

JJ Valaya

Fashion Designer

'I'm blessed that I can make a difference through beauty'

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Fashion Designer JJ Valaya believes in the awareness of the spirit.

What does spirituality mean to you?

I hate preset definitions. And besides, in today's world, everything becomes faddish. If you are spiritual, it can easily be a fad, with all sorts of practices attempting to make you spiritual. The cliché definition of course says that spirituality is about reaching within yourself, about discovering this life-changing utopia, about projecting positivity so that you only attract positive things etc.

Yet, I find spirituality to be a beautiful word as it comes from the word spirit. And spirit itself is the most honest entity around. We all have one but most of us do not recognize it. Worse even, sometimes spirit gets covered by so many toxic layers that it gets completely dimmed, it doesn't really exist anymore within.

Awareness of spirit is the most important thing to me. And that is what spirituality is about.

How does one become aware of spirit?

Everybody goes through different phases in their lives. But sometimes, especially at times of major crisis, or huge difficulty, or intense stress, people may feel the need to discover some ignored parts of their being. They sense they do not know certain essential sides in them and yearn to discover them, as those are the truest and most authentic reflections of their being.

At that point, when the yearning is there, they may be lucky enough – and truly worthy of being chosen to be enlightened - to find a person who can guide them. I believe it is extremely important to have someone showing the path. And for me, it involves meditation. It is the core vessel in order to reach a certain level and be alive per se.

Feeling the need to go on that discovery, then being fortunate enough to find a guide and fully following his guidance – I have been through the entire cycle.

It was triggered by a particularly difficult phase in your life?

We all go through difficult times. We all have turmoil in our lives. But there always is a path out. The path is actually really easy. It is as simple as gratitude, as awareness. But it must start with a genuine want. Do you want that peace in your life? If you really want it, magically, something happens, pointing you in that direction.

About ten years ago, I went through such a phase and was fortunate enough to meet someone - not a god-man with followers, not someone wearing saffron robes but someone deeply spiritually evolved. He got me into meditation. And I cannot even begin to tell you the difference between me then, and me now. Those are two completely different human beings. And it amazes me so much to feel the transformation.

I may only be able to achieve one or two percent of what meditation can give, but it has been so enlightening. It changed my entire outlook on life. Now, everything I do comes from a different place. Look for instance at the photography exhibit I just did. In the last twenty years I have built a respected and successful fashion brand. It is a comfort zone by now. Why come out as an artist suddenly, with this photography show? Things could have gone terribly wrong as one comes under the critical eye of everyone. It took much faith and conviction to stand up and get out there as an artist. But in the end, my work was received amazingly, including by the biggest art critics.

It all is a testimony to the fact that when things flow from spirit, they come out very differently than when they are just like a chore or a routine. This photography show was truly my spirit calling out. And I know it is only the beginning of a journey. It feels so incredibly exciting to suddenly have this new parallel path, to lead a double life fully emanating from the spirit. Because in this there is no commerce involved, I do not have to follow market norms and trends. The language of spirit is very different.

So essentially, my guru, my spiritual mentor guided me to something priceless. It is the biggest treasure I have today. And I am so glad it all happened when it did. It had to happen and it's been a beautiful journey.

Actually, I really feel that whether you are an atheist or not, you should wake up in the morning and say a big thank you to the 'man up there' for giving you another 24 hours to enjoy your gift. And at night, you should go to sleep feeling 'what a day!' and looking forward to the next one.

You mentioned "the man up there" – so you believe in God?

Definitely. I don't believe in religion. But I do believe in God. Is it a He or a She I have no clue. But I do believe in the entity of God.

What is it precisely for you?

It is a greater force watching over you; and depending on how you treat - and respect - the life given to you, of how aware you are, your path gets shaped by God. That is God's responsibility.

Awareness is the key word. I have been taught how crucial it is. And I have seen for myself how increased awareness has changed everything in my life. When drinking a glass of water one should enjoy it. When riding in the car one should not only talk on the phone, write text messages or eat a sandwich – one should enjoy the experience of traversing all sorts of landscapes and realities. Not being aware and focused, being constantly distracted by other things while you are doing one particular activity actually prevents a holistic experience of life.

In the way your life unfolded, is there such a thing as destiny or preordained events?

I want to believe in destiny and a large part of me does. But how self-made or how pre-decided it is, I do not know.

I just know that if you truly believe in your spirit, if you can truly be aware of every little thing you do, your quality of life changes to an unimaginable extent. You start reacting to everything in a much more beautiful way, your path starts getting clearer, longer, wider, more enriching. You start attracting all sorts of things, people and opportunities that you would have never imagined could come your way.

And life becomes really magical. There is so much magic in life if you allow yourself to see it ! You can always find problems and hassles to focus on, so it is up to you to spot the magic.

How does it feel when you meditate?

It is a huge tussle because you are fighting with your mind, trying to rein it in. In general, your mind totally controls you. With meditation you are trying to control it - at least for a little while. It may take years to be able to still the mind for just a few minutes. But when you succeed, it is a triumph. Because once you do that, you can control just about everything in your life.

Some days I feel like a current going all through my body. Such an amazing feeling! It is such a happy moment - purity at its best, feeling so happy, and with absolutely no particular reason. It is such a high. No cocktail could ever give it to me.

Do we have a particular purpose to our lives?

We all have a particular spirit. If we do not connect with it and discover it, we'll obviously make absolutely no contribution to the world. I can assure you of that. It will be like coming and leaving without a trace.

But if we do discover our spirit, we open up avenues and thread paths leading to amazing things, to places we would have never thought we could ever reach.

And in that case, there may indeed be a purpose.

We live in a super charged magical environment. But to truly sense or understand it, you must awaken your spirit. And to me, the key to it is meditation. You are truly blessed if you find a mentor or guru who can point you in that direction.

Would you say your contribution or purpose is - among others - to create beauty and touch people through it?

Absolutely. I totally agree with you. I feel so blessed for instance when a young girl comes for the most important day of her life - her wedding - and trusts me to transform her to make her feel special and beautiful. I think I have been given the ability to do it. And that is so amazing. There is a very special psychology involved in making it happen. It is definitely not only about beautiful fabric and embroidery.

Or take the photography show - when creating those photographs, what mattered to me was how it would touch people. And when I heard how it talked to those who saw them, it was the biggest high. I feel truly blessed to make a difference through the path of esthetics and beauty. It is important! A lot of people say it is an elitist thing in a poor country like India. But I completely disagree. It creates pleasure for people and makes them feel nice, which definitely is a big contribution.

Did you always know you would be in the world of fashion?

Not at all. Following my father's wish, I went to study chartered accounting. But one day I came back home, sold all my books and stopped those studies. I had no idea what I would do instead. I just knew it couldn't be that! Then I discovered NIFT and entered the world of fashion. And that was it.

As a child I had always been drawing and sketching. I couldn't ever stop doing so. My textbooks were full of sketches and teachers kept scolding me for it. But what to do ? I couldn't stop my hand... You cannot stop it if it is in your DNA.

You describe yourself as an introvert. Yet how can you be in an industry which entails being fully out there, exposed to the world?

Yes, I am an introvert and a social misfit. I so much love time with myself. I am happiest in my own company. I am not a great friend because making friends is an art; it requires time and a lot of investment. I know a lot of people. I have only a few good friends. But I cannot have intense times with them. Because I like time with myself so much.

So yes I am an introvert and yes I am in the fashion business where it is all about being 'out there'. I have to be around, step out, charm my way through situations. And I cannot for the life of me understand how I have managed to do so, how I have managed to succeed in such an environment. But obviously, something is working ...

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

Is our existence a life in totality or is it one year, one phase of a larger journey? We are born from less than a drop and eventually we become dust. In between those points of non existence, we tend to obsess so much about all material realities and experiences. It is so wrong. So is this all there is, or is this only a chapter of a much longer story?

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

I have too much faith in God, so I would leave it to him. As long as it is something creative, it will be fine.

Actually, most creative people have a very deep spiritual side to them. But often they don't realize it and it can therefore go all wrong. Creativity can be very damaging if it is not properly channeled. It can be a very destructive energy.

What is your idea of happiness?

For me it's really about being aware. If every day, from the moment I get up to the moment I sleep I can be totally aware of everything I do, meaning, totally enjoying it, then it's 100% happiness. Nothing can be higher than that. It involves everything, the entire experience. And if I cannot feel gratitude for the life I've got, then I've lost the plot.