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DISCOVER YOUR *True Self*

People have been using mindfulness to relieve stress for years. Now the buzz is about creating greater self-awareness.

MINDFULNESS HAS gone mainstream. While it's been prescribed for depression by the NHS since 2014, over the past few years it's become a huge industry with many of us turning to it to help deal with stress. With scientific studies backing up many of the benefits, we're becoming more open to alternative ways of relaxing and dealing with anxiety. Zen, which

originates from a school of Buddhism that initially developed in China, is one form of meditation that is now becoming more accessible to Westerners through new teachers.

While most mindfulness and other regular forms of meditation simply aim to relax the body and restore the mind, Zen goes one step further. It helps you realise your true nature: who you really are – what is known as 'awakening' or 'enlightenment'. The aim is not to



become Buddha-like but to have a profound grounding for your life and a calm certainty about who you are which, in turn, removes stress, anxiety, depression and fear.

'Zen can enhance health and vitality – increasing happiness, energy, concentration and problem solving,' says Zen teacher Kim Bennett. 'Those who practice it report less fear and anxiety, and much less depression than those who don't.'

'I've taught all kinds of people: high-flying business owners, actors, teachers, engineers, psychotherapists and working and stay-at-home mothers. They tend to be down-to-earth types who want a no-nonsense way of looking at their lives and effecting change. There's nothing remotely fluffy or New Agey about Zen.'

Research by Emory University in Atlanta, US, suggests that Zen meditation could help treat obsessive-compulsive disorders, anxiety and major depression. 'The regular practice may enhance the capacity to limit the influence of distracting thoughts,' says Emory

Keep a meditation diary. Writing down your thoughts gives you distance and perspective on anything emotional that may have arisen.

University neuroscientist Giuseppe Pagnoni. He found that Zen meditators were more able to control their thoughts.

Daizan Roshi is the founder of Zenways, which teaches Zen meditation via classes, workshops and retreats. He spent years studying in Japan before returning to the UK. 'Zen is the perfect tool for modern life,' he says. 'It's suitable for stressed-out westerners who need to find a source of meaning in their lives. It also builds up physical and emotional strength and energy.'

Even complete novices report huge benefits after doing a retreat that revolves around an active form of meditation known as Sanzen, a self-inquiring part of Zen where you ask yourself one question: Who am I? This is done in a group but you can

also do it by yourself at home. It sounds too simple to be possible but Daizan insists that this question is the most important one a human can ask. He explains that even if we have great relationships and careers, many of us still feel a sense of being alone, of being alienated from the world.

Zen helps you see the world with new eyes; to find your place in it. 'It becomes less 'me against the world' and more 'me in and of the world,' says Kim. 'That, in turn, makes the world a less stressful place to be.'

Although ideally you would practice in a group, Daizan says you can make great progress on your own. 'All you need is a little time,' he says. 'Thirty minutes a day for eight weeks. That's it. You don't need anything else.' See opposite for how to get started...

'SUDDENLY THERE WAS A "POW" MOMENT'

Charlotte Day, 35, from Bournemouth tried a Zenways retreat at Gaunt's House in Dorset.

'I had never practiced meditation before. I was a complete novice, so I had absolutely no expectations before I went. By the second day, I was starting to get annoyed. I felt drained physically and mentally. I couldn't seem to get comfortable and I had problems

letting my emotions come out freely. At one point I really just wanted to go home.

'It was when we did the silent meditation that I really broke through. I sat concentrating on my breathing. Every time I breathed out I would mentally speak out all the negativity that was coming up in my head. This letting-go process grew quickly, building on itself like a snowball.

Suddenly there was a "Pow" moment. I was complete – better than I've ever felt in my life with anything or anyone. It was overwhelming. I burst into tears and ran out of the room.

'It completely changed my outlook on life. I continue to meditate on my own and also with a small group once a week. There are a lot of meditation techniques



out there but most just take you to a peaceful place. This technique fundamentally adjusts your outlook on life, and it takes you there really quickly. I feel incredibly clear now and I have a sense of security inside.'

I was complete and felt better than I've felt in my life with anything or anyone. It was overwhelming.



Sitting meditation is the core of Zen practice. Sitting effectively will encourage good posture and help prevent back pain.

FINDING YOUR SITTING PLACE

Find a position that is comfortable, either on a chair with your feet on the floor, kneeling with your sitting bones (the bones that stick out at the bottom of your pelvis) resting on a cushion, or sitting cross-legged with a cushion under your bottom.

- Create a stable triangular base with your lower body, meaning there are three points anchored to the floor: chair and feet, or buttocks and feet or knees. Make sure your knees are separated and the weight of your upper body is supported by your ischia, the two sitting bones in the base of your pelvis. Sway a little from side-to-side, forwards and backwards to find your position of natural uprightness. Your spine should adopt its natural curves.

- Relax your shoulders and let your hands sit in your lap. Imagine you have a string at the top of your head, gently pulling your spine upright.

- You can either shut your eyes or have them gently downcast.

- Rest the tip of your tongue against the roof of your mouth.

- Relax your body. Allow your breathing to be natural. Feel the rising and sinking of the breath in your belly. You are now ready to begin Sanzen.

MEDITATION WITH A QUESTION

Practice Sanzen every day aiming for 30 minutes. Start with 15 minutes if you're pressed for time.

- Sit in a comfortable position and breathe naturally.

- As you breathe out, ask yourself silently, 'Who am I?'

- As you breathe in, just allow whatever arises

to come up. You may notice thoughts, memories, perceptions, sensations and theories. Don't censor yourself.

Just observe each thought and then let it go. Return to the question.

- There is more to you than any theory, any past and any emotion. Who are you really? Continue asking yourself the question.

■ At the end of the meditation, gently sway your body side-to-side. Stretch a little bit. Slowly come up into standing.

■ Keep the question in mind throughout your day, coming back to it during quiet moments or as you go about your daily routine.

THE PRACTICE OF PRESENCE

Do this meditation technique instead of or as well as Sanzen for optimum de-stressing. Set a gentle alarm on your phone (maybe a chime) so you know when you have done 25 minutes. Don't focus on your breathing or any question, just stay 100 per cent present regardless of whatever arises and passes away.

'I HAD SOME EXTRAORDINARY INSIGHT INTO MYSELF'

Top Santé writer Jane Alexander attended a weekend intensive retreat at The Mirfield Monastery in Yorkshire.

'Every day during the retreat we had 13 sanzen sessions in which we would sit in pairs asking the question 'Who am I?' while the other person sat and listened. I found old memories and emotions coming up but we were encouraged not to psychoanalyse ourselves – rather to observe the feelings, thoughts and memories and then move on.

'Sometimes, insights took me by surprise and at some points I felt old pains coming up in my body. I felt the asthma I'd had as a teenager, the sudden pain of a broken wrist, the discomfort and bloated feeling of pregnancy. It was very strange, unlike anything I have ever done before.

'When we weren't doing sanzen, we had sessions of silent meditation (zazen), walking meditation, breathing meditation and exercise. Days started at 6am and didn't finish until 11pm,



during which we didn't talk (outside of sanzen) so it's not for the faint-hearted.

'I didn't achieve 'enlightenment', sadly, (although many people did) on my weekend but I did gain a deep sense of calmness. I had some extraordinary insights into myself and also learned how to listen without judgment or jumping in to tell "my side of the story". I will definitely go back.'

■ Come into your sitting place. Relax your body. Allow your breathing to be natural. Feel the rising and sinking of the breath in your belly.

■ Sit and allow thoughts, feelings, emotions, anything at all to come up and then pass. For now, you can just be. There is nothing to do, nothing to chase after. Just relax. Don't hold on to thoughts and develop them. Let things go, they are not you.

■ As you go through your day, come back to this sense of presence as much as you can. Allow things to arise and pass and just deal with what's necessary. How simple and straightforward can your life be? How clear, open and enjoyable can it be?

FURTHER INFORMATION

Zenways run workshops and intensive retreats and can also put you in touch with a teacher for Zen study and meditation. Call 01698 542677 or visit www.zenways.org
Kim Bennett runs Serenity Retreat. Visit www.serenityretreat.co.uk

CAUTION: ALTHOUGH EVERYONE CAN BENEFIT FROM ZEN, IF YOU SUFFER FROM SCHIZOPHRENIA OR PARANOIDIA, YOU NEED INDIVIDUAL AND SPECIALISED HELP. CONTACT ZENWAYS FOR ADVICE

PRACTICE THE HACHI DANKEN

Moving meditation is also a part of Zen. This series of exercises is known as Hachi Danken or the '8 silk brocades'. Research shows it strengthens the body and can help prevent bone loss. It also has an uplifting effect on the mind.



1 Stand with feet shoulder-width apart. Knees are soft and shoulders, relaxed. Bring your hands up over your head, palms facing up. Push upwards as you breathe out. As you breathe in, lower your hands so they're just over your head. Repeat, eight times.

2 Bring your arms out to the sides. Your index fingers should point straight up, while your thumbs are pointing forwards. As you breathe out, push out so you stretch across the chest. As you breathe in, soften the stretch. Repeat eight times.



3 Stretch your right arm up, with your palm facing up while your left hand reaches down, with your palm facing down. Imagine you're a rubber band being pulled. Breathe out as you stretch your arms apart and breathe in as you contract. Repeat this four times each side.



4 Have your arms stretched out in front of you at shoulder height, with your palms facing out, fingers pointing up. Turning to the right, breathe out and push away. As you breathe in, return to centre. Now do the same on the other side. Repeat four times on each side.



5 Bend your knees slightly more and make your hands into fists (fingers facing up) either side of your body. Bring your right hand forwards, turning your fist so the fingers face down as you breathe out. Breathe in as you bring your fist back to your side (fingers facing back up position). Repeat on the other side and alternate four times.

6 With weight on your left foot and the toes of your right just touching the floor, bring your arms up above you. As you breathe out, bend to the right. As you breathe in, come back to centre. Change feet and repeat on the other side. Alternate four times on each side.



7 Swing your hands down in front of you in an energetic movement, so they sweep over the floor as you breathe out. Bend your knees as do this. Bring them up behind your head as you breathe in. You're making big circles. Do this eight times.



8 With your hands in the small of your back on your kidneys, shake your body loose as you breathe out, making the movement from your legs. Stand still as you breathe in. Repeat eight times.

