

R H A P S O D Y

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MICHAEL SHANNON

Hollywood's
secret weapon

POETIC JUSTICE
Chile through
Neruda's eyes

JUST BREATHE
Inside America's
obsession with
meditation

MEASURE OF A MAN
Why your next suit
should be bespoke

UNITED 

A STAR ALLIANCE MEMBER 


A large crowd of people is shown in a meditative state, with their eyes closed and a calm expression. The background is dark, and the lighting is soft, highlighting the individuals in the foreground. The overall atmosphere is serene and focused.

IN DEPTH

OM LAND

With celebrities and high-powered CEOs embracing 'bliss consciousness,' meditation has gone mainstream

STORY NATALIE SHUKUR

A large group of people, including former MLB pitcher Barry Zito, David Lynch, and Russell Brand, are shown meditating with their eyes closed in a dark room. In the foreground, two men are prominently featured: an older man with white hair on the left and a younger man with long dark hair and a beard on the right. The background is filled with a dense crowd of other participants, all appearing to be in a state of meditation.

FREE YOUR MIND
Former MLB
pitcher Barry Zito,
David Lynch,
and Russell Brand
meditate with
San Francisco
high school
students, in 2013

ON A RECENT stormy Thursday evening at a small studio nestled between art galleries and townhouses in the affluent Sydney suburb of Paddington, an eclectic group gathered. An events manager, a café owner, a skincare expert, a finance executive, and a couple of creative types, myself included, sat on low-slung Japanese chairs arranged in a semicircle; the faint smell of sandalwood lingered in the air. While our vocations, personalities, styles of dress, and postal codes all varied, one thing united us: stress. But we weren't there to wallow in our stress in some kind of overwrought anonymous support group. We were at wellness hub The Broad Place to learn Vedic meditation, a technique that, when practiced for 20 minutes twice a day, is said to cleanse stress from the nervous system, increase clarity, heighten creativity, and leave us better able to cope with life.

While the thought of meditation conjures images of monks and ashrams, the practice of Vedic meditation was originally developed in the “householder” tradition, meaning it was intended for those of us engaged in society, spinning the plates of work, family, relationships, and community. It was designed to bring harmony, unity, and wellbeing to everyday people—busy people. After all, it is the most plugged-in and overburdened among us that require such tools.

Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the Beatles' meditation teacher, famously brought Vedic meditation—which he branded Transcendental Meditation, or TM—to the west. (Generally speaking, both abide by the same method and principles; TM is to Vedic meditation as Kleenex is to tissues.) In the early '70s, director George Lucas learned the technique, inspiring *Star Wars* themes (the Force) and characters (it's rumored that Yoda was modeled on Maharishi Mahesh). Today, artist and director David Lynch is perhaps TM's most visible celebrity proponent. This past November, he held a benefit concert, *Change Begins Within*, where everyone from Jerry Seinfeld to Katy Perry performed and extolled the life-changing virtues of the practice. “When I meditate, there's something physical that actually happens,” Perry said at the event. “Something medical, scientific, where I feel like the neural pathways in my brain open up like they've had cobwebs on them for days or weeks, and I feel my most sharp.”

But it's not just creatives searching for enlightenment. Nowadays, leading CEOs and entrepreneurs—like Tupperware CEO Rick Goings, NationalField developer Edward Saatchi, economist Nouriel Roubini, and Def Jam founder Russell Simmons—are quick to cite meditation as a key factor in their triumphs. Ray Dalio, the billionaire founder of investment firm Bridgewater

specifically for each individual—and students are taught how to use their mantra, workshop the method, and practice 20-minute group meditations.

So how exactly does it work? Many teachers use diving as a metaphor. On the surface, the choppy waters represent our chattering minds. As we dive deeper, anchored by our mantra, we begin to transcend thought, going within. Down

beneath the surface lies our pure consciousness, or “bliss consciousness,” where we are humans *being* rather than humans doing. This is our natural state, according to the practice. We dive, we float back up, and we dive again. With regular practice, it is said, the gap between the surface and the depths shortens as we become more connected to this inner state, therefore more peaceful outside of our meditation practice. The objective is to release negativity and boost

our “happy hormones,” so we can enjoy the present moment instead of holding out for that afternoon sugar hit, evening glass of wine, or vacation to bolster us when we're absolutely spent.

I SOUGHT OUT VM for a number of reasons. Stress, and the associated burnout and anxiety that anyone who has worked in the New York publishing industry understands, was up there. As a freelance writer who simultaneously works with multiple clients and projects in different time zones, I wanted to stoke my creativity, boost my productivity, and become more dynamic in my thoughts

“Nowadays, leading CEOs and entrepreneurs are quick to cite meditation as a key factor in their triumphs.”

Associates, has said, “Meditation, more than anything in my life, was the biggest ingredient of whatever success I've had.” Oprah, Arianna Huffington, and Marnie Abramson, whose family owns the real estate firm Tower Companies, have arranged TM courses for their employees. Abramson said it's “probably the fastest, easiest, and least expensive way of getting more out of your workers than you could ever imagine.”

In the Vedic method, as with TM, you take a course of four 90-minute sessions with a certified teacher; the price tag is typically around \$1,000. The teacher gives you a mantra—an abstract word selected

COME TOGETHER
The Beatles with
guru Maharishi
Mahesh Yogi,
in 1967



and actions. And, of course, who doesn't yearn for more joy, calm, and compassion in their personal lives? I liked that this technique could potentially tick all these boxes and then some. I practice yoga regularly and have dabbled in everything from astrology to reiki, but my past experience with meditation (a three-day silent Vipassana retreat where I sat for hours on end meditating cross-legged and remained mute between sittings), though it was awakening, was impossible to sustain in everyday life. In Vipassana, you concentrate on the rising and falling of the breath; no mantra is given. When friends started mentioning VM as the trick that keeps them sane and on their game, I was intrigued.

On the recommendation of two brilliant women, a fashion photographer and a hotelier who manage to balance young families, endless travel, and thriving careers with grace and joy, I decided to

study at The Broad Place. Here, Jacqui Lewis and her husband, Arran Russell, provide ancient practices and knowledge for modern high-grade living. "Everyone tries some sort of meditation these days, usually to no success, and then they're like, 'Oh, I can't do it,' but they haven't tried Vedic," Lewis assured me. "I haven't found anyone that Vedic meditation doesn't work for."

For our initiation ceremony, we were told to each bring six flowers and three pieces of fruit. Lewis sang a little song to honor the names of the great teachers of VM before taking each of us aside privately for a couple of minutes to impart our personal mantras, a rite that instilled in me an otherworldly sense of calm. (Lewis stresses not to share your mantra with anyone; it's your private key, and divulging it softens its power.) Despite the offerings, VM is not a religious practice. "We get a ton of people

from the corporate world because I think we don't have that hippy-dippy woo-woo way that actually terrifies people a little bit," Lewis said.

Indeed, stress is the primary reason people come to The Broad Place. Clarity comes in second. For London-based fashion consultant and Style.com fashion director Yasmin Sewell, it was "balance, clarity, and connection on a deeper level." Her experience practicing with Gary Gorrow, one of the leading teachers in Australia, inspired Sewell to team with Gorrow and chefs Jasmine and Melissa Hemsley to create Mind Body Reset, urban retreats for busy, stressed-out Londoners to learn about meditation and nutrition. (Both Gorrow and Lewis were taught in the U.S. by the world's leading Vedic expert, Thom Knoles.)

Cisco Tschurtschenthaler, a model and health coach who has shot campaigns for H&M and been featured in *Vogue* Paris,



JUST BREATHE
Oprah leading a group meditation at the Golden Dome of Pure Knowledge in Fairfield, Iowa, in 2012

“As the trend toward mindful leadership gains traction, perhaps it’s only a matter of time before meditation is integrated into our offices, too.”

was seeking stability. “As my modeling career took off, and I was constantly traveling and working long hours, stress levels also increased, and so did the search for a tool to help me balance my lifestyle and quiet my mind,” she said. For film and TV producer Avriil Stark, chronic anxiety led her to learn the technique with Gorrow. “I was having five panic attacks each day,” she said. “It was debilitating. His teaching me meditation, I am certain, saved my life. After three weeks, I had much greater breaks between panic attacks, and after three months I had no panic attacks.”

Lewis, who counts clarity, happiness, and improved creativity among the benefits of VM, puts general physical health high up on the list as well. “I get so many referrals from chiropractors, osteopaths, and GPs for their patients to learn to meditate with a tool that actively removes stress out of the nervous system as opposed to [something that’s] just relaxing while we do it,” she said. “It’s a big quintessential difference.”

Comprehensive medical studies have linked the practice to increased gray matter, lowered blood pressure, obesity

control, and improved cardiovascular function. Recently, the American Heart Association gave meditation the official tick of approval as a preventative tool for heart health. “Think of it as a 20-minute vacation from the stress in your life,” said Richard A. Stein, professor of medicine and director of the exercise and nutrition program at New York University’s Center for Prevention of Cardiovascular Disease. EEG results, which measure electrical activity in the brain, differ significantly between people simply resting their eyes and those in the state

of VM. One study compared TM with other methods of stress relief and found it to be twice as effective in reducing anxiety. Unlike medication, there are no side effects to this technique, and a growing number of schools across the U.S. are making the practice part of the academic curriculum. As the trend toward mindful leadership and wellbeing in the workplace gains traction, perhaps it's only a matter of time before it's integrated into our offices, too.

Lewis described VM as “laundrying the nervous system.” She said that a lifetime of accumulated stress is notched on the grooves of our neural pathways, and as we meditate, stress, tension, and fatigue are released; over time, your practice will leave you rested and refreshed, with one 20-minute session equivalent to two hours of sleep. Tschurtschenthaler uses it as a way of recharging her batteries. “I’m a very active and impatient person, and I have trouble stopping and slowing down at times,” she said. “[Through VM] my energy levels are higher, and I have a lot more clarity, which allows me to navigate smoothly through stressful situations. I am a lot less reactive and overall more joyful.”

For some, it deepens their spirituality; for others, it's more like getting a VIP card to an exclusive club, the key to a more advanced way of living. (Lewis referenced a CEO who uses the practice tactically to quickly make big decisions with ease.) Skeptics question the need for and selection of the mantras. I questioned the price tag, wondering if it wasn't something I could learn on my own, and I felt a little conflicted about a “householder” practice that's not affordable for everyone. Ultimately, though, I don't think I would have been confident that I had the practice down pat without undergoing the course. And, as an alumnus of The Broad Place, I have lifetime access to a library of talks and articles, as well as regular gatherings and the option to re-sit the course at any time—all gratis. Not that the course is designed to keep you dependent on its community. “You don't have to keep going [to group meditation] every week,” Lewis said. “You learn, and then you're up and independently practicing.”

How that plays out in the real world varies from person to person. “Buses, trains, planes, taxis, broom closets, meeting rooms, park benches, sitting in a

parked car—these are the places where people tend to meditate. It's not, like, on a rock at the beach or in the forest,” Lewis said. Flying is an exception to the 20-minute twice-a-day guideline; Lewis recommends meditating for hours at a time on long-haul flights and for the entirety of short ones. “When we can do that for extended periods of time when flying, we actively nourish from within ourselves, and when we land we just feel a million times better. I've got so many students who literally learn for that reason.”

Everyone's VM practice and progress is different. Some see the benefits within a week; for others, it may take a year. The results can be subtle—over time you might gradually start to notice you're calmer in traffic or more tolerant of a co-worker who's acting out. Stark, the film and TV producer, said that while she's still susceptible to stress, “For the most part, I'm able to observe situations rather than ‘become’ them. I work in a creative field with many different people who have varying demands. I find myself more comfortably being able to listen to creative ideas and flow with them. This has made it easier for me to make changes in the way I work, the way I run my business, and also in the way I enjoy my personal relationships.”

Sewell concurred: “That feeling of non-attachment,” she said. “Nothing trivial really affects me anymore, because you realize everything is dictated by that thought in your head that is so fleeting, and of course [there's] that feeling of peace and being truly present.”

For me, in the first few weeks of practicing, VM created a constructive, nourishing template for my days. Carving out the time to meditate gave me more focus, intention, and mindfulness. Now, I'm waking up half an hour earlier to meditate, and instead of reaching for a snack during the 4 p.m. slump (digestion and meditation don't mix), I'll try and grab another 20 minutes of meditation. It's a positive domino effect that's left me feeling energetically lighter. At The Broad Place, I learned there are no “good” or “bad” meditations. There are just meditations. This, for me, is the kicker. As I close my eyes and my mind babbles away (Did I email her back? Is there avocado in the fridge? I must finish that article today!), I'm now able to see these thoughts as debris in my nervous system evaporating. It's also becoming a tool for moments when things are getting on top of me—an adult timeout, if you will. Now, I'm able to savor a glass of wine at the end of the day instead of inhaling it. 🍷

DEEP THINKERS
The Broad Place
founders Arran
Russell and
Jacqui Lewis

