

Stop, Relax, Meditate

Set aside a few minutes each day to bring balance back into your life

BY DEBBIE OLSEN

It's morning at the Temple of Heaven Park in Beijing, the capital city of China, and locals have gathered en masse for their daily exercise. Yet unlike similar gatherings of fitness buffs in North American parks, there's nary a jogger or tracksuit in sight. Instead, small and large groups are avidly engaged in different forms of Tai Chi, a type of meditation in motion. In Asia, the emphasis is not on aerobic workouts, but on activities that encourage the circulation of *chi*, or life energy, within the body. The result: a focus on Tai Chi and other forms of inner meditation, all commonly used to reduce stress and encourage relaxation.

While such exercises have been popular in Asian countries for many centuries, the health benefits of meditation are just starting to be realized in the West. Today, new research from Yale University School of Medicine is helping to bring meditation in from the fringes to be recognized by mainstream western medicine. A study presented at the 2004 scientific sessions of the American Heart Association suggests that practising yoga and meditation at least three times a week may reduce blood pressure, lower pulse rates and significantly reduce the risk of heart disease. Research also found that participants with heart disease benefited most from these activities, averaging an almost 70 per cent increase in blood vessel function after six weeks of yoga and meditation.

Results like those demonstrated in the Yale study have caused the medical world to stand up and take notice, and local medical practitioners are no exception.



Time-out! Regular meditation can reduce your blood pressure, lower your pulse rate and reduce risk of heart disease.

“Meditation is one of the stress reduction techniques we recommend to patients in the cardiac rehabilitation program,” says Michelle Benson, an occupational therapist with the Grey Nuns Community Hospital’s cardiac rehabilitation team. “Techniques that improve stress management are essential for cardiac patients and an important tool for anyone who wants to develop a balanced lifestyle.”

So what exactly is meditation? Most experts define meditation as a state of mental calmness and physical relaxation caused by suspending the stream of thoughts that normally occupy the mind. Meditation takes different forms, including prayer, and transcendental, Zen, Buddhist, or Taoist meditation, to name but a few, and each has its own techniques. Although meditation is often associated with major religions, it does not need to be a religious or spiritual activity. In medicine, meditation is used for non-religious benefits: to reduce stress, alter hormone levels, elevate one’s mood and decrease dependence on drug therapies. “The mind and body are inter-connected,” explains Ron Fitz-Simons, coordinator of Edmonton’s Brahma Kumaris Meditation Centre. “Meditation looks at the whole being and tries to help from the inside out. It doesn’t replace conventional medical treatments, but it can definitely complement them.”

With so many different techniques and styles of meditation, knowing which will be most effective can be very confusing. The good news: most experts say not to get hung up on the style of meditation you choose. “You just need to find a form of meditation

you are comfortable with and do it,” says Debbie Spence, executive director of the Yoga Association of Alberta.

Whatever technique you use, making meditation a regular part of your busy life needs to be a priority to experience the health benefits associated with this mental exercise. “I started meditating about two years ago after reading a book about it,” says Neetu Arora, a systems analyst from Edmonton and a meditation student at the Brahma Kumaris Meditation Centre. “I wasn’t sure how to do it or how to fit it into my life, but I started with 20 minutes each morning and evening and progressed from there. It has really helped make me a healthier, more positive person. Now I get up early to have extra time for meditation. It’s something everyone can benefit from.” •

Meditation Resources

Check out these local resources to learn more about meditation, try different techniques, or join a group meditation.

Brahma Kumaris Meditation Centre

This not-for-profit group practices Raja Yoga (the yoga of meditation). The centre offers meditation classes, morning and evening meditations, and other resources focused on meditation. No charge for classes, donations accepted. 425-1050, www.bkwsu.com

The Yoga Association of Alberta

Check the Yoga Association website for a listing of yoga centres and instructors offering workshops and classes on meditation. 427-8776, www.yoga.ca

Meditation 101: Do Try This at Home

Meditation doesn’t have to be difficult and you can feel its positive effects in minutes. For starters, try these seven simple steps at home, for 10 minutes in the morning and again at night, to feel relaxed, refreshed, and better able to take on life’s daily challenges.

- 1.** Find a place that is free from distraction for your meditation. Dimming the lights and playing soft music may help you to relax.
- 2.** Sit in a comfortable position with your eyes closed, allowing yourself to be quiet and still for a few minutes.
- 3.** Focus on your toes. Clench the muscles in your toes tightly and hold this position for a few minutes before relaxing your toes. Repeat this two more times.
- 4.** Work slowly up your body repeating this process of tightening and relaxing your muscles until you have consciously relaxed every muscle in your body including facial muscles.
- 5.** Let your breathing fall into a comfortable pattern, and pay attention to it. Be aware of your breath as it passes in and out of your nose.
- 6.** Now, become aware of the thoughts in your mind. Let them float up to the surface, then imagine them drifting away or dissolving into nothingness. Take some time to experiment with this process. Between thoughts, enjoy the quietness and silence in your mind.
- 7.** Become aware of the calmness and peace that you now feel. When finished, gently bring your awareness back to the room and the present.



Serenity Now!
Just **20** minutes
of meditation each day
will lead you down the path of
relaxation and inner peace