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## Giving Meditation a Spin

By Katherine Ellison  
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SAN FRANCISCO -- 2006 wasn't easy. I had thyroid surgery three months after having had brain surgery. Blessed at last with a clean bill of health, I fell off my bike and broke both arms. Meanwhile, my rambunctious sons chased off a series of would-be child-care providers.

Yet together with what are now several millions of other Americans, I've got a new tool to cope with the inevitable adversity of being human. Suffering led me to indulge a long-standing interest in Buddhism, with some surprising payoffs. I've meditated during MRIs, watched my breathing during talks with my rebellious preteen and sometimes even managed to pay full attention to my spouse.

As our big demographic bulge of boomers hits the years when mortality truly starts to sink in, Asian spirituality has suddenly become more mainstream than ever. (*Coincidenza?* as Father Guido Sarducci might ask.) Some 10 million Americans say they meditate. Yoga is a \$3 billion market. You can download a "Dalai Lama ring tone." Even Lisa Simpson calls herself a Buddhist.

With the Asian-inspired practices growing in popularity and becoming inexorably less spiritual in nature, workaday schmoes who wouldn't know Vipassana from lasagna now believe we may be able to boost our mental and physical health with brief stress-reduction workouts, much like flattening our abs. The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine at the National Institutes of Health is sponsoring studies to investigate the effects of meditation, how it influences health and which problems it might be effective in treating.

As the Buddhist monk and author Matthieu Ricard recently told me: "The idea of meditation as developing some mental skills is now coming in to replace the old notion of someone blissing out under a bongo tree."

Search the medical database PubMed using "meditation" as the keyword, and you'll find there have been more than 1,200 scientific papers involving the subject published since the 1950s. Only in recent years, however -- armed with cutting-edge technologies such as functional MRI scans -- have neuroscientists been able to look inside the brain to try to tell if the practice can produce physical change. Many of the findings so far have been only suggestive, but tantalizingly so.

A study at Massachusetts General Hospital, for instance, found that parts of the cerebral cortex were thicker in people who had practiced meditation daily for just 40 minutes for several years. Did this mean people with that kind of brain gravitated to the practice, or had meditation actually changed the part of their brain known to be involved in attention and sensory processing? And is thicker better? The answers aren't known (though we do know that the cortex thins with age).

Other studies appear to show behavioral benefits. For instance, Zindel Segal, a professor of

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psychotherapy at the University of Toronto, has found that combining principles of mindful awareness with cognitive therapy -- stressing the links between thoughts and feelings -- has helped people suffering from depression. And scientists at the University of Wisconsin have reported that people newly trained in meditation have shown an increase in electrical activity in the left frontal part of the brain, an area associated with positive emotion -- while also showing a significant boost of immunity to the flu.

You can probably expect more news about the impact of meditative practices this year and next, as scientists report findings from two comprehensive studies, unprecedented in size and scope. The Cultivating Emotional Balance project, based at the University of California at San Francisco, will be releasing data on a study of 80 female schoolteachers who received just four days of training in Buddhist-inspired emotional-awareness techniques and meditation.

And in the Shamatha Project -- a reference to a state of highly focused attention -- a group of neuroscientists next month will evaluate 64 meditators on three-month retreats in the Colorado Rockies, looking for physiological and behavioral changes. (They expect to report their findings next year.)

The new research isn't serendipitous. The Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhists and a beloved figure for many Americans, has been meeting with neuroscientists and psychologists for the past 20 years, in a collaboration of growing popularity. In a meeting in India in 2000, he challenged the Western experts to test Buddhist practices in their labs, to determine whether they are beneficial and, if so, to find ways to share them with the secular public. "If you think about that, it's really an incredible vision," says Adam Engle, chairman of the Colorado-based nonprofit Mind & Life Institute, which is promoting the Buddhist-inspired research.

Secular Washingtonians already have an opportunity to share in the potential benefits of contemplative meditation, through a two-year-old program called Visit Yourself at Work. Founder Klia Bassing, 31, estimates she has given classes to about 400 people at workplaces including the World Bank, the National Academy of Sciences and The Washington Post. Some employers underwrite the \$75, five-session course as an investment in stress reduction they hope will lead to fewer absences from work and maybe even more output. (Post employees pay their own way.)

"People are completely stressed out," reports Bassing, a former Peace Corps volunteer in Bolivia who holds an MBA and a master's of public policy and is still in training as a meditation teacher through Spirit Rock, a popular Buddhist instruction center in the hills of west Marin County, Calif. "They feel like they don't have the internal or external resources to handle what's going on in their home and work lives."

Tabitha Benney, a senior program associate at the National Academy of Sciences and one of several grateful students of Bassing's, agrees. She was feeling so out of sorts after injuring her ankle running, and facing surgery, that even though she initially doubted that meditation would help, she figured it was worth a try. "Now I use it all the time," said Benney, 33. "When I can't fall asleep at night, I use it. When I'm just thinking too much, I use it. You learn to recognize emotions in your body so that you can work backwards."

Benney said the class has "no religious undertones. All she does is ring a bell at the end of meditation."

Bassing isn't the first to tailor meditation courses to beleaguered working stiff. For more than 20 years, the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School has offered a "mindfulness-based stress reduction" course combining meditation instruction, gentle stretching and yoga, and awareness-enhancing techniques. Versions of the course are

also offered at other U.S. universities. The Massachusetts center's Web site says participants have included CEOs, attorneys, judges, prison inmates and professional athletes, including members of the Chicago Bulls and Los Angeles Lakers basketball teams.

Bassing's interest in meditation followed her own trail of suffering. Upset after a traumatically ruined love affair and obsessing about food as a way of suppressing her emotional turmoil, she was 20 pounds underweight when a friend recommended that she take a class offered by the Insight Meditation Community in Bethesda. "I resisted it at first," Bassing told me. "I thought meditation was New Agey and weird, and they would just try to brainwash me and get me to give them all my money. But as soon as I got into that class, and brought my mind and body into the same time zone, I had a sense of wholeness and peace I'd never experienced before."

As she continued to meditate, she had more insights, one of which, she says, was: "I'm really going to die! It will happen. So what am I going to do with my life? Am I doing the right thing with the short time I have on Earth?"

That feeling of urgency led Bassing to launch Visit Yourself at Work. A typical class in her five-week "starter series" runs 45 minutes, including a 20-minute guided meditation and the discussion of a topic such as mindful eating or how to let go of worry.

"I remember that I used to come out of work at the end of the day feeling like I was coming out of a dream," she says, "that I'd gone somewhere else during work hours. I would wonder: 'Where have I been all day?' I've heard this lack of presence called the 'trance.' . . . The exception to this lack of presence was on bring-your-child-to-work days. Everyone seemed more alive. This was the inspiration for the name of the business: What if people could visit themselves at work to bring about this same aliveness?"

This notion of self-awareness (psychologists call it metacognition) is basic to the 2,500-year-old wisdom of Buddhism, unique among religions in its emphasis on mental training to lead to more clarity and compassion -- a fine definition of improved mental health. Buddhist practices give you effective tools for living -- for coping with suffering, riding out emotional turmoil, accepting change (including your own mortality) and treating others with compassion.

Engle says the next step is to bring training in these techniques to schools. And in fact, scores of U.S. public and private schools have begun to experiment with emotional-awareness techniques including mindful breathing.

As for me, 2007 is off to a promising start. I recently got my casts off, and my preteen has enrolled in a class at a meditation center near our home. Among other things, the class has given us new language to talk about emotions. When we get into conflicts -- about once an hour when we're awake -- I now suggest we both take timeouts. Incense not mandatory.

The painkillers help, too. ·

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