

# The San Diego Union-Tribune



## Professor says meditation makes better doctors

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**LA JOLLA** -- Some UC San Diego medical students have been studying an ancient but little-known form of meditation from a professor who believes the practice can make them better doctors.

“If a physician is in a good mental space, the physician can take care of patients in a better way,” said Dr. Daniel Lee, a clinical professor of medicine who treats HIV patients at UC San Diego’s Owen Clinic.

Lee teaches Kelee® meditation to first- and second-year medical students in the elective class Medicine 249, which started in the fall of 2015. It wasn’t easy getting approval from the internal review board, and Lee said he doesn’t know of any other university that teaches meditation to medical students. “There was resistance,” he said. “We submitted the recommendation for the class two or three years ago and had gotten turned down.”

Lee said he originally wanted the class to be just about Kelee meditation, but at the school’s suggestion he redefined the course to be about how the practice can be applied to patient care. In putting the course together, Lee worked with Ron W. Rathbun of Oceanside, founder of the Kelee Foundation and the mentor who taught him the practice about 10 years ago.

Rathbun describes Kelee meditation as a method of clearing the mind and dissolving negative thoughts. Unlike better known types of meditations that involve focusing on breathing or repeating a mantra,

Kelee meditation involves focusing on nothing. “It’s the most difficult thing you can do in the mind,” Rathbun said. “The mind can only do two things. It can be in motion, and it can be still. Most of the time it wants to be in motion.”

Mantras and breathing exercises also are techniques to still the mind, but Lee and Rathbun said doing either still requires the mind to be active. Rathbun admits that it sounds like an oxymoron, but the goal of Kelee meditation is an awareness of nothing. That awareness of nothing leads to the ability to dissolve negative thoughts that Rathbun said are compartmentalized in the mind, relieving stress, anxiety, depression and other distracting chatter that leaves people unfocused. While that can be hard to grasp and even harder to master, Rathbun said he’s seen students learn the skill quickly.

Lee said he began the practice 10 years ago following the breakup of a relationship. His partner had practiced Kelee meditation, and he said he decided to give it a try to deal with his own issues. Lee said that as he saw the practice work on him, he realized its potential for helping medical students who often deal with burnout and depression. On a larger scale, he also saw that the practice would someday make them better physicians.

“How many times have you gone to a physician and they don’t seem present?” he said. “What happens in a patient-care setting if they’re stressed out? They can’t really provide good care for patients. Part of the goal is to help students be in a good space throughout their day so when they’re working with patients, they’re going to be present.”

Lee said he believes all meditation works on some level, but offer only temporary solutions. The popular Transcendental meditation require 20 minute sessions twice a day, while he said Kelee meditation requires only five minutes twice a day because its effects are more lasting.

Rathbun said the technique goes back thousands of years, and the word “Kelee” is a Sanskrit word that refers to different states of mind. He called the practice deeply spiritual, but based in science. “The most important thing we’re trying to do is bring some understanding that there is a difference between brain function and mind function,” Rathbun said. “Brain function is basically associated with memorization. Mind function is associated with understanding, which means that you can read a book, but it doesn’t mean you’re going to understand it.”

In a practical sense, Rathbun said the meditation can help med students tap into the greater resource of the mind and develop an understanding of how to treat patients rather than just remembering book lessons.

Lee said students are not graded on how they meditate, but rather evaluated on their personal descriptions of their experience doing Kelee meditation. “From their answers, we can usually get a sense as to whether or not students are doing their practice and understanding the concepts or not,” he said.



Noelle Van Rysselberghe, 25, is a third-year UC San Diego medical student who took Lee’s meditation class last year to improve her ability “to be fully present in each moment.” “When you recognize that your reactions are coming from a compartment within yourself, the compartment begins to lose power over you,” Rysselberghe wrote in an e-mail. “I have become less reactive and really do feel like I am more in the driver’s seat of my life than I used to be.

Rysselberghe wrote that after a few weeks of meditating, she found herself more calm and less likely to react to small things like spilling protein powder on the floor or finding her roommate hadn’t done the dishes. On a larger scale, she also wrote meditating helped deal with her family after her mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. “I found learning the difference between compassion and empathy has helped me lift up others who are in a sad place instead of bringing my own mood down to join them at their sad place,” she wrote.

There’s a reason Kelee meditation isn’t well known or widely practiced. Rathbun said he learned it in 1978 from a retired Caltech professor and astrophysicist who held two doctorates and three master degrees. “He knew more about the mind than anybody I ever met,” Rathbun said.

Rathbun holds and closely guards the trademark to Kelee meditation, and he teaches it in his Oceanside studio to a group that hasn’t had an opening in years. Outside of Lee’s classroom, a husband and wife team in Australia also teach it. “I knew early on I didn’t want somebody to take this and make money off it when they didn’t understand it,” Rathbun said. “Nobody can even use the name because I have it so protected. Not because I don’t want the world to have it. I don’t want to turn it into something that doesn’t work.”

Rathbun said the meditation technique can be easily self-taught. He explains how to do it in the 39-page book “Kelee Meditation, Free Your Mind” available for \$5 at thekelee.org.