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'Others shouldn't decide the woman I ought to be, I should'

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Anu Aga is director of Pune-based engineering firm, Thermax, and is also engaged in social activities such as education for underprivileged children.

What does spirituality mean to you?

Spirituality is the inward journey of discovering who you are and getting in touch with your inner strength. It is about taking responsibility for your life and well being, no matter what happens in the outside world.

How has that journey unfolded for you?

In many people's case, and very much in mine, something not so good takes place in one's life and we are pushed to find the answers. Otherwise we collapse. After such an event, we basically have no choice, we either find inner strength or give in and head for the black hole.

I was in my fifties, coming back from England and landing in Bombay, where my husband was to come and pick me up. There, I learnt that he had had a massive heart attack and died.

We were very close as a couple, we were very good friends. I had to cope with his death, while the Board of the company [Thermax] appointed me as Chairperson. I had never defined myself as a business woman. And the economy was going down. The business began doing very badly. The company shares went within a year from Rs.400 to Rs.36. I felt completely inadequate at leading the company and I was missing my husband badly.

So I decided to go for a vipasana meditation program, sitting for ten days in silence. My husband had always joked about that practice, saying he would love to see me quiet for ten days. In fact, I found it extremely difficult. But every time I considered giving up, I looked at the other 700 people in the course, and thought there was nothing that special about me that would prevent me from completing it as well.

I ended up doing it thrice and I credit it for bringing peace into my life. At times I question my sitting every day for meditation, but I know it is the right thing. It gives me tranquillity, it brings down my negativity, my reactivity and my tendency to judge.

After my first vipasana course, my son died in a car accident, at the age of twenty-five. I could have been completely broken. But with meditation, and a lot of inner work, I managed to come to terms with death as a reality, and find the inner strength to carry on.

I used to be constantly knotted inside, even before my husband's death. Vipasana undid that knot and gave me the strength for instance to take tough decisions within the company, or make a strong stand against the Gujarat government in 2002, even though it was quite risky for my family and the business. With it, I have learnt to live on my own, which had never been the case before. Also, I jumped into the unknown and took responsibilities I had no idea about – for instance when I became the first woman to chair CII's Western Region.

So after those deaths, and with the help of vipasana, I found tremendous energy and inner strength, engaging on the journey towards tranquillity, well-being, with less negativity, less one-upmanship, and the ability to laugh at myself. Indeed, I learnt never to take myself that seriously, since I will not come alive from that experiment called life. And that is also what spirituality is about. Once you realize it and how short life is, why live in fear? Understanding it was a tremendous liberation for me. And I therefore decided to define what kind of a woman I would be and not let others define it, with one simple rule: not harming myself and others. If not, then I should never hesitate to go out and do it. Not everything is perfect of course and coming to terms with death does not mean I never cry or am never sad. But I am not ashamed of grief when it comes, and I am not consumed by it.

Do you believe you are guided and protected by a superior force?

I have a strong faith in God, of someone taking care of me. Maybe it is a crutch but in any case it is a good feeling. Also, I have a sense that my son is taking care of me – not my husband, as he would more likely say that I can look after myself, but my son. He has not talked to me, or come in dreams for instance, there is no evidence of it, but it is a faith.

Besides, I do not feel God has been cruel to me, or ever revolted against what happened. I simply feel that God has opened hundreds of doors and new worlds to me, as He is the one who ultimately decides what my life and destiny should be. He knows what is best.

There is no place here for the question "why". Asking "why" is the worst thing, as there is no answer. I do not ask why my husband or my son died. I know there was a purpose behind it, a larger plan. It is like a mother scolding a child. The child does not know why the mother is unkind, but she knows what is best and does it for the good of the child. So I have that kind of faith in God, that certitude of a larger vision and plan and that whatever happens is for my best, not as a punishment for some horrible past life deed or something of the sort.

Do you believe you have a special mission or purpose in this life?

I am not so sure I managed to figure that one out. But I know I feel better when I am involved in something meaningful. So for my own selfish reasons, I like to spend my time and money on issues that make sense to me.

There was a time, many years ago, when I was only playing cards. My husband was dead against it, feeling I should make a better use of my time. But I was such a rebellious person that I kept telling him off. And if there is one thing I regret it is all those wasted years. On the other hand I understand those women better thanks to it. But I do have a bit of guilt somewhere, thinking of all I could have done.

As a child, I just thought I would marry and have children. I was extremely programmed in that way and never thought if that was what I really wanted. I was lucky to marry a wonderful man after a few boyfriends. I was lucky that he challenged me, pushed me to be independent, to be different. So my journey to become an independent woman started with my marriage.

The only condition was that I would live with his mother, which was not easy as I did not accept her as part of our family. And if you do that, even God would feel like an intruder. So the problem was with me, not with her.

What is spirituality for you in your day to day life?

I do an hour or half an hour of vipasana every day, but ideally, all my life should be meditative and I should not need that daily vipasana session. In the meanwhile, it acts as a reminder, a daily wake-up call to remember what the larger purpose is and to find inner strength.

What is the role of spirituality in your work?

It is about doing my work intensely, with all my heart, but also with a certain degree of detachment, knowing that the world will not collapse without me. My company carried on beautifully without me, my social activities may carry on better after me. So having that kind of sense of humour, that detachment while doing my best all along, is what spirituality means in my work.

These days, I am very involved with human rights (Commonwealth Human Rights) and women rights, and above all, with education projects, in particular for underprivileged children in the slums, through the Akanksha NGO and the Thermax Foundation.

What are your spiritual inspirations?

People and their generosity have been the most tremendous spiritual inspiration. Many say after losing someone dear that the world is a cruel place. For me, it was exactly the contrary. I have experienced unbelievable patience and generosity from so many.

Also, I feel that miracles keep happening every single day, in so many shapes and forms. It is up to me to be open and see them. But once I do, it is such an inspiration. And being open to it is exactly what spirituality is about.

If you were to be reincarnated, what would you like to be reincarnated as?

God knows best what would be good for me. So I would wish for anything that will help me grow. I read in the book "Seat of the Soul" that every being is asked before incarnating about what we wish to learn, what we fear most. So if for instance we fear poverty most, then we are born in the poorest circumstances. In my case, I must have had a tremendous fear of death. Before my husband died, every time something disturbing happened, I would touch wood. Now I know that even if I was to carry the whole jungle, I could not change my destiny.

If there was one question you could ask God, what would it be?

Where are my son & husband?

What is your idea of happiness?

It is about inner well-being. All other things that we usually call happiness are passing, nothing is permanent, everything is transient. So I would only wish for the ability to take everything with equanimity and attain this state of inner peace.