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Diseases, we all know are caused by a combination of genetic and environmental factors, with rare exceptions of purely genetic and purely environmental maladies. Of the environmental factors, most, fortunately for us are self inflicted injuries and therefore amenable to rectification with a little effort. These self inflicted injuries are a part of our “life style”, a combination of advancing science and technology and our incurable addiction to “purchasable” happiness. Advice on life style modification is now an essential part of a doctor’s prescription. A whole new paramedical force is now in operation in modern clinics – consisting of physiotherapists, dieticians, councilors, psychotherapists, “yoga” experts and similar professionals to help patients change to a healthier life style. Print and electronic media is brimming with advertisements of resorts with facilities for all sorts of therapies and exercises that are supposed to give benefits of life style changes in days or weeks.

In other words life style modification is a big industry these days. As with our endeavors in all spheres of activities, here also, we are looking for short cut “made easy” processes. This leads to the advertisement boom and the transformation of an essentially scientific activity into a booming business.

Despite all these efforts and considerable expenditure, the medical fraternity knows for sure that the desired life style changes are difficult to initiate and even more difficult to sustain.

Why should this be so?

We change the way we behave (not necessarily the way we think) and it happens usually in two circumstances. Firstly, if there is a possibility of material gain and secondly if we are scared. Rich and powerful people can make us do things that we would not ordinarily do by offering money or

just issuing a threat. Most of the time, they do not need to threaten us actually. The knowledge that they are in a position to harm us in many ways is enough. But these situations can and usually does change us only temporarily. As soon as the situational difficulty is over, we change again to our original ways of life.

A permanent change, not just of a behavior pattern but of a personality is needed for a permanent change in life style. An individual must change the way he thinks, to be able to change his life style for good.

Swami Vivekananda said “..... religion is realization. It is being and becoming, not hearing or acknowledging, it is the whole soul becoming changed into what it believes”

It is the last bit that is important – the soul must change, then only the change in life style is permanent with consequent effect on health. Otherwise it remains a fashion, a pose, meant to deceive everybody and specially one’s own self.

History of civilization is full with reformers – social, educational, religious – who have tried their best to get rid of evil practices and improve quality of social life. Many of these attempts used force to change things dramatically often producing apparently spectacular results, without trying to change men into better quality human beings, and consequently, in spite of the dazzle of so called success, the reforms could not stand the test of time.

What is an ideal life style? It should be one that follows nature and works in harmony with nature. Nature gives us an idea of a balance, the seasons change in regular periods, the animal and plant kingdom balance each other to recycle natural resources. Extreme phenomena do not last long, there is a built in system in nature to counteract occasional aberrations, as these occur. Human

physiology is a story of balances and counter balances and that is how nature manages to keep our body temperature, acid base balance, water and electrolytes, within a narrow range, in spite of changes in the ambient temperature, varying quantity and quality of food intake, varying state of physical activity (from sleeping, to marathon running) and habitation from sea-level to hill-sides. To cite an example, Khardung LA Pass at 18000 feet, is a popular holiday destination and the barometric pressure there is 380 mm of Hg (PiO₂ – 80 mm of Hg). Although some of the tourists need supplementary oxygen, most people are enjoying the trip without significant trouble.

A healthy life style means cooperating with nature, instead of fighting with her; listening to the messages being sent from stomach heart, lungs, joints and so on. Body is programmed to restore balance and can withstand occasional insults to the system, to a limit. But as was said in the beginning, irrespective of the socioeconomic status of an individual the body suffers as a consequence of our “attitude”. Jesus said “blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs’ is the kingdom of heaven”. Mark the phrase, He did not say poor are blessed – He said “poor in spirit”, and we all know that even the

“poor” do not possess this “spirit” of the poor these days.

Body functions as a complicated machine, When we buy a piece of gadget, the manufacturer gives us a set of instructions of “do” and “don’ts”, so that it functions well without a hitch and remains functioning for a longer period. Our life style should observe a degree of restraint (sangyam) and a discipline – that is part of nature, and fortunately for us, nature has given us the power to discriminate between good and evil, to use rationality, unlike the rest of animal kingdom, who are entirely driven by their natural instincts. We have the freedom to commit mistakes and the ability to rectify ourselves. Animals have neither of these faculties. Swamiji said, “The cow never tells a lie, but she remains a cow all her life”.

Therefore, the practice of healthy lifestyle should begin long before falling ill or seeing a doctor. Physicians and paramedics come into the picture, only after something has gone wrong with the body. Healthy life style should be part of our education and training to have significant effect on prevention of morbidity and mortality affecting the middle aged population all over the world.