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'I do not crave happiness as much as meaning'

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Ash Vajpeyi is a poet and chairman of Lalit Kala Akademi.

What does spirituality mean to you?

Over the years, the word has gotten quite stained with several meanings and interpretations. I would imagine that it consists of the inevitable human desire to connect with a larger reality. And also, to feel responsible for others.

I lost my God, if I may say so, at a very young age. When I was 16, I saw so much poverty and suffering, that I thought there couldn't be a God behind it all, as posited by religion. I got disillusioned and disinterested in religious belief systems ever since.

So spirituality meant that if I weep here, in my loneliness and isolation, there are tears in the eyes of some star somewhere. This feeling that I am not alone, that others would respond to me, is what spirituality is all about. It has nothing to do with religious beliefs.

Over the years, as I became a poet, and started taking interest in the arts, I realized that literature and the arts are the last residence of spirituality. Because certainly it has been driven away from most

religions, which have become so aggressive, so violent, so intolerant of their own plurality. And there cannot be spirituality without a belief in the world's plurality. Plurality is the crux of spirituality. Spirituality makes us see others as ourselves. It is meant to liberate you from the prison of yourself, and from the enormous prejudices thrown by many agencies including religion, politics, media and culture. The major problem in the world is "others", whichever they are – linguistic, economic, ethnically others etc. Spirituality is about seeing yourself in and with others.

The notion of creativity is also inevitably a spiritual notion. The normal popular belief is that the universe was created by God. So the very act of creation is the beginning of everything. And it is replicated by mankind in many different ways. So another aspect of spirituality would be that which makes you create. Spirituality must be a bulwark against destruction.

How did you develop this understanding, what was your journey from the age of 16 when you rejected God?

I started moving into three directions.

First, I started believing that ultimately, what matters are the relationships you can forge and sustain. Human relations are the only thing you can possibly hang on to.

Second, I started writing and getting interested in the arts and increasingly realized that arts and literature teach you to see the world in its enormous contradictions, while your moral imagination gets expanded. That expansion then gives you a sense of responsibility. When something atrocious takes place, you cannot just say that because I was not there, I am not responsible – in fact, you are not only condoning it but also perpetrating it.

And the third thing I found is love. Ultimately in all religions the basic instinct is love. And particularly in India, the Hindu belief is that the universe was created out of Leela. Brahman was one, he was bored with himself, so he started playing, he divided into two, they fell in love and that is how the universe was born. So the universe was born out of play. And in some ways, I developed this understanding that there is an element of love / play everywhere, that in some form, you have to find a place in that love / play for yourself. It is difficult, because most of us are selfish, demanding, possessive etc. But I still think that at the core of it, the main compartment of that train called spirituality is love. Plurality and so on should take you to that rather permanent station called love.

Did you always have a desire or need to create, to write?

Almost. I started writing at a quite young age, when I was 8 or 9 - meaningless verses and all that. I was the eldest of my parents' eight children. In some sense I was lonely being the eldest, and in some sense I had a kind of deep sadness, which I still have. An existential sadness. Not being able to find solace.

Why?

I don't know why. There is this famous image of a bird eating and another one watching. I think that somewhere there are two people in me. One who does things and one who watches. There is a kind of dichotomy, which I tried to resolve through my poetry. If I were to wear only one of the two, perhaps the kind of poetry I create would not have been possible.

Which one has the existential sadness?

The watcher I guess, because he realizes the existential futility. On the other hand, my persona is of a quite jolly human being. In a certain way, that persona is there to prevent others peeping on that vulnerable side.

Yet for me, the spiritual can only reside in the sensuous. I am not interested in becoming a so-called saint and only be in the spiritual. I want to enjoy life, to laugh, to make love etc. I do not want to reject the world, I want to celebrate it.

That is one level.

On the other level it is about those larger issues – why are we here, where are we going and so on.

Did you find answers to those questions?

I don't really have an answer. I only hope that ultimately the answer would be that I was here to write poetry, that this was the purpose. To be in some ways a witness, in some ways a participant, in some ways a victim of all this. And to leave a kind of record of it all.

Every writer writes from his own experience, but also from other writers' experiences. You are not an imitator, but all literature is about love, death, cosmos, loneliness. The same themes have been written about over and over again for thousands of years.

Do you dedicate specific timings for writing?

Well, writing never was my only or main activity. I always had some other large responsibility, like now with the Lalit Kala Akademy. But I developed three traits. I write as and whenever I want. I can write anywhere. I don't need a particular ambiance or setting. And third, I developed a kind of poetics of hurry, I am a draft writer, and do not require many corrections or alterations.

Why did you decide to join the civil services?

One because making a living from poetry was not an option. But also, I was an IAS officer for 35 years and I was trying to change the system from within, hoping to accommodate some creative elements. For instance in Madhya Pradesh where I worked for a long time, I created several institutions, including the department of culture (I became the first culture secretary), I established an international Hindi university and many other things. I hoped that institution making and institution running would also prove to be creative activities: they would not only require imagination, sensitivity, courage and skills but also, deep down, a kind of spiritual inspiration, which is that you care for others and create spaces available to others. All the institutions I created were meant for others. Many have fulfilled that objective, whatever their current state of decline may be. As you know, in India, institution running is not the most efficiently widespread skill. Once the founder is gone, it declines.

But regardless, it does give me some spiritual satisfaction to have created opportunities and spaces for many people belonging to different genres of art. To that extent I feel satisfied.

In the way it all unfolded, was there a larger orchestration, or was it all random?

Was it destiny? I wouldn't know... But I very much think we create those things ourselves. Certain coincidences may play a role. But they only are coincidences, they are not part of a larger design. I do not think that somebody would be so interested as to take time and interest in what I do.

When you look at the world, does it make sense?

It makes sense to me because the beauty, suffering, ugliness, turmoil all add up. They are part of the leela. We cannot blame some other force for it. We are very responsible for it all. Because if it were not the case, how could you justify something like Auschwitz? Would you have to say it was the Lord's wish because of some fault of the Jews? It would be absurd...

So as much as we want the world to make sense, in the end you have a feeling that such a design, such an orchestration actually do not exist.

Wouldn't that be a reason for despair?

Definitely. In the thinking realm. But I haven't given up or despaired in the realm of action. I still think that perhaps we cannot make a change to the world at large, but we could bring some small change at our own scale.

So when you have to face some major challenge or crisis, where do you find the energy, where is your anchor?

I do not know where my anchor is. I find my energy in the fact that some of the most important heroes in history, as well as very ordinary men and women do find this energy somewhere in themselves. So it cannot come from elsewhere. There are times when you feel very lonely, when you feel the utter absurdity of life, but you have to fight, and regain your balance.

Sometimes I ask myself why at my age I should take the chairmanship of an institution like the Lalit Kala Academy. Why bother? But I can't be that way. Something in me says 'you can still do things, so why not?' It gives meaning to my life and opens up all sorts of opportunities.

Even though there is no God according to you, if there were such a thing, and you could ask one question, what would it be?

Why must innocent suffer so much in this world supposedly made by You, and for which You are responsible?

I would also ask, why must time destroy beauty? Why can't time and beauty coexist?

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

I would choose to be the same, born to my parents and a writer, but also become a Hindustani classical musician.

Would you keep the existential sadness?

I would not mind, as long as it is creative.

What is your idea of happiness?

It is not a lonely happiness. It is a happiness of many, in which there is space for both being happy together and being allowed to be happy alone.

Have you found it?

I don't think so. Life cannot be happy all the time. But in any case, I do not crave happiness as much as meaning. And meaning does not necessarily come through happiness.