



## *special report*

Jesus. Mother Nature. Yoda.  
Collingwood. The feeling you get  
when you know you're being  
hoodwinked. There are as many  
ideas of spirituality today as there  
are psychic hotlines. But whatever  
your definition, research shows  
that tuning in could be the missing  
ingredient for ultimate health.  
We can't answer the big questions  
(hey, God wasn't available for  
an interview) but in the name  
of a 360° version of health,  
**here's a workout for your soul...**

*By Jessica Levine / Photography by Anna Lene Riber*



**Ki Yoga (yoga and Eastern energy healing), Qi Gong (literally “life energy practice”), Tai Chi – there are more spiritually-inspired wellness classes popping up in gyms, exercise studios and spas every day. It seems everyone and their guru thinks it’s your spirit that needs whipping into shape. Whatever happened to Sunday School?**

Good question. “Over the past 30 years church attendance and participation in traditional religions has declined, but at the same time, belief in ghosts has doubled and neo-paganism is on the rise,” says Dr Justin Barret, a senior researcher at the University of Oxford’s Centre for Anthropology and Mind, UK. “All kinds of new religions are cropping up. It seems hard to suppress these [spiritual] tendencies.” He would know, having just wrapped up a three year cognition, religion and theology project he directed for the university. His project sought to answer the very question he asked in his 2004 book *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?* (amazon.com). With more than 40 new studies conducted, Dr Barrett says they back up the key finding: humans are simply predisposed to be spiritual.

Psychiatrist Dr C. Robert Cloninger, director of Washington University’s Center for Well-Being in the US, and author of *Feeling Good: The Science of Wellbeing* (amazon.com) agrees. “Human beings have an innate drive for understanding their role in the cosmos,” he says. “The science of feeling good involves people growing in self-awareness of all our needs – physical, mental and spiritual. We need to recognise the importance of self-transcendent virtues like hope and courage and kindness, or we cannot be fully healthy and happy.”

## Losing our religion

Dr Barrett’s claim that we’re born to be spiritual does seem to hold water. According to the Australian Community Survey of 8500 people, conducted by NCLS Research and Edith Cowan University, Perth, about 75 per cent of us say we’re interested in spirituality and believe in God or some

spiritual higher power. The survey also found that almost half of Aussies believe in “something beyond that makes sense of it all.” That’s despite churchgoers now hovering below 10 per cent of the population and 18 per cent of Australians saying they have no religion, according to the most recent ABS Census data from 2006.

“You’ll often hear Australians say, ‘I am spiritual but not very religious,’ says Dr David Tacey, associate professor at La Trobe University, Vic, and author of the new book *Gods and Diseases* (\$35, HarperCollins). “That is new. Before that, the institutional religions held sway over spirituality, but not anymore.” Also new to some is the idea that the two are even separable. “Increasingly in the modern world, spirituality and religion are separating categories,” Dr Tacey says. “They used to be together, but various historical reasons have forced them apart. The main one is the rise of science, which has rejected the claims of traditional religion.” In fact, a recent study out of Rice University in the US found that more than 60 per cent of elite American scientists currently describe themselves as atheist or agnostic, yet nearly 50 per cent of them call themselves “spiritual”.

This need to seek out the bigger meaning in your life but not necessarily wanting to do it by frocking up for Sunday mass is Dr Tacey’s specialty. “The question that interests me in my work, is: where to from here? As spirituality becomes a popular personal and social concern, it must eventually lead to new institutions, given that the old ones do not look capable of being revived,” he says. Plenty look eager to answer that calling with all the new ways and places – from psychics in Mudgee to healers in Byron Bay – offering a chance to get more cosmic.

## The spiritual void

That doesn’t necessarily help make the answers clear though. Artists, authors, Oprah, yogis in Rishikesh – they’ve all tried to pin down spirituality, but the concept is more slippery than a cut snake in an oil slick. To get to grips with it, we first asked our experts what it *isn’t*. Turns out modern life hurls a lot of booby traps along the path to enlightenment. “Being very ‘busy’, excessive alcohol, drugs, focusing too much on external things (like your appearance or your iPad 2) – these all reduce your awareness and contact with the present moment. This then gets in the way of your spirituality because they don’t allow time and space for reflection. They take you further away from meaningful pursuits,” says Dr Angela Morgan, psychology clinic manager at Griffith University, Qld.

Another pastime experts consider spiritual kryptonite: incessant Facebooking, YouTubeing and Twittering. “For all their value in entertainment, education and work, they also adversely influence our mental health,” says Richard Eckersley, scientific researcher and author of *Well & Good: Morality, Meaning and Happiness* (richardeckersley.com.au).



**70,000**  
Number of Aussies who declared themselves to be members of the Jedi order in 2001\*

Eckersley also holds Western culture’s excessive materialism and individualism responsible for our current spiritual confusion. Dr Cloninger’s research has found that the 21st century Western life is veering away from spirituality and down the path of emptiness and unhappiness. “People feel lonely, isolated, incomplete, because they fail to recognise and live according to the fact that the unit of life is the cosmos as a whole, and feeling like something separate is an illusion,” he says.

## So, what is it then?

Unfortunately, it’s tough to ask that question without addressing even bigger ones. Do humans have a spirit or soul? Is the mind separate from the brain? What is human consciousness? What is the nature of the universe?

Pretty big. And unfortunately, we’re not going to sort it out here. But in the past decade, some intrepid scientists have started to tackle the subject. And though definitions are inconsistent, a common theme emerged in our experts’ explanations. Dr Morgan summed up the gist of them: “I see spirituality as related to a person’s sense of connection with others, a sense of being connected to something larger than themselves, and the capacity to find a unique sense of meaning and purpose in their life.”

That’s not exactly a step-by-step how-to. But here’s

the thing: Dr Barrett says it’s more individualistic [than religion]. “Spirituality is an individual, personal attempt to engage with something that transcends oneself, a bigger, more transcendent meaning system,” he explains. So your version will be different to your best friend’s, which will be different to Luke Skywalker’s.

## I want to go there too

So how do you go about that – transcending yourself? What makes an activity “spiritual”? Certainly praying exemplifies it, since in prayer one is typically seeking a connection to God or Allah or the universe or whoever. But what about mindfulness or meditation? Are they spiritual? Were those peace-loving hippies on to something?

“Spirituality and mindfulness are definitely related,” explains Dr Morgan, who emphasises the importance of the practice (which is touted by both psychologists and Buddhists alike for its uncanny ability to connect you to the present moment) in both her personal life and her psychology practice as a way to connect more meaningfully with herself and others. “For some people, being in nature helps them connect with something greater; for others it may be small acts of kindness, or playing an active part in their community.”

As for meditation, it could be the gateway to a higher

## INSTANT KARMA

According to the Benson-Henry Institute for Mind-Body Medicine in the US, eliciting the relaxation response (a focusing technique which can bring on a sense of spirituality) is simple. Here’s how:

• Repeat a single word, sound, phrase, prayer or muscular activity (ie, tensing and relaxing).

• Stop yourself from thinking about everyday things. Simply push thoughts aside as they come to mind and return to your repetition. Hello, Spirit. Hello, Spirit. Hello, Spirit. Hello, Spirit. Hello, Spirit. Hello, Spirit. Hello...



plane. “I don’t think there is anything inherently spiritual about holding your attention on a small stone for 45 minutes. Meditation is a tool to shape the mind. But the result of that training may be insight, which could be called spiritual,” says Dr Joshua Grant, a neuroscientist with the Max Planck Institute for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences, Germany, who studies meditation, emotion and pain.

Meditation could also lead to spiritual insights, according to Dr Amy Wachholtz, director of health psychology at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, US, who has published studies on meditation and migraine pain. Because plenty of research has shown meditation works well for reducing pain, Dr Wachholtz wanted to find out if spirituality had anything to do with it. She compared a relaxation technique with what she calls “secular meditation,” using “I” statements or neutral ones like “cotton is fluffy” and “spiritual meditation”, using a phrase like “God is peace.” (Participants had the option of changing “God” to any other higher power, eg, “Mother Earth”.) Her results showed the spiritual meditation did make a difference to study participants’ pain. Migraine sufferers in another Dr Wachholtz study who practised spiritual meditation saw many more improvements in their migraines across the board than the other groups. One finding was particularly surprising, though. “All four groups reported some sort of increase in spirituality – even the ones that we weren’t intending to be spiritual,” she says. “So in some ways it says that taking 20 minutes out of your day to stop and turn off the mobile phone,

television and radio, and be present in the moment may actually have some positive spiritual effects.”

## Healthy spirit = healthy mind and body

Researchers have started to uncover evidence in what monks and yogis have long believed in: strengthening your spiritual side has big health benefits. This area of science – studying what happens in the brains and bodies of people who believe they connect with the divine is called “neurotheology”. Scientists in Canada and the US have found that the brains of people who pray or meditate operate differently from normal brains. Perhaps the most basic health measure is life expectancy: studies show that spiritual people live longer. If that’s not enough of a reason to start omming or seeking out meaning in your Pink Floyd albums, there’s plenty of other evidence why dialling the divine hotline is good for your health.

For starters, have you ever seen a pissed off yogi? Recent research published in the journal *PLoS One* has shown spiritual practices like prayer and meditation can activate certain patterns of genes associated with what’s known as the “relaxation response”. It adjusts the body’s response to stress by decreasing heart rate, blood pressure, rate of breath, muscle tension and production of stress hormones. Think of it as the antidote to the usual heart-racing teeth grinding reaction you get under pressure – it’s a state of deep physical rest and is known to be induced by relaxing practices like prayer, meditation and yoga. Another study from the American Academy of Sleep Medicine showed

### Parietal cortex

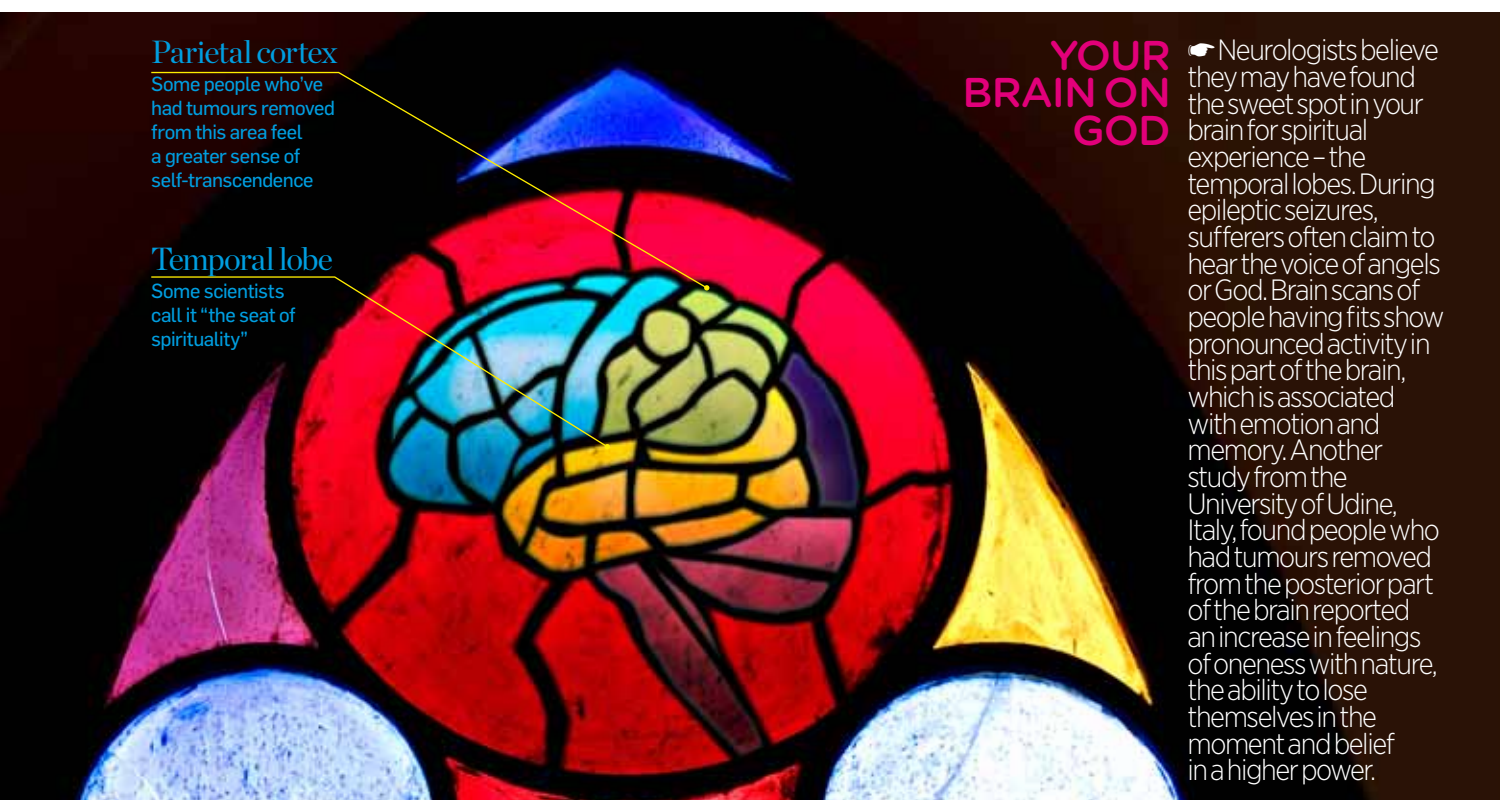
Some people who’ve had tumours removed from this area feel a greater sense of self-transcendence

### Temporal lobe

Some scientists call it “the seat of spirituality”

## YOUR BRAIN ON GOD

Neurologists believe they may have found the sweet spot in your brain for spiritual experience – the temporal lobes. During epileptic seizures, sufferers often claim to hear the voice of angels or God. Brain scans of people having fits show pronounced activity in this part of the brain, which is associated with emotion and memory. Another study from the University of Udine, Italy, found people who had tumours removed from the posterior part of the brain reported an increase in feelings of oneness with nature, the ability to lose themselves in the moment and belief in a higher power.



insomniacs who practiced Kriya yoga, a type of meditation, during the day were able to sleep better at night.

If mindfulness is a gateway to getting your spirit on, then there's a whole host of benefits for your mental health, too. Including the concentration skills of Cadel Evans. Harvard Medical School, US, researchers conducted a study this year that found meditation's affect on the alpha brain waves helps us tune out distractions and gain focus. Another study published in *Psychological Science* showed three months of regular meditation practise increased participants' attention span during boring tasks, while Emory University, US, research has shown that when distracted during a task, experienced Zen meditators are able to return to their task more quickly than beginners.

### Pump up your spirit

Good news if you're ready to send your soul to boot camp: you don't have to meditate, pray or step foot in a church if that's not your thing. And you don't have to read Rhonda Byrne books either (thankfully). "The conditions for developing spirituality begin with humility and love," Dr Cloninger explains. "Find something you love to do or that fills you with awe. Then immerse yourself in that. What different people love varies tremendously – it could be love of nature, gardening, childcare, practising medicine."

It could be a yoga class that stirs your soul. Or horse riding – or maybe Taoism. It could be swimming in the ocean or simply sitting in the bush. Many people find spirituality through a connection to music (no Bono, we're not talking about you), art or through alternative medicine practises like Reiki. Jean Byrne, a renowned Ashtanga yoga teacher and lecturer in Women's Studies at the University of Western Australia, agrees that it doesn't have to be overly disciplined. "For me my formal spiritual practice consists of yoga and meditation, but informally it is through being a mother to an active four-year old," she says. "Every person will prefer different practices, but the common denominator is usually internal or external quiet, nature and slowing down the break-neck speed at which many people live." Hallelujah to that. **wh**



## HOW STRONG IS YOUR SPIRIT?

Psychiatrist Dr C. Robert Cloninger's research shows that the more spiritual a person is, the more unpretentious, humble and fulfilled they are. Those are traits that help you deal with adversity (and make you altogether more awesome too). Take this quiz and see if you're tuned in:

☞ I often feel such a strong connection to people around me, as if there's no separation between us.  
**TRUE** ☐ **FALSE** ☐

☞ I often do things to help protect animals and plants from extinction.  
**TRUE** ☐ **FALSE** ☐

☞ People often call me "absent-minded" because I get so wrapped up in what I'm doing that I lose track of everything else.  
**TRUE** ☐ **FALSE** ☐

☞ I sometimes feel so connected to nature that everything seems to be part of one living organism.  
**TRUE** ☐ **FALSE** ☐

☞ I'm fascinated by the things in life that science can't explain.  
**TRUE** ☐ **FALSE** ☐

☞ I've had experiences that made my role in life so clear to me that I felt very happy and excited.  
**TRUE** ☐ **FALSE** ☐

☞ I feel I have a "sixth sense" that sometimes allows me to know what is going to happen.  
**TRUE** ☐ **FALSE** ☐

☞ Even after thinking about something for a long time, I've learned to trust my feelings more than my logical reasons.  
**TRUE** ☐ **FALSE** ☐

☞ I often have unexpected flashes of insight while I'm relaxing.  
**TRUE** ☐ **FALSE** ☐

☞ I often feel a strong spiritual or emotional connection with all the people around me.  
**TRUE** ☐ **FALSE** ☐

☞ Sometimes I've had moments of great joy in which I suddenly had a clear, deep feeling of oneness with all that exists.  
**TRUE** ☐ **FALSE** ☐

☞ Often when I look at something ordinary, I get the feeling that I'm seeing it fresh for the first time.  
**TRUE** ☐ **FALSE** ☐

### SCORING

Give yourself:

1 point for each **TRUE** answer

0 points for each **FALSE** answer

**14 AND ABOVE** Spirituality is innate to you. You naturally see and feel your way through the world with a sense of a higher power at work. You're highly attuned to the idea of a force bigger than yourself at play.

**12-13** You're spiritually aware, and get lost in the moment. But it's likely you have a grounded personality that keeps you from being fully away with the fairies. Tune in to your own intuition by not asking the opinion of too many people and practising mindfulness.

**8-11** You're comfortable with the idea of spirituality and occasionally you think there's more to life than meets

the eye. But often the practicalities of life take over and you're too busy to spend much time contemplating. You might benefit the most from the relaxing side of spiritual practises like yoga or walking in nature.

**6-7** Science and empiricism is what makes sense to you and you find comfort in having concrete evidence. If your spiritual curiosity is piqued, check out some scientific books on the subject, such as Barbara Bradley Hagerty's *Fingerprints of God* (\$24.95, Penguin), since both disciplines are searching for the same thing – truth.

**1-5** Highly skeptical in nature, you probably give spirituality as much clout as you do to psychic hotlines. Still, you can't deny that some questions in life aren't answerable by logic or reason. That's all we're saying.