

Padma Bhushan

Chairman

'My conscience is my guide'

Sun May 24 2009



Padma Bhushan recipient S. K. Misra is Chairman of INTACH (Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage).

What does spirituality mean to you?

It essentially means conducting my life according to what is best in the scriptures, meaning the basic principles of what one shall and shan't do. It is not about adherence to ritualism, even though I believe in religions, with the conviction that all present a different path to the same end-goal.

How does it manifest in your day-to-day life?

I try to keep to the correct path in my dealings with fellow beings. My conscience is my guide. I spent more than fifty years in a variety of public responsibilities in the government, in the public sector and now in an NGO, and have often been under tremendous pressure from some who tried to corrupt me or force me to do certain things contrary to my convictions. I can proudly say that I did not bend, even though it sometimes meant great suffering and going through some really difficult times.

But I felt that taking that path pays. For instance, when I was handling Tourism in Haryana, I set up all those tourism complexes. I never took advantage of it to get free meals, bring friends etc. The result was that people down the line in the hierarchy also did not do it. And gradually a certain pride and efficiency came in, which increased the market value of all those places, as people got to know that they were "cleaner" and efficiently run.

At such times of challenges, where do you find the energy, where is your anchor?

First of all, I have always had tremendous faith in myself. I am willing to suffer and I will not compromise as far as the basics are concerned. I had running battles with Ministers and all sorts of officials.

During the Janta government for instance, my house was raided, my phones were bugged, I had so many inquiries against me, I was to be abruptly transferred and I faced all this, knowing I had done nothing wrong. Two things sustained me: the firm belief that this cannot last for long. Ultimately I will be vindicated, ultimately good triumphs. And I have to say, it did – I was vindicated. Secondly, I took recourse to reading the Gita: "do your duty regardless of the consequences" – that has been my guiding principle throughout life, as a karam yogi.

Some people had falsely deposed against me. But I did not harbour hate against them and when I was later on in a position to take revenge, I did not do so. I could have crushed them. But I thought it was simply human frailty, they had deposed against me to save themselves.

In that context, do you feel there is such a thing as destiny?

I believe in destiny in the sense that there is some power above protecting me. I first got a sense of that in 1958, with a simple incident that could have been fatal. I was then posted in Punjab. I had acquired a gun and was playing with it thinking it was not loaded, I pushed the trigger on my temple and suddenly a bullet fell down from the magazine. People would have wondered why I had committed suicide...

Later on, I went next to a waterfall and fell into the water, five feet away from it, I hit a boulder, which got me stuck and saved me, until people managed to come and rescue me. Again I was saved...

Also, the way things unfolded in my public career were often very serendipitous, leading to significant events I could have never fathomed. For instance, as I was Chairman of the India Tourism and Development Corporation, I was having a running battle with the Minister. I was refusing to do what he wanted me to do. I had suspended someone completely corrupt and was getting constant calls from the Ministry to reinstate him. I did nothing. The Secretary gave me a damning report. It went up to the Prime Minister. I had brought the ITDC from loss to profit. So Mrs. Gandhi decided I would continue there for two years. But the Minister said "over my dead body". She suggested I choose another posting. Among other things I became in charge of the Festival of India, which took me to New York. This in turn led to my daughter studying at the Fashion Institute there, where she met her husband. So it was all meant to be in this nice way.

If there is such protection and guidance, who does it?

I believe there is a superior controlling Force in the universe, though I cannot define It.

What is your interaction with that Force?

It is based on my conscience, on trying to do the right thing. The vibrations coming from it are those that really protect me. Had I been evil, negative forces would have ultimately destroyed me.

Apart from the Gita, what have been your spiritual inspirations?

Christian theology, as I was brought up in a Catholic school. I knew the scriptures so well and many thought I would become a priest. But I am a Hindu and always took pride in it. I was raised by my aunt as my mother died when I was three years' old. She would go to the Ganga and take a bath, which I regularly did with her, as much as the pujas and other rituals that she would engage in. Today, I do not practice any rituals but when in a religious place, I often close my eyes for a couple of minutes, and pray, especially for the well being of those around me.

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

I believe every person ought to have a specific purpose in life. I would not regret the death of a person if I found that his life had been purposeless. In what way had he contributed to society?

For me, it has been about being in a position where as a result of my actions I am able to improve certain lives. I want to leave something behind, which has had an impact on the community or a section of the community. And when I go, I would wish for people to feel my absence, and say that yes, things have been done.

I am particularly proud of the school for villagers I established from scratch, and which opened up so many opportunities they would otherwise never had. Or when Secretary of Tourism of India, I did not want to only focus on generating foreign exchange. I thought we also ought to do something for the crafts people. So we established the Surajkund Crafts Mela, where crafts people could come and directly sell their products – and which has been a continuous success for twenty years.

These days, with INTACH, it is about the preservation of heritage and the creation of awareness. My basic mission is to spread the message across the country, and not only within urban centers but also in the rural areas, especially to the youth. The community benefits from preserving heritage but it can only happen if they get sensitised. The government's involvement is definitely not enough. Young people for instance should understand what it means for potential jobs, and stop inscribing their names on monuments, or throw cans and trash everywhere.

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

My first instinct is to ask why there is so much misery and suffering, if He is a benign God. But immediately I feel there is a certain reason for all this – karma.

Someone extremely corrupt may not go to jail, but who knows what illness comes to him and so on. It would be interesting to study the lives of those who have achieved material success through shady ways, and see the real quality of their private lives.

If you were to be reincarnated, what would you choose?

I would be anywhere and in any capacity, as long as I can make an impact for the good. In this life I have really no regret. I feel that whatever I have been given, I have somehow handled in a way that brought me satisfaction.

What is your idea of happiness?

To improve myself, to live within my conscience, not to do anything that would give me sleepless nights, that would have people start whispering about me. Basically, peace of mind is most important.

I now got the Padma Bhushan for instance. Many people have been saying for years that I should get it. My answer was that I would rather people ask why hasn't he got it yet, rather than why has he got it.