

GOOD-BYE MIDDLE AGE HELLO NEW AGE

By Nancy Ross-Flanigan

Seven A.M. I'm sitting cross-legged on the futon in my family room. Across the coffee table, Deepak Chopra is reciting poetry to me.

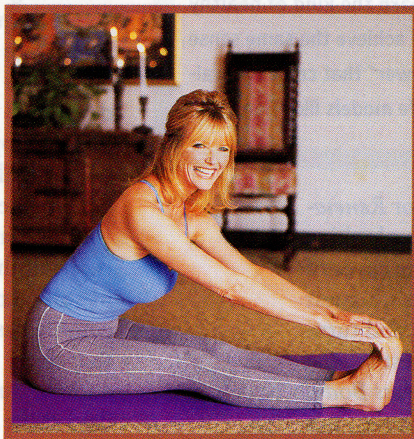
"Spring flowers," Chopra begins, his voice as soothing as lavender-scented sesame oil. "Summer breezes, colors in autumn, snow in winter. If you are awake, this is the best season of your life."

Only halfway into my mug of Colombian Supremo, I am most definitely *not* awake. But Deepak doesn't notice. Gazing earnestly at me from the TV screen, he speaks of "rediscovery," "fulfillment," and opening "a doorway into a new universe of opportunities."

Hmmm. Even in my sleepy state, I'm starting to be intrigued.

I've popped Chopra's new video, *Renewal: A Time for You*, into the VCR because, well, with the new millennium approaching, the moment seems ripe for fresh beginnings. All right, all right, I admit it: I turned 50 this year, and a "midlife survival kit" by one of the most influential mind-body gurus on the planet seems like something I ought to pay attention to. Plus, it comes in a very pretty box, and I can do it at home.

Not that I'm some crumbling crone. In fact, I have only a few complaints: knees that tend to ache and creak, mood swings that make a roller coaster seem like a dip in the asphalt, a short-



term memory so pathetic that I . . . um . . . what were we just talking about?

Oh, yeah. Come to think of it, I'm all so up to my third eye in deadlines, my mother-in-law is in the hospital, my husband has been having chest pains, and my head feels like a melon about to explode. No wonder Chopra's promise—a time for *me!*—is so appealing.

Renewal is based on a new Women's Week program at the Chopra Center for Well Being, an oasis for the body, mind,

and spirit in tony La Jolla, California. For \$2,700, you can spend five days floating from massage table to meditation room, breathing in sandalwood and citrus and attending classes like "Life's Seasons, Cycles, and Rhythms" and "Nourishment at Midlife." Another \$600 buys a medical consultation and post-massage "detoxifying" enemas called *bastis*.

At \$54.95, *Renewal* is the Mini-Me clone of Women's Week—without the enemas. In addition to the 90-minute video, the package includes two 30-minute audiocassettes on meditation and "emotional wholeness" and an 80-page journal, all wrapped up in shades of apricot and decorated with a butterfly, that universal symbol of transformation. The message is simple: Midlife isn't the end of youth, but the beginning of a new, potentially more satisfying phase—if we are only willing

to let ourselves metamorphose and take flight.

The problem, Chopra says, is that too many of us get stuck in the crotchety caterpillar phase. Stress, fear, anger, and other negative emotions, not to mention wild hormonal fluctuations and an assortment of health problems, can keep us from getting the most out of midlife. That certainly seems true of the “real” women who appear on the *Renewal* video. One clings to the side of a swimming pool and complains that she lacks the energy to swim as many laps as she used to; another dabs at a canvas and frets about snapping at her husband for no good reason. (The *real* real women I know would not have much sympathy; no one who looks this good in a bathing suit or has enough time to paint should be this mokey.)

To transform ourselves into floaty, fiftyish butterflies, Chopra would have us emulate models of midlife like



Deepak Chopra's biggest fans have always been women. But *Renewal* is his first program designed just for them. His message is that anyone can learn the kind of healthy habits and achieve the same sense of “self-power” that come naturally to midlife models like Tiegs.

52-year-old Cheryl Tiegs, a spokeswoman for *Renewal*, who recently appeared on *Larry King Live* looking much the same as when she smiled from the cover of *Glamour* in the 1960s. Women are Chopra's biggest fans, filling most of the seats at his lectures and turning his books (25 at last count) into instant best-sellers; after a 1993 appearance on *Oprah*, his *Ageless Body, Timeless Mind* sold 137,000 copies in a single day. But while Chopra's devotees have been soaking up his wisdom, he has been learning from them, especially the ones like Tiegs who defy stereotypes of aging, staying strong of bone, heart, mind, and spirit.

“These women know how to deal with stress,” Chopra says. “They usually are very physically active; they usually know how to deal with emotional turbulence. . . . They know how to avoid toxins, whether in their diet or in their drinks or in their environment or in their relationships. And they may not know it, but a lot of them are very empowered. They have what can only be called self-power.”

Looking for a way to teach other women these age-defying habits, Chopra turned to Ayurveda, a 5,000-year-old healing tradition from India that underpins much of his work. Its cornerstones of meditation, massage, and yoga can keep anyone supple, stress-free, and youthful, he says. They also arouse the five senses, helping us tap into an “inner pharmacy” of natural tran-

quilizers, pain relievers, and immunity boosters. Aromatherapy oil, restful music, pleasant and uplifting sights, and a diet that emphasizes the “six tastes of life”—these are just some of the other tools he says can engage the senses and keep your inner prescriptions refilled. Throw in some “early to bed, early to rise” wellness wisdom and a few scientific references, and you've got the essence of Chopra's *Renewal* program.

To take the message beyond the stuccoed walls of his La Jolla retreat, Chopra teamed up with Women First HealthCare, a San Diego company that markets a range of products from educational programs to vaginal moisturizers. (You can order *Renewal* by calling 877/896-6361; a whole line of oils, lotions, and even music may someday follow.) The kit that arrived in my mailbox a day or two ago is commercial, sure, but I like the idea of a program that pulls together all the things I've been meaning to do to improve my well-being. The fact that menopause, midlife's prunish sister, scarcely rates a mention is appealing, too.

But how am I supposed to fit Chopra's regimen into days that already seem frantic? Let's see, do I massage and meditate before or after I check my E-mail? Just the thought of sitting still long enough to attain the “state of quiet awareness” he talks about on the tape makes me nervous. I already have enough trouble adding up five (or is it nine?) fruits and vegetables a day; now I have to worry about six tastes? And all that oil I'm supposed to slather on my skin and scalp during my daily self-massage—how will my shampoo and flash-tanner handle the overload?

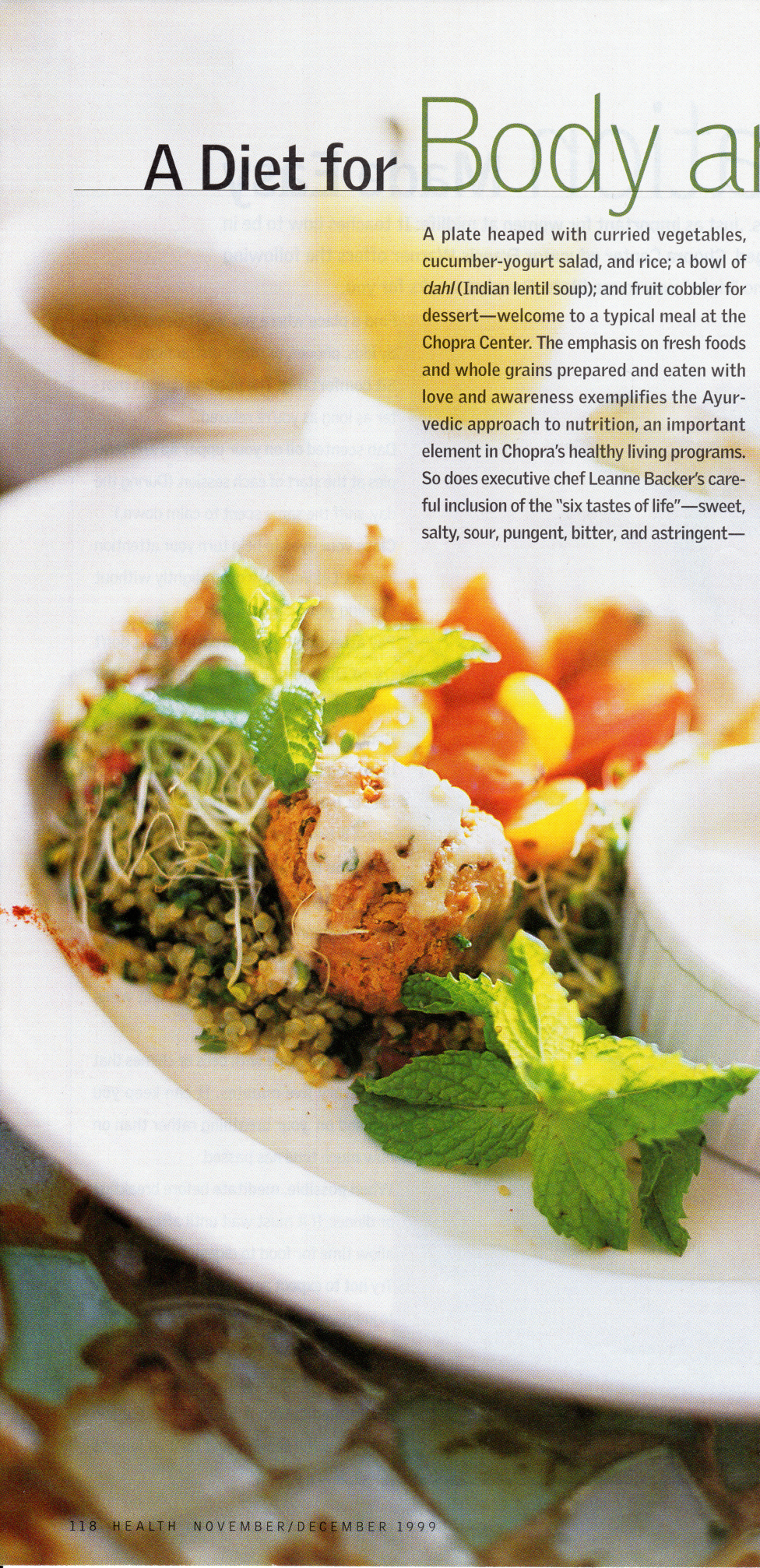
I don't mean to sound cynical. Cynicism, I suspect, is one of those toxic feelings that could keep me stuck in some cramped, misery-making cocoon. Briefly I consider using the emotional wholeness tape to move that nasty feeling right along—sort of an emotional enema. But then I have a better idea. Perhaps a few days at the Chopra Center will purge me of my doubts.

JUST A FEW STEPS DOWN the center's tile-paved hallway, and already I feel purer, maybe because my senses have ascended to heaven. From a fountain, the elephant-headed Hindu god Ganesh, remover of obstacles, casts his gaze toward tinkly water and twinkly candles. Earthy colors saturate the walls. Bits of mosaic glass decorate tabletops, mirrors, even the tissue boxes in the bathrooms. Around every corner wafts a new scent.

My guide for the next two days is Francis Warner, whose impish face, shaved head, and gold earring make him look like a genie. In a charming Caribbean lilt, he explains the Ayurvedic view that health is not just the absence of disease but a state of harmony and balance involving the mind, body, soul, and environment. I can help achieve this harmony by tailoring my diet, exercise, and other habits to my personality and “mind-body characteristics.”

The first step is to figure out my dominant *dosha*, or

A Diet for Body and Soul



A plate heaped with curried vegetables, cucumber-yogurt salad, and rice; a bowl of *dahl* (Indian lentil soup); and fruit cobbler for dessert—welcome to a typical meal at the Chopra Center. The emphasis on fresh foods and whole grains prepared and eaten with love and awareness exemplifies the Ayurvedic approach to nutrition, an important element in Chopra's healthy living programs. So does executive chef Leanne Backer's careful inclusion of the "six tastes of life"—sweet, salty, sour, pungent, bitter, and astringent—

in every meal. The results are so balanced and satisfying (nutritionally *and* sensually) that your jones for Ben & Jerry's will just wither away, says Backer. Her proof? She's lost 40 pounds in the past year.

The traditional Ayurvedic diet is Indian vegetarian. Food choices are tailored to *dosha* or body type—warmer, heavier foods to balance the airy *Vata*, for example. But it's easy to adopt Ayurvedic principles without giving up lean meat or your favorite ethnic cuisines, Backer says. Nor does eating this way mean every meal is huge. Some foods contribute more than one flavor; spices, nuts, and seeds can suffice for several tastes.

Other Ayurvedic guidelines: Eat only when you're hungry and stop when you're sated but not overly full; have meals in a pleasant, peaceful place (not at your desk or in front of the TV); and don't eat when you're upset.

To get started, here are some foods in each taste category. If some classifications seem odd (like bland celery listed as salty), it's because they're based on traditional notions of the foods' presumed effects on your body, not just on how you perceive their flavors.

Sweet: Ripe fruits, artichokes, carrots, sweet potatoes, grain products, meats, milk.

Salty: Celery, ocean fish, soy sauce.

Sour: Citrus fruits, tomatoes, cheeses, yogurt, vinegar.

Pungent: Onions, garlic, peppers, ginger.

Bitter: Endive, kale, spinach, squash, almonds, sesame seeds.

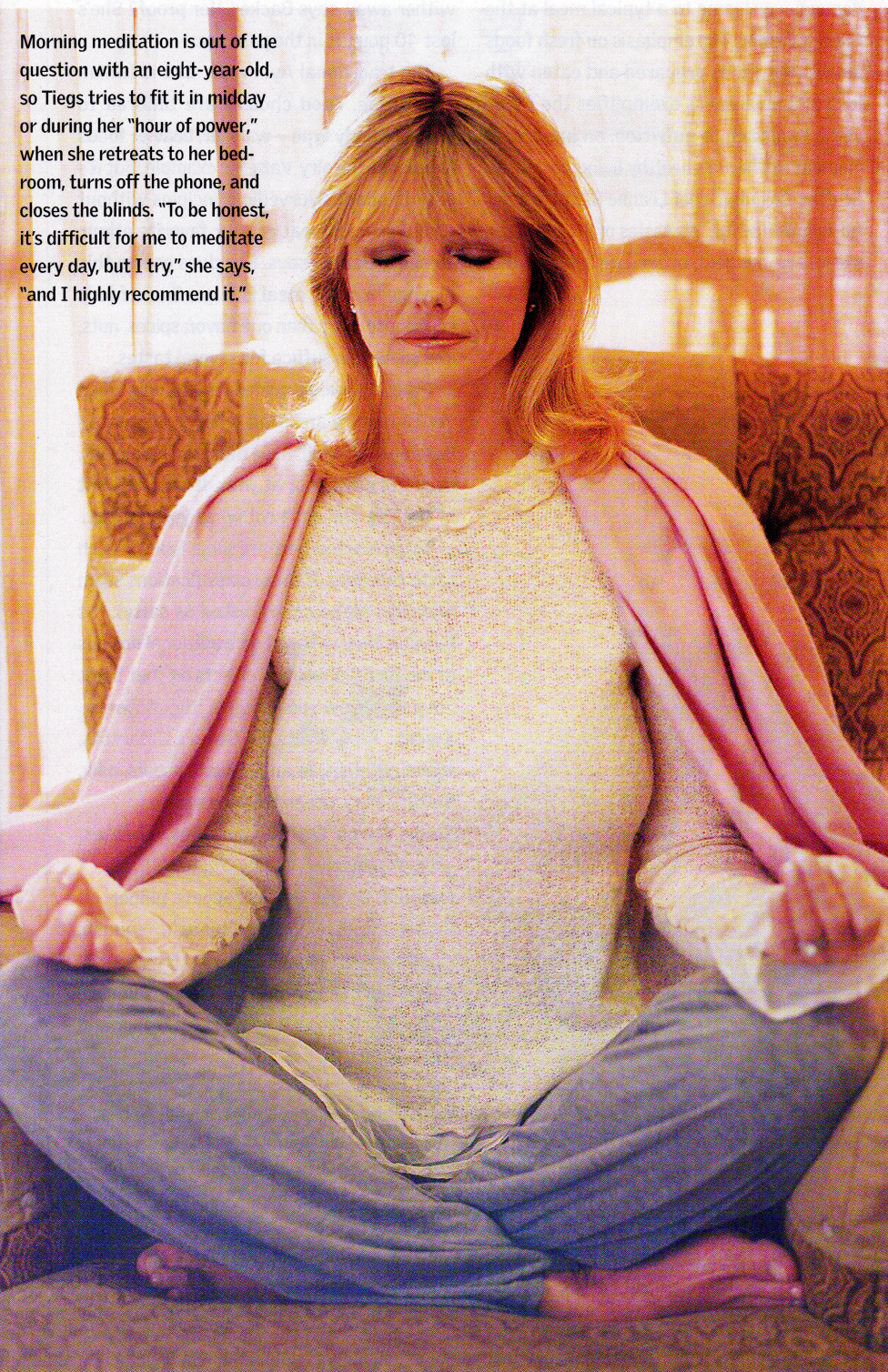
Astringent: Cranberries, strawberries, cabbage, most nuts and beans (including soy and tofu). —N.R.F.

Find recipes and additional information in the Culinary Consciousness section of the Chopra Center's Web site (www.chopra.com/ccwbcc.htm).

Meditation Made Easy

Meditation has many health benefits. Just as important for women at midlife: It teaches how to be in the moment so you feel more engaged. Chopra Center educator Francis Warner offers the following tips with this reassurance: There is no "right" way to meditate. Do what works for you.

Morning meditation is out of the question with an eight-year-old, so Tiegs tries to fit it in midday or during her "hour of power," when she retreats to her bedroom, turns off the phone, and closes the blinds. "To be honest, it's difficult for me to meditate every day, but I try," she says, "and I highly recommend it."



Find a place where you won't be disturbed by kids, phones, or other distractions.

Sit comfortably. The position doesn't matter as long as you're relaxed.

Dab scented oil on your upper lip and temples at the start of each session. (During the day, sniff the same scent to calm down.)

Close your eyes to help turn your attention inward. Let your jaw drop slightly without opening your mouth.

Pay attention to your breathing, but don't try to change it. Let it speed up or slow down on its own.

Gently direct your attention back to your breathing if it drifts (and it will). If restlessness or boredom sets in, don't fret: pent-up stress is being released—a good thing.

Continue this way for 15 to 30 minutes. Then slowly open your eyes and sit quietly for a few moments.

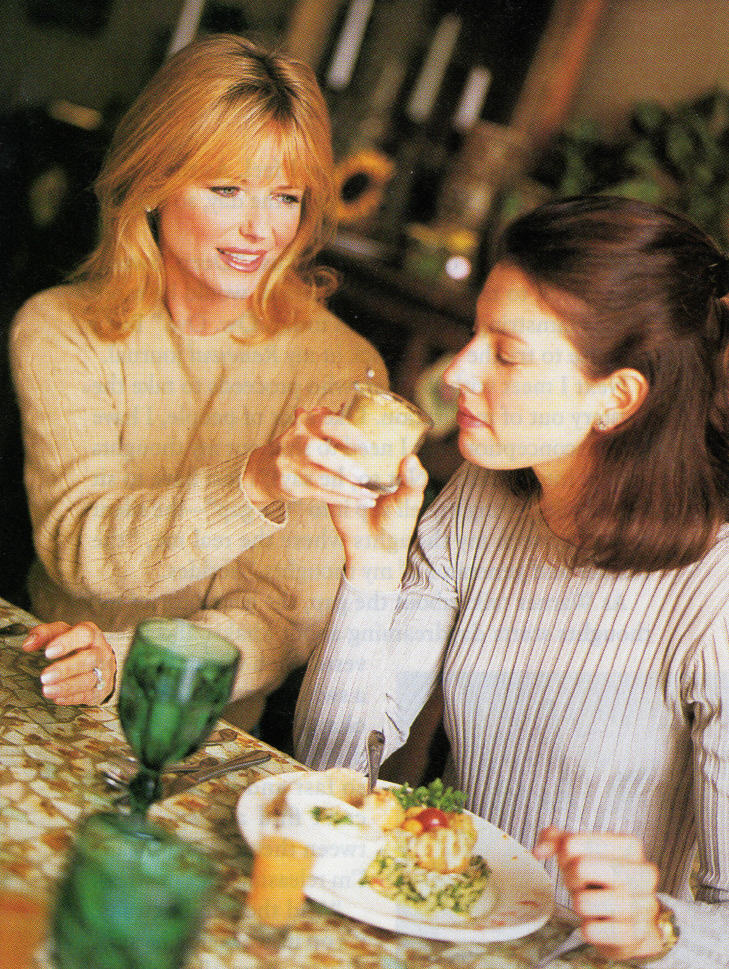
Don't worry if you doze off. You probably need the rest. Continue meditating when you wake up.

Play an audiotape with bells or chimes that ring every five minutes. It can keep you focused on your breathing rather than on how much time has passed.

When possible, meditate before breakfast or dinner. If it must wait until after a meal, allow time for food to digest.

Try not to expect any particular sensation or to judge your experience by how you feel during a single session. Every act of meditation helps, and no two sessions are the same.

Make meditation a habit. If you're too busy for a full session, just do it as long as possible. —N.R.F.



Massage

to Suit Your Mood

An oil massage is a wonderful way to start the day, and learning to do it yourself can give you a greater sense of power over your moods. *Renewal* suggests varying the type of oil and amount of pressure as needed: a light touch with sesame or almond oil to ease anxiety, a brisk rub with safflower or sunflower oil to boost energy, a deeper massage with coconut or olive oil to chase away crankiness. A few drops of scent can enhance the effect: sandalwood, lavender, and vanilla to calm you down; juniper, ginger, and bergamot to perk you up; chamomile and jasmine to take the edge off irritability. Put on a favorite tape or CD, and pace your strokes to the rhythm.

To begin, fill a small squeeze bottle with oil, and warm it under hot water. Massage about a tablespoon of oil onto your scalp as if you're shampooing. Gently stroke your face and ears, then your neck and shoulders, adding just enough oil to make your hands glide smoothly.

Work your way down your entire body. Use small circular motions

on your shoulders, knees, and other joints; long, smooth strokes on your arms and legs. Try big, gentle circles on your midsection; do your back and spine as best you can. Knead each finger and toe, not just the palms and soles. If time is too tight for a full rubdown, just concentrate on your scalp, face, ears, neck, hands, and feet.

When you're finished, sit quietly for a few minutes. Then bathe or shower with a mild cleanser and warm water (you can probably skip moisturizer). —N.R.F.

If Tiegs doesn't get six tastes at every meal, she doesn't worry about it. Her diet includes a lot of vegetables, salads, and soy, and she's been adding more bitter tastes lately: a glass of tonic water or a cup of tea, some greens with a bit of a bite. But she makes no apologies for ordering an occasional burger and admits she's got a weakness for fries.



body type. Before my visit I was asked to fill out forms with some pretty odd questions. Are my eyes small and active or large and pleasant? Do my joints crack? Are my hands and feet always cold? Am I easily frustrated by other people's incompetence? My answers will show whether my basic nature is that of an airy *Vata*, a fiery *Pitta*, or an earthy *Kapha*. Everyone has aspects of all three *doshas*, but one or two usually predominate.

I learn that I'm equal parts *Vata* and *Pitta* with hardly any *Kapha*. (Making me a de-*Kapha*, I guess.) But a *Pitta* imbalance that's off the charts has me irritable and prone to heartburn, skin rash, and insomnia. For the next two days, the center's experts will offer advice and treatments designed to restore my equilibrium. They'll also provide tips on improving the effectiveness of the *Renewal* program once I get home (see sidebars).

For my first treatment, I lie on a massage table in a candlelit room. As I close my eyes, two therapists loosen my braided hair and drizzle oil onto my scalp. Then, silently, they work in such perfect synchrony that I imagine I'm being stroked and kneaded by a four-handed Hindu goddess. After the massage *à trois*, called *Abhyanga*, they move on to *Shirodhara*, pouring a stream of warm oil onto my forehead for half an hour or so. Noodle-limp and sesame-oiled, I feel like I should be curled up in a Chinese take-out box.

After a shower, I meet with Rama Berch, who developed the center's yoga program and also runs a yoga academy down the street. The basic postures in the *Renewal* program are good for melting tension and promoting a peaceful feeling, Berch says. She gives me a tip that works for her: After each yoga session, write

7 Steps to Serenity

When anger festers, it invades every part of your life. Your health and relationships suffer; you become tired, cynical, even depressed. The next time you feel resentment building, try the Chopra Center's process for restoring peace of mind.

Accept responsibility for what you are feeling. This doesn't mean blaming yourself; it means acknowledging your role in your own emotional responses. You don't *have* to go into a funk when your best friend cancels on you at the last minute. How you react is up to *you*.

Pay attention to how your body responds to distress. The next time something unpleasant happens, tune in to your throbbing head or the lump in your throat. If the upsetting event took place in the past, try to relive it in as much detail as possible. By conjuring up your physical feelings, you can begin to release them. Continue letting go of them each time you exhale. As the tension subsides, take a moment to record in a journal what you felt and where you felt it.

Identify your emotions and what generated them as precisely as you can. When your husband was late for dinner, were you angry? Disappointed? Worried? Does his habit of not calling make you feel unappreciated? Neglected? Watch for patterns that emerge over time; maybe you often feel that no one is grateful for your efforts. Start to question whether such beliefs are true.

Spend some time writing or talking to yourself about the upsetting experience. For the first few minutes, pretend to be a reporter, accurately and objectively describing what happened. Next, describe the feelings that coursed through your body. Finish up by recalling other times when you felt and reacted the same way.

Release your emotions through a ritual. Some kind of physical activity is best. Take a walk or put on some music and dance like mad.

Share the emotion with someone you trust—ideally, the person you're upset with. Ask her to listen without judging or commenting; try not to blame her, either. Just talk about what you felt and learned about yourself, remembering to take responsibility for your role.

Reward yourself for working to break destructive patterns. If you've mended a rift with a friend or mate, celebrate together. —N.R.F.

a six-word haiku describing how I feel. As the words float back through my mind later in the day, so will the good feelings.

She recites one of her yoga haikus: "Deep. Sweet. Don't want to talk." Mine, I'm afraid, would be more like, "Hamstrings tight. Again today. Ow. Ow." But I promise to try the haiku trick in my *Renewal* journal.

Next I meet with Warner, who proceeds to take the mystery out of meditation. Like a lot of people, I have the misconception that I need to shut out my thoughts and go into a trance. Not so, he says. I just have to sit for a while, letting myself slip into "the gap"—the silent space between my thoughts where the real me, "the thinker and generator of my thoughts," resides.

As Warner talks about the gap, the generator of my thoughts starts daydreaming about khakis and fleece

vests, then wanders off to a swing dance class. That's okay, Warner says. When distracting thoughts come so fast and furious that I can't find any space between them, it just means I'm releasing a lot of stress.

"And the good news is, it's on its way out," he says. "You want to allow that to happen." The idea is not to swing dance away with my thoughts, but to guide my attention back to something else—either my breathing or a mantra, a word or sound that plays in the back of the mind.

I like Warner's description of meditation as "resting easily" with myself. When I start thinking of it as nothing more mystical

than a chance to relax for a few minutes, it works.

My skeptical side still isn't sold on Ayurveda, but my scientific side knows that a lot of what I'm learning here has solid research behind it. After all, study after study has shown that yoga can reduce heart rate, increase energy, and make you limber as a kitten. Meditation helps a host of troubles, including headaches, high blood pressure, PMS, anxiety, and insomnia. Massage, besides feeling re-e-e-ally good, stimulates the immune system while lowering blood pressure. Researchers say certain scents can calm you down or pep you up; even writing in a journal has been found to promote mental and physical health.

The six tastes idea is harder to swallow at first. Including sweet, sour, salty, bitter, pungent, and astringent tastes in every meal will keep you balanced, satisfied, and slim, says the center's executive chef,

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Tiegs tries to do yoga three times a week and to sleep eight hours a night. "I think you do the best you can," she says. "That doesn't mean slacking off. It means pretty much every day trying to do your best, and that's a lot."

Leanne Backer. Maybe if you love Indian cuisine, I think. But when I scrutinize the list of foods in each category, I see that working in six tastes will probably help me get my five-a-day, plus lots of grains and the soy I've been avoiding. As for the breakfast challenge (Cheerios with sprouts?) I stop worrying once I sample Backer's oatmeal. Simmered in soy milk and spices, topped with nuts and a glaze of berries and maple syrup, it has all six tastes—and is mighty good.

After a couple of days of this kind of thing, supplemented with evening strolls by the sea, I feel about as balanced and healthy as anyone has a right to be. But I stay one more day to meet with the center's medical director and cofounder, David Simon. A board-certified neurologist, Simon has the take-your-time-and-tell-me-all-about-it manner of those beloved family doctors found in TV reruns. He takes my pulse, one of the Ayurvedic practitioner's ways of assessing body type, and confirms that I'm a *Vata/Pitta* whose *Pitta*'s run amok.

He asks about my medical history, but probes past the stark, clinical facts into the hollows of my emotions. Noting that I'm about the age my mother was when she developed breast cancer, he wonders aloud if that worries me. When I talk about my own treatment for another type of cancer, he asks about my fears as much as about the chemotherapy drugs I took. The physical exam goes much the same way. Simon is curious about the rash on my left arm, but also about the significance of the tattoo on my right.

After the exam, our conversation is equal parts philosophy and practicality. Midlife, he tells me, is the ideal time to "start asking the bigger questions: Why am I here, what are my needs, how can I connect more deeply with myself, the people I love, and with my God, in whatever form that is." For me in particular, "this is a good time to start pacifying your *Pitta*," he says. His advice ranges from moonlight walks, frequent laughter, and flowers on my windowsill to a diet that favors sweet, bitter, and astringent

tastes over pungent, salty, and sour foods. He also suggests daily doses of aloe juice and an Ayurvedic herb, *Shatavari*. I can already feel my feverish *Pitta* chilling out, even though I'm still not sure I believe in the Ayurvedic approach.

I don't have to, Simon assures me. "We don't want anything to be on faith, actually," he says. "Our belief, based on our experience, is that belief is based on experience. If someone tells you, 'Eat this pie, it's going to be delicious,' you'll believe that only until you take a bite. If it is, then you don't have to believe it anymore; then you will know it from your own experience."

IT'S TRUE THAT MEDITATION, YOGA, AND THE REST ARE TIME-CONSUMING, BUT I'VE DECIDED THAT'S A GOOD THING.

IT'S BEEN A MONTH SINCE I started *Renewal*, and I'm starting to notice some changes. Deadlines still loom, but my head has lost that exploding melon sensation. I'm finding, too, that it's not as difficult as I expected to ease the program's recommendations into my day.

Instead of staring dumbly at the coffemaker as it brews my morning cup, I do a little yoga. A couple of nights a week I do a longer sequence, haiku and all. After just a few weeks, the hamstrings that had forgotten how to give during the ten years since my last dance class have gone from "ow, ow" to "ahhhh."

Not every day, but at least once a week, I oil up for a self-massage. I'm no four-handed goddess, but I'm keeping my neck and back happy enough. I've discovered that listening to music makes for a more rhythmic, leisurely massage, but instead of the haunting voices and dreamy flutes that played in the Chopra Center's massage rooms, I'm partial to "Hooked on a Feeling."

Before breakfast and at the end of my workday, I rub a little scented oil onto my temples and sit in silence for 15 min-

utes, 30 if I have the time. At first I had to slap a sticky note with a blissed-out happy-face on the door of my meditation room so my husband wouldn't barge in. But now he's catching on and uses the time to watch home improvement shows, the midlife male version of *Renewal*.

It's true that meditation, yoga, and all the rest of it are time-consuming, but I've decided that's a good thing. The program requires me to slow down and focus on flavors, smells, and sights that I was too busy to savor before. One evening, I discovered spearmint growing at the end of my road. I've lived here six years and never noticed its scent until now. And—

honestly, I wouldn't make this up because it's just too corny—I'm suddenly seeing butterflies everywhere. At an outdoor concert, a swallowtail swoops into our tent. Another one flits over my head as I'm eating lunch a few days later. Skippers, sulphurs—I can't set foot outdoors, it seems, without having one flutter into my face.

What all this means, I'm not sure. Maybe it has to do with those big questions I'm supposed to address in midlife, though I don't feel particularly enlightened on that score. I have gotten a few of my little questions answered, though. Like how to include six tastes without making every meal a major production. Even a tuna sandwich works, I've learned, when you mix in onions and top it with tomatoes, spinach, and sprouts. It doesn't turn lunch into a spiritual experience, but my husband says it's the best tuna sandwich I've ever made.

Another insight: That sesame oil I've been massaging into my scalp is no challenge for my shampoo if I lather up *before* wetting my head, then gradually add warm water.

Oh, and my flash-bronzer? Even on massage days, it still works fine as long as I shower and exfoliate first. But you know, I'm not using it so much anymore. I think I'm getting a little glow of my own, and this one isn't making my hands turn orange.

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