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MAGAZINE

Carey Mulligan

On rebellion, rejection and lucky breaks

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Who do you think you are?

[SPIRITUALITY] When Jane Alexander, a renowned wellbeing author and writer, found herself questioning her beliefs and faith, she went on a Zen Buddhist retreat in search of answers

Spirituality is a part of me; I've spent my entire adult life believing in a meaningful universe, in connection and purpose. I'm the type who trusts the messages on my morning teabag; who can find synchronicity in music playing at the gym. I'm a stargazer, a fire-watcher, a dream-catcher.

I grew up in a house where people debated past lives over breakfast. If you had a headache, you were given a homeopathic pill; if you felt grumpy, you were wound into a yoga pose. Small wonder I've ended up spending the last 25 years reporting on therapies, treatments and retreats for magazines and newspapers. I've written over 20 books on natural health, wellbeing and assorted esoterica, the latest being *Wellbeing & Mindfulness* (Carlton Books, £18.99). How many retreats have I been on? I've lost count, but last year alone I tallied 12 – or was it 13?

However, over the last year or so, the magic drained away to leave a bleak and barren world. It wasn't depression – I've been there and have the black dog's collar to prove it – it

was a deeply unpleasant nihilism. Was it a midlife existential crisis? It seemed so clichéd, I tried to dismiss it as a hormonal hiccup at the onset of menopause. Or perhaps I had simply

“Sure, why not? I thought. I simply couldn't be bothered to say no. After all, what did I have to lose?”

become *too* introspective, spending too many nights staring at stars, lost and dizzy in the vastness of the universe. Whatever it was, I felt so bleak I stopped doing yoga, stopped meditating and stopped looking for signs; I just slumped in front of the TV watching back-to-back repeats of *Grey's Anatomy*, which convinced me even more that we're just bags of bones and flesh fired by neural impulses.

Then my friend Kim challenged me to go on a *Zen Intensive* retreat run by

Daizan Julian Skinner of Zenways. 'It's hardcore,' she said. 'You'll love it and you'll hate it.' She explained that, while most meditation retreats rely on staying in silence with yourself, the Zenways approach is far more active, involving intense self-questioning. It goes far further than the standard relaxing and stress-busting mindfulness that most retreats offer. The weekend aims to 'awaken' you – to help you achieve enlightenment. Yes, as in the Buddha thing. It's a big claim, but Kim said up to half the participants typically 'get it' over the course of the retreat. Was I game, she asked? 'Sure, why not?' I've tried pretty much every kind of meditation and mindfulness going, as well as most types of yoga, therapy and bodywork, but I simply couldn't be bothered to say no. And after all, what did I have to lose? Anything was preferable to *Fifty Shades of meh*.

My room was the first sign that this was about as far from a pampering retreat as it's possible to get. The retreat was being held at a (Christian) monastery and my bedroom was a monk's cell with a narrow bed, desk, >>>

>>> chair and sink – that was it. The retreats are strictly distraction-free: no phone, laptop, books, writing, no sex even (whether with a partner or yourself!), so I switched off my phone and joined the group of 18, an equal mix of men and women, with ages ranging from 20 to 80.

Zen is from a school of Buddhism that developed initially in China before spreading into Japan, Vietnam and Korea. It's considered enigmatic and is well-known for its *koans*, paradoxical questions like 'What is the sound of one hand clapping?' designed to jolt you into fresh ways of seeing yourself and the world. Daizan, a quietly spoken middle-aged man who exuded calm and warmth, said while Zen wants to shake you out of a rut, 'it's not about becoming a monk, or meditating for 12 hours a day. Zen is simply designed to help you see the world with new eyes; to make you happy.'

He explained that we come up with all sorts of strategies to manage conflict and loneliness; that we distract ourselves, not just with TV, the online world or too many glasses of wine; but also with work, families and friends. 'Often, despite having great careers or relationships, we still feel a sense of being alone; of being alienated from the world,' he said. That struck a chord.

Sounds simple but...

We spent the majority of the day in 'Group Sanzen'. It was hard work – we started at 6.30am and finished at 11pm and, even when we weren't sitting in formal practice, Daizan said we should keep focused on the work. The work? Just one simple-sounding question: 'Who am I?' 'It's the most important question a human can ask,' said Daizan. 'It opens up the universe.'

We worked in pairs for 13 sessions a day, sitting opposite one another and taking it in turns to say quietly: 'Tell me who you are.' If you were the one questioning, your job was simply to sit

ASK YOURSELF, 'WHO AM I?'

- Try to practise meditation every day – aim for 25 minutes. In addition, keep the question in mind during your day and come back to it as often as possible.
- Sit in a comfortable position, either on the floor or on a firm chair.
- As you breathe out, ask yourself silently, 'Who am I?'
- As you breathe in, just allow whatever arises – thoughts, memories, perceptions, sensations, theories. Don't censor yourself; just observe each thought, then let it go. Keep returning to the question, 'Who am I?'
- Bear in mind that there is more to you than any theory, any past, any emotion. Who are you really? Keep asking yourself the question. Keep investigating.
- As you come to the end of the session, gently sway your body from side to side. Stretch a little and come to standing.

in silence, in complete acceptance and non-judgment, as a witness. If you were responding, you had to look within and express honestly whatever came up. It felt like therapy but, rather than dwelling on the past or trying to analyse responses, we were encouraged just to observe what emerged, then let it go.

I've always loved silent meditation, but I balked at this. I didn't want to talk about myself. I was bored of me. I was already sure that 'I' wasn't anything other than a mental process. I was convinced that 'god', 'spirit', whatever you call it, was a survival mechanism; that spiritual highs were purely neurochemicals patting us on the mind. But I went along with it for the sake of politeness and all kinds of random memories started popping up; then, bizarrely, physical symptoms. Old aches and pains ambushed me; ancient heartaches, long-forgotten injuries. At one point, I felt a sick crunch and my wrist went weak, as my body

remembered falling off a pony, aged 10. My belly even ballooned and twisted as it revisited my difficult pregnancy. The listening was more illuminating still. In everyday life we bat words around; we barely hear the other person, so busy are we formulating a response. How seldom do we ever feel and *ponder* before we talk? I became entranced by these people – watching their faces and listening to their stories I saw the beauty and magic in each and every one of them as if in super HD, in the closest and clearest focus. It was the most extraordinary blissful and humbling experience.

Did I achieve enlightenment? No. But a fair number of people there did and their faces shone with a truly transcendent joy. Part of me felt happy for them but, I'll be honest, the larger part was seriously hacked off. Some of these people had never even meditated before the weekend, while I've been on this spiritual quest for almost my entire life. How come I didn't get to be enlightened? So I asked myself, 'Who am I?' yet once more and laughed – at my overeager ego, at my competitive striving self and its scrabbling for achievement, for the prize.

The aftermath was interesting. I usually come home from a retreat feeling wildly positive, full of good intentions, fired with resolutions. But this time, I sank into a further slump. Yet, the question remained and I found myself asking it, over and over – and still do, three months later. Sometimes I wake in the night and lie there, quietly breathing, repeating softly, 'Who am I?' Or it will catch me at odd moments during the day. 'Who am I?' I still haven't 'got it' and I certainly haven't become enlightened but, gradually, I've become remarkably calm and peaceful... almost, you might say, Zen.

Zenways runs workshops and intensive retreats and can also put you in touch with a teacher for study and meditation. Tuition on the intensive retreats is by donation and accommodation is low-cost. For details, see zenways.org

