

COMPASS

A State of Being

MEDITATION GOES MAINSTREAM

by rhea maze

Dustin Bennett was in search of relief. “I hold on to a lot of stress and just needed something,” Bennett says over post-meditation tea and cookies at the Fort Collins Shambhala Meditation Center’s Wednesday night open sitting. Though he’s only meditated three times, it’s already made a difference. “This has really helped me to alleviate stress from work—and life in general.”

Bennett’s curiosity for the practice led him to try out the local center’s weekly meditation classes and open sittings, which are held in Old Town and free to the public. “Shambhala is a secular type of meditation and mindfulness practice—it’s not some cosmic thing. Meditation is completely ordinary and doable,” says outgoing center director Pam Turner.

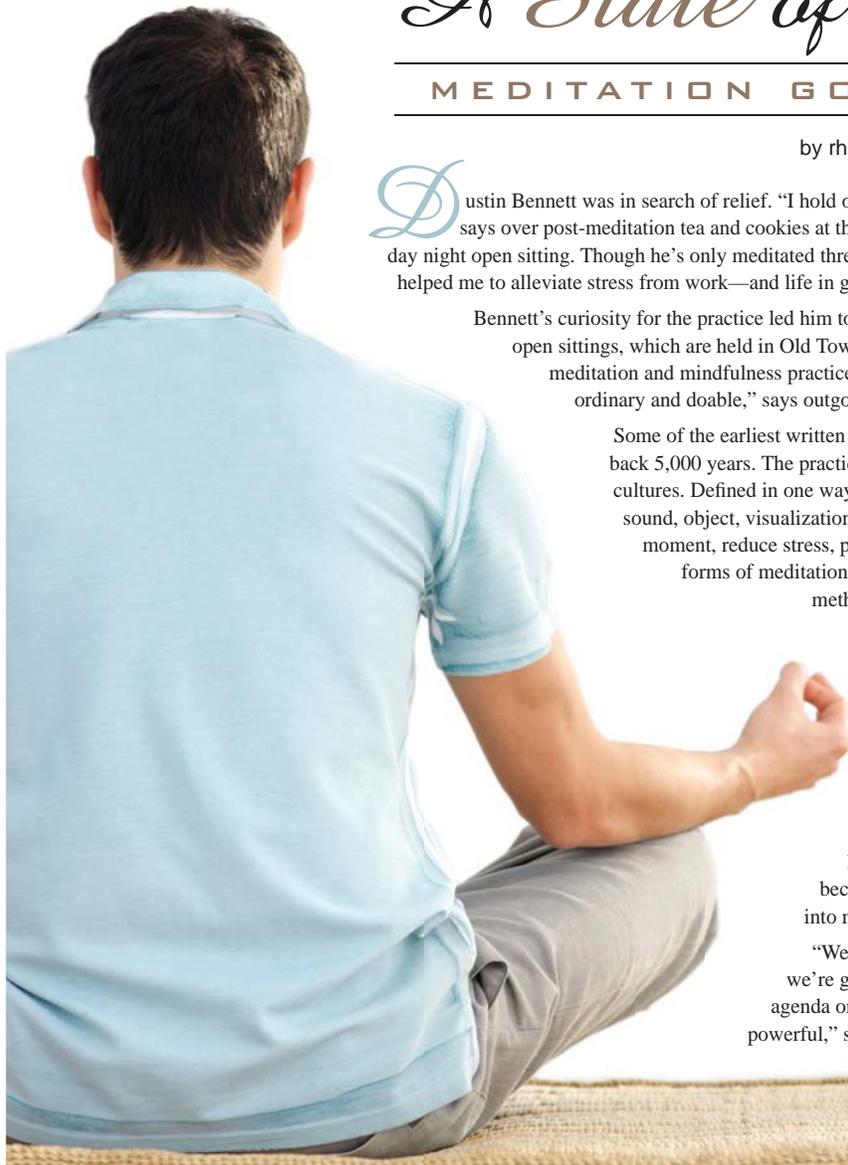
Some of the earliest written records of meditation come from Indian scriptures dating back 5,000 years. The practice has since evolved and adapted to fit within different cultures. Defined in one way as a practice of concentrated focus on the breath, a sound, object, visualization or movement to increase awareness of the present moment, reduce stress, promote relaxation and enhance personal growth, some forms of meditation focus on spiritual aspects while more mainstream methods emphasize stress reduction and relaxation.

“Meditation is not a religion. When you’re trying to build up your own practice, you should seek out different venues offering guided meditation and training to see what feels right for you,” says Gwyn Tash, psychotherapist and meditation instructor with Om Counseling and Yoga in Fort Collins.

With meditative techniques that can be done at red lights or in the few minutes it takes to brew coffee, it’s become easier than ever to incorporate aspects of the practice into modern life. All that’s required is the ability to breathe.

“We’re always either thinking about what we just did or what we’re going to do next. The power of just being, without an agenda or any planning, naturally relieves stress and is extremely powerful,” says Turner.

▶ continued on page 4



INSIDE	Drug and supplement interactions Finding the right balance can be tricky as we age 2	Pumpkin crazy Think outside the pumpkin pie box and celebrate fall fever 3	Safe haven Crossroads Safe-house's new and improved domestic violence shelter 5	Stuck in a rut? Spice up your workout routine with some cross-training fun 6	Health District news 7 The Health District gains a new CDC public health associate Local views on health care to be shared statewide Community health survey resumes
	SPECIAL PULL-OUT Health Care Coverage Guide				

According to Dr. David Vago, instructor at Harvard Medical School and senior research coordinator for the Mind and Life Institute, in 1998 there were only about 11 peer-reviewed research papers with the words 'meditation, mindfulness or yoga' in the title or abstract. In 2011 alone, there were 560 such publications. Mindfulness refers to becoming more conscious and aware and encompasses a variety of techniques that tie in with meditation.

Last April, Vago and his colleagues presented findings from different research projects on meditation and mindfulness to the Dalai Lama. The team represents a new generation of researchers taking a closer look at how these techniques actually work. The Dalai Lama, who doubles up on meditation sessions when his schedule gets the most hectic, responded by telling the team that they must continue this research for the world's benefit.

Emerging science associates meditation and mindfulness practices with a host of health benefits, from decreased depression and relief from chronic pain to the ability to quit smoking and achieve weight loss goals. What's generally widely accepted is that the practice can lead to overall better health, a higher quality of life and lower health-care costs.

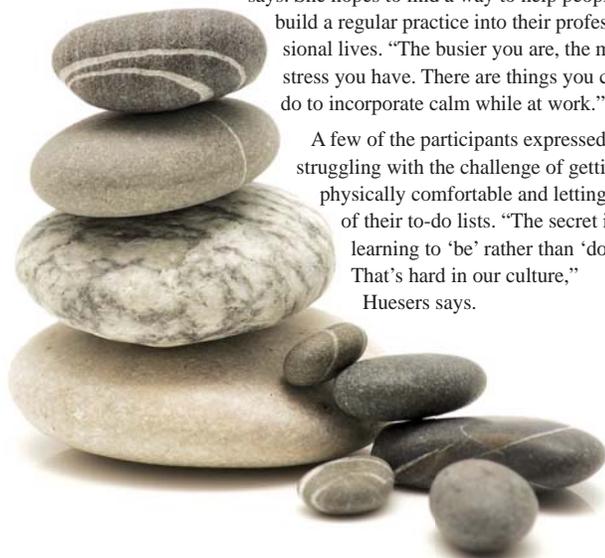
"The well-known benefits of meditation include decreased anxiety, blood pressure, cholesterol and cardiovascular risk and increased longevity," says Dr. Jacqueline Fields, physician at Healing Gardens Health Center in Fort Collins. "I regularly teach patients brief practices they can do with breath and meditation to ensure they have a modality to cope with stress and difficult life situations."

Studies link meditation to improved working memory and test scores, reduced risk of death from heart attack or stroke, enhanced ability to focus, increased signaling connections in the brain, better control over processing emotions, sounder sleep and a healthier immune system—to name just a few. And it's being made increasingly popular by programs like Oprah and Dr. Deepak Chopra's 21-day meditation challenge. Schools, businesses, corporations, hospitals and even prisons are starting to catch on and incorporate elements of meditation and mindfulness into their programming.

Cher Huesers, a support specialist at the Health District of Northern Larimer County and meditation instructor at Creative Healing for Inner Balance, recently volunteered to facilitate a meditation instruction session for interested Health District employees before the busy workday began. "It was exciting to have so many people show up who were interested in learning about meditation and wanting to be being exposed to it," Huesers says. She hopes to find a way to help people

build a regular practice into their professional lives. "The busier you are, the more stress you have. There are things you can do to incorporate calm while at work."

A few of the participants expressed struggling with the challenge of getting physically comfortable and letting go of their to-do lists. "The secret is in learning to 'be' rather than 'do.' That's hard in our culture," Huesers says.



"MICRO-MEDITATIONS ARE MINDFUL TOOLS AND EXERCISES YOU CAN DO ON A DAILY BASIS. WHEN YOU'RE WAITING IN LINE AT THE GROCERY STORE, RUNNING LATE IN TRAFFIC OR HAVE A FEW MINUTES BEFORE AN APPOINTMENT, YOU CAN SIMPLY BEGIN TO FOCUS ON YOUR BREATH AND PERHAPS INWARDLY RECITE A WORD OR PHRASE THAT'S CALMING AND CENTERING. A SIMPLE EXAMPLE WOULD BE TO RECITE 'I AM' ON THE INHALE AND 'CALM' ON THE EXHALE."

~ GYWN TASH, PSYCHOTHERAPIST AND MEDITATION INSTRUCTOR WITH OM COUNSELING AND YOGA

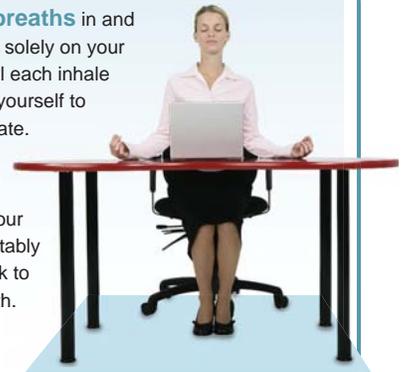
The inherent challenges of meditation are why it's helpful to seek out support, resources and to try different techniques. "The practice needs to be user-friendly. And while there has to be some semblance of discipline around it, there also needs to be a lot of flexibility or people won't do it," says Tash.

Though easier said than done, it's clearly helpful to breathe more and stress less when life picks up speed and throws curveballs. The deadlines, messages and to-do lists will still be there when we ex-

hale, but perhaps won't seem as daunting. Bennett felt the calming effects of meditation immediately and plans to continue developing a practice that will fit his busy lifestyle. "Meditation has helped me to let things go," he says simply. ✨

A Basic Meditation:

- 1. Get comfy.** Meditation doesn't require sitting cross-legged and can even be done lying down or while in motion. Put yourself in a position that works for you and find an uplifted and relaxed posture, making sure that your spine is straight. Lean against a wall if needed and use pillows, blankets, chairs, etc., for comfort and support.
- 2. Take a few deep breaths** in and out and begin to focus solely on your breath. Follow and feel each inhale and exhale and allow yourself to settle into a relaxed state.
- 3. Notice and release thoughts** as they arise. When your mind strays, as it inevitably will, gently bring it back to focusing on your breath.



Need help?

- ▶ Set a timer, even if you only have three minutes at your desk. Try slowly increasing your time each session, perhaps working your way up to 10 minutes a day.
- ▶ Play soothing music or listen to a guided meditation.
- ▶ Visualize being in a place that makes you feel calm and happy.
- ▶ When thoughts lead you astray, experiment with using verbal or mental mantras or sayings, positive affirmations, or simply repeating an intention to yourself to bring your focus back.
- ▶ Attend a meditation class and ask the instructor questions.
- ▶ Remember that meditation is not meant to empty your mind of thoughts, nor should it be a constant fight to shut off your mind; rather, it's a practice of observing the thoughts that come up, without judgment, and letting them pass as you come back to your breath—like cleaning the slate for a fresh start.