

The Practical Teacher: Acharya Prashant

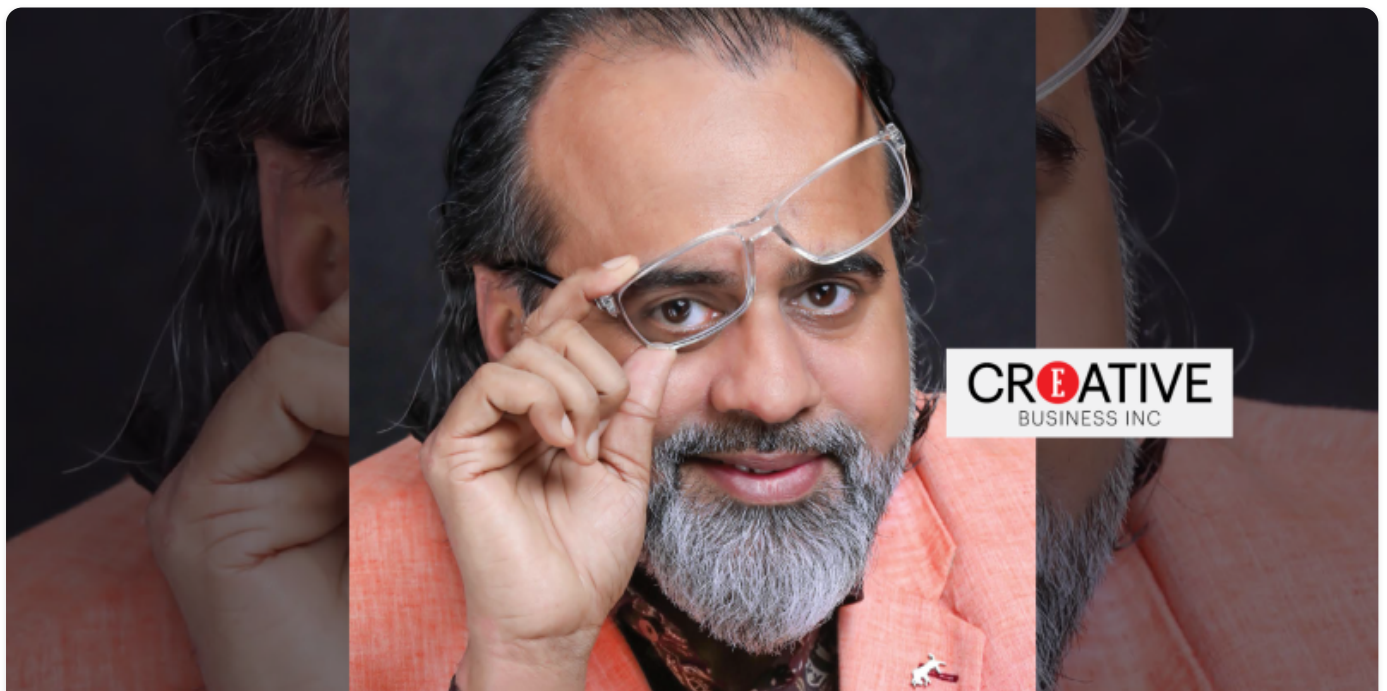
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Prashant Tripathi, now known as [Acharya Prashant](#), has shot up as a unique wisdom teacher. He is renowned for his command over the entire corpus of wisdom literature from all times – ancient till modern, and all places – East to West. In India, he is revered specifically for his scholarship on Vedanta philosophy. His work on 17 Gita Adhyays and 60 Upanishads bear testimony to his authority, as do his 160 books on philosophy, spirituality, and all aspects of life, including many national bestsellers. He champions awareness on Climate Change and Biodiversity Loss – PETA awarded him the “Most Influential Vegan of India” in 2022. Entrepreneur India seeks to find out more about the man and his mystique.

On being asked how despite his IIT-IIM background he veered towards spirituality, Acharya denies having a standout significant moment that nudged him. Instead, he has always been a keen observer ever since he was a child. What he observed behind the niceties of life was ignorance, discord, and sufferings that plague normal human life.

“As a kid, all these sights were being registered and questioned by me. The ugliness was being disliked. There was a constant urge to change the shape of things,” he says.

THE DAWN

The early years were significant for young Prashant. He was quite the reader, played a lot, was also known to have plenty of mischief, and this while being an introvert. Being good at studies seemed like a natural ability- he topped the ICSE exams and was also an NTSE scholar. What distinguished his childhood was his proclivity to read books of all types beyond his syllabus.

“Reading wasn’t confined to one particular genre. I was hungry and sucked in whatever came my way. From comics to somebody’s PhD thesis, even if I couldn’t

Acharya feels that this is what made him mentally branch out erratically in all directions with no particular plan or pattern. He thinks that this aided him to grow organically, without a blueprint.

Books played a major role in Prashant's life, thanks to his father. His father was a well-read bureaucrat, and the family was sometimes posted at places with little access to decent bookstores. The father then would plan trips just so that the young boy could have his stock of books.

"I'd never be satisfied with the collection I had. My father would plan trips to bigger cities so that he could purchase books for me. It was remarkable to travel just to visit a bookstore," recalls Acharya.



rationales and ponderings. The boy would get his answers in a very brief manner; and often only in a couple of sentences. Other than that, the budding thinker would just absorb the things around him and try to process them himself.

The future teacher hardly nurtured any ambitions or dreams to become something in the future. During his studies, he does not remember keeping any long-term objective, he says. He was just watching the world attentively, without coming to any quick conclusions. “I don’t remember feeling content with my understanding of life, nor do I remember having a plan for the future. I was not even actively thinking about changing the world. However, I was sure something was so excruciatingly wrong that it needed all my continuous attention to unravel it. Hence, I just dedicatedly kept trying to understand”, he says.

Prashant wasn’t one to sweep things under the rug as he recalls, “I’d say things as I saw them and this allowed me to process things in a very raw manner. I did not pretend to understand if I did not. If something was beyond my comprehension, I’d let it stay because there was nothing I could do about it. And this process was continuous and laborious and required patience.”

“I don’t know if all of this is making any sense but it didn’t make any sense to me as well at that point!” he suddenly guffaws. We discovered that it is difficult to see when he is serious and when he is not. Seeming solemn and pensive, he unexpectedly breaks into laughter in a flash. Of one thing he was relatively sure. Being around bureaucrats in and around his family, Prashant had civil services as the obvious career choice. He thought the power it comes with can be used to change lives. When asked ‘why IIT then?’, he responds, “I wasn’t greatly interested in engineering. IIT simply because in those years most UPSC toppers were from the IIT background. I would be dishonest if I say I had a clear sense of direction. But I wasn’t in a hurry anyway.” “It was a patient yet diligent wait for clarity in life to emerge, a continuity”, he added.

college politics, deepen his reading, and establish himself in debating, dramatics, and poetry composition.

Prashant then secured admission to the prestigious IIM Ahmedabad and also cracked the UPSC exam in the same year. He says that the service allotted based on his rank didn't turn out to be the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), the only one he thought of as useful for his purpose. So he turned to head toward IIM Ahmedabad to continue his journey.

“I had no desire to develop the organisation further into a money-yielding machine. It was rather my instrument to fight the monster”

When asked about life-changing moments during the crucial years of his initial career, Acharya is silent. He emphasizes there weren't any singular epiphanic moments where life turned instantly. “We have this picture where a special moment upends a person's life. Actually it doesn't happen that way. Behind every Eureka moment is a long continuous unspectacular period of attentive work. It would be quite fascinating if important critical decisions could emerge instantaneously and dramatically, but that's not the way of life”, he added.

On being asked about how his journey took shape after studying at IIM he responded that he knew he wouldn't be in the corporate world for long. However, he had to settle his loans, and that meant he had to spend three years in corporate life. “I switched jobs thrice during that three year period, every time moving to an entirely new industry. Before I bid goodbye, I wanted to explore as much as possible. I learnt well and was an able performer. Once my dues were cleared, I said I'm out.”

ANYTHING FOR THE CAUSE

During his corporate stint, Prashant was already preparing for life after corporate, doing what he could and letting a future organically emerge from there. He invested in his weekends. “I picked up books that I especially loved, and figured out how they could be used to deliver leadership concepts. I devised a course blending wisdom literature with leadership education and proposed it to a few worthy management institutes. I would teach the same on weekends,” he reveals.

Suddenly Prashant found himself busier on the weekends than on the weekdays. IIT Delhi, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Symbiosis, Institute of Management Technology – these were some of the places where he was engaging with the students. Traveling to several institutes in different cities, and teaching a new concept was hectic and challenging. “One of my student batches was from Executive Management – all with more than 5 years of corporate experience – and I found I was younger than my youngest student in that class,” he reminisces with a laugh.

“Management education is mostly about finance, marketing, supply chain, recruitment, etc., and all of those things concern external objects. There is not much in this education that takes you within. And unless you know where your desires, hopes, and motives are coming from, you will suffer, and you will make the entire planet suffer with you. Knowledge of the self must be the first thing” explains

myself where all the suffering comes from. In my classrooms, I was practically conducting experiments on how the monster of misplaced confidence and ignorant ambition could be fought.”

Prashant then founded Advait Life- Education, which gave his insights and efforts an organisational structure. His leadership course was now diluted and repackaged for students younger than post-graduates and was renamed as the ‘Holistic Individual Development Program’ (HIDP). It was a course spread over a long duration, designed to invoke self-awareness among the students. The recipients were students of schools and graduate and postgraduate courses. More than 90% of the cohort were from B.Tech courses alone.

“The HIDP was a work in progress, and every semester new activities would be drawn, and I designed them individually. This part was very personal to me,” says Acharya. The organisation now had a team of teachers that would then go out and teach the course concepts through these very activities. The initiative met with success. Soon, the teaching team comprised around 100 teachers engaging concurrently with over 20,000 students in more than 50 Institutes. It wasn’t an online thing – besides the content and teaching quality, the logistics itself was daunting. Managing such a peculiar organisation extracted every bit of his management acumen. But the experiment was successful. Within two years of its inception, Advait Life-Education was doing great on all metrics. In the academic circles, the HIDP had already created a buzz. Eager Institutes from all over India lined up to host the HIDP. Success had arrived early, that too in the field of meaningful work.

“On one hand, I had the satisfaction of delivering meaning on the campuses. On the other hand, my own restlessness persisted. What I was delivering to the students was too feeble, too little to disrupt the usual flow of their doomed lives. The monster had a thick steel armor, and I felt I was throwing pins at it. I needed to strike much harder. I needed to see a concrete change in the life of the individual”. 2008 was when

fight the monster”. He started taking things head on. It resulted in huge dialectical seminars called ‘Samvaad’, and the HIDP started turning deeply spiritual. He talks of two specific activities that heralded the change – ‘Kabir in Campus’ based on the songs of the saint poet, and ‘So Said the Sages’ based on the verses of the Upanishads. As expected, this drew solid trouble from the host institutions, parents of the students, the students themselves, and even Prashant’s own faculty team.

Acharya opines that these methods and philosophies were so alien to these types of institutes that they started questioning the usefulness of these programs. He recalls, “They would remain grumpy and uneasy, but couldn’t call off the program. Deep within, they knew of the benefits and could also see the tangible demonstrations. But the resistance from all sides persisted. The entire process remained challenging on a day-to-day basis. The stakeholders would ask if the HIDP gave the students a better career in the future. Teachers would ask if this is going to help the students get better grades. Still, they couldn’t dismiss what I was doing because those who remained in my process saw tangible benefits within a semester.” With each passing year, the HIDP kept becoming more stringently a course on self-awareness. And with it, kept growing the resistance.

THE TEACHING GOES GLOBAL

The work had to move beyond the confines of the campuses. In 2010, at 32, Prashant conducted his first Himalayan Camp. He would travel to serene, sometimes remote, locations in the Himalayas with small groups of 20-50 genuine seekers. The camps would last 3 days to a week. These Self-awareness camps became tools for deep personal transformation and started drawing seekers from all walks of life, and all places, including other countries. The highest wisdom literature from all spiritual

mind and embrace the truth of their being. Those who met him in the camps would often be stunned to encounter an extraordinarily meditative and radiant being, unbelievably different from the humdrum of life. The quotidian “Sir” started appearing too mundane for what he was, nobody exactly remembers who brought up the new honorific for the first time, but “Acharya” had arrived.

The vast online presence of Acharya Prashant’s teachings, with over 10,000 videos and articles freely available, represents a modern-day treasure trove of spiritual wisdom. Millions engage with this profound content daily, finding solace, inspiration, and profound insights to navigate life’s complexities with grace and understanding. His videos have clocked more than 2.5 billion views so far. He engages with his audiences for several hours thirty days a month, and the output emerges as the publication of two new books per month. Besides internal transformation, Acharya has been relentlessly vocal on issues like climate change, animal rights, women empowerment, and the eradication of superstition.

ALL ABOUT ACHARYA PRASHANT

Author of 160 books

Won the IIT Delhi Alumni Award and Most Influential Vegan of the Year Award by PETA

62 million+ subscribers across social media



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