

Dayanita Singh

Photographer

'Freedom is my idea of happiness'

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Photography is simply the vocabulary or medium Dayanita Singh uses to explore the world she finds herself engaging with.

What does spirituality mean to you?

Not very much really. It is another over used word like 'love'.

Your parents were followers of Anandamayi Ma, was she a significant influence for you?

Her influence was very much present in my childhood, and actually still is. I made one of my strongest works in her ashram - "I am as I am".

My parents always encouraged me to be a free spirit as I suppose they were in their own way. When I was eight or nine years' old for instance, my father would suddenly decide on a full moon night to go to the Taj Mahal. We would talk there till five in the morning about death and detachment. Being able to love with detachment was one of his favourite subjects.

When I was eighteen, he had just passed away, I was completely shattered, as he was the absolute focus of my life - my mother said, "I want you to always know and remember two things: don't let any man make you feel less of a woman for not having a child. Having children is drudgery, it is hard work, and you have other things to do in life. Two, I don't think you are the marrying kind. You may have as many lovers as you want. But don't ever be compelled to get married. Just be happy."

So you made that choice, a quite unusual one isn't it?

There is a shop in Goa called 'Happily Unmarried'. And it is so true. Some people are just happily unmarried. There is a certain stigma about being single. Being single can be someone's choice, and not a situation by default. I thrive in it.

Why is there such a stigma about being single?

First of all, I think there aren't enough role models of people who have chosen to be single. Second, the social conditioning is strong. We are all brainwashed with the 'perfect partner syndrome'. It is terrifying to break that convention. But it is an illusion: we are born alone, we die alone, we are equipped to be alone, and it is very healthy to be alone.

Because then you take full responsibility for yourself. And you have all the freedom in the world to do what you like, go where you like, change your profession, your plans or your home as you like. I do not want to depend on anyone or anything. I want for life to be free and open.

So I went to photography as my ticket to freedom.

How did it happen?

I was 18 and I had gone to a Zakir Hussain concert. I was prevented to take photographs by the organizer. I was angry and let Zakir know about it. He suggested I could photograph him while he rehearsed the next morning. I spent the whole night with three of my friends trying to decide if I should go.

I went.

He invited me to join him and his musicians to travel for a few days. And that was it.

I realized then that no other profession could give me freedom from social norms. I travelled with them for six winters and made a book from this work for my diploma project.

But photography is just a tool. My references and inspirations come from literature, from the cinema, from music. Photography is simply the vocabulary or medium I use to explore the world I find myself engaging with.

Have you been able to love with detachment, as your father insisted?

I haven't actually. I had several important relationships and was never able to stay detached as yet. But what I did imbibe from him was that everything passes. Even the most intense of attachments, the deepest sadness and joy too. The only thing we know for certain is death. It is the only absolute truth. So I go through this constant push and pull of love, life, memory, and it becomes work for me. I translate my concerns and the things I grapple with into work. I guess I am privileged to be an artist.

Why do you say so?

Because I am working with that inner world, I have facilities to deal with what comes to me. Even if there were vast doses of pain, 'Go Away Closer' came out of them for instance. Whatever the situation, I have a way to process it, through my work.

What about the idea of a divine force or what some people call God?

Not God. It is life. My philosophy is to just be open to life and see what it brings your way.

And not have too many ideas for what it should be. Because then there is no room for the fantastic things that life can bring in.

For instance, life brought me to that Zakir Hussain concert. If the organizer hadn't pushed me, I may not have screamed and Zakir may have not invited me the next day. I may have never become a photographer. I may not have realized that I can create my own freedom, that I can get out of all of societies' conventions. Back then it was about going to college, getting married, having children and then maybe having a hobby. Life presented me with another possibility. I took it. And of course I had great support from my mother who was not bothered by anything others say.

Do those possibilities come by chance or sometimes as predestined?

Life brings you gifts, you must be willing to receive them and act upon them. When what people call coincidences happen, to me it is a sign from life that you are ok, that you are centered with life, that you are fine.

But if you pack your house completely with your husband, children, work, and everything going as per plan, then you are completely house-full. There is no chance for anything new come in.

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

There isn't a big pressing thing I need to understand. I actually find the unknown to be fascinating. Thank god there is the unknown. Who wants to know everything? The unknown is where all the magic is. Where the surprises will be.

What is your idea of happiness?

Freedom.

So you have it?

I do and I feel blessed about it.