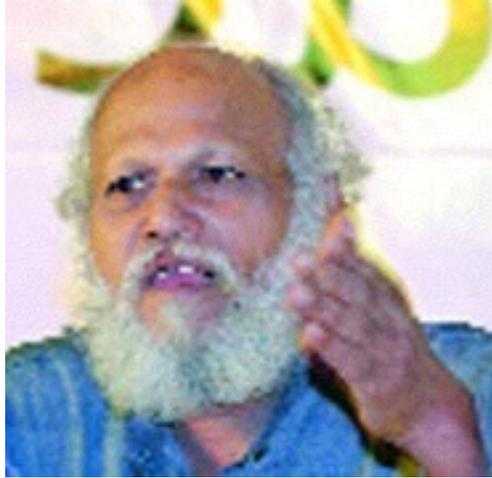


Jatin Das

Artist

'If you are in tune, a glass or a chair will talk to you'

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Jatin Das has been painting for over four decades and is one of India's prominent artists.

What does spirituality mean to you?

Very often people mix up spirituality with religion. Maybe at some point religion was born out of a spiritual quest, but it has long gone far away from it into all kinds of "-isms". So even though I was brought up in a traditional Hindu family, I have nothing to do with religion, I do not have any religious practice, in any shape or form. But I do fundamentally believe and invest into spiritual elements. When I walk, or paint, or eat, or look at the sky, it can be a spiritual experience. Even when I sit in the toilet it can be a spiritual experience. If you and I are having a conversation that elevates us, that elevates our imagination, our thoughts, our perception, then it is spiritual. When I drink coffee, it may be a dull experience or I may enjoy it in a way which is beyond the materiality of the coffee, which is not about the coffee itself. So spirituality is not tangible, it is metaphoric, poetic, beyond the immediacy of the element that provokes it, but which can come from any concrete entity. If you are in tune, a glass or a chair would talk to you.

Also, spirituality has no paradigm, no doctrine. This is why you may be from Timbuktu or the North Pole and we may deeply connect, while I may not have a genuine interaction with someone I have known for twenty years.

So in everything I do, I look for the spiritual element. Otherwise I get bored very quickly. I am a very restless person. But I can have a lot of patience if I find that the experience and the journey are more than what they look like.

One more point: money, power and other tangible material things are divorced from spiritual elements. Yet, if money can buy freedom, then it becomes spiritual. It is simply in that case a means to freedom.

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

Of course there must be guidance of some sort. I believe there are actually three levels in us. The top layer deals with this reality – "it is night, let us get ready and do something" etc. The lowest one is about the inner mind, which can guide us and push us to do things with no rational reason. The middle one takes a bit from both.

If you let yourself be guided by that inner voice and go intuitively, you will reach high ecstasy but may also face sharp pain or anguish. Yet, for me there is no hesitation. When I travel into the unknown, no matter what, the journey is fantastic. Very few people choose to do so. They are so caught up in the game of gains and losses, and so scared of uncertainty. But life is not about gains and losses. It is all about energy. It is like being on a river that goes to the sea. I can swim or I can drown. But no matter what, I need to flow with the larger current, guided by that inner voice.

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

Those words are very dangerous, because of all the meanings they can have. But one thing is sure: everything in the cosmos is also in us, and while some elements are latent, others are more evolved. So each one of us is born with certain talents – I am a zero in mathematics but I can draw and paint. And then there is what is called sanskar. Gold gets polished and shines if rubbed. Similarly for our talents, if we work hard, if we master our craft, and mix it with our vision, ideas, concepts, turmoil, it may make for a work of art.

Why do I say "may"? Because not every canvas I paint becomes a painting.

What is it that makes it a painting? Or likewise what is it that makes life? It is what makes your mouth water when remembering a meal cooked by your grand-mother twenty years ago. It is that indescribable, untouchable thing that has no colour or shape or form, and that is spiritual.

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

Every single moment of life is right to have a spiritual experience. And to me, that is the meaning of life. That is what makes it worth. That is what makes me feel alive and want to wake up in the morning. It can be provoked by a long-lasting relationship, or by a passing moment. I wrote one day a whole poem about a young girl I had seen for a few seconds at a roundabout in Bangalore. She was sitting with flowers in a three-wheeler, a flower in her hair. She smiled and then disappeared. That experience was so moving and marking.

Those things have to be felt, they should not be analyzed. We have those five sensory organs dealing with the cosmos and altogether, they bring the sixth sense, our sensibility, which is our real connection to the cosmos. If we analyze too much it destroys everything. Like art historians in the West who have destroyed the pleasure of looking at a painting by dissecting it into so many details. Or analysts, psychologists and academicians who destroy the pleasure of life by putting things into cubicles and scrutinizing everything.

What is the role of spirituality in your work?

Spirituality is not an external element coming into art. What matters first and foremost is not art in any case, it is life. And so if you invest into your life, your art evolves. If you keep having spiritual experiences in the way I defined them, you get enriched and it reflects in your art. I do not need to read many books; I do not need to know many artists or art theories. If I deal with the light, the sky, the water, the fire and so on, automatically it will happen. And I have done so since I was a child: I used to work in the garden, swim in the river, do clay modeling, draw, sit by the window at night and look at the garden or the stars.

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

There are innumerable experiences of so many kinds. I would not know which one to share. A dear friend of mine, a poet, recently told me: "in the early days, we had an empty book with blank pages; they are now fully filled and written down, there is no more space. We therefore have to create more empty pages, we have to shed baggage". Instead of going to so many parties, or meeting so many people, I concentrate on searching for energy, on finding and feeling the real connection, the moment of sparkle.

What have been your main spiritual inspirations?

I grew up in an old princely state in Orissa. There I had a guru who was a school headmaster, a drummer, a painter, a poet and who taught yoga. I have not met someone like him since then. On the other hand, I would point out that an endless stream of things and people and experiences have actually inspired me, knowingly and unknowingly. It is a continuous process while eating, reading, observing, dreaming; when I go to China or to Egypt, when I go to the villages, when I see the floods and when I see the draught. Everything, all the time, continuously comes to fill our reservoir.

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

I definitely believe in the recycling of all energy. So had I to choose the way mine will happen, I would want to be an artist on a larger scheme of things, a Renaissance artist. Right now I am a painter, and I am aiming at being an artist. I have not reached that place yet.

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

Why do You give pain to people?

What is your idea of happiness?

Anything with a spiritual element giving me a feeling of elevation is happiness. So I am constantly on a quest to feel it.