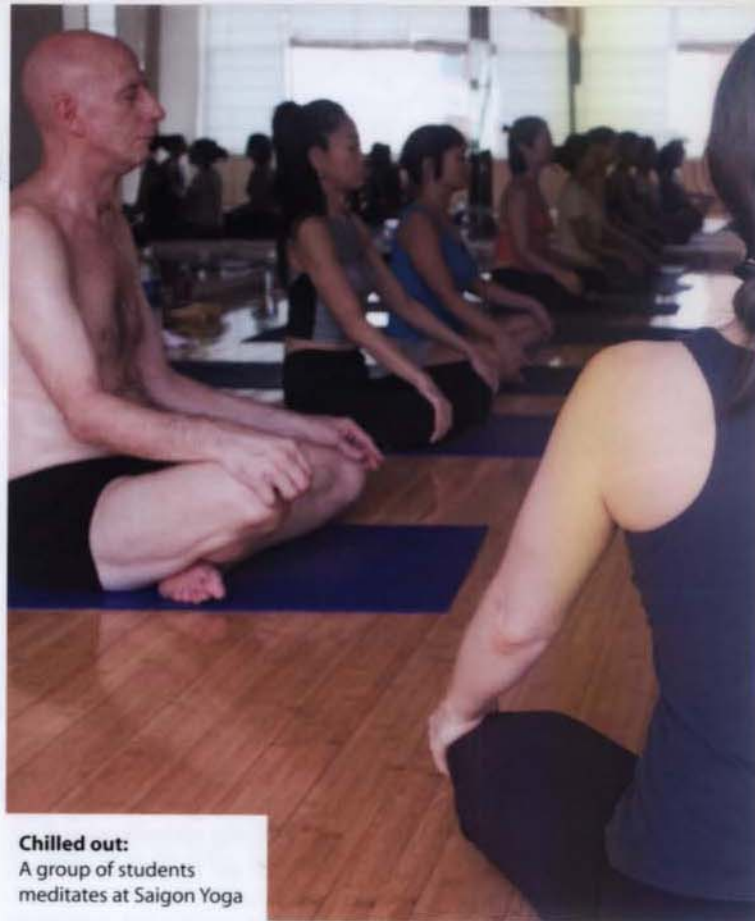


MEDITATION ... and the city

What better way to counter the stresses of a big noisy city than regular meditation practice? **Pham Anh Chi** discovers that you don't have to be affiliated to a religion or cult to reap the benefits of daily meditation.



Chilled out:
A group of students meditates at Saigon Yoga

Tenets of Meditation

■ ACHIEVE A STABLE POSTURE

Most teachers do not expect beginners to be able to sit in full lotus. Instead, any sitting position with a straight spine is usually allowed. The important point is to be comfortable physically.

■ FOCUS YOUR ATTENTION ON A SINGLE OBJECT

The object can be almost anything — the breath, an image, a mantram, etc. It varies according to the purpose and philosophy behind the practice.

■ BECOME THE OBSERVER OF THE PROCESS

Just by making the effort to concentrate the mind, we stop identifying with it, and become just an observer of our thoughts and emotions. This awareness is a powerful tool for self-transformation and growth.

■ RELAX

Learning to relax the body and mind is a key component of meditation.

■ PRACTICE CONSISTENTLY

In order to reap the benefits of meditation, we must practice consistently. This doesn't necessarily mean lots of time within a day, even five, 10, 15 minutes a day can have beneficial results.

■ BRING YOUR PRACTICE INTO YOUR LIFE

If we sit beautifully in lotus position at temple, but still react angrily when a car cuts us off on the way home, our sitting would have been for naught. We must use the tools of observation and relaxation that it gives us in our daily lives. After all, meditation is not about retreating from the world, but how to act in it.

MEDITATION is not just for monks and recluses. Doctors prescribe it to reduce hypertension; business executives, to increase productivity; and coaches, to score the winning shot. This practice of looking inward or "intentionally paying attention to a particular object, for a particular purpose" has health and social benefits that the worldly should not ignore.

In Ho Chi Minh City, most practitioners are Buddhist monks, nuns, and laity. But more and more people are being introduced to "sitting" through yoga and increasingly through lay teachers from various other religious and secular traditions.

Andrew Walsh, the spa manager and staff trainer at La Maison de L'Apothiquaire on Truong Dinh in District 3, wears many hats, including that of in-house meditation guru. The Australian native credits his practice of 13 years with improving his ability to concentrate, diminishing anxiety, eliminating insomnia, and "dealing with working issues better."

During his career, Walsh, who is also a doctor of traditional Chinese medicine and acupuncturist, was treating a high number of patients a week. The workload and emotional demands of the job led many of his colleagues to either burn out or lose compassion, but meditation allowed Walsh to thrive.

"Breathing affects all of our emotions. If we can control our breath, we can control our emotions; we retrain our bodies to react to stress differently," he says.

On Friday Sep. 15 at 6.30pm, Walsh will conduct a complimentary meditation workshop for both existing and new stu-





dents of L'Apothiqaire in the spa's yoga studio, which has rooftop views of the city.

"I like to introduce to people the many ways they can use meditation," he says.

Walsh borrows from different traditions including qi-gong and yoga. He encourages students to experiment with different objects to train their attention on including music, candlelight, and scents. Walsh's class will centre on the two fundamentals of meditation: first, focusing the mind on a simple task, and second, removing tension from the body.

Trish Summerfield meditates with her eyes open as she weaves her motorbike through

Saigon's clogged streets. A native of New Zealand, Summerfield has been practicing and teaching meditation, particularly raja yoga, for over 18 years. Raja yoga is a secular practice whose foundation is based on eastern philosophy. What distinguishes raja yoga from most other forms is that practitioners keep their eyes open.

"This is important because by keeping our eyes open, we develop the skills to choose what we take inside. It is very special to be able to have this choice," says Summerfield.

Instead of working to clear the mind of thoughts, which can be too difficult and esoteric, raja yoga focuses the mind on a positive thought, visually represented by a painting of a distant point of light in a background of calming orange common to all raja yoga meditation centres.

"The goal is to create positive thoughts so that we can adapt to life's changing circumstances in more creative and positive ways," says Summerfield.

If you want to learn more, you can schedule private or group lessons with Summer-

field at the Living Values Centre, near Ba Chieu Market. The introductory series consists of four one-hour lessons comprising of two short sittings, discussion, and lecture.

The topics of the four classes are: awareness of thought, deepening concentration/dealing with daily life challenges, understanding the eight powers, and differentiation between action and reaction. In addition, the centre provides resources to support your practice: a library, a daily 7pm sitting, and special events with senior teachers such as Dadi Janki.

If you are interested in Buddhist meditation, specifically the Vietnamese strain of Zen (or Thien), Teacher Thich Tam Duc, the secretary general of the Vietnam Buddhist Research Institute based at Van Hanh Pagoda in Phu Nhuan District has taught meditation to westerners. The best way to establish a relationship with him is to attend his class, "Lecture on Buddhism in Vietnam: Past and Present," through the Department of Vietnamese Studies and Vietnamese Language for Foreigners at the University of Social Science and Humanities (US\$10).

He gives this lecture every March, June, and October, an overview of Vietnamese Buddhism and a discussion of meditation, but is itself not a meditation class.

However, you can ask him for personal instruction at Van Hanh Pagoda. Thien focuses our attention on the breath in order to still the mind and ultimately, to have a direct experience of Truth. The breath is an ideal object for contemplation because "it does not excite, it has no form, no smell, no taste, yet it exists with us until we die," said Teacher Duc.

As a young novice, he did not believe in the theory of Buddhism, but he found that meditation was practical and effective.

"Within nine months (of sitting two hours a day), I felt a change in my body. I no longer

had difficulty concentrating. I had a weak heart, I couldn't lift heavy objects or run far, but afterwards I could run the distance as I like," he said.

The most important factor, he said, is consistent practice, as experts say that the only possible failure in meditation is the failure to meditate.

For those of you who want to meditate, but have difficulty sitting still for a long time, consider taking Christopher Gladwell's "Pranayama and Meditation Workshop" on Sep. 9 at Saigon Yoga (US\$25 pre-registered, US\$30 at the door). Pranayama is the yogic method of breath retention used to move "prana" or life energy throughout the body. The class alternates between sitting meditation, breath work, and yoga poses in order to explore the connections between mind, body, and breath.

Unless otherwise noted, all classes are free of charge, but please donate to the institution according to your volition and means so that others can benefit from the teaching as you have. *Namaste.*

Doctor Thich Tam Duc:

Giving his lecture on Buddhism in Vietnam: Past and Present

