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'Your destiny changes as you work on yourself'

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William Bissell is the managing director of Fabindia.

What does spirituality mean to you?

A way of life.

Meaning?

An orientation of your mind. Your mind can be oriented in a crassly material direction. Or in a deeply, spiritual direction.

Spiritual direction - meaning?

Some people who are poor would obviously occupy their mind with survival. But for those who have enough, some can focus on what to wear this evening, what next to buy, which spa to go to, which trainer to get etc. Others occupy their minds with things of more lasting value, of greater significance.

How would you describe your own orientation?

Of course it depends on the time of the day and the location I am in, the books I am reading. Using Thoreau's expression, I would say that being in a more spiritual orientation is a contemplative state of mind, it is about being capable to look at oneself with a certain sense of detachment.

How can you reach such detachment in such a busy life as yours?

It is always triggered by something I see or hear. The important thing is not to be blocked. Let's say I go through a village and a dead body is being carried away. Of course it would trigger in me all sorts of thoughts about life. But if I were on my blackberry while driving through the village, none of it would happen. So it is about being aware in the moment. The moment communicates with you if you are present. Otherwise, you miss the opportunity of something profound happening.

Are you consciously creating moments in your daily life for that contemplation?

I practice meditation and yoga regularly. It helps clear my mind, concentrate and focus. If I hadn't been practicing both, I would have never been able to do what I did – for instance, writing a book with a full life, a family, kids, an expanding business. It gives you the ability to harness the mind's energies instead of letting them be dissipated.

Looking at the way your life unfolded, was it a random process or is there a larger orchestration at play?

I don't believe in the mumbo-jumbo of destiny, preordained things etc.

Rather, I think that events happen on two axes.

One is about probabilities - being at the right place, at the right time. And there is nothing you can do about it. You cannot change the year you were born for instance. And anybody born in India after 1960 would get the huge benefits of liberalization and an access to so many opportunities. Whereas someone born in 1940 would be too old to benefit from them.

And here we get to the second axis: your destiny changes as you work on yourself. I never thought I would be an author. Through yoga and meditation, through self-introspection and because I was feeling passionately about the subject, I came to writing this book, "Making India Work". It opened opportunities and avenues that business alone would never have. This is the axis of efforts, of your personal journey. As you improve yourself and the quality of your thoughts, of your intent, your life takes a different direction. You try to be a better human being, more straightforward, more pleasant in the moment, even practice compassion. All those things. Then again it is about timing, and probabilities, which you cannot control.

Do you feel your life has a particular purpose? Were you meant to do certain things with the tools given to you by life?

My background is mixed – Punjabi on my mother's side, American Calvinist Protestant on my father's. From the latter came the belief that if you are fortunate enough to be born in a particular place in life, then you have a responsibility. It is very deeply engrained in my DNA. Someone like my paternal grandfather lived with such a strong moral code. It was a way of life, and a very spare one, with a very profound utilitarian view of the world, and a very deep sense of responsibility.

Was that your upbringing also?

Partially. Certainly from my dad's side. He had an unbending morality. There was right and there was wrong. Nothing else. His principles were extremely consistent.

As a child, what did you think you would do growing up?

I wasn't sure. I did many things, trying journalism, getting involved in environmental issues and more. Then fate played its hand, my father fell ill and I had to make a decision. I joined Fabindia. I don't know what I would have become had this not happened. Sometimes, in our generation, the luxury of freedom can paralyze us. We have too many choices so we freeze.

So, talking about responsibility, there is Fabindia, and now a book to "Make India Work"?

I wrote this book like a sermon. And I believe business people should be public intellectuals. Unfortunately India doesn't give you that opportunity. I would love to spend half my time working in government. But in India you are either in the government or in business, which comes from the class system. Everything is stratified.

How many Fabindia stores?

120.

How many craftspeople do you work with?

We provide work for 40,000 craftspeople.

Well, you are definitely impacting many lives, aren't you?

I don't think much about those things in that way. Because that's fate. You do what you have to do, you keep improving yourself. And then what has to happen will happen.

How do you know what it is that you have to do?

You know it from inside. To me a wasted life is where you start and end at the same place. A life well lived is a life where you have made progress to a point where you develop the ability to be present, to be passionate without being attached, you develop an equanimity of mind.

A Hindu sage once told me that if you can conquer your mind you can conquer anything in the world, there is no force as difficult to conquer. And it is really true.

Are you attempting?

Attempting... The mind has an amazing power and all the difficulties you encounter in your mind you encounter in the world.

So precisely, at times of deep difficulty and challenge, where do you find the energy?

The challenge is in taming the mind. You just have to keep at it. Just keep at it. And I found that when you move from one level of consciousness to the other what was a problem is no longer a problem. As Einstein said, "no problem can be solved by the same level of consciousness that created it".

What about special inspirations on your journey, people, places, experiences that would have shaped your understanding of things?

The more subtle your mind is, the more you understand how interdependent things are, and the less you would look for a single point of causality. No one event or person could change you completely and drastically. It is an accumulation of so many things and experiences.

What is God to you?

It is a crutch, a mental concept, a label that means different things to different people.

Still, if there were one question you could ask God, what would you ask?

My Indian side wouldn't be able to resist and would ask if there is a soul, while the western side would ask if the concept of heaven exists. And in saying this, I am basically repeating things I was taught. Because in reality, no matter how much you want to distance yourself from your history, you can't, it is woven into you.

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

I can't even begin to think about that.

The concept of karma?

Every concept is an attempt to freeze something which actually is fluid and apply it randomly. Things should be experienced. We should use fewer labels, listen more and more deeply.

What is your idea of happiness?

I have a million ideas of happiness. I need a book for that! Having a nice conversation, reading a great book, being with my kids, being in a lovely place... We underestimate the power of nature and beauty and the effect they have on us. The string of happiest moments takes place when you are surrounded by people whom you love and who love you, and in beautiful environments. Those two things combined...