

# THE HINDU

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## Magazine

### A retreat for a new beginning

To those caught in today's rat race, one of the major killers is stress and its related problems. The way to 'wellness', in such a situation requires a reappraisal of attitudes and mindsets. S. RAMACHANDER writes of a retreat that helps one pause and take stock.



**ACME's leafy green campus ... conducive to a break from routine.**

IN the hurly-burly of today's executive life, it is not surprising that few people can take time off "to stand and stare". And yet one only has to listen carefully to doctors, executives and professionals on the sick list to appreciate that one of the real killers today is stress and its related ailments — from blood pressure or diabetes to complications of the kidney and heart. Yet the sources of discomfort go deeper than excess weight or wanting to become more energetic and healthy, which any health club or gym can promise you. The 'wellness' movement asks for a deeper commitment, one that probes further into our attitudes to living, food, rest, exercise and, of course, into our minds. It demands of us an honest reappraisal of the career oriented, eternally ambition-driven, "mindset" itself.

Realising this fact a group of senior executives have started setting some time apart to gather themselves and be refreshed mentally and physically at what we call the "Niyati" retreat.

A retreat is a pause in the relentless forward thrust, a break from the monotony — to go away and stop the routine — not only of outward existence but also, as J. Krishnamurti says, "the routine which the mind establishes for its own safety and convenience".

In that silence we bring our minds and bodies closer into an alignment and stop this eternal churning of thoughts and habit-driven responses.

As the daily work routine is broken, say on a vacation or over a weekend, we are used to it being replaced by another routine, typically 'having fun and celebrating' — in the company of friends and to the accompaniment of more movement and noise, be it at a disco or by the sea or on the road. Rarely do we relax body, mind and spirit to let nature heal and correct the imbalances of a maddeningly robotic modern urban life.

At the leafy green campus of the Academy for Management Excellence (ACME) in Chennai, over the past couple of years a small group has met, inspired by the vision of some of us trainers and counsellors including Raghu Ananthanarayanan of Chennai and Bernard Kilroy of United Kingdom, both of whom share

an eclectic and non-denominational approach to things that I too find very attractive.

As one of the participants in the two-day retreat said, it helps some to take stock of one's life, see the journey of life in perspective, sharing it with friends in an unthreatening atmosphere — and looking at how to make a new beginning. For some, it has helped to evolve a radical course correction in life. While there are a lot of opportunities for quiet reflection, meditation, narrating one's life stories and listening to those of others, this is by no means any religious cult or group. It is totally free of traditional "religion" but steeped in a spirit of enquiry where readings from various philosophers have their place. One could be a parable from a Western tradition and another a Sufi tale and a third a dialogue of J. Krishnamurti with David Bohm or a few pages from Aldous Huxley's metaphysical novel, **Island**.

Niyati means taking time off to rediscover the sense of unfolding within and through us. It is a new experiment by the business school, which has included yoga, theatre, and creativity exercises in its regular MBA curriculum as well. There is a place for physical relaxation — and breathing exercises are an integral part of a holistic process, which is also meant to give an opportunity to revisit deeply felt personal values and dreams. The school which goes by the twin names of Institute for Financial Management and Research (IFMR) and ACME had been carefully planning this experiment for a year in order to meet a latent and felt need before it was inaugurated in 2001 over the Republic day weekend. Normally the euphoria of even an experiential learning course wears off as managers return to reality, so to speak, and the unrelenting pursuit of the clock takes over. In this case, the participants have voluntarily got together for shorter sessions on Saturdays during the months that followed, and a second weekend early in 2002. This has meant an opportunity for company executives, who would normally attend courses at the campus on management subjects, to be released from their pressures and consider how they can fully express their personal values in their work and their personal relationships. The feedback fully justifies the initiative.

The feedback sheets tell of the `refreshment' and `stimulation' at a `crossroads in my life'. Says Bernard, "Although we have wisely avoided any link with a specific faith, it has been for the participants a kind of secular spirituality. Modern business can be relentless in its demands on the individual and their family, especially when the managers impose upon themselves the need to achieve more and more". Another participant wrote how he had needed to touch his inner self for the first time — "... only bereavement touched me in this way before now".

#### Ideal ambience:

The ambience at ACME is ideal for being at ease, the workrooms spacious and air-conditioned and the vegetarian diet is light, with plenty of vegetables and fruit. One room is reserved for meditation. Participants are enjoined to leave their mobile phones and brief cases behind, along with their outside `lives'. From the outset, they are encouraged to use their `right brains, introductions to each other are not shared in the conventional way but through the pictorial metaphors and symbols to embody their dream and their vision.

As a result, a compact of complete trust between all the participants develops quickly and it is hardly necessary to remind everyone that `what goes on here stays here'. Nor does that mean that the atmosphere is tense or contrived. If there are the occasions when nerve ends are touched no one is forced or manipulated into sharing more than they care to, and the laughter of relaxed play is a much more common sign of the atmosphere.

#### The presenting past:

Each session starts and finishes with everyone sitting in a circle; and there is no teacher and taught, no guru, nor any `chalk and talk'. After starting the new day with breathing and relaxation routines, ways are suggested for everyone on their own to explore their past, again using pictures and symbols on large sheets of paper to recall key events in the landscape of their `life journey'.

Why? Because, like a hologram of time, the past is ever present, and inevitably there is unfinished business, which merits being re-visited with the help of the right brain in order to access intuition, emotions and the subconscious.



### **At the Niyati retreat**

The scene is now set for engaging more deeply with the inner self, not through the conventional devices of management psychology but the age-old technique of story telling. Each listens to the first half of a typical childhood fairy-tale until we decide which kind of the four princes we identify with, and therefore with which of the life challenges we are engaging. Then we explore how we can complete that prince's story, that prince's quest and challenge. In that composition, we reveal ourselves, confront our weaknesses, and appreciate the gifts with which we have been endowed.

To some, this recalls the heroes of the Mahabarata and to others, modern personality guidance and the understanding of organisational cultures, an integral part of leadership development.

#### **Confronting fear:**

All change raises the prospect of the unknown. After supper a video of J. Krishnamurti in conversation echoes the wisdom of his counsel to look at "fear", learn to stay with it and resolve it rather than run away from it. A passage is read out and a lively, thoughtful discussion follows. On the last morning before departure, individual participants slowly and deliberately bring to the surface their right brain journey. Monday morning means going back to the left-brain of practicality, numbers, logic and rational thinking.

So, each participant journeys through the different 'rooms' of their lives (health, family work... using different rooms of the campus building to consider what their main challenges and options are.

Finally, each one in turn is invited to make a covenant with the group assembled in a circle, selecting that aspect which needs attention or affirmation. Much hugging follows, with pleas for this *sangha* to meet again soon!

The quality and style of the two facilitators has played a key part in making "Niyati" what it is. Bernard Kilroy, is an Oxford-educated, U.K.-based management consultant, with 'a deep respect for the wisdom of the East' and Raghu Ananthanarayanan is an Engineering graduate now much in demand for his Yoga inspired consultancy work in 'soft' development skills in large organisations.

*This article is based substantially on notes provided by Bernard Kilroy and incorporates my experience of Niyati too.*