

# **M S Swaminathan**

Agriculture Scientist

**'If there is a challenge, there is an opportunity'**

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**M S Swaminathan is an agriculture scientist, popularly known as the Father of the Green Revolution.**

**What does spirituality mean to you?**

Something beyond comprehension.

I am a scientist and I am used to try and analyze issues with my intellect. But there are certain issues you simply cannot understand by analyzing them only. This to me is the realm of spirituality. It acts as a guiding force indicating which path to take in life, like a guiding light or a guiding star.

And what it tells me, what is right for me, will not necessarily be right for someone else. It is a very personal approach, which cannot be transplanted easily or automatically to others.

On the overall, it is a profound and humbling experience, something beyond you, something you do not understand. Why were you born in this family, why did you take this path more than another... All those things are a mystery. So more than principles, spirituality is an experience, which cannot be put in words.

Yet, two ideas are essential to me.

I believe in the philosophy of advaita, or non duality. It gave me an understanding of the unity of life, which is actually now clearly sanctified by modern-day genetics, with the discovery of DNA as the basis of all life.

Also, spirituality of the right kind leads you to a spirit of non-violence – to nature, to others, starting from your own immediate surroundings. Hinduism is unique in many respects, as it teaches and insists so much on respecting the living and non-living alike.

If you come to South India, there is a day when everybody worships his or her work instrument, thanking it for serving them well. The surgeon worships his knife, the taxi driver his car etc. There is also a day when all farm animals are worshipped, and so on. So one aspect of spirituality is an understanding of the unity and diversity of nature. This prompting and understanding to live in harmony, is actually a very enriching one. You experience and enjoy life completely differently. You see a neem tree for instance, understanding all that it gives you, and relate to it differently. It is now Darwin's bicentenary and one thing is sure: there can be selection only if there is diversity. Yet intolerance to diversity is growing everywhere. To me it all comes from a lack of spiritual experience. Because spirituality makes you humble. Ego is the biggest enemy of growth. If I think I know everything, I can't ever grow and I miss an important part of life. I have closed my mind to important issues and to new teachings. Tagore said that a candle that is not lit cannot bring light to others. A teacher who does not constantly learn cannot teach others. Ego puts a stop to our learning. If you are an ego-less person, you enjoy life more, and others love you more. They don't feel you think of yourself as superior.

So spirituality is the foundation of a meaningful and purposeful life.

### **How did you develop this understanding?**

Partly it was innate. My father died in 1935 when I was very young. Our lifestyle collapsed at once. It came as a rude shock. The quest for a meaning to life started then. What should I do, what should I study.

I was very influenced by Gandhi. My father was a strong Congressman and Gandhi had stayed in our house. My mother had warned me that he would ask for whatever chain or bangle we were wearing, and we should graciously give them away without crying, without cringing. The next morning he would auction them and use the proceeds for the Dalits or the Freedom Movement. We had to consider ourselves a trustee and not the owner of those things, which are not essential. All this played an important role in forming my thinking. Any time I receive prizes for instance, the money always goes to my research center.

### **Was your childhood religious?**

There wasn't much religion at home, but we were taught the values of simplicity and humanism, that all are human beings. My father used to bring Harijans home. They would sit and eat with us. So of course, the orthodox Brahmins thought of excommunicating him. Even when my grandmother died, they did not come to perform the rites. We were outcast. But my father did not care. He was concentrating on eradicating mosquitoes in the village, on helping others through the hospital he had set up.

My mother was the same, very simple. She gave away all her ornaments.

And we were made to spin the khadi two hours a day when we were young.

In the early forties, when I entered university, it was the time of the great Bengal famine. Most students were very patriotic. The Freedom Movement was in our blood. I asked myself how I could help. The Bengal famine convinced me that what independent India needed was more food. And that required science. So instead of choosing medicine, I joined the agricultural college and then went for genetics since I thought it could help me develop new varieties of plants and crops. Hunger-free India has been my single-track approach ever since.

**Do you actually think we all have a particular mission in life?**

Yes, we must have a mission in life. And it should be to make a difference in people's lives for the better. In my case, it has been about hunger.

**And in the way your mission unfolded, was there something protecting or guiding you?**

Definitely. I feel the hand of God has been continuously guiding me.

For instance, at my mother's insistence I had sat for the civil services exams and was appointed to the Indian Police Service. I was called to report for training in Rajasthan. Fortunately, by God's grace, I received at the same time a fellowship to go to Holland. So I went to Holland. Had that offer not come, there would have been tremendous pressure to join the Police. My family wanted me to settle down. This came right on time. It was God sent.

When in Holland, I was convinced I would come back to India once done with the fellowship. But one month before leaving, my professor suddenly suggested I do my PhD in Cambridge since it had many potato varieties and this was my specialty. He arranged for both my admission and fellowship. And suddenly my life was taking another turn.

Then again in Cambridge, in 1952, when I finished my PhD, I was about to come back to India when an invitation to Wisconsin's university came. I spent there fifteen months. Again, I was offered a very attractive position.

But that was it; I was ready to go back, I had always thought that my time abroad was meant to train me so that I could help more efficiently once back in India.

So I ended up in Delhi, joining the Indian Agricultural Institute.

**Do you think there is something as destiny, are things preordained?**

Many things are definitely beyond our control. But I wouldn't go to the point of saying there is a script with things written in advance.

Why are we born or do we die at a particular time and place? These are questions for which I basically don't think we can get an answer.

Yet, I look at things like the way I got involved in the Green Revolution. There was no way I could have ever planned it. Of course there is something as hard work, cause-consequence, action-reaction. But still, it went beyond those explainable patterns. So it is something one may call the hand of destiny.

**At difficult times, where do you find the energy to cope?**

If there is a challenge, there is an opportunity. I always saw that. In 1964 I was told I was a naïve if not silly dreamer when I said that the 1968 wheat harvest would herald a new era in Indian agriculture. And sure enough, it was the case. We were so obsessed with this single idea: "we must have a breakthrough", "we must have a breakthrough". The begging bowl image of India had to be erased.

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

At this stage in my life, the only question would be: how can I be useful to people, to my own family, and beyond, for the rest of my life? These days, I am involved for instance in a program called biohappiness with tribals in Orissa, with the idea that happiness would come from the sustainable use of bioresources. And it makes me feel I do something valuable, meaningful.

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

This birth was really interesting, so I hope I can be useful again to everyone next time. If you derive satisfaction by bringing happiness to other people's lives, you also get happiness. So in whatever way, I should make a difference in others' lives.

**What is your idea of happiness?**

Bringing joy to others, starting with your own family, because you can't be a hypocrite. You must first give time to your children, grandchildren. Then your extended family, your neighbors, then finally, the universe...