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TIME

Monday, Aug. 04, 2003

Just Say Om

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The one thought I cannot purge, the one that keeps coming back and getting between me and my bliss, is this: What a waste of time. I am sitting cross-legged on a purple cushion with my eyes closed in a yoga studio with 40 people, most of them attractive women in workout outfits, and it is accomplishment enough that I am not thinking about them. Or giggling. I have concentrated on the sounds outside and then on my breath and then, supposedly, just on the present reality of my physical state--a physical state concerned increasingly with the lack of blood in my right foot. But I let that pass, and then I let my thoughts of the hot women go, and then the future and the past, and then my worries about how best to write this article and, for just a few moments, I hit it. It looks like infinite blackness, feels like a separation from my body and seems like the moment right before you fall asleep, only I'm completely awake. It is kind of nice. And then, immediately, I have this epiphany: I could be watching television.

After 20 minutes we stop for a break, which surprises me, since I would not have guessed that sitting on a cushion is an activity that requires a break. Before we begin again, our instructor, Sharon Salzberg, a cofounder of the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Mass., and the author of *Faith: Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience*, asks for questions or comments. Four are about breathing. "Breathing is too complicated for me to concentrate on," one woman complains. "I mean, breathing must be the most complex thing we do." I briefly consider waiting outside and mugging the lot of them.

But as pitifully muggable as these people may appear, the latest science says they've got something on my judgmental self. For one thing, they will probably outlive me by quite a few years. Not only do studies show that meditation is boosting their immune system, but brain scans suggest that it may be rewiring their brains to reduce stress. Meanwhile, we nonbelievers are becoming the minority. Ten million American adults now say they practice some form of meditation regularly, twice as many as a decade ago. Meditation classes today are being filled by mainstream Americans who don't own crystals, don't subscribe to New Age magazines and don't even reside in Los Angeles. For upwardly mobile professionals convinced that their lives are more stressful than those of the cow-milking, soapmaking, butter-churning generations that preceded them, meditation is the smart person's bubble bath.