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'Talking to my ancestors gives me solace and peace of mind'

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What does spirituality mean to you?

It is about talking to someone who is not visible. At one level, I have images of Lord Buddha, Lord Jesus and a few gods and goddesses.

At another level, it is about connecting to my deceased ancestors -my parents, grand-parents, great-grand-parents. Recollecting them, addressing them, asking them to help support my entire family through whatever we go through, preventing us from five things : greed, temptation, jealousy, arrogance and anger.

I face hurdles every day in my daily life. So I ask them to show me the way forward.

And it has really helped. For instance, I learnt from my parents never to harm anyone, even if he or she harms me. Because otherwise I would not be different from that person. There is no end to going down if someone hits me below the belt. So I only go to the level I think my intellectual caliber allows me, and according to the interest of the institution I belong to. If I decided to engage in an institution building process, I must remain detached, I cannot take personal attacks to my heart.

Very often, I know about people harming me, defaming me, trying to sabotage things. My instinct would be to retaliate with much force. But I always say "I will not do it today". I do not say "I will not do it tomorrow" because that I cannot know. But at least today I won't. And in general that person realizes he has made a mistake.

But so often it seems that exactly the contrary happens in society – the worst you behave, the more you succeed?

No, that is not what I see or how I want to act. Even if I have the power to retaliate I won't. And ultimately it's been my experience that the person fades away or acknowledges having been wrong.

And people don't think you are weak, they don't take you for granted?

I am lucky that till now, not too people have publicly humiliated me. Because if that had been the case, others would have also been upset and retaliated. But privately, it has often happened, for instance because of jealousy. But I do not retaliate. I generally try to do even better, in order to completely wear down that person's jealousy. And I maintain my distances as much as possible. There are many things I don't like in my daily life, but I maintain a distance, and that keeps me quite happy. Also, I have learnt from my very simple grand-father to lead a very simple life. In some cases your simplicity is taken for granted. But ultimately it wins

All those things have given me a lot of intellectual and moral strength.

Did it happen at times that those gods and goddesses did not give you the strength you were asking for?

It definitely happened. And I have been tested several times very hardly. But I always managed to get what I wanted, in the end.

For instance the Sikkim University building project. Finding land was such a challenge. Many people did not want me to succeed so they tried to sabotage any attempt to find land in all sorts of ways. But I was clear I would not use any dirty tricks. Among others because I knew that if I engage on that path, that person is capable of being much dirtier than me. So I only used fair means. And in the end the land has been coming.

It requires much patience and a single-minded focus, as well as a lot of moral courage.

Those things mostly came from your family?

Definitely. They always said, if you are not wrong, don't get defeated. So I have five minutes in the morning and five in the evening, wherever I am, talking to my ancestors and to my gods and goddesses. It gives me a lot of solace.

At the same time, I am not a very religious man and we are a quite secular family. I do not talk of gods and goddesses every minute or every hour.

But do they influence your life and decide things, do they preordain things?

Definitely. I do not know about destiny. But whatever material desires I've had, have been satisfied. And I have asked for peace of mind, and clarity of thinking, which I have had, and which makes my life very easy.

You were always clear about what you had to do in life?

Broadly yes, I wanted to work for my country, for my society, and this was the way forward.

As a child, what did you want to do when growing up?

I didn't have any ambition. But my great-grand-father who used to work as a chef in a British household, always said I should be a magistrate. I had no idea at the time what a magistrate was. Then when I went to college, I realized I could be good in academics and chose to pursue this career.

Now you are the youngest Vice-Chancellor in the country, and a member of the National Security Advisory Board, how did all that happen?

One great advantage I have is that I have multiple interests. I am crazy about knowledge and information. I just want to know about anything. This developed in me an ability to cope with any subject. One of them is foreign policy, and national security. Another one is economics. And many others.

Also, working closely with the Government, I have developed the ability to move fast and make quick decisions. At times it is risky to be a quick decision-maker, but I am willing to take that risk. And I also speak freely and frankly. If I think I have to say something in some gathering, I will say it, even though many people may not like it.

So I relate all the spiritual thinking with my daily life. With a very specific perspective in mind.

What about the idea that we all have a specific purpose in life?

I really believe in that. It is not a purpose which is personal or self-centered. It is a purpose that serves society, which serves the country. It transcends me.

For instance, in the university-building process, I decided that I should never ever have my interests come first. The interests of the university should always come first, even if it was to cost me. And the university has come up, in record time, the first Central University in Sikkim. There were quite a few challenges. But the choice was always clear – Mahindra Lama is only an individual so he can suffer. The university should not suffer as it is an institution that should live for centuries. And it has really paid. What do I have to lose in the end ? My sleep, my social prestige, being humiliated ? But at least my university would gain respect. I never wanted to compromise for personal gains. Many people ask how come the university has come up so quickly. We have opened 17 programs in barely three years. There was absolutely nothing when I first went there. Now in the HRD ministry, it is the example they quote to be followed. It has happened first because of a single-minded mission; second thanks to a good team spirit; and third thanks to sacrificing my personal interests. For instance I sacrificed my two daughters and my wife. They would require so much of my time at this stage of their lives but I have not been able to give it to them. But they know and appreciate why, I was able to convince them.

Beyond the University, another dream I have is to save Darjeeling tea. Because it is dying, due to a variety of political, environmental and other reasons. The tea industry dying means a tradition, a wisdom are disappearing. So this is another mission into which I wish to jump once I am done with this one.

In a nutshell, spirituality gave me that clarity - the clarity regarding what my life is about, which gives me a certain peace of mind. That's a great advantage I have.

Do you believe in reincarnation?

Yes, I believe in it. When my mother died, the lama declared she had reincarnated in a squirrel. After that, whenever I see a squirrel, I see my mother. That is a belief. But I have no proof.

My father used to say that seeing deceased people in dreams is bad, and it would be a torture. But I am just the opposite. I love seeing my parents and ancestors in my dreams.

When my father passed away, I actually kept a portion of his ashes and in the morning, after my prayers, I go to it and connect with him, asking him to keep my entire family away from those five things - greed, temptation, jealousy, arrogance and anger.

What would you choose for the next reincarnation?

I have no choice about it. But I am always in a great hurry, wanting to do more. My worry is always "who will finish this incomplete work?". I may go tomorrow and there are so many things to do ! DPS Principal Vinay Kumar who built the school in Vasant Kunj was a very dear friend of mine. He was also a man in a hurry and created such a wonderful institution, taking it to heights that no single individual could have. He suddenly passed away last year. Who remembers him now?

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

I would only ask why people die. What is this mystery all about ? Why do they die and where do they go? My father suddenly left and I can't see him again. Where did he go? But I can see him in dreams, so he may be somewhere nearby...

But isn't it the basic cycle of nature, creation and destruction?

Of course. But why is there such a cycle? And how come we can bring them back in our dreams?

What is your idea of happiness?

Very small things make me happy. But I have this great disadvantage of never being satisfied. That's very bad. I always want more to be done and expect more from people. I know it's wrong. My wife correctly points out that I cannot expect from others to work 18 hours like me and sacrifice the rest of their life. So that is wrong, and it is a source of unhappiness. But materially at least, I am always satisfied. My needs are very minimal and easily satisfied. I always felt that if I have minimum needs then half of the problems are gone. For instance, in the morning, drinking a really good tea is very important to me. But for the rest of the day, I eat the simplest of meals. Whereas if you have all sorts of needs, it becomes another investment for which I have no time.

Apart from this constant desire to do more and achieve more, the other disadvantage I have is that I want to do things myself. I like to supervise everything, as I want to make sure they are done in the

best possible way. That makes me a little unhappy sometimes. I look into so many details. In a way it's good, because it trains people. And it sets standards. But it creates constant dissatisfaction in me.

But if you were content, you would not achieve so much, whereas making a difference is the purpose of your life – so by definition you couldn't reach a place of contentment?

Absolutely. The moment I would feel content, it would be the end.

Where do you get the energy to do all that?

My family is my biggest strength. I keep consulting them. I offload on them. Once it is offloaded, I feel so light!