

Pandit Birju Maharaj

Leading exponent of Lucknow Kalka-Bindadin gharana of Kathak dance

'When I sleep, my fingers tap a rhythm. Behind the sound, there is God'

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Pandit Birju Maharaj, a leading exponent of the Lucknow Kalka-Bindadin gharana of Kathak dance, is a teacher, choreographer, vocalist, composer, poet and plays a number of drums.

What does spirituality mean to you?

Every time I am about to perform, when I prepare myself in the green room, I tell God: "please come into me and use me, use my hands, feet, expressions - use it all like a conduit so that people may get a glimpse of you, may see a sparkle of you". My gurus (my father and two uncles) used to tell me I should believe in God. And I actually would recommend anyone learning classical music or dance to believe in God. Because you can learn all the techniques from the Guru, but only you can open yourself up to be a conduit for God.

Who is God, what is God?

It is not a statue or something of the sort; it is an energy, the supreme power. There is a cosmic beat, a cosmic rhythm. It is the same as the beat of the heart's rhythm. Great gurus took that beat and translated it into music and dance so that people could feel God, so that they could connect to it.

Do you feel God outside of the stage?

No matter what I do – I may be talking to you or running errands – in my mind, I am actually always connected to music and to the rhythm. Even when I sleep, my fingers move and tap the rhythm. And behind the sound, God is there.

Like a sadhu constantly meditating, I am always involved with music and therefore my mind is actually always engaged with God.

You never doubted God – even in difficult times like when losing your father at the age of nine?

I actually believe things are written and happen as meant to.

My father married two women who died. My mother was his third wife. One day someone came on stage to tell him a son of his had died. He continued to play, undisturbed, and later simply said that God had decided to take the child. My mother was quite surprised – "don't you have any feelings?"

Similarly, my wife always complained. I was so involved with dance and teaching that I never paid enough attention to her needs or to the needs of the family. I can say I was neither a good husband nor a good family man. I never went to the movies for instance, or to the hill stations for some vacation. I only went if there was some artistic program happening. My life has always been about being a good artist, and not about other dimensions.

If someone were to ask me whom do I love, I would say I love my dance and my work above everything else. People, family and so on only come after.

As far as problems are concerned, I would say problems always come in life. If there weren't problems, we could never appreciate the good times. After the night comes the day. It is normal to face problems and challenges.

For you, everything is preordained or prewritten in life?

It is. But of course we have to work very hard at what we do. If we believe in God and in the guru, and practice hard, then some success will come, no matter what. It may take time, but it will come.

What is success?

If I have a good performance, then I can smile for a month. I carry on and can face any kind of problem, thanks to the happiness coming from the appreciation people give me.

When I grew up, we had almost nothing. There was no television, no car, nothing. I had to struggle. And I think struggle is important in life to build you, to strengthen you. I look at my son or at my uncle's two sons, who also dance. They grew up with much more comfort so they are good, they are trying their best and slowly they are learning, with time. But it is different because they didn't have to struggle as much. And also, when there is a big tree, I guess it is difficult for other trees to grow under it. Everybody is looking at the big tree and not at the smaller ones.

Becoming an exceptional artist – is it about learning or is one born with it?

I believe that the more you practice, and the more you believe in the guru, the more it comes. Look at someone like Shashwati Sen – she is not a relative, but she has been for 42 years with me, and even when I teach a class of young children she stands there humbly, learning. There is always something new to learn.

Do you still learn every day?

Hopefully I do, and those new elements combine like in churning waters, out of which one never knows what will come out. You keep assimilating things and you do not know what will come out of it.

The divine energy is timeless yet the body is not, and it is your tool – how do you deal with aging?

The power of imagination is the most important thing. When entering the stage, the feeling of being young Krishna with his flute inhabits me fully; I then feel so young, and there is no question of age.

We all have regrets, insecurities, fears – what are they for you?

Say you ask a saint sitting next to a river, for him there is no complaint, everything that comes is good. I am trying to be that way. Look at my house, quite modest looking. And I answer every phone coming even though people around me say 'you are Maharaji you shouldn't'. I do not care about those things.

The playfulness and sense of humor seem to be very important for you – life is like a cosmic play or a cosmic joke?

Absolutely. And I want to be happy in it and make others happy thanks to my dance.

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

Every morning I do seva to Krishna, I pray to him and ask him – "please be with me, please come into my dreams, and show me the dance nicely so that I can catch it". Also, I ask him to make sure my mood is pleasant throughout the day, no matter what comes my way.

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

I would want to be the same – the name can change, but I want to do more work for kathak, as much as I can. This is a spiritual way of being.

What is your idea of happiness?

When something good happens thanks to my work.

What do you mean something good?

Constantly things happen in life – children are born, you make some money, you may buy a new car. This is all routine. I am talking about something coming out of hard work – imaginative or creative, something having an impact on people. Then I can be happy.

For a long time, I was craving the clapping of the audience, I was vying for that kind of appreciation and recognition. But inside I was not satisfied. About 25 or 30 years ago things started to change, and I understood that people could go like into a trance as I'd dance. I could take them to some other reality and dimension. I know when it happens. And that is what matters to me more than anything else.

Do you feel at peace inside?

As long as I dance and hear music, I can feel at peace.