

# Rajiv Mehrotra

Student of Dalai Lama

'I often feel trapped in the web of samsara'

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**Rajiv Mehrotra has been a familiar face on public television. A personal student of the Dalai Lama, he also heads the Foundation for Universal Responsibility of His Holiness the Dalai Lama.**

## **\*What does spirituality mean to you?**

The first image that comes to my mind is that of a monk wearing ochre colours, with great simplicity, great joy, and great compassion. The processes of cultivating these while still in samsara, is what spirituality means to me.

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

It manifests mostly in my failure to get there! I neither wear ochre, nor am I simple, nor am I able to live as austere a life as I would like to or should. I feel deeply caught in the web of samsara, and the more I try to break out of it, the more the web sticks to me and traps me. So I am trying to be patient and learn not to try too hard, to accept and to surrender, keeping my mind in check when it constantly says "break through". I try to follow His Holiness' advice when he keeps reminding me to "practice, practice, practice".

It is fine to study the scriptures and develop an intellectual understanding, but it must be deeply internalized. Inspired by the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, I therefore try to combine practices that

cultivate reason and logic on the one hand, and appropriate emotions on the other. If we only do the first, and attain some deep intellectual understanding or even some peace with an illusion of equilibrium and equanimity, it all goes out of the window the moment we are exposed to a really difficult situation. On the other hand, we may get deeply emotionally attached to an idea, a philosophy, a master, or a deity, which can be a good starting point; but unless it is also reinforced by reason and logic, it can easily crumble.

I find myself less at ease with the first category of practice – following, remembering, and understanding the sutras. I am more successful working with emotions. For example, one of the practices of cultivating compassion involves visualizing one's mother, so that the emotion of unselfish love develops. Holding onto this emotion, you visualize someone you feel neutral about and transfer that feeling of love to that person. You then attempt to do the same with a person you are upset with, and begin to try and feel love and compassion for the "enemy". I first saw a very powerful implementation of this principle in the early eighties, on a trip to Dharamsala, when I watched Tibetans using prayer mats that said "pray for the Chinese".

I am several lifetimes away from significantly achieving these stages of insight and transformation but I am attempting to do so. Many mornings, I sit and nothing happens, the mind is dull and dead. Often I give up in frustration and despair, wondering why it takes so long and I feel I am getting nowhere. It is a continuous struggle, a learning process, a journey.

One of the reasons I feel so close both to Ramakrishna and to the Dalai Lama is their acknowledgment of a process, a journey. Many narrow spiritual masters claim an enlightening epiphany and then proceed to teach. Instead, those ancient traditions encourage learning and practice to the last day of one's life, in fact even during the process. Till his last days, when he was dying of cancer, Ramakrishna was still crying "Ma, Ma, Ma", seeking union with the Goddess Kali. Although many of the sadhanas spontaneously came to him, he constantly sought to expand and intensify his experience. Similarly, to this day, the Dalai Lama practices five or six hours every day, receiving teachings from a variety of lamas, both from his and other traditions.

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

The Buddhist doctrine says that such a protective or guiding force is actually a projection of our minds. And because this sense of protection and guidance is not consistent and tends to fluctuate, I am tempted to agree with the Buddhist view. On the other hand, I feel that the great Masters and the divine, if one believes in it, constantly shower us with grace. It is just that our antennas or receptors are too polluted and blocked to receive it.

Given the encounters and experiences I have had, I recognize I have actually been deeply blessed, deeply privileged and yet, hopelessly unworthy. I feel millions of lifetimes away from the masters with whom I have interacted and who have been so generous with their time and teachings. I often wonder why I have not been able to do anything truly significant with all those blessings.

Talking about a protective force though, I may share here a personal experience that resonates with the question. When I started doing some practice related to emptiness, it violently backfired. I started experiencing a deep unarticulated anxiety for long periods of time, with no external circumstances justifying it. His Holiness felt it was related to an imperfect practice. I come from the Hindu tradition, in which there is a strong belief in Atman, an ultimate presence, that gives us a deep sense of comfort and solidity, even if it may be an illusion. So if one misunderstands emptiness as the void, it can create

a sense of vacuous fear. And it does raise the question - could the teachings and practices previously almost exclusively taught to monks be appropriate for people outside monasteries, who live in samsara?

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

I have not reached a stage at which I can honestly claim to have an archetypal selfless mission to change the world out of pure altruism. A strong element of the self intrudes. To be able to go beyond this, would be a genuine transcendental shift.

I feel that the most fundamental and real mission is to be able to explicitly and directly touch and transform human lives. The work I do managing two NGO's, the workshops, the books, the documentary films I am involved with obviously give me some satisfaction. But it somehow feels as if I have yet to penetrate or impact the core of the human condition, of human suffering. I often think of this magnificent visit of the Dalai Lama to Baba Amte's ashram. At the end of it, both men embraced and wept. His Holiness whispered "you practice what I preach". Baba Amte of course felt it was the other way around. If I am able to go beyond the self to truly work for other people, it will be a real transcendental mission. I would have loved to travel as a mendicant. I crave a fundamental spiritual transformation at the core, but somehow I lack the courage and the confidence to go for it. I am deeply attached to my physical comforts and the love of the people I share my life with. So I am trying to evolve a middle path. The greatness of a Gandhi, a Mother Teresa or a Baba Amte lies in their ability to go beyond these needs and do what needs to be done. In my case, it has come in the way!

### **What is the role of spirituality in your work?**

It basically has no overwhelming conscious presence in my activities. And even though I delve into such themes in my work it does not mean I have attained any real, enduring "spiritual" qualities. Labels are dangerous because we tend to believe in them, instead of working to truly reach deeply into the depths of self understanding and transcendence. Instead, I often feel trapped in the web of samsara.

### **Can you share a unique experience that changed or shaped your spiritual beliefs?**

I have had a few such moments. When they were happening, they felt like the most natural, inevitable processes. I have never had a singular cataclysmic or cathartic experience, which in an instant has transformed my life. When I first met the Dalai Lama for instance, it felt like the most natural, inevitable thing - as if I had just met my long lost elder brother. And I am a little envious of those who have experienced these sorts of moments. Instead, it's been rather like a roller-coaster, moving a few small steps ahead then slipping back, and the moment I would recognize some progress, I would fear it would disappear.

It all began when I was an undergraduate at Oxford. I plunged in at the deep end of the university's subculture, of those who were into art, poetry, and writing - expanding their creative universe. I did a lot of theater. Those were very self-indulgent, exhilarating and intense times. By the end of three years, I felt drained and out of synch with an environment and culture that was not fundamentally my own and I had foolishly sought to embrace. My emotional reflexes were at odds with those around me. I needed to go back home to my roots, to try and understand them and myself.

On my return to India I spent some time in Rishikesh with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, who was the big name at that time, with Transcendental Meditation. I completed a teachers training course. I spent a

month in Pondicherry, a spell with the monks at The Ramakrishna Mission and so on. Through what then seemed a series of coincidences I met His Holiness the Dalai Lama. I was deeply privileged that he accepted me as a personal student – a "chela". It has gradually opened up a new universe for me, even though I often feel unworthy of the time and affection he has showered on me. In 1989, when he received the Nobel Peace Prize, I accompanied him to Oslo for the ceremony. With a part of the proceeds of the Prize he started the Foundation for Universal Responsibility. I am privileged to serve my teacher under its umbrella. The vision for the Foundation is to further the agendas of His Holiness beyond those of his role as a pre-eminent Buddhist leader or the issue of Tibet. It is a world view deeply committed to the celebration of diversity and the cultivation of a sense of Universal Responsibility.

### **What have been your main spiritual inspirations?**

There have been many, but His Holiness the Dalai Lama has been my pre-eminent teacher for more than twenty five years, and the Ramakrishna Mission has been the pre-eminent Sangha [community]. What I deeply appreciate in both is the articulation of specific sadhanas, or practical techniques and processes to facilitate one's spiritual evolution. Unlike recent trends that have commercialized – even patented – spirituality promising "enlightenment over a weekend".

When I was a child, my father would take me to the lectures of Swami Ranganathananda, then just a young monk of The Ramakrishna Mission (he became its head later on). I understood very little intellectually and was not aware of any significant impact that it had on my life at that time. But when I came back from England, my journey took me back to him. I felt a deep sense of connection with him as if getting flashbacks of insight and understanding. He was very patient, very kind and generous with his time, directing me towards the path of Sri Ramakrishna. He gave me a formal initiation and encouraged me to use the media space I had access to as a television anchor and film maker to further an authentic spirituality. Later on, his successor Swami Gahanna was also a beautiful inspiration. One day I went to see him with my book on Ramakrishna, intending to ask him to write the preface. He gently looked at me, held my gaze silently for what seemed both an instant and an eternity and finally whispered "fear not fear". That was my only verbal communication with him, ever! And it was exactly what I needed to hear at the time.

B.K.S. Iyengar, is another great master I have been privileged to meet. I have known him for about twenty five years. I am amazed how at the age of 90, he still performs every single asana he teaches. Two years ago, he mentioned, he would stop conducting regular yoga classes and only supervise remedial yoga, so that he could spend more time on his own practice : 'I am 88 years' old, there are still parts of my body my consciousness has not reached". What a splendid and definitive articulation of his goal and journey! During one of my recent conversations, I asked him about it and he simply stated "it has now reached every part of my body". Sometimes, when we are on the path, we feel obliged to be modest about what we understand or at the other extreme we boast about seeing the light. True masters have this amazing ability to be very matter of fact about their attainments – both humble and self confident.

What excited and inspired me in all of them is the documentation and articulation of the sadhana, of the unending spiritual journey and quest. This is contrary to the trend we observe these days with the need for quick fix – a weekend course to enlightenment, three days of training to become a past life regression therapist, a few weekends to become a "healer". I fear it is dangerous, as is the corporatization of spirituality where ancient techniques are patented and taught for a fee. There is a similar problem with mass yoga classes on television. It is at the core of Iyengar's criticism of Swami

Ramdev's approach. Yoga is very individualized, very personal, and if for instance you start doing Bhastrika after watching it on television, someone with a hernia could die. I celebrate the democratization of Yoga achieved by Swami Ramdev but it must be personalized.

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

As a monk in the Ramakrishna Mission with a master of the caliber of The Dalai Lama or Sri Ramakrishna.

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

Why is there suffering on this planet and what are You doing about it?

**What is your idea of happiness?**

I try not to be obsessed with it. I fear the word happiness because it has been corrupted, it is now usually associated with transitory experiences which inevitably lead to unhappiness. Instead, I would wish for the state of mind of a Baba Amte, or a Mother Teresa or a Dalai Lama, people who give themselves up to serving other people. They radiate such a sense of infectious joy that you too feel blissful in their presence. In such a state, I would have transcended the sense of self, the obsession about my happiness, my spirituality and so on. I would be so involved in trying to create the well being of others that it would give me a sublime level of equanimity.