

Catch the New MBA Craze: Raoism

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(FORTUNE Magazine) - The terms "self-help" and "MBA" don't often go hand in hand. So it's surprising that a Columbia Business School class called Creativity and Personal Mastery (CPM) is fast becoming one of the most popular B-school classes in the U.S. Weirder still, it's arguably the toughest to get into, requires thinking about the "meaning of life," and not infrequently convinces MBA students that--surprise!--money isn't everything.

CPM is the brainchild of Srikumar Rao, an ex-marketing executive from Wall Street and Hollywood. (The Exorcist was one of his early successes.) He went into teaching when, he says, "I needed to integrate my spiritual life with my work life." Now Rao is spreading his message with a new book called *Are You Ready to Succeed?: Unconventional Strategies for Achieving Personal Mastery in Business and in Life*.

Unconventional is right. "Raoism," as his devotees call it, uses a system of intense introspection to revive energy and creativity. In a series of eight mental exercises, Rao explains how to shush the inner chatter and clear the way for career growth. Granted, it sounds like New Age hokum. "I was sticking my neck out a bit to recommend that we take on this course," says Paddy Barwise, head of the marketing department at the London Business School, where Rao taught last fall. "Most of the people who come to my class are downright unbelievers," admits Rao. "But is the mental model you're using now working better for you than the one I'm proposing?"

There must be something to it. The class is so oversubscribed that he has had to devise a rigorous application process. (Each candidate must submit a resume, agree to be interviewed, and write seven essays.) And Rao's is the only course at the Columbia B-school that has its own alumni association.

If you read Rao's book, brace yourself: Some Raoists have had dramatic epiphanies. Magnus Asbjornsson, a newly minted MBA, was hell-bent on a high-powered consulting job--until he took Rao's course. "I realized I was chasing brand names, and it was all driven by pure ego," he says. Now he works for Marakon Associates, a small strategy firm whose culture emphasizes work-life balance and public service. ■

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