

INDULGE

Edited by Suzanne Harrison suzanne.harrison@scmp.com

Head space

Meditation experts say purging your mind of anger, greed and ignorance will bring great benefits to your body and soul, reports Yenni Kwok

WHO WOULD HAVE thought staring at a wall could be a wonderful experience?

I'd been sitting cross-legged facing the white wall for about half an hour, doing *zazen* – the sitting meditation of Zen Buddhism. There were 11 other people, mostly dressed in black kimonos.

Despite the prevailing peace, broken only by birds' chirping outside, I was distracted by different sensations. As various thoughts came by and drifted away, I felt an intense itchiness on my nose, soreness in my back and most of all, impatience to know when the session would be over.

I quickly scratched my nose, hoping the Zen monk wouldn't rebuke me by tapping my shoulder with his stick. Then, I focused on breathing in and out, and suddenly I got it. My mind slowly but surely emptied.

The 75-minute *zazen* was interrupted by a five-minute walking meditation to stretch our legs, and ended with chanting of the lotus Buddhist sutra. When I stepped out from the *dojo* (the meditation hall) my head felt much clearer. It was as if I'd just returned from a blissful holiday.

Ryumon Zen-Dojo isn't housed in an idyllic Zen temple in Japan – it's in a five-storey office building in Hamburg. The woman who gave us a short introduction to *zazen* was French, while the rest of the meditators were German.

Meditation is big in Europe. Posters and brochures offering meditation classes or lectures are visible in subways, shops

and restaurants, with subjects ranging from yoga to Buddhist meditation techniques. Many Buddhist centres, mostly Zen and Tibetan, offer meditation sessions daily, attracting devotees who swear by the benefits of their practice.

Maria Andreassen, a 30-year-old journalist from Copenhagen, says she tries to meditate every day for at least 30 minutes. Twice or three times a year she joins a meditation course in Spain or Germany.

"On my inner level, a lot of things have changed," says Andreassen, who converted to Tibetan Buddhism in 2000. "It allows me to handle things in a more sensible way, and the methods help me to avoid anger or other disturbing emotions and see things in a broader perspective."

Anke Klinkenberg, of Hamburg, started practising Tibetan Buddhist meditation more than five years ago. She also feels a change in her emotional state when she meditates. "I've become much calmer and more relaxed. I no longer get too anxious or worried," says the 49-year-old former secretary. "If I have a problem, I don't think about it the whole day."

Meditation plays an important role in Buddhism, especially in the Theravada, Zen and Tibetan schools. "Buddhism recognises three poisons of the mind: anger, greed and ignorance," says Geshe Ngawang Sonam, a Hamburg-based Tibetan monk. "It's not possible to get rid of these poisons without meditation."

In the west, the interest in meditation

is as much medical as it is spiritual. It's no longer considered New Age mumbo-jumbo. Scientific research shows meditation has positive benefits on mental and physical health, from easing emotional strain to boosting the immune system.

"Doctors and medical professionals are becoming increasingly interested in the power of meditation to affect both mind and body and in the healing potential of the kind of inner peace that meditation makes possible," says Mark Epstein, a New York-based psychiatrist who

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Mark Epstein Psychiatrist

has written several books on meditation and psychology.

In a recent study, University of Queensland researchers discovered that Tibetan monks practising one-point concentration meditation had superb visual awareness and consciousness.

"Our study supports the contention that meditation does allow an individual

to have more control over their state of mind," says lead researcher Olivia Carter.

Different Buddhist schools have their own meditation practices, varying in focus and technique. One method may focus on concentration, another on compassion. Yet, the differences matter very little, says Michael André, a Zen monk at Ryumon Zen-Dojo. "They eventually reach the same point."

Meditation generally involves a regulated breathing exercise and encourages an awareness of one's state of mind. Whatever emotion comes by, be it a happy moment or an irritating experience, meditators are advised not to dwell on or suppress it, but to let it go – like watching clouds move in the sky.

Inge Kobarg, a doctor in the German town of Marburg, says that even simple meditation, focusing on breathing and thoughts, can calm one's mind.

"Meditation is known to have effects on lowering blood pressure, as well as increasing the amount of endorphin, the hormone associated with happy feelings," says Kobarg, who also teaches Tibetan Buddhist meditation.

"Most problems of anxiety and depression are caused or supported by rumination, negative judgments and worry," says Roger Thomson, a clinical psychologist in Chicago and a devoted Zen practitioner. "Letting go of our preoccupations and turning towards the present-moment experience of breathing and sit-

ting can feel very liberating. In meditation, we become aware that these anxious trains of thought are simply thoughts, and we don't get caught up in them the way we typically do. It's not that we stop thinking in meditation, but that we change our relationship to our thinking."

Healthy people can also benefit from the same practice. Epstein says basic Buddhist insight meditation, or *vipassana*, not only helps people's understanding of self, but also gives "positive benefits such as a better ability to deal with stress".

Hans Oberlaender, who has practised Zen meditation in Hamburg for eight years, agrees. "Without doubt, meditation helps me alleviate stress," says the journalist, 49. "I could be in a big mess. Then when I meditate, I can find myself laughing about it." Oberlaender says he also noticed his backache has disappeared since he started meditating regularly. "Maybe the sitting position in meditation helps correct the body posture," he says.

Meditation clearly has a healing effect on the body, according to Kobarg. "Many physical problems are caused by the neurotic mind," she says. "The happier you are, the healthier you become."

Meditation is increasingly prescribed as a method to prevent, slow or at least control chronic pain caused by heart conditions, cancer and Aids.

The travel industry is also embracing the power of meditation. Virgin Atlantic and US Airways have introduced an in-

flight meditation programme to help passengers relax, sleep and overcome flying anxiety.

Responding to the interests of non-Buddhists, meditation experts have developed non-religious practices.

Despite the potential benefits of meditation, doctors warn that it shouldn't be practised by people with an untreated mental illness such as manic depression or schizophrenia.

"Meditation shouldn't be undertaken as a sole treatment of any mental disorder," Thomson says. "If someone is also involved in an appropriate therapy, however, it can be a great help."

Surrounded by a multitude of choices, people are advised to do some research before deciding which school or teacher to follow. Meditation experts say people shouldn't jump from one school or technique to another and should meditate with a qualified instructor.

"Meditation is about controlling one's ego. Without proper guidance, a practitioner may become an egomaniac or feel he is the greatest person on earth," Kobarg says.

Daily practice, even for as little as 10 minutes, is considered better than say, a weekly one-hour session. The challenges are to find quiet time and space, and to combine meditation with daily routine.

It's not an easy thing to do in a crowded, high-paced city such as Hong Kong, but perhaps it's what many stressed-out souls need.

A HISTORY OF MEDITATION IN ASIA

The earliest written references to Hindu meditation, such as yoga, can be found in the religious scriptures the Upanishads.

The texts, from as early as 800BC, were composed when meditation practices in the Indian subcontinent were popular, particularly among Hindu renouncers (*samanas*) and adherents of the orthodox tradition of Indian religion (*brahmanas*).

The Buddha (566-486BC) learnt meditation techniques from two teachers, but later

modified the methods significantly. It was while meditating that he reached enlightenment, which is why meditation occupies a central place in Buddhism.

As Buddhism spread to different parts of Asia, so did meditation.

Before the arrival of Buddhism in the first century, the Chinese already knew some form of meditation exercise, not unlike today's *qigong* (a Chinese healing art using a series of gentle, focused

exercises for mind and body). Taoism also advocated the stilling of the mind by controlled breathing and posture to promote health.

Buddhist meditation promised equanimity and nothingness, resembling Taoist principles of inner stillness and actionless action (*wu-wei*).

A new school of Buddhism, called Chan (meaning meditation), was born as a blend of Taoist and Buddhist philosophies. From China, it spread to Korea,

and finally to Japan in the 12th century.

Adherents of Zen, as Chan is called in Japanese, practise rigorous *zazen* (sitting meditation) sessions, sometimes using *koan*, or riddles, in their training.

Buddhism reached Tibet in the 7th century. Meditation, sometimes in esoteric forms, has an important function in Tibetan Buddhism, aided by hand gestures, breathing control and chanted mantras. *Yenni Kwok*



WHERE TO PUT ON YOUR THINKING CAP

Hong Kong Vipassana Meditation Centre Lot 7A, Section 3, Ngai Yuen New Village, Hang Tau, Sheng Shui. Courses in Sayaygi U Ba Khin. Inquiries: 2671 7031 or go to www.hk.dharma.org

Inquiries: 2887 1498 or go to www.hkheartbeat.com/pages/ishayas.htm

Central. Yoga and meditation. Inquiries: 2522 6802 or go to www.siddhayoga.org

Raja Yoga Meditation Centre G/F, 17 Dragon Rd, Tin Hau, or 9G Golden Crown Court, 72 Nathan Rd, TST. Free courses in meditation, positive thinking and stress management. Inquiries: 2806 3008 or go to www.rajayoga.com.hk

Vajradhara Buddhist Centre 3/F, 6 Stewart Rd, Wan Chai. Regular meditation and talks on Buddhism. Inquiries: 2507 2237 or go to www.meditateinhk.org

Ishaya's Ascension Hong Kong Flat 542, Phase 2, Block A, Ming Yuen Mansions, 30-44 Peacock Rd, North Point. Simple techniques to bring the mind back to its source and eliminate stress.

Siddha Yoga Meditation Centre 4/F Shun Ho Tower, 24 Ice House St,

The New Age Shop G/F, 7 Old Bailey St, Central. Regular group meditation classes. Inquiries: 2810 8694

HOLISTICS

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Handy work Acushla continues her palm workshop where participants will work on one another's hands to learn more about their differences. She will also do a palm reading for each participant. Bring pencil and paper. Today, 7.15pm, New Age Shop, 7 Old Bailey St, Central, \$350, reservations necessary. Inquiries: 2810 8694 or e-mail enquire@newageshop.com.hk

From this angel Acushla will talk about angels and personal spirit guides. July 19, 7.15pm, New Age Shop, 7 Old Bailey St, Central, \$350. Inquiries: 2810 8694

Shake your beauty Frederique offers a bilingual career talk about holistic health and beauty. Career advisers will answer



questions. Wed, 7pm-10pm. 7/F, Wilson House, 19-27 Wyndham St, Central. Inquiries: 2522 2526

Heal climb Sandra Gonzalez (above) helps us to learn about our lives in order to heal and increase understanding. Tomorrow, 10am-1.30pm, Healing Circle, 15/F, Lucky Bldg, 39 Wellington St, Central, \$350. Inquiries: 2521 5099

Peace talks Send the power of peace around the world. Experience meditation, silence, music and guided meditations. Sun, 6.30pm-7.30pm. Brahma

Kumaris Raja Yoga Centre, 17 Dragon Rd, Causeway Bay, free. Inquiries: 2806 3008

Animal instincts How to use essential oils safely on your dog or cat. Jul 20, July 27, 7pm-9.30pm, Asia Pacific Aromatherapy, 15/F Lucky Bldg, 39 Wellington St, Central, \$600. Inquiries: 2882 2444 or 9324 3868

Water works Colourpuncture therapist Nisha Dadlani, who recently attended a seminar with Masaru Emoto, author of *The Hidden Messages in Water*, shares her experience. Emoto's concept is our thoughts affect the structure of water, with implications for spiritual life. Jul 21, 7.15pm-8.15pm, Reflections Bookshop and Resource Centre, 21/F Jing Long Commercial Bldg, 52 Tang Lung St, Causeway Bay. Inquiries: 2504 1333

Peter Lloyd is editor of www.holistichongkong.com

TRIAL THERAPY

Lactic acid facial

What is it? Although it sounds as if it could strip paint, this is a gentle procedure using lactic acid, an alpha hydroxy acid found in milk, molasses and human skin. It can hold up to 100 times more moisture in the skin than its sister, glycolic acid. Because of this, there's less sensitivity with lactic acid, therapists say. The facial targets fine lines, blotchy skin, sun damage, acne and dry skin.

What was it like? A course of five is said to get the best results. My skin tone markedly improved (and I had quite a lot of sun damage). Whether fine lines were lessened is harder to tell, as this depends on how much sleep I've been getting.

But overall, my complexion has improved. It's not the most luxurious facial because it's designed to solve problems rather than relax you. The therapist cleanses and then applies a mask that stings a little (a small fan is held in front of your face to ease this). After about 10 minutes, the mask is removed and the therapist massages your face. She finishes with pressure point massage around the eyes and bridge of the nose. It makes you feel as if you've had a face-lift as she works from the chin up, manipulating around your chin, cheek bones and eye sockets.

What was wrong with it? The massage is blissful, but not long enough. Just as you've passed the stinging mask part, the massage starts – and then it's over too quickly. Still, it's meant to be more practical than pleasurable.

How often do you have it done? Every two weeks for 10 weeks.



The lactic acid facial is designed to refine your complexion

How does it work? Lactic acid dissolves the glue that holds dead cells to the surface of the skin, the salon says. It's this layer that creates a rough, uneven skin tone. It also clogs pores and can lead to acne. A course of treatments is said to stimulate new cell growth so the top layer of living cells become plumper.

Are you red afterwards? I wasn't – except once, when there was a light tinge to one of my cheeks.

What products do they use? Ultracentials, an Australian brand sold through doctors and specialist centres. It was created by a dermatologist and contains ingredients such as vitamin C and green tea.

Where can I have it done? Beauty Clinic by Su, 10/F, 50-52 Queen's Rd Central. Inquiries: 2522 7822
Suzanne Harrison