

# Never doubt healing powers of the mind

**By Ruth Ostrow**

THREE activities have significantly reduced my stress levels and altered the way I am looking at the world.

The first was a Hindu Vedic chanting workshop with Krishna Das, the world-famous singer who had us chanting the various name of God for several hours. Though at times restless, and definitely aching after being squashed up on a pillow cross-legged, I found myself regularly entering states of pure bliss.

By the end of the night I was floating in a bubble that didn't seem to pop even after I got back into reality. Every time I felt stressed I went back and chanted the mantras and felt myself drifting off into a realm where my heart rate decreased and my body felt light.

The week after, I attended a meditation evening where much the same thing happened. Focusing in a relaxed manner, dropping down into the deeper, stiller parts of myself, at the end of an hour I felt like I'd had 10 hours sleep.

Thirdly, a particular friend is in Australia – hypnotherapist and trance master Dan Russell, head of the Hypnotherapy Training Centre and Northern School of Tai Chi in Carlisle, on England's Scottish border. As he had done before, Dan put me in a deep trance. In a way that was similar to the first two experiences, we relaxed in a meditative state before I felt myself dropping to the deepest place of peace.

I was awake and yet so heavy, so relaxed, so deeply satisfied as to be in bliss despite the stresses and strains going on in my life. When he brought me out of the state of altered consciousness I felt amazing and have referred back to this place, even managing to stop myself from my usual bout of road rage when sitting behind tourists doing 10km/h in a 60km/h zone!

I'm fully aware of the chemistry of such altered states and their benefits to health. There are studies that show the increased production of feel-good chemicals such as dopamine and endorphins during euphoria, as printed recently in a *Time* magazine article on happiness.

Many scientists allude to the natural production of DMT, a shamanic drug ingested to get primitive peoples into an altered state and yet said to be produced by the pineal gland during intense states such as passionate sex, near-death and meditation.

One interesting book on the subject I happened to pick up on the weekend whilst researching the health benefits of trance and meditation was David Michie's *Buddhism for Busy People* (Allen & Unwin).

In it he writes that cardiologist Herbert Benson, founder of the Mind/Body Medical Institute at Harvard Medical School's Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, has spent 30 years studying effects of meditation.

According to Benson the relaxation response helps decrease metabolism, lowers blood pressure and heart rate and slows breathing and brain waves. Just about any condition that is either caused or made worse by stress can be helped with meditation.

Given that so many of the stress-related illnesses from which we suffer arise within the workplace, the benefits of regular meditation to all of us seem self-evident, Michie says.

He writes that separate studies by UCLA physiologist R. Keith Wallace, who drew samples for his studies from the large number of transcendental meditation, or TM, practitioners, showed that those who used TM regularly for up to five years had an average biological age five years lower than their chronological age. Those who'd been meditating for more than five years had an average biological age that was 12 years lower than their chronological age.

Other studies have shown that DHEA, the only hormone known to decline directly with age, is much higher in regular meditators. In fact, people who meditate regularly have the average DHEA levels of people 10 to 12 years younger, possibly explaining why so many Buddhists look younger than their age.

If these same benefits were bottled and retailed through pharmacies, meditation would be the biggest selling drug of all time! On this last point, ground-breaking work by Richard Davidson of the Laboratory for Affective Neuroscience at the University of Wisconsin-Madison shows that volunteers who underwent just an eight-week course in Buddhist meditation showed greater activity in the left prefrontal cortex than in the right.

Depressed, stressed or angry people tend to have greater activity in the right, whereas left cortex activity is associated with happiness and relaxation.

The research fits very comfortably with my own empirical research.

After those three experiences I have given up one of my worst habits: reminding us that we should never underestimate the healing power of the mind.

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