

# Pavan Varma

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## 'Nothing is random in life'

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**Pavan Varma, head of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, has worked as a diplomat for many years and authored over a dozen books.**

### **What does spirituality mean to you?**

It is about a fulfilling search at a very personal level.

As Hindus, we grow up as harmonious schizophrenics. We live both with a great deal of rituals, and with a great deal of spirituality which is sans rituals, which is metaphysics. And we seem to live both worlds without feeling the strain.

For instance, even the definition of divinity is neti neti, because any other definition would circumscribe it. On the other hand, we extravagantly humanize our gods. We celebrate their marriages, their wars, their love affairs. We make a God out of almost everything – a tree, a river, a stone; while at another level we say that divinity cannot be defined in any category which would be part of the world we live in.

Metaphysics have been my focal point rather than rituals, though the latter have at times helped focus my spiritual quest. For instance, if I am on the ghats on the Ganga in Varanasi, sitting in a small temple

where a puja to Shiva is being performed. The priest is following certain rituals, but it elevates the mind given the settings, to a totally different level of spiritual experience. In the end, my overall focus is on the spiritual experience, the search for knowing who you are, and trying to understand WHY. It also means a search for peace and serenity within oneself.

### **How do you go about that search?**

I have no prescribed formula. The greatest obstacle to that peace is the mind. I have tried to pursue consistently but not continuously ways to silent the mind. Meditation has helped, especially the form which has its origins in Krishnamurti and was carried on by others, including Osho. You sit quietly and become the observer, with no comment or participation. I have found that the mind then settles down on its own. And in that void, resides peace. The challenge of course is to prolong it. So you have to regularly meditate and recharge your batteries.

I don't do it as regularly as I would like to, because the sterile seductions of the world are infinite.

One thing I would like to add: the defining word for the Hindu way of life is "anand", joy. Even in terms of spirituality, this is not a negative worldview. So I try to look at the gift of life as the reason for the joy of life. The sheer joy of being alive. There is so much to be grateful for. And as Osho says, "gratitude is the only real form of prayer".

Here again, the problem is the mind: it mediates that experience of joy with so many other distractions and futile pursuits, that one loses the sense of immediacy of the experience.

### **What is the role of the divine in your life?**

I strongly believe it is a sign of mental conservatism to deny that which you don't comprehend. That is why I continue to believe. Because there is so much I don't comprehend. Unlike the revealed religions, as a Hindu I have no definition for the divine. Yet, because of several personal experiences, I do believe that there is a higher power. Merely because I cannot comprehend or define it, does not mean I should reject it. Therefore, I believe and think I will continue to do so.

Also, I am convinced that nothing is random in life. While at some level, life seems to be an accumulation of events permeated by essential futility or no ontological meaning, another part of me believes there is nothing random, and that everything happens because it was destined. I just cannot escape it. My mind says I am elevating my individual mundane ego to an unrealistic level to believe that everything in my life has a preordained pattern; while another part of my mind genuinely believes that even though I cannot comprehend it, nothing happens randomly in life.

I look at horoscope readers for instance and think of the influence huge planetary bodies can have on our lives. If a mobile phone with a microscopic chip made by humans can pick up a signal in the middle of nowhere, why can't a ring on your finger pick up a cosmic ray to change some coordinate of your life? I cannot even reject that. The chip is a hundred times smaller than a ring or our brain, and it catches a signal! Are our antennas up? Can we catch a signal?

So because one does not understand, in a sense one is compelled to believe.

### **Is this divine force also a guiding or protective one?**

I am actually willing to take a gamble that my belief has a hearing. You cannot correlate two plus two together in a realm where there is no arithmetic. You seek rational answers where there is perceived rationality. When you have stepped off the precipice, into the undefined, you can't always postulate a correlation.

But I believe there is a higher force. I believe that prayer occasionally does have a response. I used to go to a guru until he died and I personally witnessed miracles. Those miracles are not in the realm of conventional logic. I can give you dozens upon dozens of examples, his ability to heal for instance. People about to die, and he would heal them. It is about releasing the conventional anchors of your life. Belief is that leap into the dark. And it requires training to allow your mind to do that. Because the mind always confines you to the realm where two plus two must equal four. Once you take that leap, you begin to see that things happen which have no rational explanation in the world we live in. I have seen it with some other saints. In the case of Guruji, his ability to heal has so many living witnesses, with many who are still alive thanks to him. And it certainly reinforced my own inclination to believe that there are forces beyond.

If you can dip into that force and access it, you are in touch with another cosmic force – though you could go through an entire lifetime without witnessing it. So if you are open to it and witness to some of its more mundane expressions like these miracles, there is no way you can deny it.

### **Have you experienced it directly, without the intermission of a Guru?**

I have felt moments of sheer elevation, akin to a form of spiritual solace which I would not credit myself for. I could not have believed that I could experience it but I did. Yet they are far too sporadic and I have not been able to extend their momentary bliss.

Also, I am equally convinced that in spite of all this understanding, there is, even if joyous, a futility to our lives. We are born and we die. In between we may achieve. But when we seem besieged by life's normal problems, we should step out and look at the sky. For a moment we see the infinity of the universe, the galaxies, millions of light years away; we realize the infinitesimal irrelevance of our own little world. And that is also a source of solace, because it suddenly changes our perspective.

As a Chinese philosopher said, "nothing matters to the man who says nothing matters". We need that daily therapy in our lives. The most unacceptable and pathetic phenomenon is the way people take themselves so seriously. So one form of spirituality is humour. I consider that person closest to being a sage who can laugh freely, including at himself. I thereafter often do laughter therapy. Because it really corrects my perspective.

### **Still, is there a certain purpose to us being here?**

If there is, I did not manage to figure it out. I believe one of the reasons we cling on to the belief in the afterlife is because we are unable to accept the finality of death. In a sense, it is a solace structure built for us. For me, because of the great opportunity of solace, transcendence, peace, joy and tranquillity that it can promise in THIS life, the spiritual field is in THIS life, between birth and death. No one can change those coordinates, and no one has ever fully answered the question of why I was born, why I die, what is the purpose of my life.

### **Yet you are so active – WHY?**

Partly it is the principle of anand. I may occasionally get tired and want to escape to my farm, or to Kasauli, or to my haveli, which I am building an hour away from Delhi. But I really enjoy what I do. I would be a complete failure otherwise.

On the other hand, I really try and not take myself or what I do too seriously, because that is the first prescription of not enjoying it fully. So I do it with a sense of abandon as well. Not yet at the point of the Gita where you work without the hope of reward. But certainly a consciously cultivated attitude of transcendence, based on the fact that however important I may feel, I have no illusion about myself or what I do.

### **So how did you end up doing all that you have done?**

When I was growing up, the most coveted job opportunities were either in the Foreign Service or the IAS. My father was in the precursor of the IAS, so I just sat for the exams, I qualified and got the Foreign Service. I simply moved with the flow. Otherwise, my family has been in the judiciary. My grand-father was the Chief Justice of UP, his son as well. And now my son has gone back to law.

The writing happened because I genuinely wanted to explore certain topics. Like my first book on the poet Ghalib, which happened because I wanted to see his life in the context of his times. All my books happened because I had something to say.

For instance the one on Krishna – Krishna the child, the lover, the warrior, the saviour and God. Many people only read the chapter on love. Hinduism is a very pragmatic religion, as shown for instance by its views on the pursuit of desire, Kam. It is the only religion which gives philosophical validity and social sanction to the pursuit of desire. It is a very balanced and pragmatic worldview. There is no word for sin in Hinduism. It is all relativist.

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

First I'd like to be born an Indian. And for all the ups and downs which are the inheritance of any human being, I have no complaint about the life I've had, so I would choose the same kind of life. At many levels, God has been kind.

### **Yet, in moments of challenge, where do you find your energy and anchor?**

In acceptance, because there are things you can change, and others you can't. I have not met a life without any downs. So it is not the situation, but the attitude to that situation. It gives you the energy, the survivability.

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

What is the purpose of such an amazingly amplified universe? What are we a part of, what for?

### **What is your idea of happiness?**

The closest to happiness for me is the acceptance of what I have. I try to, even though I can't say I have reached that level completely.