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ST INTERVIEW

His Serene Highness

Meditation brings clarity of mind in the midst of crisis, says GIC chief of investment Ng Kok Song

By Lee Siew Hua, Senior Writer



Mr Ng Kok Song, 62, the group chief investment officer of GIC, has been a practitioner of Christian meditation for 22 years. He is the 'Christian friend' who taught a meditation mantra to Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew, as mentioned in a recent New York Times interview. -- ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

THE idea of sitting silently on a meditation mat - twice a day, like a statue - is likely to agitate the typical executive shackled to a very important schedule in stress capital Singapore.

But Mr Ng Kok Song, 62, the 'Christian friend' who taught a meditation mantra to Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew, serenely flips the perspective.

Think of meditation as an antidote to the rush of the corporate world, suggests the group chief investment officer of the Government of Singapore Investment Corporation (GIC).

Mr Ng has spent 40 years working to invest Singapore's foreign reserves. For 22 years, he has been a practitioner of Christian meditation.

The Catholic says meditation gives him clarity of mind, especially in times of financial crisis.

'Meditation brings calm and equanimity - not to be overelated when times are good or overdepressed when times are bad,' says Mr Ng, who meditates 25 minutes each morning, and again at night.

'I think it gives you greater clarity of mind, which helps in times of chaos and great stress, to see what's the cause of things, what's passing, what's enduring and what's really important.'

It also lets him work with full dedication while keeping a certain 'detachment' from the outcome which may be beyond his control.

'It helps you not to be kan cheong,' he says, using the Cantonese word for anxiety, which he notes is stoked by the desire to be in control. 'After doing your work to the best of your ability, you take a step back and go home, with some detachment from the results of your action.'

Of course, detachment does not mean the inner planner in Singaporeans has to die. 'If I have to do a five-year plan for GIC, I am totally focused and engaged,' he tells The Straits Times in an interview at his riverfront Tanjong Rhu condominium on Saturday.

He wants to nurture contemplative executives and leaders, whom he feels will be an asset in today's harried workplace.

Most people, especially on the executive ladder, operate from the left brain, which is linked to logic. Scientific studies indicate the benefits of meditation to the right brain, which is linked to intuition and the big picture.

The balance of the two sides of the brain can bring more holistic views to the complex work an executive faces, he says: 'To be a whole person, you need to tap into the untapped.'

One important quality that executives or leaders can cultivate is to 'transcend the ego', he adds. This is the servant leadership modelled by Jesus Christ. 'The will to lead cannot be an ego trip or domination,' he emphasises. 'I would call it acceptance of responsibility.'

'With meditation, your mind is remade. The way you see leadership becomes quite different. You see it as serving. You see it as the ability to admit that you don't know everything and can make mistakes. Otherwise, you can lead your folks into disaster.'

This takes self-knowledge, he says. 'In the silence of your meditation, in a very mysterious way, you come to understand yourself better. You come to a state where you see your limitations and also your potential...and gradually you learn to love yourself as you are.'

It was a sense of 'restlessness' that led him and his late wife, Patricia, to meditate 22 years ago.

He was doing well in his GIC career, which he has enjoyed greatly. He sees his job as a rare role intertwining finance and a contribution to generations of Singaporeans if he and his team perform well.

'Family life was joyful,' he recounts. His two children, Terence and Deborah, now 37 and 34, were entering their teens. A third child, Georgina, now 20, was yet to be conceived.

But the couple felt there was more to life and began to search for a meaningful spiritual path. They discovered it in Christian meditation, which Mr Ng calls 'a form of prayer'. This was taught by the late Benedictine monk John Main, who used prayer phrases as a mantra, in London and Montreal in the 1970s.

Their years of meditation helped them cope when his wife was diagnosed with late-stage stomach cancer. She died in 2005, 19 months after the diagnosis.

MM Lee had seen the benefits of daily meditation in Mrs Ng. In a New York Times interview earlier this month, he said she was 'completely composed, completely relaxed' in her last weeks.

In March this year, MM Lee rang Mr Ng to say he wanted to resume his meditation practice, which he had started two to three years ago.

Mr Ng said: 'I said I use 'maranatha' as my personal mantra. I explained the meaning, which is 'Come, Lord.'

He was struck by Mr Lee's humility to learn. He helped him with the posture of meditation - sharing with him how he himself sat still, comfortably and alertly - and introduced him to Father Laurence Freeman, who continued Main's teachings after he died in 1982. Father Freeman, director of the World Community for Christian Meditation in London, has met Mr Lee in London and Singapore.

In his New York Times interview, Mr Lee revealed that he now meditates and repeats 'maranatha' in his 'innermost heart' at night to push out the day's pressures and help him sleep, especially when he hears sounds of his wife's discomfort in the next room. Madam Kwa Geok Choo has been bedridden for two years, unable to speak after a series of strokes.

When Mrs Ng died, she was only 57. Certainly, Mr Ng says he had dreamed of them growing old together. 'There is a saying that if you want to hear God laugh, tell him your plans,' he says. 'Now is the time to spend quality time with your wife, not retirement. You don't know when something will upset your plans.'

He misses her very much. Yet her death did not fill him with grief, for they put everything into her last 19 months. As she poignantly told him in a video interview with Father Freeman: 'You put my needs before yours, like taking me to the beach which you used to say we will do some day, but now we do this quite often and lie on the beach; act like holiday-makers or young lovers.'

Five years on, Mr Ng says: 'You can sum up meditation as the art of living and dying. Meditation is the first death, death of the ego. It's a voluntary loss of control. This letting go is essential preparation for death, an involuntary loss of control.'

The man whom friends call 'His Serene Highness' now promotes serenity by giving talks at one-day meditation workshops every three months or so. Hundreds or thousands have heard him, says the trustee of the World Community for Christian Meditation, who is also its national coordinator in Singapore.

Today, the organisation has 30 weekly meditation groups in 25 parishes here, as well as in prison and Gleneagles Hospital, where his wife was treated.

Ultimately, he hopes that helping more people journey inward will spur them to care more about the wider Singapore community: 'The problem in Singapore is the consumerist tendency to measure our well-being too much in terms of lifestyle and material possessions, so much so that you don't have time for expansion of the spirit. But the human being is not created for the self, but for others too.'

Schools can be the next frontier, he hopes. He has observed a Brisbane programme where children aged eight to 12 meditate before class. In the age of Google, where children learn in bits, he thinks contemplation can help them develop concentration, relieve stress and discover common ground with others. This can be done in a secular style on a pilot basis.

All this is good, but if meditation feels like hard, disciplined work, it is because it is: 'The mind has been characterised as a tree full of monkeys.' It took him two years to carve time in his schedule, sit still and not be distracted in seconds.

Meditation, like the spiritual life, is paradoxical. 'The way to experience joy in everything is not to seek to possess. This is in contrast to our material life.'

But whatever you do, don't say: 'I want to meditate because I want peace.'

Because ego and desire are abandoned in meditation, his swift rejoinder will be: 'Take away 'I', which is self-centred ego, and 'want', which is desire. Then peace remains.'

[Sep 22, 2010](#)

Long finance career in the public sector

MR NG KOK SONG, 62, is managing director and group chief investment officer of the Government of Singapore Investment Corporation (GIC). He evaluates the risk-reward analysis of all asset classes and manages the GIC portfolio at the strategic level.

Before joining GIC in 1986, he worked briefly at the Ministry of Finance (1970-71), and then at the Monetary Authority of Singapore (1972-1986), where he was responsible for foreign exchange and money market operations and reserve management.

He was the founding chairman of the Singapore International Monetary Exchange in 1983, now incorporated into the Singapore Exchange. He is also the founder chairman of the Wealth Management Institute.

In the civic sphere, he is a Singapore Labour Foundation director, and is on the board of governors of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies. He is a trustee of the World Community for Christian Meditation and is also its national coordinator here. He has served as chairman at the Lien Centre for Palliative Care since 2008.

He studied physics at the University of Singapore and management at Stanford University.

His wife, Patricia, died in 2005. He has three children: Terence, 37, a public transport manager; Deborah, 34, who runs a boutique business; and Georgina, 20, an undergraduate. He has five grandchildren.