The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?

All stories have a central character and for my story it is ice cream.

When I was in second grade, my mother asked me to join a Maths program. This was to be during evenings and for some very obvious reasons I was not very enthused. For starters, it meant that my Tennis classes got curtailed. But more importantly not spending those hours with my best buddy Yajur was unthinkable. However, all my kiddy tantrums and attempts to obfuscate quickly evaporated when my mother promised to buy me an ice cream after every class.

So, the ice cream initially was a bribe. I would do the bidding to get the ice cream.

I was always a bright student and all teachers had a good word for me. In addition to getting motivated I also developed a vein to show-off. Therefore, I would put in the extra hours just to be ahead of the class. Somewhere along this journey I really started enjoying the subject. The evening Maths program gave me an opportunity to explore subject at my pace and go beyond the school curriculum. Every day the teacher would give me problems to solve and the sheer thrill of breaking the code and evolving a solution was a huge high. I started looking forward to the adrenalin rush every day and it soon became addictive. Doing this would make me lose all sense of time and existence. The feeling was awesome.

The ice cream soon started coupling with this euphoric feeling. Ice cream and happiness were now interlinked.

I distinctly remember that day in grade four. I had finished the hour-long exam in about half the time. Early completion had its privileges, I walked out onto school grounds and sat on the benches of the sun-drenched courtyard. Everything was perfect and picturesque and I obviously had my ice cream. I do not remember the calendar day but the image and what I felt is still very vivid in my mind. The sheer happiness and contentment was and continues to be awe inspiring.

Symbolism was established. Ice cream had now the power to take me back to that beautiful day into that beautiful mindset.

Along with all adulation came the head heavy attitude. Teachers, parents and friends thought the world of me. Everybody said that I was a ‘natural’ at most subjects. A born genius. I got entrapped in this enamour and stared believing that I could achieve all with little effort. But life has its cruel ways to teach. My first lesson came in Grade five when I could not perform well in the prestigious ‘Aryabhatta’ competition. Our school team lost and I did not finish even in top three. This followed initial days of complete denial, then blaming anything and everything around and even getting critical of destiny. It was only later through self-contemplation I admitted that in the days leading upto the competition, I was lulled into a cocoon of self-adulation, over confidence and very little hard work. It was plain and simple that there was nothing as ‘natural’ and ‘gifted’. Whatever one achieves is by sheer hard work.

Parents and Teachers encouraged and supported me to get over this reversal. But it was my ice cream that I drew solace from. It brought back the memories of the beautiful feeling. The thrill and fun I used to have by engaging in subjects.

Over the years, I have had many ups and downs. However, that lesson of grade five was very profound. I try, though not successfully at all times, to not be carried away by adulation or bogged down by criticism or failure. I derive a lot of satisfaction from losing myself in understanding concepts and solving problems. The joy and satisfaction it brings is immense.

And I still relish my ice cream that bonds this feeling of joy.