

The marketplace of inner happiness

As Western materialism falters, Eastern ideas about spiritual wisdom are gaining ground.

The Honourable Barry O’Keefe, AM, stands on stage in an elegant suit. The former NSW Supreme Court judge and head of the Independent Commission Against Corruption, now a corporate consultant, is about to introduce the main speaker at Sydney’s State Theatre. A hushed audience of several hundred awaits. To my right are a corporate trainer, an architect and a manager at IBM. To my left are Detective Chief Inspector Pamela Young of the NSW Homicide Squad and a fellow superintendent.

O’Keefe explains how privileged he feels to be introducing the guest of honour, who is in Australia to share his wisdom on coping with the difficult world economy. The pair met at an international convention on corruption and the effect on O’Keefe’s life has been profound.

A spectator could be forgiven for presuming the audience was about to hear from an international legal, business or banking doyen. But something is different. Two men arrive carrying a gold sari, which they drape over a large white couch in the middle of the stage. Suddenly the star of the evening emerges, looking like someone out of a Bollywood movie.

He’s an Indian with long black hair, a flowing beard and a white robe trailing after him. As he walks on

stage the audience goes crazy, rising from their seats and cheering, some throwing flowers, some have even fallen to their knees. O’Keefe’s face is full of joy. “The honourable Sri Sri Ravi Shankar,” he says.

My friend, the corporate trainer, is agog: “This is the real deal – a real-life guru!” In fact, he’s the disciple of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the Beatles’ guru of the 1960s, the man who made meditation a household word. Sri Sri Ravi Shankar (not the musician), guru to millions around the world and chairman of the International Association for Human Values, was in Australia last month to teach self-transformation.

Having studied with many Buddhist and Indian gurus, or “teachers”, over the years, I am fascinated by the long list of corporate and government players who have opened their minds to the concept of spiritual wisdom in these harsh economic times. No longer content with personal or business coaches, they’re looking for a more meaningful edge.

The next day, while waiting to interview the guru at his hotel, I meet business identities also keen to meet the man. Kumar Parakala, global chief operating officer of KPMG’s IT advisory practice, talks to me about the “great wisdom” he’s learned from the guru. Ivan Brownrigg, client manager for IBM

Australia’s business recovery services, says he met “Guruji” (meaning “my guru”) in London while helping companies develop disaster contingency plans. “My stress levels, alcohol intake and personal sanity required my own disaster recovery. Sri Sri Ravi Shankar’s Art of Living course was recommended to me. I learned some simple breathing and meditation practices. They were so effective that they saved my job, marriage and mind.”

This month Australia again hosted the annual Happiness and its Causes conference in Sydney. The event is run by the Vajrayana Buddhists and supported by the Dalai Lama and academic heavyweights

including US neuroscientist Richard Davidson.

Buddhist guru Sogyal Rinpoche, who wrote *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* and who was in Australia in March, attracts a large business following, including John Akehurst (Reserve Bank of Australia board member and former Woodside CEO) and Gordon Cairns (Westpac board member and former Lion Nathan CEO). For them, Rinpoche’s “practical wisdom” is a science of the mind that can transform our thinking with quantifiable results. Science confirms that meditation, yoga, tai chi and other Eastern practices can make humans happier and more effective.

“Guruji” finally arrives but my mind goes blank. I can’t think of a single question. I’ve gone into alpha or theta brain waves simply by sitting in front of him. I just want to laugh and laugh. But eventually I manage to ask one question: “Why are professional Westerners now embracing the Eastern concept of guru?”

Smiling, he answers: “You can’t play a game of soccer or sport properly without a coach. Life is a game and the more risky the game, the more important it is to have a coach.

“Westerners have previously been prejudiced towards our gurus. Rightly so, given the dubious activities of some. But slowly our wisdom – yoga, breathing techniques, meditation, holistic healing – are being widely accepted, especially in difficult times when inner happiness is worth everything.”

I’m grinning from ear to ear, joyous for no good reason. Sri Sri Ravi Shankar says the longest journey for humans is the path from head to heart. But it can be shorter if you follow the practices recommended by these coaches. I leave the meeting knowing why Eastern gurus are the new “must-haves” of the professional world. ■

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