

Finding a little breathing room

An Indian meditation expert has a message that is being used to help prisoners deal with stress, writes **Claire Scobie**.

WHEN the NSW Attorney-General, Bob Debus, launched the Sentencing Council last year to reduce recidivism, he pledged to explore "unconventional and even controversial sentencing options". Debus seems to have kept his word, holding a private meeting earlier this year with a white-robed, bearded Indian guru, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, whose breathing technique – sudarshan kriya – is practised in jails worldwide to reduce stress.

Debus met Shankar (no relation to the musician) on the advice of Justice Barry O'Keefe. While nothing was formally agreed at the meeting, says Luke Grant, the Department of Corrective Services' assistant commissioner for offender management, interest was expressed in Shankar's Prison Smart program. The course is designed to encourage relaxation, and maintain people's positive health.

"It is all about giving people choice and this program comes highly recommended," says Grant, who was at the meeting. He does, however, have some reservations about how such a short program – daily two-hour sessions for 10 days – can have long-term effects when violent offenders usually undergo an intensive nine-month psychotherapy course to deal with deep-seated trauma.

The technique begins with simple stretching warm-up exercises. The prisoners then sit in silence with their eyes closed, followed by a rhythmic breathing exercise and relaxation lying down.

"Negative emotions are flushed out through the breathing and a sense of calm prevails," says one of its teachers, Dinesh Ghodke. "The sudarshan kriya brings into harmony the rhythms of the breath with the physical, emotional and spiritual rhythms of the body."

The program also looks at ways to deal with conflict and trauma.

O'Keefe met Shankar last year at an anti-corruption conference in Seoul, and

was impressed, describing him as a "charismatic, focused and undoubtedly genuine person, and his prison work has brought even hardened criminals to peace with themselves".

The program ran for several years in Los Angeles's juvenile probation centres where it provided the anger management component of their mandatory court-ordered violence management program. However, it ended last year due to a lack of funding.

"We felt it was very effective from the change we saw in kids who were really violent and angry. It helped them cope



Guru ... Ravi Shankar with George Bush.

with that anger," says Willie Doyle, director of youth at Challenger Memorial, Los Angeles County, a facility with 660 wards of court. "We saw the program as very positive, and when we lost it there was a void that we didn't know how to fill."

O'Keefe says the program has also proved successful in Poland, Germany and England, and "if targeted correctly" has real prospects here.

"My impression is there is always concern among Westerners about those who talk of spiritual values and solutions

outside the square of conventional wisdom, that they might be charlatans or weird ... but it is a question of an open mind," he says.

During Shankar's Australian tour, O'Keefe attended his public address at the Sydney Convention and Exhibition Centre. "The crowd of several thousand, a cross-section of Indian and Australians of all ages, loved him," says O'Keefe.

Mark Cohen, head of complimentary medicine at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, agrees. "In India I saw 50,000 prostrating themselves to him. In 1982 he started teaching sudarshan kriya to 20 people, now 2 million have done the course," he said.

But just how does a dynamic breathing technique which, once taught, need only be practised for a few minutes every day, reduce stress, violent behaviour, addiction and alleviate trauma?

Many breathing traditions, over thousands of years, have calmed the mind, says Cohen. "There is a body of academic research that looks at the psychophysiological measure of breathing patterns and muscle activity, and sudarshan kriya is one of the most researched ... and it does show how it helps with depression and insomnia."

While there is only anecdotal evidence to show how it helps in prisons and with drug rehabilitation, Cohen says "that the breathing practice is a prevention rather than a treatment and by synchronising mind and body activity, it helps in health conditions."

While in Sydney, Shankar also met Senator Aden Ridgeway and 15 Redfern Aboriginal leaders to discuss the introduction of courses in indigenous communities. "Material standards in indigenous communities have improved, but stress, grief and trauma are not addressed," says Ridgeway. "This sort of program could provide vital tools for people to manage their own stress and connect with their own spirituality."

A pilot program has been conducted at an Aboriginal family alcohol and drug rehabilitation centre in Kinchela Creek, in mid-north NSW, with some success, and another is planned for Redfern.