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If You Put Your Mind to It: Provo Yoga teacher wants to heal economy through power of meditation

Cody Clark - Daily Herald

After yearlong financial stumbles became a full-fledged slide into economic recession in September, President George W. Bush and members of Congress chose to fight fire with fire by authorizing the federal government to invest billions of dollars in an attempt to stabilize the nations teetering financial system.

Provo resident Syl Carson, who owns and operates White Mountain Center for Yoga in Provo, had an idea that's much simpler, quite a bit more elegant and, admittedly, somewhat less likely to have a measurable or quantifiable effect on the stability of world markets. On the other hand, it's completely free.

Since early October, Carson, 40, has been leading a rapidly growing effort to use meditation to disperse anxiety and anguished speculation connected to the breakdown of world economies. "It started out with people in about six states and two foreign countries," Carson said.

Her idea, in which people scattered around the globe engage in shared, focused meditation at a prearranged time, is catching on quickly. Though there have only been two meditation events so far, Carson said that people in 25 states and eight foreign countries are now participating. Anyone can join in simply by going to aglobalmeditation.blogspot.com to read the details of the next meditation.

It was the troubled economy that inspired Carson to organize a collective meditation series -- she's named it "A Global Meditation.Calm."

"People were telling me, 'It's so hard to even function,' " Carson said, because of days spent weighed down by thoughts of escalating economic disruption. She

shared her idea with a network of clients and got an immediate and positive response: Let's do it.

Even people who aren't specifically troubled by worries about mortgage rates or collapsing stock market indexes, however, have taken heart from "A Global Meditation.Calm." Pleasant Grove resident Karen Beagles, a 48-year-old mother of four, said she's benefited just by realizing that her personal problems aren't unique.

"We think we're so solitary sometimes," Beagles said, "but so many other people have gone through the same things."

The power of positive thinking

Many, if not most, people would acknowledge the benefits of meditation to personal well being. The notion of fixing the world economy by sending it healing vibes, on the other hand, sounds preposterous.

Carson said that most people would probably agree that it was the thoughts and actions of individuals that created the current financial stew. "If you believe that it was something we did that caused the recession," she said, "then if we have thoughts and actions in the opposite direction, it would have the opposite effect."

A cover article in the Aug. 4 issue of Time magazine suggests that meditation, or the practice of self-calming through regulated breathing and relaxed mental activity, is becoming widely accepted in mainstream America. The article additionally reports that recent scientific testing has demonstrated that brain chemistry is altered by meditation, with demonstrably beneficial results.

And Carson is hardly the first person to suggest that people can improve a difficult situation by focusing on turning anxieties and stresses into productive, reasoned mental energy. For example, Linda Walton, who's co-director of the Interfaith Student Association at Utah Valley University and also a nondenominational UVU chaplain, said that colleges often encourage students to find positive mental outlets in the aftermath of both small- and large-scale tragedies (such as the shooting spree at Virginia Tech in April 2007).

"When there are bad things that happen on campuses," Walton said, "administrators usually always have some kind of program available to students" to help them process what they're thinking and feeling.

Often that's in the form of counseling, but meditation and reflection are frequently also encouraged. Some schools provide facilities to students for quiet contemplation as a matter of course -- personnel at the new UVU library have plans to use furniture and plants to isolate an open area on the fifth floor of the library that will provide some seclusion for meditation and contemplation by students and faculty.

You don't need a designated area, however, or special techniques to meditate. Carson said that meditation is so simple and natural that people sometimes do it, so to speak, without thinking. "When you're driving on I-15 and you look up and realize that you've gone from Orem to Point of the Mountain, but you don't really remember anything about it," she said, "you've been in a meditative state."

Different people, different places

Meditation can involve posture as well as breathing, but Carson said that the most important thing is for the person meditating to feel relaxed. "Learning to sit comfortably is a big key," she said. Whether that's in a chair, on the floor or somewhere else entirely -- outside on a rock, or sitting with your feet in a cool stream or lying under a tree -- is up to you. Just don't get too comfortable.

"Sometimes people are so relaxed they fall asleep," Carson said.

"I happened to [meditate] a few thousand feet up in an airplane," said Beagles, who was traveling to Hawaii for a family vacation on the date of the first meditation for "A Global Meditation.Calm."

Orem resident Maria Carr, a mother of five and the Thursday morning host of the KJZZ-TV series "Home Team" (www.kjzz.com/entertainment/hometeam), said that she's benefited from "A Global Meditation.Calm" just because it's helped her to acknowledge sources of stress and fear. "I think so often we feel that we have to fight things," Carr said. Meditation helps her respond to challenges with compassion, she said, and then "whatever the challenge is, you're not so much fighting it."

Meditation often has religious connotations. Carson, who is a Latter-day Saint, said that, whether or not you ever meditate for religious reasons, practicing meditation to improve your overall health can be a boon to personal spirituality.

"The way I like to look at it," said Walton, "prayer is talking to God, and meditation is listening to God. If you're not a person who believes in God, it's listening for whatever else you're waiting to hear."

With people joining in from so many different places -- Thailand, India, Singapore, Canada, Germany, Mexico, Australia -- it's likely that "A Global Meditation.Calm" takes in a wide range of religious and non-religious personal backgrounds.

Actually, that's kind of the whole point. "You realize that here is something with people dotting the globe and they're all trying to do the same thing," Carr said. "Even though we may never meet each other, we have that same desire of bringing clarity and peace to the world."

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Clear Your Head

What: Feeling stressed? Meditation could help you find reassurance by joining with other people to reduce the level of anxiety in world societies. "A Global Meditation.Calm," sponsored by Provo's White Mountain Center for Yoga, is a coordinated effort to relieve fears and stresses by helping people to collectively benefit from the soothing influence of meditation. Every other week, participants meditate together at a prearranged time.

Schedule: The most recent meditation was held Oct. 27-29. The next one is scheduled to begin Nov. 13.

Info: aglobalmeditation.blogspot.com, www.wmyoga.com