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'In that one pill, I find a lot of spirituality'

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Dr Swati A. Piramal is director of Piramal Healthcare and as President of ASSOCHAM, she is the first woman to ever head an Indian industry chamber. In 2006, she was awarded by the French government the Knight of the Order of Merit.

What does spirituality mean to you?

I do not tend to associate it to one religion in particular. My son-in-law is American, Protestant, and I love his religion, I love mine, I am interested in Buddhism and Sufism. So I tend to associate spirituality with a very broad idea of the universality of life –we are actually all one– and the idea that we ought to serve a higher goal than just ourselves. The idea of service to others is very important to me. I am a doctor, and it is inherent to my profession: how can I contribute to reduce the burden of disease? How can I help in some way? It is something I love doing.

How did you choose medicine?

I always knew I wanted to be a doctor. My family has been in the textile industry, for more than a hundred years, so I was a little bit of an aberration, but a good one. Because we began taking part in the pharmaceutical business and today it is one of our main ones. It is a business, but with the opportunity to serve. It is therefore very attractive to me – there is a larger meaning than just the

bottom line, and we are not creating some uninteresting, inanimate objects. And I actually feel that in this little pill, there is a lot of spirituality. Why? Because discovering it took years and years of some scientists' life and it is being used by so many people. A very little thing can create so much healing. So to me, producing medicine itself is very spiritual.

How else does spirituality manifest in your life?

If you do everything with that aspect in mind, you do it with much clearer thinking and you end up creating an amazing energy.

For instance, recently, I decided to use spirituality to design my daughter's wedding. I did not want it to just be another wedding where people come to talk, network and eat. I also wanted them to feel the idea of the divine in such a union, using some of the Vedas' essence, as well as some Protestant Psalms, and see what kind of blessings they were giving to a married couple, thousands of years ago. If you pay attention to it, instead of just putting together a big party, you create a very different energy.

Another example would be ASSOCHAM [] which I will be heading as of the month of June. I am trying to think how to make it the Chamber of the future, how to attract young people, how can it be a pillar of democracy, how do we look at an internet economy, how do we adapt to this new era when something like the swine flu can affect so much of the world in such a short time. It is a completely different world we live in and we need to prepare ourselves, we need to adapt. So in a sense all those questions are also related to spirituality.

Spirituality can also apply to business and management?

Yes, I wrote a book with my husband on that subject, "The light has come to me". We wanted to share the lessons one can draw from the Gita for management.

The Gita is an amazing book because it tells you what is the right way. You can keep going back to it when you have a problem. I have learned so many lessons from it when I had issues and hurdles to overcome.

For instance, last year, I suddenly saw on TV a report from Lucknow saying that one of our products was killing people and should not be on the market. This drug is for life saving and not life threatening. I realized that some business rival was pushing this report to sell more of his products. I was wondering how to protect our reputation. I asked the channel to withdraw their report, explaining that our products are manufactured in FDA and WHO approved plants etc. But the Editor did not do anything. So I decided to sue him. Everybody told me I cannot take on one of the world's leading channels, and warned me that I would spend years in courts with no end in sight.

So I tried to imagine what would Arjun have done in such a situation. If it is right to protect what is good, then we have to fight. So for the first time in my life I went to the courts. The Editor, Rajdeep Sardesai, and his lawyer came to our office. I told them they had shown a forgery, which is criminal, and as a pillar of democracy they should not do such things. So they withdrew it and let me speak on their channel to explain the situation, with one of the Padma Bhushan doctors who had worked on the medicine. They aired it many times. The point is, other people would have said just forget it. But the Gita is very clear. You have a responsibility to do what is right and you have to fight for it.

But how can one keep to the right track constantly when doing business, especially in India's quite challenging circumstances?

I will give you an example. In our industry, quality control is paramount. And you may have heard recently that some of our competitors had been called up by the US FDA for quality issues. I went to our quality people and asked them if there had ever been pressure on them to fudge reports, because of our need to sell products on time and meet the bottom line. They confirmed there was no such thing. The quality person reports to the Chairman and not to the product manager. We just finished three audits by the US FDA and there was no deficiency found. So it is your responsibility at the head of the company to create such a culture where nobody is afraid to act in such a way, where people are not only obsessed with the bottom line and instead care for the long-term value and reputation of the company.

You can always take shortcuts, it is up to you. But the culture we have been trying to create in our company is about long-term reputation and ethics. If at the top we follow it, everybody else tends to do it. We cannot say we are 100% lily white. But we try. That is the goal, to be at the leading edge.

In the way your life has unfolded, do you feel there is such a thing as a guiding and protective force?

For me, there is a force out there, intangible, with a big protective influence on our family. Sometimes we do not know exactly why we do things, we take some risks even though it does not seem reasonable. But we look at that protective force and feel that Krishna will look after us.

Has Krishna failed at times to protect you?

I cannot remember such a moment.

At times of challenge, where do you find the energy, where is your anchor?

I first think of my mother and her attitude: she always says "there is no D for depression in my dictionary". She is always so positive. And when there is a problem she tells me to connect with the power of Hanumanji, or think of the Hanuman chalisa. Those are basically tools to help me be more positive at times of challenge.

So every day I spend a few minutes in my office disconnected from everything, in front of the Hanuman statue that lies in it. It centres me. Also, I try to meditate as much as possible. I have a wonderful yoga teacher, a Christian priest by the name of Father Jo Pereira.

Is there such a thing as destiny?

There is such a thing, though it is 99% perspiration to get there. Still as long as you feel your goal is beautiful, the path does not really matter. You get stones, valleys and hills, everybody does, but as long as your values – respect, compassion, positive attitude etc. – and objectives are clear, you can be strong. And the path unfolds as meant to be.

So few people though are so clear about the meaning of their lives, weren't you particularly blessed in that sense?

I definitely have been quite lucky. I always wanted to be a doctor, and I always wanted to find a new drug from India that would impact the world globally. It is a very clear goal. Yet, it is a really very long road, where 90% of the time you fail.

It takes 12 years on average to develop a new drug. We started in 2000 and nine years later I still do not know if we will succeed. So mine could be a wasted life, completely. But what an amazing challenge to try and understand this wonderful thing called the human body. Despite the billions of dollars poured into research, it is still such a mystery.

Yet, if you manage to create such a pill, you can really change people's lives. Recently I have had three friends facing cancer and it takes such a toll on human life.

So if I can find that drug it would be so beautiful. It is a beautiful goal. And it is my dream.

Also, even if we fail, in the meanwhile, thanks to our research, we have already removed the idea that India can only be a copier, and cannot invent earth-shaking stuff, or cannot do things the world has not yet thought of. We have filed about 200 patents on different things. So we have blown those bits. But to really find that drug it the real goal...

How did you form your views on spirituality?

I have been really lucky to meet beautiful, spiritually inclined people who influenced and inspired me tremendously.

Mother Theresa was one of them. When I first saw her, I felt she was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. Photographs do not make her justice. Sitting next to her, you could feel that energy and radiation. Her face was so full of lines, she was so short, and very slight, but what energy...

We were in the car one day, with thousands of people waiting for her. We were late, stuck in traffic with trucks lined up, idle. She started praying. We were wondering how it would affect the trucks. But suddenly they began moving and we reached on time. It was just a little thing. But she used it to explain the power of prayer.

There also was my yoga guru, Iyengar, who is such an amazing person of yogic strength. In the last ten years, Guru Radhanat Maharaji, an American swami, has also been a significant influence. He has this great facility of story telling and I am a sucker for beautiful stories. He explains the meaning of life through them.

But even Mother Theresa had moments of doubting God, it never happened to you?

I never had such doubts. The human body for me is the biggest proof that there is God because no one has figured this thing out. Just take diabetes: there are 30 different genes involved in it. And despite billions of dollars poured into its research, we still do not understand how it works. So obviously there is somebody else understanding it and doing it for every human being. So even though we may achieve A, B or C in our lives, we still do not understand that larger thing. It makes me feel very humble.

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

Why does He give so much suffering to people? Some of them are really good people, so gentle, so beautiful inside, and facing so much tragedy. Maybe He should give equal doses to everybody?

If there were such a thing as reincarnation, what would you choose?

I would love to be like my dogs – I have three of them and they are amazing. They entertain me every day with their mischief. One of them was ill the other day, he hurt his shoulder. He has a little puppy who kept telling him get up, let me help you! I realized they have it too, this immense sense of service, even though we are not aware of it. And they are so positive. How can you welcome someone joyfully five times a day? If I was to welcome my children in such a way that often, they would think I am a bit mad. But these dogs have that ability. Every time I come back they greet me with so much joy. It means they have it in such an innate way, like a basket of joy, and much more than what we have. Endlessly flowing. So I just figure they have something more than what we do.

What is your idea of happiness?

It is about doing what I really love and do it with joy, with enthusiasm. It is so important to keep that joyful laughter in whatever I do, to keep that positive energy. Some people go through life and keep complaining about something or the other. I think it can be a conscious decision to see things that way or not. People constantly cribbing, I meet them everywhere, and I feel bad for them, as if they were ill inside. I have to make sure I stay away from that kind of energy. It happens to all of us of course to have such moments, but we must try and remove ourselves from it, we must remember to use those muscles on our face, and smile...