

O. P. Jain

President of the Sanskriti

'I do not believe life is all orchestrated by some God'

Sat Feb 06 2010



O. P. Jain is president of the Sanskriti Foundation and co-founder of Intach.

What does spirituality mean to you?

Primarily, spirituality is to think and do good.

I also feel that spirituality is a process of cultivation, like cultivating a field. You cannot quantify it or acquire it by education. If there is a compulsion for it, then it is not spirituality. It should be a natural instinct and in the course of time it becomes one's nature, one's modus vivendi. It becomes svabhava as we say in Sanskrit. The moment you make an effort, it is not there.

It can come from nature, from people, from experiences but no matter what, you have to be greatly receptive and in a mode of acceptance.

Spirituality is also about trying to reduce the difference between what you say and what you do. It is an evolving process. It is a constant journey. It never ends and should not end. You cannot say "now I am spiritual, I don't need it anymore"; or you cannot say "I was born with it, because my father was a great scholar". It never happens. It is very personal. It is like your fingerprint - the only thing completely unique to you.

It should be a totality. Most of your visions, deeds, efforts must be imbibed by it. And you are not trying to be a monk, just to be a better human being. To become a saint is actually very easy – you change your robe, language, style and become a monk or a sadhu; you learn something here and there, do some cutting and pasting, and you become a monk! That's very easy. But to be a good and useful human being is the most difficult thing.

I should add that I am a Jain. We are non-believers in a way. We do not think there is one God, one entity keeping records of everybody's deeds. We firmly believe in atma, an eternal atma.

How would you define atma?

It is the purest form of energy.

There are two different things: a cosmic energy, life; and a personal atma as consciousness, which varies from person to person.

What do you mean by consciousness?

It primarily is a very enlightened awareness about who you are, who others are, how the world moves; about the things that make you a better, sharing, more responsible person. It all starts with that awareness.

That kind of relationship with atma and the development of one's consciousness translates into becoming more spiritual.

And again, effortless goodness is the key point as a human being.

What does goodness actually mean?

You feel it when it's good. When the air is fresh you know it, when the air is polluted, you feel it also. The same thing happens with your acts. You just know it.

But some people feel good at harming others?

That's a very degraded sensibility.

If I say something and you smile, I just know it's good. If you frown, I know it's bad.

Also, goodness is about doing to others what would make us feel good.

For example, so many times I say something I shouldn't have said. As long as immediately after that I understand and have the courage to say sorry, I feel better. Otherwise I feel awful.

What is good to me is also good to others.

On the overall, life has been good to you?

I wouldn't say it always has been good. I really had a lot of adversity.

The circumstances of my family were not the easiest. My childhood was very often painful. Many things didn't go the way it should have gone. But ultimately, I converted those adversities into opportunities.

My father basically did not fulfill his duties as head of the family and of the family business. So very early on I had to get involved in the business. I could neither finish my education properly nor go to college. I had to learn everything from hands-on experience. Economically those were very much struggling times even though originally, it was a reasonably well-off family. Back then, I felt quite miserable about it. I had to work really hard from my late teenage years to my mid-forties. But if I look at the sum total of the whole thing, it was good. Because my whole thinking, my understanding of life became much easier and better. And I am very happy about it.

Isn't it often the case that hardship becomes an opportunity if we know how to transform it?

It doesn't mean that you should have hard times! But if it comes, if you accept it, it makes it so easy. And most importantly, you must find your own answers and solve your own problems. The moment you go to palmists, astrologers, psychiatrists to take pills and give away your power, it is a problem. Even if you have to struggle for it, you must find your own answers. It is much more helpful. It empowers you in a way so that no matter what happens later on, you don't get so disturbed, you don't lose your balance. So I found those years of struggle very helpful later on. I learnt a lot from those hard days. And of course, I have also seen the best of days. Because if you earn something and have worked hard for it, you are that much happier than had it come on a silver platter. So I have enjoyed the bliss of getting things which I then enjoyed a lot. That's a bonus!

Do you think things happen because of some grand orchestration, somehow preordained, or is it all random?

I think there is some kind of orchestration. In classical music for instance, to get a joyful sound, there must be harmony between the instruments.

But things are not necessarily preordained.

There is a destiny, like being born in a certain kind of time, place, family and so on. That may be 30%. The rest is for you to make it.

So I don't believe in God as a separate entity. It is there, it is in me. It is for me to find Him out, if He is there. The very fact that there is something driving me to do good things, is my god!

I feel that society develops many alternatives. People are born with different kinds of intelligence, abilities, circumstances, so for each there is a different prescription. It would never work with only one prescription. And I believe India is better-off that way, because there are so many prescriptions. You need a different kind of anchor for each section of society. And I find it quite democratic!

How did you get involved into the arts?

I was in the paper business, which was a family business.

One day I met Dr. Mulk Raj Anand, a great and very well known writer. He was what we may call India's cultural czar. He was the editor of Marg, the best arts magazine in the country. I wanted to sell him my paper. After spending some time together, he told me "you are a nice young man, it would be a pity if you die as a shopkeeper. Do something else!"

It completely opened my eyes. And this happened at least a dozen times in my life, when just one sentence completely changed its course.

That night and the following night I could not sleep. What a provocation that was! And coming from such a worldly, well-respected man, not a sadhu or a monk. It changed my life. The seed was sown. I started thinking of how I could contribute. A few years later I established the Sanskriti foundation as a catalyst to revitalize cultural sensitivities. I was also involved with establishing INTACH, Neemrana and more.

I had been tempted by politics and had even been offered a seat. But I decided not to get into it; there was just too much corruption. And politics divide. I was thinking of something that would create harmony, connection between people. Religion, politics divide. Culture, heritage, conservation connect people. Culture doesn't have an agenda. It is only about sharing, educating, enriching each other, and connecting with the soil.

So again, spirituality is not abstract. It is a very organic thing, here and now. I feel it. I try to live it.

How would you define Sanskriti's mission?

At one level, it is an oasis shared by hundreds and thousands of people in the midst of this urban jungle called Delhi. Craftsmen, writers, artists, work there. Children come and enjoy the place. We planted thousands of trees. The whole environment and atmosphere give something special to those who come. And they also leave something of themselves when they go away.

How would you look at the overall purpose of your life?

I am happy because I feel I have been a good instrument in the grand scheme of things. With my limitations, I was still able to create something, and it is a good feeling.

At the same time, I am not trying to own and possess it. I am not trying to control it. Which gives me a sense of peace. I left my business just like that. I can detach from things.

My only prayer is "give me both the capability to do things and to walk away from them." That's the best thing that can happen.

Also, I look at my journey in a very special way. I don't like oceans as much as I love rivers. Because a river to me is a metaphor for the journey of life. It never stops, it always finds its own way, it doesn't fight with anybody, it meanders according to circumstances, gets herself submerged into the sea, then rises to the mountains as snow, and then again comes down. Constantly in a cycle, never complaining. Doing beautiful things along the way. If you can make your life like that, it's gorgeous and you couldn't make it better.

Do you have daily prayers or rituals?

Not really. I do my yoga whenever I feel like it. I don't want anything to be a stress on me. The moment I say "I have to go for my walk", it becomes a stress. I do things whenever I feel like it. Ultimately as a human being, you are only asking for the freedom to say yes and no. If you get that, you are the most blessed. What more can you ask?

Keeping in mind that you don't believe in God, if there were one question you could ask God, what would it be?

Why are You fooling the world? Why don't You come one day and tell people that You don't exist, so they take charge of their lives? Because of this illusion, people just don't take charge of their own lives. It's not a good idea. He should come and say "take charge, I am too old now!"

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

Whatever I do, if I am useful in some shape or form, then it would not mind coming back. Even though of course, as everyone, my desire is not to come back. I doubt I won't. But one never knows, because the journey is not over yet!

What is your idea of happiness?

Sharing is the most important thing in my life. Sharing makes me happiest. Whatever it is. For instance, I would have felt very suffocated as an art collector, if I had amassed all those pieces only for myself. Apart from that, I use a very simple technique for happiness. Bad things always happen. So if I feel a bit depressed, I take a piece of paper and divide it in two. For instance, if I feel bad physically and am down because of it, I first make a list of everything that goes wrong. Then I make a list of everything that is actually still going well in my body. And invariably, the second column is much, much longer. Which immediately makes me feel much better.