

Swami, How They Love Ya

By [Claudia Wallis](#) Thursday, Oct. 18, 2007



The philosopher Swami Parthasarathy (middle), known as Swamiji, founder of the Vedanta Cultural Foundation, during a visit to Connecticut.

Erika Larsen for TIME

The private dining room in Manhattan's timelessly tony 21 Club is packed with more than 60 CEOs, corporate presidents and managing partners. They represent a cross section of mostly midsize New York City-area businesses. There's a biotech exec from Manhattan, an aerospace guy from Long Island, the head of a jewelry firm in New Jersey, a manufacturer of architectural lighting--all of them members of the Young Presidents' Organization (YPO), an international fraternity of business leaders who have won their corner offices by age 45. This group of BlackBerry-wielding overachievers has filled every seat to hear from a man who will let them know that, despite the title on their business cards, they are functioning at less than full throttle, distracted by needless anxiety and basically missing the boat on their voyage through life. He's a man who adds new meaning to the phrase business guru: 80-year-old Swami Parthasarathy.

Parthasarathy (the stress falls gently on the third syllable) has been traveling the globe for 35 years, speaking to business people--including at such bastions of commerce as Wharton, Kellogg and Harvard business schools--luring them with assertions about learning to improve concentration and productivity, eliminate stress and develop their intellectual discipline and overall well-being. His message derives from his lifelong study of the ancient system of philosophy called Vedanta, the focus of a nonprofit academy he established 19 years ago outside Mumbai (formerly Bombay).

Known to his full-time students as Swamiji (swami for spiritual teacher; ji, a title of respect), he is well aware that he is his own best advertisement: he glows as disciples introduce him as a man who has had the same weight and waist size for 60 years and who can still swing a mean bat on his cricket team. He loves to mention his similarly consistent record in marriage: "One wife, 52 years," he boasts.

In fact, as he takes the podium in his spotless white tunic and trousers, a vertical line of red dye on his forehead, Swamiji is the picture of unbowed vigor, with a voice that crescendos to full boom when he's making a particularly insistent point. "You are the architect of your fortune. You are the architect of your misfortune," he thunders. His topic, "Managing Stress Through Self-Management," seems perfectly pitched to this crowd of overtaxed self-starters. "There's nothing but stress--personal, work, health-related," admits Steven Silverman, 51, president of Kurt Versen lighting, by way of explaining his attendance. Silverman says he does some yoga and meditates a bit, "so I'm open to this. You try to get some balance in your life."

Swamiji's message, delivered in part via that transcendental software, PowerPoint, and some well-placed jokes, is that stress is not a function of external demands--the number of employees and dollars to manage, e-mails to answer, strategic plans to complete or loved ones to placate. Stress is internal, he insists. Make a rational assessment of your situation with all its requirements and flaws--consider, for instance, the past behavior of your customers, your colleagues, your spouse--adjust your expectations accordingly, and the stress will vanish. He gives some quick examples. "I'm in New York. There will be traffic," he says, smiling calmly. "My wife is an irritable person." he observes. "If I say, 'Darling, get me a cup of tea.' She says, 'I'm not a servant. Get your own tea.' If I hear this, I know I'm in the right house."

Such equanimity might appear to be incompatible with soaring professional ambition, but he disagrees. Parthasarathy, who studied international law at University College, London, tells the room that he starts his day at 4 a.m. and ends it at 9:30 p.m., never needing a break or vacation, though with plenty of time to maintain his health with yoga and cricket. "You believe work tires you? Work can never tire you!" he scolds. "What tires you are your worries about the past and anxiety for the future." The undisciplined mind, he says, too easily slips into the past and future, veering toward likes and dislikes that prevent you from staying focused on your present objectives. And thus he dangles the possibility--irresistible to this audience--of being both less stressed and more productive.

The audience lingers for another 45 min., asking questions about health, marriage, reducing stress. Swamiji, like any good management guru, pushes his newest book, *The Fall of the Human Intellect*, one of 10 he has written over the decades ("Every word, between 4 and 6 in the morning," he later explains. "After 6, it's not worth reading.") He invites the audience to come to a YPO retreat in January at his Vedanta Academy, 67 miles (108 km) southeast of Mumbai.

Larry Moon made the trip last January with his wife. ceo of the Sandstone Group, a family-owned holding company in Milwaukee with 150 employees, Moon, 53, says he was an unlikely prospect for a week of vegetarianism, quiet study and yoga. "A year ago, if you said I'd go a week without eating meat, I would have said you are crazy." But after six days with Swamiji, Moon is not only "about 90%" vegetarian; he's also a man transformed. He now rises early every morning to study Vedanta. "I've not missed a single day," he says in amazement. At the end of each evening, he spends 10 or 15 minutes reflecting on his day--"like doing a superfast advance through a dvd," he explains. "To be diligent and focused like this, I can't even tell you how unusual it is for me. My nickname when I was growing up was Fast-and-Sloppy." Reading and rereading Swamiji's writing is like practicing a musical instrument, Moon says, bringing fresh insights that have changed him. "My ability to work without a break is very different. My ability

to not get flustered or to spin out of control is much better." The foot-high piles that used to clutter his office are gone. "I just worked my way through them," he says. The 1,000 unanswered e-mails are also history. "Now when I leave my office, I have between two and 10 e-mails in my inbox." Not surprisingly, he sleeps better.

Certainly, organizing your mind to organize your desk is a technique Swamiji shares with other practitioners. The same goes for his emphasis on exercise, healthy diet and moderating expectations. But some corporate coaches insist that working on your mental outlook is not always enough. "Can you be in a toxic work situation and have a great attitude?" asks Maynard Brusman, a consulting psychologist and executive coach in San Francisco. "Sometimes you have to help the environment change as well."

And not every chief executive is ripe for an attitude adjustment. After the 21 Club lecture, a honcho asks Swamiji a question that brought titters of recognition from fellow ypoers: "What if you want to shoot for the stars? How can you manage your expectations?" Swamiji nods. He explains once again that a calm intellect is a more productive intellect. But then he concedes that in coming before this group of strivers, he had to manage his own expectations.