

Arvind Kejriwal

Social Activist

'Staying in the present is happiness'

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Arvind Kejriwal is a social activist and founder of Parivartan, a citizens' movement. He campaigned for the Right to Information Act.

What does spirituality mean to you?

It actually means a couple of things to me. It is different from what we understand as religion. First, it is the connection to myself. Then, it is my connection to the rest of the universe, including human beings. It is basically a process through which I try to find myself and establish a true and proper relationship with the rest of the universe.

How do you go about this process?

Vipassana is the main way. I have been practicing it since 1996, attending regularly the ten-day silent retreats, and trying to do some every day on my own. This is my way to peep inside.

Why vipassana?

It teaches you to be in the present. Because we all the time live either in the past or in the future. So whenever we are overtaken by anger or any such instinct, two changes take place in the body: our breath goes awry and tension takes place in some part of the body. So if you watch that sensation and your breath at that point of time, you are able to overcome it.

This may be easy in the isolation of a silence retreat, but does it translate into daily life?

The whole idea is to gradually grow the habit of being in vipassana at every single moment. I cannot change the world. There will always be opportunities to get angry for instance. But it is up to me to choose how to react. I can act out and become angry. Or I can try and get used to watching my breath and sensations. Then anger won't affect me. The outside world won't affect me.

In a nutshell, instead of reacting to the outside world, I basically try and react to the sensations in the body, to the breath going awry. It cannot happen overnight of course. It takes place with regular practice.

Earlier, my habit pattern was to react to whatever was taking place. I would get angry and boil in anger for eight or nine hours. Now the length and frequency of my being angry has gone down. It has really happened. I can feel the difference.

But say someone you are very attached to has betrayed or abandoned you, how can you remain completely aloof to it? If you detach completely, it would mean you have no more feelings, wouldn't it?

No, on the contrary. They say we have never experienced true love with the way we usually function. We have to put our best without emotions or attachment. Otherwise it would mean we are not really attached to the process but to the outcome. We have expectations. That is why we get frustrated. Whereas if you do it just because you have to do it, you enjoy the process without worrying about the outcome.

This is true about relationships also. Either it is about giving, and it is pure love, or it is with expectations, and then frustrations creep in. If the other person does not fulfil our expectations, we become miserable inside.

Have you managed to be detached in that way?

I would love to but I haven't, so far. Yet I can see it has started happening in small measure. And when it happens I am so much at peace with myself.

I would imagine that with the work you do, there are constant causes for anger?

Absolutely, all the time. I used to get so angry and shout and scream so much. Now it happens much less. And my work is not less efficient. Instead of reacting in an emotional manner I actually have more time and distance to think efficiently.

What does it mean "to do what you have to do"?

There are two ways to look at things. You can plan, you can have long term plans. And actually, everyone does. But if you stick to them, it doesn't work. Because things never flow the way you envisioned them.

And here I was really inspired by Gandhiji. He went to South Africa, and wanted to come back to India. Someone asked him to stay for another two weeks. It ended up being two years. When he finally came back, he thought it was for good. But he got a telegram asking him to go back immediately, which turned out to be another couple of years. Everywhere and every time he responded to the circumstances he was in, rather than trying to stick to some theoretical long term plan and career. He could have had a good practice in Bombay but he abandoned it to return to South Africa. If you are stuck with your plan, you are actually deaf and blind to opportunities coming your way. Because nature or God or whatever you name it keeps sending you so many opportunities in so many ways.

There is such a thing as God?

I have no idea. Because I have never seen or experienced God.

You had a religious upbringing?

Yes, with very religious parents, and as a child I used to believe. I would do all the pujas, and the rituals.

What happened then?

Gradually when I grew up I began questioning everything and letting go of rituals, beliefs and customs. It has progressively transformed into this personal quest with vipassana.

But do you feel there is something like a guiding or protective force in your life?

I don't know about guiding or protective. But I definitely feel there is oneness. It is like a bucket full of water, all these bubbles are human beings. It is the same matter everywhere. We are all part of the same matter.

What about synchronicities or strange coincidences?

I very strongly believe in the theory of karma, which means that whatever you sow, you reap. All that is happening now is because of your past deeds. Then I have a choice how to react to those circumstances.

I hope science will solve this puzzle one day. Which karma leads to which circumstances? But without the theory of karma too many questions remain unanswered. Why was I born here, why is this happening and not that, etc.? I don't believe in probabilities and that nature works randomly, there must be a cause.

When growing up, what did you want to become?

I wanted to become a doctor. I ended up an IRS officer and today a social activist...

A friend in 10th class had convinced me that whatever I would do would have to be the best. AIIMS had only 30 seats, the IITs had 300. So instead of going for medicine, I tried engineering. After IIT, I sat for the civil services exams and ended up at the Revenue Service.

A few years later, in parallel to my work I started working as a volunteer. I then set up Parivartan and took two years' leave from my work. My involvement with Parivartan kept growing, I was enjoying it; so I decided in the end to resign from the services. I thought my life would be more useful here. Anyone else can do what I was doing in income tax. But there aren't too many people with my kind of background doing what I do.

What is Parivartan exactly?

We are a group of people working on governance reform. In the day-to-day life we come across various spheres of governance, at the electricity department, the ration shop, the police station etc. We interact with the government on so many accounts, facing bribery, corruption, insensitivity. We basically try to make the government more accountable, transparent, sensitive, just, participatory etc.

At times of toughest challenges, where do you find the energy?

The challenge itself gives me the energy.

And I think that since the beginning of times, there has been a constant tamasha, a constant struggle between good and evil, such as the one described in the Mahabharata. So at every point in time, we in a more or less seriously challenging situation. We just have to see and accept it.

What about the impression that people with the wrong values succeed more than others?

The circumstances we are in are there because of past deeds. Only the way we react is in our hands. So someone very evil right now, may have good circumstances because of some past good deeds. Whatever wealth or success is attached to a person I see it a result of past deeds. The theory of karma explains all those things. If I were not to believe in this theory, so much would not make sense. Things would not fall into place.

So do you believe in past lives?

If you believe in the theory of karma, you have to believe in reincarnation.

So what would you choose for your next birth?

I would like to be a farmer. The life we live, with no body labour, is useless. We were programmed to work with our body. And I can see that those who work with their body are very satisfied people. And also very mature.

Try and organize a public meeting in an area where people live this kind of a life and another meeting where they don't, and instead, they only think. The kind of reaction you get from people doing body labour is so different. They have this huge ability to accept things the way they are, and a huge sense

of sacrifice for others, as well as a huge sense of compassion. They are far more content. Those basic instincts like anger, lust, hunger are far less prominent amongst them.

If, on the other hand, you come across people who throughout the day are only involved in working with their minds, they suffer from a huge amount of anger, tension, anxiety, always hungry, lustful.

Never content. This set of people is a curse for our planet.

For instance, we are doing community meetings these days. We feel Indian democracy is a farce because citizens don't get to participate. They only vote once every few years and that's it. So we had a meeting in a village of farmers in the Delhi area. The meeting took place very nicely. The counsellor announced he had a quota of 50 pension slots for old people or widows. There were 100 people in the meeting. They consulted between themselves and gave us a list of eight people. We asked them, why don't you request more, since there are 50 slots available! And there were more older people sitting in the room. They said no, these eight old women are really poor and have no one left in their family to help them. No one else needs or wants it. Similarly, for every topic, we would announce it, things would be discussed and a decision would come.

When we organized the same meeting in a middle-class colony, people shouted and screamed, nothing would come out of it; they would each give an entire philosophy of how the Prime Minister should conduct the country and so on. And they tried to grab all the slots offered.

Have you actually ever tried to talk to street children? They are far more worldly-wise and mature in their outlook than many of us will ever become. They have seen the whole life.

Yet, you were not tempted to do body work in this life?

I did. But I didn't get an opportunity to do it.

Maybe you can contribute more to society with the things you are doing now?

We don't contribute to society. That's an illusion in our minds. It is just an opportunity society gives us and we should be grateful for it. There are hundreds of people who would do much better than me the type of things I am initiating. Millions of people in the past have done much more amazing things and their work has long been forgotten.

So for me it is really not about the impact on society, but about my journey and doing what I feel I have to do. We are given certain tools and we should put them to use to the best of our abilities. But without any delusion that we are doing something great for the country or for society.

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

Is there a theory of karma, is this theory true? Otherwise things would not make sense to me.

What is your idea of happiness?

Staying in the present. And believe me, when I manage to be that way, the simplest things give me so much happiness. I can be in complete ecstasy from brushing my teeth, taking a bath, brushing my hair.