



At the Royal Hospital for Women in Sydney, a Meditation Research Program has been in progress, under Ramesh Manocha in the hospital's Natural Therapies Unit. Using the sahaja yoga technique of meditation, the research has shown promising results for the treatment of asthma, headache, menopause and depression.



MATTHEW COOPER, MATRIX PHOTOGRAPHY

Researching meditation

Clinical applications in healthcare

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Dr Ramesh Manocha graduated in medicine from the University of New South Wales. After a number of years in clinical practice he became interested in the clinical applications of meditation. He is now Barry Wren Fellow at the Royal Hospital for Women, Sydney, where he initiated the Meditation Research Program.

by RAMESH MANOCHA

THE ANCIENT TRADITION OF YOGA and meditation began in Indian prehistory as a system of mental, physical and spiritual exercises. In approximately 500BC the physician and sage Patanjali formalised this tradition into a science with four major and four lesser branches involving ethical restraint, self-discipline, mental focus, physical exercise and meditation. The entire system was used in an integrated fashion and directed at the attainment of a unique state of spontaneous, psychological integration.¹ Modern psychologists have described this state as "individuation"² or "self-actualization"³ and it has been traditionally termed "self-realisation".

Many studies of meditation and yoga have been conducted over the past 50 years with variable results.⁴

The advent of Transcendental Meditation in the 1960s and 1970s gave scientists an opportunity to study a standardised technique. Many interesting results were obtained in multifaceted studies; however problems with methodology and interpretation of data have been noted.⁵ Similarly, other techniques have been assessed giving results which are often remarkable but, unfortunately, inconsistent and difficult to reproduce. The cultic connotations of many of these techniques and the organisations that promote them are also of considerable and justifiable concern and have, no doubt, hampered research in this area.⁶

Yet the health practitioner continues to intuitively recognise the role of stress in clinical illness, particularly in relation to the so-called "psychosomatic" diseases.⁷

Despite the tremendous advances in modern medicine we are still to develop truly effective strategies to deal with the common public health problems that cause most of the mortality and morbidity in the wider community. The use of stress reduction has been shown to be beneficial in many diseases, as it improves psychological and physical health and lifestyle awareness.⁸ Importantly the utilisation of stress-reducing techniques brings us closer to the ideal of a holistic, integrated health care strategy.

Several mechanisms have been proposed to

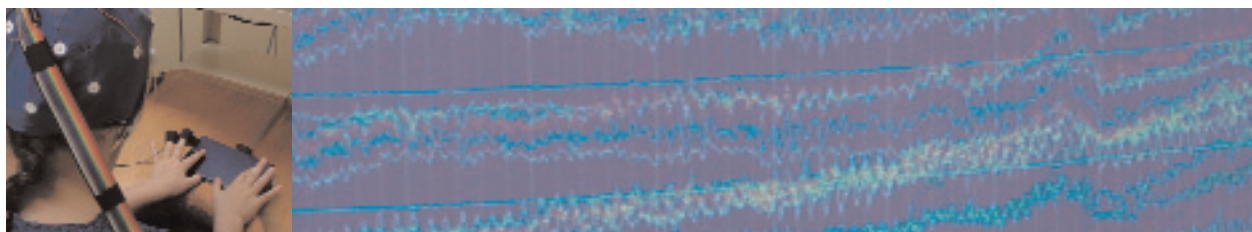
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explain the way in which psychological stress translates into physical disease. Some of the mystery has been explained by the "general adaptation syndrome" in which stressors induce psycho-hormonal changes. In an acute context these changes result in emergency adaptation of physiological function. In a context of chronic stimulation these changes, rather than maintaining psychological homeostasis, ultimately result in physical debilitation of body systems.⁹ The "parasympathetic response", or "relaxation response", is another mechanism worthy of investigation.¹⁰ It is the physiological opposite to that of the "fight or flight" reaction that we are all familiar with. It involves a slowing of the heart rate, reduced rate of respiration and relaxation of the muscles, in association with a reduction in circulating stress hormones and alpha brain wave activity. This physiological reaction is mediated by the autonomic nervous system, a complex set of nerves that

Some years later, we, a handful of health workers in Sydney, came across Rai's work. The results that he had achieved in conditions ranging from asthma to high blood pressure were very encouraging so we decided to test this technique under scientific conditions here in Australia. This was the beginning of the Meditation Research Program.

Our first goal was achieved when we established the Mind-Body Meditation Clinic. This was a non-profit service that offered instruction in meditation to patients looking for a more holistic approach to the treatment of their condition. A wide variety of patients were sent to us with many different problems; most of them chronic conditions for which there was little to offer within the mainstream of medicine. Within a few sessions of instruction most patients reported improvements. Some of the toughest cases, to our amazement, remitted completely with diligent practice of the technique.



Brainwaves from a meditator as displayed on a computer screen.

governs all the automatic systems of the body that are essential for life. The role of the hypothalamic pituitary axis, which is the main controlling centre for the hormonal activities of the body, is also worth considering.

Regardless of the underlying theories, the majority of clinicians recognise that stress is a major contributor to disease and that a simple stress management technique, such as meditation - once scientifically proven and clinically evaluated - could be widely applied in the clinical setting.

SAHAJA YOGA

About fifteen years ago in India, Professor U.C. Rai accomplished some pioneering work with a technique of meditation called sahaja yoga. He was head of the Department of Physiology at Maulana Azad Medical College in Delhi. He himself had suffered serious angina attacks and was surprised to find that this technique of meditation seemed to alleviate his medical condition.

Professor Rai, impressed by this personal experience, sought to scientifically document the effects of this technique. He set up a multifaceted research project. Part of this was a study on the effects of sahaja yoga meditation on chronic illnesses such as epilepsy and asthma. Rai's research team found that regular practice of this technique reduced the frequency, severity and duration of his patients' epileptic seizures.¹¹ Moreover, when Rai taught another group a mimicking exercise, which resembled but was actually not the real technique, the same improvement did not occur!¹²

ANDREW: TAMING THE BRAINSTORM

So when "Andrew" arrived in our clinic one day, we were not unaccustomed to challenges. Andrew was a young man of about twenty years of age when his mother brought him to the meditation clinic at Blacktown, a working class suburb in Sydney's outer west.

Two years before this, he had contracted encephalitis, a viral infection of his brain tissue which put him in hospital for several weeks; his condition so critical at one stage that he was transferred into the intensive care unit. Although Andrew did survive, the viral attack on his brain had left subtle scars on this most sensitive of organs. It caused the neurons to "short circuit" and produce overpowering waves of electrical signals that spread across his entire brain. This "brainstorm" resulted in severe epileptic seizures. While the viral infection of Andrew's brain was over, it had left behind permanent damage which condemned him to a life of violent epilepsy.

Epilepsy is a well recognised complication of brain infection. In this case it had taken a promising and talented student and turned him into an invalid. Andrew's fits were so frequent - sometimes up to two or three times per day - that he could neither resume his schooling nor keep a job. He was dependent on his parents for everything, and so their lives had also become considerably restricted by their son's illness.

As with the other patients in the Mind-Body Meditation Clinic, we advised Andrew that his response to the technique would mostly be



Participant in the Meditation Research Program, with a QEEG headcap designed to pick up electrical signals produced by the brain, and thus monitor changes in brainwave activity during meditation.

A study of sahaja yoga meditators using a Quantitative Electro Encephalo Gram, demonstrated widespread changes in brainwaves, with prominent theta wave activity at the precise moment that the meditators reported a state of complete mental silence and “oneness”.



MATTHEW COOPER, MATRIX PHOTOGRAPHY

determined by his own motivation to meditate regularly. We were not the healers in the clinic, rather Andrew was going to learn how to awaken an innate and spontaneous healing power within himself. This energy would work inexorably through his meditation to improve his physical, mental and spiritual health.

Professor Rai's epilepsy research showed that patients who practised the technique consistently experienced reductions in the amount and severity of the fits that they were experiencing. This gave us confidence that Andrew could use this technique to his benefit.

Andrew learned the sahaja yoga technique quickly and practiced it diligently. The first changes we noticed were in Andrew's face: his eyes lost their usual dullness; they looked clear and bright. When we first saw this 19 year old boy he looked like an old man: hunched over, drawn face and dark rings under his eyes. Now he started to look young again and the dark shadow that seemed to hang over him had gone. After a few weeks he would even come to the class with a smile where usually there was only a frown. Andrew's progress was obvious to us and it was not too much of a surprise to hear from his parents that his fits were reducing in frequency.

After several weeks his mother came to the clinic to invite us home for dinner. Andrew had not had a major fit in four weeks, they were planning to go away for the weekend and for the first time in many years life was starting to look normal for them!

ASTHMA RESEARCH

Successful cases like Andrew's and many of the other patients were inspiring for us all, but single case histories, no matter how remarkable, do not constitute scientific proof. The medical science establishment demands a standard of scientific rigour in order to establish the authenticity of any new form of treatment. So after more than two years of the meditation clinic we had enough confidence and had gathered sufficient evidence to embark on a proper attempt to scientifically evaluate the sahaja yoga technique.

It so happened that Professor Rai had also looked at the effect of meditation on asthma during his investigation into the sahaja yoga effect. So we decided to use his results along with our accumulated experience at the meditation clinic as a basis for an asthma trial here in Australia.

In consultation with a number of respected asthma researchers a strategy was devised to compare the effect of meditation against a simple relaxation technique. We wanted to know whether there really was something unique about this process or if it was simply like any other relaxation technique. Our plan involved selecting a large group of people with severe asthma whose condition did not properly respond even to maximum levels of medication. These people were divided into two groups. One group received regular instruction in sahaja yoga meditation while the other group was taught a popular relaxation technique. Before, and then after, about 16 sessions, the patients were assessed and the two groups compared to see if there was a difference between the two techniques. The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners funded the project and after 18 months it was completed.

The results were surprising! Most of us expected to see no difference at all between the relaxation and meditation groups. Yet the results clearly showed that while both groups did appear to bring about improvements in the way the patients felt, the meditation also showed improvements in the severity of the disease process itself! This effect was not seen at all in the relaxation group and it suggested that meditation can actually influence the disease process.

DAVID: A BREATH OF FRESH AIR

There were many remarkable individual stories within the Asthma project. One of them is "David's". A typical 42 year old "Aussie battler", he had suffered asthma since infancy, which had greatly frustrated both his career and his sporting ambitions. When we assessed him prior to his entry to the trial his asthma



Sequence showing a group of meditators sitting with the founder of the sahaja yoga meditation technique, Shri Mataji Nirmala Devi. The photographs appear to record rays of light emanating from the meditators, not visible to the naked eye. This may represent an increased radiation of subtle energy during meditation.

was in the severest of categories. Simply blowing into the spirometer, a machine used to test lung capacity, caused his asthma to worsen! After sixteen weeks of meditation, which he took to like fish to water, he returned for reassessment.

At the lung function laboratory we saw a changed man. David's lung function had increased, his symptoms reduced massively and the standard tests that initially placed him in the severest of asthma categories now indicated that his asthma was one of the mildest! David told us that his asthma had improved so much that he was sleeping through the night rather than being woken with symptoms; that he was playing sport; and that he had

saved more than \$1,500 in medication expenses since he started the program!

HOT FLUSHES

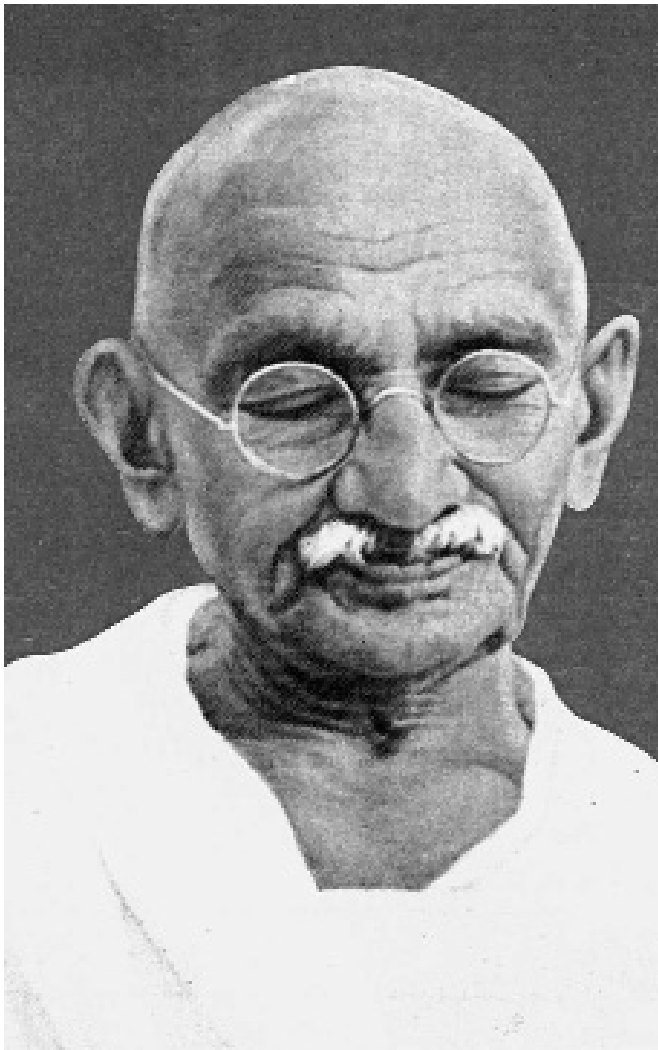
Hot flushes are a common problem amongst women in their menopausal years. In fact 90% of women can expect to experience menopausal symptoms of which the hot flush is the most common. It is an experience characterised by flushing of the skin of the upper part of the body, sweating, a sensation of heat and associated feelings of unwellness.

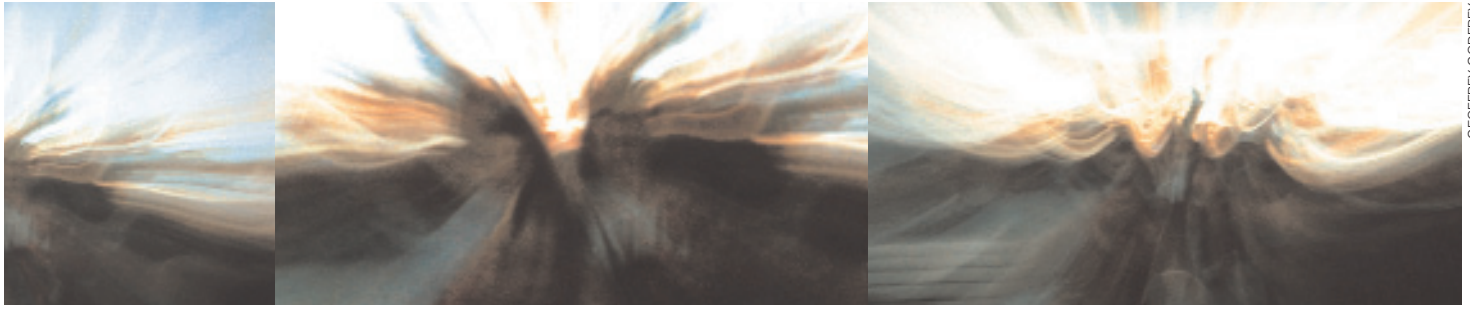
“What a great thing it would be if we in our busy lives could restore into ourselves each day for at least a couple of hours and prepare our minds to listen to the voice of the great silence. The divine radio is always singing if we could only make ourselves ready to listen to it, but it is impossible to listen without silence.”

Mahatma Gandhi

Interestingly, the hot flush can be worsened or brought on by stress. In fact many women report that high-pressure situations greatly worsen the number and severity of the flushes that they experience. Also, women report that their flushes improve somewhat when they are calm and relaxed.

With this in mind we set up a pilot trial of hot flushes for menopausal women. Ten women were enrolled into an eight-week program. The frequency and severity of their hot flushes and other menopausal symptoms were recorded using standard methods before and after the 8 week program. The results were very impressive with all women experiencing improvement in their condition. In fact 9 out of the 10 women reported at least 50% reductions in the frequency of their hot flushes. Six of these women had a 65-70% improvement in their hot flushes which, after eight weeks of meditation “treatment”, is comparable to that seen in conventional





hormone replacement therapy! In addition, standard measures of quality of life and symptom profiles showed similar degrees of improvement.

We are now planning a larger, randomised, controlled trial to more conclusively determine the potential for meditation in this troublesome problem.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

How does meditation bring about these effects? The "sahaja yoga hypothesis" is that meditation triggers a process within the autonomic nervous system, a complex set of nerves that governs the function of all the organs of our body. Imbalance within this system, says the hypothesis, is the cause of both physical and psychological illness. The process of meditation rebalances this system thereby allowing our natural healing processes to revitalise and rejuvenate diseased organs.

The ancient yoga tradition explains the inner healing process in terms of seven subtle energy centres (called "chakras") that exist within our body. Each of these centres governs a specific set of organs, and aspects of our psychology and spirituality. Imbalanced function of these centres results in abnormal function of any aspect of our being (physical, mental or spiritual) that relates to the imbalanced centre.

Meditation is said to be a specific process that involves the awakening of an innate, nurturing energy called "kundalini". The awakening of the kundalini causes it to rise from its position in the sacrum bone and pierce through each of the chakras, causing each of them to come into a state of balance and alignment (like a string threading through a series of beads). In this way the chakras are rejuvenated and nourished by the kundalini's ascent. As the kundalini reaches the brain and the chakras within it, mental tensions are neutralised. An inner state of mental calm is established. This inner silence becomes a source of inner peace that neutralises the stresses of daily life, enhancing creativity, productivity and self-satisfaction.

BRAIN WAVES

In order to try and understand what it is about meditation that makes it special we have turned to some sophisticated brain imaging technology. A pilot study of

advanced sahaja yoga meditators using a QEEG (quantitative electroencephalogram) has yielded some very interesting results. This method is able to produce two-dimensional maps of the electrical changes in the brain as the meditator enters into the state of meditation. Our study was conducted on a small group of meditators who were each asked to meditate while wearing a QEEG headcap designed to pick up the tiny electrical signals produced by the brain.

They were instructed to sit quietly for some time, then to commence meditation and signal when they had definitely entered into the meditative state called "thoughtless awareness". The findings were fascinating: all three of the meditators displayed widespread changes in brainwave activity that became more intense as they meditated.

GEOFFREY GODFREY

Widespread, intense "alpha wave" activity occurred initially. Alpha wave activity is associated with relaxation and is thought to be a beneficial state. In fact alpha activity has been observed in a number of different forms of meditation. The remarkable thing, however, is that as the meditators signalled that they had entered into the state of mental silence, or "thoughtless awareness", another form of brain wave activity emerged which involved "theta waves" focused specifically in the front and top of the brain in the midline.

Precisely at the time that the theta activity became prominent, the meditators reported that they experienced a state of complete mental silence and "oneness" with the present moment, a state which characterises the sahaja yoga meditative experience.

There are several remarkable features about this pilot study which warrant further investigation.

First, very few meditation techniques have shown this kind of consistent change in the theta range suggesting that the technique may have a unique effect on the brain. We were only able to find one other study, out of several dozen published in the scientific literature, that showed changes of this nature. This study involved a group of Japanese Zen monks.

Practitioners of sahaja yoga often claim to feel the chakras (energy centres) within the head open up as the

Sanskrit for "effortless").

Third, the focus of theta activity at the front of the head and top of the head, both in the midline, suggest that structures deep within the brain, possibly the limbic system, are being activated. The limbic system is responsible for many aspects of our subjective experiences, such as emotion and mood, so it is no surprise that meditation, which is traditionally associated with blissful states, might involve this part of the brain.

Finally, in speculation, the two areas of theta activity coincidentally correspond to the two main chakras in the brain, according to yogic tradition. The forehead chakra called "agnya" or "third eye" is located in the centre of the forehead while the chakra at the top of the head, is called "sahasrara" or "crown chakra" and is traditionally associated with the limbic system.

VIBRATIONAL ENERGY

Many practitioners in the complementary health field subscribe to the idea of "vibrational medicine". This idea essentially suggests that complementary therapies such as homoeopathy and therapeutic touch, as well as other therapeutic phenomena such as the placebo effect, therapeutic contact, bedside manner, and spiritual healing, act on a subtle energetic level to achieve cure or

JAPAN NATIONAL TOURIST ORGANIZATION



ANGELO BUTAVA



Meditation at a Zen Buddhist temple in Japan (above) and at the Buoyancy Foundation in Melbourne (right). Zen meditation and sahaja yoga meditation are the only two types of meditation which have demonstrated prominent theta brainwave activity.

meditative experience intensifies. They assert that it is this experience which is the essence of true meditation and that very few other meditation techniques enable the subject to repeatedly access this experience. The fact that the theta activity is relatively unusual and that it was observed in coincidence with the meditators' reported experience does suggest that there may be something unique and authentic about the sahaja yoga method and its claims.

Second, it is very significant that the changes observed in the brain images occurred at the moment that the meditators reported experiencing the meditative state. This suggests that the QEEG method may make it possible to directly study mystical states of consciousness! The fact that these changes occurred within minutes rather than hours or longer suggests a relatively effortless or spontaneous process (as suggested by the name of the technique - "sahaja" is

promote wellness. The difficulty has been that we are unable to detect this "subtle energy" and so scientific verification of this concept is difficult to achieve. However Kirlian photography, new research technology such as SQUID ("superconducting quantum interference device"), and aura imaging all offer clues to the puzzle.

The yogic explanation is simple: all therapeutic modalities act in one way or another on the subtle system of chakras and kundalini. This idea is difficult to directly verify but while doing background work and interviews for our research program a number of sahaja yoga practitioners described unusual sets of photographs that had been taken of sahaja yoga meditators. There appeared to be a wide variety of these photographs displaying, for the most part, rays and streaks of light around people.

One series of photographs, which included a group of meditators sitting with the founder of the sahaja yoga meditation technique, Shri Mataji Nirmala Devi, was



particularly interesting. It consisted of a series of photographs in which the "vibrational energy" emitted by the individuals was recorded in the photographs, progressively becoming more intense with each photograph. Remarkably, these photographs were allegedly taken well before the age of digital photography. Of even greater interest was that the people who owned this fascinating evidence were not particularly fussed as to whether or not it should be publicised. When I expressed my surprise at their apparent diffidence, they replied that photographic evidence was irrelevant to them as the primary goal of their technique was personal meditative experience rather than the collection of physical artefacts - no matter how remarkable.

THE EASTERN VIEW OF STRESS

Meditation is an eastern tool that offers western health practitioners a new way of looking at health. The role of stress in disease is well recognised by modern medical researchers but, despite the progress that has been made in this field, there remains some very fundamental yet unanswered questions. One of those questions is, "What exactly is stress?". Few of us can easily come up with a good definition of "stress", yet while we don't know exactly what it is, we intuitively recognise that

while we can think about events in the past (even a few moments ago), or events scheduled in the future (even milliseconds in the future), it is impossible to actually think about the present moment which we are continuously experiencing and is ever changing.

Now think about the stress that we all experience from time to time. Despite the huge variety of situations that "stress" us they all have one thing in common: we have to think about the events before they can reduce our sense of wellbeing. In other words thought itself is the final common pathway by which all events create stress within us!

The past, comprised of events that have already occurred, no longer exists. Similarly the future, comprised of events that have yet to occur and are therefore undetermined, does not yet exist. However, paradoxically, we human beings exist only in the present. The mind (and its thoughts), since it is comprised only of stuff from the past or future, is therefore not real and so the stress that it generates is also not real!

If we are beings that exist in the present, and we realise that the stress and angst of life emanate from a mind which is the product of past/future, we acknowledge also that the antidote for the mental illusions that cause stress is to reign in our attention and focus it on the present moment.

In a trial of sahaja meditation, 9 out of 10 menopausal women reported at least 50% reduction in frequency of their hot flushes, and the overall improvement in their condition was comparable to that seen in hormone replacement therapy

it is a factor that affects almost every aspect of our lives!

The eastern explanation of "stress" is probably one of the most commonsense and practically useful ones. While you read this see if you can "look inside" and apply this perspective to yourself. Stress, says the eastern perspective, is the by-product of thought. If we examine the nature of the thoughts that each of us experiences from moment to moment we will find that they all relate to one of two broad categories: (1) events that have occurred in the past or (2) events that we anticipate will occur in the future. Whether the event was an argument with a friend yesterday (past), an unpaid bill (future), a deeply troubling childhood experience that has become part of our subconscious (past) or anxiety about the share market (future) we will find that all of these troubling thoughts, and the resulting stress that they cause us, to have arisen from only the past or future!

Take the exercise a little further. If the vast majority, if not all, our thoughts emanate from events in the past or future, is it possible to think about the absolute present moment? Most of us will admit that,





While, for most of us, focusing on the absolute present moment is virtually impossible, it is this razor's edge of "thoughtless awareness" that the easterner seeks to cultivate and sustain in meditation. The vast inner silence of the thoughtless state leaves the mind uncluttered. By existing in that "space-between-the-thoughts" one is neither enslaved to one's past nor confined to a predetermined future. The inner silence of meditation thus creates a naturally stress-free inner environment.

LIVING IN THE MOMENT

Is it possible for humans to live in the present moment? Yes, it is, and most of us encounter living examples of it regularly!

Observe closely the next small child you encounter. They have no worried lines on their faces, are almost always playing and enjoying themselves, and rarely complain about bills, jobs, chores, etc. If one happens to have an unpleasant experience it is quickly forgotten and life goes on. They are naturally balanced, living-in-the-present, stress-free beings. Who has seen a toddler hold a grudge, worry about the next meal or even think about what they did yesterday or will do tomorrow? They are so focused on the present moment that they are entirely spontaneous, unpretentious and usually very happy. They are in a constant state of effortless meditation.

Living in the moment is not, however, a regression to immaturity. It is an evolutionary step in which we return to our childlike innocence and simplicity but in full awareness of ourselves, our place in society and our moral role and responsibility.

How does one tap into and sustain a connection with the present moment? How does one escape the brainstorm of mental stress that we all experience?

We would all agree that more research needs to be

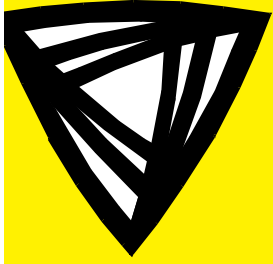
done to try to understand how the "sahaja yoga effect" occurs. Does it work via the autonomic nervous system? Is it really the result of an energy that exists within each of us called kundalini? Is it possible to examine the most ancient of traditions with modern science? The Meditation Research Program at the Royal Hospital for Women will continue to delve into these important questions.¹³ Suffice to say for now that sahaja yoga meditation appears to offer a method by which each of us can tame the brainstorm, realise a state of peace and tranquillity and begin to heal our body, mind and spirit.

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