

How I became a bankrupt monk

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[Sandeep Anirudhan addresses the audience at an Aikyam event](#)

Original title - How I became a bankrupt monk: My journey towards building an eco-conscious community

On the first anniversary of Bangalore's Aikyam Community for Sustainable Living, founder *Sandeep Anirudhan* travels back in time to recollect the journey that led to a different approach to building sustainability awareness. 'The biggest realisation was that there was no isolated solution for any of the problems we face, because everything is connected', he writes. **After several years of adventures as a serial entrepreneur and management professional, there came a moment when I had to face myself; this moment arrived, when I had to fly down to see my dad on his death bed, diagnosed with terminal stage brain cancer. As my dad breathed his last right in front of my eyes, it set something off within me; a concrete realization of the fact that 'nothing is permanent'. Only it wasn't intellectual, it was experiential knowing that can only happen if you see a person breathe his last, in front of your eyes! It moved the ground from under my feet. That moment, the definiteness of the fact that life is momentary sank in; the wise words of Steve Jobs rang in my head: "[Remembering that I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I've ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Because almost everything – all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure – these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important.](#)"** "*Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose. You are already naked. There is no reason not to follow your heart.*" What followed was a period of introspection, and I asked myself these questions: What is really valuable to me and my life? Do I know it? Have I been pursuing them? The answers were quite unsettling. One fact stared me in the eye:

"I knew what was valuable to me, right when I was in college. But once I got out of college, I didn't pursue them. I kept postponing those for after I make enough money! I had been waylaid by popular notions of success and career, and I had ignored the calls of my heart!" I remembered, when I was in college, my favorite topics were organic farming and renewable energy. I had even organized an exhibition on organic farming, and had met the pioneer of organic farming in Bangalore, Mr. Narayan Reddy, and marveled at his Food Forest farm, which shattered all notions of farming in my mind. I knew right then, there were things beyond what was conventional that were more appealing to me. But still, here I was, having wasted years, chasing dreams of money, and toys, and social acceptance. I was making lakhs of rupees every month, and I was spending lakhs of rupees every month, but was I enjoying myself? Sadly, no, I wasn't. My father's death proved to be a catalyst in many ways; I had already been seeking ways to re-connect, and this incident accelerated that search! I started to reconnect to everything around me, to the planet, to the universe, to my inner self and more. Soon, I quit my job. I moved back to India, since my mother was alone now. His presented itself as an opportunity to take a break, and to re-examine my priorities. I set out on several explorations, both outwards and inwards. I developed spiritual friends who directed me to introspect on my time on earth. In the course of my search, the wisdom that 'money' or what we make of it, is at the core of the unsustainable path our civilization is on, hit me. I made an important choice: I would not live for money anymore. I decided to chase my dreams instead. I have been bankrupt ever since! It has been 4 years since I earned a single paisa, but never have I felt more accomplished, or happier. I gave up my ego, leaned on the generosity of my kind family for support, and I started doing things that give me joy, that were truly valuable to me. I decided to trust the Universe, to trust that it has my back!

Of Connections and Connecting:

I kept getting drawn to issues of the planet's sustainability; I was also feeling very motivated to do something in sustainable farming. As I searched for information on the same, I came across the [One Year Program on Sustainability](#), offered by [Bhoomi College](#), which seemed God sent! I registered for the program. As luck would have it, the one year program was dropped due to some reasons, that year. But fortunately, some modules of that program were on offer, one of which was the 'Sustainable Food and Farming' module for a month, which called out to me. So, I enrolled for that course, and began a new journey. Little did I realize then, that this was all that I needed. There are times when you are really driven by a passion to learn something, and everything seems to teach you more than you could imagine. This was one such time. The one-month course at Bhoomi seemed to impart enough learning for me, than an entire year's program or even a 4-year program could. The structure of the course was workshop style, with great resource people who were from different backgrounds, doing disruptive things, whose only job it seemed, was to help us question everything we had accepted until then as truth! And as we kept questioning, life kept unraveling, and masks just kept falling apart. The course was less about food and farming, and more about how we see things, and what the reality is, and how these are surprisingly different, recognizing the disconnect that seems to have affected us, in all areas of our life. From food and farming, to our lives as social beings, the economic system, manufacturing, markets, health, etc. Everything that seemed to drive man's dominance on earth was so much at disconnect with the natural laws of life. During this program, I learnt to look under the skin, and recognize the 'disconnects' that drive our unsustainable lifestyle, and then connect the dots, on how it could be sustainable again.

Learning to un-complicate everything!

My journey eventually led me from looking for complexity, to seeking simplicity. For every question, now instead of looking for complex answers, I was looking for the simple basics. Understanding the basics seemed to be the mantra. It revealed everything about why the problem was being created. It also revealed why the popular cure was often not a solution, but a propagation of the very problem it tries to solve. The biggest realization was that there was no isolated solution for any of the problems we face, because 'Everything is connected. A food problem is not just about food, it is about business, about livelihoods, about industry, about education, about awareness, about habits, about convenience, about money, about profit, about greed, about ethics, about ignorance, about so many different things. And everything in life seemed just that way. Now it became clearer that if we are to seek a solution to any of the challenges we face today as a civilization, as a species, as a planet, we cannot continue the 'reductionist' approach that has led us here, we need to turn 'holistic' again. This search for the 'unity' of things, I hadn't realized, was a sign of things to come. Among the great gifts of Bhoomi college, was a great network of people who were already diving deep into things ecological, this helped me get deeper into the domain, and learn more, get exposure to activities that were happening both in and out of the popular awareness.

The Aikyam story begins...

After the course was over, I had an acute sense of discomfort with the fact that the entire world is rapidly heading towards disaster, only because society as a whole had outsourced its responsibility and blame for the sustainability of the world, to governments, institutions and business. By and

large, nobody had a sense that as individuals we had a role to play, not just in influencing policy, but in just making our own simple choices every day. We kept complaining about corporations, and government apathy, but every moment of every waking hour and even while asleep, we were consuming goods or services, that were produced unsustainably, transported across the entire globe, sometimes many times over, exploited raw materials that were not renewable, used energy and fossil fuels, polluted the air, water and land, exploited cheap labour, followed unethical codes of employment or trade, destroyed livelihoods and knowledge systems due to their [trade practices](#). It got me thinking:

'What if, every single one of us, becomes aware of the overall impact, that every single choice we make, has on the planet, due to the money we put on that particular type of business, by that decision? Then, wouldn't we be powerful to stop that from happening, by simply changing every choice?' The challenge seemed to be in getting people to become aware of this, in the simplest manner. That was not easy I realized, since we were committing environmental crimes the entire day, by the things we used every day; from the toothpaste we use in the morning, to the water that is piped to our homes, to the food we eat, to the clothes we wear, to the modes of transport we use, to the buildings we work or live in, the energy we consume, the fossil fuels we were burning, the goods we use, the industries that we depend on and work for, we are living in a state of continuous blindness! How are we to take on such a huge challenge of reviving human awareness? It had taken us centuries to become so blind. People are now convinced that there is no other way to live. Where are we to begin even? Then I examined my own journey; it had begun by seeking, and as I kept learning, I also found myself among a loose community of seekers. This sparked an idea: How about setting up a community for sustainability, where people can seek awareness freely? Where questions could be asked freely, and answers found freely? After all, one of the biggest cause of our disconnect, is our loss of community. We are disconnected from the very places we live in, our immediate society, our cities, villages, and forests. Discussions took place with a few fellow travellers, and it started to evolve. It took many shapes and concepts, not all of which we pursued as a group. Some became paths for different group members to follow in their individual journeys. But a name evolved: the name 'Aikyam' showed up. Aikyam means – oneness, unity, harmony (in Sanskrit). It is as though the idea was expressing what it would like to be! And we kept an open mind to receive... We toyed with organizing an awareness event, without spending any money. We spoke to people, and support came from unexpected quarters. We immediately had a venue and speakers, and we were on! This culture that we developed early, of not raising money, and not spending money, and purely depending on gift culture and voluntary support, set the tone for inter-dependence and community, from the word go! On the 12

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of March of 2016, we held our first event christened 'Earth Friendly Choices'. We invited speakers on different areas of sustainability. It was instantly popular, especially, since it addressed diverse subjects such as food, handloom and gardening. This set the mold for Earth Friendly Choices events of the future; and we have always had diverse topics at every event, to drive the message home firmly, that sustainability is

'about everything'

. What followed were many such talks and discussions, from the who's who of experts on sustainability, a few outbound immersion sessions and workshops. We organized ourselves as a facebook community and discussion group. In a year, it has grown to over 1,500 seekers, and continues to grow. And it inspired many more dreams. To achieve those dreams, we called for volunteers, and 300 enthusiastic volunteers registered. We held our first volunteer meeting a month ago, and organized into teams to take on various focused efforts. Before we knew it, we were upon our First Anniversary. Question on our mind was, 'should we celebrate it?' March was nearing, and we realized the 'International Women's Day' was around the corner! Then it dawned on us: Why not celebrate the anniversary with an Ode to women in sustainability? Why? Because, in the course of this journey, we had noticed that a majority of the champions in sustainability efforts happen to be women; what better way to celebrate it, than to devote an edition of Earth Friendly Choices, to Celebrating 'Women in Sustainability'? Thus unfolded one of the most memorable days we have ever had! Seventeen amazing women, who have gone against the grain, and worked towards preserving the earth, building more sensitive neighbourhoods and communities, and brought about change... graced and brightened the occasion, sharing with us, their remarkable life journeys, inspirations, brilliant insights and dreams! Everyone present was enthralled and inspired. It was such a perfect way to crown a year of existence! How does it get any better than this? These women descended, like angels with a message, reinforcing our faith in the journey we had undertaken, egging us on, telling us that we have a shared destiny to fulfill.... that a sustainable world is possible, we are not to rest till that dream is realized! The quest continues!

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