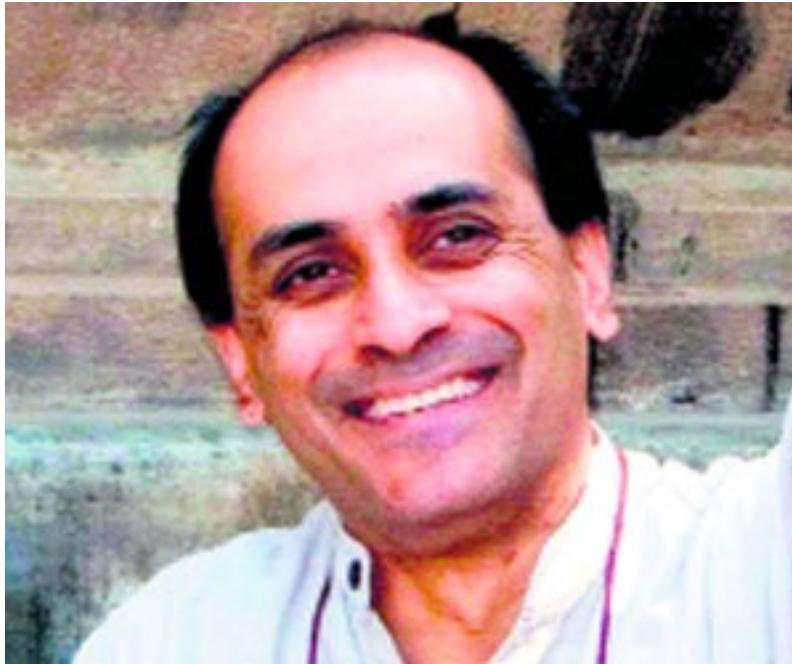


Shantum Seth

Zen Buddhist Teacher

'People ask me what my career is. I say it is to awaken'

Sun Nov 01 2009



Shantum Seth is a Zen Buddhist teacher.

What does spirituality mean to you?

I do not use that word very much. But it would mean awareness, being present, being mindful about what is going on within myself and around.

How do you manage to be so?

I use my breathe as my anchor. My body is here in any case. So my mind is what I have to train, as it constantly journeys into the past or future. I try to always stay aware of my breath, be in the present, without too much preconception. When meeting someone for instance, I may feel an instant like or dislike and become aware of it – does this person remind me of my mother? Or of someone who has hurt me deeply?

So spirituality is about this constant process of getting in touch with the inner world. The outer is the realm of the social. But it is not disconnected from spirituality either. They are both intertwined. My actions, my speech, my thoughts are all in the realm of spirituality as long as there is awareness and mindfulness.

Spirituality is basically just a way of being. It is not something you pick up for half an hour, chanting or sitting on a pillow and then leave for the rest of the day. When I drive I want to be aware, when I talk on the phone or brush my teeth I want to be aware. At no point in time would I not want to be spiritual.

What does this constant awareness bring you?

One, instead of being a reactive person with actions determined by impulsive emotions, I am responsive from a more centered place, truer to myself.

Second, it allows me to touch what is wholesome, what makes me happy. Instead of responding in a way that may be destructive, I may come up with a wholesome and helpful response.

And your answer can therefore be truer to who you really are?

Yes, even though who I am is not a static thing. At every moment it changes.

But let's say I see a beggar. I just stop and try to see him as my teacher. What is he bringing up in me – compassion, anger, disgust, empathy, guilt? If it happens to evoke compassion, I try to act out of it with some wisdom. Which does not mean giving money as it perpetuates a system into which everyone suffers. But it's an energy building up in me. And I may try to help some non-profit doing some good work for instance, or talk to a group of friends. I am a great believer in the collective mind.

What do you mean by collective mind?

We are by nature interdependent. If I am unhappy and moody at home, other family members will feel it and be affected by it. Same with a larger group like a company or society. When you eat mindfully, others begin doing so as well – if you look at the food attentively, if you are grateful for what you are eating, then you find that your children and friends start imbibing that. So collective mind is not an idea, it is a way of being.

For instance, I organize those pilgrimages to Buddhist places around India, which is my livelihood. Every evening we sit down and discuss what struck us during the day. If it is an issue like the beggar, all of us will share our view. And out of that collective view emerges a collective wisdom and some action. It is a bit like the Native American council system. Each one shares and nobody interrupts. Knowing how to listen to others is fundamental.

Part of my practice also involves being attentive to the interconnectedness of all things. For instance, let's take the element "air". You and I are breathing the same air. So where is the separation? At the mind level, it is the same. Thoughts circulate and connect us.

Yet I have to emphasize that it all is about a practice – like a tennis player who has to exercise every day to become a great player, I constantly try to practice and over time it simply becomes part of me, it becomes me.

Why did you choose this particular practice?

It has been a long journey.

I was in the corporate sector in England, working for Clarks, a shoemaking company. I was earning more than my parents combined, and had a fancy house. I would come to India and purchase shoes from extremely skilled artisans. A hotel night of mine was more expensive than a weekly salary of theirs. So I moved out of my hotel and went to stay with them in the slums of Agra. I learnt a lot there and upon my return to England, I wrote a letter to my managing director arguing that we should put people before profits. He answered that the name of the game in capitalism is to put profits before people. I was a very angry young man and decided it was not the game I wanted to play. So I left and went back to university.

I then got into politics and was elected as a Green. I was an activist involved in much street action. I even went to jail as a conscientious objector.

But at some point I understood I was fighting for peace but had no peace myself. I had become part of the problem. This realization made me want to be peaceful. Coming from India, I knew that spirituality could help for that. So I went to many teachers in India but couldn't find anyone suiting me. There always was too much God, or too much Guru.

What do you mean by "too much Guru"?

You put everything in the hands of the guru, you subcontract your inner guru to the outer guru. And I had been brought up in a spirit of free inquiry, self-reliance. It was not about everything being preordained etc. The guru trip was becoming too much about building the guru, letting go of your own power.

Then I became the manager of a performing troupe, which was touring America. And I realized that the best teachers in the world had come to the West coast of America.

So I went up and down the West Coast for fourteen months. I practiced everything I could find with Sufis, Christians, Native Americans, Hindus. Finally, I met Buddhist teachers and felt it suited me best, because of the free inquiry, the reflective element, the self reliance, the idea that it's about the suffering in this world and not some other world, the non necessity of a belief in God. It is about how you handle yourself in the here and now, how you deal with suffering here and now.

In particular, I met a teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh, who reminded me of Gandhi – which meant a lot as I had done my thesis on Gandhian Economics. Thich Nhat Hanh, had coined the term "Engaged Buddhism" and that practice attracted me. Being spiritual for him is not only about becoming a hermit in a cave but also about being engaged in society.

Most importantly, he allowed me to touch peace. I would do walking meditation and then and there, touched the essence of peace. Not as a notion I had been fighting for. But the actual realization of it. Once you taste it, you know it is possible. This was in 1987 and I began to practice that way. Since then, I have become used to constantly asking myself: "is this a happy moment? Is this a peaceful moment?"

The practice of present moment awareness as explained by Zen is realization itself. There is no separation between means and end. This moment makes the next moment. There is no point in thinking about the future, you can only have an idea about it. And the past is gone.

And of course I strive to apply the practice to all realms of life – how to create harmony in my family, in the workplace and so on.

You also became a teacher yourself?

Yes, I was ordained as a Zen teacher in 2000. At some point, when your teacher feels you are ready, there is a transmission of the lamp. So I am the 43rd generation of a particular lineage of Zen. I am particularly interested in bringing this practice to schools, and sharing it through Sanghas, or group meetings.

I also lead retreats to Buddhist sites, or even tourist places like Agra. These are meant to be transformative journeys. Of course I share all the details about history, craft, architecture. But I also always make sure they are aware of the eleventh directions: north, west, east, south, northwest, northeast etc. that's eight, above and within that's ten, and the eleventh direction is within. And say it is in Agra. There I will also talk about love, how we can develop it in ourselves, with our family, our friends and so on. It is about awakening of consciousness. The real journey only starts once the person is back home. There, they hopefully look at their reality in a different way – what makes them happy, what gives them peace and so on.

Teaching children is so important. I never learnt as a child how to have emotional regulation or inner resilience. I had to go through a lot of difficulties, a lot of angst to find it out.

There are some basics on how to manage our anger for instance. Or how to pay attention in class, how to develop an attentive mind, concentration, memory, emotional awareness and so on. So I teach children, and I teach teachers, so it can have some continuity.

I also like to share practical things, relevant to people's lives. For instance, phone meditation: any time you are about to call someone, stop, breathe and smile.

Calling someone is intruding in their reality. So I first breathe asking myself if I really need to intrude. Second, as words can create so much suffering, I ask that my words be as beautiful as gemstones. I pay attention to the energy of my speech, I try to be aware and mindful when speaking. It is communication at a different level, at an attentive level, knowing I can affect the other. And in the end it all boils down to try and make the world a better place, while keeping myself in a good place.

As an activist I used to try and change the world. Now I know I also have to look after myself. If a tree is ill in the garden, you don't only go to it and try to heal it. You also look at the flowers, the birds, the other trees. Then you are strong enough to heal that tree.

The anger you used to have is gone?

It's not gone but I can handle it. I have managed to reduce other afflictive emotions like jealousy considerably.

Meaning?

When people are close to you and somebody else is coming into that space, a strong feeling of jealousy and anger arises.

I then use the same technique with all those destructive emotions. I breathe. I do not compare with others, as that is great cause for suffering. If I am not strong enough, I try to change the location, to go out. I recognize the anger rising in me. And I embrace it. I acknowledge that it is me!

It is like a child crying. You do not know why he is crying. You pick him up and he stops crying. You don't know if he is hungry, or his diaper needs to be changed or something else. You gradually discover it. The same goes with anger. You embrace it, look at it, and gradually find its root causes. Then you can decide if it's worth keeping it.

Often you actually find a pattern in the various occurrences of anger. And once you see it, anger is killed off, like by a laser. Recognizing it makes it lose its steam and then it disappears. That's the magic of the practice.

It is basic psychology, basic Buddhist psychology. The Buddha was really a doctor of the mind. All he was saying is that the mind creates reality. Happiness is not created outside but comes from within. Can you be a happy person? Do you need another person to be loved? You can give that love to yourself, instead of developing that dependency.

That's the crux of spirituality. The dance of living this life, and the world. It's a real gift to be alive. So I always breathe in and I know I am alive, I breathe out and I smile to life. It doesn't need to be a big smile on my face but a pleasant warm inner feeling.

Everything is a miracle. As one of the great Zen masters said in the 9th century, the real miracle is not to walk on water but to walk on earth. That we are sitting here talking is a miracle. If I look at your background, where you came from, your ancestry etc. and mine, this moment, our paths crossing is really a miracle. What were the conditions that allowed for it to happen?

All of this requires a moment-to-moment awareness. Otherwise we lose the magic of the moment, as if it had never been there.

And we don't know, we may get out of this house and be knocked down by a car. But if in THIS precise moment we can really feel that sense of connectedness and precious magic, then we are living in a different space.

Everyone can do it. There is no great science, or great spiritual mumbo jumbo. It is pretty simple.

And then it's about practice.

Yes, and about the process. People ask what is my career. And I say — it is to awaken.

Of course other things go on, family and children come, suffering and problems will arise, people dying and getting married, friendships coming and going. Everyone is a teacher.

Talking about career, you went from shoemaking to politics to drama to UNDP to teaching...

Yes, it's all about change. It's not because you are a shoemaker that you have to stay a shoemaker.

Is it at all predestined and predetermined?

No, it isn't. There definitely are many things outside of our control, outside of our conceptual mind. I call it interconnectedness. But there also is a degree of free will. When a feeling arises, I can choose how I respond to it.

Even at times of major challenges, you manage to keep that awareness?

I try but don't always manage. It's a path you know. But I am much better than before, I can see there is a shift.

I see it as a store of consciousness with various seeds – seeds of anger, jealousy, awareness, love and so on. Which ones do I choose to water?

The seed I want to water most is mindfulness. Even more than love, because I must be aware of love when it is there. Seeds of anger or jealousy exist and I do not repress them, I embrace them yet try not to create conditions that will feed them.

When I was watching 26/11 for instance I was really angry. So I went out for a walk and began looking at the flowers, trees and birds, I started reflecting on that person, Kasab. If I had been brought up like him, in the same place, with the same hardship, indoctrination and incentives, I would most likely have been like him. What is different in me? So who am I to condemn? My anger thus became compassion. And out of that one can act more wisely. How do we help the situation so we don't get another Kasab?

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

God who?

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

I am already choosing. Because I am reborn every moment. From moment to moment, I am just being. It just happens. And what happens is determined by my own choice as well as many other causes and conditions I do not control.

What is your idea of happiness?

I would reverse the question – happiness happens here and now, but can I be aware of it? Happiness is a matter of being aware of it. It has to be a realization. It is not an idea. The idea of happiness, the idea of my lifespan, the idea of a person, the idea of death are actually the key to our suffering. Because it all is about realization in the moment, not about an abstract idea.