

CONTENTS

Foreword	...	ix
Acknowledgments	...	xi
The big dreams in life	...	2
The long littleness of life	...	6
Evasion of first principles	...	14
Awakening in education	...	24
Resistance to awakening	...	34
Entrapment by the ego-self	...	52
The power of awareness	...	64
The lightness of being	...	76
The little things in life	...	88
About the author	...	100

FOREWORD

This is a ‘spiritual’ book with none of the jargon or technical terms that often scare away prospective readers from reading such books. This fact makes it special, and different from many other books on spirituality. Its main feature is that it is free from ‘impressive incomprehensibility’ and pedantry. Another special feature of this book is the highlighting of a higher dimension in education, which appears to be completely missing in the modern world, and which India was renowned for in ancient times.

Some people seem to believe that spiritual awakening is at variance with excellence in performance in the material world. The author of this book, Dr. Devdas Menon, by his personal example as a successful consultant and professor of structural engineering at IIT Madras, bears ample testimony to the fact that this is not so. All indications are that spirituality does improve the quality of whatever work is undertaken.

Dr. Menon is well-exposed to the various traditions of spirituality represented by Buddhism, Zen, Vedanta, Taoism, Christianity and Sufism, and has a special preference for the teachings of Ramana Maharshi,

Stop sleepwalking through life !

Chuang Tzu, J. Krishnamurti, Nisargadatta Maharaj, and now Eckhart Tolle. He has received guidance from some highly evolved persons, a fact that will be evident upon reading this book. As the focus of this book is not on the author, and not even on the contents of the book, but decisively on the reader – spirituality is about the subject, and not the object – it is not proper to write much more. The less said, the better.

Dr. Menon's brilliant and popular lectures, which I have attended during the past two decades, have been peppered with some of the ideas expressed herein. This book is an outcome of persuasion by many of his friends, including myself, to articulate his insights in a logical order and publish them in a popular book form, so that many more people may be benefited.

I consider it a special privilege to have been called upon to write this Foreword, and I thank him sincerely for this honor.

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I am grateful for the support given by my colleagues and students at IIT Madras, and other institutions in India and abroad.

Finally, I wish to express my love and gratitude to my parents, my teachers, and my dear wife, Roshni.

A young Apollo, golden-haired,
Stands dreaming on the brink of strife,
Magnificently unprepared,
For the long littleness of life.

Rupert Brooke

1

THE BIG DREAMS IN LIFE

“What is the *big dream* in your life?” I asked my class of undergraduate second year students at IIT Madras, a few years ago.

The ‘young Apollos’ gave me responses like: “*a genius the world will never forget*”, “*a world-famous academician*”, “*a billionaire in Silicon Valley*”, “*the CEO of a giant multinational company*”, etc. With the exception of a couple of responses, the ambitions of the majority were loud and clear. One student expressed it rather poetically: “*to have my name etched in gold in the shifting sands of time!*”



I went down memory lane, to some twenty-five years ago, and saw myself sitting in the same classroom at IIT Madras. The scene looked unbelievably the same. It seemed as though time stood still. The dreams seemed no different except, perhaps, that they were now being expressed more forcefully. These kids appeared less doubtful and more focused.

Like their seniors, most of them are headed for the United States, *the promised land*, and they know that nothing can stop them from achieving their ambitions. They believe that they are the brightest and the best in today's technology-driven world, and have good reason to do so. During the 2002 Golden Jubilee celebrations of the Indian Institutes of Technology (India's premier institutes of higher education), inaugurated by Bill Gates in California, the world came to know that "gaining admission to the IITs was more difficult than getting into the best Ivy League schools in the United States."

(Source: CBS News)



What happens when the big dreams get fulfilled? What happens when you become rich and famous? Will you attain an enduring state of fulfilment? Will you then be able to live happily ever after? Or, will there be something vital missing, something that you need to address now, when you are young and full of life? Is there not a deep truth in the saying of Jesus: "*For what does it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?*"

When I pose these basic questions to the students, they feel uncomfortable – but usually not sufficiently to seriously question their direction in life. The majority are too heavily programmed; one cannot really blame them for their strong

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sense of insecurity, discomfort, and inability to address the questions. There appears to be too much at stake in the rat race of life, and it takes considerable courage, even just to pause and reflect, especially when one has traveled far and got ahead in the race. It becomes even more difficult, if not impossible, as one grows older. The dreams of our brightest and best students are ones that have been consciously and unconsciously ingrained in them by social conditioning, by their parents and teachers. Their dreams are but a direct reflection of the prevailing materialistic world-view.

There is little in their education to persuade them to think otherwise. Everywhere, they see the extraordinary emphasis on competitive performance, on getting ahead of others. These kids have sweated it out to be way ahead of others. They, and the institutions that nurture them, are the leaders of the pack, the role models for the rest to emulate.



Is this the best our education has to offer today? Are we not completely evading certain key issues in life? Are we not leaving our young students “*magnificently unprepared, for the long littleness of life?*” as Rupert Brooke puts it so eloquently.

*Most people are asleep; they live asleep,
Marry asleep, breed children in their sleep,
And die in their sleep, without ever waking up,
Never understanding the loveliness of existence.*

Anthony de Mello

2

THE LONG LITTLENESS OF LIFE

The big dreams in life are actually few: getting through an entrance exam, securing a dream job, getting married, obtaining a 'green card', reaching the top of the ladder of success. These are but turning points in our life, which often signify the culmination of great struggles. Every accomplishment certainly brings us some sense of fulfilment but this, unfortunately, does not linger long. At no point can one stop, or even slow down, and feel: 'Yes, *at last, I have found enduring happiness.*'

The little day-to-day things are the ones that dominate our lives. More often than not, we get so caught up in our daily chores that we barely remember our big dreams. Life moves at a hectic pace and, although we are somehow kept busy throughout the day, we may have little to show by way of accomplishment, and this is a source of daily dissatisfaction. We complain of too many distractions that prevent us from focusing our energies productively. The moments of creativity that we may experience at work are, for most of us, too few and far between.



Our interactions with people at the workplace and at home are not always pleasant. Frustrations, irritations, jealousies and clashes recur all too frequently, and these leave scars in our minds. We tend to become suspicious of people, and freely pass mental judgments on everyone in sight. Conversely, we also become vulnerable to other people's opinions and judgments, although we may pretend not to care. Our state of mind is often completely at the mercy of circumstances, at the way other people behave or fail to behave. Even an innocuous or stray remark can expose the fragility of our sense of well-being.

I was told the other day of one such incident involving a middle-aged lady. It happened to be the lady's birthday, and she was really happy to be woken up by her husband in the morning with birthday wishes and flowers. In a happy mood, she went out for her usual morning walk. But her happiness proved to be short-lived when she ran into a neighbor, who remarked: "Hi! You've been walking like this for months together, but instead of losing weight, you seem to be putting on weight!" The poor lady cut short her walk, locked herself up in her room, wept for two hours, and remained depressed the whole day.

We all have different reasons to feel depressed, and what may seem trivial to one person can be very serious to another. The mind has its own mechanics, and it does not obey the cold logic of reason. Small, unconnected but disconcerting events may cause our anger or depression to accumulate quietly, and suddenly, we may take it all out

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on someone vulnerable, our reaction being totally out of proportion with the apparent cause.

When we are so susceptible to such little tremors in our daily lives, how much more vulnerable will we become when some really big crisis hits us!



Life, of course, is not always that bad. We do have our moments of fun, don't we? Unfortunately, we cannot cling to them for long. It is probably more correct to state that, more often than not, we are neither happy nor sad. However, that intermediate state is frequently marked by listlessness, boredom or unease. I recall a very perceptive description of this mental state by a former student: "There is a deep sense of insecurity, a kind of nagging fear, that keeps popping up every now and then, although we do our very best to cover it up." One common way of covering it up is by continually engaging in some activity or other, even if it is routine and monotonous. We end up, consciously or unconsciously, doing all kinds of daily tasks, none of which may enthuse us. The drudgery of doing something mundane is often decidedly preferable to not doing anything at all. But even while engaging in physical activity, our minds are rarely focused on the job at hand. The mind is like a monkey, always distracted and disturbed.

Have we not been warned: ‘an idle mind is a devil’s workshop’? When there is nothing to do, and no company to gossip with, we tend to fidget. We crave for some distraction or the other. The TV remote and the cell phone prove to be handy instruments that relieve us somewhat from our boredom. We often need something really sensational, like an action-packed movie, to feel a sense of aliveness.



We human beings have the dubious distinction of undergoing untold suffering, including boredom, caused by our own minds. Look around you, and you can see everywhere that man, although endowed with more abilities than other living creatures, is ironically more discontent. Wise men in the past have suggested that this discontentment is nature’s way of saying to the intelligent human being, “*something’s wrong with you*” and, thereby, enabling one to awaken to a higher level of consciousness. But very rarely do we view life with this spirit of learning. It is very difficult for the ‘normal’ person to believe that the problem, if any, lies in him or her, and not in others or in the external circumstances.

When we have suffered enough, or when we are lucky to gain a sudden insight, we may awaken to the truth and discover a deeper dimension to life – one that promises an incredible freedom from the ‘long littleness of life’.

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Then, awakened, one can experience the *loveliness of existence* that Anthony de Mello refers to. One then becomes the ideal teacher and the ideal parent. But, first, one has to awaken. It is an awakening from a deep-rooted spiritual ignorance regarding one's very identity. A quiet joy then replaces the underlying unease.



There is a nice story on awakening or the lack of it, a story about the chicken and the eagle, made popular by Anthony de Mello. Once upon a time, there was an eagle's egg that somehow got lost and got mixed up with the eggs of a hen. The eggs hatched, and the eaglet grew up with a brood of chicks. The eaglet believed it was a chicken (although it did look rather awkward to other chickens), and it lived all its life doing what the other chickens did. It clucked and cackled, and scratched the earth for insects and worms. It could even fly up a few feet into the air, thrashing its wings about like the other chickens.

Many years later, on a bright cloudless day, the eagle-chicken saw a magnificent bird high above in the sky. With its wide wings fully spread out, the great bird glided effortlessly and majestically. Awed by this sight, the eagle-chicken asked "Who's that?" and a wise old hen replied, "*That's the eagle, the king of the birds. The great eagles live in the sky; but we chickens can live only on the earth.*" And so, the eagle that

believed it was a chicken, lived like one and eventually died like one, without ever realizing its true identity and potential.



Awakening does not figure in the list of big dreams in life for most of us – not yet, anyway. Many of those dreams are identifiable with whatever it is that causes envy in others, and awakening implies, among other things, an immediate freedom from this stupid obsession. Also, awakening is not something to be pursued in the distant future in some remote place. It is something to be realized here and now, in almost everything that we do.

If we do not choose to awaken, we will continue to sleepwalk through life.

*The birth of a man is the birth of his sorrow,
The longer he lives, the more stupid he becomes,
His thirst for survival and happiness in the future,
Prevents him from living in the present.*

Chuang Tzu