

LIFE'S BALANCE

Renowned psychiatrist and disaster survival expert Dr Are Holen is driven by the desire to improve our quality of life, writes **R. Gowri**

SOME spend their entire lives looking for a purpose to their existence. Others happen upon it by chance, perhaps in unremarkable ways, but in those defining moments, a course in life is shaped. And so it was with Dr Are Holen.

On a summer's day in 1961 in a town in Norway, a 16-year-old was babysitting his nephews. Looking for something to occupy his mind, he idly picked out a book sitting on a bookshelf at his brother's home. Written in Norwegian, that book, *Yoga And Health*, was an awakening of sorts for the teenage Holen. In the months that followed, he began trying out yoga poses and then meditation. There were no yoga schools in Oslo then and yoga wasn't something your average outdoorsy Norwegian teen would've been absorbed in.

Holen, however, was inspired, so much so that at 20, he took off to India, travelling for six months through northern India and Kashmir. He explored various meditation techniques and met many teachers.

Fifty remarkable years have passed since those youthful adventures but his embrace of meditation has only deepened. Sitting before me in a sunlit room in uptown Bangsar, Dr Holen is on his first visit to KL to hold stress management and meditation workshops at Violet Flame. Dr Holen (a Knight of First Class of the Royal Norwegian Order of St. Olav — an honour bestowed upon him by King Harald V for excellent services for the fatherland and humanity) confides that what he read in that book had "captured and awakened something" in him.

Dr Holen's gentle eyes are reflective as he says: "I wasn't a sick child, I didn't have an unhappy childhood, so mine wasn't the usual story for that sort of journey," referring to the health and spiritual quests that bring many to India. "I was fascinated not by the religion but by Indian philosophy. I studied Sanskrit for three years, read some of the scriptural texts, and these really connected with me. By 21, I knew meditation was going to be an essential part of my life."

LIFELONG PURSUIT

This year marks the 50th year of Acem Meditation (www.acem.com). Dr Holen started it as a student organisation during his university days. In July, to mark the anniversary, Acem will hold a world retreat in the Pyrenees. Acem has centres worldwide, with people of various faiths and races attending days-long retreats amid nature.

Acem meditation aims to lay the foun-

ation for self-understanding. Dr Holen says it's based on first-hand experience, and is in line with scientific research and psychological perspectives and not tied to any particular belief system or ideology.

At 21, Dr Holen's life was also flowing simultaneously along another channel — he was studying medicine. He's a qualified doctor, psychologist and consultant psychiatrist. He holds a chair as a Professor of Behavioural Medicine (Medical Psychology) at the Department of Neuroscience at the Faculty of Medicine, Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim. He's also associated with universities elsewhere, including as Adjunct Professor of Family and Community Medicine at University of North Dakota School of Medicine and Health Sciences.

He's a respected researcher and author and the founder of the RITS method (Reconstruction and Integration of Traumatic Stress). In Scandinavia, Dr Holen trained the police, fire squads, Scandinavian Airlines, the military and others on handling extreme events.

His understanding of the human body and psyche has made an indelible difference in the lives of severely traumatised people. He has flown to sites of major destruction at the behest of governments, to the victims of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster (1986), the 2001 terror attacks in the US, the Kobe earthquake in Japan (1995), the 2004/5 Asian tsunamis, and many more.

How does one even begin to reach out to victims reeling from such gut-wrenching trauma and despair?

"If you know yourself, you're able to understand others," he says, adding: "Meditation helps you develop your inward self. It gives you a higher sensitivity, a higher understanding of yourself and others because introspection turned outwards is empathy, ...and empathy turned inwards is an introspective quality."

DEEPER INSIGHT

Dr Holen reiterates that for a psychotherapist, understanding another is crucial. He uses his medical training for traumatic stress relief and counselling but sometimes, he has had to reach further, into the insights meditation offers to impart a sense of balance and grounding. Because the grief these victims bear is deeply debilitating.

He recalls one victim of the Asian tsunami in 2003. Called to Phuket, Thailand, Dr Holen came across a young father, who had cuts all over his body caused by the debris in the waters.

The victim told his story to Dr Holen,



one of extreme grief and an overwhelming sense of guilt. The man had his 3-year-old son in his arms as the waves hit the beach. He rushed into his lodgings and ran upstairs to his room. Suddenly, the windows facing the sea turned black. Seconds later, he was being pushed through crumbling walls into the open water. His son was still in his arms and whispering "Daddy, I'm scared".

"With the waters swirling and pushing, the father felt he had to tighten his grip on his boy. In the moment he moved to do so, his son was swept from his arms," Dr Holen recounts. "The father kept going through those few seconds over and over in his head, wondering repeatedly whether his son would still be here had he not moved this way or that way. He was full of remorse and self-blame."

"To give someone attention, for that person to know someone is really listening, this is very important. Gradually, his self-blame was eroded. I used some my understanding from meditation to relieve him of some of his stresses. I made him relax, follow his breath and speak his mind and he was able to connect to that very strong pain and guilt he was carrying. I met him days later, and he was quite relieved from self-blame."

Dr Holen was also called in to help in the Sept 11, 2001 attacks because some of the counselling given didn't seem to be working. He remembers, particularly, one young woman who'd been working in a bank next to the towers of the World Trade Centre.

"She had a husband working in the towers. From her office in the bank, she looked upon the horrific scene unfolding before her as the tower collapsed. This lady had had a tough life but, finally at 38, fate smiled upon her when she found the love of her life. She married him and had been looking forward to so much more with him. He had been the centre of her life."

The woman was in a very broken state, unbelieving. "After several sessions, day after day, she was able to slowly begin to accept her loss." It wasn't easy for her, recalls Dr Holen, who never imposes his meditation practises on anyone he

counsels. But he does use his meditative knowledge and understanding to add to the traditional psychotherapy and psychiatric counselling when needed. He was able to help the woman in a way that meant a lot to her.

Dr Holen recharges from all the heaviness, "unburdening" through meditation. "I feel the meditation part has helped me be more capable and clear-sighted," he says.

MAN OF SCIENCE AND GOD

"I believe in a God," he tells me when I prod him, "a friendly entity, not a punitive one."

However, Dr Holen has a very secular orientation towards meditation. He pauses, then continues: "Meditational schools often had vague explanations about spirits and energies and these explanations didn't appeal to me back then. I felt that we could prove these very good practises also had their anchorage in understandable processes, in a way that could be explained by science."

"In our research (at the Norwegian University) we have found that when we meditate, the heart rate variability or activity of the heart changes in a positive direction. We're now looking at people with a heart condition to see if their variability improves during and after meditation. We've also done brain studies."

But despite scientific advancements, I counter, life is still increasingly stressful for many, and lurking beneath it all, a pervasive climate of fear. What does he advise?

"The material side of life has been saturated and we're looking for more profound needs. After the digital revolution, things have speeded up but man has not changed genetically. You have to be competent in so many more pursuits, so we're now pressured on a higher level. Man is more than ever in need of something that can balance the stress."

Concluding, he says: "The world is a scarier place. Psychotherapy and medical help offers one-to-one counselling, but self-administered techniques like meditation can be used for personal growth. I don't see meditation as a therapy but as way of developing and improving the quality of life."

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