

The Mindful Society

BY BARRY BOYCE

Inner-City Inner Peace

WHEN YOU GROW UP in one of the hundreds of underprivileged neighborhoods in American cities, the odds are stacked against you. Ali and Atman Smith and Andy Gonzales know firsthand how easy it is for children to lose their way and succumb to fear and despair. So when they returned to west Baltimore after graduating from the University of Maryland, they began working with schoolchildren to help them lower stress and become more resilient.

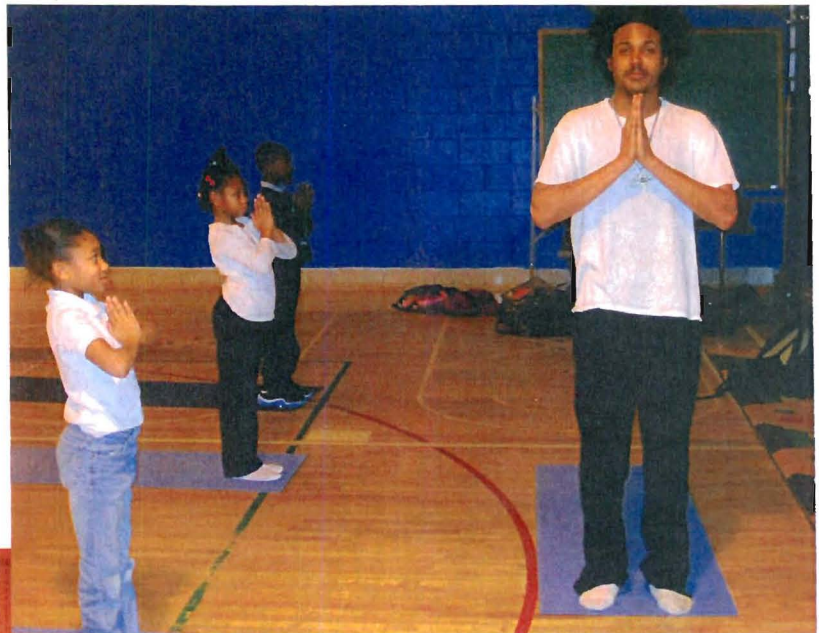
In 2002, the principal at Windsor Hills Elementary, where Ali and Atman Smith's mother worked, asked whether they would like to coach sports. "After we thought about it," Ali told me, "we decided what we would really like to do with kids is yoga, because we saw the effect yoga was having on us. It makes you feel stronger and more limber, but, more than that, there is a meditative element. Stress rolls off of you so much more easily. Your demeanor is calmer. You have a peaceful spot you can go to inside. No matter where you are, what you're doing, what turmoil you're going through, you can find that peace."

Gonzales and the Smiths started teaching fifth graders yoga, which the brothers had learned from their parents. "When we started the program," Atman Smith said, "the kids thought yoga was the little guy from *Star Wars*." But soon, yoga poses, breathing techniques, and periods of mindfulness became the means for the children to find solitude and develop inner resources.

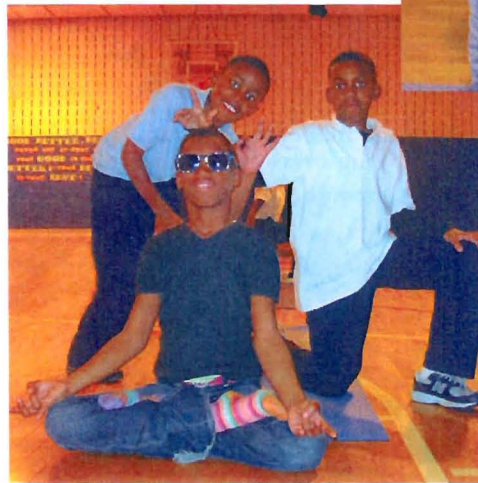
Most of the participants were "what you would call problem students," Ali Smith said, "and at first we broke up fights on a daily basis. We often had to collect students from detention." Then teachers started sending notes urging the three to keep doing whatever they were doing because the teachers were noticing a change in those taking part. So were parents.

"They weren't perfect little angels," Ali Smith said, "but they were better able to concentrate in their classes, and they weren't going out and starting fights."

The program began with fifteen students, and when the school



Students participate in a Holistic Life afterschool program at Robert W. Coleman Elementary School in Baltimore, Maryland. Above: One of the program founders, Atman Smith, leads the class.



year ended, they kept working with those original students through an afterschool program at the Druid Hill YMCA. The original fifteen students grew to twenty-five, and almost all have stayed in touch with the instructors—for help with getting started in college or on a career path, or to work as assistant instructors. The three activists set up a nonprofit, the Holistic Life Foundation (www.hlfinc.org), which in addition to the

in-school and afterschool yoga programs, offers mentoring, tutoring, homework assistance, gardening, environmental advocacy, hip-hop in the neighborhoods, and basketball in the parks. "We want to cultivate the feeling of being interconnected with other people and the environment," Ali Smith said, "so we take the kids on field trips, camping, growing food. When they're out in nature, they feel connected to the planet. When they grow food in the garden we started in the neighborhood, they see the fruits of their labors. Meditation is about coming out of isolation and getting connected to something big."

In 2007, the Smiths' mother put them in touch with Mark Greenberg, director of the Prevention Research Center at Pennsylvania State University. (Prevention research focuses on preventing negative outcomes that can result, in part, from difficult school environments.) Greenberg, who has long advocated more active forms of mindfulness for children, checked

PHOTO BY TAYLOR SMITH

Discover the book legendary British actor
Terence Stamp says “changed his life.”

Perfect Brilliant Stillness

beyond the individual self

david carse

With a marvelous sense of humanity, *Perfect Brilliant Stillness* takes you on a magnificent journey into the ultimate questions of existence – a surprising and unorthodox journey to the final realization that there is no self, only Presence.

DAVID CARSE LIVES IN VERMONT, WHERE HE CONTINUES TO WORK AS A CARPENTER AND FARMER. HE DOES NOT TEACH.

Audio book version read by Terence Stamp
available to download at: www.silksoundbooks.com



PARAGATE PUBLISHING, PO BOX 925, SHELBURNE VT 05482
ISBN 0976578301 420 pages \$19.95
Available in bookstores, at amazon.com, or visit:
www.nonduality.com/perfect_brilliant_stillness/htm
Spanish language version available at <http://www.alfaomega.es>

out the YMCA program and was impressed. “If we asked kids to just sit there, be quiet, and follow their breath,” he told me, “they wouldn’t get into it, but I saw these kids really having fun with the poses and then becoming relaxed and quiet—abnormally quiet!”

Greenberg asked the Holistic Life team whether they would be willing to have their program studied, “recognizing that a study might not demonstrate changes in the developmental trajectories of risk or well-being—it might just show that the kids are having a good time.”

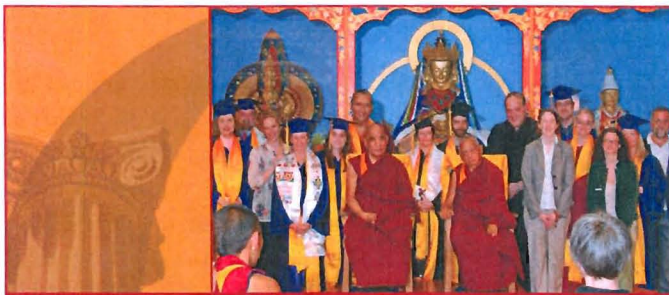
A pilot study was set up at four Baltimore public schools, led by Tamar Mendelson, a clinical psychologist in the mental health department at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health who develops and tests interventions for underserved populations. The study worked with boys and girls in the fourth and fifth grades, and tested the effectiveness of a twelve-week program during the school day, which involved mindfulness and yoga-based movement. Forty-five-minute sessions were held four times a week, with two instructors leading about twenty-five students per class.

Mendelson was impressed with the way the classes were structured, “beginning with the most active movements so they could release some of their excess energy and ending with students lying there in silence, a silence that is so rare in their lives.” These children “are exposed to high levels of chronic stress, and research shows that those kinds of ongoing stressors can impair kids’ ability to regulate thoughts and emotions,” Mendelson said. “We think this kind of program has the potential to help kids increase their ability to control emotions and intrusive thoughts, and put themselves on a more positive pathway.”

The findings of the pilot study suggest that the program had a positive impact on problematic responses to stress, including rumination (continually thinking about the same thing), emotional arousal (being overly reactive emotionally), and intrusive thoughts (having thought patterns that create ongoing anxiety). Mendelson also reported that the principals and teachers who participated in the pilot study “were uniformly supportive of doing this kind of work with students.”

Now, Mendelson and Greenberg have designed a study that would use a larger population, extend over three years with follow-up assessments, and measure more factors, including improvement in overall health from the physical exercise at the core of the program.

The pilot study prompted Holistic Life to develop a consistent curriculum and organize it into a manual, so that others would be able to use its techniques to benefit children at risk. “We would just naturally end up talking with the kids about certain issues in their lives, but we needed to make these topics a little more structured in the curriculum, so others could do the same thing,” Ali Smith said. “We’d love to have this expand to other parts of Baltimore, and then to other parts of the country. We would like to be able to help as many people as we possibly can.” ♦



Graduate Studies at Maitripa College

Master of Arts (MA) in Buddhist Studies
Master of Divinity (MDiv)
Extension Program (Open Admission)
& Online Study Options

APPLY BY MARCH 1, 2011
FOR FALL DEGREE PROGRAM ENTRY

www.maitripa.org

1119 SE Market Street | Portland, Oregon 97214
telephone: 503-235-2477 | email: info@maitripa.org

scholarship · meditation · service