

Admiral R. Tahiliani

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'Even putting my best foot forward is preordained'

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Admiral R. Tahiliani was Chief of Navy and the governor of Sikkim. He currently heads the India chapter of Transparency International.

What does spirituality mean to you?

It is about an ethical approach to life and my personal conduct as a human being. It is also about the conviction that there is a fundamental unity, as described in the Hindu philosophy of advaita vedanta: there is one awareness and we are all life's offshoots, we are all part of that awareness. We are not separate.

Did you always feel that way?

My mother used to believe in Guru Granth Sahib – as many Sindhis, she believed in Sikhism without the outward appearances of it. So from my very early childhood I grew up in an environment of believers and had implicit faith.

But when you are young, you are not very conscious of what you believe in. You know there is an entity called God but who or what is God, you do not know too much. That is something you evolve in

yourself, over time. So back then, my faith was almost like a dogma while over the years, it ripened into something much deeper. It became much more real, affecting my life in the deepest ways. When I joined the Navy, it was quite fashionable to question everything and be a Marxist, claiming there is no God and all this is nonsense. But it was never the case for me, even though I did have questions. I first turned to J. Krishnamurti for answers. Later on I discovered Bhagwan Ramana Maharshi and became a follower of his.

How did that happen?

It happened as meant to be, because it was destined. I had broken my leg in 1971 and was laying in hospital, catching up with my reading. I chanced upon a description of Bhagwan Ramana Maharshi in Paul Brunton's book "In Search of Secret India". He had come to India in the 30's, in search of the meaning of life. He had met countless so-called saintly people and gurus, but none had appealed to him. He was in Bombay, about to catch a ship back when someone told him about a fakir in Tiruvannamalai. He felt drawn to him and left for that place. The moment he reached, he felt rivers of peace flowing through him and had no more questions to ask.

When I read about it, I felt a profound desire to see that place, even though Bhagwan Ramana Maharshi had left his mortal frame in 1950, not knowing exactly what I would find or feel there. I only managed to do so years later, but Ramana Maharshi's sayings became my guidance.

How so?

When I read Ramana Maharshi's sayings, I feel the need for search is not there anymore. I have arrived.

He did not utter much but answered questions, which were compiled by his devotees. You might say that his book of sayings became my Bible. I read five pages of it every day, I finish the book and then start all over again. It is like a constant reminder. And it is the only ritual I have in my life.

I have tried to meditate, but the monkey that is my mind does not allow me to be still and dive deeply. It has too many preoccupations and I have not managed to get rid of them. It obviously means I have to come back for a few more lives...

People like Ramana Maharshi are no ordinary beings like you or me. They are so evolved that there is no sense of I or individuality. We have the ego, the "I". I am Admiral Tahiliani, former Navy Chief, former Governor of Sikkim and all that rubbish. It is all a great confusion of real awareness with the ego.

Then why have you chosen to become all those things?

When you climb the ladder of your profession, it is all very nice and exciting. I joined the Navy as a cadet. My only hope back then was to reach the rung above, then lieutenant and so on. Every time you climb one rung, you think of the next one. I never ever dreamt of course that I would become Navy Chief.

But do you think there is such a thing as a specific mission or purpose in life?

Of course there is, without a doubt. And it is all preordained. But it does not mean I can sit still, do nothing, and wait for things to happen. Even putting my best foot forward is preordained.

So what is your mission?

I would say it is to be as useful a person to society as I can be. And when serving others, you are in fact helping yourself evolve.

I do not consciously think too much of all this though. One simply IS. It is fully part of who I am.

As a child, what did you envision doing when growing up?

I had never thought of the Navy, but it was all meant to be. My father would tell me that I should become a doctor. But he died very young, when I was only seventeen years' old. I was the oldest of eight brothers. There was no more question of me studying medicine for five years. I had to work.

One day, as I was studying in Bombay, staying with my uncle, I left home then realized I had a few extra minutes so I went back. I glanced at the papers and suddenly my eyes focused on a small ad regarding "dates for applications for permanent commission in the Indian Royal Navy". This was 1947. Normally, it would not have interested me, since my dream was to fly airplanes and I would have liked to join the Air Force. But one line intrigued me: "parents of successful candidates must be prepared to pay 116 pounds for holiday expense". This meant training in the UK, which was my dream. So I wrote down the address and a postcard before taking the bus, came to Delhi, and had only one afternoon to fill all the papers and send them. It all flowed perfectly and I managed to do it all. I sailed through the exams and was then called to Dehradun for interviews. Being the elder brother, and with all my experience in the boy scouts, it was easy for me to act as a leader, take charge and so on, which is what they were looking for. So I succeeded at those interviews and joined the Navy.

That is how it all started. It was all determined. So to me, it is preordained that I would live as I do and do my little bit to serve as I have been trying.

In this preordained script, have you felt a protective or guiding force all along?

It is more than guidance or protection. As Ramana Maharshi once said:

"The ordainer controls the fate of souls.

Whatever is destined not to happen, will not happen, try as you may.

Whatever is destined to happen will happen, do what you may to prevent it.
The best therefore is to remain silent."

Were you ever revolted against that preordained way of things?

Never. Of course there are difficulties and challenges in life but I would turn to those pages of Ramana Maharshi and find all answers. It would instill peace in me and give me the energy, the strength, the anchor to face all challenges.

Were you ever tempted to leave those earthly pursuits for some exclusively spiritual path?

Never. It was simply not ordained for me to take that path. I was never tempted to take sanyas, because I firmly believe one can be as useful a human being and achieve salvation, even while living in this world as a householder, performing one's duties. There is no conflict between the two.

When you look at the depth of corruption around, or the suffering of children for instance, is that meant to be as well?

It is meant to be indeed. But it beholds us all to do something about it. And even the fact that you must do something about it is preordained. So I will do my very best to fight corruption, as I do, in an institutionalized manner and not against individuals.

With Transparency International, we are trying to put systems in place which would help reduce corruption. For instance, the Integrity Pact: as a principal buyer of goods and services, you say you won't accept bribes and those wanting to bid for your projects have to sign the Pact, vowing not to bribe. If found otherwise, the company gets black-listed. To ensure confidence in the system, there are independent external monitors of impeccable credentials, whom the bidders can approach directly. We have now a number of Public Sector Undertaking companies signatories of the Integrity Pact. We also insist on an MoU, which makes it much more concrete and binding. On the overall, more and more companies find that it is in their interest to join: cutting on bribes means cutting on costs, which improves the bottom line. Especially at times of crisis like now, it can become quite an attractive proposition.

But trying to do something about large scale corruption is not enough. There is also so much petty corruption. We recently did a study of the rural poor and slum dwellers. We found out that 31% of bellow the poverty line people, entitled to a BPL card which gives them subsidized food rations etc., actually do not hold the card, simply because they did not have enough money to bribe their way into getting it. So we now have devised a Development Pact, geared towards Panchayats and other local institutions to make sure more government and development money reaches those they are aimed at.

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

I do not ask God any question. I cannot ask God because He knows better than I would ever know. If I ask a question, it is my ego, and my ego does not know anything. Basically, our minds create confusion, but in fact, there is simply total unity, everything is Him. So there are no mysteries, life all makes sense to me.

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

None of us have a choice in the matter. It depends on one's Prarabhda Karma.

What is your idea of happiness?

Total peace with myself. Which I actually have.