

Lead story

By Suma Varughese

Enough, already

Contentment is the peace we earn if we excel in the school of life; it is the cup that life's victors hold. What stops this sublime quality from seeping into our lives and how can we attain it?



Photo: Thinkstock

Francis Carvalho is my medical insurance agent. In all my years of dealing with him, I have never seen him lose his cool even when I have raved and ranted about the steep rise in the cost of medical insurance. Instead, his response is that despite having to fork out a steep sum for *his* policy, he has always breathed a silent prayer of gratitude to God every year because he did not have occasion to use it.

Contentment. It is all about perspective. It is about seeing the silver lining in the dark clouds. It is about

“Contentment means being equally happy with the chicken I ate on Sunday and with the karela (bitter gourd) I will eat today (Monday).”

Francis Carvalho, medical insurance agent

gratitude for what one has been given. It is about trust that one will be taken care of. It is about stanching the bottomless thirst for more and more, and resting in the moment. It is an important constituent of happiness, for without it, there is no lasting joy.

Contentment can seem like a milk and water quality but anyone who has striven for it will know how hard won it is. It is the quiet harbour that we slip into if we have triumphed over the storms of our life. It is the peace we earn if we excel in the school of life.

Francis, a bespectacled 50-something, usually dressed formally in full sleeves and trousers, puts it succinctly. “Contentment means being equally happy with the chicken I ate on Sunday and with the karela (bitter gourd) I will eat today (Monday).” Chicken and karela – culinary polar opposites – brought together by the sauce of contentment.

Ankur Gupta, who describes himself as a maverick techie, defines contentment as a dynamic state of balance that is attuned to the vagaries of life. “It is an unconditional state of happiness,” he says. For Ankur, growing freedom from material desires is spiking his contentment quotient. “I started my career with Johnson and Johnson,” says this BITS Pilani-IIM alumni. “I have had tea costing Rs 400 at the Hotel Taj Mahal and tea costing

Rs 4 at an Irani place. At the end of the day, I prefer the four-rupee tea!”

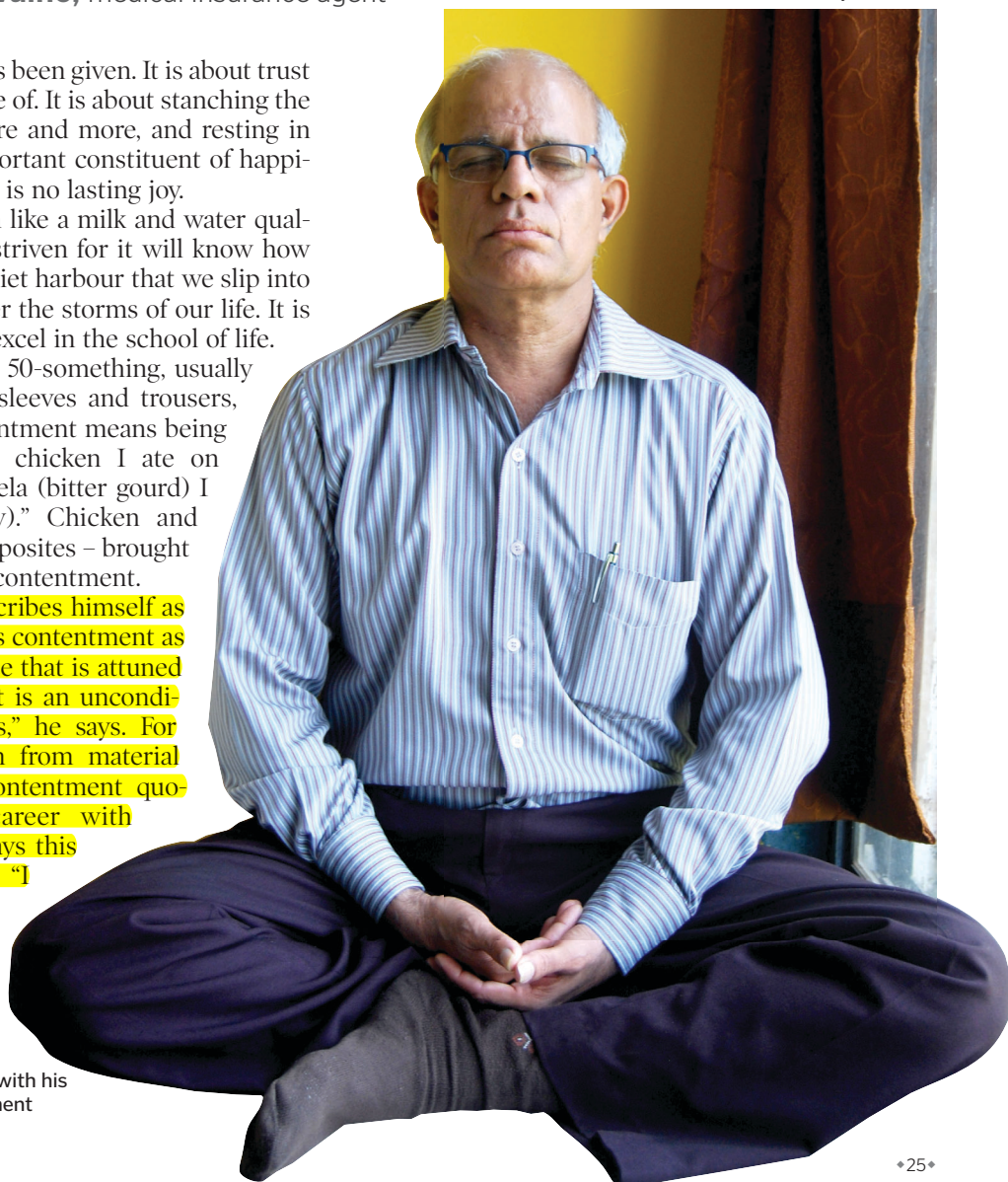
After three years of working in an MNC, Ankur found he could not work under anyone and “chose to be a free bird.”

The loss of income or status has never caused him a moment of regret. “The biggest advantage of being my own boss comes from the width and depth of the areas I have explored,” says Ankur, who, apart from holding management training workshops, has written several books including interactive electronic story books, specialises in fractal art and is passionate about multiple intelligence.

To the manner born

Rachna Bhatt, a housewife based in

Photo: Sanjoli Sharma



Francis Carvalho gets in touch with his source of bottomless contentment

Tune in

So how can our sense of inner lack and existential insecurity be stanchd? Only by tuning within.

Says Francis, "When I was young, I too was driven by the need to make money. It made me change several jobs and I even went to the Gulf. I was not happy there for I had to work from nine to nine and undergo severe stress at work. I returned to India in 1997. In 2000, I attended a meditation session at a Catholic retreat centre called Atma Darshan. In the stillness of the mind and body, I realised that I could be happy with whatever I had. I did not need to compare myself with others."

Says CV Subhash, a banker based in the Middle East, "My meeting with Sathya Sai Baba transformed me from a rationalist/communist to someone who has been striving to live up to his two greatest teachings: Help ever, hurt never; and Love all, serve all. And through this I have learnt to become more and more content."

Moving into our inner world through meditation, chanting, yoga or self-inquiry, we become intimately aware of the psychological and emotional blocks that drive our needs and desires. The more we become aware of this inner world of ours and the more we

come to terms with it, the more mastery we gain over it. Awareness and acceptance of ourselves helps us to heal our self-esteem too and we stop deriving our self-worth from achievements or status.

Neelam Sethi, a follower of Nirmala Devi's Sahaj Marg, admits to have been born into a contented family but her advent into spirituality speeded up her contentment quotient. She says, "When I come across people who have more than me I feel genuinely happy for them. Very rarely have I been racked by feelings of envy or jealousy. We all come into this material existence with a karmic baggage and each has his or her share to work off."

Ankur, a follower of Osho, says that spirituality is helping him to hone his needs to the essential. He adds, "Suddenly, one day I realised that I had too many shirts and trousers. I have now kept only five to seven shirts and an equal number of trousers for everyday usage. I mean to wear the rest only when these are worn out. This simple thing has made me so very contented."

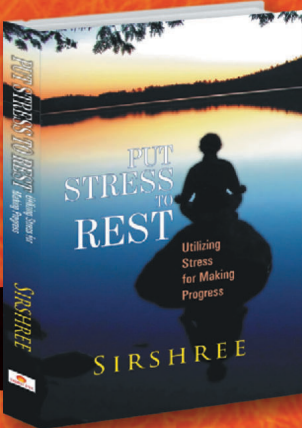
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He adds, "I am a great Apple fan and I used to own three or four Macintosh computers at a time. Now I wait for the old one to wear out to replace it. All my friends own a plasma TV but I do not intend to replace my TV because it is working fine."

Through the spiritual perspective we can overcome one of the greatest obstacles to contentment which is the urge to compare. "Chasing what you don't have causes comparison," says Ankur.

Suggests Rachna, "Eliminating the feeling of competition with others will put our agitated mind to rest. When we compete only with ourselves, we can relax."

What ads do

Perhaps in this context it might be worth mentioning that the single most important reason for the widespread discontent in society today is the existence of advertisements whose sole purpose appears to be to create an inner lack so that we are vulnerable to buying their products. Like the serpent whispering to Eve, they insidiously suggest how inadequate we are without the latest model of car or mobile or brand of clothing and so on. They compel us to look at what we do not have and therefore have us by our short hairs.

It follows then that in order to be contented, we must look at what we have instead of what we do not.

Ankur agrees, "Gratitude is key to contentment. It is better to want what you have rather than chase what you don't have."

Rachna appears to have taken this learning to heart. Says she, "When my husband had a heart attack my first reaction was, 'Why me? But then I realised, why not me? I am not above the natural law. And it could have been worse! At least we were given a warning and let off. So many did not survive them or suffered from worse incurable diseases such as cancer or AIDS!"

Rachna's buoyancy helped her confront even death. "When my mother passed away, I just could not accept it for a year. I thought of seeking a shrink's help but I realised that



Ankur Gupta brews himself a contented cup of green tea

Photo: Sanjoli Sharma

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Ankur Gupta, maverick techie

he wasn't going to tell me anything that I already did not know. I realised that death is inevitable and non-negotiable for mortals! And here I am as cheerful as ever!"

Adds Osho, "Contentment includes gratitude: God, Your will is wonderful. How much You have given me... It is attained only by glorious victors; it is worthy of heroes. Mahavir says that only jinas, those who have conquered everything, can attain contentment."

Perhaps another key realisation on the journey to contentment is the futility of desire. Swami Sivananda the founder of the Divine Life Society, Rishikesh, puts his finger on the nail of the problem, "There is no end of craving. Hence contentment alone is the best way to happiness. Therefore, acquire contentment."

I used to once think I would not want to die until I had read all the great books in the world and seen all the wonderful films as well. Now I realise, as Swami

Sivananda says, that there is no end to craving and have started addressing myself to letting go of desires rather than attempting to fulfil them.

Jaya Row, the well-known Vedanta teacher, gives a talk addressed *Desire: Friend or Foe?* In this she observes that the number of desires fulfilled divided by the number of desires harboured will give us the sum total of our happiness or contentment. Which

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means we can either increase the number of desires fulfilled or reduce the number of desires harboured. The less the desires, the higher our happiness quotient.

Rishi Prabhakar, the founder of Sidhi Samadhi Yoga, once gave a telling example to illustrate the point. He asked us to consider the experience of eating a laddoo. The first is delicious and so is the second and perhaps the third. But if we were to continue eating the laddoos we would soon find that far from enjoying them, we would be facing a distinct sense of dis-

comfort and even nausea. If happiness lies in having more and more, would it not be logical to expect that the more the laddoos, the greater the happiness? However, he points out, the reverse is true. What holds true for laddoos holds true for everything in the material realm.

But does contentment breed complacency?

Are we simply tempted to sink into the vast bog of inactivity?

Not at all. Without the restlessness that drives us and stops us from really giving ourselves fully to any project, the quiet stability of contentment provides the perfect anchor to launch us into higher and higher realms of achievement.

Says Francis, "I work to the very best of my capacity. I spend one hour bonding with the client before collecting the cheque. Earlier, I would collect the cheque and run." He adds, "I am getting more and more business because my clients refer me to their friends. Despite reducing my workload by 50 per cent, my income has increased by 25 per cent."

With the true freedom of the contented man, Francis uses his free time to pursue his passion for spiritual and personal growth as well as take frequent breaks to his native Goa. "I work for the first half of the day and the second half I go to Help library (a medical library based in South Mumbai) and attend their courses on alternative healing therapies and other subjects," says Francis. "And again, I work for the first half of the month and participate in retreats for the second half."



Photo: Sanjoli Sharma

Clearly, contentment frees you to pursue your own authentic agendas rather than be consumed with trying to fulfil society's or our family's.

Ankur too has reinvented his life into a unique pattern. His inner contentment has enabled him to drop the need to keep up appearances or project an image. Despite having a 1000-sq ft office, he keeps no staff. Says he, "I clean up my own office and keep an electric kettle in which I brew endless cups of my favourite green tea. My banking is online so I don't need a peon, and there is always the courier service."

With contentment also comes generosity. When you no longer need to hold on, you become willing to give. Jatin Shah and his wife, Pragna, embody this. Says he, "Whoever you come across in life is because of destiny. If God gives you money, why not share with them also instead of keeping it all for your children?" Mr Shah never sells any of his old gadgets even though they are well-maintained. He gives them away to his office or domestic staff. His housemaids are given a bonus of Rs 50,000 when they complete five years of service. Recently, his wife flew both their pretty young maids to Ahmedabad for a day to give them the experience of fly-

ing. "I gave them a thali lunch, took them to the zoo, went for a hot balloon ride, saw the musical fountains and rode the mini train," she smiles.

The girls are denied nothing, be it sweets, chocolates, or pricey alphonso mangoes. Mrs Shah happily takes them to see movies or for a mall crawl. After the photo session, the couple treated us to a wonderful repast of Gujju delicacies and their driver, who has been with them for years, was invited to join us.

Movingly, Mr Shah observes, "We cannot forget that our comfort is obtained by their labour. Without them how much running around we would have to do! Even your own son and daughter cannot give you as much

"We cannot forget that our comfort is obtained by their labour. Without them how much running around we would have to do! They all deserve a greater part of your wealth."

Jatin Shah

as comfort as they do. They all deserve a greater part of your wealth."

What a wonderful point of view. And could it ever have been arrived at without a contented heart?

Francis too believes in reserving 10 per cent of his income for God, which he interprets also to mean auto drivers, taxi drivers and so on. He says, "I once travelled with a taxi driver who was very upset because he had jumped the signal and the traffic policeman had taken Rs 50 from him. I heard him out patiently and when I alighted I gave him Rs 25 in addition to my fare. He was so happy." He adds, "When I am taking an auto and someone asks if they can share it with me, I happily oblige".

Shah too, relaxed though he is, stays alert for new business opportunities. His mind is presently on a New Age health resort he wants to set up somewhere in the outskirts of Mumbai.

When we are contented we are dynamically at rest, motivated to live gloriously but driven by nothing. Contentment gives us the reins to our lives and helps us to forge our own passage through life unhindered or hampered by societal directives or needs. It enables us to lead authentic and deeply fulfilling lives that are a blessing to us and to those around us.

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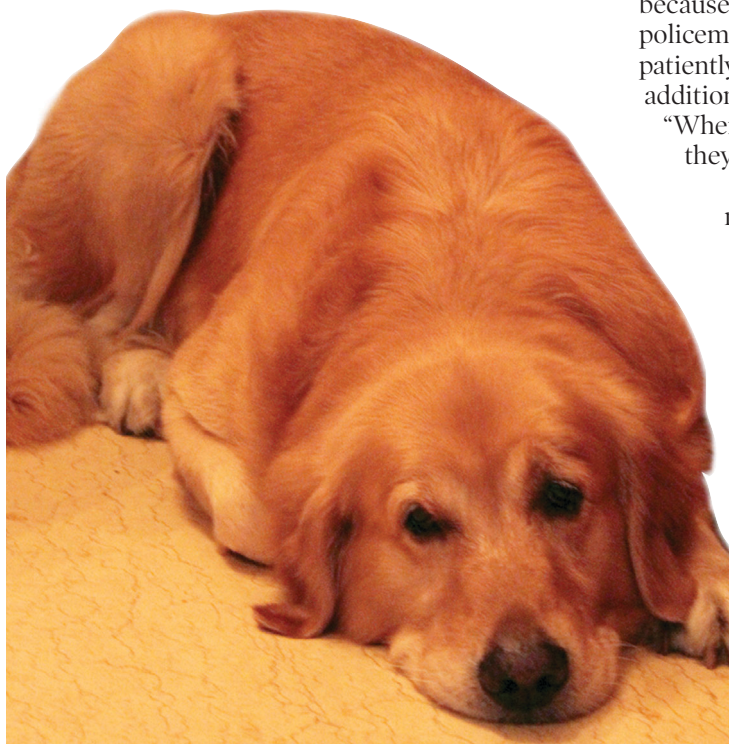


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