

**Om is where I want to be: Enlightenment doesn't come easily, fidgety reporter discovers at meditation workshop**

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Laundry . . . Dry-cleaning . . . Deadlines . . .

Did I lock the door this morning?

I wonder how many calories are in a caramel macchiato.

These are some of the thoughts swirling in my head while I'm supposed to be "contemplating the nature of my mind" at a three-day meditation retreat in Calgary at the local Akshobya Kadampa Buddhist Centre.

Led by Buddhist monk Gen Kelsang Phuntsog, it's been a day of meditating, resting, chanting prayers, sitting in silence and meditating some more. Still, my mind is as busy as ever.

Clearly, I have a long way to go before reaching spiritual enlightenment.

My 14 fellow participants, however -- all seasoned meditators -- seem incredibly enlightened already. Perched on pillows on the floor or seated in chairs, they make the process of visualization and relaxation appear absolutely effortless.

In reality, it takes time, patience and self-discipline to perfect this skill. Contrary to some misconceptions, people who practise meditation are not tree-huggers-turned-zombies. Far from it.

This one eclectic group contains an aspiring documentary filmmaker, an accountant, a lawyer, a grad student and a yoga teacher -- people of varying backgrounds, ages and walks of life.

One thing many meditators have in common is they often turn to meditation following a life-altering event such as losing a job, the death of a loved one or serious illness.

Scientific research has shown meditation can reduce stress levels and chronic pain, providing relief for physical ailments, says Sarah Nesbitt, education co-ordinator at the Kadampa Centre.

"Our society experiences great isolation and we are often unable to connect with other people.

"There are some things we suffer here that are very unique to the West -- fearing that we're not good enough or not being able to talk to people," explains Nesbitt.

"Meditation can help to develop a sense of clarity and confidence in yourself."

Meditation has been practised for thousands of years, with most forms rooted in the religions of India, China, and Japan.

A mind-body technique that induces a state of mental and physical calm, meditation is an approach to living that western medicine has only recently begun to recognize as a powerful tool for dealing with physical and psychological conditions.

In the context of meditation, Buddhism can be interpreted as a form of cognitive psychology and a way of life, rather than a religion.

"We speak about Buddha, but concepts and ideas are open and we don't require that you choose to believe or follow Buddha," says Nesbitt.

"People have found (meditation) compatible with their own faiths and backgrounds.

"One of our most dedicated meditators is atheist."

There are numerous forms of meditation, but its effect on the body and end goal are the same.

In teaching people how to take control over their experiences, meditation can decrease anxiety and depression, improve learning ability and memory, and lower the heart rate, cholesterol levels and blood pressure.

At the University of Calgary, recent research studies have shown meditation leads to significant improvements in overall quality of life, reduction of stress symptoms and better sleep quality for patients with breast and prostate cancer.

Group meditation programs are offered through U of C's Faculty of Continuing Education, the Grace Women's Health Centre, Alberta Children's Hospital and the Tom Baker Cancer Centre.

Focusing on "mindfulness-based stress reduction," the programs consist of body-awareness exercises, meditation and yoga, to help individuals deal more effectively with stress, illness and the demands of daily life.

Rooted in the tradition known as vipassana, meditation is a way of learning to live in the present moment, rather than in the past or the future.

Shaun Hunter, 43, is a skin cancer survivor who has been meditating in the programs since she was first diagnosed three years ago.

"Normally I would have dismissed meditation as being flaky," she says. "But everything changes when things strike out of the blue."

Soon after her diagnosis, a close friend was diagnosed with breast cancer. And the week Hunter started her meditation program, the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks took place.

"My life had spun out of control, I was watching my friend's life spin out of control and now the whole world was spinning out of control. I didn't have the tools to deal with it at the time."

Hunter readily admits that sometimes, she too thinks about laundry when she's supposed to be meditating. But she has noticed higher energy levels, a strengthened immune system and, most important, a new take on life since she started this quiet practice.

The ability of the mind to create positive and negative experiences for ourselves is a powerful concept. For some, meditation provides a chance of grasping whatever true happiness is.

"The person who stops to help the accident victims at the side of the road doesn't see the same scenario as the person who angrily leans on the horn," explains Gen Phuntsog.

"If you don't know how to change the way you relate to something, you're caught in a trap."