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Life

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The 'Grand Master of Memory' has an impressive talent he's willing to share. **David Momphard** puts him to the test

Total recall

He solves a Rubik's Cube within 90 seconds and is working on doing so blindfolded. He can memorise the sequence of a deck of shuffled playing cards in less than two minutes. And Nishant Kasibhatla says he can teach anyone to do the same.

The 30-year-old Indian "Grand Master of Memory", who was in town to hold a series of memory training workshops for local business executives and students, says he was once a shy Hyderabad teenager who had trouble remembering people's names. He and his younger brother Anant were introduced to memory improvement as children when their father came home one day and asked them to test him on the techniques he had studied.

"He had us write down 40 numbers and after a few minutes' study, recited them back to us without looking," Kasibhatla says. "We both were amazed."

The two Kasibhatla boys began studying memory techniques and within a few years were entering competitions.

The elder proved a prodigy. In 1999, he was the first Indian competitor in the World Memory Championships (WMC) in London. He holds Indian records for having memorised a 1,944-digit number and a 705-digit binary code. He also holds a Guinness World Record for his forwards and backwards recall of a 400-digit binary number.

In a few tests for the *Post*, he makes quick work of a scrambled Rubik's Cube - in 93 seconds. And given one minute to view 20 items on a table, he's later able to describe them all in detail. He also remembers the information on two business cards, the advertisement on a lighter, the label on a packet of tissues and the sum of three coins, even though the visitor could be forgiven for not recognising one was a one-yuan piece. Kasibhatla then recalls 30 numbers that have just been read out to him, and then reels them off again without a pause in reverse order.

He describes a technique he has honed over a dozen years' study and teaching. "I assign each number a

sound," Kasibhatla says. "One takes a 'ch' sound and nine takes an 'n' sound, so 1-9 becomes 'China' and so on." Vowels are changed ad hoc to create words that he likens with other association techniques.

At the 2003 WMC, where he finished ninth, the International Federation of Memory Sport gave him the lifelong title "Grand Master of Memory" for remembering a number consisting of 800 digits in one hour; memorising the sequence of eight decks of playing cards in an hour, and reciting the sequence of a single deck in one minute, 51 seconds.

Now based in Singapore, Kasibhatla still competes in WMC events in which competitors face off in 10 disciplines, from "spoken numbers" to "random words" and "names and faces". He hopes to rise to fifth place at this year's WMC in Bahrain on October 23, but he'll have stiff competition. Last year,

As with any sport, competition will hone your capabilities

Tony Buzan, World Memory Championships founder

former world champion Ben Pridmore of England memorised the order of a deck of playing cards in 26.28 seconds, smashing the previous Guinness World Record of 31.16 seconds. In 2002, eight-time world champion Dominic O'Brien successfully recalled 54 inter-shuffled decks of playing cards after seeing each card once. The Briton is reported to have made eight mistakes out of 2,808 cards, but he corrected himself on his way to setting that record.

WMC founder Tony Buzan says the top-ranked Indian's odds of reaching his goal are "good but not great". Kasibhatla's absence from recent championships could affect his chances. "As with any sport, competition will hone your capabilities," Buzan says.

Kasibhatla has grand master status, but his ultimate ranking could depend on the intensity of his pre-competition training. Buzan cites the example of O'Brien, who stops drinking alcohol and trains for

four to five hours daily for eight months before a competition.

Kasibhatla claims to have trained 25,000 people in workshops held in seven countries over the past decade and says he relishes the challenge of teaching bankers how to memorise details of their clients' accounts or advising waiters how to memorise a wine list.

Polytechnic University neuro-psychologist Alma Au May-lan says courses such as the one Kasibhatla offers could improve a person's memory, but says attending a workshop will not produce results. "These are techniques that you've got to continue working at," she says. "I sometimes think there's a correlation between the amount of money you pay and what you get out of it."

Kasibhatla's workshop on the second day attracts 30 participants, who each pay HK\$3,000 to attend the eight-hour session.

He is animated with his class. "The sound for five is 'ke'," he says. "Why? Because if you extend the line on top of the five backwards, it looks like a hook and 'hook' ends in a 'ke' sound, so five is 'ke.'"

When his students seem bewildered, Kasibhatla says: "I hear you say, 'Ah, Nishant, that's too much!' but it's not because now you know what sound five takes and you won't forget."

At lunch, Kasibhatla is asked if he still remembers the 30 numbers from the previous day. He grabs a pen and starts to write them down.

"There may be some mistakes," he says. "If you told me yesterday that you wanted me to recall them today, I could perfectly." Even so he makes only two errors.

Part of the key to good memory is knowing to throw out information you no longer need, he says.

Kasibhatla, who plans to hold another workshop for students in Hong Kong in April, says he's increasingly busy around the region and regrets his travels keep him away from his wife.

So, does he at least remember their wedding anniversary? "November 29," he says, because "two takes a 'd' sound".

But Kasibhatla offers a more straightforward method for remembering that all-important date. "Forget it just once," he says. "Your wife will ensure you never forget it again."

