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Stressbuster

by [Larissa MacFarquhar](#) October 15, 2007

When an American businessman calls upon a guru of the Eastern persuasion, he is generally seeking to be abused for his attachment to success and worldly goods while also learning how to acquire more of both. Swami Parthasarathy, eighty years old, a native of Chennai, India, having renounced a lucrative career in the family shipping business and the Rolls-Royce that came with it, and founded the Vedanta Corporate Academy two hours southeast of Mumbai, has a deep understanding of this delicate role. In the past, he has harangued and soothed supplicants at Microsoft, Ford, and Lehman Brothers, and has been invited by the deans of Kellogg and Wharton to instruct M.B.A. students in the use of the Sanskrit Vedas for purposes of serenity and profit. On a recent visit to New York, he appeared at “21” to instruct members of the Young Presidents’ Organization (to join, you must be younger than forty-five and run a business) in the management of self and stress.

“After that traffic, he’s gonna help us relax, right?” one young president, wearing an open-necked blue shirt and a blazer, said as he waited for the elevator.

“I hope he makes us think,” a female young president in a white trouser suit replied. “Not relax, but the opposite.”

The meeting took place in a room upstairs whose walls were lined with ornate beer steins. The Swami was introduced by a female acolyte in a silver-and-white shalwar kameez, who informed the audience that Parthasarathy still followed a regular regimen of yoga, jogging, and cricket, and noted that “Swamiji’s corporate seminars are always a sellout.”

The Swami himself, wearing a white cotton dhoti kurta, walked to the podium and regarded his audience for a moment in silence.

“Stress!” he declared in a dramatic undertone, his hands clutching the lectern. The room hushed; the Young Presidents chewed their roast beef very quietly.

“Stress is entirely an internal phenomenon!” Parthasarathy shouted. “You are the architect of your fortune, you are the architect of your misfortune. Don’t blame the stars! Blame yourself! A man goes to his lawyer to divorce his wife and says, ‘What’s the fee?’ ‘Five thousand dollars.’ ‘How long it takes?’ ‘Six months.’ ‘I pay you ten thousand dollars, you make it three months.’

Another man is desperately waiting to marry the same lady! What's this? The lady is the same who produces agony to one and ecstasy to another! Therefore I put it to you for your consideration: stress is in you. Period."

The Swami said he would not offer them solutions to stress—he would speak only of its origin. "You go to a friend's house, there's a peculiar foul smell," he said. "You ask your friend, 'Look here, what's happening, there's a funny smell.' The friend rushes to get some fresheners and starts spraying all over the place. And you say, 'Look here, I'm only telling you there's a funny smell.' So the second time he gets some perfume and dabs it on you. The third time you pick up a curtain and there's a decomposed rat. Now I ask you, do I need to give solutions?"



"It turned out that everything he poured out to me that night on the bridge was spin."

Parthasarathy is a pioneer in the field of what has been called "karma capitalism." Hindu philosophy is now widely discussed in business schools, but few students of the Bhagavad Gita can match Parthasarathy's peculiar charm—his blend of spiritual admonishment and Catskills-style compassion.

"Once you make the right assessment, then you have the right expectations and you have no disappointments," he told the Young Presidents. "My wife is an irritable person. Fifty-two years of marriage, still going strong. I decide to live with her, but I must understand that she has a short temper. First thing I get up in the morning, I ask her, 'Darling, will you get me a cup of tea?' 'I'm not a servant—go get your own cup

of tea.' If she says that, I know I'm in the right house, she's my wife. You have to have proper assessment!"

The crux of the Swami's message was that stress derives from unreasonable expectations—for a wife who isn't irritable, say, or three hundred million dollars—and attachment to what one has. "As long as there is attachment, there is misery," he said. "Somebody scratches your new Seven Series BMW, you're attached. You start a family, you're attached."

During a question-and-answer period, these ideas met with resistance.

"How do you manage your expectations when you want to shoot for the stars with your business?" a man in the back of the room wanted to know.

"How do you combine being in a marriage for fifty-two years with a lack of attachment?" a woman asked.

Parthasarathy stuck to his message. “You don’t know how to handle your partner, you don’t know how to handle your children, you don’t know how to handle society!” he proclaimed as he warmed up to his conclusion. “You hit the pillow, if you don’t fall asleep in twenty seconds there’s something wrong with you! At the end of the day you need a Scotch-and-soda. At the end of the week you need a weekend. At the end of the year you need a vacation. Why you guys need weekends and vacations? In the academy that I’m running, in the three-year course there are no breaks for weekends and vacations. Why you need a break? You believe that work tires you, but work can never tire you! I want to change T.G.I.F. to T.G.I.M. If you don’t find peace and happiness in action, you’ll never find it!” ♦