

RK Pachauri

Chairman of IPCC

'I have been seeking the meaning of life'

Sun Oct 19 2008



RK Pachauri, Chairman of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). He received the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize for the IPCC, along with co-recipient Al Gore.

What does spirituality mean to you?

I equate it to a force within myself, stronger than my mind or body, which can translate in a certain level of confidence, and in pushing me to seek something that would defy simple logic. It is a force that tells me not to accept defeat when it is staring at me in the face, or to rise higher than where I am today. And above everything, it is about profound connections with individuals. When you are able to connect with someone well beyond the professional or usual personal interaction, there is a spiritual force binding you to that person.

Do you believe you are guided and protected by a superior force?

I do indeed. I have had several experiences when things would look so down and out, and then suddenly something would happen that would completely transform the situation. Explaining it statistically with probabilities would not be enough, because it entails too many elements coming together. So then one does get the feeling there may be a hand protecting me all the time. And when I need it most, it is there to take care of me. It is a resource I can draw on at certain points in time.

I do not think of it as God though, in the way that religions would. It simply is a force that permeates the universe and to which we can connect through our spiritual journey. Communication goes in both directions – we can reach out to it, and it comes to us, helping with information or protection. When connecting with it, one can bring about happenings driven by this force somewhere in the universe, and in some strange mysterious way, it helps protecting us.

This of course can happen only if we are open to it. If our gate is closed, that force has no value or relevance to our lives.

Do you believe you have a special mission or purpose in this life?

I find it very difficult to define what my mission in life is. If there was one, it would be to keep struggling, to seek challenges and try to meet them, try to do what my conscience dictates.

I do wish to be of some use to society and move it in a particular way which would be better for this planet and the human race. In that sense I could say I have a mission, but it is not something I could identify in simple terms.

As a child, I wanted to be a poet. I used to write English verses and I actually still do. Writing is such a precious activity, such a release. But when growing up, you look for avenues that will also give you a good life, you get influenced by society, and back then everybody wanted to become an engineer. So I became one. But I had a sort of fire in the belly, I was dissatisfied, and was determined to study more. So I went to the US and studied economics, which I enjoyed much more. I always felt that the engineering profession confines you as it limits you to the mechanical parts and technicalities. Economics on the other hand deal with broader issues which very much excited me.

During my doctoral work, I focused on energy issues, first on the power sector, then on petroleum and renewable energy. And of course once you get involved with energy matters, you realize the implications on the environment and I began studying the whole issue of climate change. From very early on in the eighties, I was convinced it would be an extremely serious problem and that we would have to shift towards lower carbon fuels. Many thought I had gone mad. But the more I studied it, the more I realized it is something we would sooner or later have to come to grips with.

In that process, one develops a certain reverence for nature, which we are destroying in our desire to consume ever more. We most definitely need a complete and fundamental shift in our development modes. Anything short of that will be inadequate. How soon will that happen, I do not know. But if it doesn't, we are undoubtedly on a path to destruction.

There are a few encouraging signs though, in particular with the youth, as I often find them more aware, more concerned, more willing to change.

What is spirituality for you in your day to day life?

I do not do anything formally, I do not meditate or practice yoga for instance. I do spend a lot of time on my own though and allow my thoughts to move into a different sort of space, with no particular object of concentration, just as meditation practitioners would do.

I have an extremely intense work schedule, but I do try and find the space for such moments of detachment. Sometimes in the office I also do it, simply taking my mind away from work for a few minutes. I do it for survival, to keep some sort of balance, otherwise one could go crazy – though some feel I already am... No matter what, it gives me a feeling of calm. I do not get perturbed or disheartened easily. I do get upset but I get back to normal very shortly. So spirituality in my daily life is about getting this sense of time and distance.

What is the role of spirituality in your work?

It is a force, a conviction and a clarity about what I do that keep me energized in everything I do – I travel so much and should suffer from jetlag; also at times, I miss two or three nights of sleep in a row. Yet I am very seldom tired, always ready for action.

Spirituality is also about staying above the inevitable problems that accumulate in daily work. I am not easily bogged down by those things. It gives me the necessary strength and distance to be that way.

Can you share a unique experience that changed or shaped your spiritual beliefs?

I have been seeking the meaning of life for the longest time – why am I here, how do I connect with that supreme power and so on. I was looking for a scientific explanation which of course I never found. But some experiences have shown me the existence of such a supreme force and reinforced my belief in it.

Let me give you one simple example. I was about fifteen years old and got sick. My mother called our family doctor, a very renowned physician in the city of Lucknow. He diagnosed some sort of fever and gave me several drugs. Yet, it was becoming progressively worse; I lost my appetite, getting weaker and weaker. It just happened then that an uncle came from Delhi. This was maybe the second time since my birth that he was visiting us. He was the head of the army medical corps. He examined me and found I was suffering from jaundice. Basically, a few more days and I would have likely died. So had he not come at that precise point in time, my life may have ended just then and there. To me, it was obviously willed by some superior force, in a way that I would have a hard time to explain.

On another occasion, years later, I was living in Varanasi and my father came for a visit. I drove at night to pick him up in some village in Eastern U.P. It was dusk, a jeep suddenly passed me. Shortly after, in the dim light from far away, I saw it stopping, with a few people lining up on the road. I sensed something was wrong, I just knew I had to turn around. I made a u-turn and drove back. It turned out those were actually a bunch of dacoits. Had that jeep not passed me, had I not felt that urge to drive back, I would have been robbed or even killed. So how should I explain it but with some mysterious protection?

What have been your main spiritual inspirations?

The person that influenced and inspired me most of all was my mother. She was an extremely intelligent person, both very spiritual and practical, who would never say die. For her, no matter what, one should never get disheartened by setbacks and failures. One should never abandon but always persevere – and in the end, things will work out. She basically had a great deal of spiritual strength. She was quite religious and became even more so towards the end of her life. Her father was an Arian Samaj though, so she was not into idol worship or rituals. Once in a while only, we would have some ritual at home, reading from the Upanishads.

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

I would love to come back to my current existence, but carrying the memory of my failures and mistakes so as not to repeat them. I would wish to be someone who can influence society to move in a particular direction. And of course I would not mind being a poet.

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

What happens when we die?

What is your idea of happiness?

Happiness is about looking forward to something, having something to strive and work for, living in a sense of hope. Enjoying the whole process is even more important than attaining the goal. Often in any case, once we have reached it, we get interested in something else. But was I to ever lose that kind of hope, was I to lose that excitement of wanting something, then I could never be happy.