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Spiritual Software

Alka Patel had it made. Or had made it. The U.K-born Indian had ploughed through medical school and residency to fulfill her childhood ambition of becoming a doctor. She had a happy family life, a fulfilling relationship, and a good job as an assistant clinical professor of pediatrics at the University of California in San Francisco. She lived in a fancy house, wore designer clothes, drove a Beamer, and had a closet full of footwear "like all women do." A material girl she was not, but she lived in a material world.

Some months back, Alka and her sister planned a trek through the Himalayas. At the Parmarth Ashram in Rishikesh headed by a guru she refers to reverentially as "Pujya Swamiji," the two attended a pre-dawn aarti on the banks of the Ganga. It was a life-changing experience. Alka was overcome by a feeling of complete tranquility. She felt a call to serve God and serve humanity.

Returning to the U.S, Alka told her parents, friends and colleagues that she is giving up everything and moving to India. None of them could comprehend or accept what she was doing, but she is going ahead with her decision. Over the next few days, Alka is disposing of her possessions and returning to the ashram to spend the rest of her life there. She doesn't care who gets her BMW and her father will probably have a garage sale for her shoes, she jokes.

"During my residency, I started to have lot of spiritual experience, especially with my patients," she explained to The San Francisco Chronicle, which wondrously reported her upcoming exile from the material world. "I became convinced that the more I learned about Western medicine, the less I knew about life...I want to be able to understand how to heal people with their hearts and souls, not just their bodies," she says.

Alka Patel's decision is rare, but not unheard of. While the typical image of Indian-Americans, especially the so-called ABCDs, is one of success-on-steroids, there are increasing instances of young professionals opting out of the rat race and taking the spiritual road in a way that completely abandons the typical American way of life. Is it the call of spiritual India heard in soulless America, or are Indians generally more spiritually inclined?

Another recent case involved Rahul Patel, a Georgetown Law School graduate who last year turned down a \$ 125,000-a-year job from a New York firm to respond to the call of Pramukh Swami Maharaj of the Swaminarayan sect. The 27-year old son of two doctor parents from Houston, Rahul was typical Texas kid. He liked country music, Mexican food, and was a conservative, serving as a campaign volunteer for George Bush Sr when he was still in his teens.

But like so many ABCDs, who are not compelled to "make it" (like is usually the case with FOBs), Rahul felt the spiritual tug. Last year, he gave up his car-driving, cell-phone-carrying, movie-watching American life to join five others in a diksha vidhi initiation ritual at a Swaminarayan Mandir outside Houston. At the end of a two-hour ceremony, he was given a new name (Virat Bhagat), a "guru mantra," and simple white cotton clothes he will wear en route to becoming a sadhu in an Indian ashram.

For the longest time, the biggest Indian export to the west was spirituality, not software. Evidently, that's not enough for some Indians. They want to go back for the source code.