

Google Searches



Chade-Meng Tan, founder of Search Inside Yourself

“FOR AS LONG AS I CAN REMEMBER, I have had a desire to do something big and important for humanity,” says Chade-Meng Tan. “In 2004, the door of opportunity opened up for me. One August day that year, I suddenly had real money.”

That was the day Sergey Brin and Larry Page, two graduate students on leave from Stanford, took their little start-up public. Raising \$1.7 billion in capital in one day, Google became the largest internet IPO (Initial Public Offering) ever. Google—the noun, the verb, the company, the way of life they created—was about to make its early employees, those who’d taken stock options to compensate for the low pay and long hours, very rich.

One of the people whose lives changed on “IPO Day” was employee #107, Chade-Meng Tan, who is now bringing mindfulness to Google through a program known as Search Inside

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PHOTO BY MARK TUSCHMAN

Hot-shot geeks at the world’s leading information company are taking a ground-breaking course called Search Inside Yourself. As **BARRY BOYCE** reports, it’s a new model for teaching mindfulness and emotional intelligence, and its creator is thinking big.

Yourself (SIY). Googlers—as employees there are known—operate with a lot of autonomy and are urged to be free spirits. For example, Meng just up and decided to call himself Google’s “Jolly Good Fellow” and had cards printed adding the phrase, “which nobody can deny.” As Google’s Jolly Good Fellow, Meng has become Google’s unofficial VIP greeter. Behind the reception desk in one of the main Google buildings is Meng’s Wall, a gallery of snapshots of Meng standing next to luminaries like Bill Clinton, the Dalai Lama, Gwyneth Paltrow, Nancy Pelosi, Muhammad Ali, and more than one hundred and fifty others—and counting.

Google employees like Meng spend one day in five working on whatever inspires them, regardless of profit potential. So he didn’t need to get rich to start a meditation program at Google. But achieving financial freedom somehow enabled Meng to think big about what he could do for the world—sadly not always the first thought of those who strike it rich. For Meng and the many collaborators he has brought together, SIY is more than a corporate meditation program. Just as Google’s founders saw their search engine as a way to influence how people

work with information altogether, the SIY designers see it as a working model for how to bring mindfulness and peace to work, a place where people spend vast amounts of time. If they develop mindfulness there, it will spill over into the rest of their lives and influence all those around them.

“Many people at Google spend 20 percent of their time on their own endeavors for saving the world through technology,” says Norman Fischer, founder of the Everyday Zen Foundation and one of the principal SIY teachers. “In some sense, that’s what Meng is doing. He wants to make the world a better place through the ‘technology’ of meditation. He’s starting at home, within Google. And it’s working. For the people who take the course, it makes a difference in how they operate, how they communicate. They learn that they don’t have to leave their emotions at the door when they come to work. That’s big. If Wall Street traders, for example, had had more emotional intelligence, they might have realized the crazy derivatives they created were wrong.”

According to Mirabai Bush, senior fellow at the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, who helped design the program



The Googleplex, Google world headquarters in Mountain View, California

PHOTO BY RICH GIBSON

and has taught within it, “It’s great when contemplative practice comes to any workplace, but it’s particularly meaningful for Google, a fount of countless creative ideas. In many ways, Google is a model place to work; *Fortune* named it the best place to work in America two years in a row. And Google has had a big influence on all of our working lives. If it works at Google, other employers take notice.”

“LET’S GET A SMOOTHIE before we talk,” Meng says to me as we wait for one of the many meeting rooms in Building 43 to be vacated at our appointed time. Building 43 is where Google founders Brin and Page have their offices, including a rooftop workspace. It’s in a cluster of four buildings (40–43) that surround a green space, like a quad on a college campus. They are part of the Googleplex, the large headquarters complex in Mountain View, California. Buildings 40–43 seem inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright. There’s lots of glass and curves and odd angles, and when you’re inside, you rarely feel disconnected from the outside. Building 43 contains a Mexican restaurant, a multiethnic cafeteria, a California *nouvelle café* (serving a delicate red snapper when I visited), and kitchenettes all around that fulfill the Google promise that you will never be more than one hundred feet from free food. Lest you gain weight, there are gyms, bikes to ride, volleyball courts, and lap pools in the open air.

In the smoothie bar over in Building 40, there are some people who might almost pass for corporate, but one googler is sprawled across a couch with his feet over the back and his head on the floor, his laptop held in front of him, fingers dexterously flying over keys and mouse pad. Meng and I carry our smoothies back across the quad to Building 43 and, just in time for our meeting, the team using the room rises and exits gracefully. While Google is very free and loose, with foosball, pool tables, and sleep pods in open view, it’s also quite precise in many ways. It’s an engineering company after all. And being respectful of others’ time and space is part of Google’s “Don’t Be Evil” philosophy. Employees are given every amenity to make work enjoyable, healthy, and creative, and when you get a feel for the atmosphere, a meditation program seems not radical, but sensible. It could only start, though, once someone figured out just what kind of meditation program would appeal to the average googler.

When you first sit down with Meng, he likes to share “life stories.” How did you get to where you are today? What has motivated you? He begins with his own. Meng’s life has taught him that persistent intention will bring the dawn of the next big idea. His life had changed significantly several times before the turning point of IPO Day. A dozen years prior, at the age of twenty-one, in a time of fervent searching for relief from the pain of life, he encountered an American Buddhist nun, Sangye Khadro, in his native Singapore. When he asked her what Buddhism had to say about suffering, she told him that *all* of Buddhism is about suffering. “It was like suddenly somebody opened the floodgates.

I immediately understood,” he writes on his blog. He committed himself to serious Buddhist practice.

The next of his epiphanies, or “eureka moments” as Meng prefers to call them, came the year before the IPO, when he was strolling around the Google campus on a beautiful summer’s day and “something strange” happened. “A strong aspiration to save the world suddenly solidified in me, for no good reason at all,” he writes. “I just stopped and made a solemn promise to myself that one day, if I achieve financial independence, I will dedicate my life to humanity. For as long as I can remember, I’ve always had a desire to do something big and important for humanity. It was a thought that existed as a constant, faint background buzz in my mind. It just never really solidified until that lovely summer day.”

IPO Day was a day much like any other, Meng says. Apart from some high-fives and a “few very embarrassing seconds of victory dances,” little changed. Meng wrote code. The magnitude of the windfall didn’t really sink in, and in any case, Meng felt that by the time he was permitted to sell his stock, six months hence, it might well be worthless. As time wore on, though, what Meng calls “denial” began to wear off and, he says, “Sometime in early 2005 it hit me. I caught myself thinking, ‘Omigod, I actually have real money!’”

Meng has given some of that money away. He donated one million dollars to the Center for Compassion Research and Education at Stanford (which received seed money from the Dalai Lama), and he has started his own small foundation. But it’s clear that his deepest aspiration has been, in software engineering parlance, to “make SIY open source.” For that to happen, it had to succeed within Google.

MENG’S FIRST FORAY into marrying meditation and Google was Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, but it didn’t attract much attention. “Stress reduction didn’t really fly here,” he told me. The hiring process at Google, Meng pointed out, is designed to draw out high achievers and idealists who have done something a little different, like hiking in Patagonia or going to war-torn areas to help children. “For high achievers, stress can be a badge of honor, and not many people will sign on for stress reduction, particularly those who need it the most. So I needed to go beyond stress reduction. I wanted to help people find ways to align mindfulness practice with what they want to achieve in life, so they can create peace and happiness in themselves, and at the same time create world peace.”

World peace—expressed with no irony—is *the* recurring theme for Meng, and his contemplations have led him to the firm conviction that meditation is the path to world peace, since all prior efforts, he says, have failed by “imposing social or political structures on people. They tried to create world peace from the outside in. My idea is to do the reverse, to create world peace from the inside out.” In Meng’s view, meditation is the methodology for creating peace from the inside out.

However, Meng feels that if meditation is not approached scientifically—if it is not “data-driven”—it won’t achieve widespread



Life at Google: food, fun, and creative workspaces. Below: Google University’s logo



Google employees are given every amenity to make work enjoyable, healthy, and creative. When you get a feel for the atmosphere, a meditation program seems not radical, but sensible.

PHOTOS BY (left): SHAWN WINES, (other photos): COURTESY OF GOOGLE

popularity. Very few fellow Buddhists he contacted showed much enthusiasm for the idea of proving the benefits of meditation scientifically, but Alan Wallace (whose Shamatha Project aims to prove the tangible benefits of intensive meditation) was very encouraging. When Wallace told him that the Dalai Lama had reached the same conclusion, Meng felt he was really on to something.

Yet, as Meng sees it, establishing meditation as scientifically valid is just one element in a larger campaign. For meditation to be widely adopted, people will need to think of it as something as normal and obviously beneficial as exercise. If meditation is regarded as a workout for the heart and mind, the thinking goes, it will start to become a part of the fabric of daily life. When Meng read Daniel Goleman’s *Emotional Intelligence*, he felt he’d found his “vehicle for aligning meditation with real life.” Emotional intelligence seemed like a desirable feature that everyone would like to have and that would be appealing in a business context, as a means to make people more effective. “Google is, after all, a business, and there needs to be a business justification for whatever we do,” Meng concluded.

Meng felt EI would appeal to engineers and high-achieving people because “we may have some problems in dealing with difficult conversations. We either avoid them or go at them like ram-paging geeks. Either way, we recognize it’s a deficiency.” Also, Meng says, software engineers may think that the most important thing is coding, and that interacting with others takes a backseat, but

as one gets into higher levels of engineering, “half or more of the work is about talking to people.” Learning to emerge from your shell and interact well is what emotional intelligence is all about.

Meng asked Mirabai Bush to help design a course. She brought in poet and Zen teacher Norman Fischer and persuaded Dan Goleman to help generate interest by giving a talk at Google. Peter Allen, director of Google’s employee education program, known as Google University, became SIY’s patron saint and an active participant. Eventually, Google University started the School of Personal Growth, which is headed by Meng. It includes SIY, a course that Meng teaches called “The Neuroscience of Empathy,” and a few other offerings. They frequently invite eminent guest speakers such as sleep scientist William Dement and neurobiologist Dan Siegel.

The current SIY curriculum has been designed by nine contributors, in typical Google teamwork style. The design team mixes scientific, meditation, and business expertise. In addition to Fischer and Bush, it includes, for example, the young Stanford professor Philippe Goldin, a leader in the budding field of contemplative neuroscience who told me that he’s fully in sync with Meng’s notion that contemplative practice may one day be seen as a beneficial workout for the mind; Marc Lesser, author of *Z.B.A.: Zen of Business Administration*; and Monika Broecker, who was instrumental in the development of the School of Personal Growth and is now an independent consultant and business coach.

SIY includes an introductory class, a full day of mindfulness practice, and six two-hour sessions, each a week apart. Class sizes range from twenty to fifty, depending on the time of year and whether an entire team or department has signed on for the course. The course begins with the “Neuroscience of Emotional Intelligence,” which shows participants that there is a growing body of scientific literature on the effects of training attention and emotion. In addition to basic mindfulness, the course includes instruction in journaling as a means of nonjudgmentally noticing mental content, mindful listening, walking meditation, mindful emailing, and a variety of other contemplative techniques. The latter stages of the course emphasize empathy using loving-kindness meditation, and social skills, including how to carry on difficult conversations. The word “Buddhism” is not used.

The first course ran from October to December in 2007. It garnered a lot of attention within Google and participants deemed it a success. It has been offered regularly ever since, and more than two hundred people have gone through the program. In response to my request to interview participants, Google asked that, given the personal nature of SIY, I use anonymous reports of participants’ responses to the course. One reported



Norman Fischer, the “Abbot of Google”

quickly came to love teaching at Google, and students there are fond of him as well. They find him unassuming and yet deeply insightful. He takes them places they aren’t accustomed to going, and according to Fischer the googlers take him to unaccustomed places as well. He’s called “the Abbot of Google.”

When I spoke with Fischer about Google, he was enthusiastic about his experience with SIY. “Googlers are not interested in being quiet and calm, they don’t want less stress, they’re not interested in religion. So why would I be there? Because the corporate culture supports people who sincerely want to make the world a better place. I’m a Buddhist teacher but I don’t teach Buddhism there. That hasn’t been hard, though, because my goal of personal integrity and the goals of the corporation and the participants seem to line up. Many people these days recognize that operating out of touch with your emotions yields bad results. It’s not going to work anymore to pay all of your attention to work life and none to your inner life. They’re not separate.”

One reason Fischer likes making the trek from his Marin County home down to Silicon Valley is the spirit of inquisitiveness and debate he encounters in the high-tech crowd. As Meng pointed out to me, many of the people at Google “grew up being very scientific, very investigative. The best of scientific

PHOTO BY RICHARD BOSWELL

“Google’s main value is not the hard-edged, profit-seeking mind,” says Norman Fischer. “They really believe that if you foster the creative, altruistic mind, you will make money and you’ll also be able to do good things.”

discovering that a lot of body problems have emotional bases and found that they were sick a lot less often. Another talked of being less egocentric and yet better able to make decisions and stick with them. Another said that he “began to practice responding rather than reacting. I realized that my assumptions about the other shaped my reactivity.” Googlers are encouraged to work in non-hierarchical teams of three to five, and one person said that being more relaxed in meetings seemed to bring out the creativity in others. One participant simply said, “This course changed my life.”

NORMAN FISCHER, one of the foremost students of Shunryu Suzuki Roshi and a former abbot of San Francisco Zen Center,

engineers do not accept authority. If you simply take things on authority, you never make a breakthrough.” Both Fischer and Meng feel that the googlers’ questions and doubts make for a deeper engagement with the material and the practices.

“Questioning,” Fischer tells me, “is built into the spirit of Buddhism. In the *Kalama Sutta*, the Buddha explicitly tells people not to accept something just because the teacher said so, but over the generations debate and questioning have become very circumscribed. There are questions considered outside the sphere of questions that can be raised.”

Whereas his Buddhist students are more inclined to simply accept what he has to say, “the people at Google feel full permission

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Meng’s Peace Plan

CHADE-MENG TAN hopes the benefits of meditation will someday be as widely accepted as those of exercise. He thinks that’s the key to world peace, and he has a way to get there.

THE SECRET ACTIVE INGREDIENT in my formula for world peace turns out to be something simple: meditation. It’s such a simple solution to such an intractable problem, it’s almost absurd. Except it may work. World peace may actually be achievable in this way.

This insight led me to one of my eureka moments: my life’s goal is to make the benefits of meditation accessible to humanity. I’m not trying to bring meditation to the world. I’m not even trying to bring its benefit to the world. All I intend to do is to make its benefit accessible to the world.

I’m confident the transformative power of contemplative practices is so compelling that anybody who understands it will find it irresistible. It will be like offering the secrets of health (hygiene, nutrition, exercise, and sleep) to unhealthy people who previously didn’t know them. Once people understand and begin to experience the benefits of health, there’s no going back.

Then, of course, the question becomes *how* to make the benefits of meditation accessible to humanity. My answer is something I half-jokingly call “Meng’s three easy steps to world peace.”

Step 1: Start with me

I need to become the change I want to see in the world. Toward this end, I came up with an almost measurable goal for myself: by the end of my lifetime I want to create in myself the capacity to be kind to

everyone all the time. I want to become like the Kindness Channel, all kindness, all day. It’s an audacious goal, but if I’m audacious enough to try to save the world, I’m audacious enough to try this too.

Step 2: Make meditation a field of science

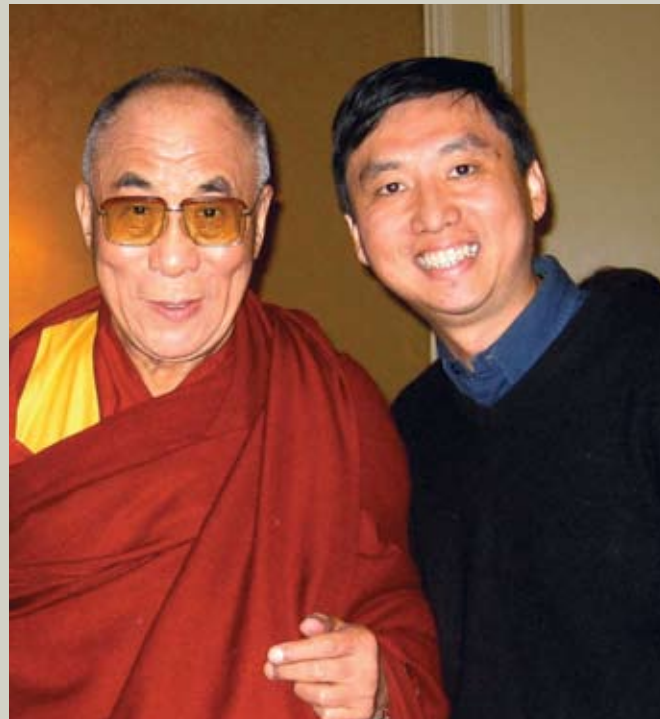
To become widely accessible, meditation needs to become a field of science, the same way medicine became a field of science. Like meditation, medicine had been practiced for countless generations, but ever since medicine became a field of science in the nineteenth century, everything about medicine has changed. The most important change was access. Medicine became greatly demystified. New tools, equipment, and methodologies became available, and training and certification of service providers greatly improved. A lot more people gained access to good medicine. I want to see the same thing happen with meditation.

Since I am scientifically minded, familiar with meditation, intelligent, and have money, I thought perhaps this is where I can make a contribution. I started by writing an email (more of a mini-manifesto) to Buddhist friends explaining that meditation needs to become scientific, and inviting all to initiate an effort to make meditation training data-driven. The response was underwhelming. Some people didn’t think making meditation scientific was very Zen. Others liked the idea, but were not particularly excited by it.



From “Meng’s Wall”: Meng with Barack Obama, Magic Johnson, Dan Goleman, Hillary Clinton, Robert Thurman, and Al Gore.

One of my friends, Tenzin Tethong, forwarded my email to Alan Wallace. Alan replied immediately and told me how excited he was about it, and that he had been working on a very similar effort for six years at the behest of the Dalai Lama. None of my meditating friends (many of them men and women of science) were excited by the marriage of meditation and science, but the Dalai Lama was. I knew I was on the right track. I also concluded that given the Dalai Lama's support, this effort would move forward with or without me. I decided to do nothing more here beyond providing financial support, and to focus my personal energy on Step Three.



Meng with His Holiness the Dalai Lama

Step 3: Align meditation with real life

For the benefits of meditation to become widely accessible, it needs to become “real.” It needs to align with the lives and interests of real people. This, I suspect, is the most important of the three steps, and the one where I can make the most impact.

There's a historical precedent for this. In 1927, a group of scientists started the Harvard Fatigue Laboratory to study exercise. It must have been hard for them to embark on what many at the time considered a frivolous pursuit, but they did it anyway. Today, with the benefit of hindsight, it's easy to see that their pioneering work in creating the field of exercise physiology has changed the world.

Today, thanks to the contribution of those pioneers and others, exercise has acquired at least four important features:

1. Everybody knows that exercise is good for them. There is no more debate. Even those who don't work out know the benefits of exercise.

2. Everybody who wants to exercise can learn. The information is widely available, trainers are readily accessible, and most people probably have friends who could show them what to do.

3. Many people can exercise at or near their work, often encouraged by their employers. Companies understand that healthy and physically fit workers are good for business.

4. Exercise is so taken for granted today that when you tell your friends you're going to the gym, nobody looks at you funny. In fact, it is now the reverse. If you were to argue against the benefits of exercise, people would look at you funny.

In other words, exercise is now perfectly aligned with the modern lives of real people. It has become fully accessible, and humanity benefits from it. I want to do the same for meditation. I want to create a world where meditation is treated like exercise for the mind:

1. Everybody knows meditation is good for them.
2. Everybody who wants to meditate can learn how.
3. Most people can meditate at work, often encouraged by their employers, because it's good for business.
- 4: Meditation is taken for granted. Everybody thinks, “Of course you should meditate. Duh.”

Once again, we return to the *how* question. How do I create a world where meditation is taken for granted like exercise? After months of thinking and false starts, I found my answer when I read *Emotional Intelligence*, by Daniel Goleman.

Many people have a rough idea of what emotional intelligence means. And even without fully understanding it, they know or suspect that it would help them fulfill goals such as becoming more effective at work, getting promotions, earning more money, working more effectively with other people, being admired, having fulfilling relationships, and so on. In other words, EI aligns perfectly with the needs and desires of modern people.

Emotional intelligence has two more important features. First, it fosters greater inner happiness and increased empathy and compassion, precisely what I want to achieve with my plan for world peace. Second, a good way (and I suspect the only way) to truly develop EI is with contemplative practices, starting with mindfulness meditation.

Eureka!

The way to create world peace, then, is to create a mindfulness-based emotional intelligence curriculum, which is what led eventually to the Search Inside Yourself curriculum, with the collaboration and support of many people inside and outside of Google. What started in 2003 as an impossible dream to create world peace had become an actionable plan by the end of 2007. My life is very strange. ♦

Adapted from Chade-Meng Tan's blog (www.mengstupiditis.com).

to ask any question, whether it fits the realm of Buddhist discourse or not.” That's “energizing and fun” for Fischer, because “questions that are not the usual questions give me a chance to rethink what I know, and understand and reframe it in new ways.”

Fischer also enjoys the Google ambience. “Their main value,” he says, “is not the hard-nosed, hard-edged, profit-seeking mind. It's the creative mind, the altruistic mind. They really believe that if you give room to and foster the creative altruistic mind, you will make money and you'll also be able to do good things.” Fischer allows that Google's brief, stunning history has helped reinforce that belief, but whether it lasts or not, the belief and its beneficial results are very much intact at Google today.

Above all, Fischer has come to appreciate the workers—their diverse talents, their brilliance, their readiness to bring mindfulness into every aspect of their lives, and even their grace. “One time, during a break,” he tells me, “I was staring dumbfounded at a very sophisticated espresso machine. A participant came up, a young woman who had been a champion barista at Starbucks. She offered to make me a cup. She created magic before my eyes. In two minutes, she ground the beans, made the espresso, steamed and swirled the milk, and handed me a latte whose surface was the shape of a bodhi leaf. It tasted magnificent, and it's the finest offering I've received as a Buddhist teacher.”

MIRABAI BUSH is the grande dame of the movement to bring contemplative practices into the mainstream of society. She's a connector par excellence and was instrumental in the cross-pollination that brought Search Inside Yourself into being. When I asked her whether she thought SIY could be exported—made “open source,” as Meng said—Bush felt certain that it could be. “Of course, it would probably have to be adapted,” she said. “The whole point was Meng wanting to bring mindfulness first into Google. That required figuring out how to design and market it for Google people so they would see it as helpful for both their work and for becoming full human beings. But what motivates people will be different in different workplaces. SIY is a good curriculum and if it's exported—and we've been talking about how to do that—it won't simply be a Google thing.”

Bush noted that the accommodating environment at Google removes much of the stress that's ubiquitous in the traditional workplace, but she says, “the stress of producing and creating is still there and when people take SIY they start to see underlying patterns that were causing stress. They begin to actually

reduce stress, even though stress reduction wasn't the door they entered through.

“On top of that, you have to appreciate that these are people who've gone to the best schools and been at the top of their classes,” she says. “They've been thinking algorithmic thoughts in front of screens from a young age, but maybe they've been less at ease in their interactions with others. Emotional intelligence can help them be better integrated people with a wider circle of friends and family, a sangha.”

Questions always arise, Bush says, when contemplative or spiritual practices are brought to any corporate setting. Will they be taught in merely a technical way with no larger ethical significance? Will they truly serve the participants' lives or just the company's goals of efficiency and profit? In her experience, “If programs are taught by good teachers with integrity, students glimpse the whole span of the dharma and it begins to have profound effects beyond the workplace.”

Bush feels we “could be right on the edge” of a world where many people will want mindfulness in their workplace, and equate emotional fitness with body fitness, as Meng hopes, but “the challenge will be to take it to scale. Big institutions do lots of training, so they're inclined to think it will be easy to simply teach larger and larger numbers of people and to train trainers. But this kind of teaching is not simply about getting people to close their eyes and watch their breath. If you don't

have the experience of transformation through practice, you can't really appreciate the depth required in a teacher of contemplative practice. There are not many Norman Fischers out there.”

That said, Bush is upbeat about Google and loves going there. She tells a story about teaching mindful emailing, in which participants are taught to take three breaths after typing an email, look again, imagine how the other person will receive it, visualizing both their mental and emotional response, and then alter it if need be.

“One person came back the next week,” she said, “and he was amazed at how much of a difference it made when he was reflective about email. ‘I wrote this whole email out,’ he said, ‘and I knew it was really important for the person to receive it with openness to my ideas. But the message was emotionally loaded, so he might not respond very openly. I looked at it carefully and reflected, and then I did something very radical. I called him on the phone.’ Others in the class nearly gasped, and then he said, ‘You know, it really worked!’” ♦



Mirabai Bush of the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society

PHOTO BY DAN KOWALSKI