

Robert Chartoff

Legendary Producer

'India completely changed my life'

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Robert Chartoff is one of Hollywood's legendary producers, behind commercial blockbusters like the Rocky movies and other critically acclaimed productions. He has had a long association with India, through his education foundation in Bodh Gaya.

What does spirituality mean to you?

I would not label myself as spiritual or not. But I admire people who are – people at peace with themselves, open to honouring others, to paying attention to what is going on in life, for instance to social issues. I don't relate it at all to a particular practice. It is irrelevant to what spirituality is.

what about your own attempt to be at peace?

I constantly do. And it is not a futile attempt. But it is a challenging one. It is something I have been recognizing more and more with age, trying to find peace after having been in an extremely competitive business, where being at peace is not the objective, only your accomplishments are. That is how the community judges you and how you end up judging yourself, unfortunately. So this quest for peace started when I began realizing that there are other values than these kinds of achievements.

What triggered that realization?

If there was one seminal triggering event, it would be drug experimentation, in particular MDMA. I took it many times with a Jungian therapist who would sit with me for eight hours, in silence or in conversation according to my needs. He was in his seventies and felt he could do far more good sitting

with people taking MDMA and dealing with whatever their needs were under those conditions, rather than in more conventional therapy.

Did you explore realms you had never explored before?

Yes, myself. Those experiences did more to change me than all the years of therapy and all the experiences of life I had had, more than any other single event. It is what took me to India and to meditation. It was the root of so many things that happened in my life. I cut down my work tremendously after it and began exploring many other things.

It is rare that one event can change who you are. But this was one. I was then fifty years old. MDMA is an incredible drug, if used in such circumstances. I have no idea about using it in parties and so on, it does not make much sense to me. But I did it many times with that therapist. And every time there was something to learn. The last time I did it, about ten years ago, the message was that I did not need to take it anymore.

These days, how do you go about that quest for peace?

It is very much about how I use my time. It is about owning my time and doing whatever feels right to me. It is my choice to use or waste it. And it is very connected to my involvement with India in fact.

How did India come into your life?

I started meditating with a vipassana teacher who had lived in Burma, Alan Clements. I befriended him and asked him to show me the spiritual India he knew. We went on a tour, with Bodh Gaya as our last stop. There, I met two young boys at a chai shop and decided I would educate them. That is how my involvement with India began.

The first day we reached Bodh Gaya, we went to have tea. There at the shop was a young boy chopping away pieces of coal. In some way I felt he represented everything we had experienced in that trip. Somehow, I was transfixed by him. At some point he walked over and I gave him a candy. He was maybe five or six years old. He hung out with me and every day I saw him. On the last day, I gave him all my remaining candies. He took one for him, then found three other kids and gave each one of them a candy. It blew my mind. It felt like one of the most generous acts I had ever seen.

On the last night, during my meditation in a Japanese temple, I thought about the money I wanted to give him – either he would piss it away, or someone would steal it from him. So if I wanted to do something for him, I should rather give him an education. I then began wondering how on earth I could commit to something like that in Bodh Gaya, thousands of miles away from me, for the next ten or fifteen years of his life. When leaving the temple, I shared my idea with Alan, telling him I would not be leaving the next day as planned, until I find a way of doing something for this boy and his brother. Back then, there was only one full time Westerner in town, a Canadian suffering from leukemia. We went to see him. He had all the right ideas and suggestions. We found someone who would take charge of the kids' education. I would send him money monthly and he had to send me tapes showing the kids' progress.

A year later I came back and the kids from being semi-savage had changed considerably. I thought that if we can do it with two, why not with fifty. That is how the idea of building a school came up. And gradually we had 700 kids and a staff of 70. We had a little campus in Bodh Gaya, and satellite

schools in five villages for the younger kids. For about ten years it developed, from the mid eighties onwards.

Then the corruption became more and more obvious. I kept warning them. The teachers would come late to school. Everybody would get away with something. And the kids were being shown the worst examples. So finally I discontinued the school and sent the children to the Jai Hind school instead. I also am sending some of them to the Maytreya Project's school. I have about 30 kids in college. I just started a kindergarten in one of the villages, and a computer school in Bodh Gaya. So I am still involved, but not to the same degree.

How would you describe your connection to India?

It is some sort of a fascination. Of course I do not know it. The same way I do not know America – last year 48% of Americans still voted Republican. So I definitely do not know my country! And for India, the more I learn, the more I feel I don't know it. But the children I have worked with are so bright, joyous, anxious to learn, unspoiled, never complaining even though they often walk miles to go to school. It is so different from the world we live in here in California. Such different values. There is only a thin epidermis separating our world from theirs. It would not take much to be like theirs. And I find it morally appropriate. I think we live too good in a way in our world here. Yet these kids have a spirit we can't match.

So India completely changed my life. Not only the knowledge that at least I have done some good beyond working at films, but it was never only about sending checks, I know and connected with the kids I have been helping.

Would you say there is something like a definitive purpose to life?

I try not to be too philosophic about who I am or the world I live in.

As a kid, I had no idea what I would want to do. I grew up in the Bronx. People were just struggling to make it. Ralph Lauren and Calvin Klein lived a few blocks away from me. Many people in the entertainment field in Hollywood also came from the Bronx. I don't think it is by chance. But because they knew how to struggle to get ahead, and that is what is needed here. It is competitive, you can't just sit idle and expect for things to happen. The Bronx was not poverty but definitely lower middle-class. So we all intuitively understood there was no fall-back. We had to make it for ourselves.

My dad was a musician and wanted me to be a doctor. An uncle was a theatrical agent and through some synchronicities, I met him and he offered me a job while in college. I was blown away: it was so much fun while pre-med class definitely was not fun. One day I told my father I would not continue with medicine. I felt he might collapse at disappointment just then and there. So I instantaneously said I would become a lawyer instead, even though I had never thought of doing such a thing. I went to Columbia Law school, which actually served me well in my business career.

After Columbia, I went into personal management representing artists and then I flowed with opportunities and ended up in Los Angeles. My first picture was an Elvis Presley movie, then "Point Blank" which was very successful, then "They Shoot Horses, Don't They", which was extremely successful. And with my then business partner, we became part of the establishment. We had ideas and people would listen to them. That's what is important. You don't get destroyed by a "no". You just get strengthened by it.

Most of my films were definitely not done only for entertainment. I have never been motivated to make a movie because it would be a commercial success. I might have said it to the studio, because of course otherwise they would not put their money in. But in my heart that was not my main motivation.

Yet, if you are in Hollywood, if you make the decision and commitment to be in this community, status is everything. Status is what gets you more work. To have access to the individuals who have the money requires some prior success or experience. So much of being here is about that.

But I also find it is a very charitable and liberal community. People were not afraid of giving to Al Gore or John Kerry when we had this right-wing government; they are at the forefront of generosity. They are not ashamed even if the cause is not popular. And they are not doing it only for their selfish interests. It is not motivated by materialism in that regard. Because they know for instance that if a democratic administration comes in, they will be paying more taxes.

All along, did you feel there was some guidance or protection, or was it all about your own efforts?

I feel blessed, but I don't understand how or why. I don't know about some other force. I did connect with something out of the ordinary in meditation or with the drug. There were other connections, which I did not know from my ordinary life and which attracted me a great deal, changing my life significantly. It was a power beyond the ordinary, but whether in me or out there, I did not and do not know.

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

In real challenges, not commercial ones, stuff from the heart, a lot of the energy comes from learning from the wisdom of others. I am a major fan of Seneca. I find such incredible wisdom in the things he had to say 2,000 years ago, not focusing on God but rather on human behaviour.

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

I'd like to be someone who won the Nobel Peace Prize.

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

As Bertrand Russell said, why didn't You make Your presence more obvious to us? Or as Julian Barnes wrote, if there is a God, I wonder what He would think of our Gods...

But in fact, I don't believe there is a God. And for me, we just have this one shot at heaven.

What is your idea of happiness?

Being with the people I love and care about, feeling that we are all capable of touching one another.