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'Dissatisfaction should always be there; it keeps you going'

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N. Enkhbayar has been the President of Mongolia since 2005. Mongolia's strong Buddhist tradition has implied rich cultural and historical ties with India.

What does spirituality mean to you?

I spent my student years in Moscow, where finding the meaning of life is the most common topic of conversation. Russians love asking metaphysical questions. As I was trying to find answers too, I felt I should go back and look at my roots, explore Mongolian culture and identity. This is how I really discovered the beautiful world of Buddhism, and through it, developed my understanding of spirituality. Rather than escaping the world to find peace and quiet in other realms, it is for me very much about dealing with this reality, and trying to transform it, helping others, fueled by a fundamental feeling of guilt for not doing enough. So spirituality is about finding my own identity, understanding who I am and where I come from, finding the right place for me here and now, embracing the challenges of the present while forming a vision for what tomorrow ought to be.

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

I would not talk of a mysterious external force, but I have definitely experienced some kind of guidance. It mostly came from Buddhism and my understanding of it. At times, people in Mongolia, especially politicians, say that my involvement with Buddhism – erecting monuments or bringing Buddhist relics etc. – has helped my career, bringing blessings to it. But I do not think it works that way. Buddhism helped me understand who I am and why I am here, what is good and what is wrong, the law of causality and karma, and therefore it acted as a guiding force in building my life. It helped me focus on fulfilling my duties, and understand that beyond my duty, things will be taken care of by God, in the way they are meant to be.

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

In Mahayana Buddhism, which prevails in Mongolia, there is the ideal of Bodhisattva, a being who achieved enlightenment and yet incarnates again in order to help others. Instead of leaving and simply finding peace, he comes and gets involved in worldly actions, into difficult and stressful situations. Those who are not afraid of doing so are true spiritual beings. The Bodhisattva is a spiritual ideal, attained by someone like the Dalai Lama for instance. But for all of us, I believe that assisting others is at the core of our purpose as human beings. We have that very rare chance and privilege to be born as humans – Buddhist scriptures compare it with the probability of a grain of rice falling on a needle's head – and I do not think it is only about using it to enjoy food, drinks and so on. It is about doing for others.

As the eldest child in the family, my parents always implied I had to take care of my youngest sisters and of the house, that I had to be actively responsible without their asking. By extension, it helped me feel responsible for my friends, then for society and for my country. Entering politics, becoming a statesman was the way to fulfill that mission.

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

I have this understanding that spirituality does not mean being satisfied with oneself, but rather constantly feeling guilty of not doing enough, both to improve myself and others' lives. So daily spirituality is first and foremost to constantly be very critical of myself. Some people have this destiny that makes them feel more responsible for what is happening in their family, or society, or country. And when such is the feeling, guilt comes every time something goes wrong as you feel you should have done something to prevent it; you feel you have to constantly work to improve the situation and somehow influence things. Many people think of spirituality as something that will relieve them from life's stress, that will give them quiet and peace. For me it is the contrary, it is a daily prompting into action, responsibility and stress.

I do pray though, in mornings and evenings. It is more like a routine most of the time. But at times of pain, it becomes very real and powerful. I experienced it once for instance, when prayer prompted me to throw up, as if it enabled a deep cleansing of the body and mind. Then it definitely is not a routine! When facing some real difficulty or physical pain, or psychological issue, prayer may make you feel the pain even more acutely – but then it is the most cleansing experience.

What is the role of spirituality in your work?

It manifests broadly in three different ways. First of all, at the essence level, spirituality as I said is not about disconnecting oneself from reality but very much about being part of it and acting within it. Second, spirituality is about transforming this reality, improving it, and helping others. This is the essence of my work as a politician and statesman. Thirdly, spirituality is about the awareness of my imperfection, about the guilt associated with not doing as much and as well as one ought to do. As a politician, I have reached the three highest positions possible in Mongolia [Speaker, Prime Minister & President] and yet I am so far from ever being satisfied. When I see how poor the country is, I feel so guilty not to have been able to solve the problems. Of course I know it requires time, people need to be educated, corruption combated, infrastructures and healthcare systems need to be put in place. But that very special feeling of dissatisfaction is always there. And in fact, it should always be there. Thanks to it one keeps doing, one keeps developing, initiating and improving.

Of course compromises are needed at times. We never act on our own and we have to understand it. Very rarely does a situation actually generate a consensus. And one step will never be enough to solve all problems. Life is a direction, a movement, a process made of many steps. Once you understand it, you just try to keep that direction, and find compromises that would not endanger it.

Then, when difficult moments happen – and of course in politics they are rife – I tend to blame myself first and foremost. I see no point in blaming others, it would never get me out of trouble. And I also know that the more one tries to do and change, the strongest the attacks and resistance, but also the more interesting and enriching the path.

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

When I was 26 years' old, and earnestly looking for answers to the meaning of life, I met a lama, who helped me find those answers and therefore shaped significantly the rest of my life. It was 1982 and back then, in a Communist country, it was still forbidden to be close to religion. But notwithstanding those restrictions, his teachings shaped my understanding of life and spirituality, of what is right and what is wrong, of one's responsibilities in the world and what my life should be about. I noticed that great teachers have this capability to explain the most complex things in the simplest ways and that is how he was. I do not believe that this kind of encounter happens by chance. It comes when we are ready for it and back then I was really ready for it. At every moment of our life, we are being prepared to take the next step. Sometimes we have to do much, sometimes events gradually bring us to that step, but no matter what, when time comes for that step to be taken, we shouldn't miss it. And life is this process, building it one brick at a time. Of course often we would rather have everything happen instantaneously; especially as politicians we are tempted to make such pledges. Many will promise "choose me and tomorrow will be different", in order to be elected. That is so wrong and dangerous. I try not to use that kind of cheap tricks. One has to explain that hard work and long term work are needed. But then I have to show the example, be consistent with my values, constantly try to further and accomplish my goals – in line with the teachings of that lama.

What have been your main spiritual inspirations?

In Mongolia, both Buddhism and Shamanism are prevalent influences and beliefs. Many Mongols have lineages of shamans in their families and pursue those traditions. Many politicians also often use the help of shamans to reach some objectives or manipulate situations. I do not think it is the most recommendable behavior though – one should simply do his duty and be responsible for one's actions,

instead of trying to find such help from the outside. Besides, unlike monotheist religions or Buddhism for instance, shamanism is not based on books. And as I am so attracted to books and feel they are so fundamental, I have been more drawn to Buddhism.

In fact, Buddhism has been traditionally prevalent in my family. Some of its members had been lamas, spending time in Tibet, becoming Tibetan-Mongolian traditional doctors. They were then arrested and repressed [by the Communist regime], their books were confiscated. When growing up, my parents would show me their pictures and some Buddhist artifacts they had left. I instinctively felt the need to defend them, and through them, to defend the Mongolian culture. It was not such a conscious effort, but somehow I felt there was no reason to be ashamed or punished for one's heritage and beliefs, quite the contrary.

Talking about spiritual inspirations, as the place where Buddhism originated, India has also played an important role both for me and for Mongols in general. It is for us a very special and sacred land where we come to engage with a powerful and spiritual nation, to be blessed by its air, rivers, mountains and so on. In many ordinary Mongolian families you will find some water from the Ganges, or some sand from the Nalanda monastery's ruins. Many Mongols come to receive His Holiness the Dalai Lama's blessings or attend his teachings. India is a spiritual inspiration in all of our minds. Since 1987, I visited India a number of times and whether in Bodgaya or Dharamsala or Varanasi, every visit was a precious opportunity to get nourished, to find energy and inner power, to be encouraged and feel on the right path.

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

As someone with a rich spiritual life, able to assist others all along.

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

I believe that I have to fulfil my duty, and beyond that, God takes care of things. So the idea of asking a question is actually foreign to me. I should stick to my duties and for the rest, God does what is meant to be done.

What is your idea of happiness?

There is one kind of happiness that comes and goes, we have all tasted it. From the moment we are born, we constantly crave for things that are supposed to make us happy. It creates constant frustration and the moment we reach the object of our desire, unhappiness comes again, no matter what. So I would talk about another kind of happiness, about the inborn potential for inner peace and contentment. We can strive for it though we may never achieve it. But it is not that critical as at least, along the way, it enables us to learn, develop and grow. The process is what matters, aspiring for it gives us a direction that enables us to mature, develop and honour our potential.