

Rajshree Pathy

Sugar Industrialist and Art Collector

'I am in a relationship with the whole world'

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Rajshree Pathy is a sugar industrialist and an art collector.

What does spirituality mean to you?

To be at peace with myself and in touch with everything around me. Living with an enhanced awareness and consciousness of myself in relationship with the universe. It's a very subjective thing and it actually is difficult to put it in words or define it. I am religious...

...In what way?

I go to temples. I believe in my gods, especially Krishna. He is the very embodiment of everything that is quintessentially human. And the story of his life, the Gita, the way he lived, dancing with the Gopis, fighting the battle of Kurukshetra, being the charioteer, and so on, the whole story of the Mahabharata is the story of our lives!?

I grew up in a conventional Hindu family in Coimbatore. Every morning we went to the prayer room and would thank God for everything we had. And I continued to pray, not asking for something specific, but thanking God, and asking Him to give me the strength to carry out what He wants me to do. Because I believe there is a purpose in life.

Around the age of 14, I started reading J. Krishnamurti, who became a major influence in my life. I was going through intense times of questioning, and he was crucial in shaping my mind. I read him, especially "The fear of the unknown", and went to hear his lectures whenever I could.

I was also very interested in the Theosophical movement, and the whole breakaway from conventional Hindu thought, using some of its fundamental principles and expanding on them to become a global universal consciousness. I needed to go into that. Krishnamurti took me from believing in a more conventional Hindu belief system into something with far more awareness of oneself in the context of one's environment.

Thereafter, I started reading a lot of Swami Chinmayananda and hearing his discourses on the Gita. He was larger than life in his rhetoric. It was so fascinating to listen to him.

When he passed away I went on to learn Vedanta in its true sense. I was only 18, but was already married. I was facing difficult personal times and trying to understand more about life. So I started listening to Swami Dayananda Saraswati, who was Chinmayananda's protégé. He was teaching Vedanta in English in a pure and simple form, without taking away from its truth. I did with him the whole Mandukya Upanishad, which is really wonderful as it is so full of logic. It helped me refine a perception of what the universe and life are all about. I was so privileged to learn it all with such a teacher. And same about the Gita later on, with all its fundamental thoughts on what is good and bad, what is truth and untruth. What you and I think is a lie in fact may not be a lie at all. All these amazing contradictions. Life is not about black and white. Life is mainly about maneuvering the grays. All these things gave me the strength to live my life unconfined by the limitations of conventional everyday life.

And I would always be like an outsider looking at life. I am always hovering somewhere and looking in.

That way, I wouldn't get subjective about situations. I put everything in compartments and handle each one separately. I look at myself as another person and deal with each issue one after the other. I had gone through the death of loved ones very early on. My father passed away in my twenties, my mother then lost her memory and became completely incapacitated. My only sibling moved away to America. I was going through a lot of personal and work issues – yet, all this while, I never went into escape mode or resorted to addictions. I always went into confrontation mode.

Where was your anchor in all those moments?

In this deep faith that if you are true to your expectations, the universe will support you.

Did it always happen or did you revolt against the universe at times?

I have so much, so I don't really have the right to revolt and complain, or ask "why me?" Rather, I should ask "why not me", since I am more equipped than many to handle hurdles. And on the overall, the universe has never failed me. It has exasperated me of course, or surprised me, but not failed me. For instance I never wanted to be a businesswoman. I am a very creative person. I don't think in numbers. So I used to wonder "why me?" I never asked to be in business! Why has this karma come to me?

Indeed, why did you get into business?

I was very determined to be financially independent because it would give me the right to have a decision-making power, the right to choices. I decided I had to have that freedom. My father always believed I should be a good wife and the moment I would start working my marriage would fail. But for me, having my choices and freedom was more important than anything else.

Today, I live my life 100% on my own terms. And with no conflicts. Many people live with too many conflicts. I constantly have been working on removing them.

How have you been doing that?

It is not easy. They constantly come your way. But if you really live the way you think you should live, then you have zero conflict.

How do you get that clarity on how you should live your life? It is easy to get swallowed by the race of life and lose clarity.

During those years of learning, I learnt this objectivity about my life and the ability to take a few steps back, to identify the issues that create conflicts.

But did you always have clarity about what your life was about and where it was going?

Well no, and now let me come to the word 'surrender'. I believe there is another power. I believe in destiny. I believe in karma. But I also do believe life is like being a cow with a long rope. The larger circle is our karmic circle. Yet there is a huge distance between the periphery of the circle and the center. Our choices determine our movements and achievements within this larger potential.

Why do you believe there is such a thing as karma?

Why else would there be inequalities in life? Why else would you have certain things happening that you could have never planned? My whole life has been karmic. I had my choices. I could have continued being in situations that my heart, body and mind were telling me not to be in. I could have continued not to adopt change. We all have these choices. At every point in life we make those choices. But there is also something creating potentials or barring certain routes. Very often I tried so hard to achieve something and it would not happen, no matter how hard I would try. A few years later I would look back and say, thank god it didn't happen!

To achieve is hard. But if it is meant to happen, the universe plots in that direction. It's like running a marathon with lots of stones and hurdles but you get there. And sometimes there just is a wall. And you simply are not meant to get there.

You need to be as conscious as possible of all that is happening to you and around you, and be sensitive enough to act on those messages.

Why sugar as an industry?

It was a regulated industry and you needed a license from the government to grow sugar. My father was a philanthropist and was asked to uplift one of the most backward areas of our state, Tamil Nadu.

Using sugar to do so came as an idea. And I said "I will do it!" I do not know why I said that. We didn't know anything about the sugar business. But I thought I needed a challenge, so let me do it! And my journey in that industry began. I didn't even know back then how long it takes for a sugar stick to grow. And yet, at the age of 28, I established my first large factory.

People now call you the "Indian baroness of sugar"!

I cringe at those names. I simply feel I did what I had to do. Over time, after losing my parents, I was somehow alone, but everyday I felt stronger because I felt the universe was helping me. I never felt orphaned. And never felt alone. So many people came into my life giving me the support exactly when I needed it. I just knew I had to do it. Then it became a creative process. I don't like to look at a balance sheet. I don't look at the numbers. I use intuition and it's all a creative activity. I hate the politics that go on in the sugar business as there is a lot of political interference. But I love the idea that from one stick of sugar you can produce so many things - alcohol, power, organic fertilizers, gas, sugar of course, and more.

Besides, each of my four factories deals with about 37,000 farmers. Each one is different, with its own set of problems, its very specific farmer population and so on. India is such a fascinating and diverse country. I can see it from one factory to the other. And it is such a challenge, such a joy to actually go to these homes, see the way they live. It is an industry with such symbiosis. Whatever you do really transforms an area. We built these factories where there was nothing. And within a few years the entire area had become prosperous. You remove them from debt. You make an unknown farmer a person. Every one is not a statistics in my records. The first thing I did was actually a revolution, because I was fresh in that business and came with my beliefs: I decided to open a bank account for every farmer instead of paying them cash. It had never been done before. I encouraged the banks to open subsidiaries in the villages so the farmers would get self-respect, having now become individuals with a bank account, who can sign checks. Besides, they would be removed from debt, because having no fiscal discipline they would usually borrow money, drink it all and so on. Also, the women are so much more secure because there is money in the bank. So you empower a huge community. This is the challenge, this is the fulfillment.

Changing the lives of so many people is part of your purpose I guess?

Absolutely. Also, I have a stronger and stronger urge to share and give what I have gained and learnt. I can see it for instance with my art. Instead of hanging it on my walls, I'd now rather share it with people through a foundation.

Besides, so much awareness needs to be raised for contemporary arts. Therefore, the birth of COCA, the Coimbatore Center for Contemporary Arts. It will be the first of its kind in India: a world-class arts education facility, as well as a museum with my collection and rotating works.

At the moment, when students graduate from an undergraduate arts program, they simply can't get jobs. And they mostly have chosen arts by default, because they could not get into medicine, engineering or law. So if I could create awareness and give dignity to the arts. No college teaches art journalism, museum studies, curation or any of these things. To be able to provide that would be fantastic. Art has become so intimidating for the common man. It's not ok! Creating a less intimidating space and make it more inclusive. Art is not made by rich kids. Patrons should be wealthy. But the appreciation should be with everyone.

So basically, I am turning my dream into a reality, because I love being surrounded by creativity. I love debating about the issues confronting society through art.

So I am so excited! On the one hand I am expanding my sugar factories and on the other I am building the museum. Those two activities are seamless, they both are creative activities.

Why did you say that we all have a purpose?

Each individual should feel their life has meaning. If you feel fulfilled, you know you are doing the right thing, whatever it is – building a factory, raising kids, working in the fields. This feeling is one's endorsement of one's existence. And it goes back to this idea of having no conflict. And just doing what you are happy doing.

But conflicts come all the time in life, and they also are teachings?

Yes, if you can solve them. How do you resolve them? It comes from strength, from clarity, from a belief that there is something beyond that you can see, call it hope, call it universe. It's the same thing.

How do you ensure you get the clarity and strength?

My belief in ayurveda helps. The whole process is about cleansing internally and externally, it is about meditation. I also did a few meditation programs at Isha Yoga for instance. I questioned every single part of it. But in the end I found it really works for me. After 45 days of the meditation on emptiness, I was really flying. I was so joyous. But it also was so scary because I was so complete in myself that I even stopped having the need to be with my children. That's the scary part about spirituality. You detach so much! And you come to a point you don't need anyone anymore. So I don't practice this meditation all the time. But I do take a few minutes every day to stop and be in silence, when I feel I can stop the world instead of constantly run around.

You mentioned Krishnamurti, Chinmayananda and others, were there other major influences in terms of your understanding of life?

Well, as you change, the kind of people coming into your life also changes. I have always needed replenishment. When you give you also need to receive and must be open to it. There have been books, like Fritjof Capra's "Uncommon wisdom", or people, like Paolo Coelho. I met him in Davos. From a small town girl I had become a Global Leader for Tomorrow. My ideas about business and the world, about life changed. Then meeting him, talking about the universe, life, relationships... He is a guru of sorts for sure. He is equal to any of our gurus in saffron robes, if not more. As a person, he is even larger than what he is in his books.

Do you approach your life today in a very different way than, say, 20 years ago?

I am calmer and more at peace with myself. 20 years ago I was struggling to find my identity. I was more competitive.

What about being a woman in business?

There always was an inequality. All the more coming from small-town Coimbatore. I was always called decorative when sitting in meetings. Everyone used to say I would never last in this industry. It's too hardcore. She is pretty, she is fragile, she doesn't have a father, she doesn't have a brother. So of course she won't last... and yet I have lasted more than twenty years. And have been very good at it. Every time some man would put me down, there was this firm resolve in me to grow even taller the next time I would meet him.

Now of course there are no barriers as I have taken this avatar of being a successful person. For a while I have actually stopped taking awards for a female entrepreneur, because the balance sheet doesn't know about gender. The thing is to be successful. Of course at the beginning my levels of confidence were low and today it is very different. I have removed the conflicts from my life. So I am much more at peace.

So what is next on your journey?

I have so many things going on. My company is a far more professional organization than when I built it. I play much more a role of a strategist and mentor than a hands-on CEO. We have recruited very talented young people. Each organization actually needs to go through this kind of churning and shuffle. You need to bring transformation to get to the next level.

This has meant that I could step back and spend time about what's next. I am interested in so many things – education, hospitality, health and so on. It's all very exciting. Time is so precious. Every minute I am so enthused just working in my head on what's next. I see such a limitless set of possibilities. Life is so full of things we can do and give. I am now in a position to be a catalyst for many things to happen in many areas. And that is what I am working on.

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

I never ask God any questions. I question myself, not God. God is really in myself so I look for the answers inside.

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

The same thing, I really love my life! There is so much to do. Life and death are so seamless. It is one continuous process. I would simply wish to be a human, because we are the only creatures privileged enough to be able to change the lives of people around us.

What is your idea of happiness?

It's a state, it's every moment in my life. I am always happy. I have never been depressed or lonely. I am in a relationship with the whole world! How could I ever be lonely? If you are not happy, do something about it! We always have a choice.

Is it contentment?

Yes, to be at peace with myself. And again, it comes from doing what I have to do. To be in a zero conflict zone.