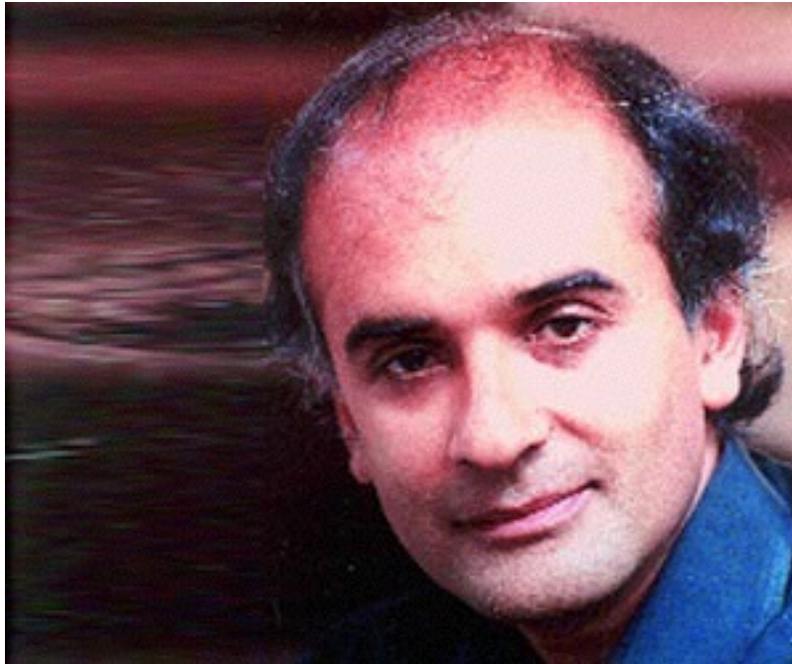


Pico Iyer

Writer

'The less I have, the happier I am'

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Pico Iyer is a travel writer and novelist.

What does spirituality mean to you?

It means the human being's love affair with the truth, which comes in and out of focus.

It is not about sitting on a mountain top and seeing the light.

It is about being in the midst of everyday's confusion, glimpsing the light, losing it, getting reflections and fractions of it, knowing it is there, but also knowing that one is not always in it – though one is truest and richest in it.

Spirituality is a very human thing. And I have always been more interested in the human than in the divine, because the human's attempt to recover the divinity inside himself is what most of us can relate to.

So for example when I think about spirituality, I always give it a small "s"; and sometimes I dispose of the word altogether.

And if you look at someone like the Dalai Lama, his power is not about sitting on a mountain top in Tibet, imbibing wisdom, but being in the middle of Washington, Beijing or Delhi trying to bring those principles into our very confused worlds.

So I suppose spirituality for me has as much to do with doubt as with faith, and as much with questions as with answers. It is the opposite of a fixed idea, or a finished process, or something that is even clear in our minds. It is a constantly evolving and changing thing.

Because of all this, I think of it as a love affair, an intense engagement with something really important to you, which you can't expect to be absolutely stormless, nor absolutely clear. In our closest relations whether with family members or our partners, it is not and should not be a constantly leveled surface. It is something shifting and alive, changing at every moment, coming near us and then further from us as we change, and as the other person changes as well.

Therefore, I find that the most exciting religious figures are those for whom those issues are very alive, those who do not have it all under their control, who do not have all the answers, who do not always know the right from wrong; but who are constantly possessed by the thought and the wish to find clarity.

So in the end, the struggle for clarity is as much part of the spiritual process as the discovery of it.

Can't this constant struggle lead to despair?

Of course, getting a glimpse of that light and constantly losing it, being haunted by its absence could lead to despair. But one could look at it from the opposite angle: the beauty of our lives is to have such visitations of clarity. And there lies the hope. Often we may be confused and scared. But those moments tell us that there is a deeper truth that we can find inside ourselves.

Those moments remind us that confusion is not everything, that it is up to us to fight our way through the confusion and through the despair to what lies behind it, to the radiance.

How do you find your way to that radiance?

By being as still as possible.

For eighteen years now, I have been going four times a year to a monastery in Big Sur, California. It is a Benedictine monastery, though I am not Catholic. There, I stay absolutely still for two weeks. I do not go to services, I read and walk, I stay in absolute silence, with the ocean around and the sky.

It clears things out so much for me. When there, I feel it is the real world while the rest is illusion. So when in the thick of illusion, all I need is be reminded of that reality to somehow find my way to clarity. Regardless if you have a religion or not, the beauty of the monastery is how it trickles down into the rest of your life, reminding you in the midst of the confusion that there is something other, and better, somewhere.

I noticed over the years how going there has shed its light to more and more parts of my life. I now spend eight months of the year in rural Japan, where I originally went to join a monastery – which did not last for long. But twenty years later, my life is very similar to that of a monastery: a life of great stillness, spaciousness, slowness. I have no bicycle or car; I just live as far as my feet will take me. I

have no internet, newspapers or magazines. And I am not missing anything at all. Everything I need is there. So I find the more I have managed to cut away the external, the happier I have been.

Especially now as the world is speeding up, becoming so fractured – very much like an MTV video – I feel we need freedom more than ever; the soul cries out for stillness, and space, and slowness.

Someone asked me if spending time alone is not self-indulgent. It actually is the contrary. The more you spend time alone, the more you have to give to others. And that is what I notice when I meet monks. I am the beneficiary of all that time they have spent working on compassion.

When I first went to Kyoto, I remember meeting a Zen master and asking him about meditation – he insisted it is not about going away from the world, but coming back to it. So whether the Dalai Lama, or Bono, or Bishop Tutu, we are seeing the fruits of all that time, when they are collecting themselves in stillness. That is what they are showing to us.

What about you, how are you interacting or giving back to the world, do you have a clear sense of mission?

No, I am very happy for the mission to disclose itself in contradictory ways as I go along.

I feel I was lucky about certain things in my life and I want to share that luck. For instance, I was lucky to meet the Dalai Lama when I was seventeen. At that time, nobody cared about him, now he is such a figure of fascination. So I can offer my small experiences of him. And I have been lucky to travel, with a freedom that most people don't have. So I feel there is an obligation coming with that opportunity.

But I suppose that my own private purpose in life is to balance stillness and movement. And to feel that whatever I try to develop or nurture within myself makes sense if I come back and share. When I am in my monastery in California or in rural Japan, there is nothing more tempting than to stay there. Because it feels so luxurious, so right and so real. I feel I have everything I need when there. But I am not helping many people if I do that. And there is a great benefit in forcing oneself back into the world.

For instance, while in Japan I am in the farthest reaches of serenity and centeredness. But there is a great virtue in coming to India, in encountering so many people and stories, while bringing what I got from Japan to them. It is an initial effort, but it is like breathing in and breathing out. I need to gather all this, take it all in, and then digest it.

Also, it is tempting at times to feel the nothingness of one's existence, like an insignificant spec. But as the Dalai Lama would always say: "no, no, no!" If you are too full of yourself, it is good to think about it, but if you are insufficiently confident, you need to be reminded that the personality has its real function in the world.

As a child, what did you want to become when growing up?

I am lucky in some ways. I grew up a lonely child in England. So I have been used to being by myself, in a foreign country. And quite early I realized it was a good training to become a writer and a traveller. I have been continuing with this idea ever since. And nothing I sought out as a child I do not have today.

Your father was a philosopher and theosophist while your mother is a religious scholar – how have they shaped your beliefs and perceptions?

Invisibly. Initially as most children do, it was something I wanted to get away from. And as years went by, I realized how much I gained from it. My parents were interested in so many religions. When I was five years old and I'd go back to our little house in Oxford, there would be a Tibetan monk, a copy of the Baghavad Gita, and my parents knew the Bible inside out. So I did not know it at the time but actually they were preparing me very well, especially for a global world.

What have been your main spiritual influences and inspirations?

I like anyone who takes seriously the thought that there is something that we do not know, that we have not done, and that we could investigate.

I sometimes feel embarrassed, because I never had a spiritual teacher, I do not have a spiritual practice, I do not have a particular affiliation to any church or tradition, but I do find that light in so many people I meet or read or hear about.

So whether it is Graham Greene struggling with his imperfections but still feeling the need for compassion & conscience; or Bono, so haunted by religion to the point of impersonating the devil on stage; or the Dalai Lama, or Leonard Cohen or many writers such as Emerson or Thoreau – all people who are interested in romancing the unknowable have always been my inspirations.

When you talk about the divine inside, do you also place yourself in a larger divine reality?

That is the hope! When I see people who manage to do it, it humbles and silences me so much. They do something more wonderful than anything I have seen elsewhere.

I spent quite a bit of time recently with Mathieu Ricard. He was telling me of his life growing up in the Parisian salons with Sartre, Cartier-Bresson and many others. Then he went to the Himalayas and met some lamas, immediately realizing that whatever they were doing, he wanted to do. He instantly felt that this is where he belonged. And he is speaking for many of us when he tells that story.

But the word divine itself is a very charged one. You can call it Buddha nature, or the immortal soul, or energy, or nothing at all. Actually, the fewer words and distinctions, the better. When I go to the temple and see a small candle in the corner surrounded by a protective ball, it is all one needs.

What about the idea of a particular order in the universe?

One of the reasons I have been a writer, and spent a lot of time alone is to explore the subconscious. The subconscious is a reminder that nothing is accidental in the world, that there are all those patterns surrounding us.

Usually we are too distracted to see them, but as soon as we pay attention, we notice that everything is together. There is a real logic to it.

Many of us feel it more particularly when we are in love. When in love, the world suddenly becomes this pulsing gold network where everything has a meaning. The person you are interested in will say

something and you just thought about it, will pick a book and it is the one you have been reading. And suddenly you feel so attuned to it all.

It actually happens all the time, but our eyes are so dimmed and we are not awakened.

So the beauty of love, or of a crisis, is that it opens our eyes to see the underlying patterns.

What people need most is meaning, a sense of order. Vaclav Havel wonderfully said that hope is not about everything turning out right, but about the conviction that there is a sense of order and logic behind events, even if it is not one that is apprehensible to us.

I remember when I was very young, keeping a dream diary. I went back to it many years later, and I could see for instance that a dream I had in 1973 played out in 1976. Those dreams were not only about the past. And it is not something I would have believed had I not gotten some evidence there. The challenge is to gather the evidence. And writing is very interesting that way. Because it is partaking of a kind of magic. It comes from the unconscious and therefore, often I write about something that turns out to happen in the future. For instance I would describe a precise encounter with someone, in some place I have not visited yet, and later on such an event happens very much as described.

When writing, do you feel at times like a conduit for a larger reality?

Absolutely, systematically. Anyone involved in any act of creation, is always aware that we are happiest when most lost. It is the very reason to be there.

And the beauty of writing is to put oneself in a place where you can receive and entertain that feeling as much as possible.

So I keep most of the hours of the day available for it. And it is quite a painful process, it does not come automatically and often you feel like turning on the TV or talking to a friend. The beauty of it though is that systematically, every day, at some point, I unexpectedly feel irresistibly compelled to start.

And I know it is nothing I have willed or chosen. I just opened myself sufficiently for it to happen, like opening the window so that the breeze can come in.

Do the topics of your books come that way as well?

A book is probably best when I don't know what it will be about, when I have not decided what it should be and no one else has suggested it. It is often forced if somebody asked me to do something which does not feel right for that moment.

So most writers have this experience that whatever book they embark on, they end up writing something very different. It is a matter of listening and paying attention.

The process involves sometimes writing hundreds of pages before something sweeps you away and takes you to the real topic you ought to write about. And it obviously takes a lot of patience.

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

I don't think I would choose. The whole beauty of rebirth is to surrender to some larger logic.

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

I would ask what is the most fun part of that particular destiny – of being God.

I would not ask questions about the "workings of God". Because I have full trust in the universe, so there is no issue I want to take on.

Even regarding the issue of suffering, injustice and so on, my approach is very much along the Dalai Lama's idea: it is very difficult for you or me to change the nation state, the government, corporations etc.; but there are infinite possibilities at any moment for us to change ourselves.

So I have always had great faith in changing myself, thus changing whoever comes in my orbit, and working incrementally that way. I have never been an activist, trying to tell others what to do and how to do it differently.

In the end, trust in the universe is the best thing I have tried to learn. And the unhappiest people are those fighting it. If you assume there is a logic to the universe, you can trust it. But if you assume the world is senseless...

Many religious thinkers have said we are like dogs in a library – we can see coloured objects but we can't understand what is in them. The difference between dogs and us is less than between us and whatever larger force is at work. So there is no way we can begin to understand the workings of the universe. Yet, dogs are very good at trusting their masters. And that, we can do.

At times of difficulty and challenges where do you find strength and energy?

In those moments I would hope that all the fruits of my time in silence would come out, more than ever. Besides, I tend to be a fairly optimistic person. And again, I have been influenced by the Dalai Lama's approach. He insists on trying to look at any difficult situation from different angles. If you are blocked this way, remember there are many other ways of approaching it. You do change the world by changing the way you look at it. and he is a living example of it.

A small example is that he lost his homeland at the age of 24, but the first words he uttered to his younger brother when coming to India were "now we are free". He's lost his people, the country he was born to rule and instantly he sees it as an opportunity. Exile, which we so often associate with loss, disruption, severance from the path, for him became an opportunity, a chance to improve Tibet, to bring it to the outer world, to learn from it and give to it.

I have been relatively lucky, I never had to deal with real poverty etc. So when small things have happened, for instance when my house burnt down, it was not that difficult to see how it would allow me to do so many things I couldn't have done when I was stuck inside, with my fixed habits. Also, as I assume there is a higher logic at work here, a better logic than my partial understanding, it is possible to respond to difficult situations more fruitfully.

What is your idea of happiness?

It is about complete absorption, complete attention. Whenever I am engaged in a really good conversation, or deep at my desk, totally in my imaginative space, or listening to some mesmerizing concert...

Forgetting myself is happiness. When the conscious mind stops bringing in second thoughts, hesitations and so on.

There has been a lot of research on the topic of happiness, with an emerging idea that most of us have a certain level of happiness that does not vary much over life. Scientists have found out for instance that people who suddenly became paraplegic, are not less happy than before, after a period of adjustment. Similarly, people who win a million dollars at the lottery are not better off after some time. So it is a reminder that it has very little to do with our external circumstances.

I asked Mathieu Ricard if our happiness level is something like our height, which we can't really change. He said it is more like our muscles – we can change them if we go to the gym regularly.

So for me, I find that happiness happens with fewer and fewer things to worry about. The less I have in my life, the happier I tend to be.

Henry James said "I call that man happy, the one who meets the needs of his imagination". The more you can clarify and simplify your needs, the happier you can be. It has nothing to do with external circumstances. It has everything to do with your perception. So for those of us lucky enough not to be at the mercy of a dictatorship for instance, it is wonderful that so much of it can be in our control, in our own hands.