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STRATEGIES

From West to East

Gast goes from Type A to Buddhist principles

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Some hard-driving executives in Colorado are turning to Eastern practices and philosophies, such as yoga and Buddhism, to deal with the tension of their Western corporate life.

Helping to lead the way is Brian Gast -- the stereotypical go-getter executive in a previous life.

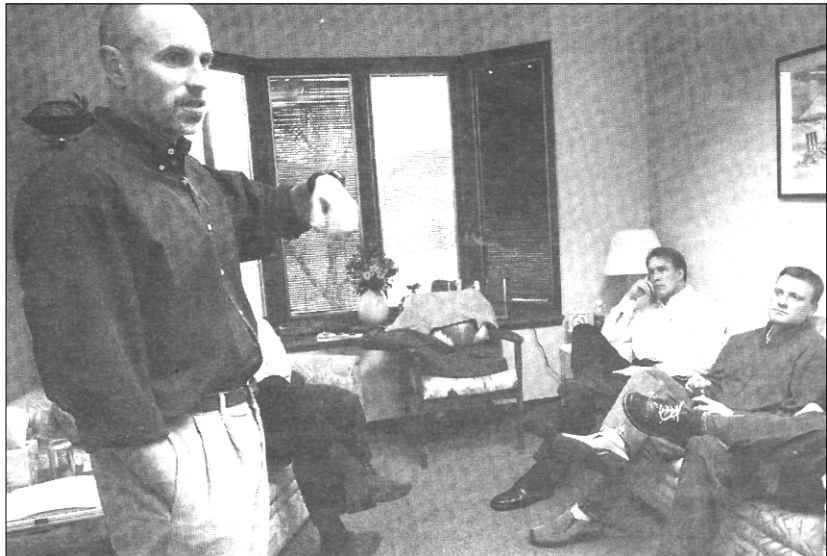
The founder of former Denver DSL provider Jato Communications achieved a net worth of more than \$50 million, wore custom-made Italian suits, took vacations in Hawaii and Australia, and logged more than 100,000 miles of air travel for two years straight, qualifying him to join United Airlines' 1K Club.

But during a flight from Denver to New York, Gast had a spiritual awakening.

"I realized that what I was doing -- jetting all over the country, signing huge deals, running a high-growth company, accumulating a big net worth -- just wasn't making me happy," Gast said.

After that realization, Gast, the son of a Presbyterian minister, shaved his head, grew a beard, got rid of his television and gave up alcohol.

He dramatically changed his lifestyle and now helps others, as an executive coach,



Jato Communications founder Brian Gast in his new role as a counselor to harried executives.

find a path toward balance and more happiness in their lives.

Gast leads two groups of executives in monthly sessions and retreats that provide members with a support group to discuss conflicts at work or at home. Members can test-drive business decisions with the group without real-world consequences.

"The group is a sounding board where you can see and hear how other people are doing things," said John, a group member who did not provide his last name.

"You wouldn't think a group of dudes

could get together and talk about their feelings," said Alex, another group member who did not want his last name used.

Supervisors or peers recommended most of the members to the group. Members are encouraged to provide feedback to each other and also hold each other accountable to see if they followed through with the resolution discussed at the previous session.

"A conflict that goes unaddressed is like a virus that turns into a nasty disease that, down the road, you have to go in and get your arm amputated," Gast said.

Gast: Teaches execs to slow down, get in touch.

One exercise held at the start of each session is to go around the circle to catch up on events of the past month. This brings each participant's focus into the group and shuts out outside disturbances or distractions.

Gast said the process is about "being present" and in the now, which is one of the principles of Buddhism.

He added that the group provides a feeling like a sanctuary, which promotes honesty and "truth-telling," also part of Buddhist principles. Promoting truth also keeps the group from being "nicey, nicey," Gast said.

The groups are no larger than about eight people, which seems to be the perfect number for proper communication, he said.

Western culture has become chaotic and full of uncertainty, Gast said, and he hopes to bring not only self-awareness to the group members but also "connectedness" to other people -- two other aspects of Buddhism.

Ego often guides leaders, Gast said, illustrating some of the failures of that mindset -- such as former MCI WorldCom CEO Bernie Ebbers who landed their companies in financial trouble and themselves in legal trouble.

The best leaders are aware of their true selves and don't make decisions based on ego, Gast said.

"Some of these guys were motivated to make sure they succeeded," he said. "They acted out of ego, not mindfulness, and so they let their ego overtake themselves." He teaches that by using the connectedness lesson, helping leaders realize their decisions have a chain effect.

Two other fundamentals of Buddhism include embracing the present with the realization it is not permanent, Gast said. People often make decisions thinking of the future, not of the present, he said. Instead of making the right decision for today, they choose not to make a decision. They wait for external change, like an upturn in the economy, to change their lives for them.

But people still must remember that life is not permanent, so they should let go of control and the need for certainty, common among micro-managers, he added.

Gast tries to teach group members how to have emo-

tional intelligence so they can stay in touch with these basic principles. Western culture is often wrapped up in how you think, not how you feel. But Eastern philosophy is all about how you feel and what's going on in your body, he explained.

Gast also takes yoga classes, which are drawing increasing numbers of stressed business executives who seek more balance of mind and body.

Tim Johnson worked for a national telecom company for 10 years before he decided to open his own yoga studio, Bikram on Broadway two years ago. Two months ago, he opened a second studio, Hot Yoga on Hampden.

Johnson, a former member of the U.S. Ski Team, had suffered from knee injuries and was trying to find a good therapy for his knee surgery recovery. Although skeptical about trying yoga at first, Johnson stuck it out and found that indeed his knees felt better, and other aches and pains that he had learned to live with had subsided.

For the first time in his life, he was equally strong and flexible, and he began recommending yoga to friends and other athletes dealing with pain.

About 2,000 people a month take classes at his studios, most seeking stress relief. If they make their body feel better they can de-stress, he said.

"People have Palm Pilots, cell phones and meetings. We are taught to juggle all those things," Johnson said. "The brain is used to juggling, so it loses the ability to focus on just one thing, such as breathing.

"The primary benefit of yoga for executives is that they can get through their barriers and focus on just one thing," he said.

Executives have public speaking engagements, meetings and deadlines. All these things can raise panic level and blood pressure, Johnson said. Yoga can clear the cobwebs of the mind, he said.

There are no cell phones, no meetings. They have to be present and focused in class -- even if it is just on their own breathing, Johnson said.

"The person who says yoga's not for me is the best person for it," he said.