

PALOS VERDES PENINSULA NEWS

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By Jeremiah Dobruck, Special to the News

CLEARING MINDS FROM LONG BEACH TO PALOS VERDES

Playing piano on Broadway, the organ in synagogues and churches or pursuing a musical art that he has enjoyed since he was 5 years old is not what Victor Byrd found personal serenity in — meditation is.

Byrd founded and runs Long Beach Meditation Center where more than 30 attendees — including Peninsula residents — gather weekly to practice Vipassana meditation, or as Byrd put it, “sucking out all the gook in your brain cells.”

They gather in the “sacred space” of The First Congregational Church of Long Beach and practice being aware of oneself, as well as what’s going on around someone else. “Meditation is still an exotic thing in our culture,” Byrd said, but he views it as something to be embraced and understood. He described meditation as not just monks sitting cross-legged on cushions with their eyes closed, but as something he invites people to experience as part of their everyday lives. At Long Beach Meditation Center, Byrd begins a session by ringing a bell to signal the start of the first half-hour of meditation, followed by a 45-minute Dharma talk. Dharma refers to “eternal or underlying wisdom,” and Byrd gives his talk as an unrehearsed sharing of experiences open to discussion.

“It’s really like a sermon,” he said. They then delve into 30 more minutes of meditation before ending. “Then we close with what’s called a Metta chant, and Metta means ‘loving-kindness,’” Byrd said. “‘May all beings be happy and safe from harm; may all beings be healthy in body and mind; may all beings be peaceful and free of suffering,’ We chant that and we end by wishing it for ourselves.”

Other than the normal session every week on Sunday from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m., there is a beginner session from 1:30 to 2:30 p.m. and bimonthly all-day retreat at the Pacific Unitarian Church in Rancho Palos Verdes. The next retreat will be Jan. 12. At the all-day session, nobody but Byrd speaks a word from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. as the group rotates through sitting meditation, yoga and walking meditation. “It’s boot camp,” Byrd said. “The whole idea is to spend the day looking at yourself. It’s a totally inward experience.”

Byrd began learning yoga while he lived in New York and worked as a professional musician. "Yoga is really physical meditation," Byrd said. After being intrigued by the idea, he started sitting meditation and eventually went to India to study it. He spent 3 years there, intermittently going on months-long vows of silence and chalking up more than 5,000 hours of meditation. "That is major deconstruction," Byrd, now 66, said, referring to getting thoughts such as greed, hate and delusion out of his mind.

Long Beach Meditation only came into being after Byrd came to California to study psychology. He never planned to stay and open a practice, but he did. "I kind of got seduced by California weather," he said. In 1993, he started the center, and since then he has cut back his psychotherapy practice to focus on introducing people to meditation and teaching them about it. However, that background still influences his teaching.

"I had gone to other meditation groups and his blending of Buddhism and psychology really attracted me because I'm a psychotherapist myself," said Peggy Kersulis, who has a private practice in Manhattan Beach and lives in the Hollywood Riviera. Kersulis has attended the one-day retreats in RPV in the past and contends that they are life-changing. "The day itself goes amazingly quickly," Kersulis said. "It varies between sitting meditation and walking meditation and some very gentle yoga. We even have eating meditation."

Although it may not be the easiest way for someone interested in meditation to get a head start, Byrd says he's had first-timers show up. "It's a very supportive environment. It's really an opportunity to be quiet within yourself," Kersulis said. "It's really a treat in many ways to spend a whole day for yourself." Unlike the center's other offerings, the retreat isn't free. It costs \$50. But Byrd has never turned anyone away for lack of money. Attendees like Kersulis believe that the time dedicated can make a dramatic impact. "I think that there's a much greater feeling of compassion of one's fellow human being. There's an increased feeling of connectedness with people. There's much less reactivity to problems," she said. "It really does accentuate one's ability to intuit answers in one's life than kind of think it out."

Neither Kersulis or Byrd seemed to be able to fully express the effect they felt from meditation. Something in it eluded the words they used. "I don't think anyone understands until they start meditating that it really does change one's life," Kersulis said.

For more information, log on to www.longbeachmeditation.com or call (562) 804-5570. Pacific Unitarian Church is located at 5621 Montemalaga Drive in Rancho Palos Verdes. The First Congregational Church of Long Beach is located at 241 Cedar Ave. in Long Beach.