

## **Meditation and the workplace**

By Wanphen L. Sreshthaputra

“Meditation is the smart person’s bubble bath”, writes Joel Stein in the cover story of *TIME* (vol. 162, N. 4) dedicated to “The Science of Meditation”. With an ounce of irritation and a welcome dose of humour, the journalist -- initially ostensibly resistant to this “New Age mumbo jumbo” -- dwells on the practice which attracts millions of practitioners worldwide and as he puts it, ever more “upwardly mobile professionals convinced that their lives are more stressful than those of the cow-milking, soap-making, butter-churning generations that preceded them”.

“In fact, it’s becoming increasingly hard to avoid meditation”, the journalist concedes who asserts that meditation is available in all places and becoming “demystified and mainstreamed” and its methods “more streamlined”.

For a trend to find its way onto the cover of *TIME*, there definitely must be a grain of truth beneath it. More than just the latest craze, meditation attracts a burgeoning interest and possibly so because it works. That is also the stance taken by the nine-page feature story published in the weekly English-language magazine. Crammed with examples, evidences and graphics, the article explains in great length how meditation works on the body and brain and why physicians increasingly often recommend it.

Stress, in particular work-stress is one of the foremost reasons that leads workers in developed and developing societies alike to search for ways-out and for internal “exhaust valves” to make use of in order to cope with increasing pressure, strains and competition. Meditation is indeed demonstrated, with scientific backing, particularly effective for stress-related conditions.

But meditation is actually much more than an antidote to this modern curse.

Evolved from immemorial traditions in Eastern as well as Western societies -- from the ageless Shamanistic traditions to Vedic, Buddhist, Christian, Cabalistic and Muslim (Sufi) scriptures -- meditation might actually well be the most precious tool in one’s daily struggle for survival and self-surpassing.

In this bold hypothesis, it may be useful to note that as a hotchpotch word, “meditation” nowadays has come to embrace a very heterogeneous group of practices, definitions and concepts, and this mixed-bag status might not help to substantiate the claim that meditation is an underrated tool for self-transformation.

Meditation is often understood, especially in the West, as a highly developed method of relaxation and as a consequence it is generally assumed that rest, relaxation and meditation belong on the same continuum.

But in contrast to a “contemporary”, “consumer” understanding of meditation viewed simply as a relaxation method, there exists a “classical”, traditional idea originated and developed mostly in the East. As explained in a research paper on work-related stress conducted by Dr. R. Manocha and other researchers based in Australia and

France, meditation [in a traditional sense] is a qualitatively unique phenomenon which involves a state of awareness best described as “mental silence” with outstandingly beneficial effects on health and psyche.

The highly developed meditator is not only less stressed and more relaxed but has also activated potential for positive psychology and optimized well-being, the researchers find.

The distinction between the various types of meditation is simplified in terms of a “relaxation” versus “mental-silence” dichotomy. Whether the “former [relaxation-meditation] aims to reduce, simplify and focus mental activity as a kind of therapeutic intervention” the authors state, “the latter [mental-silence meditation] aims to eliminate mental activity altogether (without reducing self-control or alertness) as part of an overarching theme of holistic health and personal development”.

Thus according to Dr. R. Manosha and others, a systematic comparison of these two approaches has the potential to clarify our understandings of meditation and can lead to better informed decision-making when considering therapeutic tools of this nature.

Among the major findings brought forward by the study (a three-arm randomized control trial conducted over an eight-week period on 178 workers in Australia); the fact that both types of meditation generated significant effects in terms of state and trait anxiety, however, the degree of improvement associated with the mental-silence meditation was found “approximately twice as large [in subjective and objective measures] as that of relaxation meditation”. The mental-silence meditation group experienced a significantly larger decrease in occupational stress and personal strain scales as well as in state anxiety. Traditionally accepted physiological parameters of stress (such as galvanic skin resistance, blood lactic acid, heart rate, respiratory rate, etc.) showed gradual improvement both during the meditation and with ongoing practice.

The team of researchers -- whose work is arousing interest in the field of corporate social responsibility and who have conducted and published various other studies including on the effects of meditation on asthma, hypertension and epilepsy -- conclude: “There appears to be a measurable and practical difference between the two different conceptual definitions of meditation... We propose that mental-silence meditation is uniquely beneficial because it both reduces physiological arousal as well as facilitates cognitive behavioural changes [related to perception, learning and reasoning faculties], whereas relaxation meditation appears to act primarily to reduce physiological arousal alone”.

In other words, meditation in any form obviously helps to enhance self-control and concentration but it might well be that some types of meditation can help more than others, especially as regards occupational stress and work-related problems.

The state of mental-silence, or Void, is the ancestral theme of oriental spirituality and a highly prized and deemed as hard-to-reach state in which one’s relentlessly bombarded brain finds unique respite and rejuvenation. Surprisingly, some forms of meditation which focus on attaining this state have made it easily accessible, for example, as used in the above-cited research, *Sahaja Yoga* meditation.

Coming increasingly into the attention of clinical researchers, *Sahaja Yoga* -- from the Sanskrit terms “sahaj” meaning “in-born” or spontaneous and “yoga” meaning union - - is a practical method of meditation primarily aimed at quieting the mind and accessing a higher state of awareness by the awakening of an inner subtler energy known traditionally as *Kundalini*. The awakening of this potential energy that can be experienced during a simple process of meditation, brings meditators effortlessly into a state of mental silence. The meditative experience is characterized by a sensation of normal, or even heightened, alertness yet the meditator is free from any unnecessary mental activity. More precisely, he gains total control over the thought process rather than being subjected to it. As thoughts, which are either futuristic or retrospective lessen, the practitioner’s attention embraces the present moment. A sense of relaxation, positive mood and benevolence follows. The process also helps restore balance in the subtler system of channels and energy centres (*chakras*), bringing about a wide range of benefits.

In terms of study and workplace skills, these gains most commonly translate into clear-headedness and enhanced consciousness, leading to an improvement of the practitioner’s cognitive faculties and concentration power. The mental silence secured during the meditation tames the brainstorm of the mind and opens new doors of perception. Providing an all-round enhancement of self-esteem and well-being, this contemplative state somehow permits optimal performance.

Relieved from the symptoms of stress, the meditator is also able to tolerate higher levels of pressure, his “reset” brain being able to delay the point at which “a traffic jam, for instance, sets the blood boiling”, as the journalist of TIME puts it.

With ongoing practice, a long string of benefits usually follows on the emotional, physical, mental and spiritual levels.

But again, using meditation as a mere work tool would be missing the point. As my former supervisor and dear colleague, Sanitsuda Ekachai, Assistant Editor, *Bangkok Post* comments in her weekly column -- reflecting on the Cabinet’s decision to allow civil servants in Thailand to attend Vipassana meditation retreats 3-5 days a year – “Meditation is ‘in’ now as a mental tool to relieve stress and improve work efficiency. But is this the real goal of meditation in Buddhism?” (Bangkok Post, 22/01/2004) Applauding the decision “although it misses the real meaning of meditation”, Ms. Ekachai explains: “Vipassana frees practitioners to experience for themselves that the mind falls under the law of impermanence, interconnectedness and non-self. The understanding that there is no me or mine to cling to is liberating because it reduces the cycles of mental suffering”.

“Meanwhile, the spiritual realization that we are all interconnected and subject to the same causes of suffering brings forth unbounded loving-kindness, humility and commitment to a non-exploitative life of simplicity and service”.

She concludes: “If we miss this point, Buddha’s precious teachings will be reduced to a mere tool to make people more efficient in their exploitative work...”

If I may, I would only add these well articulated thoughts a practical extension; more than a mental understanding and realization of one’s interconnectedness, this very

integration and “interconnection” should verily take place. It should be a tangible experience, a becoming, an actualization. This living process should occur within one’s awareness and be tangible on one’s central nervous system. Only then will it become reality. This initial spark, and the union (or “yoga”, from the root word “yoke”, “join”) between one’s Self and the All Pervading Energy is precisely what the awakening of the *Kundalini* energy has to offer.

As R. W. Trine, one of the founders of mind sciences so eloquently captured it in his best-seller *In Tune with the Infinite* (1899): “The great central fact in human life is the coming into a conscious vital realization of our oneness with this Infinite Life and the opening of ourselves fully to this divine inflow. In just the degree that we come into a conscious realization of our oneness with the Infinite Life...., do we actualize in ourselves the qualities and powers of the Infinite Life, do we make ourselves channels through which the Infinite Intelligence and Power can work...”

R.W. Trine adds further: “You will exchange disease for ease, in-harmony for harmony, suffering and pain for abounding health and strength. To recognize our own divinity, and our intimate relation to the Universal, is to attach the belts of our machinery to the power house of the universe”.

With this type of fuel, what can be easier than becoming a focused, balanced, loyal and productive worker?

*Notes:* The relaxation-based meditation used in the above-mentioned research is a generic meditation technique based on the relaxation-response concept. It involves a combination of modifying and focusing thinking activity and visualization.

The author of this article, Wanphen L. Sreshthaputra, has been practising Sahaja Yoga meditation for the past 17 years and teaching on an occasional basis. Born in Viet Nam, from a Thai father and French mother, she is a French national brought up and educated in Switzerland and France. Trained as a journalist, she had been working for about 10 years with daily newspapers in France (*Le Progres* ; France' second largest circulation daily) and Thailand (*Bangkok Post*) before joining ESCAP in April 2002. She is a staff of the Emerging Social Issues Division. Among her favourite hobbies are Indian classical dance (*Bharat Natyam*) and water-skiing.

Depending on her availability, she is holding meditation sessions every Monday from 12.15 to 13.00 in ESCAP’s Staff Activity Center (Meeting Room). Staff interested in joining the sessions can contact her by email (*Lotus Notes*) or call outside office hours at 01 824 38 25. Sahaja Yoga is a method of meditation taught free of charge everywhere around the world.