

And they no longer have to go off to some bearded guru in the woods to do it. In fact, it's becoming increasingly hard to avoid meditation. It's offered in schools, hospitals, law firms, government buildings, corporate offices and prisons. There are specially marked meditation rooms in airports alongside the prayer chapels and Internet kiosks. Meditation was the subject of a course at West Point, the spring 2002 issue of the Harvard Law Review and a few too many locker-room speeches by Lakers coach Phil Jackson. At the Maharishi University schools in Fairfield, Iowa, which include college, high school and elementary classes, the entire elementary school student body meditates together twice daily. The Shambhala Mountain Center in the Colorado Rockies, a sprawling, gilded campus that looks like casino magnate Steve Wynn's take on Tibet, has gone from 1,342 visitors in 1998 to a projected 15,000 this year. The Catskills hotels in New York are turning into meditation retreats so quickly that the Borscht Belt is being renamed the Buddhist Belt. And, as with any great American trend that finds its way onto the cover of TIME, many of these meditators are famous. To name just a few: Goldie Hawn, Shania Twain, Heather Graham, Richard Gere and Al Gore, if he still counts as famous.

But the current interest is as much medical as it is cultural. Meditation is being recommended by more and more physicians as a way to prevent, slow or at least control the pain of chronic diseases like heart conditions, AIDS, cancer and infertility. It is also being used to restore balance in the face of such psychiatric disturbances as depression, hyperactivity and attention-deficit disorder (ADD). In a confluence of Eastern mysticism and Western science, doctors are embracing meditation not because they think it's hip or cool but because scientific studies are beginning to show that it works, particularly for stress-related conditions. "For 30 years meditation research has told us that it works beautifully as an antidote to stress," says Daniel Goleman, author of *Destructive Emotions*, a conversation among the Dalai Lama and a group of neuroscientists. "But what's exciting about the new research is how meditation can train the mind and reshape the brain." Tests using the most sophisticated imaging techniques suggest that it can actually reset the brain, changing the point at which a traffic jam, for instance, sets the blood boiling. Plus, compared with surgery, sitting on a cushion is really cheap.

As meditation is demystified and mainstreamed, the methods have become more streamlined. There's less incense burning today, but there remains a nugget of Buddhist philosophy: the belief that by sitting in silence for 10 minutes to 40 minutes a day and actively concentrating on a breath or a word or an image, you can train yourself to focus on the present over the past and the future, transcending reality by fully accepting it. In its most modern, Americanized forms, it has dropped the creepy mantra bit that has you memorize a secret phrase or syllable; instead you focus on a sound or on your breathing. It's a practice of repetition found somewhere in the history of most religions. There are dozens of flavors, from the Relaxation Response to *gtum-mo*, a technique practiced by Tibetan monks in eight-hour sessions that allows them to drive their core body temperature high enough to overcome earthly defilements or--even cooler--to dry wet sheets on their backs in the freezing temperatures of the Himalayas.

The brain, like the body, also undergoes subtle changes during deep meditation. The first scientific studies, in the '60s and '70s, basically proved that meditators are really, really focused. In India a researcher named B.K. Anand found that yogis could meditate themselves into trances so deep that they didn't react when