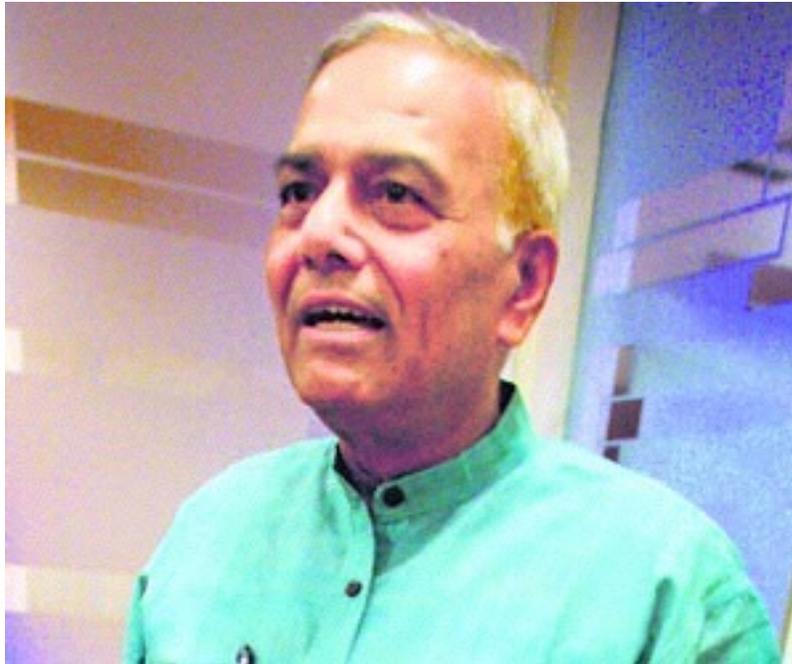


Yashwant Sinha

Senior BJP Leader

'If you seek happiness, you will be unhappy'

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Yashwant Sinha is a senior BJP leader and a former finance minister and external affairs minister.

What does spirituality mean to you?

It means far more than religion. It means the universe, it means questions such as why we are, who we are, the purpose of my life, the purpose of this Creation. These are some of the aspects of religion plus spirituality.

How do you go about finding out the answers to those questions?

It is difficult to find answers, mankind has tried since the beginning of the thinking age and has not arrived yet at any satisfactory answer.

When do I think about it? When I am all by myself, with absolutely no one else around, immersed in my own thoughts.

Among all those questions, one has baffled me throughout my life and I have yet to answer it: is the universe limited or unlimited? Can I imagine with all the intellect I have something unlimited? I can't, it

is humanly impossible. My brain is simply incapable of it. This is what compels me to believe there is some other power, responsible for all this. And if that other power is responsible for creating something limitless, then it must also be guiding at least some part of my life.

How do you concretely feel this guidance?

It comes suddenly. You are looking for answers and suddenly it is there. You are looking for strength, you are feeling weak and inadequate, and suddenly from somewhere you feel very confident and strong, and go about your purpose much more vigorously than you would have done otherwise. This injection, inspiration, intuition, call it what you like – but there is some 'shakti' helping me. Otherwise I would not have been able to do many things I have done in my life.

Is that shakti missing sometimes when you need it?

Yes. It happens.

How come?

It is difficult to explain it. That is where Indian fatalism comes to your rescue, the thinking that probably that shakti did not want you to act in such way, or that not acting in such way may be for your larger good.

Basically, that shakti is not something I can invoke. It comes, imperceptibly, silently, in its own way. I pray to God though, every morning. It started ten years ago or so, before I did not pray regularly, apart from going to temples. Now in the morning, I spend some time praying to God.

Why has it become regular?

I don't know, I simply felt the need for it. So I have a place here in my house and where I live in my constituency I even have a temple. Those prayers are my own devices, my own words.

Do you make sure you have time on your own?

Not regularly, I am not cogitating about those questions every day, but there are moments, when I am all by myself travelling in a plane or a train, or before sleeping at night. You also think about them when someone dear to you dies.

There are occasions when such thoughts come to you and you start seeking answers. For decades for instance I have been thinking about that limitless universe and I have not been able to find an answer. My mind feels so baffled, as if about to burst. Because if the universe is limited, then what beyond those limits, and if it is limitless then my brain is too small to grasp it.

I can see here in your offices figures of deities, are they important to you?

I worship Shiva. The temple I have built in my place, Hazaribad, is a Shiva temple. I worship Shiva because I consider him to be the original spiritual power.

Is that a family tradition?

No, there is no such tradition in my family. My father was agnostic and did not believe in many of these things. My mother was a traditional Hindu woman chanting prayers all the time, but we did not have family traditions around worship.

When facing tough challenges, and the shakti is not there, where is your anchor?

There are two things: you take life itself as a challenge, and you chart out a course, you start on that course, then once you have charted it and started on that path, it is a general movement in that direction. It is a general kind of shakti propelling you. Then you need special kinds of shakti at times of special challenges. So I pray or hope it will come to me. Sometimes when it does not come, I try my best to meet that challenge. My direction is set, I am walking towards my objective. The speed and the clearance of roadblocks will vary from time to time.

That direction, that road, when did it become so clear?

It's actually been clear from a long time, from my early adulthood days I would say. It was a general direction to be as useful to society as possible and be regarded as a good man.

I met very briefly someone who told me something which stayed with me ever since. He said, "when I die and am taken to the burning pyre, I want people to say 'he was a good man', and genuinely say so". That impressed me a great deal. That day my direction in life became much clearer, I thought it is something worth striving for – when I am done, for people to say, "he was a good man". Then family and peer group pressures propelled me in a certain direction of school, college and so on. Back then, getting in the top civil services was considered the ultimate thing. So I got propelled in that direction, I succeeded at the IAS exams and then advanced on that course.

I learnt that I must excel in whatever I do. I remember a conversation with a friend who had gone back to teach in the village school he had studied in. He was comparing his path and mine. I remember telling him: if as a teacher, you receive the President's Award and I failed as a civil servant, whose life will be more fulfilled and successful? So it is about achieving excellence in whatever I do.

So whenever I get to talk to the younger generation for instance, I insist on EECC: Excellence, Ethics (because excellence without Ethics is not worth it), Commitment and Clarity.

It has been my effort throughout life, in whatever assignment I took, to do my job, or discharge my responsibility in as excellent a manner as possible.

And politics, is that something you always had in mind or did it come by chance?

I was very far from politics. So it was a deliberate decision, based on the desire to be useful. I basically realized after almost two and a half decades in the civil service that I would be doing more of the same in the next twelve years left of my career and then retire into anonymity. If I wanted to make a bigger contribution and be more useful to society, then perhaps I could run an NGO and do some good work. Then I met a politician for whom I had great regard. He convinced me that politics in a democracy provides a greater opportunity to have an impact, to strive for change. In an NGO, I could change at best a village, or ten villages whereas in politics I might do much more. That was a convincing argument and that is when I decided to join politics.

But there were moments for instance as Finance Minister when the things you were trying to do and which were so important were precisely derailed by politics?

Yes. And I did not feel good about it. But I had to realize that in India it is not "about economics, stupid!" but it's "about politics, stupid!"

Still, it did not dishearten you enough to leave politics?

I thought of resigning from my job, and give it all up at least for a while, but then better sense prevailed. Because in that kind of a position, you are not only responsible for yourself, but also for a large number of people whom your decision might impact. That sense of responsibility prevented me from leaving.

Politics can be edifying and politics can be demeaning. The great thing is that you can choose your own path. If you decide you will not go below a certain level, you do not have to, and you can try to float above it. I made that choice.

But I would like to add two things: there should be retirement in politics, so at some point I may just give it all up and retire for more spiritual pursuits for instance. Or there might be an occasion that our differences are so acute and the frustrations are so overwhelming that it is not worth it.

When you look at your life and the way it has evolved, do you believe it was preordained and predestined?

I believe there is something as destiny. Someone said "we want to lead our own lives, fulfil our own destinies and suffer our own fate". And Goethe said that life is a game of wits where the cards have been dealt out and each player is left to play according to his skills. So along with fatalism in the Hindu ethos and the fact that everything is ordained, there is also the concept of Purushad, which means striving, making an effort. You can't leave everything to the fact it was preordained. You don't know what is ordained in any case! So you have to strive, you have to work hard. This philosophy though gives you comfort in case of failure: it was meant to be that way, I have done my best, the rest was up to something else, to some other power. And so it did not work out.

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

Is the universe unlimited or not? Can I understand limitlessness?

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

Some people will tell you that they would live their life all over again. I would not say so. Reincarnation is actually a question I have not managed to settle in my mind: is there a soul in the human body that survives it and takes another form, or is the body just a manifestation of nature coming to a final end with death?

Did you ever experience meeting someone and feeling you knew that person from some past life?

No, I haven't, but I have definitely felt meeting someone and knowing immediately that there was a special chemistry and that we could be friends.

What is your idea of happiness?

It is about shunning happiness. Because if you seek happiness, you will be unhappy. I have a lot of inner peace in conflict, in unhappiness. I never pursued happiness as such. Of course I have joys, but joy is temporary and it is very different from happiness.