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'I've accepted reality and made the best of it'

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Lalit Mansingh is former Foreign Secretary of India.

What does spirituality mean to you?

It means very little. And I am scared of the word. It is confused with religions, meditation and so many other things. So in fact, I don't know what spirituality means. But in my own life and experience, I have translated it in a sense of integrity. This sense leads me to what I think is my core belief, and which I see as closest to Buddhism. For several reasons.

I was born in Orissa, a predominantly Hindu state. But my biggest influence was my father, great poet in Oriya language. He was very otherworldly and innocent, preoccupied by poetry. He never survived in jobs because he was defiantly anti-establishment, always questioning authority and so on. He went through his own turmoil. He first decided to give up his sacred thread. Then he decided to give up any Hindu worship of idols or temples. Then around the age of 50, he decided to convert to Buddhism, giving up his Kshatryia heritage, with its embrace of the sword. But he did not share that part of his life with us and did not give us a religious orientation. Besides, he was also an admirer of Jesus, of Sri Aurobindo and Ma, and others. So I grew up in both a religious variety and vacuum.

Today, I do not belong to any particular religion or practice any religion formally.

Why else are you drawn to Buddhism?

Because I am a skeptic and always ask for proof. Almost every other religion says "believe me" and asks you to transcend logic and have faith. I look at everything through the prism of reason. When a religion says there is no other God but Allah, while another one says there are tens of thousands of gods, why would I believe them? In Buddhism, I found the least pressure on your reason and rationality. There are many irrational areas in Buddhism like rebirth, and I take it as a probable hypothesis which can't ever be proved. But when Buddha told his followers I am not saying if God exists or not, because the relevant issue is to find liberation from pain here and now, he set aside the issue of God, therefore removing the need to speculate about it. And he placed Buddhism more as a series of ethical codes.

So you can be a good Buddhist in essence if you follow the Eightfold path, not indulge in violence and so on.

Do you agree with Buddhism's primary assertion that life is suffering?

No I don't. I question the pessimism of Buddhism. Any religion saying that life is suffering, is actually denying life. If it is all suffering, we should all commit suicide. And there clearly are moments of joy. I think the premise is incorrect.

What about the interconnectedness of things that Buddhism talks about and other such things?

I have this handicap. I am not very spiritually evolved. In the body, mind and spirit evolution, I am stuck at the stage of the mind. The material world attracts me, I can't help it. The universe of the mind fascinates me, and I am far from understanding it. So I am not qualified to go and delve into the enormous universe of spirituality. Even though I know how rich of a heritage India has in that respect. These things don't concern me. I may read them and intellectually understand them but I do not feel them.

So you never had the feeling of the presence of a larger force in your life for instance?

No. If I look at my life, it is a series of random occurrences. I could not make any logical conclusion about why I was born, what is my mission in life, and so on. I actually do not feel I have a particular mission in life. I do not feel I am an atman needing to find union with Brahman.

Even my birth was a sort of accident. I discovered in my mother's writings after her passing away, that while pregnant with me, she was very sick and the doctor wanted her to abort. But she adamantly refused. She could have gone with the doctor's advice and I would have never been born. In a way, I had a death sentence before I was born. So I regard my life as a strange experience. Maybe I am a ghost ?

Why then is the ghost here?

I also do not understand. I didn't choose my life. I didn't do what I wanted, I was guided by other people. And I do not regret it.

I joined college at the age of 14, which was way too young and I was thoroughly confused. I used to think I wanted to be a painter, a musician, or a doctor. But my mathematics was zero. So I was not destined to be a doctor. Instead I started learning the violin. My father was thrilled to see that one of his sons was artistically inclined. My mother though was adamantly opposed and didn't want her son to be a "band master". She encouraged me to sit for the civil service exams, arguing that I could always refuse to join if accepted. I applied for the Foreign Service. And I got the first position in India ! So there was no question of me not joining.

No one from Orissa had ever joined the Foreign Service before. And I had never met a diplomat in my life. So I just thought I would go with the stream. I never asked for a posting, and never rejected one. If you look at my career, there is no logic to it whatsoever. Regardless of my language specialization, I was sent to Geneva , Afghanistan , Brussels , Abu Dhabi , to the finance ministry and to the ICCR, to Washington and to Nigeria . I also was Foreign Secretary.

Many people plan their careers very thoroughly and work at it constantly. I never did that. I can't say I had no ambition. But I didn't plan it as systematically as many others. Things happened.

So if I look at my life, there is a lack of purpose, a lack of logic, a lack of any sense of mission. Except that being myself, I have accepted reality and have made the best out of it. I have enjoyed every experience immensely. My life could have been many other things.

But in all those places you had a particular impact, isn't that a purpose in itself?

But someone else would have had an impact as well ! I am not convinced about everyone of us having a uniqueness.

You mentioned you did not get to the spiritual stage, but you are so drawn to music and dance, which are worlds deeply steeped into spirituality, isn't it?

A dancer may perform the cosmic dance of Shiva, but that is not spirituality, that is part of a religious belief and worship. What is spiritual is that sense of integrity through the form you are performing. So in that sense only, dance and music could be called spiritual.

Did you regret not pursuing your dreams as a musician or as a painter?

Violin is such a difficult instrument, and I do not think I had such a gift for painting. So I guess it was fine. But there definitely is something that mystifies me about music, mostly instrumental music. It is a feeling I cannot describe. It turns my attention away from anything else I am doing. If there is music, I cannot focus on anything else. That is the mystical quality of music I can't understand. I don't relate it to spirituality. I don't relate it to Shiva or Om or the first cosmic sound of the creation of the universe. But it is there.

Like prayers – do they lead to spirituality? I do not know. If it is a form of meditation, then the object of meditation is irrelevant to me – whether a god, or a shamanic spirit.

Do prayers have a role in your life?

No. Though I have felt in temples and churches for instance, the calming effect and the serenity coming from chanting or prayers. It has a psychological impact on me which I can't explain. I think religions were very clever about those things, building temples in very special spots where one can find serenity and peace, in fact unrelated to any deity.

Not knowing if there is a God or not, but if there were one question you could ask God, what would it be?

I have not reached the stage of asking. There is no great question I would ask, like how and why was the universe created. Because as Buddhism says, if the question is not relevant directly to me, why ask? There isn't one question that would change my life.

If there were such a thing as rebirth, what would you choose?

I would choose to be myself, because this lifetime was not enough to explore all I want to explore, in the physical and mental world. Not to mention the completely unexplored metaphysical world.

What is your idea of happiness?

Difficult question. There is physical happiness which is comfort. There is emotional happiness which is love. And there is a higher level of happiness which I don't want to call spiritual, but which is there, as an unknown factor. There are moments of complete serenity and joy which are unexplained. When looking at a beautiful landscape, or listening to classical music, when you get completely immersed in it and you do not know that time is passing.

Can there be happiness of the mind?

If you are using reason, you can't ever have peace of mind, because every answer leads to another question.

If the mind is not equipped for happiness and you have led your life mostly guided by the rational mind, then you denied yourself happiness by definition?

No I haven't. Because my circumstances were happy. I didn't struggle to make a living or wasn't deeply unhappy in my personal life. Maybe I have just been plain lucky.