

Anjolie Ela

Artist

'I have died once, so I'm not afraid'

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Anjolie Ela Menon is one of India's leading contemporary artists.

What does spirituality mean to you?

The most logical to me is the idea of Atman, a force that fills the universe with us being a part of it. Intellectually it feels very acceptable and I have done some practices in order to realize it more – funnily enough, mostly when I was young, and less when I grew older. I lost my mother when I was a child, and maybe I went on that quest as a way of searching for her. Among others, I meditated, I attended Swami Ranganathan Ananda's discourses on the Gita, which influenced me a lot.

I was brought up in a family with a Brahmo background, which meant no idol worshipping or pujas in the house. So Karma Yoga always appealed to me more than Bhakti Yoga, as a path to fulfilment.

Karma Yoga influenced me a lot in my approach to work, especially when it postulates that one should not get involved with the fruits of our labour. I have tried to practice it but truly it is very hard.

Sometimes for instance, you are tempted to think of a work in an exhibition, hoping that such or such person would acquire it. Similarly, one is supposed to be detached from either blame or praise. Again, something very difficult to practice. But in the end, all religious quests are difficult to follow.

I also practiced Yoga Nidra, with amazing revelations that came thanks to it. It took me deep into the self, many forgotten and hidden things came back. It was both about opening up the past and connecting it to the present.

In all this, was there such a thing as a guiding or protective force?

Not guiding or protective. Just a force, which creates the universe. I used to argue with my agnostic grand-mother, because I think we are more than just the physical body and the ego. There is a life-force in us, very well explained and described as Atman.

At times of difficulty though, I sometimes pray or bargain with God. My husband's family believes in the Guruvayur's deity, a temple in South Kerala. We would often go there and I never quite believed in it. But one day, a strange experience happened to me. Since all worshippers barely have a second in front of the deity before being pushed by others, all of us think much in advance of what we will say, thank or ask for in front of it. Very strangely, something completely different than planned came to me in that second and instinctively I prayed for the well-being of someone I really thoroughly disliked. I was so angry with myself, wondering why of all people I had to think of that guy. When back in Delhi, I knew that all his very deep troubles would go away – and they did. After this, I started to believe in that deity and pray to it more as it had drawn me in spite of myself.

As a child, I had gone to a Catholic school; but growing up, I rejected the numerous fears the nuns had been instilling in us, as well as the idea of original sin – why should I accept to carry on such guilt for something I obviously had never done? But I was quite influenced by Christian early art, when Jesus was still shown as this strong faced, black hair carpenter's son and not as a blond, blue-eyed man with a so-called angelic face that came later and never did it for me.

During a Yoga Nidra session, we were supposed once to connect with our personal god and what came to me was a split image: Guruvayur and Jesus. So I realized in that session that half of me was still Christian.

Is there such a thing as a specific purpose to each of our lives?

I never thought about it in that way. So much of it is happenstance. And I believe in the idea of freewill. Basically, I see life as a mixture of chance or fate and our free will. But I refuse to be fatalistic about things. I can shape my life in many ways.

My father wanted me to be a doctor as he was a very brilliant doctor himself. My mother thought I should write. But I always knew I had to paint. I had my first exhibition at 17. And to this day, I am driven to paint. I love family life, cooking, my children and grand-children. I even envy at times my friends who have their lady lunches and shopping sprees. But I have no choice, I must paint. Not one day can go by without it. Otherwise it feels as though I had not eaten.

When you paint, do you feel sometimes as a conduit for something else, beyond you?

This feeling is always there. I very seldom paint with a preconceived notion of what it will be. I sit in front of the canvas, I meditate for a little while, from this extremely busy world I turn inwards to re-establish the self, or the recognition of the self. And then it comes.

Do you often feel dissatisfied with your work?

All the time. But without it there is no progress. And otherwise I would be bored. Your admirers and those who love your art can become your worst enemies because they love one thing and want you to stick with it. It's the "Hussain's horse paintings syndrome". To move away from what you have been doing is an act of courage. And it can only come when you don't care about the results of what you do. But it must come. I experienced it for instance when working in Murano – what a revelation it was! I did it just like that and discovered another dimension in an artwork: light. I enjoyed it fully and had not expected anything from it. The same thing happened when I decided to use computers for some of my works.

Is your painting evolving in parallel to your personal development?

I guess that in retrospect you can see it that way. Such a parallel emerges when you have a body of work. You can then see for instance that you have phases with dull or dark colours when most likely you were gloomier, then you burst into vivid colours during happier times.

Does the idea of reincarnation talk to you?

It is a big mystery. But I have died once so at least I am not afraid of death anymore. During childbirth, because of some blood loss, I saw a huge tunnel, white with spirals, full of light. I was being drawn through it like a magnet. And I have to say, it was a happy experience.

The doctors revived me and I then found myself on the ceiling, looking down at my own body, with all the surgeons around me. Even though I was under anesthetics and the doctors were still stitching, I suddenly sat up. They tried to put me down. But I said 'don't put me down because you will kill me again'. All this was told to me by the surgeon later on.

Basically, I did not reach the end of the tunnel and died because the baby cried. I heard the baby cry. And I remember this even though I was anesthetized. So I came back.

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

I would just want to be with my mother again. I would like to be her child and be with her till I grow up.

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

I would like to know if I will meet the people I have lost. Are they there somewhere? My mother, father, grand-mother. I would so much love to be reunited with them. But I don't quite believe there is such a thing.

And I would like to paint one great painting! I paint one sometimes in my dreams. But I can't get a hold of it. I write poetry in my sleep too. I am a great believer in the dream state. It is as real as the alive state. I connect and engage with the dream state a lot. I think there is a whole other world there, both enchanting and frightening.

What is your idea of happiness?

Everyone has periods of happiness but most people don't realize when it happens. And that is what nostalgia is all about. You seldom say "I am just happy now!"

I actually think I am happy right now. I do what I need and love -- painting, I have everything I want -- a terrific husband, most adorable grand-children, two great sons, I love their wives, I get along well with them. We are not wanting materially (we have been through times or really, really difficult poverty. And yet even then, we were happy.) Basically, there is so much love surrounding us.