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Learning to relax with the Art of Living

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Just breathe. Forget about the past and the future. Shrug off your stresses. Live in the present moment.

Every morning students wake up (some a bit more slowly than others), jump into their clothes and fly out the door. They may stop at Hillside for a morning coffee, or hungrily munch on a Power Bar (who has time for breakfast?) as they trek up the stairs to Gasson. Lunch is spent cramming for a quiz, dinner is shoved between two very important meetings, and afterward they fall into bed with Shakespeare, wanting nothing more than to sleep.

Sure, students may fit some smiles or actual conversations into the course of a day, but do they take the time to enjoy them? To concentrate on them? To really experience them?

When did we last take the time to just breathe?

The Art of Living is a program that challenges people to confront those very questions. Established in India 25 years ago by spiritual leader Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, this program combines spiritual elements, physical techniques, and social service to help people slow down and truly explore life.

Four years ago, a student brought this program to Boston College. Radhika Prabhu, BC '04, was exposed to the Art of Living by her mother at a very early age. In college she noticed how rushed everyone was, and decided that busy students and faculty could benefit from learning how to slow down and relax.

"I was excited to share something new with the BC community," Prabhu said. "The program helps you realize that there's so much more to life than we know."

The Art of Living program centers around a powerful breathing technique called Sudarshan Kriya. It is a means of detoxifying the body and bringing clarity to the mind by aligning one's own rhythm with that of nature, according to those who practice.

Sudarshan Kriya is the cornerstone technique that beginners will learn in the basic course, which consists of six three-hour sessions. The true focus of the program, however, is on the happiness of the whole person, and learning how to experience life in a more focused, positive way.

"We are never really taught how to deal with negative emotions," said Prabhu. "We are told not to be stressed, to be happy, but we aren't given a chance to deal with these feelings."

Now the director of Youth Art of Living Programs in Baltimore, Md., Prabhu is amazed at how the program has centered her and helped to relieve stress. She states her simple philosophy: "Stress is nothing but the mind going from past to future. Being able to bring the mind to the present moment is how we find happiness."

Her presentation at a BC faculty health fair intrigued many educators. Nancy Baker, associate director of University Health Services, took the beginning set of classes and was amazed at what a difference it has made in her life.



Media Credit: photo courtesy of nancy baker
Spiritual leader Sri Sri Ravi Shankar sits before an audience of men and women devoted to the calming power of the Art of Living.



Media Credit: photo courtesy of nancy baker



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She describes herself before discovering the Art of Living as "feeling pressed for time, always anticipating what was coming next - it was like living on a treadmill."

Since taking the classes she feels much more content, and has become very involved in the program. She emphasizes that it is very comprehensive: the courses that teach physical techniques are only a small part of the Art of Living program.

Shankar is a spiritual leader committed to service, and has turned his philosophy of peace and love into a global organization that does service work in many impoverished locations. In fact, the International Association for Human Values, a branch of Art of Living, works directly with the United Nations. The Art of Living Foundation fundraises for the poor and conducts many specialized classes for marginalized members of society, such as one to rehabilitate inmates and another to relieve the stress of those with substance abuse problems.

Baker feels that the values of the Art of Living coincide very well with those of BC. "There is a great global aspect to the program. It promotes diversity and acceptance. This is a similar message to that of Christianity - we are meant to help each other and to do service," she said.

The basic course is open to anyone ages 17-80 and there is at least one offered every month in the greater Boston area. Michelle Petty, R.N., who works at University Health Services, is a teacher of the class. She has also been deeply affected by the Art of Living program.

"I feel more in touch with myself and at the same time a greater sense of belonging to the community," she said. "I have the feeling that I want to give something back because I have received so much."

As a member of the medical community, Petty realizes the potential that the Art of Living has to positively affect health. "When we do these practices, the mind becomes centered, the immune system is boosted, and every cell in the body becomes enlivened and filled with oxygen. Harmony is restored to all levels," she said.

Despite the praise that this program, based on old manuscript teachings and ancient knowledge, receives, many people confront it with cynicism.

"In our society it may be viewed with a skeptical eye because it is different from our own cultural experience," said Baker.

But according to her, Americans could benefit immensely from the Art of Living. "Living in the Western society we are extremely stressed because of work and responsibilities. This program helps us to be much more content and to be able to be joyful about duties and activities," she said.

The Art of Living program has proved especially effective in the lives of those suffering from tragedy. Because of this, BC is part of an initiative to bring the course to the displaced victims of Hurricane Katrina. It will be offered in St. Williams Hall for the New Orleans students now attending BC. It is the hope of all involved that the program will help to alleviate the impressions of trauma. The classes will be open to all interested students for a fee.

Through the enterprise of many dedicated individuals, the Art of Living will continue to grow. The Boston chapter is especially active, and this fall, Ugonma Fontaine, member of the chapter and A&S '06, is coordinating a 5K race to raise money for youths displaced by the Gulf hurricanes. It will take place in Newton on the morning of Oct. 29, and Fontaine hopes to have several hundred participants. The Art of Living classes had a strong impact on her, and she wanted to become more involved with the program.

But she, like many others, can't put the experience into words, "I can't fully describe the experience - just go and take the course." she said.

Fontaine sees the inherent value in the Art of Living, one that is becoming increasingly overlooked in the mad dash through life.

"It [Art of Living] is a necessity in the time that we live in, especially as a BC student with so much going on - school, relationships, other things. Life is going on, and we all need something to help ground us."

Interested Students can contact Baker at bakerna@bc.edu or Fontaine at fontainu@bc.edu for more information. The next basic course begins October 19.