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Seeking a quiet mind

There is a growing interest in meditation as people try to bring an awareness back into their daily lives

THERE HAS been a huge growth of interest in meditation in the past few years – both in those forms of meditation practised within organised religions and those which encourage stillness and reflection outside the parameters of eastern and western religions.

Dublin-based meditation teacher John Doherty says there are two main reasons why people seek out courses in meditation. "Firstly, there are those who are looking for something that will help them deal with the stress, anxiety and busyness in their lives, something that will help them slow down their pace of life so that they get a handle on things," he explains.

The second group of individuals who seek out meditation classes, according to Doherty, are those who are on a spiritual journey. "A lot of the original forms of meditation offered came with religious wrapping – either from eastern or western religions – and people have been drawn to them in the past," he says.

"In many ways, meditation provides something that many religions are looking for. It allows people to have an experience for themselves and it allows them meet themselves on a deeper level."

According to Doherty, organised religions tend to give you the story and the language and only then include meditation or contemplative prayer within this context.

However, aside altogether from various religious traditions of meditation has been the rise of so-called mindfulness meditation. Although inspired by the teachings of Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, this form of meditation has been developed around the world as a non-denominational spiritual and psychological tool.

Courses based on the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn, author of *Full Catastrophe Living – how to cope with stress, pain and illness using mindfulness meditation* (Piatkus Press), have developed in various medical and therapeutic centres throughout the world.

Mary O'Callaghan is a mindfulness meditation teacher based in Dublin. She says that mindfulness meditation is now becoming widely practised around the world.

"What used to be seen as an alien eastern practice is now being adopted in the more secular cultures of the west. In the United States, even lawyers, business executives and policemen are undertaking mindfulness training.

"Doctors, psychiatrists and psychologists here are beginning to recognise the value of mindfulness not only as a means of helping their patients but also as a way of slowing down

themselves and connecting more deeply with their own lives.

"There is a growing body of scientific research which shows how effective mindfulness practice is for conditions such as depression, anxiety, stress, pain, etc," she says.

She also says that mindfulness, through the art of conscious breathing, is the gateway to being more alive to the richness and mystery of each unfolding moment.

Claire Pilling from the Chrysalis Centre for Wellbeing in Donard, Co Wicklow says she has noticed that the silent meditation days and retreats are the first to book out on their extensive programme of events.

"People want more peace and quiet which was one of the founding principles of this non-denominational retreat centre almost 20 years ago.

"One of the most frequent comments I hear from the first part of a meditation day or retreat is how busy people's minds are. It takes quite a while for the mind to settle. In fact, the mind may never clear but your attitude towards it can change," she says.

"Meditation isn't something you do," explains Doherty. "There are lots of practices that can bring you into the meditative state of being. There are three main qualities that you become aware of when you are in this meditative state. These are stability, peace and space. You develop a greater sense of openness – your thoughts come and go but you remain.

"The hardest thing for people these days is to let go of their thinking minds. We have become prisoners of our thoughts but the voice in our mind is generally only mental noise. It has nothing to do with who we are.

"We only really find out who we are when the thinking mind is quiet.

"This can be a very strange and even frightening experience for some people who wonder what's happening to them if they are not caught up in their thoughts," explains Doherty.

Doherty says that in his work, he encourages people to accept

what is without needing to fix or change it. "If you surrender to the moment and accept everything as it is, you will find the peace that comes from that. It is from this place of active acceptance that change comes and the knowledge of what actions and decisions you need to take comes from a deeper place," he explains.

Claire Pilling says that she herself practises meditation daily. "My impression of meditation is not just about sitting on your cushion to bring inner peace and enlightenment into your life. It is also a service to your family and society in general to help you be less reactive and more responsive in your daily interactions with people.

"I particularly like the practice which encourages people to take a three-minute stop in their day-to-day lives, take a breathe and realise what's going on for them. It's this way of bringing an awareness back into your everyday life that's most important," she says.

SYLVIA THOMPSON

Where to meditate

■ **Open Heart, Open Mind: The Art of Meditation: An introduction to meditation by American mind/body psychotherapist Ron Alexander on September 6th and 7th, 10am-5pm in Milltown Park, Sandford Road, Ranelagh, Dublin 6. Cost €185. Booking via Chrysalis on tel: 045 404713. See also www.chrysalis.ie**

■ **Meditation Mondays: an open meditation evening, offering people a space to come and deepen the peace and stillness within. Every Monday from 7.30pm-9pm, starting September 8th, Cherith, Carmelite Monastery, Firhouse, Dublin. €20 or donation. See also www.spirit.ie or call 086-6040988 for meditation courses run by John Doherty.**

■ **Mindfulness Meditation Courses:** An eight-session course with one full day of mindfulness practice, based on the teachings of Jon Kabat-Zinn in Oscailt Integrative Health Centre, Pembroke Road, Dublin 4. Courses begin on Monday, September 8th at 7.30pm, Wednesday (mothers course), September 10th at 10am and Friday, September 12th at 12.30pm. Cost €350. Booking on tel: 01 6603872. See also www.oscailt.com

■ **Art of Living Course:** This course combines breathing, yoga and meditation techniques. Cultivate, Lower Essex St, Dublin, from September 11th-15th. Cost €250. Call 087 7667195 for more details. See also www.cultivate.ie



Meditation teacher John Doherty in St Dominic's Retreat House, Ennismore Retreat, Cork city.
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