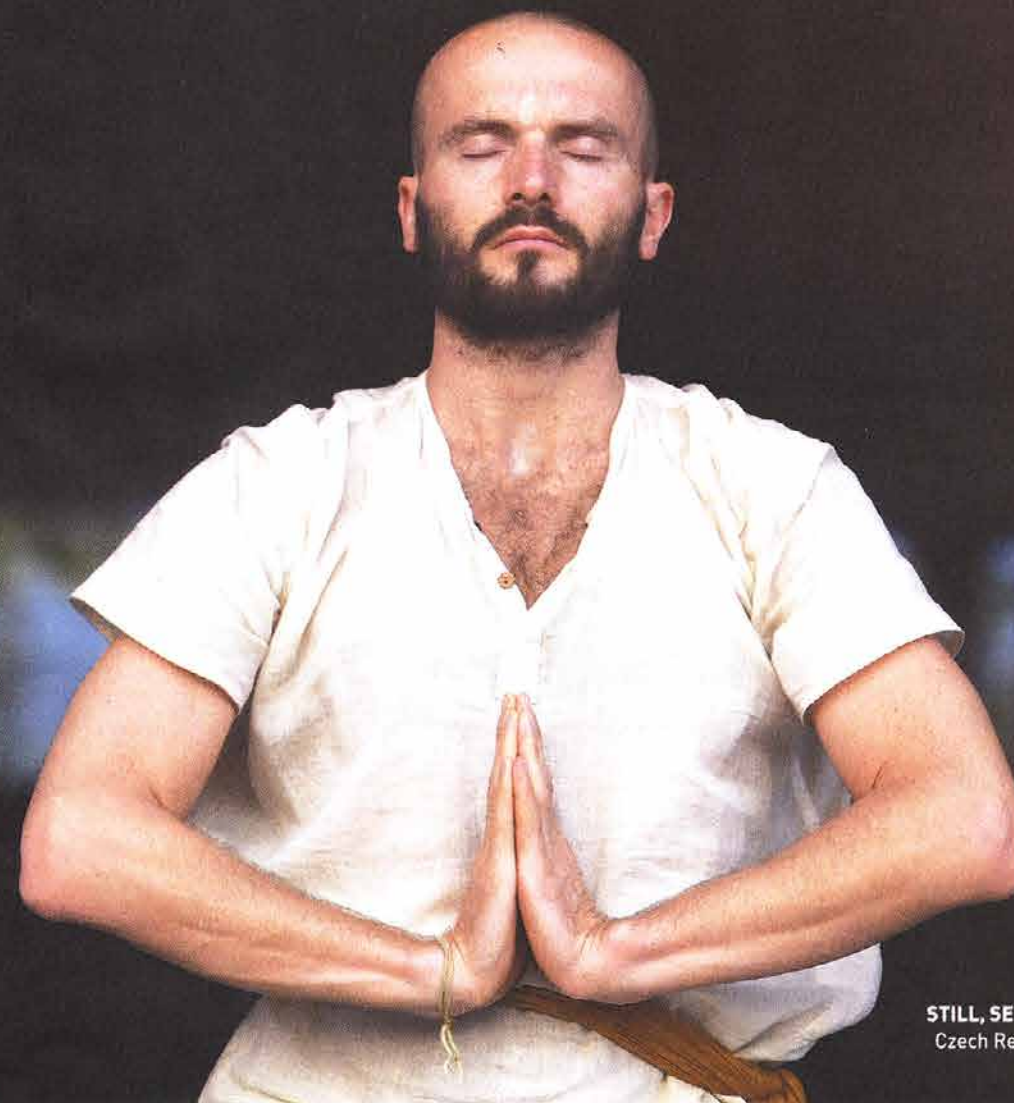


COVER STORY

BHANU PRAKASH CHANDRA



STILL, SEEKER: Jan Novak from Czech Republic at the Isha Yoga Center in Coimbatore

INTO THE DEPTHS OF OUR MIND

Peace of mind, perhaps, is what the heart desires the most in today's fast-paced world. But all you need to do is look within. Practitioners of meditation tell you how

BY MINI P. THOMAS

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it is twilight, and all you have for company is the calming hum of mantras. As the chants permeate the air, you feel like you are back in an age of seers. An urban seeker doesn't really miss anything at the Isha Yoga Center in Coimbatore. It offers a pleasant blend of aesthetics, comfort and serenity to soothe tired souls. Meditators have a lot to explore and experience in this spiritual haven, nestled in the foothills of the Velliangiri hills. Dhyanalinga, a yogic temple in the ashram consecrated by Jaggi Vasudev, well-known as Sadhguru, is believed to be a powerful energy centre. "Take a dip in the *theerthakund* and then sit in the Dhyanalinga for one or two hours. Don't believe or disbelieve anything. It will change the way you are," says Sadhguru. "You get into a deep state of meditateness, without any instruction, without any external help or knowledge. Just by your own nature."

Then there is the Shoonya meditation programme, which equals three hours of good sleep. "With Shoonya meditation what happens is that your metabolic activity drops by nearly 20-24 per cent, which is the highest drop that can happen in a conscious state. This means for 15 minutes you are almost in a state of hibernation. So the amount of rejuvenation that happens in the system, the amount of exchange of impurities that happens on the cellular level is tremendous," explains Sadhguru.

Meditation is nothing but creating a distance with the activity of the mind so it doesn't bother you, says Sadhguru. "Body is here. Mind is out there. Be a little away from the mind. A little space between you and the mind—that is being meditative. If you create a distance with the activity of the mind, it will not bother you," he says.

Include meditation in your routine; it will allow you to blossom, says Sadhguru. "Today, there is substantial medical and scientific evidence to show that if you go through 24 hours without a moment of anxiety, anger and agitation, your ability to use your intelligence can go up by 100 per cent," he says.

Who doesn't want to be more intelligent! Among those who sit in a state of meditative bliss at the Dhyanalinga, there are millennials, scientists and researchers. People sitting with their eyes closed, in a state of meditative bliss, is a familiar sight in India, not just in ashrams but also in parks and local trains. The ancient art of connecting with one's inner self has become the lifeline for modern man. Busy CEOs and executives keep visiting ashrams. Some have quit their high-profile jobs and chosen to be full-time volunteers.

Minu Saroj, 23, from Pune who now lives in an ashram says that after she started doing the Inner Engineering programme, she no longer needs an external source to be happy. Earlier, she would go on a vacation and be happy for a few days. "Meditation made me realise that there is an ocean of bliss inside me," says Saroj.

Why are people drawn to ashrams and exotic meditation destinations? What is it about meditation that fills people with bliss and a sense of well-being? Could it just be a placebo effect?

The Dalai Lama helped neuroscientists crack this riddle. He invited



SENTHIL M.

*Meditation
is a deep
sleep with
awareness
that allows
us to be more
functional in
our day-to-
day life.*

Dinesh Kashikar
Teacher, Art of Living
Foundation

them to study the brain of Buddhist monks, following which Richard J. Davidson, a renowned professor of psychology and psychiatry at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, took Buddhist meditators from Dharamsala to his laboratory. Among them, there were monks who had more than 30,000 hours of meditation practice, novice meditators and lay practitioners. Davidson had electrodes strapped to their heads and did an MRI scan. The imaging studies showed that meditation had made structural and functional changes in the brains of long-term practitioners. Their brain scans showed cognitive and emotional benefits. Davidson enumerates the positive residual effects of meditation: "Scientific research on meditation clearly indicates that brain circuits important for the regulation of attention and regulation of emotion can be altered by meditation practice. These changes are associated with higher levels of well-being."

Davidson, who got interested in meditation in the 1960s and has visited India, did numerous studies on Buddhist monks that showed how meditation can change the brain. "Collectively these findings suggest that the neural circuits important for well-being exhibit plasticity and can be transformed through meditation," he says.

For those who fantasise meditating at an exotic location, Ananda-In the Himalayas could be the perfect choice. This wellness centre in

the foothills of the Himalayas, surrounded by greenery, lulls you into a meditative state and the clean mountain air fills you with energy. The meditation instructors here focus on techniques for relaxation and to improve well-being. "We teach Yoga Nidra. It is a psychic sleep where we guide the practitioner to relax the physical body and go into the deeper layers of the mind. That gives you a deep relaxation within half an hour. It is a beautiful technique that internalises the awareness," says Sandeep Agarwalla, head, yoga and meditation, Ananda-In the Himalayas.

The art of well-being has a

COVER STORY

MINDFUL GAMES

Perhaps the oldest and most common spiritual and mental practice, meditation is diverse and involves training of the mind

The word meditation is derived from the latin word *meditatio*, which means 'think, contemplate or devise'. The actual practice differs from belief to belief, where an individual singularly focuses to train the mind to any particular end

TYPES

Focused attention

Seeks to enhance concentration

100% focus on a particular goal

Constant mental effort

Mindfulness

Allows the mind to roam free

Being aware of the happenings around

Non-judgmental third-person perspective

Effortless transcending

Emptying of the mind

The mind becomes silent and blank

Helps the mind become aware of deep states of consciousness

BENEFITS

The benefits of meditation are manifold. The most common ones are:

Boosts concentration

Lowers stress and anxiety

Boosts creativity

Improves mental stability and strength

Builds personality and character

Improves organ functioning

Disease resistance and treatment

Enhances brain activity

Controls addictions

Better inter-personal relationships

MEDITATION SCIENCE

A branch of science that studies the psychological and physiological effects of meditation

The lack of reliable studies, since it began in the 1950s, often resulted in flawed results

In 2013, researchers at Johns Hopkins were the first to provide conclusive scientific proof that meditation had

medical qualities

Instruments such as fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) and EEG have been used to measure brain and bodily changes caused by meditation

MEDITATION TECHNIQUES

Shoonya meditation

This is an effortless process of conscious non-doing. The practice stimulates the

release of physical, mental and emotional blocks and lead to a deep sense of inner well-being.

Sahad Samadhi meditation

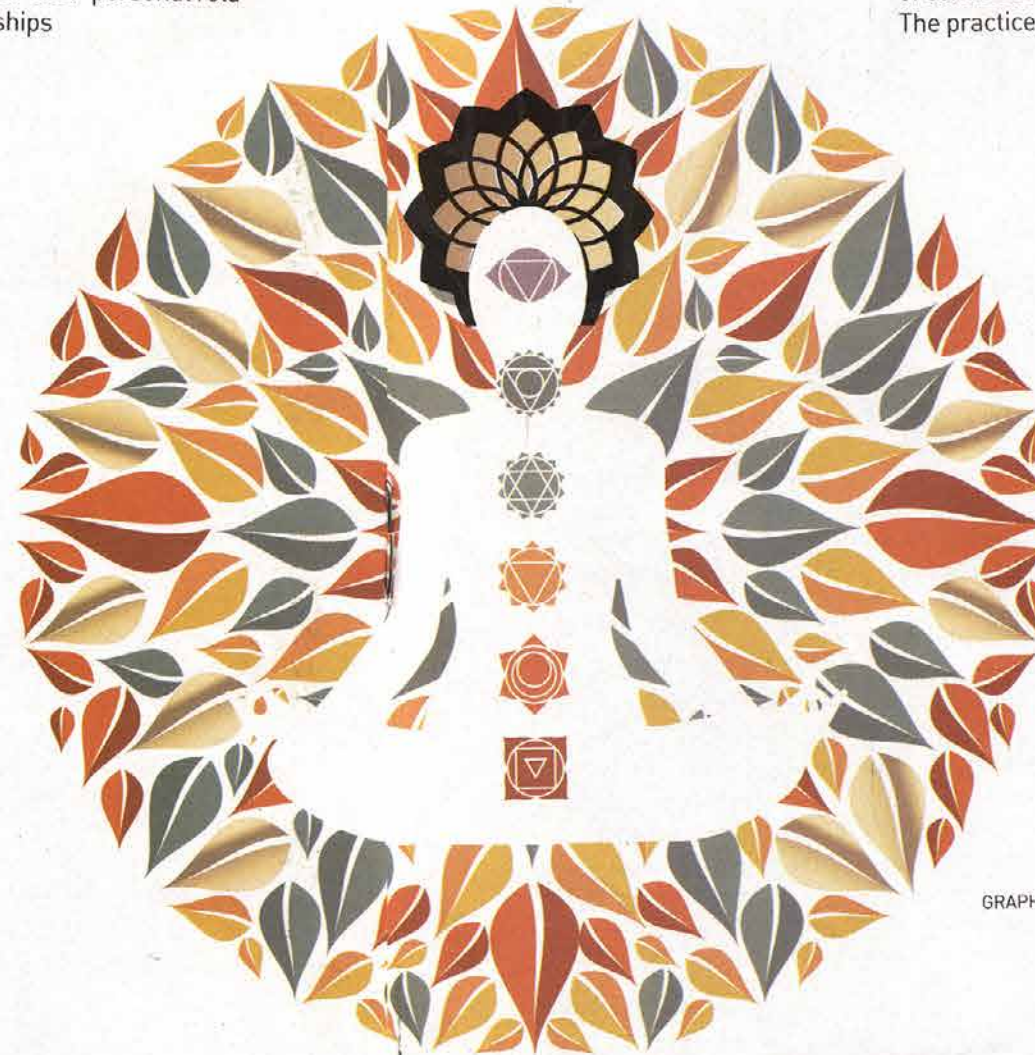
It is a mantra meditation that can be done in 20 minutes. With attention on a given mantra, the individual will be able to attain a state of peace. The mantra helps free the mind from repetitive thoughts. It is good for people with anxieties and phobias.

Inner Engineering programme

This programme involves shambhavi mahamudra kriya, a purifying energy technique that uses the breath. This practice aligns your entire system so that your body, mind and emotions function in harmony. Improves productivity and efficiency.

Heartfulness meditation

This heart-based practice combines relaxation, meditation with yogic asmission, rejuvenation and contemplation. There are more than 7,000 heartfulness meditation trainers in 130 countries.



GRAPHICS: DENI LAL; RESEARCH: REUBEN JOE JOSEPH, MINI P. THOMAS

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Interview/Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev,
spiritual guru

I DON'T MEDITATE

Why is an erect spine important in meditation?

When there is an upward movement of energy or a surge of energy within you, it is best to keep your spine in a vertical posture.

One significant development in the evolutionary process is the formation of the spine. The horizontal spine became vertical. The cerebral flower blossomed only after the spine became vertical. Through meditation, we are trying to raise human beings to the highest possible level. When you are in a horizontal position, energies generated within the system will not work. They will go waste. They may also work negatively.

In the yogic system, there are several *yogis* who never lie down. They keep their spine in a vertical position even when they sleep.

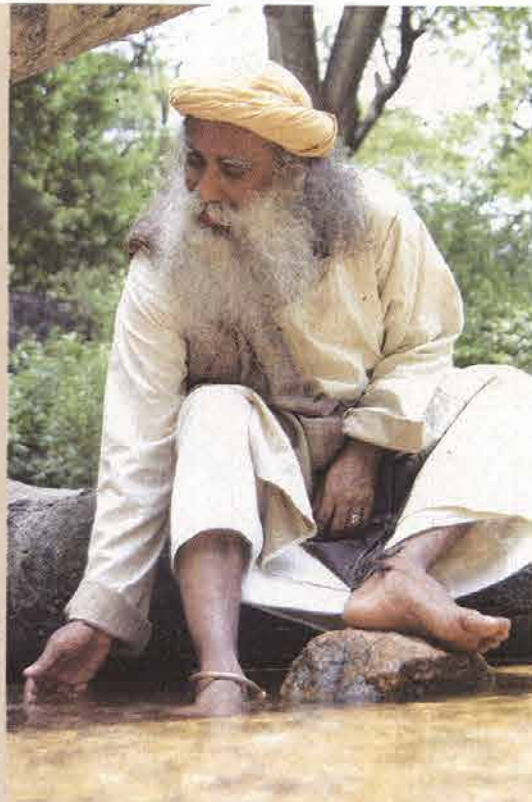
What makes meditation at the Isha ashram a unique experience?

Within the ashram, we have created a grid of energy points. The Dhyanalunga is one such energy centre. It has been made with a mercury core solidified through Indian alchemy. Solidified mercury is the densest substance found on this planet—it is 14 times heavier than water. Nobody can access the mercury core—it is completely sealed inside. But, it reverberates.

Dhyanalunga is placed at a 11 degrees latitude. This latitude is very important. When the earth spins, it is spinning at a tilt. The centrifugal force of the latitude is almost working in a similar direction here. So, if you sit at Dhyanalunga cross-legged, with an erect spine, it works far better than anywhere else. There is a planetary advantage and an energy created for this purpose, besides the ambience.

Do certain planetary positions enhance the meditative experience?

They do. Planets are dynamic and constantly moving and, at certain times, there will be an



upsurge of energy.

Spring tides occur on full moon and new moon nights because of the gravitational pull of the moon. If an entire ocean can be pulled up like this, do you think the fluids in your body are not being pulled up? They are. The entire energy is rushing into the brain.

This can have a profound impact on your body and mind. So, if you are crazy, you will become crazier. If you are very loving, you will become more loving. If you are meditative, you will become more meditative.

Has anyone studied your brain?

I don't have one (laughs). That's why I'm never burdened by it. It just reverberates with everything because it is empty.

How often do you meditate?

I don't meditate. Let's say you planted a plant in your garden. If it's a small plant, everyday you have to water it. If it is well rooted, nobody waters it. Nobody waters a tree, isn't it? I have become an old tree.

and icy winds. Then he went to the Sivananda ashram on the banks of the Ganges and took part in the Christmas retreat. "The mantras are so powerful—I am more mindful now," says Raas, sitting in the cold and damp floor in the ashram devouring a book written by Swami Krishnananda. "The erratic state that the mind gets caught up in, calms down when you meditate. Meditation helps allow that turbulence to reduce."

According to masters of meditation, every thought involves an energy. Concentrating on mantras allows you to free your mind from unnecessary thoughts and reduces the drain of energy.

Sounds and mantras are powerful, so is silence. A silent meditation can make you more present, says Roopa Rao, an award-winning web series director based in Bengaluru. "It makes us aware of our senses like touch and hearing that we otherwise use less, compared to sight," says Rao, who took part in a silent meditation programme for eight days in 2012.

Some meditations help cleanse your mind. For instance, Heartfulness meditation. It is based on the supposition that there is a divine light in your heart, the energy from which is emitted during the process of meditation. An important part of this meditation is cleaning. It helps wipe out all the stressful experiences you might have had during the day.

Heartfulness meditation is highly recommended for people having trouble sleeping. Researchers at Harvard University found that even novice practitioners who have had just one session of Heartfulness meditation could easily get to a sound state of sleep that non meditators may not get even after several hours of sleep.

For some like Om Swami, a Himalayan mystic, meditation is a way of life. "I no longer have to sit and do meditation. I don't know how to come out of meditation. I have deep sensations in my brain all the time. Scientists have studied my brain. They couldn't find a normal state in my brain; there was only the super state and the peak state," says the 37-year-old management graduate who ran a software company before embracing spirituality. "I spent 13 months in the Himalayas, of which 100 days were in extreme solitude. I lived in absolute extreme conditions. Sometimes I would just eat snow. Sometimes, I stayed in a cave in the Himalayas. Then for seven months, I was in the deep woods. There were wild boars, rats, pigs and deer. That's where I meditated—in extreme silence and solitude."

Om Swami has set up an ashram in the Himalayas, where, he says, there is a spiritual vibration that is just enor-

THE SCIENCE OF MEDITATION

Studies by the Bengaluru-based Swami Vivekananda Yoga Anusandhana Samsthana (S-VYASA) analysed the changes that take place in the body during Om meditation.

The study found "small but statistically significant" reduction in heart-rate during Om meditation. This, according to the researchers, suggests a deep psychophysiological relaxation, which in turn increases alertness. The study also showed decrease in blood flow in the skin, which, too, is indicative of improved alertness.

Some studies based on the analysis of electroencephalographic (EEG) recordings have shown that mindfulness meditation improves relaxation. One study that looked at performance in cancellation tasks (a psychometric test of visual perception and vigilance) in 70 healthy subjects—some of them meditated before the task—found that performance in such tasks improves after meditation.

Researchers have demonstrated that meditation leads to positive changes in midbrain—associated with vision, hearing, motor control, sleep and alertness—whether one chooses to meditate on a single syllable or a series of thoughts. Transcendental meditation, which uses a sound or mantra, improves perception of hearing. In the various studies done by S-VYASA on sleep and meditation, it is said meditation in many ways is similar to a deep state of sleep. Bodily sensation is voluntarily reduced in both these conditions. However, unlike in sleep, the level of awareness is significantly higher in meditation.

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mous. "I have seen the mountains of New Zealand, Australia and California. I have been all over the world. But the spiritual beauty of the Himalayas is nowhere else to be found in the world. That's my personal experience. I could be biased about it," he says.

Om Swami claims that with intense meditation, he is able to develop supernatural powers and abilities. "One is the ability to go out of my body and see other planets. There is a planet 600 light years away from earth. It's a beautiful planet, two and a half times the size of earth," he says. Swami then sits still and asks me to put my hand on his pulse. The pulse is missing! "I can shut down my heart beat, regulate the body temperature and change my blood pressure," he says.

Om Swami would meditate for 22 hours a day at the peak of his practice. "I didn't reach that state overnight. There is a structured way of championing meditation. It is like learning a musical instrument. In the beginning, you may not be able to play Beethoven's stuff. You should be happy if you are able to focus for five minutes. Then refresh your concentration and resume. The first one hour is so hard to get to. One hour to one and a half hours takes a long time. Once you cross 4 hours, then you make giant leaps," says Om Swami, who recently came out with a book on meditation, *A Million Thoughts*.

Most novice meditators

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Om Swami,
Himalayan mystic who ran a software company earlier

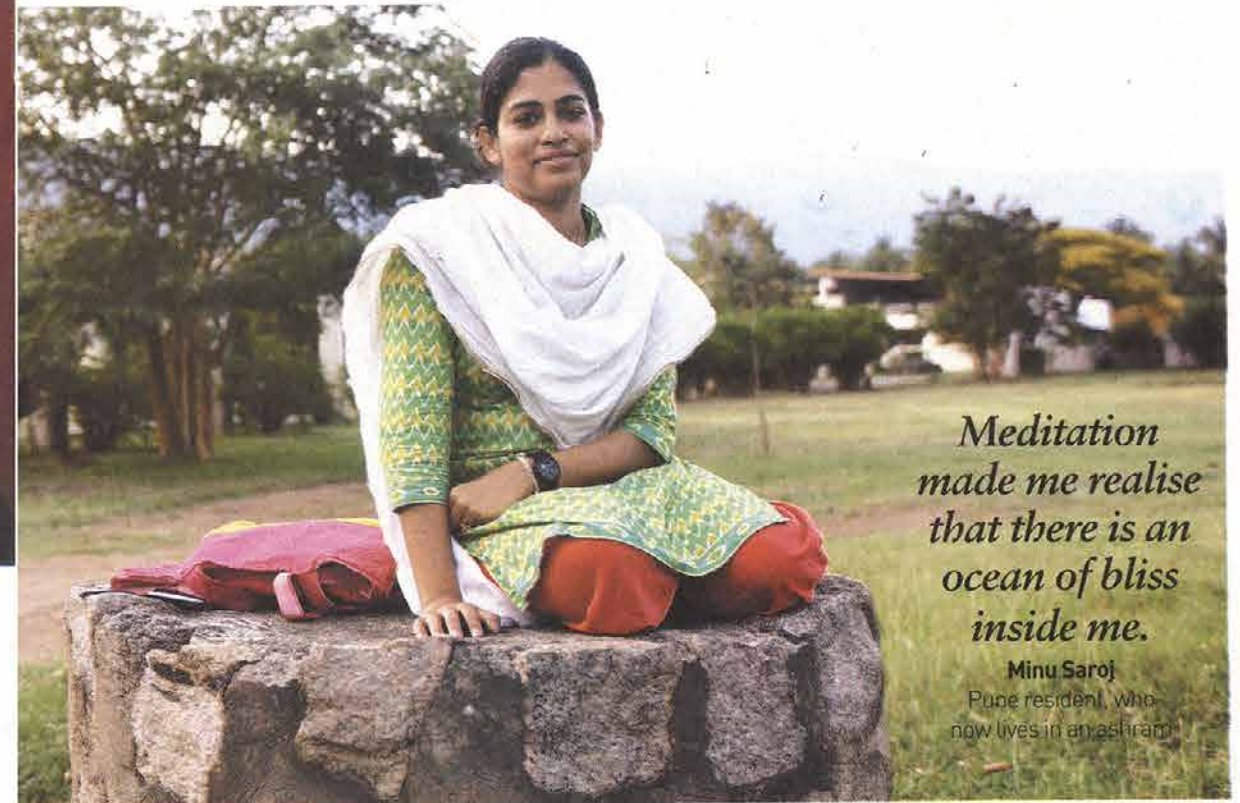
have problems with postures. Some find it hard to sit cross-legged. For Ramya Thimmisetty, a 28-year-old software engineer from Andhra Pradesh who joined an ashram five years ago, sitting still was a pain. "It took me about four months to get used to it. Now I sit in the temple for a long time and enjoy my meditation," she says.

There are postures that can help loosen up the body so one can sit comfortably in the meditation posture. "Try butterfly and half butterfly postures and some squats and stretches. All these will help get rid of stiffness from your body," says Agarwalla.

Those who want to learn meditation can start by listening to music. It helps train your mind to focus. Listen to every single word, every single beat, note and instrument mindfully for five minutes. Or, just observe your inhalation and exhalation; it relaxes and calms your mind. Meditation is a great way to cope with emotional and psychological trauma, too. Creating a little distance from the mind enables you to withstand the tempests of life. However, those in committed relationships should perhaps be wary as it could develop into detachment, which is what happened with Jan Novak, 39, from the Czech Republic. "I broke up with my girlfriend. When you aim for the ultimate, there is no chance for relationships," says Novak, who runs a meditation centre in his country.

Novak says he is happier now. He first came to an ashram in south India early last year. "I did a basic meditation programme and went back home. Soon I decided to visit again. I went to the same ashram and did a three-week programme. Since then I have been practising for a couple of hours every day. Some of the *kriyas* I learnt at the ashram have really worked with my inner energies," says Novak.

Novak calls his meditation centre in the Czech Republic an ashram. "It is just a small place in the middle of a forest. We have small



Meditation made me realise that there is an ocean of bliss inside me.

Minu Saroj
Pune resident, who now lives in an ashram

groups of 30-40 people. I teach them basic things like breathing exercises and simple meditation techniques," he says.

Novak believes these ashrams exude positive energy. Prof Ralph H. Wood, an American professor of mysticism who is known for his studies on native American practices, studied the consecration of the Adiyogi (Isha Foundation) in the US. He then presented a paper titled 'When Shiva Talks Back' at a conference of the International Association for the Cognitive Science of Religion, wherein he has explored the positive impact of consecration on human psychology and cognition.

"When the Adiyogi consecration happened, we measured the vibrations here right from the time before the consecration, using lecher antenna. On the day the consecration started, the vibrations were 10 million electromagnetic units. By the last day of the three-day consecration, the vibrations went up to 100 million units," says Maa Vama of Isha ashram. "Staying in a consecrated space can work wonders for you. It aligns your body and mind."

Can meditation heal? "I have seen people coming out of ailments like asthma in one single meditation," says Sadhguru. Disease is a state wherein there is no ease in the system, not just mentally or physically but on the cellular level as well, he says. "If there is an intelligence that created everything, it should be able to do the repair work

also. But for it to work, you have to be in a certain ease. That ease is gone in most people. They think it is because of their age or the tensions of the world. No. It is simply because they are messed up. If you know how to sit at ease, total ease in the system, a lot of your problems are solved," he says.

Scientists do not totally refute these claims, though they explain the mechanism of healing differently. They say that meditation can sometimes trigger self healing processes.

Cure or not, meditation does provide the much-needed calm amid the chaos that rules our world today. ♦