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THE ARTIST OF EXCELLENCE**



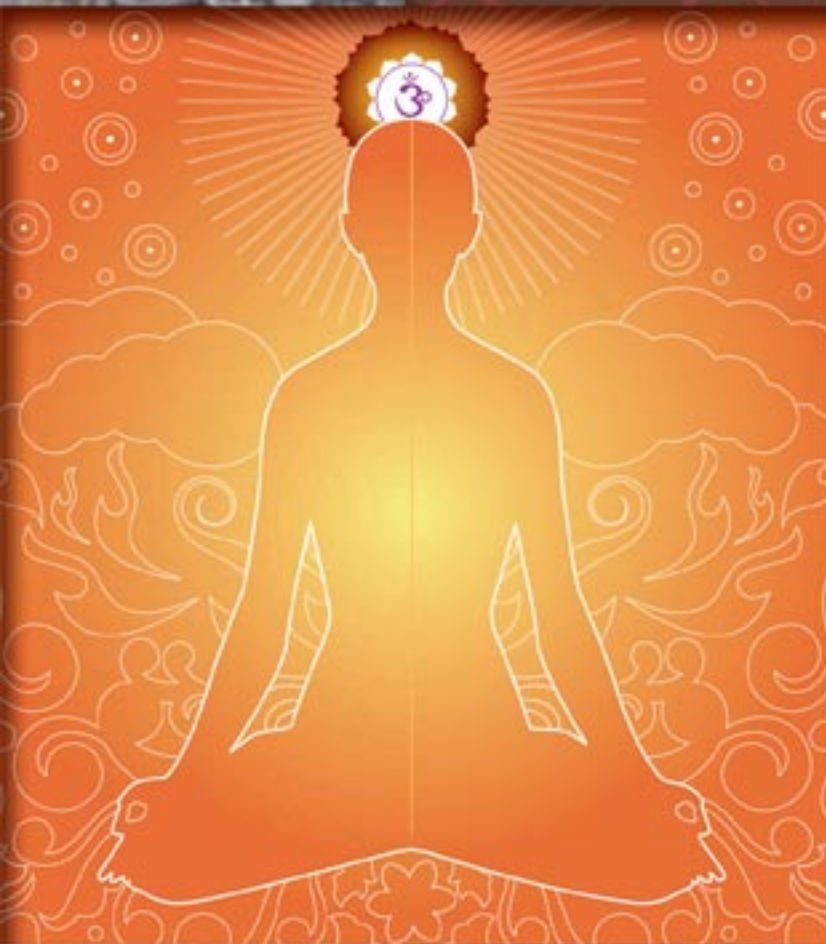
YOUNG AND SPIRITUAL



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WHEN MANY OF US MOVED TO THE “MATERIAL” WEST FROM THE “SPIRITUAL” EAST IN THE SEVENTIES AND EIGHTIES, THE LAST THING WE HAD ON OUR MINDS WAS TO PURSUE A LIFE DOMINATED BY SPIRITUAL ASPIRATIONS. TODAY NOT ONLY IS THE FIRST GENERATION OF INDIAN-AMERICANS MORE ENGAGED IN RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL QUESTS, BUT MORE SURPRISINGLY, IT IS MANY IN THE FOLLOWING GENERATIONS THAT ARE OFTEN GIVING UP LUCRATIVE CORPORATE CAREERS AND LIVES OF MATERIAL COMFORTS IN SEARCH OF INNER PEACE AND FULFILLMENT THROUGH SPIRITUAL PURSUITS.

BY LAVINA MELWANI



Would you be willing to give up your life, your family, and even the name you were born with? Would you renounce career, marriage, and parenthood forever? How about personal passions and goals? Could you live with the prospect of never seeing your father and mother again?

Bhavesh Choksi, 27, has done exactly that.

Turning his back on what most people fight tooth and nail for, Bhavesh, forsaking it all, has taken *diksha* (monastic vows), and is on his way to becoming a *swami* in the BAPS Swaminarayan organization. The swamis

in this socio-spiritual Hindu organization are bound by a strict code of conduct. They live Spartan lives, giving up even the smallest of luxuries. But most importantly, they are required to break all ties with their past lives and completely dedicate themselves to the order of the faith and the organization.

The fact that Bhavesh willingly and purposefully chose this path may seem a bit extreme to those of us still embroiled in the trappings of the material world. And yet he is hardly a rarity. A growing number of Indian-Americans whose lives are full of promise and possibilities in the sphere of their choice are nevertheless choosing to dedicate themselves to spiritual pursuits. And unlike those in traditional India who sought recourse in the ashram to escape a life of hurt or failure, many of these bright youngsters are propelled not primarily by suffering or setbacks but by an inner calling.

Indeed, Bhavesh is following his dream, walking into a joyous light that most of us cannot even comprehend. His exposure to the Swaminarayan faith began when he enrolled in the children's group at the Swaminarayan temple in Edison when he was nine years old. At a time when most kids still think of nothing but sports and video games, Bhavesh, who loved playing basketball, was nevertheless questioning the world around him. "I remember him telling me that when he was in seventh grade, he went out to play one evening, and gazing up into the sky, questioned this world and the purpose of life," recalls his father Bipin Choksi. "He felt that there must be a deeper meaning to this life, and that all things in this world are temporary. It was Bhavesh's wish since childhood to work towards his own *moksha* (liberation) and also to serve society in the capacity of a *sadhu*."

Pramukh Swami, the spiritual head of BAPS, however, insisted Bhavesh attend college first. Only after he graduated from Boston University, he got permission to pursue his lifelong quest of becoming a monk in their tradition. Bipin recalls that time of conflict—the agony of losing a child. "We knew if he became a Swaminarayan *sadhu* that we would have no contact with him on a personal level. We did not know how we would handle it emotionally," admits Bipin. However, when he and Bhavesh met Pramukh Swami for this momentous transition, Bhavesh requested the Swami to bless his

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JOURNEY TO THE MOON WITHIN

"My mom still recalls the day she came to my first-grade class wearing a sari. I was shocked because I had never seen her wearing Indian clothes," says Sheela Rajdev. "When I look back, I don't think I realized I was Indian or what it meant."

Like many Indian children who grew up in the American hinterland, she had few markers of Hindu cultural or spiritual life. Her father was an engineer at BASF and mother was a medical director at Henry Ford in Farmington Hills, Mich. "We were not oriented towards any particular religion, no lamps lit at home or God's pictures," she says. "I went to the temple and even a church a few times but only for the day camps or math classes."

Later in life her parents rediscovered religion and things changed when Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev of the Isha Yoga Program came to Michigan.

"The summer before college, I was taken to an introductory talk and with my attention totally elsewhere, half way through I took the car keys and drove off to my best friend's graduation party thinking I don't need any advice on how to be happy!" says Sheela.

The next year, after freshman year at college, she and her brothers attended a seven-day Inner Engineering program with Sadhguru. "This time I looked up at the man behind the microphone, opened my ears, and put down a few of the barriers and resistances I had towards so-called spiritual teachers," she remembers. "I listened to what he had to say and his logic hit me, his wisdom seemed unparalleled and his humor started to soften me up. He was not talking about some God somewhere or asking me to believe in anything but just to look at myself a little deeper."



How deep?

As deep as she was willing. The more willing she became, the more she discovered. Suddenly the world inside of her, she found, was so much bigger than the one outside. "I realized the difference between religion and a true spiritual process," she says. She visited India for the first time,

spending a month in silence and volunteered at the Isha Yoga Center in Coimbatore, a life-transforming experience. Ten years have passed, seven of them as a full-time volunteer and three of them living in India, all of them extremely happy and peaceful.

"I didn't realize it but all my life I was trying to fulfill some unquenchable thirst for happiness and [find] a sense of completeness," she says. "It became so painstakingly clear that nothing on the outside would satisfy me."

One big question overwhelmed her: "What is this all about and what am I looking for?" Sadhguru's Inner Engineering program gave her the tools to find this answer within. She says, "That thirst is quenched and whether I do something or don't do anything the experience is equally as beautiful."

At the age of 29, Sheela has found the inner contentment that most people struggle all their lives to find. She quotes Sadhguru: "The world is trying to do so many things. We're trying to go to the moon, to Mars, but, fundamentally, I feel the most important thing is human consciousness, the quality of life here. How happy we are here simply depends on how we are within ourselves."