

By Glenn Plaskin

Inner Harmony

When Shirley MacLaine feels angry, discouraged or stressed out, she always does exactly the same thing.

"I go into a quiet room, close my eyes, and say, 'Thank you.'"

Thank you? For being stressed out?

"Yes, that's exactly right," notes the actress, who believes that "going within" through a daily routine of meditation, Eastern exercises and breathing techniques is the key to stress reduction and inner harmony.

"I have learned to say thank you for whatever it is I'm feeling angry or upset about because what I'm feeling is based on something that's unresolved in me," she says, explaining her strategy for turning every problem into a gift.

"I'm not thanking someone for hurting my feelings or ruining my day," she says, "but rather for making me clearly look at something and understand what brought up my anger. It's not that easy to do, but it really works. I find that if I go a little deeper beyond the stress, and probe the reasons behind it, the anger I'm feeling actually disappears. It turns out the person or event that caused me to feel upset—the catalyst—is really a teacher.

"For instance, if your boss gives you too much work and you're feeling stressed out by it, it's only your opinion he gave you too much to do, not your boss's. You may feel pushed beyond what you think your limits are, but you can actually do anything. I'd say: 'The boss just told me I'm limitless. Sure I am. Thank you!'

"So what we're really talking about is a change in *attitude* toward everything that happens to you. We're so driven by

expectations, money, time constraints, ambition and vanity that we forget that nothing is a problem, depending on your perception. I can't overemphasize the power of perception."

The Oscar-winning actress (*Terms of Endearment*), who has appeared in 51 films over a 46-year career, has increasingly focused her creative energies on writing, lecturing, offering guided meditations, and operating a recently launched Web site (www.shirleymaclaine.com). Why all these new ventures?

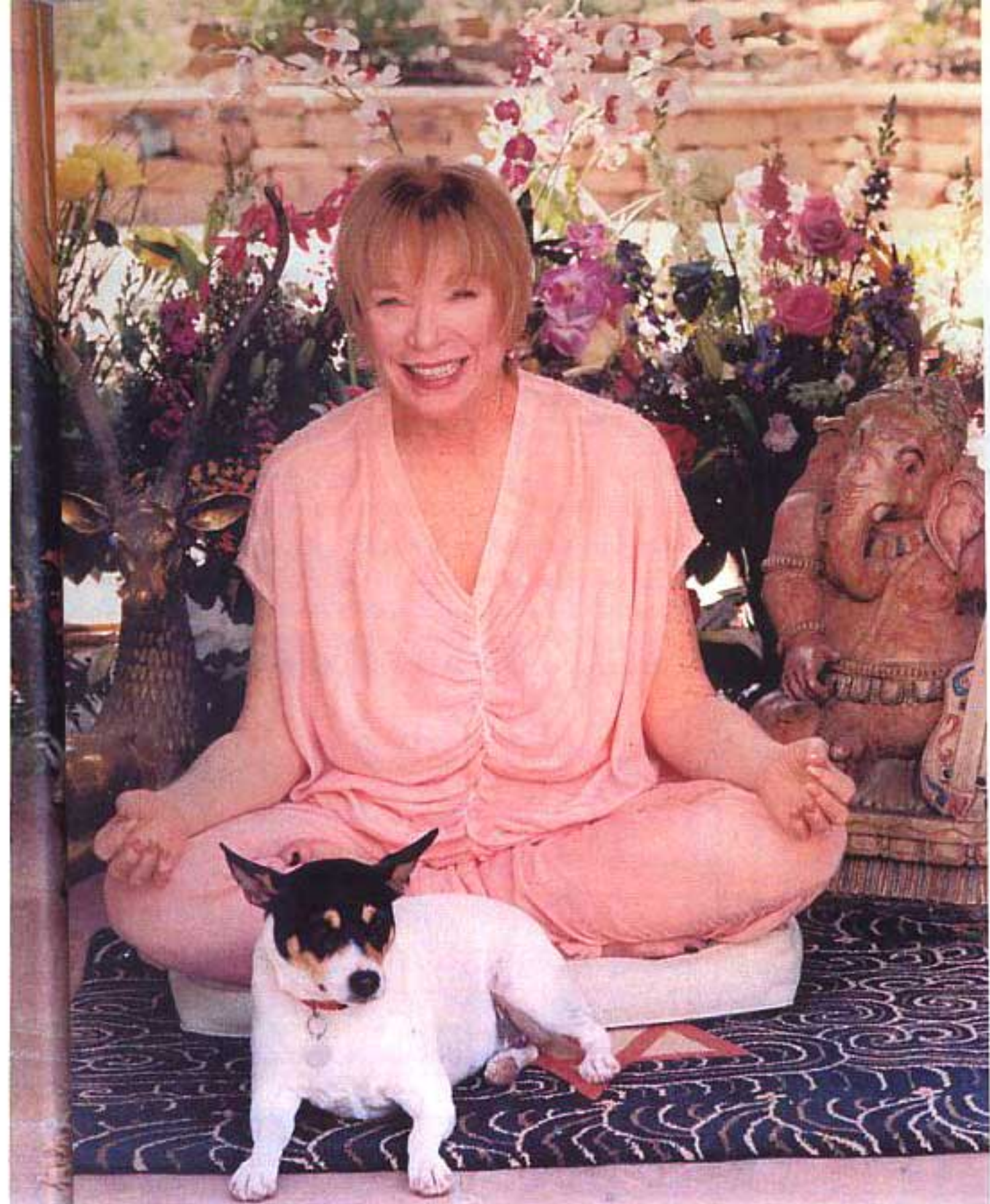
"When you get to be my age in a youth-oriented culture, the leading parts that come your way are sensational when they come, but they're few and far between. Let's just say I turn down an awful lot of junk. Through writing and the Web site I can still communicate with people in reality—not through the fiction of acting. It's so rewarding."

The key message MacLaine delivers, no matter what the medium, is the rejuvenating power of looking inward.

"Going within through meditation," she notes, "is a panacea for healing depression, worry, fear—you name it. Reducing stress is really all about calming the spirit."

And so, after saying, "Thank you," the second step in MacLaine's approach to reducing stress is learning how to meditate and breathe properly. Anyone can do it, she says.

"While prayer is talking to God, meditation is *listening* to God," she begins. "It requires faith in yourself, faith in your capacity to hear your higher power. So, when you wake up in the morning, go into a room and sit quietly in a comfortable lotus position with your back straight. It's better not to lie down, because you could fall asleep. You can close your eyes or not. Then, take in a deep, slow breath and exhale slowly. Clear your mind by concentrating on the breathing. When you take in a deep breath, you're breathing in the divine intelligence—the chi, as the



“Happiness humming feeds real contentment.”

starts leading me spontaneously. Sometimes, it looks a little like an African tribal dance. It's always different, never boring. I'm meditating, I'm moving.

"I've also just started using weights in each hand. My arm moves in spiral or circular motions. Some stretching is also involved. Again, it's my body's intelligence that tells me when to stop and stretch. I use music—though you can't force it. I don't want my pace to be dictated by anything outside myself. It's done, after about 40 minutes, I feel monious—balanced in body. It's not aerobic, but very calming.

MacLaine says that this exercise, combined with meditation, helps her to "curb the dessert craving." Her preferred method of losing weight is gradually rather than doing strenuous aerobic workouts

Chinese say. Breathing in deeply calms you down. People spend thousands on therapy and anti-anxiety medications and you can get the same results for free with breathing! If stray thoughts distract you, just remember the breath. When you become the breath, you shut everything else out.

"There's no time limit on morning meditation," she says, "because there's no such thing as time when you're in this state. Let it happen and let it unhappen. When you're ready to end, it will end itself." And when you stop? "You feel like you've had three good night sleeps."

For those who have difficulty meditating alone, MacLaine recommends listening to the recorded meditations on her Web site, finding a partner, or attending live, guided meditations, which are available in many cities through health clubs, community centers and meditation schools.

In her own daily practice, MacLaine combines meditation with an original exercise routine that includes light weight-training and an Eastern exercise called qigong, "a variation of tai chi," she says, "but more spontaneous.

"I stand in the middle of the floor," she explains, "and wait for my body's intelligence to move me. When I set aside my consciousness, my body begins to relax and then

weights for muscle development. "I had to get rid of that harshness. Extreme weight lifting or running miles on a treadmill leaves tension in the joints, elbows and knees.

"My qigong master told me that if you do any strenuous breathing through your mouth, or panting, doing it too hard. I've stopped going to the gym because I think all that pounding against the body takes away your life."

Trained in ballet as a youngster, the 67-year-old actress remains limber in mind and spirit: "I never had an artificial limit. Surrendering to what the body wants to do is the key. Cause I trusted my body to tell me when I had reached my limit.

When MacLaine finishes her spiritual and physical practice each day, she says she has attained a state of harmony: "I don't ever feel depressed, and I don't feel ecstatic. I'm right in the middle—in a calm place.

"Maybe we women have to redefine words like 'happiness.' It isn't over-the-moon joy, necessarily. It's a ming feeling of real contentment.

"It's empowering to know that, through meditation, a change in attitude, you can create your own reality."

Photo: David Weininger, Illustrations: Sharon Watts

Shirley's Daily Survival Kit

You can carry Shirley MacLaine's "necessary objects" in your purse or pocket—or in your imagination. They consist of the following everyday items, which serve as reminders of spiritual principles. "These are things we use all the time," says MacLaine, "and thinking of them this way can both reduce stress and help us change our attitudes."

- **A Toothpick**, to remind you to pick out the good qualities in other people.
- **A Rubber Band**, to remind you to be flexible; things may not always go the way you want, but they always work out.

- **A Band-Aid**, to remind you to heal hurt feelings, yours or someone else's.
- **A Pencil**, to remind you to list your blessings.
- **An Eraser**, to remind you that everyone makes mistakes, and it's O.K.
- **Glue**, to remind you to stick with it: if you do, you can accomplish anything.
- **A Mint**, to remind you you're worth a mint.
- **A Candy Kiss** to remind you that everyone needs a kiss or a hug every day, especially children.
- **A Tea Bag** to remind you to take time for yourself; you've earned it.

