**Religious rules challenged**

Spiritual practices are undergoing a dramatic shift on the West Coast

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| |  | | --- | | Rukmini Chaitanya (right) meditates at the Shree Mahalakshmi Hindu Temple in Vancouver. The embracing of ancient Eastern traditions in B.C. owes a lot to immigration. | | CREDIT: Stuart Davis, Vancouver Sun | | Rukmini Chaitanya (right) meditates at the Shree Mahalakshmi Hindu Temple in Vancouver. The embracing of ancient Eastern traditions in B.C. owes a lot to immigration. | |
| |  | | --- | | Yoga teacher Kim Pechet in the lotus position: Aiming to live more in the moment. | | CREDIT: Ian Smith, Vancouver Sun | | Yoga teacher Kim Pechet in the lotus position: Aiming to live more in the moment. | |

Kim Pechet is Jewish, but she doesn't attend a synagogue. Instead, the 49-year-old Vancouver mother teaches yoga and an array of Asian-rooted disciplines to young and old -- including wealthy matrons, office workers, Chinese immigrants, doctors and lawyers, Catholics, aboriginals, neo-pagans and whomever shows up for her classes at the Jewish Community Centre.

Pechet refers to almost every Eastern-based discipline she teaches as "movement meditation."

She won't push the spiritual aspects of yoga, meditation and tai chi on her students, many of whom come for stress relief. "But I do see what I teach as a form of prayer," Pechet says, after elegantly stretching out her arms to illustrate several yoga poses, or asana.

The co-manager of The Sanctuary, a spacious hardwood-floor studio located in a former church on the west side of Vancouver, doesn't define prayer as asking a Supreme Being to fulfill her hopes for herself and others.

More in line with some Eastern traditions, she views prayer as the process of becoming "more intentional -- making one's life more virtuous, including by letting go of anger and fear."

Don't look now, but spiritual practices are undergoing a dramatic shift on Canada's West Coast.

Through benign stealth, scholars suggest many Canadians who live on the Pacific Rim are being Hinduized. And Buddhaized.

The embracing of ancient Eastern traditions can be explained in part through immigration, with census data now showing more than one out of five British Columbians has Asian roots (mostly Chinese and East Indian).

But the rise of visible minorities in Canada doesn't tell the whole story. Disciplines generally associated with the East are attracting Canadians from across the spectrum, with people from all ethnicities looking to them to foster well-being.

Pechet is hardly alone. The number of British Columbians, particularly women, who have adopted aspects of Eastern disciplines tops 2.2 million, according to a Mustel Group poll done for The Vancouver Sun. It may be the only poll on the continent that has surveyed people about a wide range of alternative spiritual practices.

According to the Mustel poll of 502 randomly chosen adults, more than 56 per cent of British Columbians are either actively practising yoga and meditation, have tried the two disciplines or want to try them.

Yoga comes directly from Hinduism, and meditation is linked firmly with both Hinduism and Buddhism. However, there has long been a minor movement among some Christians, Jews and Muslims to practise meditation.

The Mustel poll reveals the number of people engaging in meditation and yoga in B.C. is growing almost as substantial as those who have a regular prayer practice, the exercise linked most strongly to Western religions.

Could British Columbians' enthusiasm for yoga, meditation and, to a lesser extent, tai chi be superficial? It depends on whom you talk to.

Scholars say B.C. citizens' excitement about Eastern spiritual practices reflects a variety of trendlines -- including that British Columbians' loyalty to Western institutional religions is weakening.

The fastest-growing group in Canada and the U.S. is people who say they have no religion, surveys show. Nowhere is that trajectory stronger than in B.C.

Still, polls show most people who say they aren't religious believe in God and think they have spiritual needs. These people are being dubbed the new "secular-but-spiritual" cohort, and scholars believe they're looking far and wide for something transcendent in which to put their trust.

"With so many British Columbians having no religion, it creates a kind of open space, some would say a void, that people want to fill," says Donald Grayston, professor emeritus of religion at Simon Fraser University, who is also an Anglican priest.

Pechet believes many outdoorsy West Coast Canadians are drawn in unusually strong numbers to yoga, meditation and tai chi because they prefer "natural" forms of spirituality, which challenge both mind and body.

Even the names of many yoga poses come from nature, she says -- including Cobra, Tree, Downward Dog and Mountain.

Langara College's Larry Devries, who specializes in Eastern religions, says the Mustel poll points to how the influence of Eastern spirituality on British Columbians goes far beyond the rapid rise of organized Buddhism and Hinduism.

There are now 135 Buddhist and 35 Hindu centres in B.C., says Devries. And the census shows 2.2 per cent of the population is Buddhist, with one per cent being formally Hindu.

But Devries says such statistics don't fully capture how pervasively Eastern spiritual practices are penetrating the West Coast psyche.

"The diversity of British Columbians is astounding," Devries says, noting that he sees it each week in his classrooms. "The globalization phenomenon is not only globalizing capital, it's doing the same to spirituality."

Canadians are far more well-travelled than Americans, says Devries. And being on the Pacific Rim, he says, British Columbians are constantly travelling to all corners of Asia, where many become familiar with spiritual disciplines once considered exotic.

North Americans who are not overtly religious are trying yoga, meditation, tai chi and prayer to try to "align themselves with the forces of the universe," says Patricia Killen, head of the religion department at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington.

Instead of joining institutionalized religions, Killen says many are opting for private disciplines. "They're moving to personal practices like meditation and tai chi," she says, "to keep their religion real."

One major North American study recently revealed, Killen says, that many people are seeing spirituality less as a way to foster the virtue of forgiveness, a traditionally Western ideal, "and more as a source of healing, energy and health."

There is nervousness, however, among at least some Asian British Columbians about the reasons many Canadians are setting up in-home meditation rooms and flocking to the hundreds of yoga, tai chi and meditation centres peppered through the province.

Some South-Asian-rooted Hindus, such as East Vancouver's Rukmini Chaitanya, have a gentle warning, for instance, for the hordes of British Columbians who are trying out India's millennia-old art of yoga mainly to become more flexible.

"Yoga is not only for physical fitness," Chaitanya says. "It's food for body, mind and soul. If not done in the proper method, it's not beneficial. It can actually be harmful."

WHAT A TRANSFORMATION

In B.C., it's clearly no longer the 1950s.

Back then, more than three of four Canadians, the vast majority of them with ties to Britain, France and other part of Europe, attended a Catholic or Protestant church.

You would have searched far and wide to find only a few hundred British Columbians practising yoga, meditation or tai chi a half-century ago, when B.C. seemed largely a place for rugged European-rooted loggers, fishers, miners and their families.

What a transformation. Now only one in five British Columbians regularly attends a religious institution, typically a church. That still represents a lot of dedicated people of faith, but not nearly as many as in the old days.

In contrast, the Mustel poll shows in 2005 that almost one in three British Columbians have tried yoga, with almost half keeping it up as a regular habit.

Another 29 per cent of B.C. residents have tried some form of meditation, according to the Mustel poll, with most sticking with it once they start.

The percentage of British Columbians who have tried prayer as a discipline is slightly higher, at 29 per cent, with almost all maintaining their commitment.

Prayer tends to be linked most strongly with Christianity, Judaism and Islam, but it also runs through Hinduism, Sikhism, Chinese folk religion and even some forms of Buddhism.

British Columbians' passion for diverse spiritual disciplines, the Mustel poll shows, is consistent throughout all the province's regions and across all age groups (the only exception being that people over 55 are not likely to do yoga).

Another sign of the eclectic nature of religion and culture in B.C. is that many British Columbians have no trouble mixing and matching all four disciplines -- yoga, meditation, tai chi and prayer.

For instance, roughly one in two of those who practice the slow, graceful Chinese martial arts poses of tai chi also pray or meditate.

These diverse disciplines are quietly moving in to fill the vacuum left by Pacific Coast Canadians' relative lack of loyalty to religious institutions.

The census shows B.C. has the highest percentage of people in North America who say they have no religion: 35 per cent (compared to the Canadian average of 16 per cent).

The B.C. rate is higher even than the most secular states in the U.S.: Washington (with 25 per cent saying they have no religion) and Oregon (21 per cent).

Religion scholars such as Grayston and Killen say British Columbians are at the North American vanguard of those embracing Eastern spiritual practices, blending them with those from the West.

This is a frontierland, a place where old rules are challenged, they say. That's in part because B.C.'s spiritual searchers, Killen adds, don't feel stigmatized. They don't normally have to battle against the protests of fervent Christians or other religious traditionalists.

In many regions of the world, including parts of the U.S., Killen says, arch-conservative religious people are hostile to meditation, yoga and even deep-breathing relaxation exercises -- denouncing such practices as portals through which demonic spirits can penetrate the human soul.

IT'S BIG BUSINESS

Yoga, with its emphasis on attuning mind with body, is becoming big business all across North America, but especially in B.C.

Yoga Magazine says North Americans now spend more than $3 billion a year on yoga and related products -- from yoga mats to yoga clothing, yoga vacations to yoga videos. Yoga has become popular among Hollywood stars and mass-market women's magazines.

It's hard to come by hard comparative data on how many North Americans actually practice yoga or other Eastern practices, since most polling on religion has tended to focus on Western traditions such as prayer.

But a rare poll done by Harris Interactive for U.S.-based Yoga Magazine found this year that roughly seven per cent of Americans practice yoga.

Meanwhile, the Mustel poll showed 14 per cent of British Columbians -- or twice the number of Americans -- are currently spending part of their week bending into yoga poses.

Another 16 per cent of B.C. residents have tried yoga's often-demanding body-and-mind stretches, but no longer do so regularly. A further 13 per cent say they want to try yoga, says the Mustel poll (which is considered accurate to 4.4 percentage points, nineteen times out of 20).

All in all, that adds up to 1.7 million British Columbians who have been directly drawn to yoga.

More than two out of three of these practitioners are women.

Those who do yoga also tend to be more educated and well-off than the average B.C. resident.

"The yoga community is definitely thriving in British Columbia," says Louise Quinn, publisher of Ascent yoga magazine, which is based in Montreal but has higher circulation in Greater Vancouver.

When the Mustel Group asked practitioners about the benefits they've received from yoga or meditation, however, many did not put explicit spirituality at the top of their list.

Seventy-two per cent of B.C.'s meditators say they do so to become calmer. And though 22 per cent say they find meditation "mentally inspiring," only eight per cent cited "spiritual growth" as a benefit.

As for yoga, most West Coast practitioners say they find it's made them more relaxed, flexible and healthier. But just six per cent actually used the word "spiritual" to describe their experience.

The Ascent Magazine publisher says the results reflect her observation that British Columbia's yoga community is "much more health conscious" and "focussed on physical power yoga" than in other regions of Canada.

People who practise yoga in Quebec and Ontario, said Quinn, 50, who has lived in all three provinces, don't care as much about physical fitness. They tend to put more emphasis on the spiritual and philosophical teachings of yoga.

Pechet, the Vancouver yoga-meditation teacher, believes people may be receiving broadly defined spiritual benefits from yoga and meditation -- whether they think of it in those terms or not.

To Pechet, any discipline that makes a person less emotionally reactive, more attuned to themselves and sensitive to others is spiritual.

Killen, co-editor of the book, Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Northwest, believes the move that many are making toward yoga and meditation may reflect how many North Americans want to avoid the complexities of religion.

"They're avoiding institutional politics and shifting from doctrine to practise," says Killen. "They simply have a sense they need some sort of practice to organize their inner lives and help them get through their day better."

A large number of such searchers are less sophisticated than some who attend a religious community, she says, where they learn about their faith's history and doctrines. "Many who have a religious hunger," Killen says, "don't have a vocabulary for spiritual discourse."

Hindu-based yoga philosophy is intellectually challenging, says the noted U.S. religion professor. "I can't speak authoritatively about Canadians," she says, "but most Americans are not into a complex religious vision like that in Hinduism."

Chaitanya, whose husband is the Hindu priest at Vancouver's Mahalakshami Temple on East 11th Avenue, regrets seeing her faith simplified. Yoga and meditation should be used to foster more than good physical health, she says. They should bring humans closer to the divine.

Hinduism, Chaitanya says, has a multi-faceted and elaborate cosmology, which is most thoroughly ingested by growing up in a Hindu culture and studying classic scriptures, as well as practising meditation and yoga.

"The true goals of these practices," she says, "are to cleanse the mind, visualize the divine and see yourself within -- to reach the stages far beyond."

PRAYER A SIMPLE EXERCISE

Prayer isn't dying out in Canada, but it's changing. Prayer remains among the simplest, least expensive and most adaptable spiritual exercise.

The Mustel Group poll showed roughly one out of three British Columbians practise prayer as a regular discipline.

This figure is lower than those published in earlier surveys of Canadians' religious habits, which typically find that almost two out of three of British Columbians say they pray.

But the Mustel Group's Jami Koehl says the disrepancy can be explained by the way her pollsters asked people if they prayed in the context of a regular spiritual discipline. If the Mustel poll had also probed whether British Columbians occasionally engaged in spontaneous prayer, it may have raised the prayer totals.

Whatever the case, the Mustel poll showed that even many British Columbians who pray, and would be more likely to adhere to a Western tradition, flow easily among spiritual practices.

For instance, 56 per cent of B.C. residents who pray also say they meditate, and 22 per cent stretch their limbs in yoga.

As an Anglican priest and a professor, Grayston has no trouble with British Columbians fluidly blending yoga, meditation and prayer.

That's what he does.

"I pray every morning and evening," says Grayston, who is an admirer of the late Catholic-Buddhist mystic, Thomas Merton.

Grayston accompanies his 20-minute prayer practice with a candle, and scriptural readings, including of the psalms. His prayer room includes a painting of Elijah riding a chariot, which is a traditional Judeo-Christian symbol denoting how prayer elevates one into heaven.

Grayston has also done yoga and is drawn to meditation, particularly centuries-old forms of Christian meditation being revived by American monks such as Thomas Keating.

One of them is called "centring prayer," and can include Christian versions of Hindu-like mantras, which are words repeated during meditation to focus the mind.

Grayston is surprised the Mustel poll shows many British Columbians don't highlight the spiritual benefits of meditation, given that he believes it does more than provide good health.

Meditation helps a person become in touch with their "innermost self," Grayston says. In Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Hinduism, he says, the inner self is traditionally considered "a reflection of God" -- and discovering it reminds us we are made in the image of the divine.

In a different vein, Grayston finds it disturbing that men are much less likely to practise any spiritual discipline, including prayer, than women.

Only one B.C. man for every two B.C. women does yoga, the Mustel poll shows. When it comes to meditation or prayer, two men engage in them for every three women.

"I think men are in big trouble in our culture," says Grayston, who helped found Vancouver School of Theology's spiritual direction program.

"Men are drifting. Men are floundering -- vocationally, relationally and spiritually," Grayston says.

"They're not doing spiritual disciplines because they're not disciplined in their personal lives. Men have to be disciplined for their professions, so they value the goof-off time. But I think it takes an adult to follow a spiritual discipline."

MORE THAN JUST RELAXATION

Even though life is becoming higher stress for most British Columbians, Pechet firmly believes yoga, meditation, tai chi and prayer add up to more than clever techniques to relax.

There is something spiritual about a practice that helps us slow down, says the veteran teacher. It's an attempt to create a different culture, she says, in which people can quiet their mind, connect to their body and "live more in the moment."

Pechet believes Eastern disciplines are bringing profound changes to hyper-active North America. That's why she believes when some people make physical fitness the only focus of their yoga, "there's a huge aspect being missed -- at least for me."

Pechet adds that final caveat because she wants to be open-minded, in true West Coast fashion. The best spiritual practices, she suggests, teach people to avoid being doctrinaire, to be respectful of other ways of being and acting.

Pechet doesn't feel it's the role of a teacher to condemn the way certain people might engage in yoga, or any other spiritual discipline.

"After all," she says with a laugh, "I don't want to be a yoga Nazi."

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