

Aruna Sairam

Vocalist

'I'm learning things I can use in the next birth'

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Aruna Sairam is a Carnatic classical vocalist. She was awarded the Padma Shri by the government of India this year.

What does spirituality mean to you?

To never stop wondering about the beauty of life, to get up every morning and say "look at all the beauty around you".

Also, every person you encounter brings you a piece of divinity. They are influencing you, you are influencing them. It all is a deeply spiritual process of social, emotional, mental interaction.

Seeing the divine in others – but most of us barely see the divine in ourselves!

Well, I must confess it took me a while to see things that way. And it is easy to forget it. But if you spend a few moments every day with yourself, chances are you will keep your mind and spirit in that frame. I meditate every morning for a few minutes. It gives me a sense of comfort with myself. The whole day can then unfold whichever way it is meant to.

Also, our life is shaped by desires first. Desires develop into thoughts. Thoughts develop into action. At the end of the day, when you act, you may not get what you desired for. Therefore, the idea of doing something and surrendering it. I am shaped to surrender everything I do to my Krishna. I have done what is to be done, and then I detach myself. That is a great spiritual thing for me. It is a great spiritual journey.

How did you develop this understanding?

It has been a long journey... As a kid it starts with religiosity, with icons, with prayers. I now understand that this was essential to train my mind and align it with the body. But there, the function of religiosity stops. You spend years serving it but it all is only training. It is not the real thing. As you live life with all its vicissitudes and pain, and as you go through the creative process, life slowly teaches you. Thanks to an experience, or a mentor, or some inspired soul you meet, or some music of course.

Was your childhood very ritualistic?

Not completely. My mother for instance would not behave with Krishna in the usual way. She would sing to him instead of just bathing him and so on. So it was not an orthodox ritualism but rather a musical ritualism. I was sleeping in the same room so I was privy to it all. And I treated Him as my friend. I would tell Him my problems, my questions, my feelings. There was no fear-based relationship with God. It was a love-based, sibling-based relationship.

He was like your buddy?

Absolutely. And still is.

Did you have moments of doubting Him?

Of course! As a kid for instance, I always wondered how come He never talked back. And when someone would blame me for something I did not do, I would cry to Him and wonder why unfair things would happen.

But I realized over time that it is the best thing that He never answers back. It's the best because you have to interpret life and find answers yourself.

Basically you have to find God inside, and using a statue of God, an external representation of it, makes it easy to relate to God inside, isn't it?

Absolutely.

Yet, many are tempted to "subcontract" this process and instead of finding their inner guru, they entirely rely on an outer guru?

Yes, but it could have never been the case for me. My parents never ever went to any guru. If anybody mentioned too much the name of some guru, my father would always say that this person must be a hoax. By namedropping in such a way, he or she is putting a cloak to cover something dark they hold inside. So I never was into any dogma or any guru exclusively.

As I said, as a child, my problem with Krishna was that He never answered me. But later on I understood that this was precisely the key. The whole point is to find MY way, MY relationship with this God – which may or may not exist. Dumping everything on somebody and absolving oneself of all responsibility is a very dicey way out, it is no way out actually, it is only getting deeper into the well, with no learning.

And then we would have to come back next life to learn it...

Definitely. I can illustrate this idea with music. My guru would never allow me to take notes about musical pieces while learning them. She wanted me to hear them learn them and later on reproduce whatever I had absorbed from it. She also never taught me how to improvise. She would have me sing in front of her and then react, giving a few comments. She was a real guru because she never wanted clones of her creativity. A real guru is the one who is never dogmatic about enslaving your mind. The one who awakens you and never puts you to sleep.

You grew up in music – did you always know you would continue into it?

Definitely not. I grew up surrendered by music but I was also a very cerebral person, I was doing very well in my studies. The glamour of travelling and the material world were as enticing as to anyone else my age.

I was very good in chemistry and thought I would go abroad to complete a doctorate. I did a Bachelor of Science in chemistry, then another one in education; I also did research in the intellectual development of human beings (social, emotional intelligence etc.).

But somewhere along the lines, my relationship with my mother somehow prompted me to choose music.

She was not the type who would push me to do anything. She gave me a lot of music and left it there. By the time I was 11 or 12 she became sick and I knew she would not live long. So I started early on to think about the larger meaning of life.

She passed on when I was 21. I had learnt so much musical stuff from her till the age of 10, and then from my guru. We were living in a quite modest flat in Bombay. My father was a simple railways' official. But our place was always full of musicians and singers, with plenty of food available for them all. T. Brinda had come from Chennai to teach major musicians in Bombay but decided to stay a few months every year with us – and then became my guru. My mother had taught me all the basics, and about 200 pieces. Then my guru taught me for another ten years. So this was a lot of material. Once my mother departed, I felt I had to do something with it all. Then the journey started and I went through life's school of hardship.

Throughout those hard teachings, did you feel a guiding or protective force?

Yes. Because of this relationship I had with Krishna, I always felt that in the end, someone would take me out from the abyss I was in.

And I had a few really trying times. For instance, at the same time my mother died, my guru stopped coming to Bombay, as she was growing too old. I had not figured out what I would be. And I was

married, about to give birth. So I was basically lost, drifting apart. I was like a puppet without a string. With nothing to hold me. It was inwardly a very unhappy time.

Spirituality if I may call it so, kept me afloat – basically, the belief that something or someone would come in the end and rescue me.

And it always happened.

I was singing well but I was very unhappy with my voice. It was a major blockage. Then I was guided to a practical manual on how to breathe and how to use the body. In India we are never taught anything about it, and Indian gurus don't talk about it.

But learning from a book was not enough. Then a young woman my age walked into my life and asked me to teach her music. A year later her parents came home and offered me to go abroad for three months. They said I had cured their daughter of schizophrenia within that year, thanks to the music. They wanted to thank me and offered me to spend three months in Sarrebruck conservatory, in Germany. I had never stepped out of India, and was a very framed character out of Bombay. Those three months completely changed me. My voice was never the same after it. And I was a transformed person thanks to my voice taking off.

So somebody is always there, but you have to feel it. If you know it, you attract it. If you lose heart, you are somehow blocking it.

But were all those events preordained?

Well, they may be destined, but you allow them to come into your life by trusting, by keeping yourself open to it all. We definitely have our role to play. If you believe you are here in this universe to give and take something, then things happen. You attract what you desire, but you can choose what you desire. That choice is yours.

You mentioned our role in the universe – what is yours?

Music can have a tremendous impact. In some concerts you do well but are in full control. In others, I lose myself for some time. And in those moments, I feel like engulfed in a balloon with the audience, there is no more "me" and "them", it all is interconnected energy. And it is a time to feel, to touch the divine. When it happens, you feel so blessed to be able to bring that to yourself and to others.

Yet it is so easy to forget this divine feeling when we are in this earthly reality?

Of course...

On the other hand, if we were all the time on that divine realm and not in this material reality, why incarnate at all?

Definitely.

Do you actually believe in the idea of reincarnation?

Yes, it makes sense to me that we would come back to learn and do all that was unfinished.

The idea of rebirth has also worked very well for me: I always wanted to sing with some excellence and make an impact. But I had no clue how to get there. And for years I was struggling so hard. I actually hit the classical music scene relatively very late. It took me a long while to be full steam. But all those years I kept telling myself that if I don't succeed in this life, I will succeed in the next one. And in the meanwhile I will have learnt a few useful things for the next cycle. That helped get the pressure off of me! It was a very practical implementation of the idea of rebirth.

So if you could choose your next birth, what would it be?

To be a musician, no matter where & what kind of music.

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

Where will You send me next?

What is your idea of happiness?

When I connect with people, when I am with music, when I am alone.