

Vandana Shiva

Environmentalist

'I've managed, thanks to a grace at work'

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Vandana Shiva is an environmentalist and author. She took part in the Chipko movement and has consistently fought for eco-friendly policies on food, seeds and farming.

What does spirituality mean to you?

It is the awareness of the connectedness and creativity of the universe; and built into that creativity, a sense of the divinity that pervades the entire cosmos.

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

Very much so. I would not be here without it. I can feel it especially as some very crucial moments, when I am very aware of my smallness, my helplessness, my sense of inadequacy – and am then made adequate to the challenge, way beyond my objective capabilities.

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

Growing up in the hugely ecological environment of the Himalayas and in a home of a spiritual nature, I knew from very early on that I would dedicate my life to the exploration of nature.

Why did I first choose physics to do so was a mystery. No one in my family or surroundings was even remotely a scientist. Physics were not taught in school. But I felt I had no choice but follow that path. Obviously that inspiration came from somewhere else. Some people describe it as a calling. It is like an inner energy burst. The same feeling happened when I felt I had to focus on saving seeds. I had never read or heard about this idea, nor attended a single lecture on biology. But something told me I had to do it.

So my life has been about the search for the understanding of the workings of nature, and of course of its preservation. I started alone but even at the toughest moments something would occur showing me there is grace at work. I have been working on tough issues, fighting powerful adversaries, hell bent to destroy the planet. I have had to deal for instance for more than twenty years with companies patenting and genetically engineering seeds, which to me are amongst the most criminal corporations in the world. And there is no way my limited brain would have come up with solutions. It is too unknown, too complicated, too difficult. But I managed, again because of that grace at work.

But although I do believe there is a mystery beyond, and that human intelligence is limited compared to the intelligence of the universe, it does not mean one should sit ignorant of the levels our intelligence can reach, and reduce oneself to blind ritualism in the process. Blind ritualism means for instance bathing in the Ganga as a sacred ritual without bothering about its pollution and dirt. We must act to prevent the pollution. Instead, we say that bathing is so spiritual of an act that dirty waters do not matter. It is a dangerous approach, because it means spirituality is irrelevant to the universe's creative energy's manifestation, which is matter. And that is a perception I would always fight forcefully.

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

At one level, all the work I do in ecology is a material expression of my spiritual quest. The fact that I save seeds as a resistance to patenting and genetic engineering is a recognition of the sacredness in every seed. But I do not have daily rituals, meditations or prayers of any sort. I simply stop at times of the day, to hand over my life and reconnect.

What is the role of spirituality in your work?

It is completely integrated in the very essence of my work. And it manifests in so many different ways. The insistence on preserving seeds and so much of our work at the village level is based on reclaiming ceremonies that allowed farmers to recognize the sacredness of seeds. And this is the only reason that would compel them to save the seeds – the market would rather do the contrary. Hundreds of faiths in India and elsewhere posit a fundamental belief in the obligation to protect seeds, as part of one's custodianship, like an ethical spiritual duty. So we work to bring that back again.

Another example: when we worked to stop the privatization of Delhi's water, it was very much connected to the sacredness of water. Our slogan was 'our Mother is not for sale', and it worked, with millions of people mobilized around the campaign.

Basically, you can pick up any old Veda and the ecology in it is perfect. And the same goes for the Upanishads. No better texts could be written on rivers or healing plans or the ecology of food. So as an ecologist, one finds a lot of inspiration in them.

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

I nearly lost my son when he was two as he had a brain injury following an awful accident. He was deeply unconscious for a few hours. It did not look like he had much chance of surviving. I remember my father laying his hand on my head and saying that those are the moments when we have to leave it to higher powers.

After some time, a doctor finally arrived, and as he entered the room, my son suddenly sat up on my laps, as if nothing had ever happened.

That kind of experience definitely reinforces one's beliefs.

What have been your main spiritual inspirations?

First of all, I was very fortunate in being born in the Himalayas: the region itself takes you in that direction and inspires you with its most powerful presence.

Also, the concept of the divine, the workings of a larger universe and so on were very present at home. My parents were thoroughly non religious, but deeply spiritual. They exposed us to the best and most authentic spiritual teachers as part of our upbringing, be it Anandamayi Ma or Swami Shivananda for instance.

But those were never words only, like so many people who do everything wrong every day of the week and then go for Buddhist retreats on weekends. They lived and translated their spirituality into their daily life. It was a commitment to a larger universal responsibility and of course it got engrained in my siblings and I.

A famous Upanishad says that if you take more than you absolutely need from the earth, you steal from someone else's share – either another species, or another person or someone in the future who's being deprived. So my parents applied this advice thoroughly. They were both very close to nature. My father was a forest conservator and my mother, though a senior government bureaucrat, chose instead to become a farmer. She also was a poet and nursed us with rhymes celebrating every beautiful tree of India.

Let me add that as much as spirituality was an integral part of our upbringing, we grew up completely indifferent to much of the rituals this country is so buried in. And today, I am rediscovering – or rather, discovering – some of those rituals and adapting them to my work at Navdanya, the movement I launched to protect biodiversity and rejuvenate indigenous knowledge and culture.

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

Reincarnation is plausible enough of an idea to consider it. I like the fact that the accounts are not finished now. And I would choose to be a cow or an earth worm. Indeed, so much of my work is related to organic farming and these two beings are so vital to the web of life – so I would not mind helping along!

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

I wouldn't ask.

What is your idea of happiness?

To be at peace with oneself. It is attainable if you do not get guided by power and glamour, and make them the determinant of your aspirations; and if you follow your conscience. So in general I am at peace and I am happy.