

Executives find another way to transcend the daily grind

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By day they direct meetings, command teams of lackeys and live and die by the BlackBerry. But for now they sit - backs ramrod straight, eyes closed - and ponder their toes.

"Everyone ready?"

Ding!

The resonating warmth of a small brass gong fills a conference room full of business people, a stone's throw from Toronto's financial district.



[Enlarge Image](#)

Meditation helped Lesley Parrott increase her attention span at work. (*Peter Power/The Globe and Mail*)



"Feel your feet firmly planted on the floor," intones meditation leader Maria Gonzalez, "and the contact of your buttocks to the chair."

Scoff at your peril. Before long, one of Ms. Gonzalez's blissed-out students may be levitating ahead of you on the company ladder.

Mindfulness meditation, an ancient ritual in which students learn to focus on the present rather than past regrets or future anxieties, is attracting a new strand of elite followers. Their suits are tailored and their shoes are Italian leather. Their idolatry is not Buddha or Vishnu but Tiger Woods and Michael Milken.

"It's much more productive than other escapes like alcohol or pills," says Sean Foran, a vice-president at Bank of Montreal's Harris private banking division.

"I'm not fighting life any more. My life is much more successful. Relationships are more enriching. People comment on how easy life seems to be for me. I'm the guy for whom everything comes up roses."

Such hearty endorsements have prompted corporations such as Google, Hughes Aircraft and Deutsche Bank to introduce meditation classes for employees. In cities across Canada, mindfulness classes are overbooked with stressed professionals searching for a path to increased focus and decreased stress.

The trend has caught the interest of academics. Researchers have found that prolonged mindfulness meditation eases stress, aggressive behaviour, cardiovascular problems, pain and depression.

In Toronto, Ms. Gonzalez runs a popular class. Aside from an authentic Burmese gong, her lessons bear little trace of any New Age roots.

She dresses in dark business suits and addresses the class with the understated confidence of a commercial titan. Not so long ago, she was conquering Bay Street as the executive responsible for strategic alliances at Bank of Montreal. She also held senior positions with Royal Bank of Canada, Bank of Nova Scotia and Crown Life Insurance Co.

Those credentials legitimize her practice in the eyes of business-oriented clients.

"I'm not much of a New Age, crunchy granola kind of person," says Lesley Parrott, a communications consultant. "When I heard about Maria's business background, I thought I'd give it a try."

Since finishing one round of eight classes, Ms. Parrott has gained the attention span to clear a desk she thought would be permanently cluttered and her pulse has slowed by six to eight beats a minute.

"I know it might sound flaky, but to be completely and utterly focused is a wonderful gift," Ms. Parrott says.

The flaky factor has diminished in recent years as the number of sports and business celebrities attesting to the benefits of meditation has grown. Mr. Woods has been known to close his eyes and meditate in front of the cameras during a round of golf.

Mr. Woods' unrestricted meditation illustrates one of the major advantages of mindfulness meditation: students can do it anywhere, any time. Ms. Gonzalez teaches methods of meditating while walking, talking and lying down. Before important business meetings, she usually allows herself a few minutes to meditate at her desk.

"It has nothing to do with incense and sitting in the lotus position," she says. "None of it is spacey or airy-fairy. This is very pragmatic. It's how to manage yourself while you're in a traffic jam, or a grocery checkout line or with that boss who makes life difficult."

Ms. Gonzalez first dabbled in meditation in her early 20s but left it behind for her nascent career in high finance. In her 30s, she resumed meditating during a stint teaching business classes at Montreal's McGill University and quickly saw benefits for life and work. "When you're stressed, the first thing that goes is focus and calm," she says. "With mindfulness you develop a greater ability to concentrate."

Mindfulness meditation has a rich history in both Buddhism and Christianity, but Ms. Gonzalez teaches an entirely secular version. After three rings of the gong, her students settle into meditation. They concentrate intently on a single body part or individual breaths, expunging from their mind all distractions. Ms. Gonzalez talks throughout, directing students' focus.

After the class, many students report being more alert and more attentive during conversation.

One student at a recent class said that she'd replaced her morning coffee with morning meditation. Another said that her newfound calm had helped her during tense meetings.

Reams of recent studies substantiate their claims. In one study, neurologists at Massachusetts General Hospital found that meditation actually alters the construction

of the brain. Comparing the brains scans of meditators with a control group, they found thickened cortical walls surrounding the regions of the brain responsible for attention and sensory processing.

Last year, University of Toronto scientist Tony Toneatto found that nursing students who were able to maintain a state of mindfulness had fewer symptoms of stress and anxiety.

"There are dozens and dozens of articles proving how mindfulness can help cope with illness and such," says Dr. Toneatto, a professor in the departments of psychiatry and public health sciences who has practised meditation himself for two decades.

For all its recent converts, meditation remains tied to its hippie past in the eyes of some. Many of Ms. Gonzalez's students still don't feel the need spread the secret of their sublimity.

"I haven't really shared with other people that I meditate," Mr. Foran said. "I'm not known as Sean the meditator, but as Sean the guy who has life by the tail."

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