

Mindfulness meditation boosts the immune system

A new study at UCLA shows that HIV positive patients who meditate slow down the drop in their immune cells

There are many ways to meditate, in a religious context or otherwise. “Mindfulness” meditation has been introduced to numerous American hospitals in the past thirty years by my friend and colleague Jon Kabat-Zinn, who teaches at the University of Massachusetts.

Mindfulness meditation consists of simply focusing on the sensations of the present moment – for example, by bringing the attention constantly back to the feeling of the breath as it passes in and out of the nostrils and the chest. This enables us to stop thinking about the past (which is over, forever) and the future (which is, in any case, unknowable) and to anchor ourselves in the sensation of life itself, as it is manifest in the precise moment.

Researchers at UCLA who have worked for years on body-mind phenomena related to the AIDS virus – and whose studies I quote in “Anticancer: A new way of life” – recently performed a very simple experiment.

For eight weeks, fifty HIV-positive men followed a weekly course of introduction to mindfulness meditation, which they then practiced daily for between thirty and forty-five minutes. A comparable group was given a one-day class in the method but did not practice it daily.

Eight weeks later, the non-practicing group had a sharp reduction in CD-4 cells (the immune cells that are reduced when the virus is propagated). In contrast, men who did practice meditation maintained their initial level of CD-4 cells. In addition, the more training sessions they attended, the higher their CD-4 cell count was at the end of the study.

We still don't know the precise mechanism by which control of attention or meditation acts this way on the immune system. It's likely that a more “distant” and serene outlook, which is common during periods of meditation (and also between meditation sessions) gives rise to a weaker secretion of adrenaline and cortisol, and that this allows the immune cells to remain more active.

Whatever the mechanism, it's clear that periods of time spent focusing on the inner life, allowing the sensations of life to take root without anxiety about the past and future, are so beneficial to the mind and body that it would be a pity to forego them.

1. Creswell JD, Myers HF, Cole SW, Irwin MR. Mindfulness meditation training effects on CD4+ T lymphocytes in HIV-1 infected adults: A small randomized controlled trial. *Brain Behav Immun* 2008

