

Jairam Ramesh

Minister of State for Commerce

'Happiness is about little things adding up'

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Jairam Ramesh, Minister of State for Commerce.

What does spirituality mean to you?

For many years, as I grew up in a very ritualistic environment, I used to equate spirituality and rituals. I would do them mostly out of fear – thinking that unless I practiced, something bad would happen to me or my family. Gradually I grew out of it, and now spirituality means freedom from rituals. It is a personal anchor, an individual faith that entails tolerance, understanding, accepting people for who they are and not for who I would want them to be – being a liberal in all senses of the word.

Do you believe you are guided and protected by a superior force?

Absolutely, there is in life a guiding and protecting force. Nothing is random. I could never explain the trajectory of my life, its highs and lows, as a random sequence. There have been all sorts of encounters, events, circumstances that "chance" alone could not explain. All of it helped me develop a sense of fate, that whatever is meant to happen – will, and what isn't, simply won't.

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

I definitely think there is such a thing – I remember watching this movie about General Patton in Germany, on one of the main battlefields of World War II, reflecting on this notion of destiny. As far as I am concerned, I always felt I was destined to be in public life and have an impact on people. Back then I may have thought this impact would be on a larger canvas but I cannot complain about the results – I have maintained my sanity and a degree of consistency in thought and belief, I have expressed my views fairly openly, so I guess I have had decent innings.

What is spirituality for you in your day to day life?

I was such a prisoner of rituals and now I am free of them. So spirituality is very much about contemplation (I stop working at times for a few minutes and sit back, listen to music, just think, recharge), about tolerance, but also about accommodation and resilience. Indeed, public life is mostly made of downs and blows so dealing with them with some distance is part of daily spirituality for me.

What is the role of spirituality in your public life?

It gives me a degree of detachment amidst intense involvement. Public life can be so challenging, and in my case I would say that 80% of my life has been about taking knocks and 20% about enjoying the fruits of my work. So the notion of detachment and disinterested action, so central to the Gita, has been fundamental for me. I have been trying to follow it all along – doing my work and if things come, fair enough, if they don't – so be it!

Can you tell us about a unique experience that changed or shaped your spiritual beliefs?

There definitely has been a fundamental shift in me – from a very ritualistic religiosity to a spirituality liberated from rituals – but it was not a sudden transformation. It happened gradually, in particular from my twenties on, as I was discovering how this religiosity was used to sanctify a stratified social order. For instance I used to be fascinated by Sanskrit but also progressively realized how it had been used as an instrument of repression and discrimination for centuries. So my knowledge of broader Indian social realities vastly influenced my spiritual evolution, from the classical south Indian Brahmin I used to be.

What are your spiritual inspirations?

From the extremely ritualistic environment I grew up in, I gradually opened up to other influences. I read the Gita almost every day from the age of nine, and of all the religious personalities, Buddha is one I would distinguish – he was an empiricist who, along compassion and logic, emphasized how much one should find God by oneself.

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

Why do so many good people suffer of injustice and ignominy while thoroughly despicable characters advance in society? I see examples of it every single day and the traditional explanation of karma does not satisfy me.

What is your idea of happiness?

My notion of happiness is incremental: it is about little things adding up and a general positive outlook on life, despite the many lows and knocks on my path.