

# EVOLVE

## HEART MEDITATION

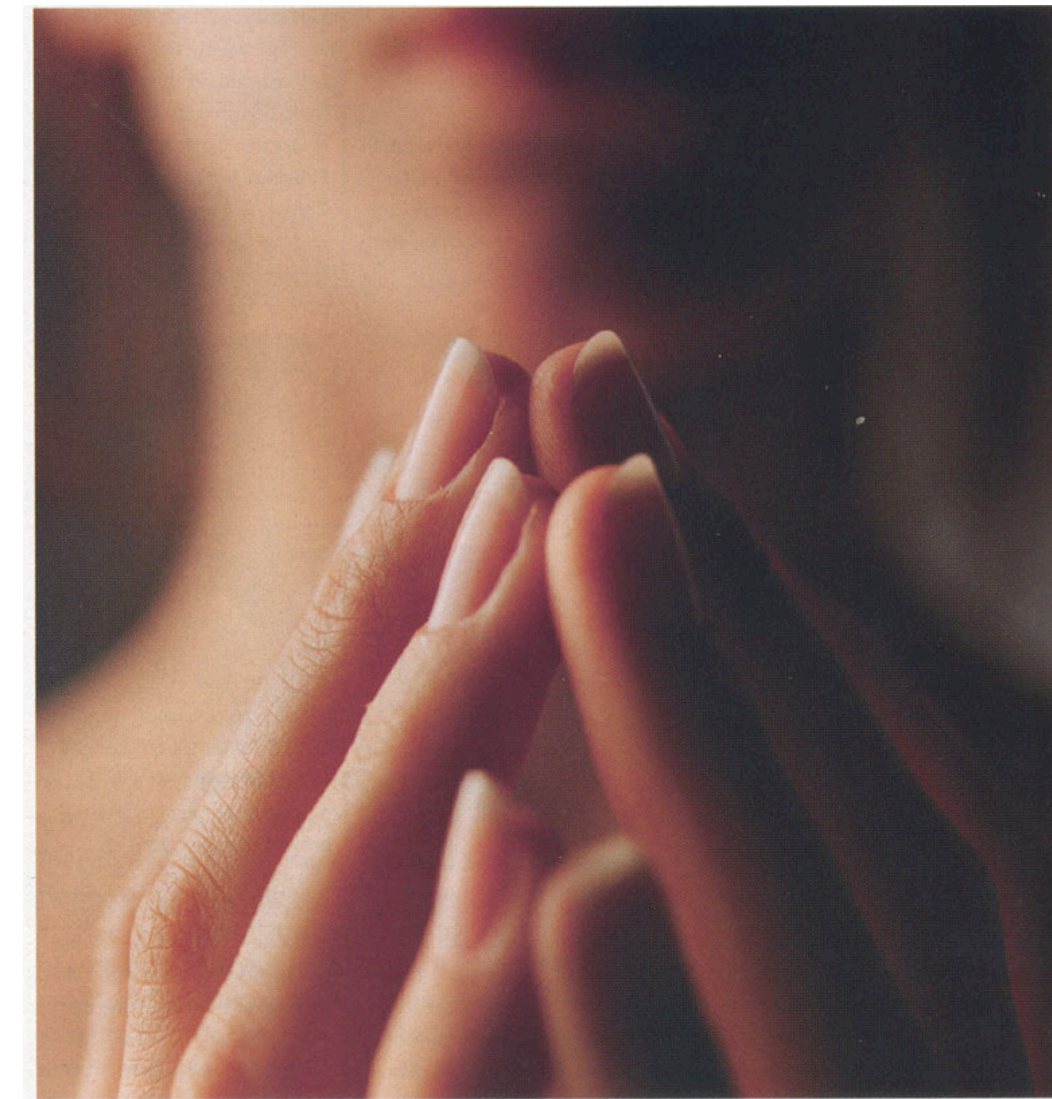
This meditation technique doesn't miss a beat

By Susan V. Seligson

The first thing that strikes me about Cindy Acorace, age 34, is her vitality. Petite, tan, and clad in a floral-print miniskirt, she fairly sparkles with optimism. While I struggle to concentrate, she manages a beatific smile in the throes of a partner meditation in which deep breathing is punctuated with subtle movement and eerie whooping sounds.

We're in a quiet pocket of the Berkshire Mountains in Massachusetts for a week-long retreat for devoted, and a handful of new, practitioners of Heart Rhythm Meditation, or HRM. In HRM the heartbeat becomes the focal point for meditation, and its devotees claim it leads to stress management, improved vigor, confidence, and focus. Leading the retreat are Susanna and Puran Bair, founders of the Institute for Applied Meditation, based in Ipswich, Massachusetts. The Bairs created HRM, adapting the approach from ancient Sufi and monastic Christian practices.

Two Years ago, when she first learned of the method through her acupuncturist, Acorace was suffering frequent, debilitating flare-ups of ulcerative colitis. "I thought I was going to have a stomachache for life," she recalls. One evening a week Acorace, an advertising saleswoman, drove nearly an hour from her Portsmouth, New Hampshire, home to meditate with Susanna Bair, at one point join-

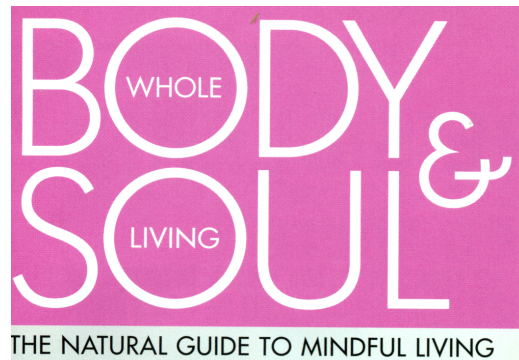


ing the teacher for a three-day one-on-one retreat. "Now when I feel out of balance I sit and breathe with my heartbeats." Says Acorace. She no longer has flare-ups and has stopped taking the prescrip-

tion medicines that once ruled her life. "It's incredible," she says.

A skeptic could be forgiven for wondering whether Acorace's story is a reflection of a mere statistical reprieve

or of ardent denial. But as I learn about my fellow workshop attendees, I encounter a succession of HRM meditators, mostly middle-aged professionals, many of whom are apparently liberated from a



Job-worthy list of conditions. We're an eclectic bunch: Among the group are an Alexander Technique instructor from London, a belly dancer from Vienna, a California psychologist and born-again Christian, and a college professor specializing in water-resource management. There's the woman with lupus who has been off prednisone for two years. There's the man whose once-frightening heart palpitations have become a rarity. Others at the retreat credit HRM with easing high blood pressure and depression.

As a novice, I spend a few days attempting the method, which, put as simply as possible, is meditation that coordinates the breath with the heartbeat. But there's nothing intuitive about it; like pranayama, the breath-control techniques in yoga practice, it must be learned.

HRM makes few physical demands beyond sitting with a straight spine. "To listen to your heartbeat, your torso has to be upright," says Puran Bair. "If you slouch, you put pressure on the chest and the heart which will dampen the heartbeat and make it more difficult to feel."

I assumed I would have an easy time shifting my attention to my heartbeat in the way we all can locate and experience a pulse. After all, I have a fairly harmless heart condition known as Wolff-Parkinson-White syndrome, which announces itself with palpitations at times so severe I imagine my shirt puffing in and out like a clown's. Trying these exercises, though, my heartbeat eludes me. "You can feel your heartbeat strongest when you're holding your in-breath," Susanna Bair says. "The longer you hold your breath, the more pronounced your heartbeat will become. When you do feel

it," she adds in a bit of an understatement, "be grateful."

Of the four participants in an introductory HRM workshop, three of us sensed our heartbeats through the pulses in our hands - which Bair calls the "echo of the heartbeat" - and one failed to find it. Some people feel it in their ears or stomach. As the practice progresses, people learn to count heartbeats with each inhalation and exhalation and advance to "Harmonic resonance," achieved by a four-part "Square Breath" in tune with the heartbeat.

Eventually, says Bair, practitioners manage to control and slow the heartbeat and direct the coordinated breath to areas of tension or pain. This can benefit everyone from corporate managers to artists to athletes, says Bair.

Once he or she can comfortably coordinate inhaling, exhaling, and holding the breath in rhythm with the heartbeat, the student of HRM graduates to the "four element breaths": earth to fortify the body, fire to rekindle the ecstatic "light in the heart," water to clarify one's deepest, truest emotions, and air to nurture reasoning and intelligence. By themselves the descriptions seem cryptic and impractical. But each element corresponds to a choreographed sequence of moving the breath through the mouth and nose with attention on the pulse in different areas of the body. According to Puran Bair, HRM "causes a shift in attention and breath rhythm to create a harmonious connection between the nervous, endocrine, respiratory, and circulatory systems - literally uniting the heart, mind and body."

There is no scientific evidence supporting that particular contention, but there is a lot that supports the value of meditation in general for

overall well being but also for specific health issues. Researchers at The Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, among others, have found positive connections between meditation and healing in numerous small-scale studies for such conditions as chronic pain, anxiety disorders, and even psoriasis.

For Bair, the development of HRM grew from decades of serious meditation practice in other traditions. He was involved in meditation experiments with Herbert Benson, author of the wildly successful, *Relaxation Response*, the tome that touched a nerve among harried Type A personalities across America. In Benson's lab, hooked up to an EEG machine for measuring brain activity, Bair, using the transcendentalist Samadhi meditation practice that he used before HRM, produced very strong delta waves, the slow brain waves that are usually associated with deep sleep.

Such otherworldly forays no longer interest him. Rather than "transcending" the present, HRM meditators seek to be more conscious, more engaged.

"I used to meditate in transcendence in the dentist's chair so I wouldn't feel any pain," Bair tells me. "But now I meditate on my heart and feel the pain without distress."

If a real-world approach resulting in qualities like stress management, confidence, and focus sounds like a formula for corporate as well as personal success, well, it is. In addition to retreats like this, Puran Bair, a former mutual fund vice president, teaches HRM to business teams throughout the U.S. and Europe. While Susanna, and Austrian-born psychologist and theater director,

draws on her background in theater performance in presenting HRM, Puran brings to his spiritual teaching a pragmatic touch honed as a consultant to IBM, Citibank, and AT&T, among other companies.

Cindy Acorace, for one, takes full advantage of the business applications of her HRM practice.

"I'll do the water breath in my car or at a sales meeting," she says. "When I'm tired I'll do the fire breath. I never really felt like I could calm down," she recalls. "Since I committed to daily meditation I calmed myself down. Now I understand that I can have a say over what happens in my body, and my whole life has started to change."