

Try to take the myths out of meditation

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A new book, *The Blissful Brain*, explores scientific evidence for the effects of meditation on the body. **Carmel Thomason** asks author, **Shanida Nataraja**, why she believes meditative practices are key to optimum health

ANYTHING that's been around for thousands of years, like meditation, is going to have its myths. And you might think that anything that's survived for so long might be difficult to understand, complicated, or just goobledogook.

However, all those generations must have enjoyed something in the way of benefits.

Neuroscientist Shanida Nataraja has a more scientific approach to meditation.

In her new book, *The Blissful Brain*, she aims to de-mystify the subject by bringing together findings of recent clinical research on meditation's effects on the mind and body.

She has collated the results of several studies worldwide, which suggest that meditation reduces stress and heart-rate, lowers blood pressure and cuts the risk of cardiovascular disease. It has also been found to

boost immune function, melatonin levels and psychological well-being.

As today is the launch of National Brain Week, it's the perfect time to find out more.

Dr Nataraja explains: "There was a need to demystify meditation and what's happening in the brain when we meditate and what we can expect to happen if we meditate on a regular basis.

"By presenting that evidence in an easy-to-read manner, more people would consider incorporating meditation into their everyday lives.

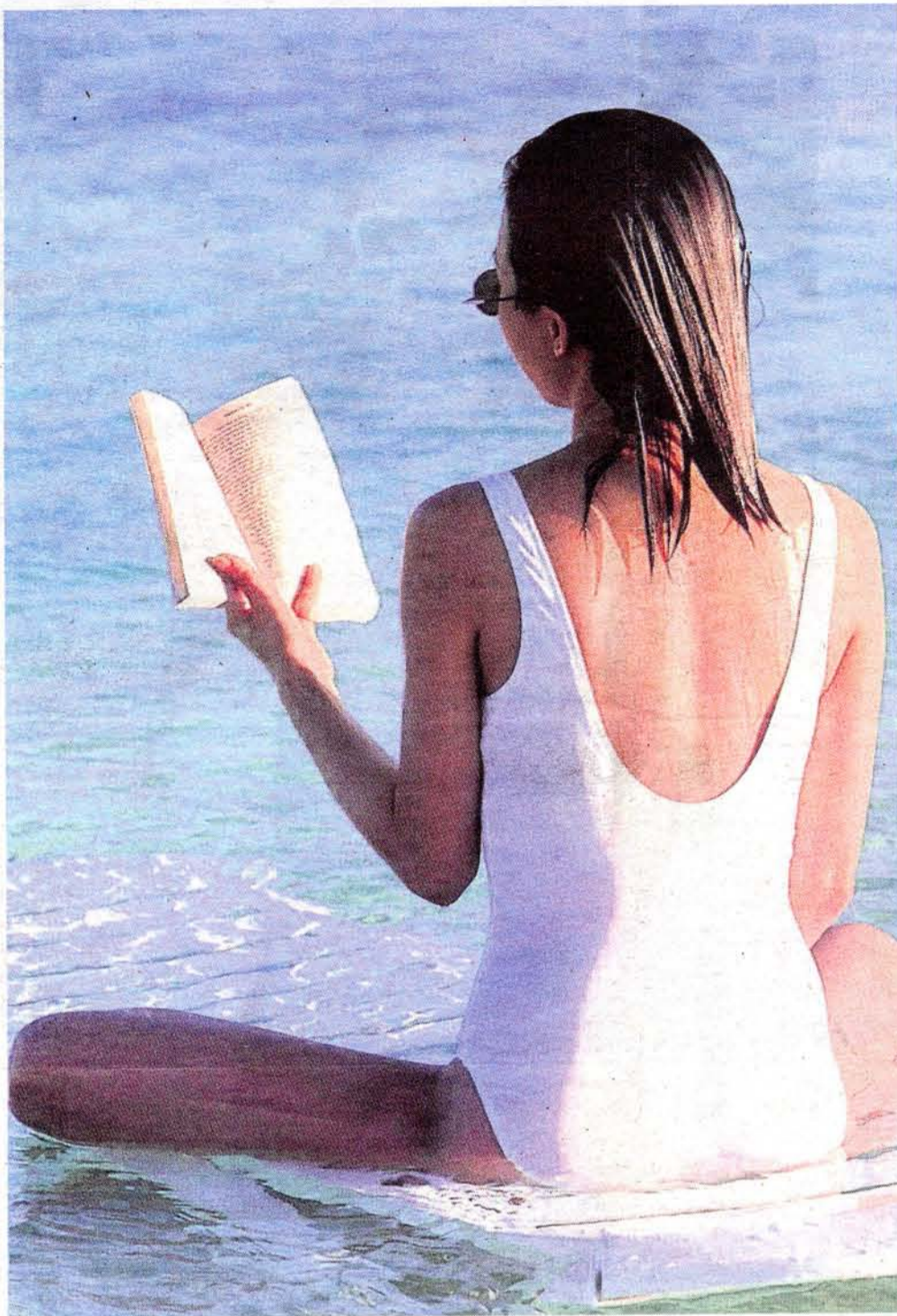
"I'm also hoping that healthcare professionals, faced with a patient suffering from chronic pain, for example, may consider meditation as a different route of treatment than they would've normally considered."

Dr Nataraja says the MD Anderson Cancer Centre, in Houston, Texas, is an example of how meditation is used as an additional therapy for certain conditions. In addition to standard care, the centre also offers more than 75 complementary therapy programmes, including meditation, to help manage cancer-related symptoms, relieve stress and improve patients' overall quality of life.

Cancer patients who practiced meditation for eight weeks saw improved mood and stress symptoms and a positive shift in their immune system.

Meditation has been found to increase the levels of melatonin in the body, with regular meditators found to have a higher level of melatonin than those who don't.

Melatonin has been shown to enhance the activity of the immune system, as well as sup-



PEACE AND QUIET Studies have shown that meditation can reduce stress and heart-rate and improve your quality of life

pressing the growth of breast cancer tumour cells grown in cultures in the laboratory.

So, increased melatonin levels could be another therapeutic benefit of meditation for cancer sufferers.

"In recent years, we have seen hundreds of studies that look at the different types of meditation on different health outcomes. My book only reflects the tip of the iceberg," says Dr Nataraja.

"In the US, we are seeing a lot of research into mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), a kind of meditation that isn't seated in any of the spiritual traditions. When applied to patients with chronic pain, research shows that doing an eight-week programme in MBSR improves people's ability to deal with pain." The MBSR programme, devised by Jon Kabat-Zinn, draws on three meditative traditions.

First, it involves seated meditation and a series of meditative breathing exercises. Second, it uses a body scan

meditation, systematically drawing attention to and relaxing specific areas of the body.

Thirdly, it involves gentle and strengthening yoga postures, combined with breath-awareness techniques.

MBSR is only one form of meditation you can try, but, as it has no link to any religion, the technique is providing a major basis for scientific research into the effects of meditation.

Dr Nataraja adds: "All the major religions have some form of meditation that underlies their daily practice but that doesn't mean you have to operate within any particular religion to get the benefits of it.

"I know as a society we are feeling a little reluctant to embrace religion in a way that we did a couple of hundred years ago. But I think what the research really shows is that meditation, while a core of all those religions, in fact transcends them all.

"It is a practice that has popped up in all of these different traditions that is really tapping

into the innate circuitry in our brains and giving us a tool by which we can optimise our brain and optimise our health.

"So, while there is a benefit in doing meditation within a spiritual framework, it certainly isn't necessary.

"It's really just an issue of the individual finding a meditation technique that fits with them. There isn't one type of meditation that's going to be the right type for everyone.

"Someone who has a foundation in Christianity may look towards Christian meditation and the teaching of John Main, whereas someone who has a basis in Hinduism might find that yoga is the way that suits them.

"The evidence that shows meditation has an effect on the brain and has effects with long-term practice on the health of the practitioner really warrants us taking another look at this and not throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

"It doesn't matter under what context you practise it – the important thing is that you do."

» **The Blissful Brain: Neuroscience and proof of the power of meditation by Dr Shanida Nataraja (Gaia, £7.99)**

Simple steps help you enjoy the benefits

DESPITE talk of training and methods, there is no great secret or challenge in learning to meditate.

It is not about emptying the mind, but rather being aware of an inner stillness in the present moment.

■ First, find a quiet spot in the house at a time when you are least likely to be interrupted.

■ Sit down in an upright but relaxed position, shut your eyes and then slowly relax your body from the top of the head to the tip of the toes.

■ Use an anchor such as focusing on the breath (as the breath goes in and out) or a mantra (a word or short phrase) to focus your thoughts so that if something pops into your head, such as what you need to pick up from the supermarket, you can use the anchor to pull yourself back to the present moment.

In doing this, you will begin to experience a quieting of the thoughts, focusing on the present and the stillness of that.

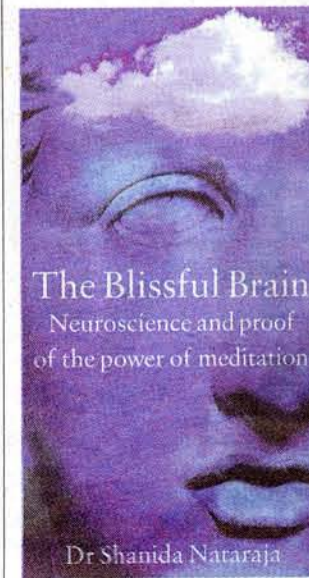
"If people could do 15 minutes at the beginning and end of the day every day they would find it would have a very quick effect on their lives and their sense of well-being," advises Dr Nataraja.

"But we have very busy lives, so setting a realistic goal in terms of how often you can practice is often better.

"One of the hindrances of people picking up meditation is that they go in with this expectation of practising every day.

"When they find that their life doesn't allow them to do that they can throw it aside, but, if they were to meditate three times a week they would still derive benefit and would probably be more likely to continue with it because it's a routine they can stick with."

Carmel Thomason



STATE OF MIND Book offers meditation advice



SCIENTIFIC APPROACH Shanida Nataraja