

taming the monkey mind

Buddhist-style meditation is shaking off its hippie image and gaining credence as an alternative to conventional medicine. **Kathy Phillips** meets the converts for whom the silent treatment has had startling effects. Illustration by **Brett Ryder**

A traditional Sussex GP maintains that it is the future; a committed Christian nurse from Somerset now thinks nothing of a week-long silent retreat; a diabetic former City whiz-kid found it changed his life. Meditation, with its roots in ancient Buddhist traditions, is emerging from the alternative fringe and being taken increasingly seriously in some quarters of the medical establishment.

People used to think that a life of contemplation – along with meditation and rhythmic chanting and the whole of Eastern philosophy in general – was a lot of mystical mumbo jumbo. In some cases, apart from seeming risible and somewhat pagan, meditation was equated with suppression and passivity, simply a religious ritual for the flock. But there is nothing sheeplike in today's interest in the subject. Meditation is now used to treat everything from chronic ailments, stress and skin disorders to depression, cancer and degenerative diseases.

Although some scientists still dismiss the surprising results of healing meditation as 'placebo effects' – the Prince of Wales's speech to the World Health Assembly last month calling for the integration of conventional and alternative

medicine sparked exactly that response – its supporters are pointing to a growing body of research in its favour.

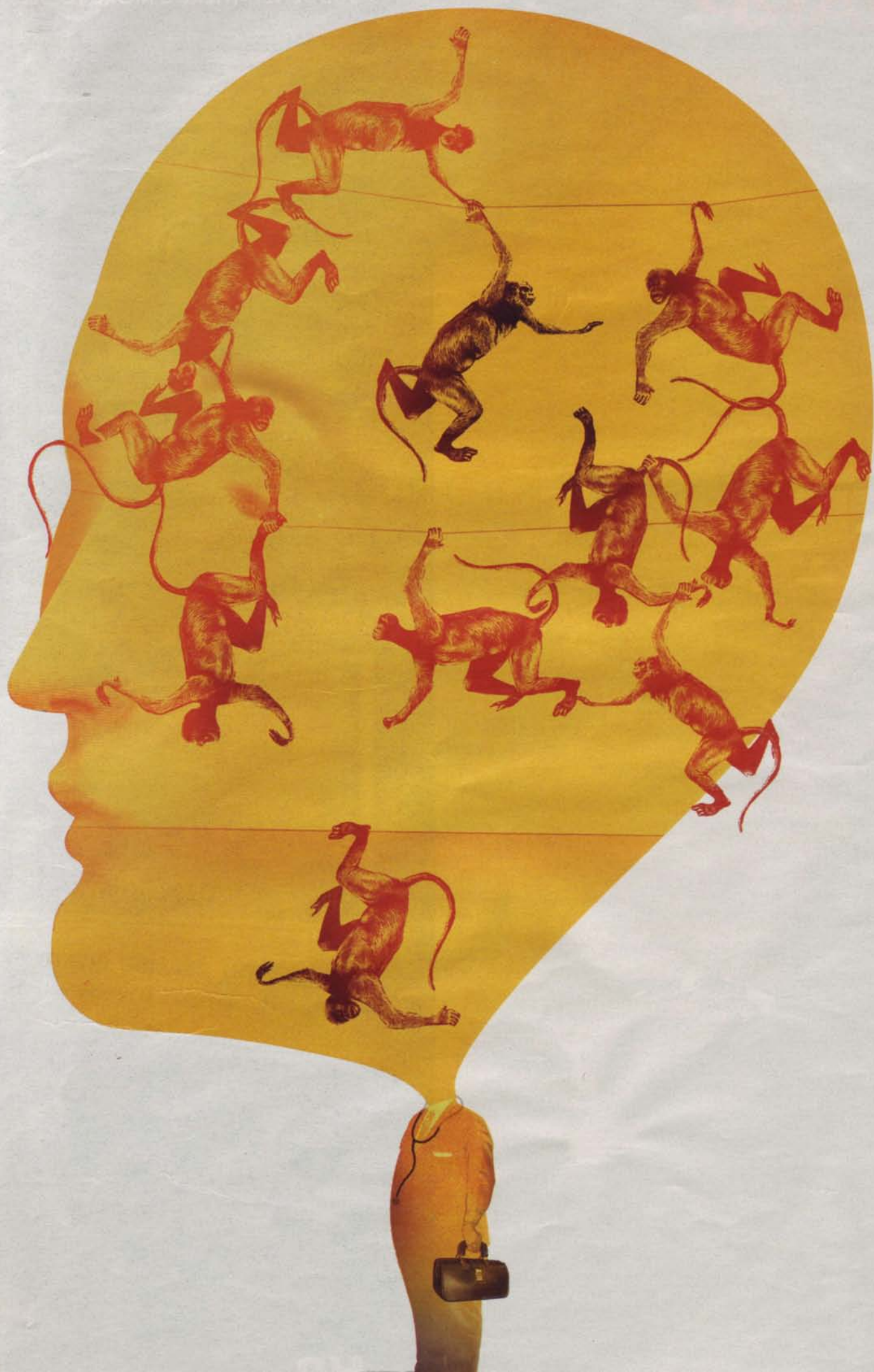
Scientists are using brain imaging and blood tests to study the biological effects of meditation. Quantum physicists have published measurements of the increase of gamma waves in the frontal lobe of long-term Buddhist meditators in comparison with those of novice meditation students – gamma waves are at the frequency we need to make new connections in the brain. In some cases changes in both physical and psychological health appear within days of first starting the practice.

The results of a study carried out last year at Massachusetts General Hospital suggest that people who meditate regularly appear to undergo changes in parts of the brain that handle perception and attentiveness. The study sample was small, and it is unclear what the changes may mean, but researchers said that when they compared MRI scans of people who meditated with those of people who did not, they found more grey matter in the frontal cortices of those who meditate – which means, effectively, that they had grown bigger brains.

Candace Pert, the eminent neuroscientist who proved how emotions cause biological changes in the body which in turn can cause disease, took up meditation and yoga herself as a result of her studies. 'Every motion of your digestion is coloured by the molecules of your emotions,' she says. 'It's not just psychological, it's biochemical.' This means that feelings of anger, desire and addiction, for example, set off a habitual reaction in the brain which in turn sets off a cascade of biochemical events, some of which result in changes to the nucleus of the cells. Currently working on a pharmaceutical way to cut off the habitual reaction at the receptor sites in the brain, Dr Pert worked out that cutting off the emotions through detachment, relaxation, concentration and mindfulness would be beneficial to her own health. The obvious ways to do that? Meditation and yoga.

Guy Burgs is a meditation teacher who trained in Asia for 12 years under several venerable spiritual teachers, including three years as an ordained monk in Burma. He now works in the UK and in Bali where he has built a specialised retreat and clinic. 'People are more informed than ever but they are sicker than ever,' he says. 'In the space of only six years, I'm seeing people with more chronic ailments and more toxicity in the blood,

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more cancer and more depression.' His meditation courses are based on the Buddhist concept of living in the moment, aware and focused, but without judgement. But he also teaches a specific 'healing' meditation taught to him from old Balinese Sanskrit texts. 'There is a point,' he says, 'that the meditation engages with the sickness actively rather than passively.'

Our general response to illness is a mental one – stress, worry and tension combined with a tight chest, bad breathing and constriction of the heart. 'Meditation healing is a parasympathetic response through good breathing,' Burgs explains, 'focused on the "out" breath, which in turn affects the autonomic response in the body, which kicks in and heals itself. A sort of internal alchemy.'

Echoing Dr Pert's observations, Burgs maintains that 'the quality of your consciousness affects the biorhythms of your body.' Put another way, you can reconfigure the software part of the package of your body and reorganise the energy by simply letting go.

Just to sit and 'be' is not that easy. It takes practice and a good teacher simply to learn how to sit up straight without strain for periods of 40 minutes at a time, and to breathe evenly and well. But it is this attentiveness and quietness that can lead to the deeper and transformational quality of the process. Learning to tame what the Buddhists call our 'monkey mind' – the internal chaos that keeps us flitting back and forwards, obsessing about the minutiae of life – can be frustrating and elusive.

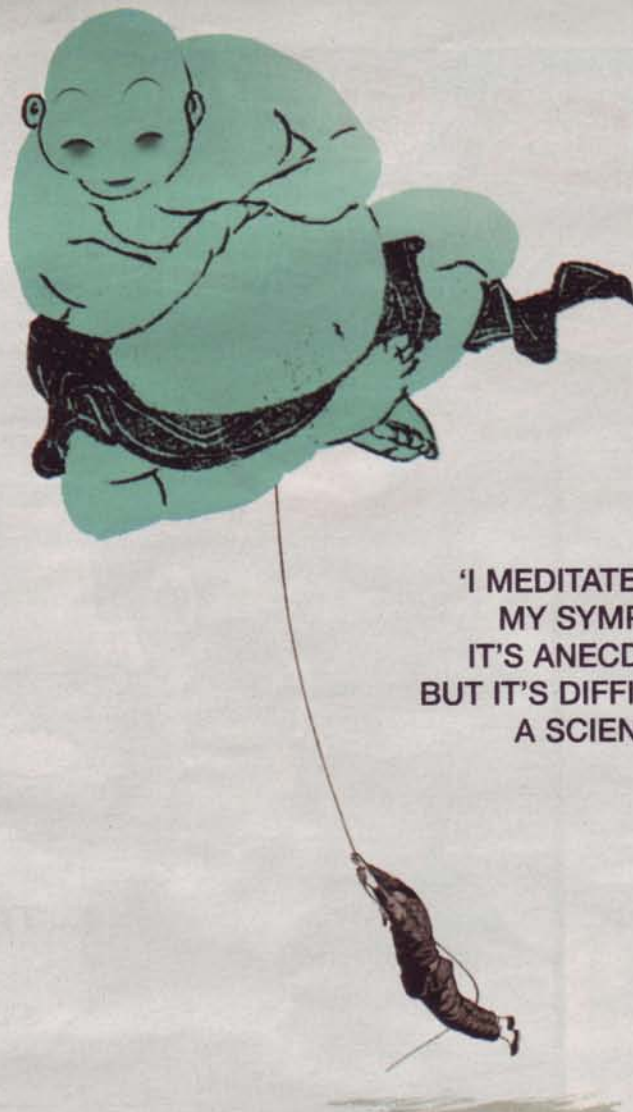
Beginners to meditation will notice their mind regularly wandering back to the past and forward to the future: 'I'll never be able to do this'; 'My hips are killing me'; 'How much longer?'; 'What am I going to cook for dinner?' and so on. 'You must allow for the transience of each thought like bubbles forming in a pot of water or weather patterns in the sky. It's an important part of the learning process,' says Dr Jon Kabat-Zinn, who has developed a technique called mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR).

Sometimes merely turning up knowing nothing can lead to surprises. Alex Coombe, 30, went to a Burgs course just because his life was in a mess and he had heard about it through a friend of a friend. The fact that he was diabetic was not what he was there for. He had been on insulin since the age of three. However, after two days of meditation he was able to lower his normal dose. After a week he was finding that he could go for several days without insulin at all. For him it was a surprising by-product of the process.

'Any doctor under 40 who trained at the British medical school has covered holistic approaches to medicine, including meditation,' says Susan Horsewood Lee, an independent GP working in Chelsea. 'They are woven into the syllabus. But meditation can be a tricky one to initiate. It is not something a patient can do long-distance or by reading a book, and if you're from a small mining town in the Midlands, say, your doctor can discuss it as an option but may not know where to send you.'

Those already on the meditation path need no equipment other than self-discipline. Ultimately the practice of good breathing and meditation becomes a way of life and a daily occurrence. 'Every exhalation brings you down to quiet and rootedness,' Mary Stewart, a yoga teacher with more than 40 years' experience, says. 'It shows you how to be in the moment.'

At Stanford University in California, the psychologist Philippe Goldin encourages patients with



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'social anxiety disorder' to take 'meaningful pauses' throughout the day as a way to monitor their fears and doubts and gain inner control. In another study in Indiana, women with obesity problems found that meditation, including special eating meditations (slowly savouring the flavour of a piece of cheese, for example), helped to reduce binge tendencies. John Teasdale from Oxford University and Mark Williams at Cambridge, working with Zindel Segal, a professor of psychiatry at the University of Toronto, have been teaching mindfulness techniques along with conventional cognitive therapy to patients suffering from depression. They have found that a large percentage taught to observe sadness or happiness without judgement recovered from a depressive period and remained stable, without relapse for more than a year.

The biological impact of meditation is the next frontier in scientific research. In a study published several years ago, Dr Kabat-Zinn, using MBSR for a randomised clinical trial, found that when patients with psoriasis listened to meditation tapes during ultraviolet-light therapy they healed about four times faster than a control group. Hopefully, according to Guy Burgs, people will realise that this tool can also be a way of preventing illness. 'Essentially the body has all the right information,' he says, 'although sadly in many cases people ignore it until they become really sick and then turn to meditation as a last resort.'

'When illness occurs, it's a wake-up call, I suppose,' says Louise Strachan, a retired nurse from Somerset, who was diagnosed with colon cancer in August 2004. 'You either respond or you don't. My son persuaded me to do the healing

meditation course and I put my chemo off for a week to do it. It was hard work and if anyone had said I'd be meditating at any time I would have laughed.' The cancer had spread out of the colon and into the lymph nodes. The doctors had offered palliative care after chemotherapy but said that was all they could do.

Strachan's scans have been clear since last Christmas, and she feels incredibly well. 'I hesitate to say I sailed through the chemo,' she says, 'but the meditation and chi kung classes as part of Burgs's course helped tremendously – and I'm a committed Christian.' Chi kung is quite simply the cultivation of 'chi' or the life-force within the body. It was first practised by Chinese doctors as far back as 200bc and is still used in Chinese hospitals today as a slow exercise system, paying attention to each muscle movement and using the breath rhythmically to reactivate the energy systems of the body naturally and without force. Incidentally, Strachan's oncologist volunteered no opinion on her treatment and gave the OK to the ancient Oriental gold-based medicine that Burgs uses for some patients during their treatment. 'His attitude was that the damage was done and that no diet would make any difference,' says Strachan, who also cut out dairy, red meat and acidic foods such as tomato and citrus fruits. 'The doctors weren't so much negative as indifferent. Eighteen months on, I get the feeling from my consultant that he doesn't dare to acknowledge what has happened.'

'I was completely thrown by meditation,' says the Sussex GP John Simmons, who has already integrated complementary treatments such as

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acupuncture into his practice and is involved in the Prince of Wales's Foundation for Integrated Health. 'I had never meditated before I met Burgs but I fell ill,' he says. 'I'd used acupuncture for things like tennis elbow, frozen shoulder and osteoarthritis with good results, so I was interested in the idea of meditation as another complementary option. Obviously when I got ill, I pursued the conventional route first.'

With symptoms of dizziness, blurred vision in the right eye, headache, fatigue and jelly legs, Dr Simmons eventually went for an MRI scan, which diagnosed a primary inflammatory brain disorder. 'It wasn't multiple sclerosis,' he says, 'but there were all the signs of it and I knew, as a doctor, that there was no medical treatment available. I had a statistical indication of the prognosis of my illness and in some ways it was nice to have a label to it. But that didn't help me understand why, with everything in my life going for me, this had happened. A combination of meditation, acupuncture, chi kung and looking at my diet has changed my life. It's just unbelievable. For the first three days of the week-long course with Burgs, I never thought I would make it. My back hurt from the sitting, my legs hurt, it was excruciating. I went not knowing anything about Buddhism but at every opportunity and at every level Burgs answered all my questions. Crucially my symptoms got 80 to 90 per cent better, and six months down the line, I meditate for 40 to 45 minutes every day and my symptoms go away. It's anecdotal evidence, yes, but it's difficult for me as a scientist to ignore it.'

Many people get to meditation through yoga; they want to go further. For the yoga teacher Katy Appleton, the radical experience at a full-on Indian ashram was also life-changing. 'I was taken ill in India and couldn't make it to the Iyengar Institute as planned,' she says. 'I found myself in Pune, southern India, and went to another ashram, OSHO, instead. After five weeks I was absolutely amazed at how transformed I was. I had been really sick with a stomach bug and was generally exhausted after a stressful year working in London. After the meditation course I felt abundant with a real sense of serenity and joy,' she says. 'In terms of being a teacher, it has made me feel in a far better position to pass that on. What has amazed me is that often I would make vital decisions in life based on

the 650,000 thoughts we have a day just constantly playing like a film that has no end. Taking the time out to sit, close my eyes and go inwards, allows me to create a distance from this chatter. Now I not only teach a weekly class, I incorporate it into my daily practice.'

Controversial as it may seem, part of the process of healing, according to Burgs's technique, is to take accountability for the situation you are in, to understand the role you have played in being ill. This is similar to the concept of self-responsibility in cognitive therapy. 'This is a difficult one,' Dr Horsewood Lee says. 'I think it's simpler for someone to accept taking responsibility for their healing than to feel blame for what has happened.'

'You have to put the pain into the equation,' Burgs says, 'and then you have to let it go. Then the meditation will reorganise the energies. Basically, it's like defragging the hard drive. How can we ignore the impact of the mind? It is, after all, running the show. The difficulty with meditation is that it isn't instant gratification. You can't see immediately how good it is for you. And in order to pull out sickness or the propensity for sickness at a deeper than cellular level you have to have a deep foundation of serenity. People usually leave it too long. But I have seen people in hospital on morphine on demand that have got better. And I've seen real positive energy changes in a week. With meditation, you're either going to do it or you're not. It's degeneration or enlightenment. Your teacher will give you the tools and then it's up to you.'

Meditation and healing with Burgs

in the UK and Bali (one-day workshop, £75, June 18, at Columbia Hotel, London W2): justletgo.org

Katy Appleton 020-8788 8892; appleyoga.com

Jon Kabat-Zinn is inviting 'leaders and innovators in business and non-profit organisations' to take part in a meeting from October 27 to November 1 at Menia Mountain Retreat, three hours north of New York. Center for Mindfulness at mindfulness@umassmed.edu or 00 1 508 856 1097.

OSHO in Pune, India, where Katy Appleton did the vipassana silent meditation for three days and then daily meditations: osho.com.

British Society of Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies babcp.com; 01254-875277