

SOUNDS OF SILENCE

KOFI KONDWANI, MOREHOUSE'S MEDITATION GURU,
URGES US TO FIND PEACE IN QUIET.

BY MARY JO DILONARDO

WHILE MOST medical school professors lecture about physical sciences like anatomy and microbiology, Morehouse instructor Dr. Kofi Kondwani specializes in a more metaphysical discipline. Kondwani, an assistant professor in the Department of Family Medicine since 1999, is one of the rare professors of *meditation* on staff at U.S. medical schools.

Kondwani, who teaches both medical school and public courses, has taught thousands of people around the country—professionals, parents, students and even children—how to practice a modified version of transcendental meditation, an ancient practice from India. Unlike other types of meditation, which are based on concentration and contemplation, TM instructs participants to “empty their heads” and think about nothing. The goal is to go inside oneself, hushing all thoughts in order to let the body relax and heal.

And heal it does. Scientific studies have found the medical benefits of meditation range from decreased blood pressure and lessened anxiety to reducing chronic pain and slowing the aging process. Those impressive results have earned the practice increased respect in the medical community.

Kondwani, age 47, came to Atlanta from the University of Pittsburgh. Here, with funding from the National Institutes of Health, he replicated studies he originally conducted at the West Oakland Health Center in California, which examined meditation's effect on hypertension in blacks. African-Americans have double the rate of high blood pressure as white Americans. His research

meditation's effect on the heart's left ventricle, finding that a year of meditation reduced the size of the heart. Currently, at Morehouse, Kondwani is wrapping up a four-year study of how meditation can lessen the amount of plaque in the carotid arteries of African-American women.

We recently talked with Dr. Kondwani, whose conservative black suit and wire-rimmed glasses are a far cry from the other-worldly stereotype of flowing beads and tall turbans, about meditation and how it can help get the new year off to a peaceful start.



★ **How do your faculty colleagues on the staff at Morehouse receive you?**

When I come in, they'll say “ohmmmm.” When they're dealing with stress and I'm in the room, they always refer to me and I don't mind. I'm in a position where I can deal with meditation in a scientific arena. I think some are even envious because I have the license and the right and the

research to talk about this meditative approach to health, whereas they're stuck with science.

★ **What are the different types of meditation and which do you teach?**

Generally, there's meditation that is *contemplative* where you're thinking about something like, “Why is there air?” And then there's meditation where you *concentrate* and fix your mind on

found that systolic blood pressure decreased by 12 mm Hg and diastolic blood pressure by 6 mm Hg after three months of meditation.

His doctoral dissertation explored

HYPER-INACTIVE

Meditation isn't a trance. You're hyper-aware—you hear the birds, the heater, the lighting—but you transcend it, says Kondwani.

certain things. With the meditation I practice, you go *beyond* thoughts and you experience pure silence, pure awareness, where there are no thoughts.

★ **What are the benefits of silence?**

When that happens in the mind, the body slows down. The heart rate slows down. The breath slows down. There are changes in blood chemistry and changes in brain wave coherence. As you begin to meditate, the peaks and troughs from all these areas come into phase with each other. You begin thinking with the power of a laser as opposed to a regular light bulb. All of these [benefits] have been measured and studied in scientific studies.

★ **How come more doctors don't recommend it?**

They're becoming less and less leery. They're going to be more likely to recommend meditation when it's associated with a renowned institution like Morehouse.

★ **What is the experience like?**

It's not a trance. You are hyper-aware—you hear the birds, the heater, the lighting—but you transcend all that. You are not unconscious.

★ **Is it religious? Can meditation be comfortable with any religion?**

I have so much fun with that question. People said, "You're going to Atlanta and that's the Bible Belt and they'll never want to start." I'm finding it's the opposite—particularly when I explain the difference between prayer and meditation. Praying is when you're talking with God. Meditation is when you're listening.

★ **How hard is it to learn?**

It's not. If a person's more than four years old, they can learn to meditate. It's already inherent within us. That's why anybody can learn it. We get so much stress on us during the day—driving in Atlanta is a good example—you have all these stressors from the time you get up until the time you go to bed at night and nowhere to release it.

★ **How did you personally discover meditation?**

While I was in Korea in the army I was studying martial arts, and the Koreans were basically kicking my ass. Research [from the University of Massachusetts] showed that meditation

improved reaction time.

★ **Did it work?**

It did. It increased my reaction time, raised my energy levels, improved my memory and gave me the ability to sleep better. That's what got me. Even though I wasn't focusing on other improvements, they came anyway.

★ **Have terrorist activities like the sniper shootings and September 11 increased people's interest in meditation?**

That's why I was recently teaching meditation seminars in New York. Everyone's on high alert physiologically. When you have a sniper going around, when you have the potential for disaster at any moment, it's going to affect how you interact with people, how you interact with your children, affect your blood pressure, your anxiety.

★ **Why would meditation be a good New Year's resolution?**

January should be a time of renewal. . . . You can't go out because it's cold and miserable so that's the time to go deep within yourself instead. ☺

HOW NOT TO THINK

- ★ **Set some time aside to be still.**
Twenty minutes a day is a good start.
- ★ **Turn off the TV and radio. Unplug the phone.**
- ★ **Sit comfortably and close your eyes.**
- ★ **Clear your mind.** Try not to think about anything.