

Bikram Ghosh

Tabla player and music composer

'I went through a rebirth'

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Tabla player and music composer Bikram Ghosh feels that when he plays, he creates pure sound.

What does spirituality mean to you?

I am relieved you are asking about spirituality and not religion. Spirituality is safer, more inward, more subjective. So it works well with me. It has to do with my belief system, with who I am. And that changes over time. I flip-flopped from one extreme to another, from being a complete believer to an atheist, to a believer again.

What do you mean by believer?

Believing in God. That is where I am now. As a kid, I was always drawn to idols and gods, and I was interested in spirituality. I read the Gita, the Bible and much of Vivekananda. Today, I have a temple in my house with a Hanuman statue. I sit there every day for 30 minutes or so.

How did that happen?

I had been around spiritual leaders for years – especially when I toured the world with Pandit Ravi Shankar, and we kept meeting all kinds of people. But I never really felt a connect.

Then, about four years ago, I was going through turbulent times and needed some guidance. I met someone who became a friend-philosopher-guide. He made me understand that I needed a divine presence in my life and basically brought me to Hanumanji.

But you cannot order faith, you cannot suddenly believe, can you?

Everything we do in life is need-based. I felt a void, I needed an anchor and this fulfilled it. I now feel much more comfortable, and internally, more satiated. It's about connecting with an energy, a source. I don't want to analyse how and why it works. I used to think and analyse so much – it doesn't really lead anywhere.

What about the idea of destiny?

I am convinced that a huge chunk of our lives is preordained. How much? I don't know and won't ever know. So there's no need to ponder too much about it. I am much happier just playing. That's tangible. That's real. I connect with it. And when I play, I feel great.

Do you feel a connection to the so-called divine when you play?

When I play, it is a moment of loss, it's pure, it's just sound. I lose myself and do not think of anything. So I don't know if I am connected.

Did you always know that it had to be music?

I didn't really have a choice. My parents are musicians and I always knew it was meant to be music. But at 30, I hit a crisis point. I had been touring with Raviji for nine years, playing at the most prestigious venues, making a comfortable living. One night in New York, after a standing ovation at Carnegie Hall, I came back to my hotel room and suddenly felt a gigantic sinking sensation, like a wave I felt my life was meaningless and hopeless.

I asked myself every scary question. I questioned every dimension of my life, including if I really wanted to be a musician. I concluded it was the right thing for me, but the way I was doing it (classical music) was not right. I had to find my own language, how best to express myself.

My marriage was falling apart, I had lost my friends because of incessant international tours. I could stop my career and basically be a nobody. I could start everything from scratch, reinvent myself and see what happens. So I literally stopped playing classical music.

It gave me a fantastic buzz to say 'no' to everything. And I started exploring. I thought of doing new-age fusion when nobody was doing it in India. I went with the flow and in the last 10 years, I've had the time of my life. The people I've met, the work I've done, it's been fantastic.

Above all, I feel so good to have faced those hard questions, to have made those hard choices and to have stood by them when nobody believed or understood them.

Today, even someone like Ravi Shankar understands why I broke off and changed course. It is a validation. And I can now play classical music again, and I enjoy it. I basically went through a rebirth and have journeyed a lot since, which feels amazing.

I used to be full of anger, I used to have a real show-off side, I was trying to constantly prove myself. Now I'm more introspective, more comfortable with myself and I can completely lose myself in the music. I can forget the audience. I can unconsciously step out and just hear the rhythms, which is such a great connect.

And can you take your audience to those other spaces?

Yes, people often tell me they get completely transported. It happens when I am so incredibly into the music that I am no longer self-conscious. If I am blown over, they get blown over.

What is your idea of happiness?

These days, I don't want anything too lofty. I am mostly in work mode. Happiness is about achieving the things I have set out to achieve – to do my work well, to reach out to as many people as I can – with as little inner anxiety and as much calm as possible.