

Dinesh Singh

Mathematician and vice-chancellor of Delhi University

'Nothing in life happens by chance'

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Dinesh Singh, Mathematician and vice-chancellor of Delhi University, believes spirituality is an inward journey to look for answers.

What does spirituality mean to you?

A journey of the self, an inward journey to discover my own true self. There is something deep that resides within us and somewhere we need to find it. That is what spirituality is about. And I have always felt that way.

Even when you were a child?

I guess not. But a few things marked me back then. One day I read some lines by Kabir and my older brother explained them to me. They stuck in my heart. Kabir talked about a musk deer who roamed all over the forest in search of the scent of musk, little realizing that it actually resided in his navel. Exactly the same way, we go all over the places looking for God, little realizing that God resides within us. As I grew older, the deeper meaning of those words unfolded and I am beginning to understand them better.

So basically spirituality is about finding the answers to all the questions that have always bothered us.

How do you go about that inner journey?

I don't claim to be fully on that inner journey. It is hard to be on that quest and know what one is, to hear the voice within uttering who and what we are. But ideally, I know that I'd want to know my calling in life, I'd want to hear that drumbeat inside and begin marching to it. If I can march to that drumbeat then the inward journey has begun. And the more we march, the more we realize what we are searching, the more evolved we are, the more united with God – and the more we find tranquility and peace.

I look at Gandhi for instance. For me, he was mostly a man in search of the absolute truth. Everything else was a corollary of that. In the beginning he may have not been so clear about it. But series of evolutionary steps got him closer and closer to what can be called absolute truth.

Or I look at the mathematician Srinivasa Ramanujan. Very early on, his inner voice told him to do maths to the exclusion of everything else in life. Nothing else mattered to him, until his last moment of consciousness. Doing maths was his sole objective. He evolved so much that he somehow became immortal because his god was mathematics. He is always around, his spirit is here with us.

What about you, what is your calling, what is that voice inside saying?

Well, I know I am doing the right thing when I have a sense of tranquility. And it happens in three ways. First when I am by myself, doing mathematics – it gives me enormous peace of mind (along with anguish at times obviously). I also get that feeling when I paint – when suddenly the need to paint overcomes me, and I do paint, I have this inner peace. And third, even though I really don't want to sound grand and so on, I have this almost naïve idea of doing something good in society. When I do such things, there is no pride there, but it gives me a sense of satisfaction that I have done the right thing, in the largest sense of 'action in the world'.

What about the new platform you have, as Vice Chancellor of Delhi University?

Yes, there are 350,000 students at DU, so it gives me a chance to create effective systems for a larger audience. I want to try and bring to reality a number of things I have learnt and seen over the years, in a variety of places. And here I have a chance to implement it on a wider platform.

Both artists and mathematicians describe themselves at times as mere conduits, do you feel the same way?

Definitely. I feel like a conduit all the time. And indeed, both painting and maths often function in similar ways. When I feel the need to paint, if I try to control it consciously, it completely messes it up. I have to go with the flow. Then, the act of painting somehow takes control over me, and I end up painting something very different. My best paintings happen in fifteen minutes!

We go through all sorts of experiences in life, they get internalized and digested in our unconscious and then come out through painting for instance, or maths. You look at the world, you think, you struggle, and then something suddenly comes out. You are never at your work table when it happens. The best maths I did were certainly not when I was trying hardest, sitting at a table. It always happened at the most unexpected of moments, when I had finally given up after hours of unfruitful work, as I would be laying in bed for instance - then the solution would come.

In those kinds of moments, you forget everything else, all the thinking, the grind, the difficulties. The flash just comes and you forget the rest of the world.

You mentioned God, what makes you think there is such a thing?

I have had some amazing experiences in life that showed me there is something else at play. But our mind is a strange monkey and we keep forgetting, we keep doubting. Yet, I had those kinds of experiences more than once, among others intense and meaningful ones with Sathya Sai Baba. Those experiences taught me.

Tell us more about our minds being this ever doubting strange monkey?

Well, faith never comes from one day to another for anyone. Doubts keep coming back, we get tested a hundred times. Our mind wavers. It is our nature, we are bound by that.

Experiences showing us come over and over again, and we feel more and more anchored. Everyone goes through it. But we all evolve. And over time we find that anchor and belief.

Also, I find tremendously important to keep a distance with things. I try to do it as often as possible, looking at my life or at a particular situation from high above. That really helps me to see how much it all is an illusion – maya; how I should not get taken away by all the surface stuff: there is something deeper happening and I should stay with it.

Did you grow up in a religious home?

My father and grand-father were deeply spiritual. My mother was more into rituals. For her, it was about having faith in something, no matter what that faith is, and then focus on it.

So what have you placed your faith in?

Well, trying to describe it would be like being in a two-dimensional world and describe a three-dimensional reality. I can only depict that higher plane's shadow on the two-dimensional plane and from the shadow, infer a little bit about it. That is for instance what Sathya Sai Baba allows me to do. I cannot describe what that higher reality is. But I keep getting glimpses of divinity through someone like him. I also see it through so-called coincidences, since for me there is no such thing. They are not by chance. It is all ordained, all predetermined.

Is all life predetermined?

Very much. But there is room for us to affect our destiny. We were given that freedom.

Baba always insists on this: the distance between you and the divine is the distance between you and yourself. It is up to me to connect to it. I don't know if it is full free will of course, because whatever I do, even when out of so-called free will, could actually also be preordained. But regardless, since I don't know in advance what is predetermined, it is up to me to walk my own path. Nobody else can do it for me.

When there are major challenges where do you find the anchor, the energy?

I keep facing major challenges. When I do, I connect with my inner faith deeply and tell it "I commit myself unto thee; I have done my best, now it is in your hands. As you will it". And I let it happen. Of course I give it my utmost, but I also have this sense of detachment that once I did my best, I leave it to that higher power.

But to maintain oneself in a place of impact, often one has to compromise and do all sorts of things against our conscience, isn't it?

I really do not want to come across as any kind of superior being, but I really do not have any attachment to positions. I do my best wherever I am. But if I am not here tomorrow, it is fine.

Apart from that, of course we have to compromise at times. Even Ram did, Gandhi did. When the need arises for a larger purpose, and if it is a one-off, then it is fine. But it is between your conscience and yourself. You cannot lie to yourself and do it more than rarely.

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

I have never understood why we go through all this, through the journey of life. There must be a purpose. But what, how... Though once I know the answer, I guess I won't be here anymore.

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

I definitely believe in rebirth, very strongly. And I would not mind to resume the journey as myself, but without making the mistakes I made this time. I would want to test myself, and see if I learnt something, see how I would go through things, hopefully without the errors I made this time.

What is your idea of happiness?

It is very different from what I used to think not too long ago. Today, it is just about being at peace with myself. I still get joy from watching a good movie, reading a good poem or a good book. But having peace is the most important. A while back I would have said to be able to prove a great mathematical theorem. That is now fading away a bit.