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## Looking beyond American materialism

By Swati Desai

When I work in Los Angeles as a mental health consultant, I still have trouble negotiating payment for my services and measuring my worth in money. My American counterparts on the other hand have no problems doing it. I still feel overwhelmed when I open the newspaper in the morning or start the TV and I get bombarded by various ads reminding me of the myriad material temptations I could fall for. If I follow all the sales, I could save so much money that I would have to think hard on what other luxury I could buy! People who visit Las Vegas, the city of casinos and overt display of glittery opulence, they could attest to the crass American materialism. I have fallen for both — the material enjoyment of the "good things" in life one can "buy" and at the same time being critical, along with my fellow Indians, of the capitalistic, money-mongering, self-gratifying, crude American materialism I belong to the somewhat outdated Indian value system that believed in knowledge over money and that happiness does not come from wealth.

I also observed two phenomena in last two decades in my visits to India. One, underneath the cover of older values, my fellow Indians were truly desiring and competing with each other for the same material luxuries that appeared crass in the US. Two, my American friends had a stronger inclination and ability to go beyond the comforts from "things" and

pursue intangible pleasures for the soul. In making the superficial observation of money being the ultimate American goal, are we missing out on understanding deeper cultural nuances? An average American, regardless of his wealth, would typically possess some of the following: religious orientation, community advancement orientation, spiritual orientation, or relentless pursuit of a cause or a belief.

Consider Bill and Kathy, a middle class couple with two teenage sons, who at-



Church every Sunday. The projects run by their Church for feeding the homeless, or running a day care centre are funded by the Church members. In spite of the modern post-industrial worldwide scepticism about religious rituals, most Americans from the Judeo-Christian tradition would use religion as a way to hold beliefs beyond their own selfish motives.

The tradition of working towards community advancement, in the form of material donation or giving time as a volunteer, is very well established in American culture. Almost all wealthy people would be involved in Philanthropy — may it be Bill

and Melinda Gates Foundation or Carnegie Mellon University. Volunteering time is very common for causes such as educating underprivileged children or counselling women with little means of fighting domestic violence. People without resources may donate money to some society or group. Altruism and helping the community are big values held by people as a means for salvation.

My psychotherapist colleagues Lisa and John, deeply involved in understanding the Yogic system and Indian mythology, are examples of many Americans with spiritual orientation that takes them beyond their own religious background. The American motivation to undertake serious study of such material makes the complex and abstract Vedanta studies accessible to us in the form of excellent books such as

*How to Know God*. I need not be ashamed of learning about Seven Schools of Yoga from Ernest Wood.

Speaking of knowledge over money, how can I forget the whole scientific community that may give up big bucks in order to pursue discovering the "truth" they believe in. It may perhaps be because their basic survival needs are not threatened. If so, this is all the more reason to pursue materialism that gives people the freedom to bring out the best in them.

*(The author, a psychotherapist in private practice in Los Angeles and a mental health consultant to South Asian agencies, is on a visit to ISB, Hyderabad)*