

# Dr. Shashi Tharoor

Diplomat

'I have felt the presence of a guiding hand'

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**Dr. Shashi Tharoor is a diplomat, author and journalist. He was the former Under Secretary-General of the United Nations. He is now the chairman of Dubai-based Afras Ventures.**

**What does spirituality mean to you?**

It is the acknowledgment of forces larger than myself. They are not immediately graspable by the daily concerns of one's consciousness. But they reflect yearnings for things beyond oneself as well as the reality that transcends the mundane, daily life. The awareness of those forces is not something rational. It is an act of conviction, an instinctive feeling I have almost always had in my life.

**Do you believe you are guided and protected by a superior force?**

I have felt many times in irrational ways the presence of a guiding hand, especially and more strongly after the passing away of my father. Could it simply be explained by the psychology of bereavement, or the sense that I was no longer accountable only to myself, but also to his spirit? I am not sure, especially as this feeling has slightly faded away over the years – this happened fifteen years ago. The shock of losing him so young (he was only 63) and as I was so close to him may have something to do with it. It basically caused the deepest pain and deepest soul searching of my life. I had a sense of regret since I could never talk to him again. And the most consoling thing I realized was: when you are

physically far away from someone you love, you know you can be in touch through the occasional phone, letter, or travel. Yet, when they have left this world, they are always with you. In some ways, I took that in very deeply. I was very conscious of my father's good wishes when he was alive, but they became a permanent feature of myself for many years after his passing away, I was very conscious of his presence.

I also believe that the world poses more questions than science and rationality could ever answer. There are too many examples of paranormal phenomena for instance. But I do have a lot of scepticism when it comes to psychics, astrologers and other types of people professing an understanding of it all. When I was running for the Secretary General of the U.N. post for instance, I cannot tell you how many astrologers told me victory was assured. And of course it was not.

On the overall, the concept of the divine very much talks to me. It does so in the Upanishad sense of the word, as something ultimately unknowable by human beings. And with the idea that all worship, all prayers are means for human beings through their own imperfection to reach out to that they cannot touch. This is why it makes perfect sense to me that there may be 333,000 different manifestations of gods and goddesses. None is more accurate than the other since nobody has actually seen the face of God. We can only imagine It. So there is no harm in imagining God as a woman with five arms or a man on a cross. These are crutches for human's imagination because they have difficulty fathoming the abstract, and praying to it.

### **Do you believe you have a special mission or purpose in this life?**

I feel so very strongly. I have argued consistently that the only purpose of life is to leave this planet in a bit of a better state. If life was only about eating bread, why would that be – to survive? But then survive to do what? To eat more bread? It would make no sense. So to me, it is about enriching life and in turn, being enriched by it. That is why beyond finding material comfort, the arts, culture, the world of ideas are so important to me. And whatever I venture into, I really try to do my best. Even if it does not succeed, striving for it is what matters. Not trying would be the unforgivable thing.

As a child, one goes through different phases and desires. Before I was even ten years old, my grandfather told me I should become an IAS officer. He was living in a village in Kerala and those officers had an impact on the lives of millions. Then I thought I should have an impact on world affairs, so I wanted to be an IFS officer. But when it was time to sit for those exams, the government declared emergency. So I refused to go ahead with the exams, as I could not see myself serve a government capable of such a move.

Academia – as I had just completed my PhD, journalism – as I had been writing since I was a child – or international affairs were then the three options left. I ended up at the U.N. in Geneva, thinking I would spend there a year only. And of course, it lasted twenty-nine instead. I went from dealing with refugees – the Boat People crisis – to Peacekeeping Operations in Yugoslavia and then undersecretary general at the New York headquarters. The U.N. basically became the platform I was given as an Indian without resources, to have some sort of impact, to make a difference.

And when my candidacy to the post of Secretary General did not succeed in 2007, it was a huge, dramatic change in my life. I have learnt to accept it as what was meant to be. But I had embarked on that race with the goal of winning of course. And it was a real shock. I have tried since then to embrace the Hindu view about it – when you embark on a journey with a certain purpose and have an

accident, it turns out the accident itself was the purpose. What is intended up there sometimes does not match the desire we have down here.

So as all that unfolded, I had no idea what I would do next. It was like rebooting a computer. A vast number of opportunities came to me and I entertained almost all of them since I was so unclear about what to do and be next.

Then I found this arrangement, an involvement in the private sector – something I had never done before – which would give me the necessary infrastructure (an assistant, an office...) and the freedom to pursue a wide range of interests. So even though I am no longer part of a large organization such as the U.N., I can still serve a number of purposes. I sit on the board of 33 institutions (maybe a bit too much!), in the fields of human rights, humanitarian action, culture, and education. And I find it all quite constructive and fulfilling. It is way too early to say what will come out of it all. All setbacks look pretty back when they happen and I lack the perspective to say what it was meant for. In the meantime, I must say it is a quite liberating experience, since it has freed me to pursue a number of things that otherwise I would have never done.

### **What is spirituality for you in your day to day life?**

I am very conscious of the higher powers in my daily life. When I can, I pray. When I do not manage to pray in a formal way, I silently think of a superior power. I do so using a picture my parents used to have in their puja room, Ram and Sita surrounded by the main gods. Years later, I had found it in a book published by the former Greek ambassador in Delhi. And I always have it in my home-made altar, so I can imagine my worship through an illustration I have seen since I was a baby.

Many people view mantras and prayers as mambo-jumbo. But I actually think there is a lot to be said for sanctified practice. A form of words that have been spoken for thousands of years by millions of people carries a certain sanctity in and of itself. Whether they came down from somewhere else, from the top of Mount Sinai, from a revelation of Archangel Gabriel, or from the composers of the Rig Veda in 1,500 B.C. does not matter. What does matter is the fact that so many millions have been repeating those words for so many years and that it means so much to them. That gives them a certain sacredness and value.

Having said that, and even though I acknowledge the role of spirituality, I have to confess that in the toughest moments of my life, I go into myself, rather than into spirituality for solace and energy. This is the problem with being a type-A personality I guess! Someone like Kofi Annan for instance has the ability to tune off for half an hour and meditate. I never had this capacity. Maybe I did not try hard enough. But maybe this restlessness comes from the genes, and there isn't much that can be done about it...

Still, at the end of the battle for the U.N. secretary generalship, when I had to find a new direction in my life, I found a lot of comfort and meaning in the words of the Gita, when they emphasize that efforts matter most, rather than the rewards. It helped me find the energy inside to go on, do other things, rather than being weighed down by the setback. So it all came from spiritual values and convictions at the core of who I am.

### **What is the role of spirituality in your work?**

Spirituality gives me the sense that it is not enough to merely make a good salary, or hold an important position, or write a book hoping it will influence readers for the years to come. It is important to also constantly give of oneself for causes that help large numbers of people. So today, it means being involved with the International Red Cross Committee, with the house of world cultures in Berlin, with projects related to AIDS in India, immigrants in the US, Bangalore slums' children education and much more.

In the end, I do not sleep much, I work seven days a week. But at least I have no administrative work and this autonomy – not being part of a very large organization – helps me being and becoming more of myself, which also helps my spirits.

### **Can you share a unique experience that changed or shaped your spiritual beliefs?**

I have always had the conviction of the existence of superior forces. But around the age of 14, I had a brief lapse. I flirted with schoolboy atheism, of the kind that comes with the discovery of rationality in school. I had grown up imbibing the spirituality of my father, and I was in a Jesuit school (Saint-Xavier in Calcutta) but it was part of an intellectual rebellion. I made a list of arguments proving the non existence of God and even wrote articles about it in the school newspaper. Yet, a Jesuit priest managed to counter my rational observations with what seemed to be superior rational arguments, quoting everyone from Descartes to Kant and Nietzsche. So as a very susceptible boy who had taken a rational stance, I had to agree and believe again. Soon enough though, I realized that this kind of conviction should not come from reason, but rather from intuition and instinct.

### **What have been your main spiritual inspirations?**

I have met a number of spiritual people, from very simple learned ones who would visit our house as a child, to many celebrated ones. But I would first mention my father. He was an extremely spiritual person though like many Hindus, he never tried to impart his spirituality onto others. He always saw spiritual yearnings as something profoundly personal, as the communication with our maker, as our own quest for truth. Still, seeing him pray every day and live his spiritual values in every dimension of his life was tremendously formative and inspiring.

### **If you were to be reincarnated, what would you like to be reincarnated as?**

I am one of those Hindus who is profoundly skeptical about reincarnation. What is the use of it if I cannot remember my previous lives? Even the concept of the soul is one I have tremendous difficulty with. Is it independent from my consciousness or part of my psyche?

It cannot be empirically observed. So I neither believe nor disbelieve.

I very much accept the notion of the cosmos being pervaded by a spirit which you could call Brahman or Atman or any other name and we can all tap into it. But does a part of that eternal cosmic spirit live within me and would not die when the body dies? I have difficulties with that notion intellectually.

Basically, all that I know, feel and experience is filtered through my consciousness. But for the concept of the soul to make sense it would have to be different from consciousness. So to consciously accept

that something so fundamental would not be conscious is a challenge, a leap which I do not know how to make.

Yet, even as a writer, I have often noticed this feeling of being a conduit, a channel for something much larger than me. Of course I type words coming from my mind but how and why they came about at that precise moment, no rational answer can satisfy me in explaining it. It seems there is something beyond the mere act of putting words on a paper or a computer screen, something that sustains and infuses those words, something larger than myself that I am tapping into. This is not something that would come into play in my professional life as a diplomat for instance, since most of my work there is based on a certain set of rules, expertise, practices and so on. The way you conduct a meeting, write a cable, give an interview, draft a report and so on are pretty laid out. But it is not the same as the blank screen of a creative enterprise, where you are looking for inspiration that is not confined to a predictable framework.

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

It would have to be a question in the form of a contradiction: on the one hand, I would ask why did You make this world with so many imperfections? But on the other, I would thank God for having done so, because it leaves us humans enough to do, striving to make things better.

**What is your idea of happiness?**

It is about personal fulfilment – the combined feeling that I have accomplished what I had set out to do, but also that those tasks were meaningful, worthwhile. They must give me a sense of having made a difference.