





# Meditation in Mexico

By Ingfei Chen

Photograph by Lever Rukhin

*Clinical psychologist **Eric López Maya** discovered meditation in the wake of a devastating loss during college. Since then, the postdoctoral scholar at UCLA's Mindful Awareness Research Center has been working to share mindfulness-based interventions adapted for Spanish-speaking audiences, founding the Mexican Institute for Mindfulness (MIM) to advance his mission.*

## **Why did you start meditating?**

It was around 1999, in college. My father became ill and died within a year. It was a huge blow, and I explored different alternatives to alleviate my suffering. Somehow I discovered a book on Buddhist meditation. I read a couple of paragraphs and did a simple meditation exercise, and that was it: Something clicked inside me. Those first practices gave me the possibility of having a silent mind for a little bit, of quieting the turmoil I was going through.

## **And you made a career of it?**

Yes. Around 2002, I spoke with a professor who oversaw a relaxation techniques program. I told him about my meditative experiences, and his response was, "Why don't you teach a meditation course?" I was terrified and excited at the same time. But I started teaching a free 10-week meditation course for psychology students. We would put up posters around school, and 60 people would show up. It was very satisfying. I started considering this as a career alternative.

## **Talk a bit about MIM.**

After college, I became an independent instructor teaching mindfulness and Mindfulness-Based Stress

Reduction throughout Mexico nonstop from 2003 to 2011. That endeavor formally became known as the Institute about seven years ago. That was when I decided mindfulness should have a larger impact in Mexico and Latin America.

## **What's MIM's mission?**

We have three areas of focus. My colleagues and I started offering more mindfulness-based programs for schools, companies, and the general public—services especially geared for a Latino population. We also have a diploma-granting teacher training program. It's the only program of its kind in the Spanish-speaking world.

The third focus is research. The research I'm doing at UCLA is part of what happens in the Institute. There's a huge lack of research on mindfulness in Latino populations, and not a lot of attention to cultural issues.

## **Is mindfulness a thing in Mexico and Latin America?**

It's not as popular as in the US, but it's really picking up. We can barely cope with the demand.

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## **What about your work at UCLA?**

Last year, on a pilot basis we started offering a free drop-in MAPs (Mindful Awareness Practices) for Daily Living class in Spanish at UCLA every Wednesday. It's a half-hour of mindfulness meditation, and it has been successful. We're also launching the same program in an online format, to reach Spanish-speaking people who don't live in LA. And we plan a lot of outreach to Latino organizations in the US to promote mindfulness in Spanish.

## **Do you need to adapt mindfulness instruction to Latinos?**

Part of the cultural adaptation is simply to have Latino instructors, because we are familiar with the use of language and sense of humor in our culture. It was funny: When I started teaching mindfulness courses in English at UCLA, I would try to use the same jokes in class that I use with Latinos, and no one would laugh.

## **What is your research showing?**

One interesting finding is that most Latino meditators in the US don't stick to a single type of meditation. They are kind of eclectic in doing a mix of mindfulness meditation and vipassana and maybe prayer.

## **You're a new father. How do you keep up with your practice?**

I try to squeeze in my meditation practice whenever our four-month-old daughter is asleep, usually very early in the morning. And I try to embody presence whenever I'm holding her or talking to her. My wife also likes to meditate, although she's been pretty busy lately—for obvious reasons. ●



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