

Nafisa Ali Sodhi

Actor

'Dreams are like being on the Internet with God'

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Nafisa Ali Sodhi is an actor and social activist. She was a national swimming champion and also a former Miss India.

What does spirituality mean to you?

I grew up in a house of several religions, with a Christian mother and a Muslim father. Being a swimmer, I was mostly on my own and often thought of spiritual matters, questioning the idea of all those different divine forms, the reality of God. Over time, I realized religions have been invented by humans, mostly as a tool for social order and today, an instrument for manipulation, especially in politics. And I gradually understood the simple truth that God is in every one of us. When we pray we shut our eyes and that is where God is. And basically spirituality is about that – investing in oneself to be a better human being, and finding the divine on the inside.

Do you believe you are guided and protected by a superior force?

There definitely is a divine force, a hidden energy that guides and protects, that can heal and propel you, ensuring that you keep focused on doing certain things, and listening to your inner voice — because that is how God talks to you. And of course one should pay attention to coincidences, to our

intuition and to our dreams. Dreams have warned and guided me about so many things. They are like being on the Internet with God.

Do you believe you have a special mission or purpose in this life?

You must have a purpose in life, otherwise why bother? We are here for a short spell; we come with nothing and leave with nothing. So what matters to me is to try and be a good karma yogi, working hard, touching as many lives as I can. Concretely, it manifests in a large variety of things — being a mother, a social worker, an activist, and being passionate about politics. Some people question my involvement in such a large canvas of activities. But if things flow well, it means it is right, and if circumstances have propelled me into the limelight, why not use it for good purposes? If I can garner funds and support for NGOs, if associating my name to a cause helps it, why not do it?

What is spirituality for you in your day-to-day life?

It is about trying to put myself in other people's shoes, praying for others, questioning any kind of dogma or ritualism. If you do not question things, you get caught up in the frenzy of hate, which goes hand in hand with the drive for control and power, two forces that make people evil.

What is the role of spirituality in your work?

It basically underlies all areas of my work. I got involved in the crusade for HIV about 15 years ago, because I realised what catastrophe was awaiting India if nothing was done. A life changing moment came when I spent time with a sex worker who was dying of AIDS in a hospital. Her flesh had rotten and I could see her bare bones. Some of her blood got spilled on my hand. I looked at it. I could have gotten the virus, had I any cut. The woman died a few days later and I decided to focus on a multi-pronged approach to AIDS, bringing emphasis on treatment rather than prevention only. I founded an AIDS shelter in Delhi. I contributed to the introduction of retro-viral drugs. And many other examples that showed me how one person can have a revolutionary impact on so many people. The power of one is also why I became enthusiastically involved in politics. When Mrs. Sonia Gandhi stepped in, I decided to join as I felt we needed to fight the divisive politics of hate and communalism, so contrary to the essence of Hinduism. When she asked me to run against Mamata Banerjee, I knew I had no chance but I did not hesitate. And would the opportunity arise again, I would grasp it wholeheartedly.

Can you tell us about a unique experience that changed or shaped your spiritual beliefs?

With Christian and Muslim parents, a passion for Buddhism in school, and a Sikh husband, I had not been exposed much to Hinduism. Until I discovered it thanks to Swami Chinmayananda and the Chinmaya Mission. When I first — reluctantly — heard him speak, it was a complete turning point to my approach to spirituality. I felt it was the truth of the Hindu Dharma, unlike the games people have been playing in its name. I was moved by his call against ritualism — a distortion of Hinduism — and for an exposure of the scriptures beyond the elites and Brahmins.

If you were to be reincarnated, what would you like to be reincarnated as?

I would love to be a dolphin. I have explored the walking planet, I have seen it from the sky, I have seen its mountains, its snows, its rivers and its cities. On the other hand, I have not explored the underwater world, which forms the majority of our planet. So I would like to do so as a dolphin and swim, unharmed, till my very old years!

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

Why are human beings fighting on religious lines and segregating each other for dominance? Why doesn't He give peace a chance?

What is your idea of happiness?

Happiness is about lying in bed, my dogs sleeping next to me, watching my husband sleep and with the TV on, very low — that is my meditation!