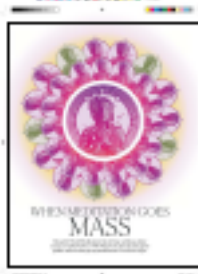


WHEN MEDITATION GOES MASS

Ahead of World Meditation Day in May, wellness editor
Lucy E Cousins looks at why this private practice has gone
public and whether group meditation is worth the hype



Meditation is tough at the best of times, but it's especially difficult when you're sitting next to a heavy breather with a whistle nose on one side and a frequent sigher on the other. That's not to mention the lady sitting in front of me with so much perfume on she might burst into flames, and the guy behind me who had garlic prawns for lunch.

But then, that's to be expected when you're sitting in the middle of Sydney's Centennial Park with 300 other people, being guided in a meditation practice by a teacher with a voice as smooth as polished concrete. It's hot, hard to concentrate and the sounds of humanity literally surround me.

Perhaps this is the attraction of events such as Wanderlust (a mindful triathlon that includes a mass meditation). They bring people together, encourage a sense of community by creating a structured space to meditate, and enable people to let go of their inhibitions. But Wanderlust isn't the only company promoting mass meditation as a new sport. In the US, there are Facebook pages dedicated to mass meditation meet-ups, and here in Australia mass meditation is offered everywhere from the National Gallery of Victoria and Sydney's Royal Botanic Garden, to Movie and Meditation Night in Alice Springs and Meditation by the Sea in Perth.

For many, a Saturday night spent silently with a bunch of strangers is the key to feeling balanced. But how does meditation as a solo sport compare with meditation in a group of hundreds?

For Vedic meditation practitioner

and Ayurveda health coach Gary Gorrow, the benefits of meditation come down to the calm, positive energy that a mass meditation creates and the effect it encourages in others. "There's a lot of science that looks very deeply at the subject of the 'field effects of consciousness' [of people in groups], and the principle is that every human being, whether they're conscious of it or not, affects their environment through their energetic field," he explains.

You might feel this effect in your everyday life, he says, when you spend time with someone who is really hyped up and you feel like your heart rate starts to increase. Or when you go to a rock concert or sporting event.

"Often, people can relate to when there's riots or when there's mayhem that erupts in a football stadium, and suddenly everyone's just losing their minds, turning into a maniac," Gorrow says. "On the opposite side of the scale is [mass meditating], when people are bathing in this state of deep peace. It pulls others into that vortex in a way."

However, for neuroscientist Dr Sarah McKay, the question of a collective energy in meditation comes down to a spiritual belief, not a scientific one.

"Some people believe that everyone gets into a conscious state when you're [meditating] in a group, and all the brains together are tapping into the same stream," she explains. "But, to do this, our consciousness would have to exist outside the brain."

McKay points out that there is no definitive evidence for this, and suggests that it should be seen as a belief system, as it's not based on what we understand about neurobiology.

"I believe consciousness emerges from the brain. And when there's no brain, there's nothing," says McKay. "But, I know our brains evolved to be social. So I think being together meditating with other people with a collective

MEDITATION THREE WAYS

SOUL ALIVE
Live-streamed meditation from Instagram. soulalive.com.au

DIPSEA
Sensual meditations to get your sexy on. dipseastories.com

EXPECTFUL
Meditations for fertility, pregnancy and parenthood. expectful.com

purpose gives us a good feeling."

Gorrow agrees, explaining, "We're naturally gregarious creatures, and we are very communal and love community and having a tribe, essentially. We, as humans, love to share experiences."

So depending which school of thought you believe, mass meditation may or may not herald positive change on a broader level. Either way, we know that meditation as a shared experience is worthwhile in the sense that it has all the benefits of a private session (reducing stress and anxiety, lowering heart rates, better sleep), with the bonus of social interaction.

But don't worry if you struggle to zone out from the crowd long enough to actually meditate; that's entirely normal, says Caitlin Cady, author of *Heavily Meditated* (Hardie Grant, \$29.99).

"Those potential distractions can become part of your meditation practice," she says. "Rather than getting our attention 'caught up' in the noisy breather next to us, it can help to just notice it and let it pass, like a cloud sailing through the soundscape, and then gently bring your attention back to your meditation focal point or technique."

Cady says the bottom line is don't let distractions stop you; instead let them help strengthen your meditation muscles. And she's right. Once I got used to the sounds around me, the debris of human existence, I sank into a relaxed state, where at the end of 20 minutes I felt refreshed, calm and somehow closer to the people around me. Yes, even death-by-perfume lady and the heavy breather.

MEDITATION'S SLEEPY SISTER

If meditation isn't for you, Cady suggests you try yoga nidra. Never heard of it? Join the club. "Yoga nidra is an ancient, guided relaxation technique sometimes called yogic sleep," she explains. "Basically, it's like a nap on steroids. Research is emerging about the effectiveness of yoga nidra in helping people heal from trauma, anxiety and depression, as well as PTSD. In some ways, yoga nidra is even more approachable than meditation – for one, you get to lie down ... blanket and eye pillow optional." Sounds like our kind of workout!