

THE WAY
OF THE
MONK

*How to Find Purpose,
Balance, and Lasting
Happiness*

GAUR GOPAL DAS

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FORGETTING THE KEYS

As you become successful,
do not forget the keys to happiness.

Although I grew up in Pune, my heart lies in a simple ashram, paradoxically situated amidst the skyline of downtown Mumbai. I have lived there as a monk for twenty-two years, during which time I have not only been studying ancient eastern wisdom for my enrichment, but also learning how to share its practical application with the world. People who attend my lectures regularly invite me to have lunch at their homes but, to their disappointment, I usually decline. As a monk, I have to be cautious of overindulgence; it is essential to stay regulated in our habits. But after months of pleading, I hesitantly accepted an invitation to go to Mr. and Mrs. Iyer's home, a decision that would deepen my understanding of happiness in the long run.

Mumbai is notoriously humid in mid-May. It's the type of sticky humidity in which your sweat causes your shirt to stick to your back. But one only felt like that at sea level, not in the cloud-bound apartment of Hariprasad and Lalita Iyer situated in a high-rise in elegant Worli. This area of Mumbai is what Fifth Avenue is to New York, or Park Lane is to London. Indeed, if there were a version of the board game Monopoly for Mumbai, you would be paying a hefty price if you landed on Worli's distinguished towers: Palais Royale or Omkar 1973. And here I was, a monk with hardly a rupee to my name, enjoying the cooling breeze from the Arabian Sea on the twenty-eighth-floor home of my gracious hosts.

The lunch started with me getting confused. I had never eaten sambar solely with a spoon, let alone three. They sat me at the head of their rich oak dining table, which overlooked the sea. A fragile, glittering centerpiece on the table illuminated the room as it shone in the midday sun. The table was set only for me—a weighty gold leaf-shaped plate with a satin napkin folded into a swan on it and cutlery of varying shapes and sizes around the plate—the three spoons lay in front of me, two knives to my right, and four forks to my left. Four forks! I wasn't sure if we had four in our entire ashram as nearly everyone just uses their five fingers. I looked at Mr. Iyer slightly uneasily and begged him and his wife to join me for lunch, not only to guide me through the maze of cutlery but to also give me company. It's no fun eating alone. Mr. Iyer wanted to serve me lunch personally, but on my persuasion, he joined in. His wife, however, fought the offer and insisted that she would personally serve us both

hot dosas and other preparations created by the army of chefs in their bustling kitchen.

And so—armed with a dessert knife in one hand and a salad fork in the other—I attempted to cut the dosa. It was clear this was an abnormal situation for me. Hariprasad smiled warmly at me, rolled up his sleeves, and started eating with his hands, signaling to me that it was okay to do the same. I was delighted. I have always believed that food tastes better when you eat with your hands. Although he was wealthy, Hariprasad didn't seem to have an air of arrogance around him.

“How are you so humble around so much prestige?” I asked him.

“I don't think I'm humble, but any humility you think I might have is due to my simple South Indian parents who raised me with so much love,” he replied.

Although there were many around his plate today, Hariprasad wasn't born with a silver spoon in his mouth. “I grew up in a small village outside Chennai . . .” he began as he dipped his dosa in the sambar. Lalita came in with another round of dosas and sat momentarily, listening to her husband with interest. “My father worked in a textile factory,” Hariprasad continued. “His wages supported our family, and the factory gave us free cotton clothes that were passed down from my elder brothers and sisters. I'm the youngest, so most of my clothes had my brothers' names on the label. My father worked very hard for us.”

“But look at your clothes now! You can only afford them because you're the cleverest out of all your siblings,” Lalita interjected as she served him another hot dosa. They lovingly smiled at each other.

“What about your mother?” I asked.

“My mother stayed at home with us. She picked us up from school, cooked all our meals, and was our counselor when times were hard. Her hair was always tightly tied in a bun, but her arms were always open for a hug. She made our education her top priority because she wanted us to live a better life.”

“Well, it seems like you’re living it now,” I said.

Hariprasad took no notice of my comment and continued, “I remember the stress of both getting into IIT Bombay and then performing well there. It was worth it though because the Harvard MBA program accepted me immediately, given that I secured a gold medal at IIT.”

“Are you talking about Harvard?” Lalita asked, while serving me two scoops of kulfi despite my protests. “That’s where we first met,” she told me. “I was completing my medical studies there when we ran into each other at the Harvard India Student Group, and it was love at first sight. But I didn’t meet the South Indian Hariprasad then, I met ‘Harry,’ as his American friends called him.”

“Well, I’ll call him Harry from now on!” I laughed.

As lunch came to a close, Harry spoke of the work he does as the director of a multinational consulting firm. Harry’s success at Harvard gave him a boost—at age thirty-five, he was already one of the youngest directors in the company’s history and he was responsible for the firm’s Asia operations.

“We both are trying to help as many people as possible before we think about children. We want to empower people to be successful,” Harry said, holding his wife’s hand.

I was pleasantly surprised at how cultured and courteous this couple was. Lalita's world-class sambar also symbolized the warmth and love between them.

"Thank you for a wonderful lunch!" I said to them, signaling that I had to leave. "I would love to stay longer, but we have meetings at the ashram in an hour. Can you call me a cab?" I requested.

"A cab!" Harry exclaimed as if offended. "Please let me drop you back. The ashram is only thirty minutes away."

I thanked Lalita for the delicious meal. She thanked me back with a smile, but I noticed that she was holding her stomach as though she was not feeling well.

I thought nothing of it and neither did Harry. We rushed to the elevator, which transported us from the clouds into the underground garage in moments.

Harry frisked himself in a panic as the elevator doors opened. It was the same expression one has when they cannot feel their phone in their pocket. "I've forgotten my keys," he said, as he vigorously pressed the button for the elevator to take him back to the twenty-eighth floor. "I'll be right back." He left me in what seemed like a deserted parking garage.

As we hurried to his car, I expressed how deeply impressed I was that a couple of their stature, wealth, and influence was reconnecting with their spiritual roots again.

"Can I tell you a story that I think you'll appreciate?"

Harry nodded as we both settled in for our short journey across town. He turned on the passenger light and gazed at me intently as I began speaking.

"Going on a holiday with your friends is one of the best experiences you can have. Before I became a monk, three

of my close friends from university in Pune and I decided to take a trip to New Delhi together. We had booked a hotel but little did we realize that our room was on the eighteenth floor of a high-rise building,” I said, watching Harry reverse the car from his parking spot. “After we dropped our bags off, we decided to explore the city by auto rickshaw. We started at Red Fort, ate lunch at Chandni Chowk, meditated at the Lotus Temple, and then rested on the lawns around India Gate. It had been a good day. Tired and slightly hungry, we decided to return to our hotel and order room service. We arrived at the hotel just after sunset, to the news that the elevator had broken down.”

Harry gasped. “What did you do?”

“We were young, so we decided to walk up all the way to our room.

“We were exhausted by the end of it, but as the saying goes, time flies when you’re having fun. Speaking and laughing with friends makes everything easier.”

“I agree,” he said, nodding. “What did you all talk about?”

“Well, we told jokes and stories, made each other laugh, teased each other. We moved from floor to floor with no complaints whatsoever. On the fifteenth floor, we realized that one of our slightly chubby friends wasn’t saying much. ‘Are you okay?’ I asked. ‘I’m fine,’ he said bluntly. We all have that one friend who is terrible at telling funny stories. He was that guy.”

“All my friends are funny!” Harry exclaimed.

“Well, you’re probably the unfunny one then,” I teased. “So after a few minutes of persuasion, we convinced this friend of ours to tell us a story. He stuttered at first, but

then blurted out, ‘My funny story is that I’ve forgotten the keys to our room in the rickshaw.’ Our faces dropped. We had just learned about the principle of *ahimsa*, or nonviolence, at the Lotus Temple, but in that situation, ahimsa was impossible to practice! Using all our power of restraint, we started our silent journey back down to the reception, praying that the hotel had some spare keys.”

Harry burst out laughing. “I can imagine the anguish on your face when you found out he didn’t have the key.”

I nodded. “However, only years later did I understand the lesson behind this story. I thought of it again today when you forgot your car keys. Harry, you have made incredible progress in life. People only dream of the kind of success you have achieved. From studying at prestigious institutions around the world to having a loving partner, living on the top floor of a skyscraper, having a seven-figure salary and a professional reputation years ahead of your age, you have come a long way. However, I am so glad that you haven’t forgotten the keys to your happiness as you have moved up on the ladder of success. As a society, it’s all too easy to focus on our external achievements and forget to assess whether we are happy with the state of our life. I’m relieved that you haven’t neglected that aspect of your life.”

“I suppose so . . .” Harry remarked uneasily. He wasn’t smiling any more. I sensed the change of tone in his voice. An awkward silence fell upon us as we left the underground parking.

There was something he wanted to say, but I didn’t know what.

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SEEING BEYOND THE OBVIOUS

Behind the smiles, everyone is going through personal struggles we know nothing about.

Have you ever walked into a room where two people have argued? You can immediately sense the stale energy in the room; the silence between them can be deafening. Miscommunication can spark similar tension. When Harry fell silent I found myself wondering: Had I said something wrong? Had I offended him? Insulting someone who has hosted you at their home is one of the most regrettable things one can do. Two minutes passed before I decided to break the deadlock.

“So where did you buy this car?” I asked, trying to change the subject to something more palatable.

Harry seemed to appreciate that I was trying to find common ground and followed suit. He still didn't seem to feel comfortable sharing with me whatever it was he

was thinking. “Well, I needed to buy a car after I sold the Mercedes. My wife and I were taking cabs everywhere for the first few weeks. One day when we were visiting some friends in Juhu, the cab stopped at a traffic light directly outside the Lexus showroom. That was when I saw her—sparkling from within the polished glass. It was love at first sight!” He cheered up at that memory.

“This car seems like your prized possession,” I replied.

He nodded repeatedly. “There are not many things in the world that can make you happier than a car like this.” Harry slammed the brakes, our seat belts tightened, and I saw him firmly gripping the steering wheel. We came to a sudden halt. Carried away by his thoughts, he had not realized that the traffic had built up ahead. “Sorry about that, I wonder what the problem is,” he said apologetically, peering ahead.

“No problem,” I replied. “Are you okay?” I asked, a little startled.

Harry gazed into the distance, trying to see the root of the problem, but had no luck. “Yes, I am okay, but I’m surprised. There is never traffic here!” he said, sounding disappointed.

Although things have improved to some extent, Mumbai is still known as India’s “crash capital.” It has roughly the same number of cars as London, but more than four times the number of road fatalities. Cars can sometimes be reckless as they zip past red lights and try everything to zigzag through dense traffic jams.

However, for the moment we were trapped in his Lexus and not going anywhere. I messaged one of my colleagues that I would be late for the meeting. “We’re stuck!”

I uttered, trying my best to be heard over the din of cars consistently honking with no results.

“Even in my new car, I’m stuck. It doesn’t matter how fast it can go. I’m stuck!” Harry’s voice choked up. “Why do I feel so STUCK?” he screamed as he hit the steering wheel of his prized possession. “Is it the fault of the people in the cars ahead of me? They caused the traffic? Is it that they didn’t build the roads wide enough? I didn’t build the roads. Or is it my fault?” His voice trembled. “Did I buy the wrong car? Should I have bought a motorbike? Is it too late to buy a motorbike?” I sensed that something was going on in his life that he wasn’t telling me about. I put my hand on his shoulder. His head dropped, and he placed his hands in his lap. His lip quivered, and he looked away from me, out of the window. In the reflection of the driver’s side window, I saw a few lonely tears leave his sorrowful eyes. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I don’t know what came over me.”

“Don’t be sorry. We can all feel stuck at times. Why do you feel stuck?” I asked empathetically.

“I’m sure you don’t have time for all of this.”

“I have all the time in the world for you. Firstly because we’re going to be stuck here for a long time, and secondly because you have fed me the best sambar I’ve ever tasted in my life!”

He chuckled as he dried his eyes with his silk handkerchief. He knew I was trying to lighten his mood. When we comfort someone, it is easy to fall into their sorrowful energy, which can perpetuate their suffering. It’s important that we bring positive, nonjudgmental energy into these conversations.