BUDDHA LESSONS

BY **CLAUDIA KALB** ON 10/3/04

At the age of 39, Janet Clarke discovered that she had a benign spinal tumor, which caused her unremitting back pain. Painkillers helped, but it wasn't until she took a meditation course in Lytham that Clarke discovered a powerful weapon inside her own body: her mind. Using a practice called Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), Clarke learned to acknowledge the aching, rather than fight it. "It was about getting in touch with your body, rather than your head," she says. "Mindfulness gives you something painkillers can't--an attitude for living your life."

With its roots in ancient Buddhist traditions, mindfulness is now gaining ground as an antidote for everything from type-A stress to depression. At the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care and Society at the University of Massachusetts, where MBSR was developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn, 15,000 people have taken an eight-week course in the practice; hundreds more have signed up at medical clinics across the United States. Now scientists are using brain imaging and blood tests to study the biological effects of meditation. The research is capturing interest at the highest levels: the Dalai Lama is so intrigued he has joined forces with the Mind & Life Institute in Boulder, Colorado, which supports research on meditation and the mind. Next month, scientists will meet with the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, India, for a major conference on the neuroplasticity of the brain. "People used to think that this was a lot of mystical

mumbo jumbo," says psychologist Ruth Baer, of the University of Kentucky. "Now they're saying, 'Hey, we should start paying attention'."

Paying attention is the very essence of mindfulness. In 45-minute meditations, participants learn to observe the whirring thoughts of the mind and the physical sensations in the body. The guiding principle is to be present moment to moment, to be aware of what's happening, but without critique or judgment. It is not easy. Our "monkey mind," as Buddhists call the internal chaos, keeps us swinging from past regrets to future worries, leaving little time for the here and now. First attempts may provoke frustration ("I'll never be able to do this"), impatience ("When will this be over?") and even banal mental sparks ("What am I going to make for dinner?"). The goal, however, is not to reach nirvana, but to observe the cacophony in a compassionate way, to accept it as transient, "like bubbles forming in a pot of water or weather patterns in the sky," says Kabat-Zinn.

The keystone of mindfulness is daily meditation, but the practice is intended to become a way of life. At Stanford University, Philippe Goldin encourages patients battling social-anxiety disorder to take "meaningful pauses" throughout the day as a way to monitor and take charge of their fears and self-doubts. Inner control can be a potent tool in the fight against all sorts of chronic conditions. In a pilot study of 18 obese women, Jean Kristeller, director of the Center for the Study of Health, Religion and Spirituality at Indiana State University, found that mindfulness meditation, augmented with special eating meditations (slowly savoring the flavor of a piece of cheese, say), helped reduce binges from an average of four per week to one and a half.

Mindfulness takes you out of the same old patterns. You're no longer battling your mind in the boxer's ring--you're watching, with interest, from the stands. The

detachment doesn't lead to passivity, but to new ways of thinking. This is especially helpful in depression, which plagues sufferers with relentless ruminations. University of Toronto psychiatry professor Zindel Segal, along with British colleagues John Teasdale at Oxford and Mark Williams at Cambridge, combines mindfulness with conventional cognitive behavioral therapy, teaching patients to observe sadness or unhappiness without judgment. In a study of patients who had recovered from a depressive episode, Segal and colleagues found that 66 percent of those who learned mindfulness remained stable (no relapse) over a year, compared with 34 percent in a control group.

The biological impact of mindfulness is the next frontier in scientific research. In a study published several years ago, Kabat-Zinn found that when patients with psoriasis listened to meditation tapes during ultraviolet-light therapy, they healed about four times faster than a control group. More recently, Kabat-Zinn and neuroscientist Richard Davidson, of the University of Wisconsin, found that after eight weeks of MBSR, a group of biotech employees showed a greater increase in activity in the left prefrontal cortex--the region of the brain associated with a happier state of mind--than colleagues who received no meditation training. Those with the greatest left-brain activation also mounted the most vigorous antibody assault against a flu vaccine.

There's more in the pipeline. Stanford's Goldin is taking brain images to see if mindfulness affects emotional trigger points, like the amygdala, which processes fear. And at the University of Maryland, Dr. Brian Berman is tracking inflammation levels in rheumatoid arthritis patients who study mindfulness. One of them, Dalia Isicoff, says the payoff is already clear: "I'm at peace," she says. Mind and body, together.