

The Bulletin

Bend, Oregon

Meditation comfortably settled in the mainstream

By Mary MacVean / Los Angeles Times

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One hundred fifty people sat in the big meeting room, hands on laps, eyes closed, feet flat on the floor.

“Bring your attention to this moment,” Janice Marturano instructed. “Be open to sensations of warmth or coolness, sensations of fullness from breakfast, or perhaps hunger.” Minutes later, the meditation ended with the traditional strikes of little hand cymbals.

Buddhists? Old hippies? New Agers?

No. The room was full of hospital executives and managers in lab coats and scrubs, jeans and sports coats at Long Beach (California) Memorial Medical Center. And Marturano, the teacher, was once a top executive at General Mills.

The founder of the Institute for Mindful Leadership, Marturano is about as far from woo-woo as the spectrum allows — and a sign that meditation has snaked its way into every sector of our lives. The hospital employees were learning a practice shared by millions these days: college students, parents and prisoners; soldiers, the overweight and the lovelorn; the

Seattle Seahawks, public school kids and members of Congress; Oprah, Chopra and Arianna.

And perhaps you. What? You're not meditating?

Meditation, primarily a 2,500-year-old form called mindfulness meditation that emphasizes paying attention to the present moment, has gone viral.

The unrelenting siege on our attention can take a good share of the credit; stress has bombarded people from executives on 24/7 schedules to kids who feel the pressure to succeed even before puberty.

Meditation has been lauded as a way to reduce stress, ease physical ailments like headaches and increase compassion and productivity.

Religious practitioners have long claimed that, adopted by enough people, meditation could bring us world peace. Now we hear that from Chade-Meng Tan, a Google executive charged with making the company more mindful. You needn't even put down your phone, with apps like Insight Timer, which has guided meditations and ways to track your stillness.

It has moved from its Asian, monastic roots to become a practice requiring no particular dogma on a path not necessarily toward nirvana but toward a more mindful everyday life. Some serious advocates worry it's becoming another feel-good commodity.

The practice of mindfulness meditation has become more widespread at a time when the fastest-growing group demographic is made up of people who say they are unaffiliated with a particular denomination, said Varun Soni, the dean of religious life at USC, which has launched a university-wide effort toward mindfulness.

“Every religious tradition changes when it moves to a new place,” Soni said.

In the case of meditation, it’s also moved full force into the academic realm. Aside from the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, and the University of California in San Diego, Los Angeles and Berkeley are among the colleges that also have meditation programs. Hundreds of research papers have been published. At Lesley University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, students can earn a master’s degree in mindfulness studies.

“It’s mind-blowing,” said Sharon Salzberg, co-founder of the Insight Meditation Society in Massachusetts and one of the people who brought Buddhist meditation to the United States in the 1970s.

“It fits a lot about the American spirit,” she said. “You don’t have to join anything. It’s very private. It’s a very direct answer to an awful lot of stress and confusion.”

Getting hooked

Marturano was one of those modern jugglers: a spouse, mother to school-age children, daughter to aging parents,

president of an arts board in the Twin Cities and a top executive at General Mills.

“Every day I juggled faster and faster, and on most days, most of the time, most of the balls stayed in the air,” she told the hospital group.

You know where this is going: What goes up must come down.

She was put in charge of a protracted buyout of Pillsbury by General Mills; failure would have meant 10,000 layoffs (as she put it, 10,000 families losing an income, some of them people she knew). Then, within months, both of her parents died. Marturano was depleted; a friend suggested a spa — not really her thing. Her friend insisted, and what finally lured Marturano was that it was an “intensive” retreat to study mindfulness. She figured, if it was intensive, then it might be OK.

And so she found herself at a spa in Arizona, studying with Jon Kabat-Zinn, pioneer in bringing meditation to a secular audience. She was hooked.

When she returned to General Mills, she was for a time a “closet meditator.” Slowly, she shared what she’d learned and her thinking on about using mindfulness as a leader. The company now has dedicated meditation rooms, and Marturano left in 2010 to found her institute.

“You do not have to chant, shave your head or wear a robe,” she told the Long Beach group.

“Being mindful or meditating does not mean that thoughts don’t intrude, that the mind doesn’t wander. It does,” she said. “Mindfulness occurs at the moment you are aware of the distraction. Then, escort the mind back to the breath.”

Taking a timeout

When Suze Yalof Schwartz opened her pristine, white-walled West L.A. meditation studio nearly a year ago, she kept in mind just the sort of people Marturano knows well.

Unplug aims to be a place where “my husband, who’s a venture capitalist and has zero tolerance for woo-woo things, won’t walk out.” There are no zafu cushions or incense sticks. Instead, meditators come into the studio and take a sleek black folding floor chair — no sitting cross-legged required. The lighting is a pink-violet, inspired by the artist James Turrell.

Unplug appeals to the meditation skeptics, to “the people who don’t want to meditate but their shrinks told them they should,” said Schwartz, who calls herself a spiritual entrepreneur.

Meditation, said Schwartz, who spent years as a makeover maven and fashion editor in New York, speaks to our moment.

“We’re all over-stimulated. It doesn’t matter whether you are 3 or 93. People are not going to the bathroom without their iPhones, and if they tell you they are, they’re lying,” she said. “We need a place to take a timeout.”

Olivia Rosewood, a teacher at Unplug who said she learned to meditate from former Beatle George Harrison when they happened to meet in Fiji, pointed to other 21st-century stresses.

“There is an acceleration of a level of suffering and an acceleration of the violence in the world. And I don’t think anyone is untouched,” she said. “That intensity increases the value of any experience that brings you to your own inner peace.”

A sign outside Unplug calls passersby to find that peace: “Hurry up and slow down.”

It’s advice Jason Garner eventually took.

A child of poverty who grew up in the Arizona desert, he rose to become chief executive of global music at the concert promoter Live Nation and on Forbes list of Top 40 Earners Under 40. Through all that, he never felt “good enough.” He was unhappy, married and divorced twice, more wrapped up in quarterly results than in his true self.

“In the business world, we were just so bombarded with work all the time. The mobile devices — you’re expected to be on call at the movie theater, at your children’s recital, even in bed. I was just looking for a way to find peace,” said Garner, now 42, sitting cross-legged in the cushion-filled meditation room of his Manhattan Beach home one gray afternoon with his wife, Christy, and Salzberg, who has become a friend. In his book “... And I Breathed,” he chronicled his journey, including time with monks at the Shaolin Temple in China, to a

more mindful life — not a checked-out life. These days, he consults people in the entertainment, sports and business worlds using “the blend of my experiences from the executive desk to the meditation cushion to share with them on their journeys,” he said.

Garner noted, with a touch of wonder, that the interconnectivity that has made so many people stressed out also can offer them a solution.

“The Beatles and Sharon went to India. They took a plane to far-out places,” he said. “Now you can just go to YouTube.”