

# S.H. Raza

Artist

'Human experience is based on happiness and tragedies'

Sat Feb 20 2010



**S. H. Raza is an artist. He has been awarded the Padma Shri and Padma Bhushan**

**What does spirituality mean to you?**

It is about going beyond the visual aspect of nature. The visual reality cannot compare with the whole realm of imagination. Spirituality may spring from reality, but to perceive it one must close the eyes. You start with a vision of reality and when the thought process stops, you enter a different domain, a new world of your own.

How many people can come to that stage – having painted a nude, a portrait, a landscape or God knows what, then reach a point where the landscape in its visual aspect gets undermined and a different experience comes out?

Many of us who are not figurative artists emerge from the study of life and with the process of abstraction go towards the spiritual side.

You see, just a beautiful woman is not enough for a man. Her personality matters also tremendously. In painting, what do you do? If you study a landscape or a woman, you have to go beyond the obvious, you have to sublimate it. It's about touching the essence and developing a concrete work out of this imaginative process when you go beyond the reality.

**You start your work every day with a prayer, don't you?**

I do. And when I finish my work, I thank God for giving me the imagination to have done so. I like going to places like temples, mosques and other so-called places of God.

**What is God for you?**

It is an endless power, which we can find in our heart, mind and being and which despite the fact we have never seen It, exists. There is a strange logic which reveals itself all the time in life, in nature, proving Its existence as if even a room where I work and a painting on which I work have been given to me by God. The painting would not have done well if He had not given Its blessings. For me, it is a mysterious unknown, which is confirmed every day, every moment. Today, at the end of my life, I am convinced about Its reality.

**Where you always convinced about it?**

It was first an idea conveyed by my parents, teachers and a few others. Over time it became mine. When I go to a temple, or have a Ganeshmurti, or a Shivamurti, I feel it is the center of the universe, I feel it is a concentration of heart and mind towards something which is immensely important to me. I thank God both when I am sad and when I am happy. You can call it a belief or a state of mind or whatever you like, but for me He exists.

**When you see suffering in the world, do you ask and wonder where is God?**

No. I am inclined to think it is an error of humanity and a misunderstanding of life, of the directions given by God. Suffering happens because not everyone is capable of understanding. Human beings make mistakes. See, Christ was killed. Mahatma Gandhi was killed. The whole human experience is based on happiness and tragedies.

**Do you see God's imprint in the way your life has unfolded, is there such a thing as destiny?**

No, I feel God has given intelligence, heart and power to every human being. Then it is up to us to choose what use to make of it. We may make mistakes, and it is our own responsibility. When something happy happens in my life, I thank Him, and when something difficult happens, I ask for His protection.

**Where there moments when His protection did not come?**

No, when I prayed for Him, He was there, always. On the overall, I feel there is a logic in the good and bad happening in our lives. But we have to make our own decisions. We have to take responsibility for what happens.

**Was it God who gave you the tools to become a painter?**

Yes, but He also gave me the freedom to use them or not. I take the responsibility for what I do and don't do. He is there to guide me.

**Also, are you acting as a conduit for Him?**

Yes, this is the power we have when taking initiatives. Without His help and appreciation I would not been able to do all I have done. His divine presence, His help are necessary.

**When you were a child, did you know you would become a painter?**

As a child, I had no idea about painting. I was a very tortured and unhappy child. I profoundly disliked school and would often weep on my way to it. Luckily, some teachers assisted and guided me.

**So how did painting happen?**

My drawing teacher, Mr. Rathore, thought I was talented for it. He convinced my father I should study it further. My father who was supposed to retire at that point, decided to continue working in order to finance my studies in Nagpur. I still had no idea what painting was. I studied it for two years. I was liked by everyone around and it was very nice. I became a drawing teacher after this and got a scholarship to study at the JJ School of Arts in Bombay. There, I had the first perception of what painting could be. But at the time, it was very difficult to choose painting as my main activity. Having studied French, I got a scholarship to the Beaux-Arts in Paris and left for France in 1950. Three years passed quickly. I got an extension. Galerie de Vinci presented me on rue de Seine. I happened to be voted as the recipient of the Prix de la Critique, the first Indian artist ever. And this changed my life. I stayed there ever since.

**Was it God's doing?**

It was His doing indeed. I had kept on praying all along. But you always, always have to take responsibility for your life. You cannot only say that all depends on Him and do nothing. You have to work. You have to be active.

**Your family is Muslim, when did you discover the Upanishads?**

Yes, my parents were Muslim but they never objected to my going to temples and Hindu rituals, or reading Hindu texts.

**Do you think that each one of us has a specific mission in life?**

Yes, but it is a mission given by us, not by God. He will not say do this or do that. He has given you the gift of perception, thinking, feeling. You have to find your mission yourself.

**Having an impact on others' feelings, thoughts etc. through your painting is important?**

What is more important to me are my own feelings, my own thoughts.

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

At every stage of life, I have different questions. At this moment, I pray to Him for time and health. When I get up, I am not sure I won't fall down within a few steps.

**If there were such a thing as reincarnation, what would you choose for your next birth?**

I would like to be born in India again and do things I have not been able to do in this life – paint better, write and try to see that institutions are built up to encourage the arts, giving a more prominent importance to culture than to money. So many people focus on money and forget more important things.

I may consider myself an unpretentious person. I have worked hard but I have no pretense beyond what I have. I hear of the prices my paintings have reached in all sorts of places. But I am so sad when I read articles about it, as I realize there is hardly a line about whatever Raza is doing in his work! Who cares about those prices. It's all sensationalism.

**What is your idea of happiness?**

Having done a good human act. Having done a good painting. Using my resources in an intelligent manner, which could become an example for others.

**Have you achieved contentment?**

Yes, in spite of difficulties and certain things that have not worked out, I have the satisfaction of having done what I wanted to. And to feel that I may have brought a certain contribution to Indian art. It is also deeply touching to see the affection and care I receive when coming to India.

**When things didn't work, does it mean God didn't want it to work for some reason?**

I don't think that way. When things don't work, it is our fault, as humans. We have to solve our own problems. God is giving Its blessings to anyone who wants to work honestly.