

Abhinav Bindra

Olympian

'My internal being must be in equilibrium for me to pull the trigger'

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Abhinav Bindra won the gold medal for shooting at the Beijing Olympic Games in 2008.

What does spirituality mean to you?

It is some kind of a belief in my inner being, some kind of trust. If you are in touch with yourself, with your inner being, that is spirituality.

I also believe that energies have an impact on our present being. I believe in positive and negative energies for sure and that it has relevance on how we are doing.

You mean positive and negative energies emanating from people?

Yes, and also, I believe in parallel worlds. When we die, our physical being goes away but the soul stays back, spirits are always around. I do think they exist and have an influence.

How do you know it, have you experienced it?

I have not had parapsychological experiences, but it is written in our holy books and I believe in it. I don't question it. Some things are best left unquestioned. Similarly when you ought to have faith in the

divine, in somebody higher. You can't question it. Because if you try to reason it out or question it, it doesn't lead you anywhere.

So you've always have faith in God?

It's evolved over a period of time. Circumstances of life have taught me all sorts of things. Life has taught me to look at things from another lense. I certainly believe now that there is no right or wrong. I may have certain values, you may disagree with them, but I don't believe you or me are right. It's all a question of perspective. It's all relative. That's what I believe in.

Actually certain experiences in life could have weakened or even destroyed your belief in God?

Definitely. Especially failures, difficult times. Those circumstances can get you closer to God, or you can totally lose it. But as I said, certain questions are best left unanswered.

Did you have a religious upbringing?

My parents are God fearing but I was never forced into anything. I participated in family religious events, of the Sikh religion, but nothing beyond that. My grandparents were extremely religious. So there was an atmosphere at home, but the choice was mine.

How did you make that choice?

My journey is still on. I am still learning. I am not ritualistic. The connection with a higher force as a faith is something very personal, which can't be thrust upon you. It has to be natural. It has to come from within.

How do you go about that inner connection?

I am quite in tune with my inner self. There are two worlds – my inner being, which is important to me, and an external world. And there is a big difference between the two.

Meaning?

I am an internal person. My internal world means everything to me. I am much more controlled by my internal world than external factors.

So your natural state is to be within whereas being part of the external world requires a conscious effort on your part?

Exactly. It doesn't come naturally; to be part of the external world I have to actively work on it.

How does it manifest concretely in your life?

It actually has a lot to do with what I have been involved in during the last 15 years, the sport I have been focusing on. Shooting is very internal and meditative in nature. It all is about dealing with your own self, your own being. It is a sport of stillness and stability. And stability you have to find inside. Every time I shoot, whether in training or competition, I have to be in touch with my inner self to pull

the trigger. The decision to see if everything is right and that I will hit the center of the target, the decision to pull the trigger comes from my inner being.

So the physical training is a prerequisite, but what makes the difference is that inner stillness and stability?

Definitely. This inner stability has a huge impact. It makes the difference and the decision.

I will give you an example: I may see a perfect alignment of the rifle and target, but yet not pull the trigger, even though everything looks fine. Because my internal being tells me that something is not right. It could be tightness in my muscles, or a wrong breathing pattern, or that by the time the bullet leaves the barrel, something is going to move. So the decision is internal. When my internal being is in balance and equilibrium, then I can pull the trigger.

How does the mind actually influence the outcome – for instance, how come many miss in competition a target which would systematically and easily be reached in training?

When you are shooting for nothing it's all easy. When you are shooting for 25 cents, it's much more difficult. Your internal being is challenged by your conscious state of mind, which is sending bad signals to your inner being. It gets too nervous or intimidated. Your ego comes in the way. That's not deep, it's conscious stuff, at the surface.

How do you cope with it?

By being more in touch with my inner self. By trying to train my conscious self not to react in a particular manner. It's a fight between the two. Shooting is a conflict between the two. My world is actually an every day conflict between the two.

Is daily training a kind of meditation?

Yes. I took a few months off after Beijing but then I went back to training, waking up early in the morning and working for hours. I don't need to train that much to be as good and at the level where I want to be. I can do without that much training. But it gives me balance. It is important to my inner being, to the inner self. Not to my life in general, because not much is happening to my life in general...

Someone who had climbed the Everest told me how sad reaching the peak was, because after the victory, what next? It can only go down-path, there is no higher peak – isn't it the same for you after the Gold medal in Beijing?

I want to meet him, because this is exactly how I felt! That is so true. That is the biggest truth. It is unbelievable. Happiness doesn't come that way. I worked for the goal of winning the Olympic gold for fifteen years. That was IT. That was the ONE focus I had. When I achieved it, when I got it, I reached the top of the mountain and I found nothing there! Besides, it was depressing because you don't know what to look for next.

What do you mean there was nothing there?

What is it – a medal around your neck? Of course, when you reflect on your journey and what you've done to achieve that, it's fulfilling. I was fulfilled and satisfied when I stood on the podium, but it's momentarily of course. There was ecstasy for a few seconds but then that's it.

And what other peak? Either you try to reach the same peak again. Or you find another outlet, you redefine your mindset on what the objective is.

It taught me something else as well, which I read: for 14, 15 years of my life, I always thought I would finally be really happy when I win the gold medal. And I was basing my happiness on this future reality, on something I didn't have at that moment.

Yet, happiness is not having what you want, but wanting what you already have. You cannot wait for something to happen. You have to find happiness and satisfaction from what you have. And this only can come when you simplify things. When you find it from simple, day-to-day pleasures of life, which we usually don't give enough credit to in our fast-paced world.

Do you manage to do it now?

I am making a conscious attempt to. Because it is more enduring and more lasting. Otherwise in this fast-paced world, we are not making the best of our lives. Even though it's good to be competitive and goal-driven – wanting to make a lot of money, achieve this and that – we may spend a lifetime pursuing future happiness.

So sure, we should have goals and want to achieve, but we should not base our happiness on achieving those things. We must enjoy the journey. Otherwise once we get there, we will say "oh my god, I have worked forty years of my life for this piece of paper?? How is it going to do it anything for me?" Ok, sure, you will buy your yacht and private jet, and you'll enjoy it for a while, but then you'll be bored of it.

I still want the yacht and the jet though!

Does each one of us have a particular purpose to our lives?

That's a very hard question. For instance, for the last many years I thought the purpose of my life was to do what I did. But I am not that sure about it anymore.

There is poverty, people dying, hungry, there is so much trouble in the world. So what is the purpose of it all? It surely can't be what we see. It surely must be something else, very simple, which we don't do. Because in this competitive scenario we all are after things, we get very caught up in that. I wish I knew what the true purpose of my life is.

What about inspiring young people in India or shaking things in Indian sports for instance – i.e. a purpose larger than you?

Yes, everybody wants to do well for themselves, but if I can reach a position where I can also do good to others who don't have those opportunities, that sounds a little bit better.

And you still continue the business management path?

I am trying. Again, either you detach from this world completely or you have to be part of this world. And I need to earn my bread and butter somehow! I am trying. I am exploring. I don't know. I don't know what the true purpose of my being is.

Do you think it may be preordained? Are certain things in life destined?

Definitely I do. I truly believe in destiny. I will give you an example. In Athens, in 2004, I broke the Olympic record, I shot better than I shot in Beijing, I entered the finals in third place, and even if I had shot a very, very ordinary final I would have won a medal for sure. But I failed. I finished seventh, shooting the worst ever final of my life. Even if I try and shoot that badly, I probably cannot. A few days later, they discovered the platform I was shooting from had a defect. There was a big hollow space between the wooden planks and the concrete bellow. So in a way I was standing on a trampoline. And in a sport where it is all about stability... They ripped that floor apart for the next days of the final, and fixed it. So the others could start to shoot well again on that point number three. So in a nutshell, I shot better in Athens, I was so emotional about winning, I had more feelings about winning – in Beijing I didn't care so much about winning, I just wanted to redeem the results from Athens. But that was destiny. It just wasn't meant to be for me to win a medal at that moment. It was obviously disappointing. In a way, my world had come to an end. I was so heartbroken. I didn't know what had hit me. I didn't know about the flooring. This came out only a day after. But my mother told me something important: "the gold was a bit out of reach, so the most you could have achieved was silver; yet, it is your destiny to win a gold medal, so this doesn't matter". And it came true four years down the road. So I do believe in destiny.

In Athens the inner being really wanted to win. It was emotional about it. In Beijing it was silent, it didn't matter. So actually I had more stillness.

And now it has changed again. I won the medal and both the inner being and outer conscience are trying to figure it out – what should the path ahead be.

When tough days or challenges come, where is your anchor?

Since I am a very internal person, I try to find the solutions from within. I swallow it as a bitter pill, accept it as a challenge, try and find a solution, and move on. You cannot be stuck. You have to move on. Good and bad you have to move on.

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

I would like to ask the purpose of my life, what am I supposed to be doing here... It would be nice to get a true answer, so that at least I can then proceed and do it.

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

I'd like to live my life again but through a different lense. I've had a certain set or values and rules for myself, certain beliefs, so next time I'd try to do it with a different set. For example my father and sister are very much extraverts, more people's persons, they thrive in the company of others. It's a different world. I haven't done it so far.

What is your idea of happiness?

When my internal and external beings are aligned.

How do you manage to achieve that alignment?

Oh, I haven't figured it out... I am trying to find an answer to that question. It just happens sometimes. So many things can influence it. There are a lot of physiological factors in one's happiness, chemical reactions in the brain do matter. And many others.