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O.K., Google, Take a Deep Breath

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MAYBE it's no surprise that a yellow-brick road winds through the Googleplex.

Step onto Google's campus here — with its indoor treehouse, volleyball court, apiaries, heated toilet seats and, yes, Oz-style road — and you might think you've just sailed over the rainbow.

But all the toys and perks belie the frenetic pace here, and many employees acknowledge that life at Google can be hard on fragile egos.

Sure, the amenities are seductive, says Blaise Pabon, an enterprise sales engineer, but "when you get to a place like this, it can tear you apart" if you don't find a way to handle the hard-driving culture.

Employees coming from fast-paced fields, already accustomed to demanding bosses and long hours, say Google pushes them to produce at a pace even faster than they could have imagined. Google's co-founder and chief executive, Larry Page, recently promised on the company Web site to maintain "a healthy disregard for the impossible."

Little wonder, then, that among the hundreds of free classes that Google offers to employees here, one of the most popular is called S.I.Y., for "Search Inside Yourself." It is the brainchild of Chade-Meng Tan, 41, a tall, thin, soft-spoken engineer who arrived at Google in 2000 as Employee No. 107.

Think of S.I.Y. as the Zen of Google. Mr. Tan dreamed up the course and refined it with the help of nine experts in the use of mindfulness at work. And in a time when Google has come under new scrutiny from European and United States regulators over privacy and other issues, a class in mindfulness might be a very good thing.

The class has three steps: attention training, self-knowledge and self-mastery, and the creation of useful mental habits.

If it sounds a bit touchy-feely, consider this: More than 1,000 Google employees have taken the class, and there's a waiting list of 30 when it's offered, four times a year. The class accepts 60 people and runs seven weeks.

Richard Fernandez, director of executive development and a psychologist by training, says he sees a significant difference in his work behavior since taking the class. "I'm definitely much more resilient as a

leader," he says. "I listen more carefully and with less reactivity in high-stakes meetings. I work with a lot of senior executives who can be very demanding, but that doesn't faze me anymore. It's almost an emotional and mental bank account. I've now got much more of a buffer there."

Mr. Tan says the course has received good reviews. "In anonymous surveys, on average, participants rated it around 4.75 out of 5," he says. "Awareness is spread almost entirely by word-of-mouth by alumni, and that alone already created more demand than we can currently serve."

Mr. Tan's first book, "Search Inside Yourself: The Unexpected Path to Achieving Success, Happiness (and World Peace)," is out this month, with a foreword by his friend and S.I.Y. collaborator Daniel Goleman, author of "Emotional Intelligence." In addition to its United States publication by HarperOne, the book is to be published in 17 markets worldwide, from South Korea to Brazil to Slovenia.

"As technology pushes us faster, we have to adapt to new ways of doing business in this new millennium," says Mark Tauber, senior vice president and publisher at HarperOne. "We believe that Meng's book lays the groundwork for a new national conversation about work and what work means to us."

But what is Mr. Tan's ultimate goal? A Buddhist for many years, he says without irony that he wants to create world peace. "I was always very different from the other kids," he says. "I have an I.Q. of 156. I didn't play sports. I thought big. I thought I could achieve great things. I don't want to sound megalomaniac, but my whole life is about doing something for the world, from as far back as I can remember."

Born and raised in Singapore, Mr. Tan describes his childhood as "very unhappy."

"It was the geek thing," he says. He taught himself how to write software code at the age of 12. And by 15, he had won his first national academic award. At 17, he was one of four members of the national software championship team.

"In Singapore, the way to distinguish yourself is to win competitions," he says. But public attention and external rewards brought him no satisfaction. "It wasn't making a difference," he says. "I wasn't any happier. There was a compulsion to be the best."

He grew up watching American TV series like "The Cosby Show" and "Diff'rent Strokes," studied computer engineering in Singapore and attended graduate school at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He was offered a job, he says, within five minutes of e-mailing his résumé after graduation.

The offer was from Google.

ABOUT 50 people file into an amphitheater filled with soft, comfortable seats in the bright primary colors of Google's logo. Mr. Tan is at the podium with his fellow teacher, Marc Lesser, a former Zen monk who is the author of two books and a successful businessman. Mr. Lesser is one of several S.I.Y. instructors hired from outside and paid by Google.

This week's class is about motivation.

For the next two hours, employees partner up and perform exercises to identify and share emotions. The teachers set a gentle, welcoming tone, so the class offers students a place to question why and how they behave. Here, simply wielding superior technical skills or ferocious intelligence won't cut it.

Like Mr. Tan, many S.I.Y. students are highly educated immigrants from Asia. Some of their peers are already millionaires. This course challenges them to examine how their choices affect their work and relationships.

"We need an expert," Mr. Tan says as the class begins. "That expert is you. This class is to help you discover what you already know." To illustrate his point, he shows a slide of a pile of four smooth polished stones, balanced atop one another. "We're looking for alignment, finding our deepest values, envisioning how they'll take us to our destination and the resilience we need to achieve that."

Mr. Tan knows how to seduce his ambitious audience. He refers to successful people who exemplify these values, from Michael Jordan to the best-selling authors Daniel Pink and Tony Hsieh, the C.E.O. of Zappos. "I'm the other good-looking Chinese guy," he jokes.

One exercise asks everyone to name, and share with a partner, three core values. "It centers you," one man says afterward. "You can go through life forgetting what they are."

There's lots of easy laughter. People prop up their feet on the backs of seats and lean in to whisper to their partners — people from a variety of departments they otherwise might have never met. (Students are asked to pair up with a buddy for the duration of the course.)

In one seven-minute exercise, participants are asked to write, nonstop, how they envision their lives in five years. Mr. Tan ends it by tapping a Tibetan brass singing bowl.

They discuss what it means to succeed, and to fail. "Success and failure are emotional and physiological experiences," Mr. Tan says. "We need to deal with them in a way that is present and calm."

Then Mr. Lesser asks the entire room to shout in unison: "I failed!"

"We need to see failure in a kind, gentle and generous way," he says. "Let's see if we can explore these emotions without grasping."

Talking about failure?

Sharing feelings?

Sitting quietly for long, unproductive minutes?

At Google?

"The notion of S.I.Y. is more radical or countercultural here at Google than anywhere else," says Mr. Pabon, who took the class in 2009. "The pressure here is really quite intense. It's a place filled with high achievers

trained to find validation through external factors."

Mr. Tan's credibility with his students and with senior management — which moved him into human resources a few years ago — stems from a few factors. He's cool in all the ways that people in Silicon Valley want to be cool. First, he's an engineer, like Google's co-founders, Mr. Page and Sergey Brin. And Mr. Tan also became rich — albeit not nearly as rich as the founders — after Google went public in 2004.

Given his fortune, his street cred inside Google and the growing popularity of the course, he's a Google star.

"People love that entrepreneur/mystic thing," Mr. Pabon says.

MR. TAN understands that Google employees demand data, not just emotional arguments or abstract theory.

Eric Chang, 44, who took the course twice because he was too busy the first time with work demands to attend all the classes, says: "I would go to S.I.Y. with a healthy engineer's mentality. My attitude was always, 'Prove it!' right up until the end. 'We need to see a controlled experiment! We need to see proof!' "

Mr. Tan likes to refer to the example of Matthieu Ricard, a Buddhist monk once described by a British newspaper as the happiest person in the world. At first, that rang hollow to Mr. Chang. "Matthieu's a monk; I don't want to be a monk," he says. "But Meng was able to make that bridge for me. He presented S.I.Y. the way we all present to one another: here's my premise, here's my control, here's my experiment."

Mr. Chang came to the course at a moment of personal and professional crisis. A software engineer at Google since 2004, he had seen colleagues burn out and quit — or work, as he did, with stress-related back pain.

"I'm from Taiwan," he says. "Half of Silicon Valley is born elsewhere. It's the immigrant mind-set to thrive on stress, go to the best schools, work hard. No one realized that way of working was really unsustainable."

Then, when his mother lay dying in Toronto, his punishing schedule never allowed enough time to visit her. "Our growth was explosive, with constant demands to keep scaling the system," he recalls. Exhausted by his ever-expanding workload, he says he began exploding easily and often at his wife and young son.

"I knew I had to get help," he says. "The question was when and where."

His wife says something had to give. "I couldn't really tell him what I was thinking anymore," she says, "because I didn't want to push his buttons."

Since taking S.I.Y., Mr. Chang and his wife agree that he's changed a great deal — becoming calmer, more patient, better able to listen. Perhaps most helpful, in a culture of 80-hour workweeks, was the camaraderie of the course's buddy system. "You definitely need a community of support," he says. "The energy in the classroom was important, too, thanks to the level of participation."

One tool the course teaches is S.B.N.R.R. — nicknamed the Siberian North Railroad but really short for Stop, Breathe, Notice, Reflect and Respond.

“Business is a machine made out of people,” says Bill Duane, an engineer in rockabilly spectacles who works in site reliability, helping to ensure that Gmail works smoothly. “If you have people, you have problems. You can have friction between them or smoothness.”

Mr. Duane took S.I.Y. four years ago and considers it as sort of an organizational WD-40, a necessary lubricant between driven, ambitious employees and Google’s demanding corporate culture. Helping employees handle stress and defuse emotion helps everyone work more effectively, he says.

Bob Sidebotham, 58, an engineer currently taking the course, agrees. “I work in a group that wasn’t very communicative, and half of them work in Germany,” he says. “What I appreciate about the class is not just learning to meditate but using it in real life. It’s more about small attitudinal changes.”

Johanna Sistek, a trademark lawyer, says the emotional skills she refined in the class help her focus on her many tasks, despite a fire hose of professional demands. Like most of her colleagues, she still faces “instant deadlines” but says they no longer freak her out.

“I think the benefit of something like S.I.Y. for anybody in any workplace is that any time you have people working together there is going to be dysfunction, people who do not communicate well,” she says. “Someone is always going to be a favorite — or not — and you can’t be unhappy about it all the time.”

For Karen May, vice president for leadership and talent, S.I.Y. is a useful tool on several levels. “We have great people,” she says. “Now how do we keep them? Teaching employees with terrific technical abilities also means helping them to develop presentation skills and communication skills, helping them to understand their impact on other people, their ability to collaborate across groups and cultivate a mentality from which great motivation can spring.”

When the executive chef Olivia Wu, now 59, arrived here after surviving decades in the deadline-driven and collaborative fields of newspaper journalism and the food industry, she still found the company’s normal pace of doing business overwhelming. “The pace! The volume! This is the most intense place I’ve ever worked,” she says.

Even her job-interview assignment — to fix food for 20 people in three hours from a counter filled with ingredients — was spine-stiffening. After taking S.I.Y., Ms. Wu finds her job overseeing 30 cafes throughout the Mountain View campuses — “controlled chaos,” she says — somewhat less stressful.

Can S.I.Y. translate to other companies and corporate cultures? One of its tenets is mindful e-mailing. Mr. Tan says it’s too easy to focus on the message we’re sending, and not on its recipients and the possible impact on them. When recipients don’t know the intent behind the e-mail — as is often the case — they tend to assume the worst, like anger or frustration on the sender’s part. “We frequently get offended or frightened by e-mails that were never intended to offend or frighten,” Mr. Tan writes in his book. “If we are

emotionally unskillful, then we react with offense or fear, and then all hell breaks loose."

Peter Allen, a former Google employee, gave a green light to the first S.I.Y. class when he led Google U., the unit devoted to internal education, from 2007 to 2009, and Mr. Tan's boss. Mr. Allen felt that a course focused on mindfulness was important and gave Mr. Tan the time and the budget to develop it.

Mr. Allen says: "I sent 1,000 e-mails a month all the time. In a culture where e-mail is so important, this makes a big difference. We all need the ability to connect. I think Meng will make a huge difference."

S.I.Y. principles are vital in any workplace where value is typically based on intellectual machismo, Mr. Allen adds. In a high-I.Q. environment, he says, I.Q. itself is not a differentiating factor, but "emotional intelligence, E.Q., is."

Or, as Mr. Pabon says: "The reason I think it will be broadly applicable is that everyone struggles. 'Am I the smartest person in the room? What if I'm not?' They're worried about losing their job. Everyone's got some fear of not being able to survive."