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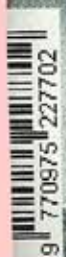
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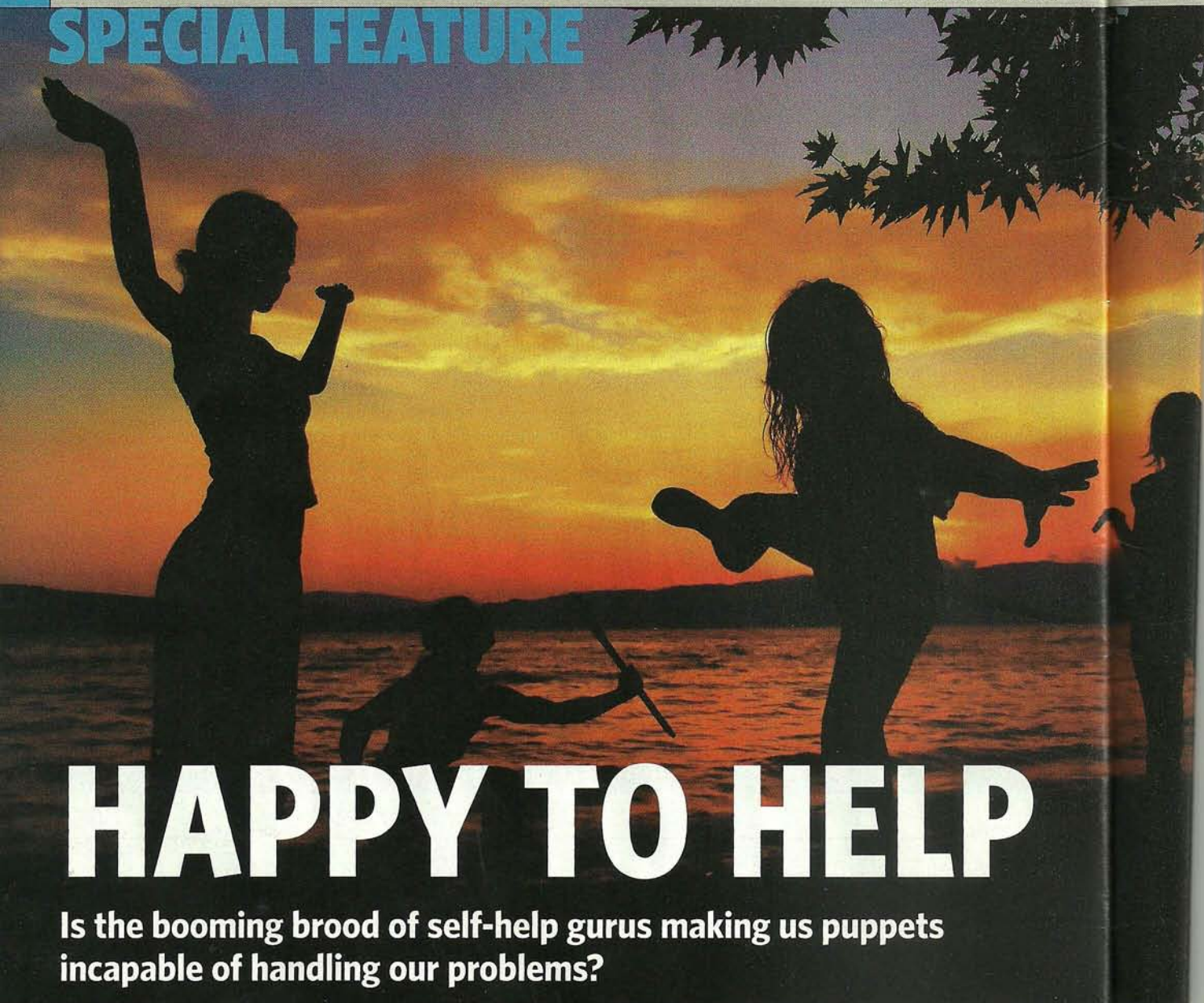
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## SPECIAL FEATURE



# HAPPY TO HELP

Is the booming brood of self-help gurus making us puppets incapable of handling our problems?

By Nikita Doval

**D**on't worry, be happy. Hakuna Matata. The power of the law of attraction. Ask the universe and it will conspire for you. Have a Ferrari? Congratulations, you are a monk. Eat, pray and love.

If the words above seem random jottings to you, then either you have been channelling Rip Van Winkle or you are from Mars. These are in fact mantras which help millions across the world, irrespective of gender and age, face life with all its difficulties, real or otherwise. They are keys to

the kingdom of self-help, where all your worries will be addressed. All that is needed is faith and belief. Faith that this is where you will find all the answers, and belief that there is a divine power within you waiting to be harnessed and unleashed on the world.

Not earning enough? Stress levels defying gravity? Relationship woes? Lack of confidence? Whatever your problem, the self-help movement has a solution, in a format of your choice. A book can tell you how to change your attitude and your life, a DVD can

teach you how to harness the law of attraction, you can sign up for a motivational lecture or a leadership summit or opt for a therapy session involving colours, dancing or drama. For the unadventurous, there is always yoga, meditation and vipassana.

The start of the self-help revolution can be traced back to 1936 when Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* was published. In 1937, Napoleon Hill wrote *Think and Grow Rich*, which spoke about positive thoughts to attract intelligence and wealth. But it was in the

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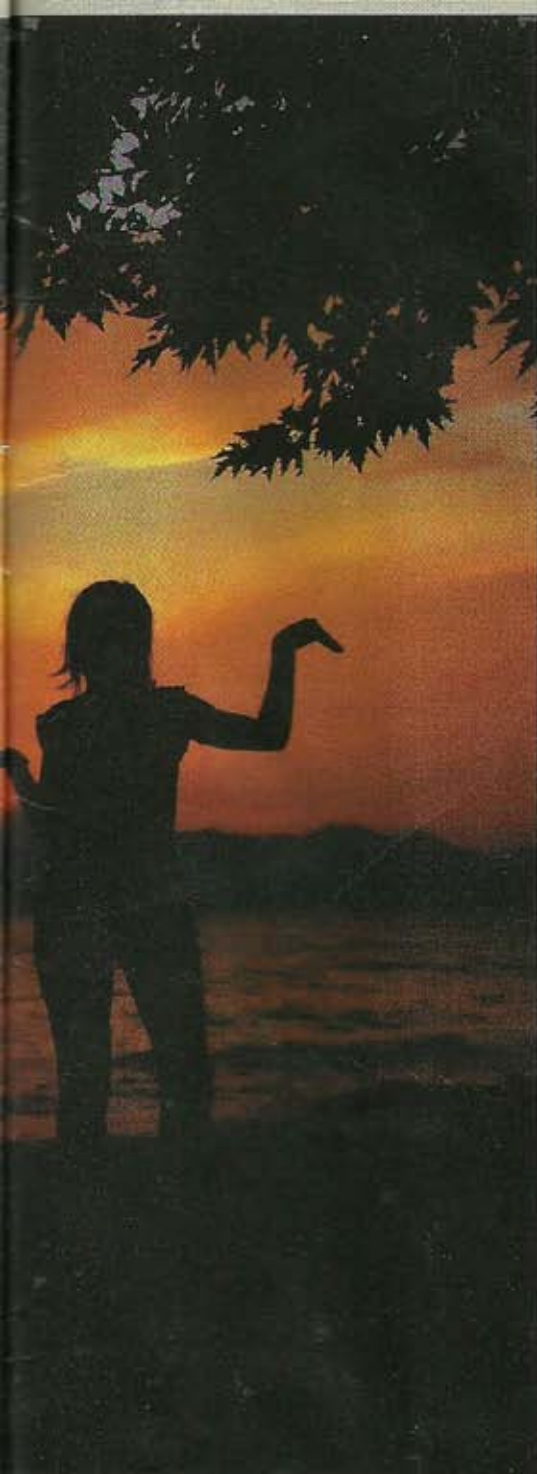
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**Venting it out:** *Martial arts play an important role in calming mind and body*

nineties that the self-help movement first came into its own in the west. Self-styled motivational speakers and spiritual gurus charmed the corporate world with their wisdom. The books with their maps for finding happiness followed and then the movement exploded. By the time the new century rolled around, the self-help industry was akin to an ocean pulsating with life.

Today bookshelves are crammed with self-help books from authors both Indian and international. Motivational talks and workshops

are part of every company's annual calendar while every neighbourhood boasts of a self-help guru who will lend a helping hand to a generation dealing with increasing levels of success, affluence, competition, stress and existential dilemmas. "Nuclear families, insecurity at the workplace, relationships, a more materialistic attitude to life... everywhere you look, you will find a cause for stress. People are tired of this, they want to be more calm, more relaxed and this is fuelling the self-help movement," says banker Puneet Mehta. It is a Sunday morning and he has just come back from sudarshan kriya, which along with vipassana he credits for his calm mind. "It helps clear the mind, lets your subconscious thoughts come to the surface so you know you exactly what is troubling you and then you can fix it."

**The pressures of** modern living are taxing, no doubt, but sceptics wonder if dealing with them requires so much outside support. Mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik is batting strongly for the self-help movement, but he does say, "We delude ourselves that the stress of the 21st century is greater than that of the 2nd. Our contexts have changed, but the human mind and heart are still the same."

The concerns of an earlier generation were, as exemplified by the title of the Manoj Kumar film, *Roti, Kapda aur Makaan*. These are still priorities, but no longer our only aspirations. "For our parents, achievements came with a glass ceiling. Till here and then no more," says Sandhya Bhikchandani, a chartered accountant, who has a guru on speed dial who helps her "deal with all the crisis that come my way". These vary from an argument with her spouse to office pressure to her son's examinations. "Sometimes I feel I will just burst with all the tension. Our parents had it much simpler," she says.

Every generation likes to believe that their problems are much more extensive and bewildering than their



SANJAY AHLAWAT

**Sometimes problems can be due to deeper issues, which require professional counselling. But most problems are immediate.**

**ROSCHI RANA**  
Colour therapist

parents'. Pattanaik feels that there is merit to the sentiment, though. "We live in a more frightening world than before," he says. "It is not just our world alone but also the world that enters our lives through the media and the cyberspace. All this suffocates us, we feel lost."

Before she discovered self-help, Bhikchandani says, she was a whiner asking, 'Why me?' every time she was confronted with a new issue. But now she deals with everything with equanimity.

The feeling of being a victim of a

force greater than yourself and circumstances beyond your control is one of the pillars of the self-help movement, says colour therapist Roschi Rana. Rana has just finished analysing a client's colour cards with the initial diagnosis hinting at low self-esteem and lack of trust in a romantic relationship. "Everyone believes they are a victim of circumstances," she says. "Few take responsibility for their life. Sometimes the problems can be due to deeper issues, which require professional counselling. But most people's problems are very immediate." She calls it the great Indian carnival where we have cast ourselves in the starring role in a tragedy of Greek proportions. "We want soap operas to happen to us."

**The soap opera** reference popped up in THE WEEK's conversation with motivational speaker Shiv Khera also. Amidst the hustle and bustle of his South Delhi office, Khera says we let external influences shape our thought processes and attitude. "They are carving out our personalities. We watch soap operas and behave like the characters in them," he says. "We are losing our basic values. We have to keep re-enforcing our mind with positives, otherwise it is very easy to slip into negativity."

Says Vikram Badhwar, who runs Syngriety Consultants, which organises programmes and workshops for companies aimed at dealing with stress, promoting team work and helping individuals work in sync with their bodies through martial arts, music and breathing science: "Today there is a lot of abundance in the external world, but is that translating into abundance of the heart?" Badhwar is also a practitioner of Falun Gong, a Chinese spiritual movement based on truthfulness, compassion and forbearance. He says what he does as a consultant is different from Falun Gong. "Everybody works at their spirituality in various magnitudes," he says. The key to understanding the secrets of the universe lies in understanding the potential of the human body. "Have

we been given limbs just so that we can eat, breathe and drink? Is this really it?" he asks.

With a request to disturb him only if there is a life-threatening situation, he demonstrates the first of the five sets of exercises prescribed in Falun Gong. His hand movements bring to mind classical dance movements. "The exercises unleash the energy within you. One sweats extensively even though the movements seem very gentle," he says.

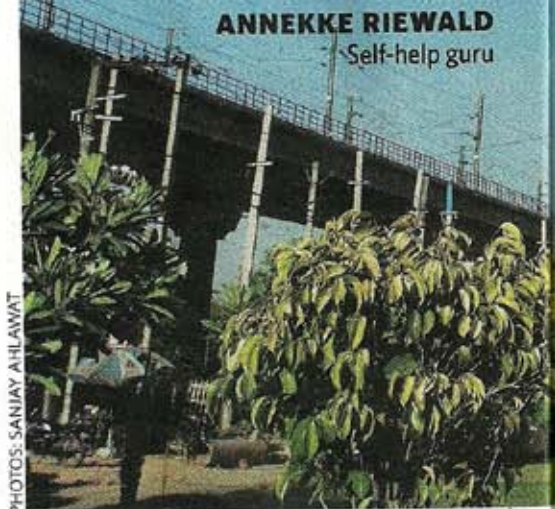
Understanding your body to realise what is wrong or to come to terms with yourself is a principle that drama therapist and actor Gaurav Saini works by. Like Badhwar, he is a trained martial arts expert. "Our mental or physical problems are often manifestations of our negative thoughts. These affect our posture, our thought process, our mood... everything. In order to understand ourselves, it is very important to understand our body," he says. In his drama therapy workshops, participants indulge in martial arts and play-acting as both mediums release our subconscious thoughts. "I have often had students tell me how some thought or problem which has been troubling them disappears, especially after the martial exercises," he says. "This is not magic, it is just our body shedding its personality, which is society imposed, and asserting its individuality which is its true nature."

**Saini, however, feels** that therapy of any sort is just a medium. "The realisation is individual. What's more, it is your own discovery and that is why you cherish it even more." When the mind and the body are in sync, says Aaliya K., a student of drama therapy, magic happens. Angry over a troubled relationship and disturbed at home, she credits drama therapy with helping her deal with her anger and frustrations. "Play-acting serves as a catharsis [and] the martial arts help in venting out my physical anger," she says.

Both Badhwar and Saini refuse to be drawn into the debate of whether the self-help movement actually

**Your current situation is the result of your thoughts. If you decide on a goal and are determined to achieve it, then what can stop you? Nothing.**

**ANNEKKE RIEWALD**  
Self-help guru



PHOTOS: SANJAY AHLAWAT

helps or makes people more dependent on external stimulus for dealing with their problems. "Who am I to say which path is correct and which is not for people?" says Badhwar. "Everyone comes to their way individually. But everything has a price. That is the second law of attraction."

It is a statement Annekke Riewald of Golden Inspiration, a company that teaches people to harness the power of thought and the power of the law of attraction, disagrees with. "Everything can be easy and smooth. I do not believe in no pain, no gain," she says. According to Riewald, it is a simple matter of opening our minds to the realisation that there is a better way to lead life than just surviving. "Harness your intuition, release mental clutter, realise that if you feel for something strongly enough, you will work towards making it happen," she says. "Your current situation, whether economic or professional, is the result of your thoughts. If you decide on a goal and are determined to achieve it, then what can stop you? Nothing."

It is a school of thought that has many takers, even those who pride



themselves on not being a part of the self-help wagon. Ritish Pujari, a 30-year-old copywriter from Mumbai, is as footloose, fun loving and cynical as you would expect anyone of his generation to be. But a chance reading of the international bestseller *The Secret* changed his outlook. "I try and make a concentrated effort to think only positive thoughts and focus on what I want." Does it

**We are losing our basic values. We have to keep re-enforcing our mind with positives, otherwise it is easy to slip into negativity.**

**SHIV KHERA**  
Motivational speaker

work? "Yes. Just the other day I was in Delhi and I thought of a college friend who I have not met in years. I remembered an incident on the campus and felt, 'Damn! It would be nice to meet him.' One hour later, I bumped into him at a bookshop. That is the power of the law of attraction."

But is that not good ol' determination and drive, that magic ingredient which separates the gifted and super successful from others? "Successful people are the ones who overcome resistance. We all know what to do in order to succeed but how many pursue it? That's the difference between trained and untrained will and we can control our will," is how Khera also argues out the point.

**Think positive, work hard**, be determined and focused—all the tenets of self-help, critics argue, are already there in the ancient texts. It is all recycled wisdom. "If it [the wisdom] is not in ancient literature then it does not exist anywhere," says author Mukul Deva. His book, *Model: The Return of the Employee*, lists 10 commandments that help people succeed professionally. "But the setting has to be contemporary," he says. In his book, he tells the reader that first impressions count, but the first impression of the first impression comes from the way we dress. "They are all simple observations which helped me change my career four times and make a success of it each time," says the army officer-turned-businessman-turned-writer-turned-life coach. One school of thought says that in life always learn from your mistakes but Mukul differs. "It is in fact easier to learn from the mistakes of others."

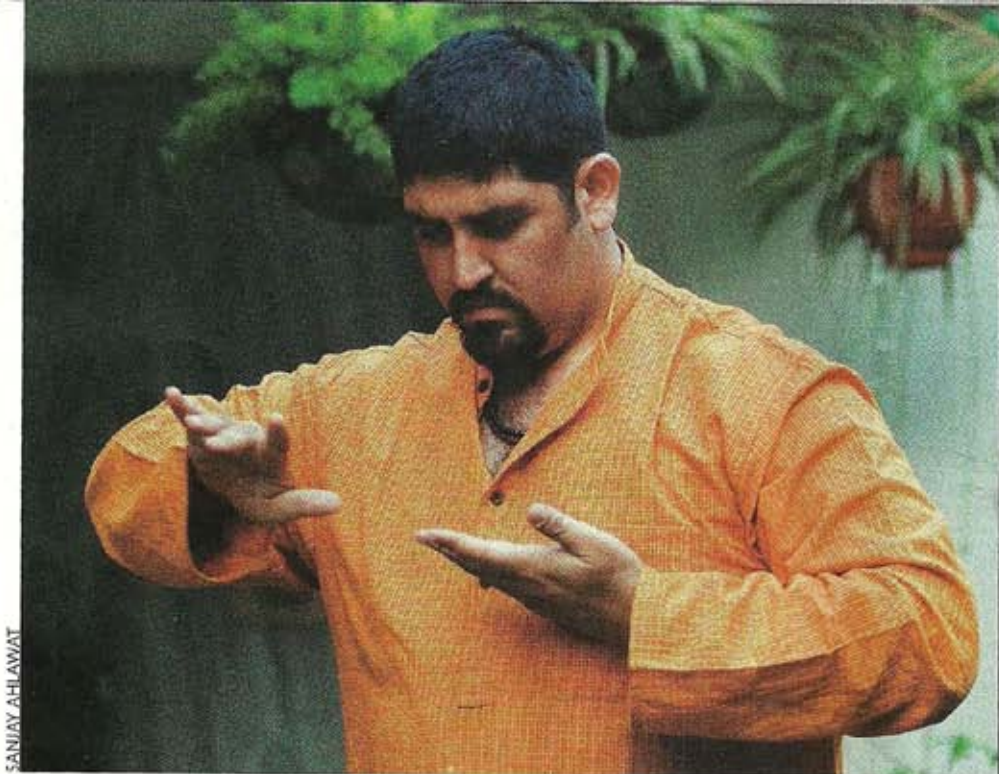
So while wisdom is immortal, the packaging in which it needs to be served every time is different. And the rest is up to the human spirit. As Pattanaik adds, "Emotions like fear, anxiety, jealousy, insecurity are still there. Why do we need new ideas to solve them?"

But that is not what self-help movement is addressing, argue sociologists. "Self-help leads to the growth

of a certain kind of individualism which is fuelled by commerce," says sociologist Prof. Sanjay Srivastava. "It propagates the idea that you can empower yourself but at the same time also peddles the belief that you are pawns in the hands of fate. It takes people away from their circumstances, from accounting for their success and failures."

Says clinical psychologist Aruna Bruta: "It [self-help] is yet another manifestation of the quick fix nature of things around us. We don't have any patience anymore. We are all prey to the *jaldi* [hurry up] syndrome, which takes root in childhood with parents urging you to hurry up every time, right from eating your dinner to doing your homework to hitting the sack. Children come to resent this." This resentment manifests itself as defiance, stress and rage in adulthood when the syndrome takes on a life of its own in our professional lives, thanks to deadlines. "So a person makes his way to Art of Living classes and yoga and self-help gurus to calm him self down, never realising that there is a deeper problem to be addressed," she says. Several of Bruta's patients tell her that though they tried alternate options, nothing worked for them and she says it is not surprising. "Meditation, breathing exercises... all these work, yes, but only when you are also dealing with issues buried deep in your subconscious," she says.

**But going for clinical therapy is still a grey area in our society. Psychiatry and psychology are still considered a taboo, hence it is easier to turn to self-help for therapy.** "I advise counselling to a lot of my clients since the surface issues are never the root cause of their problems," says Rana. Pritha Sinha (name changed) opted for colour therapy to deal with her weight problems. But the cards revealed that she was actually harbouring great grief over her father's death nearly two years ago and that was the reason behind her eating binges. "But how many of them actually end up going for professional



SANJAY AHLAWAT

## **Who am I to say which path is correct and which is not for people? Everyone comes to their way individually. But everything has a price.**

**VIKRAM BADHWAR**

Consultant and Falun Gong practitioner

help, I cannot answer," says Rana. She is honest enough to admit that many self-help gurus would want you to keep coming back to them since "even we have to make a living. So session after session is prescribed or more intensive therapy is recommended."

While avoiding social stigma might not be a conscious decision to turn to self-help, social mobility might very well be. It is the cool lifestyle choice to make, the right thing to do. "It is quite akin to seeking a social niche, moving into a class which might have been denied to you," says Prof. Meenakshi Thapan, Dept of Sociology, Delhi University. She terms it exchanging one form of capital for another. "You can have money and success and you use that capital to trade for social and cultural acceptability." According to her, each generation has its symbols of upward mobility, and one of these

is self-help in its myriad forms, especially those associated with meditation and breathing exercises, for this generation. "For middleclass India in the seventies, fluency in English was a status to aspire to. The desire for upward mobility is immortal, just the vehicle of choice with which to attain it, changes."

But not many would agree with the surmise. Nisha Middha, a lawyer, credits Art of Living with giving her peace of mind and balance in her life. "I did not join the classes to attain social mobility. I wanted to de-stress, become a calmer person. It has helped improve my productivity at work and keep emotions under check." She does not see self-help as either a crutch or creating dependency. "It is a process of growth, a process of development." Gaurav Gupta, 29, who works for a private equity firm, feels that the teachings of the self-help movement earlier came to you through experience, with age. "Now you know that such a path is there and it helps you in immense ways, so what is the harm with it?"

It is a sentiment Riewald agrees with whole-heartedly for according to her, people have always needed spiritual guidance, now it is just more easily available. "Just like technology has made life easier for us, self-help has made it simpler." ■