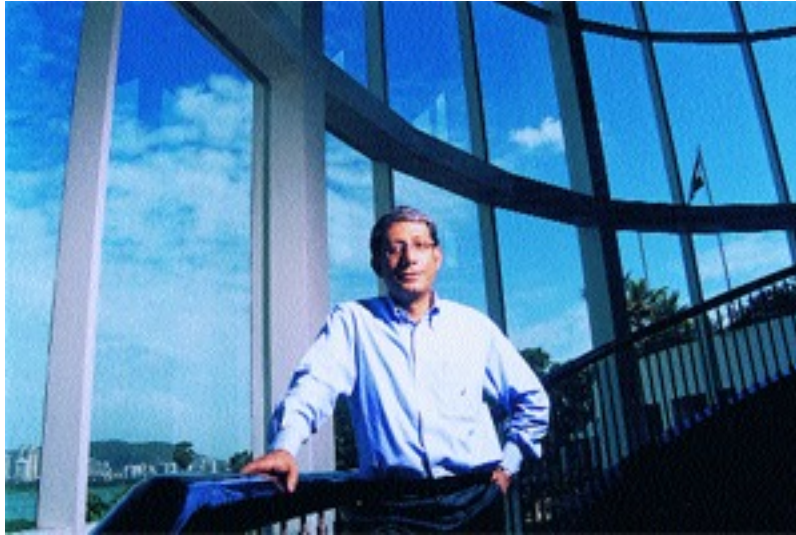


Ravi Venkatesan

Microsoft Chairman

'Success is touching the lives of one billion people'

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Outgoing Microsoft chairman Ravi Venkatesan looks at every stage of his life as a training, as a preparation for what he is really supposed to do.

What does spirituality mean to you?

It has meant different things at different points in my life. At this stage, I look at the essence of Hinduism, Vedanta, which explains that the divine and you are not different. The moment you understand and experience it, everything falls into place. Spirituality therefore, is the quest for that unity, for that moment when all of creation, divinity and you are not separate, when you do not stand apart with your ego.

How do you go about it?

For me, it began in 1994. I was living in the US and had a series of disappointments that got me thinking about life. I was far away from my culture. I began reading Joseph Campbell, which awakened in me a thirst to learn more. I came back to India in 1996, among others to take care of my parents' ill health. My father was a great scholar and he became my guru – he taught me a lot of the Vedic chanting and texts. Dying without passing on his knowledge had been a source of great concern for him. So he had an opportunity to share it and I became more in touch with my traditions.

In 2002, I met Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev who runs the Isha foundation in Coimbatore who introduced me to meditation, to pranayama and to a set of ideas which felt stabilizing. That was further progress on the quest.

But eventually I came to realize that it's all about being on a journey, spending more and more time with myself, letting the noise in my mind quieten down, putting myself at risk, outside of my comfort zones. Hopefully by doing so, some of my conditioning and socialization would fade away, allowing me to discover deeper layers in me – and if lucky enough, one day, I could find the essence of who I am.

Where are you on that journey?

I am actually at a very important turning point. I realized last year that I needed to reinvent myself both personally and professionally and I therefore decided to make a number of changes. For instance, I recently got married and also decided to leave Microsoft – not an easy decision considering how good of a company it is.

I am now trying to figure out what is the best way to live up to my potential and do something for the world. I haven't yet figured it out. But I thought I should take some risk and have faith in God that I will eventually discover it. One day, I will recognize what I am meant to do and it will feel right. That is my conviction.

Did you have a religious upbringing?

My father's spirituality and religiosity were present, but I mostly rejected them. Growing up in India in the sixties and seventies was tough. Opportunities and means were limited. Leaving India was therefore the objective for many people of my generation. Spirituality and rituals would not help achieve it; academic excellence and achievement on the other hand would, and were therefore the only priority. So I was quite stupid and rejected all those things – though I was lucky enough to get to know them at a later stage in life.

It was all about achievement, achievement, achievement. Then one day, you hit a speed bump and take stock of things.

You mentioned God – what is it for you?

There is a creation. Science explains more and more how it works, but completely fails to explain why it exists. And if there is a creation, there must be a creator. Who is it, what is it, I have no idea. But spirituality is the quest to experience even for a brief moment a real connection with it.

When does it happen for you?

When I have an incredible connection with someone, or with music, or when losing myself with animals. I love animals! They are so in the moment that playing with them is a fantastic way to feel part of that whole creation.

At times of major difficulty, where do you find your anchor?

A lot comes from my faith. Spirituality is separate from religion. But religion is important for me. I am a practicing Hindu. So I turn to prayer and chanting. Something about the vibrations of chanting is very soothing. Pranayama is another source of help – breathing stabilizes me and helps decrease a lot of the inner tension.

Also, I must say I am incredibly fortunate to have a number of really, really close friends who are a source of great strength. Foremost amongst these is my wife Sonali.

What about the idea of a particular purpose in life?

I don't know if there is one. But if we manage to give it a purpose, life becomes happier and more fulfilling than if we just go through the motions. Finding a sense of mission provides a lot of energy, strength, and courage. So I've always tried to find a higher purpose in what I do.

Was it the case at Microsoft?

Absolutely. I joined Microsoft because Bill Gates told me "if you really want to have an impact on your country, you need a platform; it is very hard to make a difference as a lone individual. And you will not find a better platform than Microsoft". Why ? Because IT touches every aspect of human life – education, healthcare, 600 million people using cellphones etc.; or look at what Nandan Nilekani is doing through the UID Authority, trying to make sure social programs have less leakage thanks to IT. Today it is impossible to transform society without enabling change through technology.

So when I joined Microsoft in February 2004, I defined success as touching the lives of one billion people. And we did a lot. Many people got truly engaged with that cause. For instance, we have run for seven years the largest teachers' training program in the world. We have trained 300,000 teachers on how to use computers – and they, in turn, have trained millions of students.

In the last 18 months I have personally led a program where in 120 hours we can take an 8th standard dropout and teach him how to use a computer, polish his English skills, make a simple resume. Instead of becoming a security guard or a driver earning 5,000 Rupees, he can get a job as a data entry clerk or in a retail store, making 10,000 Rupees. We are now having a similar program with the Indian army to train all soldiers about to retire at the age of 40.

Those are only two examples out of many. It is related to our business because we do not know much else than technology. But we are enabling people to be more successful in their lives. And it definitely impacts those working at Microsoft - they are prouder when coming to work because their company cares about more than just business and making money.

Now the question is how you can impact in a different way?

Yes, how can one impact hundreds of millions? Impacting a few millions is not enough in a country like India. And I look at every stage of my life as a training, as a preparation for what I am really supposed to do. I don't know what I am supposed to do, but everything I have done – my education, my experiences, the friendships I have built – everything, is meant for this next thing. And I hope I figure out what it shall be...

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

Why are we here? Why did You create all this? And who are You? Reveal Yourself!

Do you believe in rebirth?

I strongly believe in it. There is no other way I can make sense of all that happens in life.

If you could choose what to be in the next round, what would it be?

I would choose not to be reincarnated.

What is your idea of happiness?

To be content with my state in life, no matter what it is. Focusing on the glass half full rather than the glass half empty.

Do you manage?

No. Everything in my life – my family background, my education, my training - has taught me to focus on the glass half-empty. I am trying very hard to change.