

Can an over-analytical control freak find inner peace—or at least get up in the morning—with help from an Indian life coach?

By Megan Feldman — Thursday, Sep 24 2009

I'm on my way to see a Delhi-born meditation guru who once worked for Gandhi and who specializes in the virtues of discipline and peace. Naturally, I'm late.

I slept through two alarms and turned off the third, woke up an hour later, and now I'm speeding west on Highway 183, gulping my coffee, gobbling a banana and nervously glancing at the clock on my dash. 11:08 a.m. If I gun it I'll still be within 10 minutes of my appointment. I dodge a slow-moving semi, dart off the freeway and minutes later screech into a bank tower parking lot.

The office I'm looking for is on the top floor, a penthouse with views in all directions. Still catching my breath, I take the elevator, pad down the carpeted hallway and stop at a door marked Dr. Om Prakash, Ph.D., PC.

A longtime clinical psychologist who at 85 is beginning a new phase of his career—"If you're not engaged, you're dead," he likes to say—Prakash opens the door with a smile and waves me in. He looks at least a decade younger than any octogenarian I've ever seen. With teak-toned skin taut over prominent cheekbones and a fringe of graying hair, he wears a pressed, beige button-up shirt and brown slacks. Behind a pair of delicate silver spectacles, his dark, kind eyes seem to twinkle.

The book shelves are lined with such titles as *Beyond Negative Thinking* and *Hypnosis and Behavioral Modification*, and arrayed alongside family photos of his wife, son and grandchildren are white ceramic statues of Buddha and intricate wooden carvings from India. A silk painting shows a royal procession making its way through the countryside on elephants. In the corner, an enormous brass lamp covered with polished stones casts a soft glow. Prakash, like thousands of psychologists across the country who are switching from therapy to the still-emerging field of personal coaching, or at least adding it to their list of services, is drawn to the trend because it's about guiding healthy people to reach their goals instead of helping emotionally challenged patients heal deep-seated wounds. Coaching can also be more lucrative, generally paying between \$200 and \$350 per hour compared with \$100 per hour in therapy; it's done by phone, and there's no burdensome insurance paperwork. Prakash still sees therapy patients at least two days a week, but he intends to wind down as he gains more coaching clients.

I'd heard about life coaching in recent years, but I'd always wondered what exactly qualifies people to "coach" others on the way they live their lives. Prakash, a man who as a teen worked as a community organizer for Gandhi's Freedom Movement and did prison time for it, has been

married for 45 years and spent decades and multiple graduate degrees developing a unique approach to therapy and coaching that blends Eastern and Western philosophies, struck me as the sort of person who might actually qualify for a title as grandiose as "Life Coach."

Since getting trained and certified through a company called MentorCoach in 2004, most of Prakash's clients have been successful professionals interested in improving their work-life balance or advancing to the next level of experience or pay. He's helped a graphic designer double his income and an insurance agent leave his company to start his own business and taught an investments director how to meditate and relax in order to keep anxiety in check. He teaches all of his patients and clients meditation as part of what he calls the vital "stabilization" phase before delving into emotional issues or ambitious new projects. As a temporary client, I've selected meditation and a reasonable sleep schedule as my focus.



As I sink into the leather chair next to his desk, the stress of my morning rush begins to dissipate. Prakash sits down and folds his hands neatly in his lap. "Activity all the time has a price. The mind becomes so strained it doesn't function well and sleep doesn't provide the rest it needs," he tells me in a soothing, accented voice. "Meditation will help you. It relaxes the mind and body and allows you to respond instead of react, to be at the top of your game."

I tell him I've always wanted to maintain a meditation practice to reduce stress and anxiety, and that the rare times I pulled it off I somehow felt alert and relaxed at once. There was the time at Burning Man—a bizarre and otherworldly festival in the middle of a dry Nevada lake bed—when I sat in a Tibetan Buddhist meditation class but gave up because I was too distracted by the lip-cracking desert heat and a troupe of women in angel costumes gliding by on stilts. Then, last summer, I spent a few days at an ashram in the mountains outside Boulder, Colorado, and did practically nothing but sit in silence and do yoga. The mountain quiet and lack of electronics made it easy to sleep and rise early.

"I did it there," I whine. "I mean, I would get up at 4:45 a.m. for the morning meditation! Here it's impossible."

Prakash laughs. "You don't have to go to Colorado," he says. "You can do it here, but you have to be disciplined. I can teach you, but the discipline has to come from you. It's important that you make that commit-

ment and never feel guilty about taking care of yourself, because no one else can do it for you.”

He asks what time I usually wake up.

I say 9:30 or 10 and immediately feel like a loser.

He raises his eyebrows. “Oh my,” he says.

“But I go to bed late,” I say, justifying myself and the collection of alarms that I keep in various places so that when they jolt me awake I have to walk a few paces to turn them off.

“If you get up after 6 a.m. you’re lethargic,” Prakash says. He asks what time I’d like to get up. I say 8. He recommends 7. We settle on 7:30. He prescribes an 11 p.m. bedtime, which means brushing my teeth at 10 and doing a 15-minute meditation at 10:30. That way, he says, I can rise at 7:30 and do my morning meditation. Since this regimen would eliminate two to three hours normally dedicated to CNN and 30 Rock reruns on Hulu, late-night e-mails and Facebook, not to mention books and the occasional all-nighter to make a deadline, it seems a daunting task.

Prakash himself has adhered to the same rigorous schedule for years, decades even. He says his wife can tell the time by what he’s doing at any given moment. He wakes at 4:45 a.m., drinks an 8-ounce glass of water and makes his bed. At 5 he shaves and listens to the news, then goes over his schedule for the day. By 5:30 he’s on his stationary bike for a 2-mile ride and after that he does yoga for 20 minutes. At 6:40, after his shower, he sits down for his 20-minute meditation and then eats breakfast. He’s at the office by 8. “Routines are boring,” Prakash tells me, “but they’re life-sustaining.”

As part of the routine, he also says to plan the week each Sunday, scheduling every day so I know how everything will get done and when. He suggests spending a few minutes each night updating the next day’s schedule. “That way you won’t always have tasks in your head,” he says.

Now he moves on to meditation and explains that the practice is key to resting an overworked and never-ceasing mind, that it balances the right brain (associated with emotion and creativity) and the left brain (associated with logic and reason) and restores equilibrium to crucial brain chemicals like dopamine and serotonin. “In this culture the left brain—where there’s constant chatter—is dominant,” he says. “The right side just sits there like a bum. Meditation lets the left and right brain work together as one unit.”

He puts on music that sounds like a combination of running water, wind chimes and some sort of gong. “Now close your eyes and be aware of your breath,” he says. “Don’t focus on your breath, just be aware of it.” The difference between focus and awareness, he explains, is akin to staring intently at a lamp versus simply knowing it’s there, which takes much less effort.

I try that, but moments later I’m engaged in deep conversation with myself about the distinction between focus and awareness when I suddenly remember that I’m not supposed to be thinking. This is harder than I remembered.

“Breath is life,” Prakash continues. “Breath controls the mind; the mind controls the body.”

I pretend I’m in yoga class and extend my inhales and exhales. As soon as I relax, though, something about the babbling brook music makes me think about fairies, which makes me think about this childhood jigsaw puzzle I had that depicted a fairy castle with a unicorn in front, which randomly and for reasons unknown makes me think of my childhood imaginary friends, Scott and Chris. Chris wore blue and was very, very good and Scott wore orange and was very, very bad, so whenever I did something like carve my name into my father’s favorite hardwood table, I blamed Scott....

From far away, Prakash’s voice interrupts my reverie and reminds me

that I’ve been lost in a swirling tunnel of thought. “Don’t resist or try to stop the thoughts,” he’s saying.

Right.

“Just notice them and let them pass.”

It seems impossible to keep the thoughts at bay or let them go, but somehow, when I open my eyes a few minutes later, I feel more refreshed than I have since the last time I slept outdoors in Hawaii. I look around the room, and strangely, everything looks...clearer.



Prakash nods in apparent approval. “You’ll get better,” he says. “You’re a high achiever, and I have to tell you, the more you try, the harder it is. Just let it happen.”

Great. After knowing me for less than an hour, he’s figured out that despite my morning slothfulness and disarray, I’m also an analytical control freak who would much rather mold the future to her liking than welcome it with relaxed detachment. Maybe I’m not cut out for this...

As if reading my mind, Prakash flashes me a knowing smile. “Don’t evaluate or assess your meditation, just enjoy it,” he says. “I’m 85, I work 11 hours a day, and I can’t remember the last time I’ve been sick. It’s a gift that will last your whole lifetime, but you have to give it to yourself.”

Michael McGrath had worked as a graphic designer for more than 30 years when the tech bubble burst and took most of his clients. In 2002 he suffered a near total loss, and the year after that he grossed 80 percent less than before the bust. It was during that time that he met Prakash at a networking event and hired the psychologist as his coach. Together on biweekly calls, the two designed a six-month plan to get McGrath’s business back on track.

“He was instrumental in helping me develop a plan and take steps to implement it,” says McGrath, a shy, soft-spoken man who recounts how Prakash helped him do things he’d been unlikely to do before, such as expanding his social circles and improving his ability to speak publicly and give presentations. While McGrath may have been able to rebuild his business without the help of a coach, he thinks Prakash helped him do it faster and, perhaps most important, prompted him to challenge himself and grow in ways he would have resisted if left to his own devices. “You’re accountable to yourself,” he says, “but if you have a meeting with someone every two weeks to tell them what you’ve done and what you haven’t, there’s a lot more motivation.”

What has come to be known as life coaching is rooted in the personal growth movements of the ‘70s and ‘80s, which drew on psychology, philosophy, sports, business and education to create new ways to motivate people and enhance their performance and quality of life. People like W.T. Gallwey, author of *The Inner Game of Tennis*, and Thomas Leonard, who in the early ‘90s started the International Coach Federation, popularized the concept that the opponent within is more powerful than any outside and worked to help people view their lives through new paradigms and inspire them to new actions.

Since then, personal and executive coaches have proliferated. A 2006 study by Pricewaterhouse Coopers and the International Coaching Federation put the worldwide number at 30,000. The ICF—the largest professional coaching association and certification organization but far from the only one—has nearly 15,000 members, up from just 2,000 a decade ago.

Of the coaches working to help people change careers, up their income or repair damaged relationships, many are mental health profession-

als who have either switched completely to coaching or offer it along with therapy. It's difficult to know how many psychologists in the United States fall into that category, but according to a January Harvard Business Review survey that focused on 140 coaches, 20 percent said they were trained as psychologists. So, how does coaching differ from therapy? "Coaching is forward-moving and action-oriented. It's really looking at what the client wants for the future and helping them chart a path to get there," says Diane Brennan, a coach and former health care executive who last year served as president of the ICF. "Issues from the past may come up, but we don't look at them in depth; we notice it and create a new way to move on." Prakash says that while in therapy, the goal of a line of questioning is generally to determine which advice to dispense, as a coach he instead "asks questions that lead people to their own answers."

Patrick Williams, a psychologist-turned-coach who founded the Institute for Life Coach Training and wrote a book called *Therapist as Life Coach*, puts it this way: "Coaching is about designing your future, not getting over your past. Not everyone is self-motivated. Look at all of the great athletes and musicians; they all had coaches to hold their feet to the fire." Yet he also acknowledges that coaching and therapy can sometimes overlap, and one advantage of a psychologist coach is the ability to spot mental health issues that require therapy or counseling.

To David Ballard, a psychologist on staff with the American Psychological Association, psychologists have a more general advantage, as well. "Psychologists are really the experts in human behavior, and coaching—which is about improving people's performance and functioning—is all about behavior and behavioral change," he says.

One common criticism of coaching is that unlike more established professions like psychology, there is no single, independent regulatory body to oversee coaches or ensure they have a unified approach or code of ethics (there are some 300 coach training organizations and more than 50 credentialing systems). "You have people from a variety of backgrounds and certifications," Ballard says, "and anyone can call themselves a coach, so it's hard to know what you're getting." Both Williams and ICF's Brennan recommend consumers interview prospective coaches about their experience and request to talk to former clients. Many clients find their coaches through word of mouth.

David McBee, a managing director of investments at Wells Fargo Advisers (formerly Wachovia), came to know Prakash because he served as the psychologist's financial adviser in the late '90s. McBee, 37, quickly took a liking to the elderly psychologist, and the two grew close. When Prakash told him he was offering business coaching, McBee opted to try it, eventually recommending the coach to his partner and associates, as well. He says Prakash's input helped him to deal with employees' sometimes clashing communication styles and develop younger associates' strengths (he recommended, for example, that McBee tap a younger, more organized man to run their weekly team meetings, and McBee says they now run more smoothly). "He doesn't know anything about stocks and bonds," McBee says, "but he knows how people interact and how to make what we do more efficient and productive."

McBee, who at one point suffered from anxiety, found Prakash's meditation lessons particularly useful. "It's difficult in the investment world when the stock markets are always open and there's always a fire to put out, but you realize you can close your door and take five minutes to recharge," he says. "But you're not necessarily going to do that unless someone's on you once a month to say, 'OK, are you doing it?'"

Prakash learned to meditate during the most chaotic time of his life. It was the '40s in Delhi, India, and he was an ambitious young physics student determined to become an engineer and set a good example for

his five younger siblings. As the eldest of six children born to a telegraph operator and a homemaker, he made sure his sisters and brothers did their homework, told them education was the only way to a successful life and chastised them when they listened to popular radio shows he claimed would "pollute their minds" (all five would go on to earn graduate degrees).

Yet in the final years of World War II, as Mohandas Gandhi rallied the country against British rule and was hauled off to prison amid a brutal government crackdown, Prakash's sense of justice was ignited. He put his studies on hold to join the Free India movement. Volunteering as a door-to-door organizer, he talked with people about how the fruits of independence would be worth the struggle and spread Gandhi's message of Hindu-Muslim unity in an effort to quell simmering resentments between the two groups.

Gandhi would come quarterly to meet with the area's organizers. While Prakash never had a one-on-one conversation with the revered leader, he once sat directly across from the little ancient-looking man and marveled at the profound calm that surrounded him, no matter how stressful the situation. As the movement's ardor grew and the rulers' opposition solidified, police raids became commonplace. One night a group of officers stormed into Prakash's family home looking for him. He was gone by the time they reached his room, and when they noticed his still-warm empty bed, Prakash's mother insisted that a different son had been sleeping there. From then on, Prakash lived as a renegade, staying in a different place each night, taking few belongings with him and steering clear of the security forces.

At one point, an older Hindu organizer observed that Prakash, just 21 or 22 at the time, looked haggard. He taught the young man a traditional meditation and told him to do it whenever he could. While Prakash had been raised Hindu by his father, he'd never practiced meditation. Once he learned, he found it to be incredibly useful, especially when he'd slept little or barely had time to eat a decent meal.



By the spring of 1947, Prakash was a central organizer for a neighborhood in Old Delhi. One day, he led a procession through the streets and then spoke on a raised platform while throngs of people shouted slogans and tossed garlands over his neck. Shakti Walia, one of his younger brothers and a decade his junior, darted through the crowd to watch Prakash up close. As his speech was winding down, a police van appeared and a clutch of officers emerged to drag

Prakash off the stage and push him into the vehicle. Shakti—scarcely an adolescent—fell in with a group who chased the van, praising Prakash and cursing the police as he was taken to jail.

While his family feared prison would be harsh based on rumors of deprivation and torture, Prakash would later call the six months he spent in jail "a blessing in disguise." It was there, amid the steady routine of sleep and meals, reading and meditating, exercising and writing (he jotted his thoughts onto envelopes), that he restored his energy and learned how to take care of himself. That proved useful when after he was released and independence was granted in August 1947, the country convulsed with sectarian strife and the reality that Gandhi's commitment to peace had failed to prevent Hindus and Muslims from killing one another. When the Mahatma was assassinated by a Hindu extremist the following year, Prakash was devastated. Even now, more than 60 years later, his eyes well when he talks about Gandhi's death. Yet those tumultuous years provided him with a crucial set of tools: meditation, determination and the realization that he had both a gift for and a love of counseling people. He ditched his engineering ambitions and opted to become a psychologist.

Prakash finished his physics degree and worked as a high school teacher and counselor for eight years while earning his masters in psychology. Once enrolled in a doctoral program at the University of Delhi, a mentor

who'd just returned from the University of Minnesota told him that if he wanted to be a worthwhile psychologist, he should go to the United States. A wealthy student he'd counseled gave him 5,000 rupees to fund his trip, and soon he was on a merchant ship to France and a plane to Chicago. When he arrived at the University of Minnesota in 1960, he got a job as a bus boy at the cafeteria and worked his way through a second master's degree. A year later he met his wife, an American, and they moved to Montana, where Prakash earned his doctorate in clinical psychology and learned how to use hypnosis to heal trauma and modify destructive behavior. He later moved to Texas to serve as a therapy director at North Texas State Hospital and opened a private practice.

Over the decades of studying, starting a family and growing a business, Prakash stopped meditating. The first thing that nudged him back toward the practice was an epiphany he had while on a walk. He looked up at the moon and wondered, "How did it get to be so perfect?" The answer was obvious: It followed a strict routine. Everything that blossoms in nature follows a specific rhythm, he realized, and human beings are no different. He began to be more diligent about his study habits, following the same regimen week in and week out, and his grades and mood improved. Next, he met a transcendental meditation teacher and learned the technique (unlike the Hindu tradition he'd done before, this one was secular and didn't involve a mantra). He has practiced sitting in silence for 20 minutes in the morning and 20 minutes in the evening ever since.

Today, more than 30 years later, he acknowledges the constant difficulty of maintaining a schedule, keeping your word and honoring yourself. "You get busy and forget," he says. "Habits are hard to break. But if habits are stubborn, you have to be stubborn too. Keeping good mental health is hard work."

It's 10:20 on a Sunday night, and I'm on the phone. My unemployed friend in Los Angeles has applied to more than 100 sales jobs in two months, she tells me, her dog has cancer, and she's seriously considering going to the public assistance office to see if she qualifies for food stamps. I look at the clock and think about something Dr. Prakash said: "Never feel guilty about taking care of yourself. No one else can do it for you." Am I seriously going to hang up on her?

10:35: My friend is still complaining. I feel bad, but finally I interrupt and say I have to go to bed. I'm already 38 minutes late for brushing my teeth. Who knew taking good care of myself could be so stressful? I feel like I'm back at band camp, rushing to heed my counselors' "lights out" orders and scheming about ways to escape the militant violin instructor who seemed to relish rapping on children's fingers when they strayed.

11:30: I'm starting my meditation 45 minutes late. I sit down cross-legged, put on some crashing wave music and close my eyes. Despite the soothing sound, the jarring chords of Alanis Morissette's "Bitch" suddenly blare in my head. I hate that song! Where did it come from? I take a deep breath and notice the air going in and out of my lungs. Soon, I feel like I'm floating in a big, warm sea. There's no thought, no noise, just blissful nothingness, the way I imagine it would feel to be a jellyfish suspended in deep, dark water. Too soon, my mind comes back to life with images from a party the night before and a reminder that I need to return a phone call. Longing to return to jellyfish mode, I glance at the clock and see it's nearly midnight—time for bed.

8 a.m.: My alarm sounds and I rise, walk to the counter and turn it off. I actually feel pretty rested. Even so, habit, not discipline, is at the helm this morning. My feet carry me back to bed—just for a minute, I think—

and by the time I wake it's nearly 10. Cursing, I dash out to the kitchen to make coffee and realize I barely have time to shower, let alone meditate. I feel lethargic most of the day, and no amount of caffeine seems to make a difference.

I arrive for my next meeting with Prakash feeling like a D student who ditched class to make out with the class coke dealer. "So, how is your meditation going?" he asks. When I tell him about the uphill battle to go to bed on time and the inescapable thoughts that make it impossible to achieve nothingness, he smiles. "Don't beat yourself up," he says. "I've struggled with this all my life. It's not easy. If you have a good one, don't get too happy because you'll have a bad one. If you have a bad one, don't worry, because you'll have a good one." He also points out that it's impossible to fully stop thoughts. The point is merely to slow them down. He likens the mind to an ocean and thoughts to bubbles that rise from the bottom. The goal, he says, is to watch the bubbles ascend and over time, to have fewer rise. "Don't try too hard," he says. "Just let it happen."

That night I manage to be ready for bed and sitting in silence by 10:30 p.m. After a flurry of thoughts—a story to finish, weekend plans, a political argument I had earlier that week—I settle into my breath. The periods of blissful nothingness seem to last a bit longer each time. It feels like pushing through layers of dark organza curtains to sit, finally, at the center of the earth's core—being nowhere and everywhere at once. Each time I arrive at that peaceful place, I eventually get yanked back by a desire to make it last longer, or by the thought that I don't want the next thought to come, which of course is itself a thought. I manage to stick to the routine for an entire week. One morning, I'm shocked to awake naturally,

before my alarm, at 7:30 a.m. Feeling more clearheaded and awake than anytime I can remember, I go for a run in the rain and make French toast before work. On days like that, I notice tasks that usually take an hour take half that long and I seem to have an abundance of time. Inevitably though, after a stretch of early nights and mornings coupled with regular meditation, I have a birthday party, a late night out or trip to a different time zone, and suddenly I'm back where I started.

On my last visit with Prakash, he's in a particularly cheerful mood. He has just seen a new coaching client, a software engineer who's struggling to raise three children alone after his wife became addicted to drugs. In their first session, Prakash says, he asked questions that prompted the man to come up with a new approach to a challenge with one of his sons.

When he asks me how my practice is going and I share the accomplishments and the frustrations, particularly the challenge of making time, he asks if I'd like to learn a simple three-minute meditation. Yes, I say, of course.

As with everything he teaches, there is both a scientific and cultural context. "When the human body is conceived, the first part of the body to develop is the base of the spine, and it becomes the medulla oblongata, which is the part in between your eyebrows," he says. "That's the part that holds the awareness of who you are, that you're more than just a body. That's why in India, people put marks there to distinguish it. Christians call it the Christ consciousness center and some cultures call it the Third Eye."

He tells me to breathe deeply, imagining cool air going into that spot on my forehead. When three minutes later he tells me to open my eyes, I feel like I've been at a spa for hours. He grins. "See," he says, "that was just three minutes! Now you don't have any excuses!"

