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The Aligned Mind | Ajay Piramal's faith in balance

We're all bound to hit turbulence sometime or the other, says philanthropist and chairperson of the Piramal Group of Industries, Ajay Piramal. Here's how to stay balanced in the midst of turmoil.

Note to readers: They hold the economy together but what holds them together? The Aligned Mind delves into the mental health and spiritual wellbeing of India's finest business minds. How they confront their challenges. What disciplines and practices keep them intellectually and emotionally agile. How they attain the mind-body-spirit integrity that keeps their organisations finely balanced on that cutting edge.



“Imagine that you are taking a flight. All you can do is put on your belt and take your seat. When it takes off, you have no control. When it's in the air, you have no control. Whether it goes through clouds, turbulence, bad weather or good

weather, you have no control. Some people who sit through the turbulence pray, some take the journey in fear, others enjoy a meal. That's the only thing you have in your control; how you take the journey." We are all on that journey some time or the other, says philanthropist and business leader, chairperson of the Piramal Group of Industries, Ajay Piramal. The only difference between is how we react in the face of it. This is the essential lesson of philosophy and how we internalise that philosophy is what determines our elation or mental burden.

When we compare ourselves with others, we imagine that some people are inured to the vicissitudes of life while we are left to struggle. However, no one is free of suffering. Not even Piramal, who has faced his own share of setbacks and challenges.

He was a 24-year-old visiting New York with his father, Gopikisan Piramal, when the latter suffered a heart attack and passed away within 30 seconds. "That just shows we can build everything in life but it just takes 30 seconds for it all to be finished. I am talking to you now but I don't know I may not be here 30 seconds later. We have to realise that. I may be the world's most powerful man, but I can go in moments." The trauma of coping with his father's sudden passing was compounded by a period of strife. The group was facing a textile strike when his brother, then the chairperson, was afflicted with cancer, which had few treatment options at that time. He, too, passed away within a few years.



“If you have ever lived with a cancer patient, it is a very trying time. There are sudden peaks and then suddenly things get worse. These things keep happening. His wife was 29 at the time, he had three kids, the youngest was 2 years old. I had a responsibility towards and a struggling business and that’s where we were. Now looking back, people say ‘overcoming that was such a big deal’, but I look back and think that time too passed. At the end of the day, you have to keep fighting and ultimately the time will change. There are so many such turbulent times. I can give you a hundred examples,” he says.

There is nobody who doesn’t go through these times Piramal reminds you. There is just an image that some people, whether actors, politicians or business leaders, remain disaffected. We deify public figures and strip them of their very human suffering. When, in fact, it is by walking through such times that we all gain our keenest lessons.

“All the greatest people have suffered so much. Even Siddhartha [Gautama, the Buddha], did not lead a simple life. Just see how many struggles they have had to go through. Lord Ram had to go through 14 years of exile, he had to be separated from his wife, she was kidnapped, he had to fight, he lost his kingdom. Take any example and I’ll show you there are problems. Jesus Christ, can you imagine being nailed alive to a cross? What more can be done to you? Look at Sita, kidnapped

and had to live among devils and demons. Krishna, born in a prison, separated from his birth mother, at a young age facing so many attacks.... Look at anybody.” This assumption that some people do not suffer is what makes us quick to praise as well as quick to blame, and we tear down as hastily as we build up. This gives us a false notion of others’ success and failure.

The only solution to navigating this, the turbulence of time as well as the blame and praise, the success and non-success, that we each do go through, is equanimity.

“Life has to have ups and downs. There is nobody who has not had their downs. There will be ups also. Philosophy teaches us that you have to be equanimous. You don’t get extra elated with success you don’t get too depressed. That’s what I have tried to follow, not always, but that is the attempt. The bad will pass, COVIDF-19 will also pass, but the good will also pass. We have to recognise that,” Piramal says. The difference between the person enjoying his meal on the turbulent flight and the man praying in fear is the knowledge that whatever will come to pass will come and pass.

The key to understanding this is also to know that anyone who seems successful today has also made mistakes, faced challenges and overcome obstacles.

“Looking in from the outside, you think everybody has made no mistakes and is perfect. There is no such thing. That’s why when you read history, biographies and autobiographies, you have to remember people only narrate the good parts. I have not known anybody who has not made big mistakes. There is nobody in the world who has not faced difficulties. There is nobody who has not faced challenges. You think Narendra Modi has not faced challenges? He has. You think Bill Gates has not faced challenges? He has. First, let’s remove that notion. Everybody has made mistakes but the philosophy is what is important.”



VERSES FROM THE **BHAGAVAD GITA**
& **UPANISHADS** PICKED BY
AJAY PIRAMAL
THAT HELP COPE WITH LIFE &
CHALLENGES WITH EQUANIMITY

‘Ananyāsh
chintayanto mān
ye janāh paryupāsate
teshān
nityābhiyuktānān
yoga-kshemam
vahāmyaham’

Chapter 9, Verse 22

There are those who always think of Me and engage in exclusive devotion to Me. To them, whose minds are always absorbed in Me, I provide what they lack and preserve what they already possess.

Mayi sarvāni
karmāni
sannyasyādhyātma-
chetasā
nirāshīr nirmamo
bhutvā yudhyasva
vigata-jvarah

Chapter 3, Verse 30

Performing all works as an offering unto me, constantly meditate on me as the Supreme. Become free from desire and selfishness, and with your mental grief departed, fight!

‘Karmāny-
evādhikāras te mā
phalehu kadāchana
mā karma-phala-
hetur bhūr mā te
sango ’stvakarmani’

Chapter 2, Verse 47

You have a right to perform your prescribed duties, but you are not entitled to the fruits of your actions. Never consider yourself to be the cause of the results of your activities, nor be attached to inaction.



What is the value of going through challenges with equanimity? It opens the door to other opportunities. “Nature, the universe, the Lord whatever you choose to call it, sees to it you get another door to open. At the time, another door opened and we went into pharmaceuticals. Ultimately, if we had been average in textiles, believe me we would have done nothing else and we would have remained average. But here, we got a chance to grow more.” This time of COVID-19, with lockdown restrictions, job loss and income loss, health expenses doesn’t look like it is a phase that has much to offer us, but he suggests we look closer. “We may not realise, it is a tough time for everybody, we have to spot the opportunity. Opportunities are strewn on the path around us, we have to grasp ours.”

The things that made a huge difference to his periods of struggle, and, he says, there have been many through the years, has been family support. “My family was around me. My wife and mother were very supportive. My kids were not yet born. Whoever was there was fully behind me. At such times you need the support. I also have to thank my parents for this faith that has been given to me but I also think it’s the blessing of a higher power.”

A story he repeats often, both to himself and others, is of the young boy in a dream who is walking on a beach of his life with God. There are two sets of footprints in the good times but in the bad, only one. The boy feels abandoned until God reveals to him, that he carried him through the bad times. “That is the basis of what I believe. Everything will pass,” Piramal says.

You would think that it is difficult to be both a philosopher and a pragmatic businessperson. Merging the two doesn’t just come easy to Piramal, who has written the book *Light Has Come to Me*, on the principles of the Gita in management, and composed an entire opera, *The Dance of Life*, he thrives on this the biggest merger of his life. How is it possible to combine the creative energies with the pragmatic ones?

“Arjuna was a fighter, the best archer in the world, in the prime of his youth who was tasked with killing his enemies. The Bhagavad Gita was spoken in the battlefield. It wasn't given just randomly so. It's not that you have to go to the Himalayas to get some revelation. That's why the Gita is taught. I'm a businessperson today but at home I am a parent, husband, son and brother. I have to live as a whole. I cannot isolate. You are also another person in society. It is one. It cannot be separate. That's why we believe our purpose and values are not separate from you. They are not practised only in the work environment. If we practice these in the home environment as well, we will be better individuals.” It's a principle, he says, he witnesses play out in the lives of his colleagues and employees and their children as well.

Faith is something Piramal hones on a daily basis. Even in his formidable collection of art, prized is the collection of granite sculptures by Adwaita Gadnaya, depicting the scenes of the Gita, placed within his line of sight as he works. He undertakes several personal mindful and spiritual practices but most precious to him is the process of *Shravana*, which is the listening to sacred texts, a form of both *bhakti*, devotion, and study.

“We undertake many practices but we also have two swamijis who come to teach us different philosophies, give us examples, teach us scriptures including the Gita and varied scriptural texts,” he says. A teacher also guides them through meditation. They also practice yoga under the Iyengar school.

His son, Anand, undertook a course of Vipassana when younger. Discipline across mind body and spirit is important, Piramal says. Balance in food and exercise along with mental and spiritual processes allow one to live in a balanced and holistic way.

The scriptural lessons of this balance also inform his insight into the energy and flow of money that have earned him the moniker 'India's Warren Buffet'. Piramal has a knack of navigating distressed industry areas, negotiating mergers and acquisitions, and making a strategic exit when the time is right.

"I go on the basis of our scriptures. Money is not a bad thing to have. It's important to understand that. A lot of people in the social sector or other sectors will say 'no, no, no', 'to have money or riches is bad thing'. No, it's not bad. Even to live well... I live well, I live better than 99.99% of the people and there is no harm in that. Because what is important is: how the money is earned and how you use that money for yourself and for society also."

He cites the *purusharthas*: Artha, Dharma, Kama, Moksha, Wealth, Morality, Enjoyment and Liberation. All are necessary for life and we make the mistake of assuming these are an either/or option.

"Artha is money and Kama is enjoyment. You have to engage with both, but you have to do it in a dharmic way. Some people try to separate them. If you want to enjoy wealth, it's great, but it may not be dharmic. Actually, all of it works together." How you earn your money, the intention you set behind it and how you distribute it is important to the integrity of wealth generation.

"The dharma of money is first how do you get the money. Means is as important as the end. I can be a smuggler, I can cheat people and make a lot of money. That's not dharmic. How it is procured? What is the intention behind the use of the money? How it is good for those who become shareholders of your wealth, for yourself for society?"

The quest to maintain this balance becomes the source of his philosophy for the Piramal group, "Doing well and doing good". It's not enough to simply do well, you have to do it in a good way. Again, it isn't an either/or option. "Doing well and

doing good means we have to perform well. If you don't perform well cannot do good. CSR work or social work has to be done well. There are many people who think just the act of doing social work is sufficient they cannot be asked to measure if they are doing it well. Doing well is also important. We also measure how you are contributing" he says. Since resources for doing good are often limited, we have to make the most of them and distribute them most efficiently and most productively. Mindfulness needs to be applied to the process of creation and the process of wealth distribution.

Of this is born the concept of trusteeship that informs his philanthropy. Among other ventures, the Piramal foundation funds the ISKCON Annamrita meal distribution system that launched Operation Karuna during the lockdown in collaboration with the Reliance Foundation and several others.

"The Gita talks about how you are really trustees. You have been given what you have been given, whether it is your wealth or your intelligence. The fact that you are a human being itself has been given to you. And your role is as a trustee means you have to make the best use of it for the benefit of all the beneficiaries."

A trustee, Piramal says, is comprised of four key concepts:

"The Settler, a person who forms a trust and puts some wealth or resources in that trust. So when you are born here, these are resources that are put by the Lord, by nature, whatever you call it, into this trust.

The second part of the trustee is his role. His role is to see that whatever the resources in the trust are used in the best way for the beneficiaries.

The third is understanding that we are each trustees in whatever capacity we may function. Each one of us is a trustee.

And fourth, who do we define as beneficiaries? These are our customers, employees, shareholders and society. So that is the role we have to play.”

Above all, we need empathy and compassion by which to fulfil these roles. In the field of mental health care, we’re only just opening up to preventative measures as with physical health care.

“Lots more needs to be done. Mental health is a relatively now recognised concept. When I was young, the son of one of my employees was going to be a psychiatrist and I wondered if he would have enough patients. But now, so many people I personally know are going through mental burdens and there is also less stigma to openly discussing it, which is a good thing. We realise that some things are passed down genetically or are caused due to biochemical changes and that’s not that person’s fault. Sometimes we don’t understand it and the treatment helps. Our challenge is to empathise, and we need much more awareness and sensitivity. It’s a big process to open up as individuals and society in this way and it needs to be done.”

Equanimity is also a great lesson for the social-media age, he points out, for those of us who get elated at likes and retweets and feel as though we are unworthy if we don’t get them. “People don’t like you, give you a thumbs down, it hits you. One has to be a little tougher in this. Philosophy and understanding is so important. You have to know what is important for you. Happiness will not come because someone said something good about me. Happiness is from within. All these things are external.”

There are two quests that define every human being, Piralal notes—the search for happiness and the avoidance of pain.

“Everything is these two. I cannot be happy externally only internally. All the paths, whichever you follow, say this and lead to the same truth”

To live a life that is creative, spiritually grounded, empathetic, to not lose out on our sensitivity and awareness, to keep in mind our roles as custodians and trustees, the benefit to our beneficiaries, whoever they may be, and to keep in mind the essential humanity and suffering of all beings, is to live in an aligned way in body, mind and spirit.

“Everything has to be balanced cannot be extreme on any one thing. In eat, sleep, everything. That is how it is. The Gita talks about balance.”

It’s an especially relevant message in these times of hardship and lack.

“What is we have to try our best, we have to work hard, we can’t give up. It is a difficult time. We have to do whatever is the best leave the result it will follow. We also have to recognise the results only come out of our actions today. Focus on the action, not on the result. Either we worry about the past or an imagined future, just focus on what you have to do today and the result will follow. And what follow will also pass. Nothing is ever so bad or so good that it won’t.”

(Gayatri Jayaraman is an author and counsellor)

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