

Study Shows Meditation Improves Immune Function

Yogis have known it for centuries, Eastern monks have practiced it for eons, and now Western medicine is finally acknowledging its physiological benefits! What is it? Meditation. It would then seem that meditation is metaphorically, out of the monastery or ashram and into the mainstream.

Recent research from the University of Wisconsin concluded that a meditation practice can strengthen the body's immune function, increase brain performance in the form of electrical activity, validating what yogis and monks have experienced for thousands of years. Those who participated in the meditation study had significantly higher levels of healthy antibodies than those non-meditators, within just one to two months of practice. In addition, the folks who participated in the study for two months had significantly higher levels of antibodies than those meditating for just one month, the Chicago Tribune Newspaper reported on Nov. 29, 2009.

Dr. Herbert Benson, pioneering physician in the mind/body field, Harvard cardiologist and author of the 1970's best selling book, "The Relaxation Response, discovered the body had a physiological response to meditative states. Over thirty years ago, Benson noted that although meditation cannot eliminate stress, it can change our reaction to its debilitating effects.

Around the same time, in 1969, Sri Swami Rama, a master yogi raised in the cave monasteries of the Himalayas and founder of the Himalayan International Institute, had come to the United States with the sole purpose of bringing Eastern spirituality and science to the West. Shortly after he arrived he was invited to the Menninger Institute in Topeka, Kansas to demonstrate under the most rigorous experimental conditions that while in a meditative state, he could stop his brain waves and heart beat, yet remain fully conscious of what was going on around him in the laboratory. Soon word of this seemingly impossible feat spread throughout the Western scientific community, and he stayed at the Institute for four months with Dr. Elmer and Mrs. Alyce Green.

Renowned integrative physician, Andrew Weil, M.D., of the University of Arizona, was witness to Swami Rama's ability to control his autonomic nervous system, and noted, " I first met Swami Rama in 1970 at the Menninger Institute when he demonstrated remarkable control of "involuntary" functions, especially heartbeat. In the last decade or so, Weil, himself, has become a spokesman for the amazing benefits of breath and meditation. What had previously been thought of as "involuntary" functions of the body, such as heart rate and blood pressure, have slowly been proven to be under our conscious control. We can thank yogis like Swami Rama, and researchers such as Benson, Weil and Green for their open mindedness to the connection between mind and body. Recently, Oprah Winfrey's frequent guest, Dr. Mehmet Oz, professor of cardiac surgery at Columbia University, cardio-thoracic surgeon and author of many books and articles, including "Healing the Heart: A Leading Surgeon Combines Eastern and Western Traditions to Create the Medicine of the Future," has touted meditation as a coping tool for modern times.

But to those who have grown up in the West, beginning a meditation practice can be an intimidating and foreign endeavor seemingly reserved for those living a monastic life. It seems wrought with the pitfalls of a busy mind, noisy world and hectic lifestyle. But that being noted, today, folks of all walks of life, from corporate giants to Catholic clergy, are reaping the practical, as well as spiritual benefits a meditation practice embodies.

Among the long list of benefits: pain relief, spiritual connectedness, sharpened focus, increased feel good chemical messengers, lower blood pressure and heart rate are included. On a spiritual level, whereas prayer is often described as speaking with the Divine, meditation is said to be a quieting and a listening.

For most people, beginning a meditation practice can be an exercise in frustration, if done alone without the guidance of a teacher. And although there are many excellent books and articles covering the topic, nothing is a replacement for the guidance and interaction of a real live human being. A gentle, nurturing and creative approach is taken at Greenleaf Yoga and Meditation presenting the topic. The Himalayan tradition is incorporated. Meditation classes are held Thursday evenings 6 p.m., at Greenleaf Yoga and Meditation, presently located in the lower level of 11 N. Fifth St., Geneva, Ill. Cost is \$100 for an 8 week class. RSVP.