

Kabir Bedi

Actor

'Happiness is never constant'

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Kabir Bedi is an actor who has worked in Bollywood, Hollywood and European television.

What does spirituality mean to you?

It's your relationship with the higher self, the cosmos, in a non-material way; also it's about getting in touch with your inner sense of things.

What do you mean by higher self?

We exist at various levels: the physical level, the mental level – which categorizes things like "I am a Punjabi, I am an Indian, I am a father" etc., creating definitions for everything. But the higher self is something different and very subtle. It is our sense of what lies beyond the five senses. Whether we call it intuition or a sense of what the universe is, or what God is, that's our higher self. When we talk of God of course, there are many ways people imagine what it is.

What is it for you?

It definitely is not an old man sitting on a throne. I don't see God as a personal God. But obviously there is an extraordinary intelligence underlying Creation. You see it in the fabric of every leaf held

against the sun, in the beauty of every flower, in the harmony of nature. There is an underlying order and intelligence that has guided this creation in some way. Whatever this intelligence is, you can call it God if you wish. It preceded matter itself. It is the infinity of the cosmos outside and inside us.

Is the higher self also the essence of who you are?

The essence of who you are is who you choose to be, or how you act and relate to others. The higher self is part of you. The lower self and lower instincts are also part of you. Higher and lower self are part of the essence. High or low, that's a choice, or it may be dictated by circumstances.

For instance, if somebody is born into a gang-like family where he only sees murder, shooting and a fight for survival on the street at the very basic level, then that's what he learns and what he perpetuates. It would take a great effort for him to rise into the higher self. Versus someone brought up in an ashram who would automatically think about that.

So the essence of who you are is what you choose to believe and how you choose to act. Not what you profess.

One of the joys of life is its complexity. Nothing is quite black and white. If you take the trouble to think about things, you realize it's not two sides of a coin, black and white, you can look at it from a prism. Everything has several points of view. Everything has a multidimensional meaning and existence. It's tiring to think like that all the time. It's easier to simplify things into simple rights and wrongs. The reality though is that there ALWAYS is a "but". It is wrong to kill, but if you do it in the interest of the nation, then it's ok; it is wrong to lie but if it saves a life, then it's ok. And so on. There are always "buts" associated with anything you state. So one should not lament the complexity of life, but rather celebrate it.

What is spirituality concretely in your life?

It's really been a search for understanding.

On my father's side I come from the Sikh tradition. The Bedis are descendants of Guru Nanak so there always was a strong Sikh influence in my life. My mother on the other hand became a Buddhist and spent the last fifteen years of her life ordained as a Buddhist nun. My earliest and most formative years were spent in Kashmir with many Muslim friends and families. My schools were Christian – Sherwood and St Stephens. And of course the whole ethos in which I lived has been Hindu. So there have been a number of religious influences in my life.

Through my growing up years I simply was like a sponge, absorbing everything. Then in my first college years I started listening to J. Krishnamurti. Then in Bombay I got familiar with the teachings of Osho. And I always was interested in philosophical questions. How did this all begin? How did we all come here? Is there a God, is there rebirth, is there karma? What's the truth of it all because everyone is saying different things and not everyone can be right.

I was very heavily influenced by Buddhism because of my mother, and also as a child, I had gone with her to Burma. There, I was ordained as a Buddhist monk with the whole attire – shaven head, orange robe, begging bowl.

What kind of an experience was it?

It was a very pleasant though hard experience. It's completely different from what you are used to doing. We would wake up at four, meditate, have a cup of tea then take a begging bowl and walk through the streets of Rangoon in a file of monks. People would be standing there at five o'clock in the morning to give us food, one handful for every family. All of the monks' begging bowls would thus get filled. Once back, we would meditate some more before the midday meal – the only meal of the day; then do some studies, then a little time off, then some tea and more meditation, then back to bed. It was very difficult to get used to it initially. And sleeping on a hard bed, in a very bare room, surrounded by all kinds of strange people with shaven heads. You could be in an alien landscape. So anyway, Buddhism was a very important influence in my life and for a long time I did consider myself as such.

But over the years, my larger mindset of not accepting things just because my mother handed them to me took over. And I began a philosophical quest that continues to this day.

It began consciously after graduation with Krishnamurti's talks. I call him the greatest "deconditioner". Nobody is better when it comes to forcing you to clear the cobwebs of our minds and question many assumptions we have made, believing what others say, or taking accepted wisdom for granted. He really started my journey of true spiritual introspection.

Eventually I moved beyond Krishnamurti because I felt he is a great mental purgative, he clears our minds of a lot of rubbish. But he won't give us the answers and we have to find them ourselves.

I was fascinated by what Osho was saying. He was absolutely brilliant. I never went to see him because I could not accept his imposed dress code. But he was stunning – starting as a professor of philosophy, he understood the context of belief systems to which he added his own brilliance, contradictions and insights. It was very stimulating. He did a lot of the thinking for us by cross-relating so many strands of thought.

Then, when I went to California, I got exposed to many new age teachers like Ramtha, to Native American sweat lodges, Zen teachers, Tibetan Buddhist influences.

I integrated things from each of them. It's been a continuous quest. And I have reached my own provisional answers, my state of beliefs valid for the present moment.

I realize the world is an extraordinary mysterious place and I don't understand half its dimensions. Yet, do I believe in a personal God who would take care of me were I to pray Him? I don't. Do I believe in God as a cosmic intelligence that underlies creation? Yes. Do I think people are wrong to pray to their particular gods for salvation? I don't, if it helps their spiritual journey. If it takes them closer to happiness, then it's all good. It just doesn't resonate with me.

So is there a place in your life for rituals or prayers or meditation?

There isn't a particular time I set aside. There are times I will go to a gurudwara and pay my respects. If I am in Rome I may walk into a church. If I am close to a Hindu temple, I will walk in as well. But the place is largely immaterial. What they all do is to give me a space where I can get in touch with my inner self. And what moves me in those places are not the images on the walls, but the faith of the people around. Those vibrations are very powerful, very empowering.

Organized religions have a very important place in society, because it gives people a sense of community, of belonging. Besides, people don't have to waste too much of their time thinking out the mysteries of the cosmos. A belief system is given to you, you believe in it, you practice it, it's all fine.

Also, the rituals of organized religion are so beautiful. The ceremonies of birth, marriage, death. It's like a beautifully written script perfected over the centuries. It's moving and touching. If you don't believe in a religion and you die, what do people do? They have to invent a ceremony. If you get married, you have to invent vows. If you have children you have to find a way to organize a naming ceremony. All this is done for you by religions. There is a great beauty and convenience to that. Not everyone wants the job of wondering about the universe and there is nothing wrong with that. But for me, it could not work. I really wanted to know. Is there cause and effect, is there rebirth and karma, and so on. So the quest went on.

Do I believe in karma? Not in the sense of somebody keeping a bank balance of my good and bad deeds. But I do believe in the cause and effect. In the sense that if I deliberately kill an ant walking across my table in a vicious manner, that insensitive act has affected my consciousness, which in some way will damage me in other things I do. That's the cause and effect I see. I have become that much less sensitive and somehow it will bounce back on me somewhere.

Isn't it the contrary, choosing to kill the ant is a symptom of where our consciousness is at?

We always have choices. I could choose to let this ant continue its journey, or I could choose to kill it. When I give way to the impulse of just killing something that doesn't need to be killed it shows something. We all have the killing instinct in us. Any woman can be the Virgin Mary or a prostitute. I can be a saint or a murderer. What do I choose to do, what impulse do I give way to, that determines how I have affected my own consciousness.

You tried so many practices, but you were never tempted to adopt one fully?

No. I looked at Zen for instance. All its emphasis on mindfulness, being in the now, total concentration, essentially taking away the boundaries that separate the self from the outside world so you can feel the oneness of things. I have two problems with that. One is that it may be a beautiful ideal or theory, but I really don't think it is possible to operate and live like that in our worldly realities.

Second, even if I reach that place, how am I superior to my cat? My cat is totally present, totally aware, has almost no memory. That utter Zen-like presentness of the cat, is that a state I strive to work towards? Not really. The danger of course is that there is always an argument to answer to each point, including what I just said. But I am trying to simplify for the sake of this conversation.

Zen emphasizes awareness in the moment and interconnectedness if your objective is to reach inner peace – so it also depends on what you want and what is your objective, doesn't it?

Let me put it very simply, I just don't think it works, no matter what the objective is. I could give you a huge rationale for this. But I know it doesn't work for me and not for most people on this planet unless they really don't have to engage with the world. Because you live in a hurry in this imperfect world of ours. So I do understand, respect and observe a certain ability to have an inner calm, where I can calm in the middle of a storm, where I don't allow my emotions to take over at times of crisis so I can

step away. But there is a difference between having a holistic vision of things, i.e. have this ability to distance myself a little, and live in this perpetual nowness which I think is completely unrealistic.

So what drives you in this journey of life, why bother?

When you live the life of an actor, on three continents, in four separate film industries (Hollywood, Bollywood, Europe and Pine Wood in London), the thing that drives you is sheer survival. I am part of an industry that is probably one of the most insecure professions in the world. You have absolutely no guarantee that the next film job will come up. Meanwhile you have a family to raise, children to educate, mortgages to pay and a lifestyle to maintain. So at a primal level almost, with no highflying vision of artistic grandeur, your basic survival mechanism is what is driving you in this profession. There are of course periods of calm when things are going well and you don't have to think at that level.

Beyond that, at a larger level, what drives me is the need to know I have made a difference, that I stand out as an individual. Being an individual is very important for me. I am not a group kind of person, I am not a joiner of clubs, associations, and so on. I do believe greatly in the individual – living in a completely interconnected world of course. For me, the individual is the center of the universe. It is our differences that make us unique. And therefore, if you as an individual have made a mark in the world, you have fulfilled your purpose.

Why did you choose the film industry to make your mark in the world?

I worked my way through college in the earlier days of Doordarshan. I then started directing ad films. My objective was to hone my craft as a filmmaker. But acting having always been my hobby, I did some major plays, which became very successful. Suddenly film producers began knocking at my door. I thought it would be a way to join the industry, since nobody was signing me as a director. Then I went through years of success and failures in Bollywood, Europe, and Hollywood, then back to Europe, and back to India. It's remained a journey of an actor. I am now getting ready to produce my first film next year.

Do you think we all have a purpose or a mission we have to accomplish in our lives?

No I don't think we are born to do something. The meaning of life is the meaning you give to your life. No one else has mandated it. No one else is writing the book but you.

The meaning of life has been debated for centuries. At the end of the day, it's what you make of it.

Touching people through your acting is part of your answer to it?

You are touching very sensitive areas here. Truth be told, I have been an actor all my life but I don't define myself as an actor. I don't see acting as a passion for me. It's something I do well if I set my mind to it, and I do it as a fascinating job, which took me to incredible places and people, which opened many doors and so on. And yes, when I perform a role like Sandokan, which touches the lives of so many people in Italy, Spain, Germany and across Europe, and they call me an icon, someone who opened the doors of the Orient for them, it gives me no end of joy. But that wasn't in my mind when I was shooting it. I was just trying to do a good job. It just happened to become such a success.

So in fact, if I can help the lives of a few people around me, it gives me as much satisfaction as the professional work I do. My charity is in my daily life. Just doing spontaneous acts of kindness to strangers, that's the best test of genuine charity. And all that gives me inner satisfaction.

Where do your passions lie if not in acting?

My passion is knowledge. In every fathomable way. I am a news junky, I read everything, I read an occasional book of fiction, but I am much more interested in books giving me lots of interesting information on the world we live in. I am interested in issues like climate change, Burma, rural development in India.

The quest for knowledge has been a very important thread in my life.

At times of huge challenge, where do you find the energy?

I can't answer that question. Whatever energy I have needed was always there. It's just there. Whether it's a very complicated film I am doing, going through a divorce, or the death of my son. Whatever challenge has arisen, I just had the strength.

At times of great stress, I actually do meditate and try to reconnect with my inner self to harmonize mind and spirit. Those vipassana techniques I have learnt in Burma have remained with me throughout. But so far, I have had the strength when I needed it, and believe me there were times I really needed nerves of steel.

With my son, it was so shattering. He was such a brilliant boy, graduating from Carnegie Mellon. He had a brilliant life ahead of him. And then a disease like schizophrenia hit him. The tragedy of such an illness is that the family suffers as much as the patient, because you constantly try to adapt to him and his changing needs.

He had been diagnosed with depression and three years later, following a violent outburst with friends, he was diagnosed with schizophrenia. Of course, like most schizophrenics, he would not want to take the medication because it deadens them. There is no cure to schizophrenia, only ways to cope with it, to contain it. Medicines essentially make them safe to operate in society, like hitting them strongly on the head. And of course they don't like going through life feeling dull. My son was too intelligent, even in his schizophrenic state, and he understood what his future was likely to be. That was unacceptable for him so he chose to go, at the age of 26.

I feel as much for schizophrenics as I do for their families. It is a disease that strikes generally bright males, in their mid twenties. It has no known cause, and no known cure. It's a terrible human tragedy. Whatever the cause, you are witnessing the destruction of a human being.

Meditation helped at that time?

No. I was completely dysfunctional for months. I would go to auditions and not know what I was doing. But at the end of the day, your own survival needs take over. And you realize you can choose to survive or perish. You force yourself to come back. And at THAT stage meditation helped.

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

Why didn't you make the universe perfect to start with? Why are you putting all people through so much misery? What are you trying to prove at the cost of human suffering? Don't talk about the test of characters and so on. Please! I want a perfect world!

If there were such a thing as reincarnation, what would you choose?

I would choose to be born in Delhi, conscious of all the wisdom I have accumulated in this life – so I don't repeat the same mistakes – and not struggling for my day-to-day existence.

What is your idea of happiness?

There is no IDEA of happiness. Happiness is not an abstract. A glass of lassi on a hot summer day is happiness, looking at the pine trees in the Himalayas on a beautiful sunlit day is happiness, the enormous success of Sandokan brought me happiness, falling in love with the women I married was happiness, irrespective of the outcome later.

Happiness is never constant, otherwise you wouldn't know how to differentiate from everything else. Happiness comes and goes. It's an emotional state that certainly one likes. But it's not a state one can aspire to, like contentment. Contentment is a state you can operate from. Happiness is just sunshine through clouds lightening up your day.

So basically happiness as you explained it all comes from interacting with the outside world, whereas contentment is an inner state?

Definitely.

Wishing you always more of the two!