

Sharpen your mind with meditation

Once dismissed as hippyish humbug, meditation is being increasingly recognised by medical science as a way to keep your mind sharp, reports **David Hughes**

FORTY YEARS ago, most busy people in the West would probably have preferred to reveal an interest in bear-baiting than meditation.

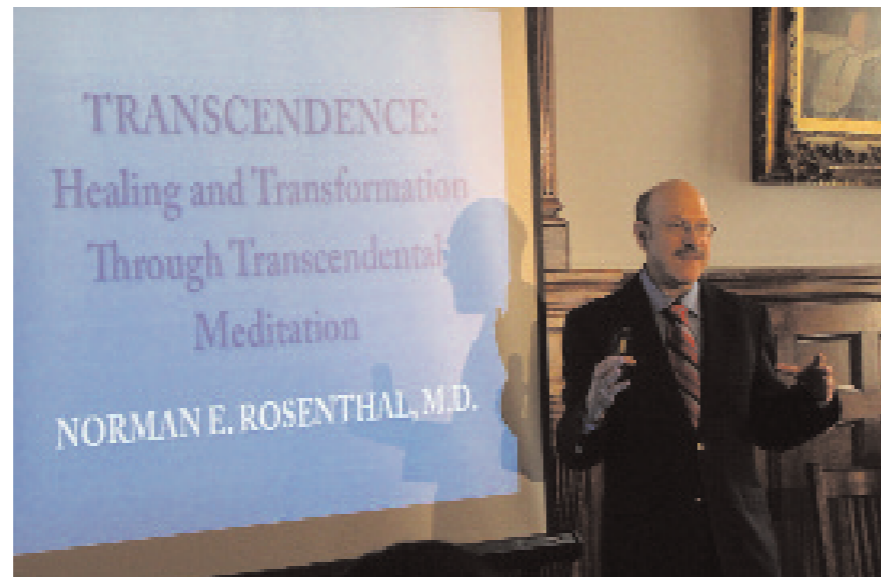
Associated with otherworldly images of incense, chanting and flower-power, meditation was generally viewed as faintly eccentric. Taking it up aroused suspicion of imminent departure on the Kathmandu trail – if not to somewhere decidedly warmer, in the view of some religious fundamentalists. Not any more.

Maybe it's the fast pace of life and the stresses that go with it, but nowadays everyone seems to be closing the eyes and seeking nirvana. No celebrity feature is complete without mention of the meditative flavour of the month, despite which – or maybe because of it – the whole subject has become not merely respectable, but downright fashionable.

Richard Gere, Goldie Hawn and many others champion Buddhist-related practices, while film-maker David Lynch has recruited a host of fellow Transcendental Meditators – including Sir Paul McCartney, who describes the technique as 'a lifelong gift' – to support his campaigns to teach TM to groups as diverse as youngsters in inner-city



"The benefits of Transcendental Meditation are considerable"
Consultant Dr William Weir



schools, the homeless, and veterans with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Everyone, it seems, can benefit from meditation. Yet while celebrity endorsement is one engine which has driven this trend, there's another, less glamorous but more impressive: scientific research.

Since 1970, thousands of studies have been performed on all kinds of meditative practices – cautiously at first, as the field hardly seemed scientifically respectable, but with increasing enthusiasm as initial, promising findings led to a host of impressive long-term results. Meditation, it seems, can be a highly effective way of 'de-stressing' mind and body, enabling us to boost physical energy, stay mentally alert, improve memory, and live longer, happier and more successful lives.

Transcending thought

The best-researched practice, Transcendental Meditation – with more than 340 studies published in peer-reviewed scientific and medical journals – involves two 20-minute sessions per day sitting comfortably with eyes closed. Easy to learn and effortless to practice, the technique – which has no religious or philosophical links – has been discovered to offer a simple antidote to the 'fight or flight' response associated with stress.

During TM, the attention moves automatically to a silent state of restful alertness at the source of the thinking process, while the body responds by settling to a level of physical rest deeper than ordinary eyes-closed relaxation.

"The benefits of TM are considerable,"

says Dr William Weir, a consultant in infectious diseases. "It has a beneficial effect on various areas of psychological functioning; it improves one's stress levels, it has a beneficial effect on blood pressure, it has been shown in one or two studies to have a beneficial effect on cholesterol levels; and more than 600 studies of various kinds have validated the general proposition that it is an extremely helpful and life-enhancing technique.

"It produces levels of psychological rest, as well as physical rest, which are really hitherto unobtainable by someone who doesn't know how to practice a technique like this."

Reduced heart attacks and stroke

Practical results in daily life could be of huge potential advantage to the NHS. A nine-year study on TM presented to the American Heart Association Conference in 2009 measured a 47 per cent reduction in heart attack, stroke and mortality rates among coronary patients who practised the technique.

"If this kind of result was observed for a new prescription drug, it would be a billion-dollar industry to make it available to everyone immediately," says Dr Norman Rosenthal, the psychiatrist and scientist who first described Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD).

So impressed was Dr Rosenthal with the research on Transcendental Meditation that he has written a best-selling book on the subject – *Transcendence* – the UK edition of which is published this month by Hay House.

Concentration and contemplation

While transcending thought appears to provide the most wide-ranging spectrum of benefits if engaged in regularly, other forms of meditation are also widely popular, particularly methods of 'Mindfulness', where practitioners learn to monitor thoughts or breath, and systems which involve concentration or focused attention. Much research is being carried out on such methods, with dozens of papers appearing every month.

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For example, a recent study on a group in the USA who attended a meditation retreat with a Buddhist scholar found the concentration practices used enhanced attention spans in daily life, while a Mindfulness-based stress reduction technique helped breast cancer sufferers recover from the disease, according to research from the University of Missouri published at the end of last year.

With today's blossoming of interest in meditation, a much clearer understanding of the variety of meditation types is emerging.

Preliminary work in cataloguing the various methods has been started by Dr Fred Travis, a neuroscientist and Director of Brain Research at the Center for Leadership Performance in New York, and Jonathan Shear of Virginia Commonwealth University.

Three main types

"All experience changes the brain," says Dr Travis. However, he points out, different experiences can be expected to give rise to different changes, and so produce different outcomes. Meditations involving concentration and directed focus will produce a different effect on the brain from those requiring contemplative monitoring, and a different impact again from transcending thought altogether.

Examining published studies on meditation, Travis and Shear were able to identify three main categories of meditation based on brain patterns:

■ Focused attention practices (including loving-kindness-compassion, Diamond Way Buddhism, Qigong and Zen-3rd Ventricle) were characterised by Gamma brain patterns (30-50Hz) and Beta 2 (20-30Hz)

■ Open Monitoring practices – non-evaluative awareness of experience (including Vipassana meditation, ZaZen meditation, Sahaja Yoga and Concentrative Qigong)

– showed brain activity in the Theta waveband (5-8Hz)

■ Studies on Automatic Self-Transcending (Transcendental Meditation) displayed brain patterns in the Alpha 1 waveband (8-10Hz).

The measuring of meditation is to be welcomed, as increased scientific understanding will help speed the integration of the most useful meditation practices into the health services and other areas where they may be of great help in combating the stress-related ailments of our time. And on that note, perhaps the last word should go to The Beatles.

For people of our generation, the first exposure to meditation was probably when the Fab Four trooped off to Bangor to learn Transcendental Meditation with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in 1967. And exotic as it all seemed then, 45 years on – as in many other ways – The Beatles look ahead of their time. Says Sir Paul McCartney in *Transcendence*, summing up his lifetime's TM practice: "In moments of madness, meditation has helped me find moments of serenity – and I would like to think that it would help provide young people with a quiet haven in a not-so-quiet world."

"I think meditation offers a moment in your day to be at peace with yourself and therefore the universe – which once was thought of as a slightly silly hippie idea, but now it's much more accepted and even fits with some of the most advanced scientific thinking."

Find out more

- Transcendental Meditation, website: (www.t-m.org.uk)
- Network of Buddhist organisations: (www.nbo.org.uk)
- Mindfulness: (www.bemindful.co.uk)

