

"I DECIDED TO FIND A SIMPLER WAY OF LIVING, TO SLOW DOWN AND THINK MORE IN TERMS OF WELLBEING AS A WHOLE"

ONCE the domain of Buddhist monks, hippies and rock stars, meditation is going mainstream. No longer confined to temples, ashrams and monasteries, the art of meditating and focusing our mind is spreading into schools, the workplace and hospitals as doctors, scientists, educators and bosses agree that meditation is good for us.

"It's very difficult to now say that all this is wishy washy. The science is very clear," says Han Wee Tan (right), one of the leading teachers of meditation and mindfulness in Cairns.

"Mindfulness has been very successful with heart disease, addiction, improving cancer treatment, lowering blood pressure, managing stress and reducing anxiety.

"There are so many experiments that now provide irrefutable proof that your body is not divorced from your mind. What you do with your mind influences your body – right down to your genetic expression."

Singapore-born Han graduated with a Bachelor of Science majoring in Human Movement from Melbourne's Deakin University before returning home to teach sports science. But the busyness of the island nation began to lose its appeal.

"I decided to find a simpler way of living, to slow down and think more in terms of wellbeing as a whole," says Han, 38, who returned to Australia eight years ago.

"Gradually, I came across yoga. From yoga, I came to appreciate meditation and met people who took me down the path of mindfulness as well.

"Mindfulness is a specific way of applying our minds – where we dedicate our attention to something. It takes away all the esoterics of meditation, so it's no longer viewed as mystical. It is just hard science that says when you pay attention in this way, these are the benefits – lowering heart disease, diabetes and addiction.

"We're not saying don't go through your treatment. Do it, but use meditation. It's proven to help in so many ways," Han says.

Meditation has also entered the workplace through lunchtime sessions, after-hour classes and weekend workshops.

"Some of the fastest uptakers of meditation are corporate executives. Employers are bringing it into the workplace to help with mindfulness. Some joke that this is because employers want more out of their staff – increased performance, productivity, stress levels mitigated, reduced sick leave."

"I don't necessarily mind that perspective, as long as people are starting to become more mindful of how they're living, what they're doing and how they're feeling."

The medical profession is also adopting it, says Han.

"Mindfulness is being used at Monash University for student doctors to manage stress, but equally as a tool to help patients."

The man who put mindfulness on the map, Jon Kabat-Zinn, pioneered it in the basement of the University of Massachusetts Medical School, where he helped patients suffering from depression, pain and terminal illnesses.

"He was a bit of a joke at first, but was getting such amazing results, experts started to take notice."

Han says everyone can benefit, particularly those who say they have no time.

"It's a running joke that everyone should meditate for 15 minutes a day, but if you don't even have 15 minutes in your day to meditate, you should meditate for half an hour."



GETTING EVERYTHING INTO FOCUS

WORDS// ROZ PULLEY

MEDITATION IS THE NEW BLACK. IT SHARPENS THE BRAIN, REDUCES ANXIETY, IMPROVES SLEEP, BOOSTS HEALTH AND MAKES US HAPPY.

Resident nun and co-ordinator of Khacho Yulo Ling Buddhist Centre in Cairns, the Venerable Rinchen (opposite page),

incorporates meditation into her daily life and shares its benefits with others.

Rinchen facilitates relaxation/meditation sessions at Cairns Hospital as part of a cardiac rehabilitation program and heart conditioning clinic.

"I talk to them about how they view stress and the benefits of meditation in reducing stress," Rinchen says. "Stress is the No. 1 factor in most of these diseases. Stress raises your cortisol levels – that's your fight and flight.

"Even low levels of stress are damaging, a bit like constantly revving the engine of a car.

"Learning to relax switches off the stress hormone, cortisol and allows the body to sleep and regenerate more effectively.

"When I teach anyone to meditate, regardless of whether they're doing cardiac rehab, the heart conditioning clinic, oncology, palliative care or at the Buddhist centre, I first

teach them to relax because you can't meditate unless you know how to relax."

That can be easier for some than others.

Rinchen says Asian cultures were more familiar with the ancient tradition of meditation in the past because they came from contemplative environments.

"But now they are becoming just like Westerners, who don't know how to relax. We've got smart phones, laptops, iPads, television, the internet. We are bombarded, so we've got sensory overload.

"First, I get people lying down. The Buddha taught four postures – sitting, standing, walking and lying down. This posture helps people to relax more easily, which is the first step towards being able to meditate.

"Once they have mastered being able to relax without going to sleep, then the training begins. Relaxation with mindful awareness."

Rinchen also works in palliative care.

"I am often asked to talk to people about the dying process and to try to help them come to terms with how to die peacefully, to relax into it and not fight it. This is a subject that few people want to talk about, and not an easy subject to deal with."

She says classes at the Buddhist centre attract a mix of people – those interested in the spiritual side and others simply wanting more peace and calm. "When I teach meditation, I don't give too much of a Buddhist overlay. Most that come ... just want to be less stressed."

Rinchen says meditation can bring a genuine sense of wellbeing and happiness that is not dependent on the outside world, but comes from within.

"It's a simple technique, but not easy. You have to sit still and nobody really wants to sit still anymore."

CAIRNS MEDITATION CLASSES

Core Life: Move into Stillness, 4.30pm Tues, Shop 11, 84 Lake St. Ph: 0457 632 700; **PhyxMe:** Meditation, 4.30pm Fri,

Piccone's Shopping Village, Pease St.

Free Breathing Meditation & Intro

Kinesiology: 5.30pm Nov 22, Chinese

Friendship Gardens, Greenslopes St.

Aguadulgent Massage Centre:

Meditation & breath techniques, 7.30pm

Sept 27, 158 McManus St, Whitfield. Email:

kglish@westnet.com.au. **Diamond Way**

Buddhism: Meditation, 7.30pm Wed;

Meditate More, monthly; 10 year anniversary lectures, Sept 29-Oct 1, 12

Majestic St, Kamerunga. Ph/text: 0415 422

321. **Khacho Yulo Ling Buddhist Centre:**

Meditation, 7pm Mon, 10am Wed & Sun;

10 day silent retreat, Sept 23-Oct 2, 348

Severin St, Parramatta Park. Ph: 4041

5556. **Life Tree Natural Therapies:** The

Soul Adventure, 12 part online guided

meditation course. Ph: 0419 665 681.

Zoe Strickland Massage, Meditation &

Hypnobirthing: 3/21 Kamerunga Rd,

Stratford. Ph: 0420 504 421.