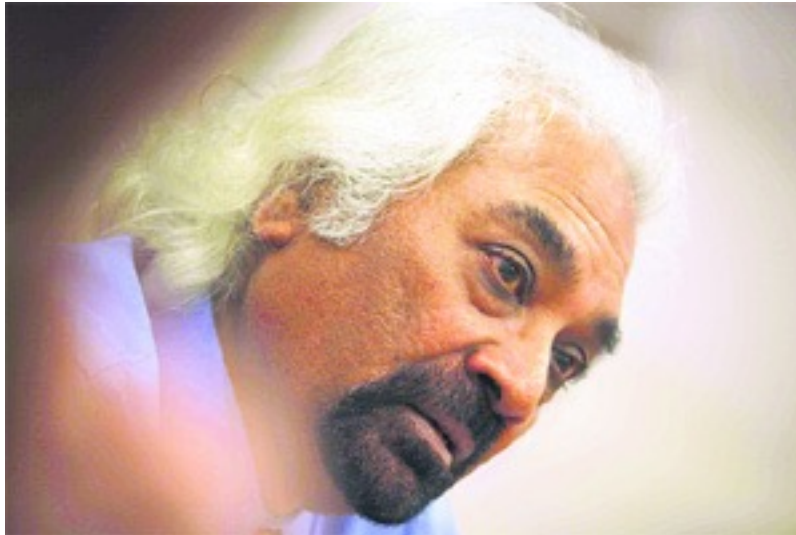


Sam Pitroda

Advisor to the PM

'It's a journey. There are no destinations'

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For Sam Pitroda, work is truly worship as the adviser to the PM on public information, infrastructure and innovation exists in a constant doing mode.

What does spirituality mean to you?

It means work.

Why?

Because life has to be centered around work. I am much more of a believer in a work-

centric life, than pleasure centric, of family centric. My whole life right from childhood has been centered around work. Getting up in the morning, and focusing on work.

While taking a bath, making the work plan for the day. And I believe that if you are work centric, life's ups and downs don't bother you, you are never unhappy, you are never depressed.

How come?

Because you can always look forward to work. You create your own work and you enjoy it. And it can be work of all kinds - building something, polishing your shoes, cleaning the floor, reading a book. But it's work.

Basically you are always in the "doing" mode?

Yes. And if one thing doesn't work, then I can go and do something else. Never a dull moment in life, that is my idea of spirituality.

You were like that as a kid already?

I have enjoyed doing things all my life. My average day, even now, first starts by cleaning floors.

That is like your daily meditation?

Absolutely. And then I am constantly on the road. Every day. There is no Saturday or Sunday. If I am at home in Chicago, a typical Saturday would be getting up in the morning, cleaning the floors, getting petrol for the car, picking up the laundry etc. There is a structure to it. It doesn't stop.

How do you figure out what to work on?

Oh my God, there is so much to do in this world! I would have enough to do for the next hundred years. Interesting work, not just for the sake of doing.

In many ways I find we are in a mindset of the 19th century, with processes of the 20th century, and needs of the 21st century. All our processes the world over are obsolete.

Especially with the Web, everything needs to be rethought, re-examined and redone.

How you get birth certificates, how you plan for admission in schools, how you plan your vacations. I recognize the tools I have. So is this the way to do it? Would I still do things the same way? Nonstop work is basically cut out for me!

Why do you say we have a 19th century mindset?

Because we are still so bothered by the questions of who you are, which caste you belong to, which religion, which race, which nationality, as opposed to just saying we are human beings, we have only one planet earth and that's it. We breathe the same air. We can't say this is my air and that is your air.

So we need to start our dialogue with prior unity.

Do you think human nature can accommodate that?

I think so. If one person can do it, everybody can do it. But it takes time.

You are an optimist?

Of course, I am an eternal optimist ! My enthusiasm has to be contagious. That's my job.

You don't ever get tired?

I am sure I do. My wife says I am overdoing it. Maybe I am tired inside but I don't feel it and outside I feel great.

When do you have a chance to feel what's going on inside if you are always racing and doing?
I am not worried about what's going on inside. I go to sleep. And that's it!

It never catches up with you?

No. I get to sleep immediately. Then when I get up, I am ready to go!

How did your passions emerge?

I don't know. First of all I don't understand a lot of the psychology and philosophy behind it. It would be for someone else to analyze it.

My parents had this great desire to put their children through school. So we studied hard. And played hard. For a guy born and raised in a small tribal area, to be able to go to college and then study in America, what a journey up! There is no way to go down! Because I came from so low. So every step has been about going higher.

In my personal life, I have found that my highs are very high and my lows are very low. I am always on a roller coaster.

I had two quadruple bypasses, I have four stents. I had cancer. So my lows have been very intense. But I go to hospital, get it fixed, then am on the roll again, back to normal.

I've had a very interesting life and a great journey so far. Lots of good friends, a great family. No complains, no regrets.

When there is a major challenge, where is your anchor?

It's all inside. I am not looking at any motivation outside. And I always do multiple things.

So if something gets stuck, I drop it and work on something else. It's a journey. There are no destinations.

And what is the journey about?

The journey is about traveling. I keep doing things till something happens, I meet interesting people, others drop off, and life goes on.

So the journey has a purpose?

Of course it does. Whatever you can do to impact some lives, get some exciting results, make a difference, create something new, whether it is a small doodle or a telecom program. It is just the desire to create.

I look at everything as a problem solving opportunity. I like to solve complex problems. Basically I am an engineer. I have an input, an output, delays, feedback, systems. I look at it that way. Sometimes it works. Sometimes it doesn't.

Is the journey random or somehow preordained?

There is a pattern to the journey because you drive it. You design your destiny. It's not about waiting for somebody else to give you directions. The last time I had a boss was in 1974 ! After that, I never had one. I did my own thing. If I feel like doing it, I do.

Otherwise I don't. Nobody can force me. And I have a lot of work!

Are things sometimes "meant to be", or destined?

I am not into all that. Those things are not real to me. Sometimes there is serendipity, or you click particularly with someone. But you just enjoy it and move on.

The concept of God never meant something to you?

Never. My mother was religious but I never paid attention to those things. My wife also is

very religious. I outsourced God to my mother and wife, and they are doing a very good job at it. So let me not complicate things and mess around with it!

Does karma mean anything to you?

I am just one out of seven billion people. One destiny. You do your thing then you die.

Nobody will remember you in any case.

Were you clear about your purpose early on?

No. I studied telecom by accident, then got a job in telecom by accident, I never planned any of it. I can't say I knew at all what I would be doing. It all was an accident of fate.

So what is fate?

It just happened. A combination of things.

And you moved from one career to another many times?

Yes. My first cycle was in business, I ran a big company, had a corporate jet and all that stuff. I then left everything, and came to Delhi. I didn't have a salary, or a friend, I didn't know a thing about the

city. I started all over again. I built all that, became adviser to the PM [Rajeev Gandhi]. Then boom, back to the US. I had given up my US nationality and had to go back as a tourist. So I couldn't work and had to build it up all over again. I built it up and now I am back here.

And I love it all. It's like being on drugs, being on a high all the time. Days just go by and suddenly it's the evening without me realizing. Never a dull moment.

You never feel the need for some stillness?

I am with myself all the time.

Yes, but with external stimuli

Maybe I should meditate...

Well, I guess you didn't feel the need for it? Being alone in the mountains, could you survive it?

I don't think I could. I would get so bored. But everyday is a vacation. There are so many interesting things to do in life. There is so much to do, so much to learn, so many interesting people to meet, so much love and affection to receive. You can't ask for anything better!

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

I would like to know more about the way the universe has come about.

How or why?

How is more interesting than why.

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

The same. To be myself. But maybe to have five of me, so I could have more time for my wife and family, and have more done!

What is your idea of happiness?

To have enough things to do in life. To get up in the morning and not have to worry about what to do during the day.

So you are a happy person?

I think I am a pretty happy guy. I have no complains. I wish I could give more time to my family. But then at times I find I have nothing to discuss with them, nothing to talk about.

It's over in five minutes.

No soul to soul conversation?

What conversation? I don't want to talk about all this high-tech stuff with them so after the 'how are you' and 'did you eat', it's over.