

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 from Hamburg



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 Andreasen, a 30-year-old journalist in 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 Andreasen, who converted to Tibetan Buddhism in 2000. Thanks to meditation, the new religion, she adds, "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, be it the Theravada, Zen and Tibetan school. "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 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 sitting 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.

BOX:
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.

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