



Guest

Venerable Tenzin Priyadarshi is the president and CEO of the Dalai Lama Center for Ethics and Transformative Values at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). In 2020, Priyadarshi released his book "Running Toward Mystery: The Adventure of an Unconventional Life". In the book, he speaks about his walking away from his school at the age of 10 based on some dreams he had been having from the age of 6. He speaks about the various twists and turns in his journey that has now brought him to MIT.

In 2009, Priyadarshi founded the Dalai Lama Center for Ethics and Transformative Values at MIT to design and disseminate innovative programs on teaching secular ethics and human values. The Center for Ethics has 6 Nobel Peace Laureates as its founding members and its programs run in 5 countries while poised for a global reach.

Context to the Conversation

Welcome to the 68th Conversation at the Play to Potential Podcast. I am your host Deepak Jayaraman and I work with leaders and Organizations and help them play to their unique potential. The two questions I try and help leaders with are "Where to go" and "how to grow". I find that these two questions are quite parallel to the two questions businesses need to ask in the context of their strategy – where to play and how to win. To know more about my Leadership Advisory work, you can visit www.playtopotential.com and click on "About the host" section.

In this podcast series, we feature conversations from leaders from different walks of life on three themes - leadership, transitions and careers.

My guest this time is Venerable Tenzin Priyadarshi who is the President and CEO of Dalai Lama Centre of Ethics at MIT – The Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He recently published a book Running toward Mystery where he speaks about his journey starting from the age of 10 where he decides to run away from his Boarding School, taking a train to the end of the line and then riding a bus wherever it went. It takes him to a monastery that he has been seeing in his dreams from his age of 6. The book takes us through the series of events that leads him to his current unique role at MIT. While a lot of us may not make the kind of extreme choice that Venerable made in our respective journeys, I feel there is a lot we can learn from him on leaning into the unknown and exploring the world of possibilities. Without further ado, let us dive into my conversation with Venerable Tenzin Priyadarshi.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Venerable, thank you so much for making the time. It's really a privilege to be talking to you at the Play to Potential podcast.

Tenzin Priyadarshi (TP): Well, it's a delight, thank you for having me.

DJ: And, at the outset, which part of the world are you in as we speak and how are things at your end?

TP: Well, I am in the Desert Mountains outside of Arizona and Southern California border, and a little bit of mayhem in neighbouring states because of wildfire but otherwise it's the relative calm before the storm of elections so to speak.

DJ: That's true. Venerable, I wanted to spend a bulk of time talking about the book you have recently published *Running Toward Mystery* in a way which chronicles your journey and your choices so far, but the at the outset what caught my attention when I read the book was in the flap on the back the book you are described as an innovative thinker, philosopher, educator and a polymath monk. I was just curious about how you relate to each of these identities. Maybe just to set context, give us a sense of what you do, how you spend time and a little bit of the why behind what you do?

TP: You know at the very outset I should say that the part of the joy of being a monk is becoming comfortable with identity-lessness. And so much of my life and the effort ongoing is to not assume additional identities but to lose whatever that there is. However, in the world that we live in of course these labels are useful but most times they become trappings of different kinds. So, I think by virtue of my dabbling in spiritual life and academia and the world of invention and discoveries, these titles or labels get afforded to me, but I would say, innovative thinker mostly in the sense that I question things, I maintain a healthy sense of curiosity, I am a fan of tradition but not bound by it, and I like to think but I don't like to think mindlessly, it's not a pastime leisurely exercise, it's a purposeful thinking and by purposeful thinking it's again something that is influenced by the Buddhist worldview, which is thinking towards the sense of collective well-being and a collective sense of joy and how to nurture a mindset of freedom. So, I think, that's my sort of world. I think the notion of... I am going to get long-winded in these kinds of answers so you will have to edit all this stuff.

DJ: No worry.

TP: You know, the notion of polymath I think simply what it signifies is that my interests are not contained in a singular discipline. And there is a clear reason for that from early on because of my interest in multiple subjects and not being somebody who was dictated by market economy or professional ambitions. I was able to deeply dive into many disciplines. When I was growing up, I had a sense of aversion to formal education, because I thought it was not a very useful way of learning. But when I first came to U.S. and I realized that I could dive into so many things that my undergrad year I declared multiple majors and multiple minors, because I was a monk, I had nothing else to do. So, I just wanted to study and it just, sort of, made me go deeper into things. So, that's what I guess these titles might be useful in terms of labels, yeah.

DJ: Venerable, I would love to go back in time. In the book you talk about leaving your home when you were just 10 and heading out into the unknown, walking out based on a dream or a vision that you saw and you say that the episode was neither rational nor irrational, it's just that you needed to undertake that journey. Could you speak about this episode and more specifically about this notion of neither being rational nor irrational? What does that mean?

TP: Certainly. I mean, so firstly, it wasn't one dream, it wasn't one episode, it was a set of recurring dreams and I think it just intensified over the years, which prompted me to run away from the school. I think the challenge with humans is that we want to find reasons or explanations for all our experiences, right? And the thing is that often times such reasoning happens in the aftermath, you know, my friends in neuroscience tell me that the way human brain functions is that it takes a decision and then it tries to tell itself of a story of why it took that decision meaning the neurons that fire around choices there is a delay mechanism in terms of when we actually do something versus when the neurons actually fire. So, you know, and that's at a microscopic level what's happening in human behaviour in terms of choices and decision making. Now on a macroscopic thing again the idea is that people want to know what was the rationale. Now, I was 10-years-old, I cannot tell them that I had thought about it; I cannot tell them that I reasoned with it and so on, but I also know very clearly even reflecting retrospectively that it wasn't an irrational impulsive decision that there was a sense of conviction that was rooted in a kind of clarity, it wasn't clarity on my terms, but it was a certain kind of clarity that prompted this decision. And so I used it as an example to also encourage individuals to leave some room for non-rational experiences meaning that we don't need to reduce the set of human experiences into binary mode of rational and irrational, that there are non-rational and non-rational simply implies that it is yet to be explored, there's no convincing story line on a narrative around it, and we may never find the right story line, but it is a class of its own.

DJ: And how do you discern that non-rational part? Rational, of course, a lot of formal education is around, you know, making sense within the limitations of the human mind. But how does one discern the non-rational elements in the context of choices?

TP: That's a great question. I think non-rational simply implies that we are pushing the boundaries of reasoning as we know at that particular moment in time. We are pushing the boundaries of the known. So, whatever data, whatever knowledge, whatever understanding I have at that time, whatever conditioning that I have at that particular moment in time that I am pushing it not necessarily knowing what the outcome is going to be or where it's going to lead me to. And it may be a complete disconnect between this set of historical experiences that I may have had meaning that I cannot see a straightforward causation that is leading to this thing. But it's also, you know, it's not irrational in the sense that it's not just a result of an emotional outburst, it's not a result of awareness, it's not a result of some kind of reactive mindset.

DJ: Got it, got it. And really changing the lens, wearing the lens of a parent, I have a 10-year-old girl and a 6-year-old son, I am just curious, how does... while what you did was quite dramatic in the context of what happens in an average household. As a parent how should we think about letting children be versus helping them navigate given our limited worldview? How do you think about that?

TP: Well, as a disclaimer, I am not a parent. So, these are I would say not personally tested advice but many of my students both in academia and in spiritual settings are parents and grandparents and we have had long conversations around it. So, first thing is that of course in my own experience the decision I took and the impact it had on my parents, of course, I don't wish it on any parent. I think they were completely distraught, but in my mind, I knew that there was a gap in the understanding of the worldview and so on, right? But let's get back to the business of parenting, right? One is that being a parent is a privilege in many ways, raising a life is a privilege and the idea that you are not just shaping or raising a consciousness, nurturing it in ways but this idea that when to intervene and when not to intervene meaning when to get out of the way is also useful parenting, it's also mindful parenting. Because often times what happens is parents consciously or unconsciously want to live their unfulfilled life, unfulfilled dreams viscerally through their kids. I had this ambition, I could not fulfil it, my son or daughter shall do it. My grandparents had this ambition,

they could not fulfil it, the family had this ambition, they could not fulfil it. And it becomes sometimes quite toxic, when we try to live our lives viscerally through the next generation because we curb this sense of freedom, we do violence to their sense of independence, their sense of determination and so on. And so, I think, that's one of the biggest challenges that I find in the world of parenting. And the second thing of course is just the right kind of guidance and Asia including India is known for helicopter parenting, where parents are constantly hovering around, planning a kid's life until they are married or even after they are married when they have grandkids and things like that. And, I think, that's one of the challenges is to recognize that we can do without that sense of dominance in the world of parenting, in the world of relationship. So, I think, that's what we need to be mindful of to be able to recognize a child's dream, a child's own vision, a child's own disposition, knowing when to correct it, but also knowing when to let it be, knowing when to encourage it. These are... it's a rather difficult task so... but those are the advice that I also give to teachers, in formal systems of education, knowing when to get out of the way is important.

DJ: True. Back to your journey Venerable, you have sort of... when I read the book the other thing that struck me was just the extent of conviction you have had in your journey despite a lot of external pressure around you at various points in time. At some point you say you talk about one of your relatives that comes to talk to you to say, why be a monk when you could be a sahib or a politician or a professor, you are throwing away every gift you had inherited. How have you thought about having the conviction in leaning into mystery at various points in time?

TP: Umm, it has been a struggle in its own rights, I mean, it's not that all these things have been a smooth journey. And I think it's the... and I cannot say that the conviction hasn't evolved over a period of time, there were days when people would ask me do you ever doubt your decisions and I say, I reflect on it every day meaning that it's not that it is kind of built into my system that this is what it was sort of thing. I have tried to imagine what my life would have been if I had followed the paths laid out by my parents and so on. And there have been numerous times when my parents and I and extended family have had these conversations. There were times even up until a few years ago when my parents were suggesting that all the work that I was trying to do in education and humanitarian stuff in India and elsewhere, wouldn't that be better off being a politician to be able to do those things better? And I thought deeply about it and I talked to a few people and I realized no, it requires levels of compromise that I am not willing to entertain. So, there have been different challenges I would say but one of the things that that spiritual life has taught me is the idea that to embrace a sense of unpredictability is important and so yeah.

DJ: And could you speak...

TP: I also mention it in the book that when my publicist and agents and all were suggesting to write a memoir, I said I am too young to write my memoir, and secondly, I might change my mind any day.

DJ: Coming to your journey, if you had to pick three or four choices that you have made that have significantly impacted your trajectory, if we just pick these two points you walking away from home when you were 10 towards the unknown and you being at MIT, one would assume it's difficult to think of a curve that would join these two points, but there is a curve. So, are there three or four discrete points in the curve where the choices you made that have significantly shaped your journey thus far?

TP: Yes, I think, besides that particular episode of running away the second episode would be despite of my aversion agreeing to pursue both secular studies and religious studies simultaneously. It was a burden at times; imagine a 12-year-old kid trying to juggle two curriculums and both in somewhat highly competitive environments. But, I think, when I look back it gave me a particular set

of perspectives that I do find very useful to this day. The third thing I would suggest is the opening to other religious traditions was very useful. Growing up in India, of course, it was natural to be exposed to so many different traditions, but the keen interest in exploring all of them and not being simply content with what I was learning on my own was very helpful to understand better human nature and how historically and otherwise various philosophical and religious traditions have approached it. And lastly, the thing around the study in the sciences and technology, which is again that making a conscious decision that I did not want to be become a professor of Buddhist studies or just become a spiritual teacher in the narrowest sense of the word or manage a temple or manage a monastery, all those things have perks associated with it. There is a kind of certitude that you get with being a tenured faculty member or running a monastery and things like that and every step of the way encountering those opportunities but then deciding that no, it's okay to continue with a degree of uncertainty. So, it's managing ambitions, managing ambitions to maintain sort of the clarity of purposefulness of things have been a challenge.

DJ: Wow! And is it fair to say that the current role that you have at MIT is sort of a one of its kind, it's not a The Dalai Lama Center for Ethics... in a way you have sort of shaped, sculpted the role, it's not a role that existed that you slotted into, is that a fair observation?

TP: No, that is correct, that is correct. I started off at MIT almost 20 years ago initially as a visiting scholar. I was invited by then the president of MIT, Chuck Vest, who was a wonderful scientist and a wonderful human being. And initially, I started off as doing just some experimental work, because I was still a grad student at that time. And then they said well, why don't you become the Buddhist Chaplain to the institute? And again, it's one of those things that the word Buddhist Chaplain was not a common thing. I don't know what a chaplain means, so I was like, okay, let's try this as well. So, I was a visiting scholar and then I had this role and then... but most of my work was teaching at Sloan and other schools within MIT and working on some joint research stuff. And then, as I have mentioned elsewhere that around 2007 after touring a bunch of universities around North America for lectures and speaking engagements, I realized that there was a sheer lack in the study of ethics meaning it was simply approached as a Philosophy 101 kind of subject and strictly sort of in an academic manner with very little relevance factor. And so, I started having this conversation with my colleagues at MIT at that time and then the financial meltdown happened and suddenly the entire world was questioning the ethics of business schools and schools of management and what's happening and I saw that as the right moment to establish a learning centre that would promote and nurture ethical imagination. And so, part of the, if you ask again about the innovative stuff, it was to figure out ways of promoting ethical imagination that was not prescriptive in nature as it had been historically but highly relevant and highly relevant to disciplines that people were pursuing intellectually, professionally and otherwise.

DJ: Got it. And actually, going back to one of the things you said Venerable, early in the journey you speak about straddling two worlds, right, where you were spending, you went to a regular school with other kids, spending more and more time at a Buddhist temple nearby and so on. One of the things I have discovered in several of my conversations at this podcast and otherwise is sometimes when you have to transition from one orbit to another orbit a lot of times, we take a deep plunge, but very often one has to straddle both these universes and that comes with a burden as you have said. Could you talk a little bit about just that notion, and how it has played out in your life?

TP: Depends what day of the week it is. Oftentimes, I used to joke with my colleagues that I wake up quite early around 4 a.m. or so and in between 4:00 a.m. and 8:00 a.m. I am immersed in disciplines and literature and tradition that is over 2,500 years old. And by 8:30 a.m., I am discussing framing of artificial intelligence, yeah. So, the jump happens quite often in that way. It is a burden, a burden in the sense that over a period of time, of course, there has been increased sense of proficiency so that

allows for this to be done in a seamless manner. That every day and multiple times during the day I find myself going back and forth between traditions in time, worldviews and juggling these things. I think the challenge, one of the biggest struggles of course often becomes is the aspect of relevance, because if you take a cosmic view of the world, we are insignificant, we are less than a dot in the ever-expanding universe. And a Buddhist would know that by virtue of their meditation, by virtue of their experiences and so on. But at the same time a Buddhist also knows the sense of uniqueness of each individual, the uniqueness of time and space that we are in, our role, our responsibilities, our sense of duty and so on. And so, it often becomes an issue of relevance that from one perspective saying that is it really relevant but from another perspective it is yes, it does matter and it matters in these particular ways. And those are the things to think about, people spend too much time bickering about shallow things but if you are constantly waking up with reflection on mortality and reflection on death you recognize that a lot of what we engage in, a lot of what we are invested in as individuals, as a society is irrelevant but we give meaning to it, we give stories to it. Sometimes those meanings are valid meanings, other times they are just fabricated stories of sorts. And I think that's the struggle, the joy that one has to experience.

DJ: And as we think about the journey into the unknown, one of the other questions that often come up is what should my compass be when I am sort of navigating into a forest without Google Maps, without streets and highways? In your experience what's been your, what's given you the compass at various points in time?

TP: A healthy sense of curiosity is important. Spiritual terrain is not new, it has been traversed by many, even the historical Buddha when people tried to make him a unique figure in history, even he came out and said, I am not the first Buddha, and I won't certainly be the last one. So spiritual terrain is very rich historically and otherwise, it's traversed by many and it's an issue of finding individuals who have traversed it skilfully, but at the same time one is also carving one's own path. So, it's kind of guidance by proximity in certain ways, but you have to maintain the sense of curiosity, you have to maintain the sense of healthy questioning to sort of progress. You see, often times what happens is that we are not looking for a compass to find direction; we are looking for a compass to gain validation, to gain a sense of certitude. Often times in spiritual conversations people are simply looking for an affirmation. I have a path, just tell me that I am on the right path. That's not how it's supposed to be because that's the false sense of knowing, the false sense of certitude that we are looking for. So, the compass needs to be driven by that and secondly that it does not need, it has become quite fashionable for example these days to talk about balance of spiritual life in a manner that it simply becomes a mode of performance enhancement and worldly life that because I am a spiritual individual look at me how successful I am materially, that I have accomplished all this thing because of my spiritual leanings. That is an incorrect portrayal of things, because your priorities do change, your worldview does change, your sense of what to pursue what not to pursue changes dramatically. And so, we should not look into those kinds of modes in terms of the compass of certitude that if I am doing this right, I am going to excel in a way excellence is defined in the worldly sense.

DJ: I think a related point you make Venerable is you talk about the fact that a lot of times still spiritual practice is turned into a life hack by a lot of people, you know, you say what's my Rol on this if I meditate for 20 and did not... I found that quite provoking and you go on to say that what's needed more urgently is the attention to the motivation the discipline and the sense of purpose that creates a nest for practice that will ultimately determine the outcome. Could you talk a little bit more about the mindset with which we need to pursue this journey, the spiritual journey?

TP: That's a useful thing and a good thing that you have picked up on. There are varying set of opinions of why one should pursue a spiritual life, why an individual should pursue a spiritual life.

But fundamentally, if you look in the tradition the goal of spiritual life was often times soteriological meaning it was for the purpose of freedom, it was for the purpose of liberation. And freedom from what? Freedom from suffering, freedom from misery, which for the most part most traditions would say was self-created, right, that there would be other causes of misery, but most of our miserable experiences are self-created misery. When we utilize spirituality or spiritual discipline as a life hack, we become good at managing suffering meaning that just like they have become comfortable with everything else that has encouraged the sense of complacency, we have become good at managing suffering to the point that we are actually content just managing it. There is no desire to free ourselves from it because our identity is too tied in this sense of management of misery and management of being in this world. And that I find is the biggest challenge is where people have sort of specially in the contemporary landscape of things where people have tried to focus on particular skill sets of spiritual life, emotional regulation or sleep regulation or regulation of mindsets to be able to break through and have a very productive day and things of that nature. In those kinds of settings, we forget to ask the fundamental questions. We are not really shifting our worldview on a grand scale of things. And then, other times we sort of give in to the oxymorons of why do something. For example, I cannot tell you how many times I have been approached to help design apps for meditation. And especially when I was taking a year at Stanford almost, I would say two to three proposals a week of various forms to the point that after first three months I had to tell my assistant any enquiry on apps find out what they really want and then we can have this conversation. But you take an example, simple thing, what is your intention? Well, my intention is for people to meditate more. Well, why do you want to create an app for them to meditate more? Well, I want to create this app so that it can facilitate people to meditate more why because tradition is obscure, tradition is not accessible, you know, people come up with all these kinds of reasons and rationales. Very different from the other mindset, which is you need to make effort to find the right teacher, to find the right fit of the tradition and so on. But here's the challenge is that then you ask them well, what are your measures for success for this app? Because you see in order for the sack... in order for the app to be successful the user must give up using the app after a while, right, meaning that if I am designing a mindfulness or meditation app that is simply increasing the behavioural tendencies of dependency and co-dependency then it kills again one of the fundamentals of meditation practices that you don't become dependent on the method. But if my model for creating a successful technology is that user keeps coming back to the same thing and I find many novel ways to keep bringing users back to the same thing, I am promoting addiction. Now, I can again come up with all the brilliant narrative I want to come around meditation and freedom and happiness, but fundamentally what I am creating and promoting is addiction just of different sorts. So, these are the things that I think people need to deeply think about when we talk about life hacks and coaching and designing apps and things like that, the spiritual world is very rich, of course, we can find things and tools from these rich traditions that are highly relevant in the lives that we live. The fundamental issue is what's the purpose? And that is something that we need to deeply reflect on. Because again, one of the things we have to recognize is that unless and until we learn to give up metrics by which we are measuring our conventional life, those metrics fundamentally do not work in the spiritual landscape and if we bring it in there again, we do violence to the spiritual landscape.

DJ: Hmmm that's a profound point. And in a lot of ways, I guess we are wired to be driven by metrics like we say we move, we monitor what we measure so clearly there's a very interesting. And on a related note Venerable you talk about this notion of deliberate practice. In one of the pages you say practice is a container and if done right everything we do every waking moment is held inside that container and every act whether it's folding a cloth or picking up a teapot is worth doing carefully correctly with patience and attention. Can you talk a little bit about this notion of deliberate practice just in the way we approach our life and every moment?

TP: The... you see, ordinary perspectives on spiritual practice is that it is something radically different from our day-to-day life. That's why we have designated places of worship, that's why we have designated time, celebrating festivities around religious calendar, observing fasts, going to retreats and things of that nature to the point almost that we have created this sense that these are sort of the sacred or the holy moments or days that I need to be more mindful of my religious or spiritual orientation. But otherwise, it's life up for grabs, we just do whatever we feel like doing. And it's a challenge to recognize that spiritual discipline is something that ought to permeate every aspect of our life from perception to decision making to choices to every interaction. And initially it takes certain kinds of effort and that's where the deliberation part comes in that it is a discipline and the more proficiency you gain in this discipline, then it becomes an effortless act meaning then you are not thinking that you need to set aside time for spiritual practice. You may still enjoy meditating for one hour or three hours or nine hours a day, but you are not sort of tied to that particular idea that meditation only means that or religious or spiritual practice only means that. So, there's this sense of effortlessness that we develop over a period of time. Now a lot of times what happens is people just want to begin with effortlessness, which is sometimes not very useful because we are creatures of habit and when we simply start with effortlessness, the old habits are not gone, the old habits simply creep their way into this effortless attitude towards things. So, what the discipline does is allows us to refine some of these old patterns, these old habitual patterns to refine them and identify which one is going to be helpful in the kind of lifestyle that I wish to live versus not. And then, what happens is that one develops something like an aesthetics of practice and aesthetics of practice is where even ordinary things and ordinary tasks reveal a tremendous sense of beauty in it. It's almost like observing the joy in a child's eye when they are observing something new for the first time and you can almost gaze into their eyes and you can see the neural synapses happening. It's like yes, she knows that the toe moves this particular way, she knows that if she touches the dog the dog is going to do this, she knows if she smells the flower this is the fragrance. The beauty of that learning and what happens is that we romanticize the idea of being lifelong learners but we have let go off this joy of learning, this joy of curiosity. And so, the deliberateness of spiritual practice allows us to maintain this aesthetics around experiencing the joy of practice so that observation, so that no two sunsets are alike, no two humans are alike, no two plants are alike, that you are able to sort of relish in the beauty of diversity that nature has to offer.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This is your host Deepak Jayaraman here. Couple of thoughts here. One is the point that came up in my conversation with BJ Fogg of Stanford, the author of the book Tiny Habits - who has studied the process of habit formation. He speaks about three things, Motivation, Ability and Prompt. He says that till we get the ability to do something, our motivation levels can be quite low. So, the idea is to keep the habit small enough so that with limited ability and motivation, we are able to get it done and slowly build from it. Tune in to my conversation with BJ Fogg if that is of interest.

Another podcast guest Rich Fernandez (RF) (CEO of Search Inside Yourself) spoke about this notion of an integrated practice.

RF: *"When people think about meditation, they think about having to do exactly what I have just said which is set side you know x block of time and you know sit in a certain way and close your eyes and protect the space for formal practice. But there is also a way to practice mindfulness and meditation in an integrated way. For example, as you move through the course of your day, integrate it into your day between meetings if you need to walk to the rest room make that a walking meditation. I am actually serious about that. Become aware of your bodies as it moves for space between your office and the rest room. Become aware of your foot fall, become aware of the felt sense of your body. How*

are you feeling actually in that moment? Or take the opportunity to focus on breath or this being in India this Podcast you know if you have a “Mantra” that you are familiar with or particularly like us that. And I say “Mantra” and there is an often a religious component to that but here what I am referring to is really finding an object of your attention to train your attention upon it whether be “Mantra” or breath or walking or sensation you can really do this throughout the course of your day. I was driving to work today and I was focusing on my breath not so much that I wasn’t able to drive but there but when there is a red light when I was stopped in traffic in and out for three breaths, I noticed my breath.”

DJ: Rather than treating mindfulness and spirituality as something separate, I guess we all have an opportunity to weave it into the small things in our life.

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Let’s now get back to our conversation with Venerable Tenzin Priyadarshi

DJ: Moving to a slightly different topic Venerable, one of the things that came up in my very first conversation, it was with the tennis legend Vijay Amritraj who used to play tennis for India and was one of the top-ranked players in Asia and so on and, you know, he quoted Thurgood Marshall and he said he did what he could with what he had. And the reason I bring it up is at some place in the book you talk about a Fuji guruji, and he says... and you talk a little bit about how do you use your distinctiveness to bring about change in the world, right? And in one of the paragraphs you say, I am not convinced that the most effective way that I can move the world towards peace is by drumming and chanting. It seems more logical to work on diplomacy and negotiation between hostile parties or designing policies to circumvent conflict. But then you go on to say that people like Fuji guruji did exactly that and impacted many people including you. So how do you pick a path that’s true to your distinctiveness and make a difference in the world? How do you think about that question?

TP: I think it is something that I am still exploring in all honesty. The thing is, one is, of course, the understanding of behavioural disposition. So, the notion that are we tied by it or is that just the starting point meaning that of course all my choices and decisions are somewhat tied to my behavioural disposition, my mental disposition so to speak, and over a period of time I might want to do certain things and I say, okay. it’s a skill set that I can acquire to expand my disposition in that regard. Now, that only happens in a certain point in time meaning you bring up tennis legend. I have an amateurish interest in tennis, however, if I start playing tennis today and no matter how much effort I put in to it, I might become really good, but the disposition is not such at this stage that I will become another Rafael Nadal or anybody else, meaning that you recognize that certain disposition needs to be groomed at a particular point in an individual’s life, and then you have to figure out that whether that is the fit, the right fit for that individual. So, I am not suggesting that everybody can... anybody can do everything, right? And in the current culture I think we give certain kinds of false promises by portraying that, you know, that you can do whatever you set your mind to. It’s a good start, it’s a good start to begin with that sense of openness, but at the same time one has to

constantly recognize am I limited by my dispositions or am I letting it grow or am I expanding those kinds of dispositions? So, in terms of Fuji guruji the thing is this is the part of mystery sometimes. You never know what could have happened during particular interactions that individuals engaged in at that particular moment in time and how it impacted somebody else meaning that a deep gaze or a silence at times has been more valuable and proven to be more effective than long speeches and dialogues. So, it's just a matter of who's in front of you. And if we lived in a world where people could decipher recitation practices and the sound of drum that they could experience a sense of awakening, it would be wonderful, it would be less words more drumming. But we live in a world where there's constant commotion, there are all kinds of noises. And in that noise, sometimes the drum is useful and sometimes a kind word, an encouraging speech those things are useful meaning that, you know, Buddha was never a big fan of one-size-fits-all meaning one of the one of the things that you would recognize about Buddhism is that it's a highly inconsistent tradition internally because Buddha was never keen on consistency, Buddha was keen on being effective. Humans are not consistent. So, when you are trying to work with humans, you come up with skilful means, relevant techniques that applies to each individual.

DJ: And when you use the term consistent in the context of human beings could you say more?

TP: Yeah, I mean in the sense that what might, you know shape thinking or behaviour of one individual, right, may not be effective on another person. And so, one of the things is as a teacher, as a facilitator is to recognize what is the unique disposition that each individual comes to you with. And even in Buddha's life time, there were learned Brahmins who showed up and who were tied to their own tradition and their knowledge and so on and there were people who were just farmers and soldiers and warriors and they came with a different worldview and Buddha appealed to each one of them in different ways.

DJ: And on a related point in the book you talk about the notion that teachers don't come to us on our terms. That got me thinking and you go on to say as long as we insist that the lesson plan has to proceed along our expectations nothing a teacher says or does will make a difference. Could you talk to us about the wisdom in these lines?

TP: Well, it's basically to shatter our expectations that we have of ourselves and that we have of the world around us. This consumer mindset has taken over to the point that even learning has become a form of consumption. What am I going to get out of... even day before yesterday I had to do a media interview and they asked me what are the takeaways from your book? And I said, what's the point of takeaways? Why do you think that there should be takeaways? Why don't you think that there should be just letting go that if you read the book, you might actually shed some traits, you might actually let go and dissolve some of your tendencies rather than takeaways. So, this idea of consumer mindset is so deeply ingrained in us that we have to recognize that the rules of engagement in spiritual life are quite different. So, this is what happens is we seek a spiritual teacher but we have expectations. We have expectations from what the teacher should appear as, what the teacher should speak in the language and so on and so forth. When we follow a book, when we read a book, it is the same thing meaning that all we are doing is looking for validation and affirmation. And this is the difference between having a spiritual teacher versus reading a book or watching a video. A book or a video is not going to push your buttons, it's not going to bring to your mind truly what is at stake because all we do when we read a book is, we seek resonance. When we listen to a teacher with expectation, we seek resonance but we seldom ask what in me is seeking that resonance? If it's the same unfiltered ego that is seeking resonance and seeking validation then what's the point of even treading spiritual life, what's the point of seeking a teacher? You can constantly just validate your own perspectives on things. So, this is the distinction that we have to recognize that it is not always set lesson plans, it's not that you know in eight weeks or six months

you are going to meet the desired goal. You know, it's like when a car salesman in U.S. when they are selling you a car and you ask them what's the mileage and they say well, the mileage may vary depending on the use of it, and spiritual life is very much like that, the mileage may vary and each user is unique in that regard.

DJ: Very well said. In the book, you also talk about the power of questions. You speak about Nagarjuna and the way he engaged with questions and you speak about the art of refining the question and in your journey, you have met several gurus at various points in time. If you reflected on some of the questions that have fundamentally shaped who you are and the choices you have made and impacted your journey, are there questions that stand out or even a broader question is what have you learnt about the art of crafting and refining a good question?

TP: It has become I would say deeply ingrained in my method of pondering, in my method of looking at things, in my method of studying things and so on. It has also prompted this sense of questions that ought to be more essential and more relevant with time. But it has also developed this sense that I may not find the answer right this moment and to be okay with it. That asking a question does not imply that I will have the answer and I will have the answer right now and it would be an answer that I like or it will be an answer that I appreciate at this moment. So, that's in a broader context. In terms of particular questions, of course, there's a whole chapter in the book entitled "Is there a joy in your religion?" That question to me was very profound given the experience, given how many of us find ways to be miserable in religious life, find ways to simply manifest a sense of misery in spiritual life, not recognizing that the very function of spiritual life or religious life is freedom. And if we continue to be miserable, if we continue to suffer then we should ask is this the right path, am I doing it in the right manner or not? The other part in terms of refinement of question that I have found very valuable is questioning my own narrative that we humans are very good at rationalizing. The more educated we are better we become at rationalizing. And we have a tendency to be able to rationalize pretty much anything to our own advantage to explain it to ourselves. And we live in a time where people are used to grand narratives and fabricating grand narratives but the idea whether there is any sincerity in it, whether there is a sense of honesty in it, those are the things that again my teachers have effectively taught me in this mode of inquiry because religious literature is filled with narratives and oftentimes the mindset becomes that these are narratives, stories given by holy individuals so we should not question it. Nagarjuna shows that everything can be questioned. In fact, that if we simply take something at face value, it's a fall, it's a fall in terms of not being able to utilize the sharpness of human faculties, but it's a very important thing, you know, to recognize and these days, for example, you know, not these days, it has been going on for some time but if you look at social narratives, Wall Street narratives, Silicon Valley narratives, political narratives, they are all deeply held narratives, but seldom are they questioned with a sense of radical honesty.

DJ: Could you give us an example when you talk about the narrative in Silicon Valley, what do you have in mind?

TP: Well, simple narrative that anything that I invent or create is going to change the world for better. How do we know? If the scale of things is going to make the world better, how do we know? Progress is good, how do we know? Meaning that again those are narratives that are closely held, deeply held, we don't question it, but we utilize those narratives to convince ourselves of things and I think it does damage.

DJ: The other element you talk about in the book, page 153 you say you quote "a teacher may see your potential in ways that you can't see yourself and may recognize conditions that are right for a change and strike a note that you didn't realize you were ready to hear". I am curious about how

you think about teachers unlocking the potential of the other person that the other person can't see yet? What's been your experience with this?

TP: I think sometimes, you know, we all have blind spots and sometimes things that are so close to us or we have held so closely our belief systems, our mental dispositions, hurdles, obstacles that they fall in blind spot and sometimes we just need another thoughtful individual to be able to see them and point out that that's hazardous. You are continuing to do this, you are not looking at it, that's hazardous. And I think we should look at obstacles in that particular manner that when a teacher points out something it is precisely that. The second thing is the trappings. The trappings in the sense again that we may get trapped in a particular story line or a particular narrative of who we are, what our life's purpose is and so on and we all, we don't need religious upbringing to have that. That's deeply sort of tied into our human nature in some way. And simply help by pointing to the idea of is that all you are, is that the purpose that really drives you or sometimes even asking a simple question like are you happy, do you feel a sense of freedom, have you been kind today? You know, simple things of that nature can trigger a kind of reflection, a kind of thinking that I think would be rather useful and that's the joy of teachers which is that it's they say things or they point to things at the right moment, at the right time. And sometimes they all have tremendous patience; they need to point to things several times before we can see our blind spot. And that's just how, that's just how this whole discipline is in some ways.

DJ: And in that context in your journey have there been one or two instances of people pointing you towards something or asking a question and you realizing the value of that several years later?

TP: Oh, yes, yes, many, many such incidents. Many, many such incidents. One, I mentioned of course is this story of one of my very dear Japanese monk teacher Reverend Sasaki and the conversation with him, the way he lived his life that at times were very puzzling to me and not by the book, which made me recognize whose book, you know, whose book is it that we want to live by. Buddha gave guidelines but are those guidelines still useful if they are simply fabricating more ego rather than dismantling the ego. So, those are the things that years later you come to recognize. You are lucky if there is an instant recognition of certain shortfalls, it's literally like the light bulb going on, but sometimes the light bulbs take time because you have to go through those experiences because at times even if the light bulbs go on meaning you have that insight, it's not that you take ownership of the insight, the insight is not embedded in your mind stream, it doesn't change anything and it's years later that that insight might push you in certain ways that it changes things. So, there are many things like that. Mother Teresa, a simple questioning of you have read a lot about compassion, you have meditated on compassion, how about manifesting it? Simple thing but very to the point it was there but it was a lesson that has changed my entire perspective on how I approach life altogether.

DJ: Wow! Another theme I wanted to understand from you Venerable is this notion of building self-awareness. How do you think about the notion of self-awareness and how do we as human beings widen our self-awareness and reduce our blind spots? What are some of the things that you would like to share with us in that context?

TP: I think first thing is to recognize that self-awareness is not a religious enterprise. It's a fundamentally, as I have mentioned in the book as well that all humans are contemplatives by nature. You don't need to have a religious or a spiritual orientation to be that to do that. And so, when we speak of self-awareness, it's a simple desire to better understand our own selves, to better understand our own mental disposition, behavioural dispositions and starting with that. And then, you build this idea of self-awareness in a manner that deeply informs you about your own biases, about your own emotional landscapes, about your own chains and fetters that are not allowing you to grow. Then next level this self-awareness informs you about relational awareness

meaning how do you relate to one another, because we are social creatures but there are ways of unhealthy relationships and then there are ways of healthy relationships. And if we don't explore this sense of self-awareness, then we are tied into this narrative of just being consumers. We never look beyond transactional relationships. We may label it as loving relationship and caring relationship but what is actually driving it is simple sense of transactions. What can this person do for me? I am willing to do this for this person but what can this person give in return? And so, this idea that can we ever think beyond that, because if we cannot think beyond that then we are not fulfilling the aspect of human evolution. How do you even continue having transactional relationship with nature at large by destroying the ecosystem, because unless and until we understand the beauty of non-transactional relationships, which is rooted in this expansive idea of self-awareness, we are trapped, we are curbing our own growth, it's like a self-sabotage. So, I don't see a choice, you see, either you pursue self-awareness or your self-sabotage. There's nothing in the middle.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This is your host Deepak Jayaraman here. Talking about self-awareness, I had an opportunity to speak to Tasha Eurich (TE), one of the leading thinkers and researchers in the area of Self-Awareness.

TE: "the reason I call it them meta skill and this is really important is that particularly in the work place our self-awareness to going to set that upper limit for our success. In other words, you know think about the best communicator you know or the best leader you know or the person who is just the most effective on a long term basis they are only as successful as they are self-aware because if we are not able to see our self clearly we can't come from a place values based behaviour we can't question our assumptions, we can't identify how we are impacting others and change our approach if we need to so I really see it is kind of the foundational skill not just to be successful at work but really to be someone lives meaningful, successful and drawable life."

DJ: She speaks about two types of self-awareness –internal self-awareness (which is about reflection, mindfulness and other things we do on our own, the other is external self-awareness which she says is often orthogonal to what we gather through internal self-awareness"

Do tune into my conversation with Tasha Eurich or look up the Curated Playlist on Self-awareness if this is of interest. You could go to playtopotential.com and find these resources. Let's now get back to my conversation with Venerable Tenzin Priyadarshi. Let's now get back to my conversation with Venerable Tenzin Priyadarshi.

DJ: And how does, how does, I guess, you could talk for hours and days about how we do it but for somebody who is trying to pursue self-awareness, one of the pieces I am beginning to become aware of is that there are two parts to it. One is about reflecting and understanding yourself better and the other is also there's an element of gathering feedback from the world around you and opening up blind spots. How do you think about widening the self-awareness? What are some of...

TP: That's a great question. I mean first thing is yes feedback mechanism is useful but seek feedback from people whom you trust, don't see seek feedback from people that are simply flattering in nature or people are just sort of giving you blind compliments in some ways. That's not feedback, that's just flattery. So, having a group of trusted individuals around you and there's a whole notion of spiritual friendship that I refer to in the book with this idea of virtuous friends, meaning that these may not necessarily be people that you want to watch a movie with or seek to do entertaining things but these are individuals that you might want to do a nature walk with or have a conversation with. So, having those circles of friends is important. The second thing is that when I say that you have to

take inventory of already what's there in the mind's landscape meaning your emotional dispositions, your behavioural dispositions and so on, recognizing them is just the beginning of things. You recognize them and then you have to understand which one of these are actually conducive to my sense of well-being. Because what often times happens is if we deeply believe that anger is what empowers me and therefore it is good for my well-being, we never let go off anger, in fact, we find every opportunity we get to manifest the sense of rage, to manifest the sense of anger. So, there is this deep kind of inquiry that goes as to is it truly conducive to my sense of well-being and well-being of people around me? If not, how do I begin reducing it or substituting it with some other framework, with some other value, some other emotional state that I believe would be much more useful. And then you start embarking on little experiments to do that. And little experiments are helpful; as I said that when we used to run programs for business schools right after the financial meltdown, nobody in the audience would raise their hand and say I am not a kind human being. Everybody believes they are the kindest people on the planet, right? But when you start to sort of go into this mode of inquiry, when was the last time you enacted kindness towards whom? What's the frequency with which you manifest kindness? So, those are sort of practical experiments by which we can start moving in those particular kinds of directions. Bias is a big thing today. How we perceive the other? And there is a lot of cultural conditioning, religious conditioning that goes around it. But even for a moment to say, what if I was in their shoes? What if my religion was different? What if my cast was different? What if my economic status financial status was different? So, these are the things that you fundamentally sort of bring in to your sphere of awareness to start moving things around, you never become comfortable, you never become complacent.

DJ: Got it. I know we have another 5-10 minutes to wrap up Venerable. But moving to something that's here and now, Covid-19 that's sort of gripping the world. In one of... as I was researching for this conversation, in one of the conversations you use the term Covid-19 at some level is a timeout that mother nature has given human beings and we have been all sent to our rooms to have a think about how we are leading our lives and I thought that's such a profound way of framing what's going on. How should we as human beings learn from Covid-19?

TP: You know, again, there are two ways around it. One way is to say there's a profound learning that can happen in this. We have learnt for better or worse to disrupt our lives meaning things like we took for granted around work, family, education all that is disrupted, right? So, one thing is basically to say okay, are there any new lessons that have been learnt in this thing? Do I begin to question that the old habits or the old mechanisms by which I was operating are they still useful sort of thing? And if that's the orientation then I think our learning is going to be rich. But if the disposition is such that oh, this was a painful experience, let's go back to the old normal. Again, old normal was no better, it was as miserable, in fact, not more miserable, but it was a familiar sense of misery so we are comfortable with it. So, those are the things that I think people need to learn from Covid-19, deeply recognize the sense of interconnectedness, the sense of interdependence that a pandemic teaches you that we don't wish to learn otherwise. The importance of a sense of solitude rather than loneliness as an outburst of the busy life that we live. Recognizing how important deep human engagements are rather than just being connected on social media and so on meaning they all have utilitarian functions, right? But these are the things that I think we need to think about and most importantly embracing uncertainty. You can never be fully prepared for your life and that's the biggest assumption that we make.

DJ: And, as you see the world grappling with Covid-19 and some of the narratives you see in terms of how people are dealing with it, how people are talking about how others should deal with it, do you see one or two elements missing in the way you see, the way you are processing it?

TP: You know, every time there is a natural calamity, for a moment you see a sense of hopefulness in despair. And the hopefulness is that people show more empathy and you hope that that empathy is going to have a long-lasting effect, that it will change people's mind where they will begin to see the beauty of being empathetic towards each other. And that's one thing that I am beginning to feel, I shouldn't say sad about but in a sense that why can't humans be more empathetic towards one another? There are a lot of positive stories around Covid of nature coming back in more than one way, you hear about extraordinary stories of care, of sharing, of compassion, but at the same time, even wearing a mask has become a polarized political statement. And those are the things that is reflective of the world that we live in, society at large which is that amidst this chaos of information and misinformation and so on how do we reclaim the fundamental sense of being human, how do we reclaim the fundamental sense that we need to create a new kind of global tribe and it needs to be rooted in a sense of empathy, in a sense of compassion and if that is something that we can learn from this pandemic it will be a worthwhile lesson. And also, the sense of solitude I think is very, very important.

DJ: Got it. And as we wrap up Venerable, this podcast is titled Play to Potential. You have had such an extraordinary journey, what's the wisdom you want to leave the listeners with to help us play to our unique potential given all that you have experienced in life?

TP: I think it's a very apt title, it could have been a title of a spiritual book. Play to Potential, playing is not always very well defined. In that way, spiritual life is like jazz. You master a set of notes but there's a lot of improvisation that's needed, that's necessary, that happens. So, one is, to continue to explore and never cease what one's potential is but also to question the path that one takes. It's important to master a few things but still leave a sense of openness, a sense of openness for mystery for the unknown, for improvisation to happen.

DJ: Wonderful. Thank you so much for your time and wisdom Venerable. Real privilege and an honour to spend time with you.

TP: Thank you so very much, likewise, likewise.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Hope you found the conversation purposeful. Just a couple of things before we wrap up.

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Thank you for listening and look forward to having you at the next conversation at the podcast. Bye now.

End of transcription

Nugget from Rich Fernandez that is referenced: [Developing the meditation habit](#).

Nugget from Tasha Eurich that is referenced: [Self-awareness: Meta-skill of 21st century](#).

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Tenzin Priyadarshi - Nuggets

- 68.00 Tenzin Priyadarshi - The Full Conversation
- 68.01 Tenzin Priyadarshi - Notion of identity lessness

- 68.02 Tenzin Priyadarshi - Limitations of the rational mind
- 68.03 Tenzin Priyadarshi - Shaping one's journey
- 68.04 Tenzin Priyadarshi - Mindfulness is not a hack
- 68.05 Tenzin Priyadarshi - Deliberate practice of Spirituality
- 68.06 Tenzin Priyadarshi - Opening the aperture of learning
- 68.07 Tenzin Priyadarshi - Pursuing self-awareness
- 68.08 Tenzin Priyadarshi - Covid-19 - a time-out for humans

About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock human potential of senior executive's / leadership teams by working with them as an Executive Coach / Sounding Board / Transition Advisor. You can know more about his work [here](#).

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