

# Finding the peace within us

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**BY BRIDGET MURRAY** *Monitor* staff

Once just a ritual of the monastery, today meditation is mainstream, and some psychologists are embracing the practice on several levels. Not only do more psychologists study it, use it in interventions and recommend it to patients, some practice it themselves as a self-care technique.

An understanding of Eastern philosophies is not essential in meditation, though it can be useful. However, something else is crucial--a major shift in mindset and life approach, says psychologist Scott Bishop, PhD, who researches the effects of a "mindfulness" form of meditation on stress at the University Health Network, affiliated with the University of Toronto (UT).

And meditation is more than a stress-reduction technique. "It's a whole affect management approach," he says. "It's a way of developing a different relationship with our experiences of stress and affect and thinking that helps with all aspects of life."

Fostering that different relationship doesn't come easily. It takes training in thought control, followed by regular practice. People who meditate learn to sit still and empty the mind of distractions. Some concentrate on a particular thought, mantra, activity or image, such as ocean waves. Or they merely rest quietly and observe their breathing and thoughts. Techniques differ, including contemplative, mindful and transcendental meditation--and even yoga as a physical form--but the object is always to calm the body and mind.

Ongoing practice helps people bring more of their behavior under conscious control, says Assistant Professor of Medicine Saki Santorelli, EdD, director of the Center for Mindfulness at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center.

"If we observe our experience closely, what is revealed is aspects of our lives that we see and understand clearly and other places where we are essentially blind," he explains. "With mindfulness [meditation], we learn to experience nonjudgmentally. This allows us to see what we have been previously blind to--for example, to habits and behaviors that undermine our health and well-being."

**Living each moment for mental health**

A major focus of meditation is letting go, says Bishop. Much of emotional and, consequently, physical distress stems from "either striving too hard to gain something we think we really want or clinging to things we can't have," he says.

Meditation teaches people to shift their focus away from their desires and future plans, back to the present moment--to their breathing and their bodies. When doing something as mundane as brushing their teeth, for example, "they learn to feel the water and taste the toothpaste," says psychologist and meditation researcher Zindel Segal, PhD, head of the Cognitive Behavior Therapy Unit at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health and the Morgan Firestone Chair in Psychotherapy in the UT psychiatry department.

He is examining the benefits of "mindfulness" meditation, in which people learn to watch their thoughts and feelings without judging them. "This keeps us from being pulled into destructive or automatic habits and responses," says Segal. You find, for example, that you can step back and observe your anger at being cut off by another driver without necessarily acting on it, he explains.

He and his research team have folded in such mindfulness techniques with cognitive therapy to treat depression. Their patients attend weekly two-and-a-half-hour group therapy sessions and meditate daily to react less emotionally to negative thoughts or situations. And it appears to work, according to a controlled, multisite study of 145 patients, published this year in the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* (Vol. 70, No. 2). The researchers found that patients who meditated relapsed half as often as those advised to seek "treatment as usual"--consulting their family doctors or other sources they normally tap when symptoms recur.

In another controlled trial, University of Calgary psychologists Michael Speca, PhD, and Linda Carlson, PhD, found that meditation can significantly lower distress and anxiety in cancer patients. Their findings appeared in 2000 in *Psychosomatic Medicine* (Vol. 62, No. 5).

Other findings suggest meditation can curb anger, anxiety disorders, and even suicidal tendencies and eating disorders. At Virginia Commonwealth University's medical school, for example, psychologist Nirbhay Singh, PhD, has been investigating how people with obsessive compulsive disorder can use meditation to defuse their controlling thoughts. Findings are due to appear in the journal *Clinical Case Studies*. Meanwhile, Segal and Bishop are working with Canadian and U.S. researchers to develop a measure of mindfulness.

**Lower blood pressure, longer lives**

Findings on meditation's physical health benefits are also emerging. Bishop and his colleagues are testing its potential to help cancer patients manage chronic pain. And it also shows promise as a means of lowering blood pressure, reversing carotid atherosclerosis and preventing heart attacks.

In groundbreaking work, Vernon Barnes, PhD, assistant research scientist in pediatrics at the Medical College of Georgia, finds that African-American adolescents can reduce their hypertension risk through transcendental meditation (TM)--a form involving effortless reduction of mental activity and twice daily practice sessions. His study of 35 15- to 18-year-olds, published last year in the *Journal of Psychosomatic Research* (Vol. 51, No. 4), revealed that those who practiced TM maintained lower blood pressure during rest and during stressful interviews and virtual reality car-driving simulation tasks, than did controls. In addition, Barnes and his colleagues have found evidence that middle-aged adults see decreases in their vasoconstrictive tone--the mechanism responsible for reducing high blood pressure--during TM practice. Those findings appeared in *Psychosomatic Medicine* (Vol. 61, No. 4) in 1999."

Through meditation, people discover the peace and wellness that already lives in themselves, Singh elaborates. "Every individual has within them the seed of their own happiness," he says. "Meditation helps connect them to it."