Mindful wanderers
Children could potentially be the last frontier in terms of meditation

Shoba Narayan

Meditation helps children focus. Photo: Thinkstock

When we think of meditation, the image that often comes to mind is that of the Buddha, or ministers with their eyes closed in the Lok Sabha. A Western spin on this is to use the word “mindfulness” as a way of approaching this practice. Harvard psychologist Ellen Langer says that mindfulness is to make a concerted effort to notice something new in every situation. When you go back home and meet your spouse, she says, try to actually see five new things in them. That is a brave goal. What if you don't want to see new things in your spouse?

We Indians have a far more laid-back approach. The yoga sutras instruct you to sit with your back straight and allow your mind to focus on one point. The Sanskrit word for this is dharana or concentration, which leads to dhyana or deep meditation. Of late, Western researchers have used meditation techniques to improve the performance of not just monks and mere mortals, but also soldiers and athletes. Take psychologist Amishi Jha of the University of Miami psychology department and director of contemplative neuroscience for the UMindfulness Research and Practice Initiative (yes, you can study these things in American colleges).

Born in Sabarmati to a Hindu family, Jha grew up watching her mother chant and pray. She studies attention, working memory and how to improve resilience in high-stress situations. She has received funding from the US department of defence and the US army to figure out how mindfulness training can help army troops improve their resilience and reactions to high-stress situations; to develop a mental armour as it were.
Her lab gives soldiers training in mindfulness so that they can cultivate discernment; so that they know when to NOT pull the trigger, as Jha calls it, instead of mindlessly turning a machine gun on perceived targets. Mindfulness trains soldiers to be present and take control of the moment so that their actions don’t result in “psychological injury” to themselves or others.

Children could potentially be the last frontier in terms of meditation. On the one hand, it is easy to argue that meditation techniques will help them focus and calm down. Certainly, several schools have tried this, with mixed results. Often, what happens is that a teacher walks around teaching the children to keep their eyes closed and breathe deeply. The minute her back is turned, a child opens his eyes and starts shooting paper rockets at his current arch-enemy.

One exercise, however, is easier on children than others. It is called trataka or trataka yoga kriya. A simple way of saying it is “candle gazing”, although this phrase does not do it justice. Trataka is about focusing your eyes on a particular object. It could be a candle or it could be your shoulder.

There are four types of tratakas. Dakshina jatru trataka is when your head remains straight and your eyes focus on your right shoulder. Try it. The effect is that of a dancer who looks to the right. Vama jatru trataka is the same practice, except that the eyes are focused on the tip of the left shoulder. Namikagra trataka is when the eyes are focused on the tip of the nose.

Bhrumadhya trataka is when the eyes are focused on the spot between the two eyebrows. Another method is when you sit at arm’s length from a candle that is placed in a spot where the flame does not flicker. The goal is to stare at the tip of the candle without blinking your eyes. What happens typically is that your eyes begin watering after a few minutes. Then you shut your eyes and relax. You bring your closed-eye gaze to the spot between the eyebrows.

Trataka is an especially good practice if you have a young daughter who has not achieved puberty. This practice delays the onset of puberty, according to yoga practitioners. This is because trataka nurtures the pineal gland, which René Descartes called “the seat of the soul”. In yogic philosophy, the pineal gland is located in the ajna chakra or the “third eye”. When the pineal gland weakens, it stimulates the sexual hormones leading to puberty. This is my broad and rather non-expert interpretation. There are many essays on this topic.

Making your daughter do trataka is an easy way of improving her concentration and delaying the onset of puberty. A simple approach is to keep a candle by the bedside. Ask your child to lie on her side and gaze at the candle just before she goes to sleep. This will get her into the habit and knock her out in a few minutes. Even Western medical doctors concede that the endocrine system responds to mind-body practices such as yoga and meditation. Hormones have powerful effects on the body, and they can be managed through ancient techniques such as modulating the breath and focusing the eye. This can also open the seat of the soul, leading to soul-stirring ideas.

Ancient India was known for its approach to spirituality and the self. Today’s India is known for its software companies, analytical skills, and business process outsourcing (BPOs). One way to merge the ancient and the modern is through these yogic practices. The West, particularly the US, has become the seat of innovation.

India can jumpstart its innovation by focusing on creativity and imagination among its workforce—by allowing the mind to wander mindfully; to see the world in a little boy’s open mouth; to activate the third eye; to sit still and follow the mind on all its various tangents and trajectories; to “sniff the winds” like Apple’s Steve Jobs did, and sense what lies ahead.

Shoba Narayan is shooting paper rockets at the pigeons on her balcony while trying to meditate. Write to her at thegoodlife@livemint.com

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