

Sudhir Kakar

Novelist

'I don't care much for happiness'

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Sudhir Kakar is a novelist and a well-known figure in the fields of cultural psychology and the psychology of religion.

What does spirituality mean to you?

I am actually uncomfortable with the word itself. It is mostly a 19th century American concept, which then underwent all sorts of transformations, including through the New Age movements and so on.

To me, it is about a state of mind combining two factors: the "I" being relatively silent – extremely rarely will it be completely silent – and feeling a loving connection. This state of mind can manifest on a large spectrum. It can be about compassion, or tolerance in its most basic forms, and extend up to what the Upanishad describes as a moment when there is no distinction between you and me.

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

There definitely is a force, but it is a very impersonal, much larger one. It is not about protection or guidance of my own self; the universe does not bother that much about me. But there definitely is something there connecting to me, and that I can connect to. I do not know what its exact meaning is, but I know it is there.

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

I do believe that life in general has a purpose, but my or your individual life do not have a particular goal. Life itself, the life force has a purpose, and we are used for it, like tools, without a clue of what this larger purpose is about. I feel too small to comprehend it, but I am definitely glad to be used for it.

All the things I have done in my life are not the purpose itself. I am clueless about it. Also, as Kierkegaard said, one of the problems in life is that you understand it only backwards but you have to live it forwards. Yet, how did things develop the way they did in my life?

As a child, my desires kept changing of course. At eleven or twelve, one dreams of glory, and it then changed; later on sentimental attachments come in, and they also change. Concretely, as a reasonably gifted middle-class child, I had only three choices: medicine, engineering and civil services. The latter was out of the question since my father was in the civil services and I did not want to go and compete with him. I could not stand the sight of blood, so medicine was ruled out. Engineering alone was left and I applied myself to completing it dutifully.

Once finished, I went to Germany to work in a shipyard as an engineer. There, I explored a completely different kind of life. I experienced the joys of philosophy, of reading and so on, far from my parents. I told them I wanted to go for philosophy. They refused, so the compromise was economics.

Once back in India (at IIM-Ahmedabad), I went through a complete identity crisis. The shift away from my life in Germany, spending nights drinking and discussing the meaning of life was too unsettling. I was dreaming of becoming a movie-director and attending film school, which was a crazy idea.

By chance though, one of the greatest psychologists in the world happened to be my neighbour. Erik Erikson had come to Ahmedabad to study Gandhi. He was lonely as well, so we would sit for hours and talk in German. I was going through a complete identity crisis and sitting with the very person who had invented that concept. I was so lucky therefore not to be labelled pathological but rather as going through something very normal.

The day he left for Delhi, I had a sort of epiphany and discovered that what I actually wanted to do was the same as him. Taking the train to join him before he would fly out of India would have been too long. I would have missed him. But luck – or something else— had it that the Ford Representative was in town, flying back that night in his plane. He agreed to take me on board.

We landed at 11pm and I went straight to Erikson's hotel room, knocking at his door. He was very surprised obviously. I told him about my epiphany. He first reminded me I had not studied psychology. But then he said, "neither have I".

So he suggested I complete my doctorate and join him at Harvard, as an assistant. From that moment on, I felt I had a goal. I diligently finished my thesis and went to join him.

When I think about it now, I wonder why such a famous professor would take me, a seemingly crazy Indian. He must have seen something in me that I had no idea about, something I had not seen, and he trusted his intuition. And of course it completely changed my life.

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

I would not say I have reached the heights of it, but definitely the base camp. The "I-ness" can get lost in a variety of ways, for instance through arts or music. But those experiences become spiritual only if accompanied by a loving connection. Even the greatest works of art do not necessarily have it.

Music actually is potentially the most spiritual of all arts, as it touches and moves emotions so much more. Some of the religious and mystical practices – for instance shamanic journeys and other states of altered consciousness – may actually not be spiritual either, as they do not necessarily involve that loving feeling. Empathy, when we both see and love the person, is such a moment. Love-making is mostly not spiritual, but at times, just after it, when bodies are not intertwined anymore, but souls still are, it can be highly spiritual.

So spirituality can be experienced in many ways, which may be called divine – when something transcends my body, my mind, all of me.

Some people associate it to the inner voice. I am actually very cautious about it. Inner voice comes from the depths of our unconscious (and spirituality probably originates from the deepest layer of all) but we never know from which layer. We may therefore be misguided by it, mistakenly taking our wishes and desires for an expression of our higher good and spiritual path. So we need to be very conscious and cautious about it. The same goes for dreams – some have a large spiritual material, while many are simply about wishful content.

People also at times associate spirituality with paranormal experiences and try to test it in university labs, with students sitting in separate rooms for instance, and testing their telepathic powers. That can't ever work, since spirituality exists where there is a strong emotional element. Moments like birth, death, and other emotionally charged experiences. I doubt for instance that someone not able to have strong emotions could feel the spiritual basis of his or her life.

What is the role of spirituality in your work?

My first reaction would be to say none at all. When thinking about it more, I would have to acknowledge a few things. First, even though I was always convinced my books were about the psychological angle of a topic, I must notice that so many of them were concerned with religion and spirituality – "The Analyst and the Mystic" for instance, or "Shamans, Mystics and Doctors". So there has often been a spiritual aspect to my work, which I was not conscious about, an unconscious engagement. If you look at Freud's work, you would have to notice something similar: even though he is perceived as anti-religious, he actually wrote so much about it, that it must have played an important role for him.

Another manifestation of spirituality related to my work is the feeling of transcendence. I have experienced the latter through arts, nature, love but the most reliable way has been through my writing. When I write, at times though rarely of course, I feel as though I am not the one writing.

Even V.S. Naipaul, the most rationalist of all writers (he despises music saying it is only for people who cannot think) confesses it: his best pieces come from outside himself. So there is something not psychological, something beyond me, that is not me, and I am connected to it in those moments.

These days I do much less psychoanalytical work with patients, but when it involves loving empathy, it can be called spiritual. Actually, I would argue that all theories can stay where they are, empathy is much, much more important when doing that kind of work. It is the basis of it all.

Can you tell us about a unique experience that changed or shaped your spiritual beliefs?

I haven't had an experience I would single out as the turning point. I have unfortunately not been Saint Paul on the road to Damascus – which would have been wonderful, as those moments are so dramatic. Instead of one such trauma, it has been an accumulation of little ones that have shaped my understanding.

And now, I have become much more conscious of the spiritual dimension. I finally understood that instead of moving around it, I should face it, relate to it, deal with it consciously.

What have been your main spiritual inspirations?

We all are a product of our parents' influence. And in my case, they were quite contradictory in their approach. My father was a complete rationalistic and agnostic person – not an atheist though. He knew there was something there, but it disturbed his rational sense and therefore preferred not to deal with it. In particular, he thought spirituality is one of the reasons India was always dominated as a country and so on.

My mother on the other hand was very religious and quite involved with rituals. I used to dismiss both as nonsense and blind faith, without understanding that they can actually be a way of establishing a connection to that transcending force. I did not see back then the underlying love that can be part of it.

Today, even though I obviously have not lost my critical edge, I can see the beauty in religion and spirituality. Maybe as both my mother and father have been in me, her essence is now coming up more and more to the surface as I age. We all grow towards the eternal feminine, don't we? And that eternal is so much more spiritual.

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

I would love to be a young spoiled upper class Indian woman – I would then be both protected and free!

Of course it would be wonderful to believe in reincarnation – as long as we go up the ladder. No one would want to come back as a street dog in India for instance... But actually it is not a concept that really talks to me. At least I do not believe in the idea of an individual soul surviving. I can see energy being released when passing away, and going into the force, merging with it. But I have no idea what happens thereafter. Something survives, but not individuality.

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

I do not believe in God, but was I able to ask a question to that larger force, I would say: what is the larger purpose of it all? I would do so, with the conviction and certainty that I would not understand the answer. And was I to understand it, the larger purpose and its power would be diminished. That is why I'd actually rather not know it.

What is your idea of happiness?

There are so many ways to answer this question. Good digestion and bad memory maybe?

In fact, I do not care much for happiness. Not that I want to be miserable, but a bit of suffering is good too. It often is way too underestimated. You would have never had a Buddha had unhappiness not been there in the first place. You do not grow from happiness; you grow from effort, from suffering. So on the overall, I am very well where I am now, I am not sure I wish for anything different or that it could get any better.