

Madhu Trehan

Author

'The biggest sin is to think the way we were always taught'

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Madhu Trehan is an author and former journalist.

What does spirituality mean to you?

It is a daily struggle, minute by minute.

When I wake up in the morning, my first disciplined thought is about what I will aspire for that day; and it usually is the same: how will I witness and watch my shenpa?

Whenever someone creates a situation which feels provocative to you, to which you would have a knee-jerk response, shenpa is not the anger itself, but the feeling of the anger, of being upset, of despair, of sadness. The triggering force which makes you act in a certain way, the urge to respond quickly, to put someone in their place, to fix them – all that is the shenpa.

So my aspiration for the day every morning is to see if I can avoid getting carried away by the shenpa.

Do you manage?

Of course not. That is why Buddhism is called a practice and not a religion. You have to practice, and it's always five steps ahead, four and a half steps behind. But you have to remember that half a step you have taken, which is good.

Spirituality also means that the last disciplined thought before I sleep is to review the day, where I succeeded, where I failed. It's very important when looking at one's failures, not to beat oneself, but understand that noticing where and why we have failed is already an achievement.

Do you consider yourself a Buddhist?

I was born in a family of Arya Samaj, which is in itself a step ahead since they don't believe in idolatry, in temples, in ritualism, in superstition and all that. Swami Dayananda Saraswati and Vivekananda also promoted education and equality of women. So it was a big advantage to be born in such a family.

In 1971 or 1972, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi came to New York where I was living and working as a journalist. I was sent to cover his events. It was my first introduction to meditation. I started doing Transcendental Meditation. Since then, I have explored many different people and techniques, including Osho's ashram in Pune. It has been like a parallel career, mostly unknown to people, even to my family at times.

The exploration has continued. Eventually, I found I was more drawn to Buddhism than any other technique. TM did not take me far enough; Osho's techniques were a bit too self-centred and selfish. It is very much about cleansing yourself, fixing your own problems, becoming happier. I thought it was a limited view. Many people who went there did not change their attitude to others at all being as selfish, lying, nasty, mean as before. Of course some followers have done wonderful things in their lives. But it is not a technique that takes you beyond yourself.

In Buddhism, I found it is not only about you. Even self-healing meditation starts first with a prayer to heal others. There is a huge consciousness of other people. So many Buddhist practices are focused on spreading compassion in you and others.

Also, it gives you tools to deal with the many downs, tragedies, and hurts of life – not to run away and switch them off, but learn to live with that level of discomfort, and use that discomfort to learn. Eventually, it turns into compassion for the person who has done something to you. Is it magical? No it is not. Sometimes it takes weeks of meditation before something transforms inside. But somehow you get under that person's pain or psyche and where they were coming from when they flipped out on you. There are failures too for sure. But at least I look at them and try to do better the next time.

Those are basically tools to cope with life?

Actually, those are tools to enjoy life to its fullest – with all its great joys, contentment, hurt, unhappiness. The whole lot, the whole catastrophe. All of it in the moment, with no escape. You can really feel the juice of life if you are going through a painful thing, and manage to handle it with the Buddhist thing. You can sleep peacefully at night and move on.

When I was very young, I had a very bad temper. And I was instantly labelled. I was a girl with a spirit, wanting to do all my brothers were doing, and as I was constantly told "you can't", I would lose my temper. So a slap or two, locked in the bathroom and so on. Which actually made things worse. When I saw my daughter showing such signs of temper, I taught her how to meditate. And it helped her so much. She became a very comfortable meditator and has used it throughout her life. In the most aggravating, humiliating situations she still stands on top.

Once you have been labelled though, even if you have changed, people still keep you in that box. Buddhism has an answer for that too, when it says you live the karma of your label for the time needed and people will see you as you are in good time. Then the frustration goes.

So Buddhism has given me tools to function well. It is so far from the stereotypical image of going on retreats and disengaging from life. It is a full engagement with life.

It helps you cope even with the horrendous situations we keep witnessing. For instance when a four year old gets raped, how can one comprehend it? Those who say there is a God, how could they ever explain it? If there were a God, he is doing such a poor job, that if he had an IPO, I am sure he would fail! Nobody would subscribe, some other company would take him over. It is simply not working! Also, people constantly make deals with God. If I give you my jewellery or hair, walk barefoot or fast, then give me a son, a faithful husband or success in business. I can't quite see how a god would take petty sacrifices and be open to barter and deal making.

So obviously, there has to be another way of rationalizing people's path and for them to also see that owning a particular God or religion is only bringing destruction to those saying that their God is better than yours.

Yet most people don't see it that way, do they?

I think there is a struggle from the moment a child is born, when we start brainwashing him with the way we were taught ourselves. The biggest sin in the world is to think the way we were always taught. That frightens me so much. When I see people from our generation and I see how they live their life exactly as their parents did, subscribed, prescribed and patterned, that really frightens me. That is the biggest problem. We get brainwashed and don't question.

I had a huge advantage in this. Because my father was extremely irreverent and quite a wild spirit. He would go and listen to gurus just to sit in the front row, heckle and ask questions. On the other hand he still had this stereotypical thing about how girls should be. He still wanted me to have an arranged marriage.

Nevertheless, it was a great advantage to question everything. And as you know, the Buddhist tradition says that if you meet the Buddha on your path, kill him. You can't say that this is the only path and my path is the best. If you do, you put yourself in a box.

So for you, there is no concept of God?

No. First of all there have been many scientific explanations for the beginning of the earth. So the idea of God as a Creator does not work for me.

Also, I could not accept that one particular sect has a handle on whose God is right. To me, the creation of the idea of God simply started with frightening things in nature, earthquakes and so on. Also in general, when frightening things happen, people turn to God.

Buddhism on the other hand says you must resolve issues within yourself. And not to some invented outer being of which there is no proof.

So at times of real difficulty, where do you find your energy?

Using Buddhist tools, like taking in all the suffering of the world, and breathing out healing to those who suffer. Or sitting with my pain while cutting the storyline, which means sitting with the feeling without thinking. Vipassana also works. Besides, I found a very interesting tool created by Bill Harris, at an institute called CenterPointe, with Harvard scientists. Instead of sitting for twelve years meditating in a cave in Rishikesh, they have worked out sounds and symbols that can change your brain's alpha waves instantly. You feel the same effect in your mind and body as if you have meditated for five days.

What about destiny, and the idea of things preordained?

I think it is an irrelevant point to consider. Whether there is a grand design or not, it is immaterial in the lila of life. We are in it, we are playing it, and we should function in the best way we can. I feel very saddened by people who get caught and trapped in this ritualism and superstition, saying "God knows best". What about when a four year old gets raped? Destiny is a very intangible word.

So the way your life has developed was not a pre-written script?

I have no idea and I don't think it matters. It's been so rich in so many ways in its joys and tragedies and hurts and teachings and bliss. I feel so blessed.

Who blesses you?

I don't know. And if I feel a sense of gratitude to the universe, to the Energy, to whatever force exists, then it is enough. Even in extreme suffering, there were instances of magic. There is always someone placed there to give you the gift of spiritual help. Something in the universe is teaching you all the time.

What about the idea of having a particular purpose in life?

Do we have to think in the morning, "what I am chosen for"? I think it's completely irrelevant to dwell on that, it's too self-centred. It's a complete waste. There is so much to do. If you open your spirit and heart to what is around you, you don't have to think about the meaning of life. It's just there in front of you. Whether you are in the wealthiest nation in the world or a nation like India where it is in your face every day, you have so much to do. We just need to choose where we can contribute.

It sounds like Mother Teresa actually. But it's not. It's the Buddhist way – when you do it to others, you also do it for yourself.

You have met Mother Teresa, who were the people who influenced you most?

I would say that actually my biggest teacher was the daughter I lost. Because what she taught me, I don't think anyone could have. She had meningitis, fell into a coma and never came back. The depth of pain; the learning that some things simply cannot be fixed – while I had grown up feeling invincible; learning to live with it without despairing, and still function. Khalila taught me all that. She was my biggest teacher.

Of course there have been people, lectures, the Dalai Lama, Osho and so on. All of them leave you with something. But I think the best teachings come from every incident in your life.

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

If God exists, why doesn't He fix it? Why are people misusing His name for pain and torture and killing? His franchise has completely gone bad.

If there were such a thing as rebirth, what would you choose?

The very concept of rebirth is that you can't choose. But if it's about a fantasy wish, it's a very difficult question. I am so comfortable in my skin that I could not imagine myself as someone else.

No regret in this life?

My only regrets are about things I could have handled with far more wisdom or discretion. That's why I never long for my youth. I wish I could have worked on myself earlier and would not have inflicted to other people the pain I did.

What is your idea of happiness?

Sitting with you Nadine and gassing my head off! The moment! Absolutely the moment. Though I have to say, it's a struggle to really be that way. Living in the moment is an effort. What is automatic is not to be in the moment. You wash your hair and think of all the people you have to call, of all the things you have to do. Instead of just enjoying washing your hair...