

Six months into our marriage, [Guri](#) (my wife) and I left home to journey India by foot. Living on dollar a day, eating wherever food is offered, sleeping wherever a flat surface is found, ours was an unscripted spiritual pilgrimage to greet life in the farthest corners of our own consciousness. As we walked, we learned much about India, a lot about humanity and most about the stranger we call "I".

Below are entries in chronological order of our year in India. Some of the early ones are of our experiments in service prior to starting the walk on March 31, while some of the later ones are at a meditation retreat following our walk.

## Before the walk

# Fourth Floor Rain-bow

Jan 29, 2005

As we were moving out of our apartment, I blurted out: "Guri, do you know what you're doing? Selling everything, moving out of your home, saying goodbye to all your friends, letting go of a thriving organization ... all for what? For some unknown destination outside your comfort zone, for some unknown reason?"

I paused and then continued my tirade as Guri, Harinder and my mom were wrapping up the packing. "It's one thing to leave if you're dis-satisfied, lacking in some way, wanting adventures, feeling the need to make a difference in the world. But I have it all here. Why would I leave all this? Now, why exactly am I leaving again?"

They all thought I was joking, and started laughing. I mean, I was sort of joking but not really. You gotta be pretty crazy to do something like this without a rational reason.

For the next half hour, we wrapped up our packing as the rain outside intensified. Then it started pouring like I've never seen in Berkeley. And out of the nowhere, out came the sun.

And the most beautiful, full semi-circle rainbow across the Berkeley hills. From the fourth floor, we had a perfect front-row view of the most majestic rainbow that any of us had seen in our entire lives.

# Walls Must Come Down

Jan 31, 2005

Everywhere I turn, I see walls. Some tall walls, some short walls, some dividing walls, some illusionary walls. But they're everywhere. I can't see a situation, without building up my own wall, my own secure fence to protect what I have -- my judgements, my opinions, my hopes, my desires.

These dividers are really getting in my way now. I have peeked on the other side of the wall, and that's my real turf. In the past, I couldn't even see the walls; I would keep running into it and complain of the headaches. But my time has come.

Walls must come down.

While I'm at it, I want to have a word with the builder too. Poor guy has been working so hard all these years, that it's time to give him some real rest.

# Kachi Kapshida

Feb 1, 2005

Guri and I are leaving for India today. We want to use our hands to do crazy acts of kindness, our minds to profile everyday heroes and broadcast it over the world wide web, and our spirits to be true pilgrims

of life. Many others plan to join us and while much is unknown, we bow to all you and request your blessings ... that we may truly serve in our every waking moment.

A friend, serving in the army, wrote me a touching note that ended with a beautiful Korean phrase: 'Kachi Kapshida' -- we go together.

Always together ...

## Doors Keep Opening

Feb 1, 2005

"I'm sure you'll have many doors open for your like this," Jayeshbhai said as he opened the door to his 21st floor, penthouse-like home, overlooking all of Singapore.

Several years ago, I had met Jayeshbhai at 11PM in Bangalore. At the time, I didn't know he was the founder of Sony Ent. TV in Asia or that he was planning on committing his life to service at the age of 50, or that he was deeply interested in spirituality. But he was. :) A year later, he handed over ProPoor to CharityFocus and himself became an active CharityFocus volunteer.

Right as Guri and I entered Jayesh's house, fully jet lagged with droopy eyes, we were taken by a striking, life-size, 600 kilogram weighing idol of "Ganesh", an Indian diety.



If we are able to first see "God" behind every door that opens for us, I will ask for nothing else.

## President of Singapore

Feb 2, 2005

On a morning walk today, we chatted with the President of Singapore about CharityFocus, the India trip and of course, Singapore. :) It turns out that he goes on this walk on the beach, with just one unarmed bodyguard and is super friendly!

Singapore is an interesting country:

- Cars are 3x the US price, with all the duty. And every ten years, the government forces you to junk your car. So Singapore streets look really rich!
- Audio CD's are sold for \$2 on the streets. Probably pirated copies. :)
- For about \$500/month, you can have a live-in, 24x7 maid in the house from anywhere in the world.
- Speaking of 24x7, there's a 5 story, 3 block Indian mall that's open 24 hours a day. Just in case you want to buy jewelry at 3AM. :)

- It's true. Forget chewing gum, many streets impose \$500 fine if you bring food and drinks!
- Public transportation is totally awesome. Simple, clear UI that San Francisco should take serious lessons from.
- Thai coconuts. I wasn't impressed. :)
- 8% of Singaporeans are Indian, largely South Indian. And Tamil is one of the four national languages!
- Weather is humid, muggy and nothing to get jealous of.

Oh, and if you've arrived into town via Singapore Airlines, you're already in a good mood -- 60 on-demand movies, 216 full audio albums, lots of leg room, great food and awesome service. Now, if they only had Internet access. :)

## Going With The Flow

Feb 2, 2005

From Guri ... from January 31st ...

After months of much thought and consideration, we're finally off to our journey in India. We've moved out of our place and gotten rid of most of our belongings. We have no real plans. With the blessings of many, we'll go with the flow.

PapaUncle -- Nipun's Dad -- used an analogy couple of weeks ago that seems appropriate for the trip. During one of our meditation circles, he shared that life can either be like a mountain where your goal is to get to the top, or like a river that flows effortlessly into the direction that is most natural and eventually merges into the large ocean.

When you're climbing uphill, going to the mountaintop, there's a constant struggle but in the end you reach the top no matter which side you start from and see the entirety of the universe.

For me, the analogy of the river flowing along is naturally a more attractive one. In this journey, I hope to be like the river that flows along. I know we'll hit a few rocks along the way but if the current is strong even the largest rock feels like a mere pebble.

## Just Do It

Feb 2, 2005



At this restaurant, you don't get billed for your food. Pay what you like, their slogan reads. It sound unbelievable but there's a fully volunteer-run, high-end restaurant -- [Annalakshmi](#) -- where they trust that everyone will pay their fair share. And the food was awesome too!

A very kind lady, who has been there since Annalakshmi opened in Singapore 20 years ago, spoke with us for a bit. I asked why she does this, and she replied, "I don't know. It just fills my heart. I don't really have any expectations. I just do it."

## Prove Your Identity

Feb 4, 2005

On the way to Sikhism's holiest spot, the Golden Temple, we saw a sign outside a hotel:

"Prove your identity."

In a land of hundreds of languages and thousands of dialects, translations can be quite hilarious. But sometimes, deep too. :)

I can imagine the hotel clerk throwing a fit -- "Sir, please prove your identity."

"Ummm, I'm Nipun Mehta, age 29, 6 feet, 155 lbs. My driver's license says so. See, here."

"Anyone can make up a badge. Prove it!"

"Well, I have this social security number."

"That's just a number to me. Are you a number?"

"Ok, fine. I read in a quantam physics book once that we are a bunch of moving electrons forming at the speed of observation. So I'm really nothing."

"Huh? This is a hotel, not a physics class. Please prove your identity or I will have to throw you out."

"Who will throw me out?"

Smilingly, the Zen master opens the door.

## Service to Humanity

Feb 4, 2005

Spotted outside of the Golden Temple in Amritsar:



# A Dip Into Sikhism

Feb 5, 2005

About ten of us crowded in a car to head to the "Golden Temple", a temple of Sikhs that is truly made of gold. Hundreds of thousands of people from around the globe visit the temple every single day; some come to heal themselves, some come to pray, some come to thank God for abundance.

You first wash your feet -- in warm water, thank God! -- touch your head to the ground, and proceed through the front gate. In the center is the huge Golden Temple, surrounded by a big lake on all three sides and a walk on one of them.

We walk the periphery of the lake and come to a tree that has been there for hundreds of years. Papaji, Guri's grandfather, shares a story of how a leper went in and came out healed; some of your sins are said to be washed away if you take a dip in these Ganges of the Sikhs. In Western terminology, the river carries a powerful vibration that realigns your subtle vibrations.

The Guru Granth Sahib, Sikh scripture, asks all devotees to take a dip everytime they're there. And in the summer, everyone is more than willing. But this is c-c-cold winter. I was with nine Sikhs, and none of them were about to step in. Out of the thousands and thousands of people, few folks stepped in and a couple souls braved the chilling water to dive in!

Guri and I got our feet wet and I really wanted to jump in. Actually, I was about to jump in but then, I heard echoes of rational voices from behind us -- "It's cold," "You didn't bring an extra pair of clothes," "You'll get sick." Actually, they were right. So Guri and I stepped out.

Walking a few meters ahead, Papaji tells us that it isn't a big deal -- just ask for forgiveness and that you'll do it next time. He just casually mentioned it but that was the last straw for me. I immediately threw away my rational reservations and declared to everyone that I'm going in.

Instead of arguing against it, they all surprisingly came together as a team. One of the Aunts busts out a towel from her purse, Harjit and Sonu start strategizing about where the water would be warmest, Guri herself is nodding her head thinking, "Will he ever listen to me?" and Papaji watched on with a silent gaze ... all slightly proud of this crazy non-Sikh. :)

We somehow managed the logistics. With just a towel around my waist, I timidly walked in the water. C-c-c-cold. No doubt. All of a sudden, the water started looking dirty, I started visualizing pneumonia, and I admired the wisdom of the many devout Sikhs who were walking \*around\* the lake. :) But then again, if rationality could get the best of me, I would've responded to another 500 inspiring emails today.

I throw myself in, head first. Hoooya. Awesome.



Sikhs have always rolled through for me in my time of need. Harkirat Bassi, Harinderpal Deol, Sukhdeep Singh Chugh, and Gurinder Kaur Grewal: this dip was for you.

(P.S. I felt warm, energized and pumped-up for rest of the day. If you've ever at the Golden Temple, don't forget to take a dip.)

## Sat-Sri-Akal

Feb 6, 2005

I asked Goga-Mama, "So what's there to see in Punjab?" He said, without hesitation, "Hospitality."

Today, as I leave this small-city, large-village in Punjab, I have definitely experienced Punjab by that definition. To pick us up in Delhi, Kaka-Mama travelled eight hours one-way! We came home and he insisted on us using their master bedroom. Another Aunt hand-stitched a "Punjabi" outfit for Guri, within a day! Kuljit took me around town on his scooter and showed me all the spots -- including an Internet stop which took me 40 minutes to send TWO emails! 84-year-old Papaji took me on long walks across the fields and through the Gurudwara, explaining the culture and history (and farming). As we left, all family members took time off from their work to line up outside our car and wave heartfelt goodbyes.

Punjab is clean, beggars-free and full of green fields. Houses have no heaters, and the doors have no locks. There is no sense of privacy; people walk in and out of your house to use the restrooms. Nothing finishes or starts; adults can walk into your room and just say -- "aur" (translates to "And?") to just begin where you had left of. Kids are jovial, flying kites on the rooftops and playing games around each street corner.

I asked Guri's grandfather if he had time to join us for the Amritsar trip -- he looked at my ignorant face and said: "Time? There's no such thing as time. When we wake up, it's morning. When we go to sleep, it's night. That's it."

And the food! Hands down, the best Punjabi food I've ever had. Ever. Sarso-da-sag with fresh spinach from the fields, aloo-de-parathe (potato-stuffed-bread) with fresh, home-made makkhan (butter), and lots of curd and sweets with milk from family's own cows! Even more than the fresh taste, it is all served with love, as if every meal were your last.

It's simplicity at its best. No rush, no agenda, no complications. People are real, honest and sincere.

Some youngsters, though, don't understand the value of what they have. They don't like being hand-to-mouth, they want discipline, they want busy-ness, they want to accomplish things in life.

[Pause] Every flower blooms when the time is right.

## Strangers of Jaipur

Feb 7, 2005

Walking down the streets of Jaipur, we decided to check out the famous "Hawah Mahal" (Palace of the Winds). Not knowing where to go, and being in a premier tourist-rip-off place, we asked a policeman how to get there.

He proceeds to cross the street and drop us off all the way to the bus! Guri and I were both wondering what he might've wanted from us, but no, he was just sincerely helping us.

Then, we boarded the crowded bus and asked the guy next to me, in our broken Hindi, what stop to get off at. He turns around, with his bright big eyes, and says, "Bada chowk". Coincidentally, he was getting off at the same stop. On the 20 minute bus ride, I talked with this gentleman and learned that he had lived in Gujarat -- where I was born -- for 25 years.

We arrive at our destination stop and he insists on going out of his way to drop us off at the front of the palace. On the way, he hands me a card -- a little surprised, I thought, this guy is way too radiant to be pulling a sell on me. Turns out, the card is of the shop he used to work for in Surat which made "varakh" (the silver stuff on top of Indian sweets). He told me I could keep the card.

What am I going to be with this card? It doesn't even have a name of person on it. But I considered it his blessing and took the card. Maybe I'll even visit the shop someday.

## Driving A Saint

Feb 8, 2005

On top of a Jaipur hill, amidst sounds of birds and sights of peacocks, Guri and I sat in silence, on a concrete slab. It was right outside the "dhamma hall", where Viral was doing his last hour of meditation. Previously, he had been in full solitude and intense meditation for 20 continuous days.

As we sat there, a deep serenity arose and it was hard not be thankful to be in company of a sincere cultivator of truth, like Viral. Guri and I both started tearing and sniffing. My mom later told us that she had a very strong feeling of gratitude, at the same time.

When Viral came out, it was an awesome sight. A very clean, uncomplicated look with a half smile and a radiant glow. During the rickshaw ride home, Viral shared his experiential dharma through his words but largely his presence. In fact, I don't know what it was, but I kept on thinking about the rickshaw

driver ... that perhaps it wasn't an accident that he was company to this, that perhaps that seeds of dharma may ripen in him too, and that may he have the blessings to cultivate dharma.

I kept on feeling like crying but I'd look out of the rickshaw to distract myself, lest Viral and Guri think I'm weird. :)

What a gift, to have a brother like Viral.

## God's Mathematics

Feb 9, 2005

Ranbir Singh seemed like a self-made man. Born in the city of Krishna -- Mathura -- he enjoyed talking about God, service and death. "When we leave, we leave with nothing; the poor of the world actually have much more than the rich; the right action is to act without any concern for the fruits." It was all music to my ears. :)

But considering that we were on a 20 hour train ride from Jaipur to Bombay, our conversation also spanned a few random things. Like my \$6.43 watch from Walmart.

Ranbir liked my watch and later asked me how much it would be, if I shipped something to him from the United States. Turns out that one of his three sons would've loved it. I did my 43-rupees-to-a-dollar math and told him; he thought it was pretty affordable and was set to pay me for it. I told him he could just have it, and he refused, but our conversation was diverted somehow and we figured we'd get to it before getting off the train.

I was just saying enough to keep our conversation focused on dharma, and Ranbir was doing a fine job talking about it. :) Part way through, though, I started wondering about my watch and what I had offered. I just have a bad habit of spontaneously giving away things, but on second thought, I didn't really feel like parting with my watch; I mean, it had an alarm, it was super convenient, and it was actually kind of cool looking. So I made up various excuses about how Ranbir's son should really have a new watch and not mine.

Anyhow, the conversation went on and off. Guri, Viral and I were largely catching up. There was another retired uncle in our vicinity, who loved the *Work and Its Secret* pamphlet by Vivekananda that Viral gave him. It was a cool little corner of dharma, on this Jaipur Express train.

We all went to sleep, prepared to wake up before our 8AM arrival.

At about 5AM, I woke up wondering about my watch again. I mean, gee-whiz, here I am trying to be selfless and I can't even let go of a watch! It wasn't the watch, actually, but rather my mind making up all these reasons why this wasn't really an act of service. I closed my eyes, trying to go back to sleep.

Right then, I heard a click. Non-chalantly, I looked around to make sure no one was taking off with our luggage. :) It ends up that Ranbir had accidentally hit the night-light switch. Instead of some grumble, he mumbled "Hare Kishan" (Praise to Krishna) and went back to sleep.

I mean, who wakes up in the middle of the night, and grumbles God's name. Must be God's man.

After waking up, we all hurried to pack-up. Ranbir never brought up the watch but right as he was about to leave, I unstrapped the velcro off my wrists and handed him the watch. He smiled and was really thankful. To reciprocate the gift, he started to write down his address and telling me how if I'm ever in Jaipur, he would take full care of us in every which way.

In the spirit of service, I reminded him of our conversation about God's mathematics. I told Ranbir that we should just treat this as a human to human interaction and leave to "God" to take care of the rest. And in that sense, it was best not to exchange contact information.

A little shocked and a little choked up, Ranbir was a little speechless. But he knew what I saying, that we are all just instruments and that all he could really offer each other were kind blessings from the heart.

With baggage on his shoulders, Ranbir folded his hands for a silent prayer. With his eyes tilted upwards, he poetically said in Hindi, "Dear Lord, I pray that you make us meet at least once more in this lifetime. Dear Lord, I pray to you again that you make us meet at least once more in this lifetime."

And we parted, fully knowing "God" will take care of the mathematics just as we take care of the smiles.

## Fragrance of Love

Feb 10, 2005

"Who are we meeting?" Guri asked me. "This guy named Ashwin Trivedi." "Who's that?" "I don't really know. Friend of a friend." "Why are we meeting him?" "I don't really know." "What are we going to talk about?" "Well, I don't really know."

Guri looks to Viral, with a familiar smile, shaking her head. :) Two hours in a jam-packed, local Bombay train can be quite an experience, especially if you don't know whose house you are going to or why you are going there.

But that's business as usual around here. :)

As we sat down with Ashwinbhai, he asked us if we had any questions. Turns out, people go to him for answers.

It turns out, Ashwin-bhai is quite a personality. An unwilling mystic, you can even say. A very rational seeker of Truth, he had been everywhere, met tons of spiritual giants like J. Krishnamurti, Pandurang Shastri, and Osho, read many many books and lived through many experiments with Truth. Still unsatisfied, he was searching for an experiential understanding of "God". As is often the case, the answer was right under his nose -- his wife, who introduced him to "Bhai".

A spiritual teacher in a small village of Gujarat, Bhai was giving a discourse one day and his seventy-something year old finger points to Ashwinbhai, as he declares, "From this day, he will answer all your worldly questions. You can come to me for spiritual questions." Much to his surprise, Ashwinbhai didn't know how a skeptic like him could be given such a position. But from that day onwards, he boldly stepped up to be an instrument of service with some new faculties that he was now blessed with.

People go to Ashwinbhai with questions. So right as we sat down, he asked us if we have any questions. Guri, Viral and I silently stared at him. We didn't have any questions, nor did we know why we were there.

And so the conversation started. :) Within minutes, he started referencing personal experiences with saints we read and appreciated. Immediately, we could relate to his rational approach to spirituality. He narrated his own personal spiritual journey, with absolutely unbelievable -- and inspiring -- experiences. Every ten-twenty minutes, someone or another would come in but he continued with his story-telling session. One after another, his English-Gujarati-Hindi-mix stories kept him away from his busy schedule and kept Guri, Viral and I spellbound for almost two hours.

He said that our meeting was destined. (My guess is that he might say most things are destined :)). Nonetheless, one thing was clear: all of us were energized by this authentic "sat-sang" (meeting of hearts in dharma). When we met his wife, she confidently told us that we would meet again.

"Just remember, you haven't come to India. You were sent here," Ashwinbhai told us as we were about to leave. "God wants you to experience reality. The heavenly showers are pouring continuously but when there are hardships, it is not because God doesn't support you but because he wants to educate you." We asked for his blessings, but he said it wasn't his place to give us blessings; instead, he hugged us. He even made it a point to tell Guri that she was very pure from the inside.

Whenever asked about the "purpose of life", Ashwinbhai sums it up in one sentence: "Spread the fragrance of love throughout eternity."

## One Rupee In Change

Feb 11, 2005

Before heading to dinner in Andheri, a suburb of Bombay, I was told that the rickshaw fare would be 40 rupees.

Now, drivers of big-city, three-wheeled rickshaws are not typically known for their compassion. In fact, if they see out-of-town travellers, they'll try to scam them one way or another. And ego always hurts when you get ripped-off. :)

So this trip, I came prepared with a different mindset -- simply account for a 10% "tourist tax" and considering that there are dozens of drivers competing for each passenger, you almost don't mind. Ironically, though, we've only had good drivers in this trip. Not just good, half of them have even started discussing dharma with us. Really.

And going to Ghatkopar was no exception. At a crowded stop, a young girl extended her hands through the iron bars on the side of our rickshaw to ask for some money. After we refused, our rickshaw driver started a discourse on giving. :)

"Giving is good. Every human should give. But we should know how to give." Guri, Viral and I looked at each other with a "huh?" face. The rickshaw driver continued, "Most of these kids, they are trained by this one guy who keeps all the money. It's run like a business. All of us should give, but this is just not the right place to give."

A lesson in giving, from a random rickshaw-wala? Bring it on! He talked a bit more, before we reached our destination. "Kitna hooa?" I asked to inquire about the fare. "39 Rupees," he said. Just an honest, straight forward kind of guy.

Now, most people who get ripped off end up saying, "Well, you know, I don't mind paying extra if it was a good guy but I refuse to be cheated." But of course, when times are good, we become greedy and conveniently forget that vow. Unfortunately (or fortunately), I remembered this time.

I gave him 40 rupees, and he gave me a 1 rupee coin in return (most folks would just round up). From his conversation and just an intuitive sense, I knew this was a good guy. So I put the coin in my wallet, and took out a 100 rupee note.

"Bhaia, can you do me a favor?" "Han-ji," he replied courteously. "We were talking about art of giving. You seem to know how and where to give. Can you put this 100 rupees to good use somewhere?"

Most people would be flustered, but this guy, without hesitation, replied: "Give me your address and I'll make sure I get a receipt of where I gave." I didn't understand him at first, so he repeated it. I smiled and told him, "I trust you."

Of course, we are not walking millionaires that we can drop 100 rupee notes in random places. So on the way back, instead of taking a cab back from the train station to my aunt's place, we walked for a while. It was almost 1AM, I had to wake up 6AM the next day, but Guri, Viral and I still walked.

One rupee in change, turned into 100 rupees of good karma. What fortune!

## Gap Between Us and Vivekananda

Feb 13, 2005

Dilipbhai, who helped found Seva-Rural, was talking about Vivekananda today.

Among other things, he said, "Our problem is that we don't know things, we know about things." After a short pause, he continued, "To us, someone is LIKE a brother and someone is LIKE a mother; but to Vivekanand, everyone IS a brother and a mother. That's the gap between us and Vivekananda."

## Two Ladies For Two Minutes

Feb 14, 2005

When Prasad Kaipa invited me to speak at [Indian School of Business](#) -- the most prominent B-school in India -- in Hyderabad, on a one-day notice, I agreed without any good reason. It would mess up many other plans, but hey, plans are meant to be broken. :)

Considering that they were flying me into Hyderabad, without knowing me, I figured this must be a high budget college. And it was. With the who's who of the corporate world endorsing it, with faculty from Kellogg, Wharton and the likes, with an annual fee of 1.4 million rupees, ISB has its own reputation.

I don't really know who I am speaking to, or for that matter why I'm speaking there, but I just show up anyhow.

My guide at the college, gives me ten minutes of an introduction. I asked him, "What should I speak about?" He said, "Well, [Prasad](#) told us, 'Do anything to get him here. He can speak on anything he wants.'" Ok, that didn't help. I'm sure my guide had his doubts too; I mean, I have no accolades to my name, I was not dressed in fancy clothes, and I looked -- and acted -- like a kid. :)

I walk into the fancy classroom and give a talk. I only know one topic -- service -- so I spoke about it, in a business language. Although I was sleepy, I spoke my heart out. And it resonated. People asked me all kinds of questions, from finding balance in life to a transformative experience that rocked that my world to my personal economic situation. I don't know what I said, but the folks came up to me at the end of the talk to shake my hand, and some even had tears in their eyes as they said their thankyou's.

After a nice lunch, I left ISB within an hour or two. I felt good about being able to make it. On the Sahara Airlines flight back, I was trying to sleep but between the Subway sandwich and the flight music and the amply available newspapers, I stayed awake all the way through.

As we boarded off the plane, I got into the shuttle to head to the main terminal.

Right then, these two ladies from the plane came and stood next to me. I stared at them, as is normal in India :), for about 30 seconds. And then I was awestruck. They looked like my school principals from Kindergarten to 7th grade!

"Excuse me," I said. No response. I repeated, "Excuse me, are you Chandraben and Bhartiben?" A third lady, whom I hadn't seen but was the school secretary, said "Oh yes, hello." She recognized me and all of sudden, I recognized them.

Immediately, in my heart, there was a feeling of gratitude for the awesome-ness of life. I hadn't seen them since I left India, 18 years ago. But the well-rounded 24 subject -- horseback riding and knitting included -- education that they imparted through Amrit Jyoti was incredibly formative in my life. I tried to see them before, simply to express my gratitude, but couldn't. And here it was, a universe arranged appointment that no one can refuse.

When I asked them if they recognized me, they bluntly said, "Of course we do." They asked me where I was now and I told 'em, "America". Both of them were immaculately dressed, as always. Chandraben had a scarf on her head and I think she had lost her hair (hopefully, it wasn't a result of chemo therapy). It was odd, but they didn't make eye contact with me. Perhaps they get many old students bothering them on flight shuttles. :) Nonetheless, for me, it was a welcome home like none other.

You give with one hand, receive with another. Sooner or later, life comes a full circle.

## What are your plans in India?

Feb 15, 2005

He was one of the brightest students in his class at IIM. So everyone expected him to take high-flying jobs at multi-national companies. Instead, Venkat went out and started a holistic school in Ahmedabad.

After six years, the chairman of ICICI bank gives him 4 crores in funding and trusts him to "do something good" for India. And he does. Venkat ends up starting [GiveIndia.org](http://GiveIndia.org), an online donation portal for quality nonprofit organizations across India. Most recently, they also organized the first fundraising walk in Bombay; this year, participants raised 2.5 crore rupees with a mere 5% overhead!

So at our 7AM meeting, right before my 9AM flight to Hyderabad, I figured I better make up a good answer to Venkat's question: "What do you plan to do in India?"

- First, hands: connect directly with the grassroots villagers, with the poorest of the poor, to keep your heart alive with the real human connections. This will foster an intergrated approach to service.
- Second, head: create oppourtunities of service, the original CharityFocus mission. To do this, we want to create an empty container, a service Wikipedia of sorts, that allows anyone to post expressions, needs and other information and allows anyone to find that information easily.
- Third, heart: sacrifice the ego, awaken the heart. Walk from village to village, meditate, fast, and anything else that inspires you to be the change to the core of your being.

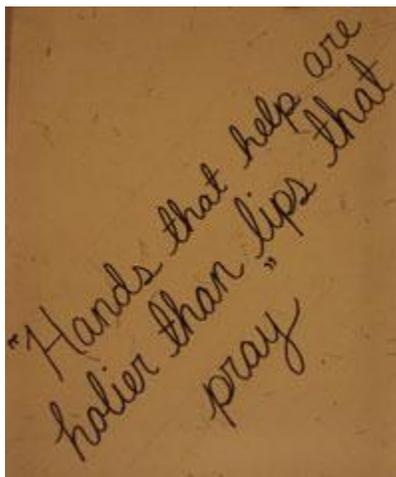
Combining all these three values can manifest tons of different "end products" like a stream of good news, a real-time service journey, and an online portal to collect and display service information. How all that manifests, remains to be seen. We'll find out, soon enough. :)

Venkat said he might even join us on the walk!

## Praying Lips, Helping Hands

Feb 17, 2005

As Guri and I entered our room, there a bag of goodies in our room on a little couch. The hand-made bag read:



# Vegetable Seller At Gandhi Ashram

Feb 19, 2005

No vacations. Life is open 7 days a week, 24 hours a day for Jayesh Patel. Whether he's sitting at the Gandhi Ashram or not, he is constantly serving. His philosophy is simple -- give everything to whatever comes up in the present moment. I mean, everything. No if-only's, no what-if's, no doubts. Just plain ol' compassion, every moment.

With the 700 million poor people in India, with a prime spot like the Gandhi Ashram where anyone can walk in anytime, you would think that he would run out of resources but he doesn't. Despite running 7 organizations that touch thousands of lives -- most prominently, [Manav Sadhna](#) that educates 7400 slum children every year -- he is never stressed, angry or disappointed. Jayeshbhai says that true service only knows love.

When a beggar (he would never call them that) comes to him to ask for money, he will gently pat their face and ask them how they are doing and invite them for a meal at the ashram; when he walks through the slums, almost everyone recognizes him as he hugs all the "untouchables"; when we showed up first at the Gandhi Ashram, he welcomed us with a huge line of kids who all high-fived us; when John showed him *The Tickle Bugs*, he called a publisher to translate it in Gujarati within two hours.

Whatever the cause, Jayeshbhai has the answer. In fact, it's the same answer everytime -- serve.

Some know him as Jayesh Patel who was born at the Gandhi Ashram, Guri thinks of him as the Godfather of Service, Peters calls him the Goodfather, John considers it a blessing just to witness "him". But I wanted to see him really tested. I mean really tested.

And so it happened, just as I was sitting next to him at the Gandhi Ashram.

A man in his mid-thirties walks in with a teary eyes and a weary face. A while back, Jayeshbhai had seen him selling vegetables on the streets; in random conversation, he gave him a card with his contact information and said that if he ever needed anything, he should find him at the Gandhi Ashram.

This illiterate man travelled a long way to find Jayeshbhai; everywhere, he would show Jayeshbhai's card and go from one place to another, until just now, when he found his destination.

His wife was dying of cancer. She needed three bottles of blood and three thousand rupees before the end of the day, to have a chance at an operation. He tried everything for the last eight days; and nothing was working. He couldn't even give his own blood since he was under 50 Kilograms in weight.

As an offering to "God", he hadn't had any food in the last entire week. When Jayeshbhai finds out, he first offers him some food. He declines, after repeated offers; his primary interest is his wife's health.

Quite honestly, I was still thinking -- how in the world can you trust this guy, how are you going to come up with three thousand rupees, and how exactly are you are going to help a dying patient. Instead Jayeshbhai tells him, "Don't worry, brother. We'll do everything we can to help your wife. Don't worry, and have some food. Will you?" He nods, somehow affirmed.

Almost immediately, Jayeshbhai passed around an empty container to the twenty-some odd folks in the room -- all doing their own things at the time -- and asked a kid to encourage others to contribute whatever he can. I anonymously put in practically everything I had in my wallet, Rs. 150. He asked someone else to open up an emergency stash that he keeps for such kindness related acts. And confidently looked at me and said in Gujarati, "Watch, it'll all work out just right."

Within ten-fifteen minutes, he had about 1140 rupees collected and three volunteers were ready to give their blood. Just like that. And here I'm still wondering if this is a legit case for kindness.

Then he cancelled his plans with bunch of us, for the night, and went to the hospital to comfort this vegetable seller and his wife. Next day, Jayeshbhai told us in his spirited yet calming tone: "See how God does his magic. One of my friends who is doctor called me last night, as I was going to the hospital, and he said that he would admit her for free at her hospital right away!"

The operation went on.

Unfortunately, the woman didn't survive. But the vegetable seller's spirit in humanity did survive.

Jayeshbhai donated the collected money to ensure a proper funeral for the unknown lady. And so ends another day in the life of a true karma yogi at the Gandhi Ashram.

## Work is Contractual; Effort is Personal

Feb 20, 2005

While checking my emails, I ran across [an interesting article](#) on work vs. effort. (Thanks, Pete!)

Punchline was this: work is contractual; effort is personal.

Volunteerism is all personal effort. So, for me, it's a no brainer that personal effort work is infinitely better than contractual work. But personal effort comes with baggage -- personal laziness and personal ego. Lot of volunteers slack off and those that don't are generally stuck in their egos; and the only way to counter that is a strong base of spirituality.

## Dancing Like No One Is Watching

Feb 21, 2005

I told 'em I wasn't going. But then, I woke up at 5:55AM and told Guri to waitup for me -- I was going. I even threw in an all day, nothing-except-water fast. :)

It was a field trip with the kids to Dakor, a holy spot for Krishna devotees. Then, the plan was to take a dip in a nearby river at Gatteswar and top it off with a water park at Ajwada-Nimeta!

Right as I was boarding the bus, I got an unexpected pat on the face, from one of the kids trying to find his seat.

But that was okay. He was blind, just like the other 50 kids on this field trip.

In Gandhinagar, Andha-Shala is a small blind school started by a Hindu and Muslim man, both blind themselves. Couple years ago, they started with 4 students and a strong message of communal harmony; today, they're growing steadily while staying true to their original spirit.

Every so often, a donor will come along and sponsor a field trip. This time, it was Premal (who incidentally has participated in several [CF events](#) and [Wednesdays](#)) who got a small grant from eBay to make this day happen.

Right as the "luxury" bus pulled the corner, you could see the kids peeping out from the school corridors and windows, listening to all the sounds. They were \*really\* excited to get this chance to take a field trip; some of them couldn't sleep the whole night!

As if they were leaving on a long trip, some of the kids brought all their valuables -- a hand bag full of stuff, a broken watch, a gift they had received a while back. These were not only blind, they were also poor. They didn't have much, but for today, they were also smiles!

We boarded the bus in a single file. And right as the bus started, one of the kids busted out his harmonium and a bunch of others started singing their hearts out. The day was off to solid start.

On the bus, our window was slightly busted, so Peters -- incidentally the only white guy on the bus :) -- and I tried to fix it. After seeing us struggle for three minutes, one of the blind students (maybe teachers), remarks confidently: "Let me try." Both of us looked at each other quizzically but responded with, "Alright." Almost effortlessly, he switched the order of the sliding windows and made our three minutes of labor look silly.

Being with the blind can really open your eyes.

I figured that when you travel with the blind, everything becomes slow and deliberate. But what I didn't figure is the power of our simple act of service.

We got off the bus at our first stop -- Dakor, a site that my grandmother would urge everyone to visit at least once in their life. Surprisingly, I was no longer a Gujarati-wanna-be with a cold, Peters was no longer an American with a red bandana, Guri was no longer a customer for the shopkeepers to target. Instead, we were instruments of service and by clearing the way, guiding us in the right direction, or saying a simple hello to the blind kids, they were inspired to participate. By mere observation, others connected with a natural impulse in themselves, to serve the needy.

Talk about the power of being the change.

As we entered the temple, the chief of the temple created space for us to go \*all\* the way to front -- a "darshan" that even my grandmother would be jealous of. :) When a few of us volunteers start vividly describing what we saw, nearby devotees tune in; when the kids chant Krishna 'bhajans', other locals join in; when we walk around the temple, random people smile with a huge "thank you" written all over it.

You almost feel like it's a privilege to be an instrument of service.

Rest of the day was equally awesome. The kids got their first chance to take a dip in a river! As if that weren't enough, we topped the day off with taking them on Great-America-like rides at a famous water park; also, their first-time-ever. And again, all onlookers participated. People would make way, all the ride operators would offer special support and tell us to go on the ride twice, and the park owners themselves offered free tickets for everyone! (Almost a 7000 ruppee donation).

Two young couples donated the dinner at a fancy place -- Rajwadu -- nearby; right as we were entering, they had a drummer playing "bhangra" music. We formed a border around the blind kids, and let 'em loose! Hooya. You could tell that some of them hadn't danced before, but they knew it didn't matter. This was their day and they went wild with joy.



Dance like no one is watching, live like there is no tomorrow.

## From Sweeper To Saint

Feb 22, 2005

Tap, tap, tap. I feel it on my shoulder, just as I was about to cry in admiration of life's majestic ways. It is the man in the seat next to mine, wanting to talk about God.

I tune in. After couple minutes, I turn around to look out the bus window next to my seat. Again, in a minute or two, I am about to cry. And again: tap, tap, tap. It is my neighbor, telling me something else about God. This happens a third time and then, there is no turning back. :)

A simple, unassuming, thin man, Vinod is talking exactly what I am thinking ... which is rather odd. To mess things up a bit, I bluntly ask him a bold yet tricky question:

"Have you actually seen God?"

Much to my surprise, he simply says, "Yes. Twice."

"Oh really?" Now, things were getting really interesting. He knew that 'God' is technically everywhere, in everyone and in everything. So how can you just see 'him' twice?

Then, Vinod describes some stories that leave me spellbound for the next twenty minutes. [While I would love to share it, a written description would not do it justice; so I will gloss over the details below.]

Vinod loves to sit in peace. Maybe we could call it meditation, but he doesn't label it. During one such time, he went to a quiet spot in a park and sat under a tree. He was sitting there, being with God, when two gentlemen came by and sat down in front of him. "They were dressed in nice, fancy clothes," Vinod added with an innocent smile.

They started talking about the only thing Vinod really knows -- God. During the course of the conversation, both of these men started crying. Vinod said he was speaking without even knowing or thinking about what he is saying. And then, as Vinod recalls, a third man came down and sat next to the two, although he never said a word.

The way Vinod was describing the encounter, I couldn't tell if these were super-human people or imaginary people or what. But nonetheless, for Vinod that experience and that exchange was God enough. And for me, just reliving that experience with him was powerful.

"What about the second time?" I ask, curiously.

Vinod then goes on to describe the first -- and the only -- time he went to a seven-day "katha" (spiritual discourse) on Ramayana. It is said that sincerity of prayers manifests God at these long prayer gatherings, and while some claim to "feel" it, almost no one can really claim to see it. Except, of course, Vinod.

"Everyone would crowd up to the front, but I saw him sitting towards the back of the room, in orange robes, shining bright and luminous, amidst the people. I couldn't take my eyes off him!" Vinod recalled. After a pause, he continued: "Most people are blind, though. I don't think they recognized or saw God sitting right there in front of them. And of course, it's ultimately everywhere but you have to have the eyes."

I asked if he has gone again to one of those prayers; he said he hadn't. "Why not?" I asked. "Circumstances," he replied without any emotion. "But God is everywhere, so it doesn't matter to me."

It turns out, Vinod is a janitor. He makes about \$50 per month, for a family of five. When he is not cleaning the floors, he is cleaning his mind.

As we were leaving, he said that he will never forget this day. I won't either, bro.



## Washing Clothes Samadhi

Feb 23, 2005

So, yesterday was the first time that I was wearing \*all\* hand-washed clothes.

When I was washing my clothes ...

- First thought: hail to laundry machines! This is crazy.
- Second thought: this is really inefficient. It's not a bad thing to do, but such a waste of time.
- Third thought: what I should do is figure a way to pay-forward a laundry machine to these guys.
- Fourth thought: you know, this is not so bad; but I should really simplify my clothes. Why do I have these fancy pockets and stuff?

- Fifth thought: what if I only had two pairs of clothes? Wear one, clean one. Easy, simple, no nonsense.

Twenty minutes later, I carried my clothes to the nearest sunshine.

# Pilgrimage To Full Moon

Feb 24, 2005

Two years ago, today, "mota-bapu" passed away. Jayeshbhai was telling me about his Dad's older brother -- to raise the family, he never married; he planted thousands of trees around, he loved animals, he treated anyone who came to his house as his own. You could say he was a monk.

As we were talking, we had an idea -- "Let's go out on the streets, find an old person, serve them, and seek his blessings." I added, "Let's go right now." "Maybe we can even visit Topovan, a nearby ashram," Jayeshbhai said as we gathered nearby friends for an impromptu pilgrimage. :)

Right around the corner of the house, the first man we encounter is a toothless, 90 year old guy with the most awesome smile. "What do you do?" we asked innocently. "Say God's name," he replied as if that was his profession.

As we were speaking to him, we smell another guy approaching. Literally. With tobacco-ridden teeth, he was drunk, smoking an almost-burned-out cigarette, holding a glass of hot tea in his left hand and snapping his fingers with the other, speaking random sentences.

Within a couple minutes of speaking to him, he motions the tea-stand owner to treat us all to tea. Drunk guy treating us to tea? What a beginning. :)

Very quickly, though, we realized this was an interesting drunk guy. One of his obvious character traits was that he never lies. When Jayeshbhai asked him if he drinks, he responded with a stern yes. He was open about all his bad habits, his bad company, his bad relations with others. But there was a sort of innocence to him; and a deep rooted kindness.

After about ten minutes of conversation, we wanted to move on, but this guy refused to leave us. He wanted us to visit his house. Jayeshbhai told him that we'll come tomorrow, but he was adamant -- "See, it's right there, right there is my house. Come, come." We eventually gave in and followed this man, unknown to us twenty minutes ago.

As he adjusted his glasses -- which didn't have the right prescription -- you could see his two charred teeth and a heartfelt glee as he took a little skip-step and led us to his home.

On the way there, he insists on taking us to his "mother's house", which turns out to be his temple. As drunk as he is, he takes off his slippers outside and start praying. Bringing his two hands together, he slapped them on his chest and then pointed it in the direction of the idol and said: "Please God, share you blessings with him." He does it again, for Jayeshbhai, who was bit further back, and Guri and Madhu who were a bit behind them. Then, almost resigned, he looks down and asks: "What else can I offer?"

I almost fell to tears, but fortunately, our friend returned to his comedy mode, right as we left the temple. He had this distinct habit of half-snapping his right hand's fingers as he spoke. It would crack us all up. :)

We went to his home, in the slums. We visited his family, saw his buffalo, saw the disrespect (and perhaps fear) with which he was treated. But our buddy didn't care. He took us to a nearby shop and insisted on buying us something (we got a mouth freshner).

When we told him that we wanted to go to "Tapovan", the ashram that was our initial intention, he proudly declared, "You are my friends, this is my community. I will take you to Tapovan."

Sure enough, he did. Since he was drunk, he couldn't enter (and he knew that) but he left us there and stood outside with two hands folded together in a prayerful goodbye. We will probably never see him again.

As if that wasn't enough, we were walking around the Jain school/ashram -- a nice, clean place in the middle of the slums -- and we realized that a swarm of kids had collected together. We asked what was going on and an onlooker said, "The leader of this lineage of Jain monks is passing through town. So today is a special talk by him."

Realizing the serendipity of everything thus far, we figured we'd sit down. A team of about 15-20 Jains "munis" walk through the front, as a senior disciple introduces the main speaker, their leader. I forget his name but he renounced when he was 16 and comes a rather strong lineage.

He largely spoke about merging action and wisdom. One without another is incomplete. To end his Gujarati talk, he gave an awesome story of a young kid born into very poor circumstances. Soon after his birth, he was orphaned and left to begging on the street.

One day, he finds himself in the forest and decides to just stay there, and live simply. Since he was a beggar, he was never allowed in the temples but when he saw a particular stone in the forest, he figured this is what temples must have. So he created his own little shrine, with all that he could find. Having nothing else to do in the forest, he would pray all day. As the story goes, he fell severely ill one day and as he was passing away, "Dear God, I don't know who you are, I don't know how to pray, I don't know what will happen next, but I am dying with a smile on my face." It is said this young kid attained much grace in his rebirth and eventually found freedom from all illusions.

We heard the talk with interest and as we left, we read a quote on one of the notice boards: "To be fully liberated, you have to be zero, not hero."

Quietly, we walk out of the ashram and the first thing we soak-in are the bright yellow full-moon rays, in all its majestic power.

Full moon, 2 year death anniversary, a blind intention to serve, an open ended walk. The night was still barely young but that's a story for another day.

# Heartless Intellectuals

Feb 25, 2005

*Dear Gandhi-ji, now that India has its freedom, what is your greatest fear?*

*Gandhi: Heartless intellectuals.*

# Lion and the Goat

Feb 26, 2005



Goggles. It used to be my favorite metaphor. If you wear green goggles, everything looks green.

While we were led by a [drunk driver](#), inspiration struck: let's walk 12 kilometers to visit a 'Vedanta' nun, day after tomorrow. Walk, so we can remove some of our goggles on the way. It's one thing to get in a car, make a visit, and zoom back. And quite another to walk in silence, struggle with the heat, become dehydrated and arrive without an appointment.

And so went.

Swami Samananda received us with her ultra-peaceful presence. She asked about us and without hesitation, responded to all our questions clearly and pragmatically. No matter how tired you were, the strength of her serenity would lift anyone up. Among other blessings, she gave us a story by [Anthony De Mello](#):

*While looking for food, a hungry young man sees a lion with prey. Under a nearby tree, he sees a goat starving for food. In a surprising move of kindness, the lion drops off some of his food for the hungry goat. Seeing this, the young man thinks to himself: "The Universe is amazing! If it provides for that goat, it will surely provide for me." He goes home and sits there, figuring that food will come to him. After a few days, a wise man drops by his home and remarks: "Fool, you have to be like the lion, not the goat. Get up and start giving!"*

# Be Seated!

Mar 1, 2005

"I like birds. They are spiritual masters for me, because they don't hoard. With infinite faith, they roam the vast skies and descend upon the earth to pick up a few grains. And off they go again. That's why I like birds," he declared.

Right then, a Cuckoo sings its morning melody. With a mischievous smile,



Balavdhut Maharaj looks to us and briefly looks to the sky -- without moving his head. We all crack up.

After our pilgrimage last morning, all five of our exhausted bodies decided to take a 1.5 hour bus trip to Matar. On the outset, it seemed like a bad idea. In hindsight, it seemed like a destined destination. My cousin, Shilpaben, had kindly hosted Mark and John during their first couple days in India. Deeply moved by their hospitality, they investigated the source of their unending inspiration. Turns out his name was Rangavdhut Maharaj and his successor Balavdhut Maharaj, who lived in Matar.

So all five of us went to Matar, a small village of Gujarat, to visit Balavdhut Maharaj and his Bal-ashram.

Neatly tucked away by the river, Bal-ashram is a place worth visiting. Apart from the obvious peace, the first thing you notice is the beautifully orchestrated plant life and the chaotically organized animal life (including ample peacocks).

Actually, we arrived very late. The festivities finished the day before but we went anyhow. Fortunately Shilapben and her mother were still there and they kindly gave us a tour of the place. Just as we were passing through one of the mud paths with our bare feet, we hear some whispers. It turns out that their teacher, Balavdhut Maharaj, was outside. He generally only comes out couple times a week, and according to the devotees, it is a divine privilege to be in his company.

We washed our feet outside and stepped in. Just as we went in, he first saw Mark and said, "You stay here. No need to go anywhere else." In his usual way, Mark cracks up and sits down. All of five of us sit down on the floor, as Bapji stayed seated on a veranda swing. Other disciples sit behind us, as Bapji continues: "Don't roam around from here to there. First find God. Then everything will become easy. Don't just build hospitals, and more efficient hospitals. Ask the harder question of why people get sick in the first place. Go to the deepest root."

Our conversation continued in all kinds of directions from nonviolence to God to is-this-all-a-dream. We'd ask a couple of questions and he would speak on it for a while, and even abruptly change topics. :) Although they were concepts all of us had heard before, it was nice to be reminded of them.

After about an hour, Bapji looks to us in an almost-intoxicated way and valiantly moves his index finger from his heart to the sky: "Ask for anything and I will grant it."

Wow. Anything? None of us knew what to say. He looked to me, in an almost challenging way. I smiled and blurted what was on my mind -- "Bapji, I just want your blessings that I find God." He stared at me for a bit, closed his eyes and then suddenly opened them to declare: "DONE."

Done? You mean, I can scratch one more thing off my todo list?!? I didn't know what to make of it, and I still don't. :)

He later told us we would find God, find abundant talents in unimaginable ways, and become very well recognized for our contributions. Interestingly enough, his predictions were similar to those of our [Bombay friend](#).

Bapji didn't want us to leave. "Your presence belongs in a place like this," he said. He asked his devotees to do whatever it takes to keep us there. While we had planned on leaving that night, we

stayed back.

That night, we learned more about the multi-acred ashram's curious practices. None of the leaves or fruits can be plucked from the huge trees; they are strictly for the 72 species of birds that are in abundance anywhere on the campus. If they have any left-over money after major events, they return it back to donor; if money is needed later, they trust that it'll come. The ashram doesn't do any "marketing"; if people are to come, they'll come. The cows are taken care of as if they were human ... so much so that vegan-John even had butter! The whole ashram was started when Rangavdhut Maharaj made a "sankalpa" -- strong determination -- under a tree of a then-baren land; years later, the owner of the land donated it in its entirety and subsequently, a major flood made the land incredibly fertile for vegetation.

The next morning, before we left, all of us met Bajji again. Among many things said, I especially remember this: "To be is God. To become is worldly. Be seated!"

Be seated. Be still and know.

## Global Pay-It-Forward?

Mar 2, 2005

Sitting on the cushions of the Gandhi Ashram is quite a feeling. Things just happen.

An old man, with a small, less-than-5-foot frame and glowing eyes, comes in and shares his art: four carefully detailed portraits of Gandhi, hand carved on plastic. He later told me it takes him 2 days to make just one of these 3x4 inch pieces.

Impressed by his art, but more so by his demeanor, I asked him if I can visit his workshop. "Oh yes, anytime," he said with a big smile. "But my house is kind of a mess, especially with a lot of animals around."

Modibhai is in dire need of financial support; yet if he sees animals in need, he keeps 'em in his house till necessary; if guests comes to his house, he greets them with abundant smiles; if someone requests a devotional art piece, he gets especially enthused. "One time, I did a piece for some Jain monks. They must've prayed to it millions of times by now," he said. "Right before I gave it, they even told me that I was going to get liberated from maya, in this birth." We both smiled.

Little by little, he wants to earn Rs. 7000 -- \$200 -- to create his life's masterpiece, a life-size piece on Gandhi. He says he'll be ready in couple of years.

If someone feels like contributing something to him, Paypal me. I'm thinking of smile-carding him. (Note: please don't give more than 10-20 bucks each, because otherwise I'll become rich :)).

# Nut Found. Bolt Missing.

Mar 3, 2005

Knock, knock. Who's there? Jayeshbhai, Anarben, and Gaurav.

At 8AM? Without a car? Their house is almost 2 hours away. We were all confused.

But they just came in with all kind of goodies and started making breakfast. Aftering fumbling around to become quickly presentable, we looked at them for the story. We figured it would a great story, but we didn't figure we'd be the subjects.

Last night, we held the Wednesday-style meditation at the Gandhi Ashram with about 30 folks. First-time ever at the ashram, but long-time overdue.

Most of the people hadn't meditated before; in fact, I was surprised that so many folks were willing to take on the challenge. Last week, I sat-out with fever, but this week I sat-in with an umph; after giving them a brief introduction, I told them straight: "If you still think this is going to be a waste of your time, please feel free to leave. But if you stay, to take on this experiment, do it with your whole heart."

After meditation, people shared a few powerful comments; then, we ate some hand-cooked 'dal-dhokli' in silence.

Now, some people were planning on leaving early but they didn't. Jayeshbhai and Anarben were two among them; their 8-year-old daughter, Sanskruti, was waiting at home.

Sure enough, right as they got home, Sanskruti was waiting to whip 'em into shape. :) Knowing her, I bet she demanded an answer in her cute voice: "Why are you so late again?"

They described the evening, and then got to talking about life in general. As Anarben was describing a few episodes, she started crying with a feeling of deep gratitude. True to his [Goodfather](#) philosophy of do-good-now, Jayeshbhai suggested that they should express their gratitude first thing in the morning.

So, they woke up at 6AM, walked in silence for 2 hours, picked up a few offerings of fruits and flavored Amul-milk, and knocked on our doors. These are important people; they don't just have time for things like this; they run 7 organizations, work with thousands of kids, have been visited by the likes to Clinton, Mandela, and the Dalai Lama. But still, they came. But still, they offered.

It was nothing fancy. We just saw them, like we do everyday. But if your heart is open, you truly feel blessed to be near such pure compassion.

Right before he leaves, Jayeshbhai pulls me to the corner and said, "I have something for you." As he put his hand in his pocket, he explained: "I prayed to God that I want to take something for Nipun and I prayed that I should find it on my walk. And this is what I found." He hands me a nut, as in a screw that takes a bolt on the other end to fasten in. Like a child, he cracks up and adds, "I'm sure that one day



you will find the bolt that will fasten this nut. I don't know what it means, but I know it means something."

Nut found. Grooves understood. Now searching for the right bolt. Fasten your seatbelt.

## Grapes From The Heart

Mar 4, 2005

On one of our silent mini-pilgrimage-esque walks, we ran into a fruit vendor family that was decorating their watermelon van, in front of their small house. In our brief interaction, we tried to make their day in every way possible. Guri takes this photo:

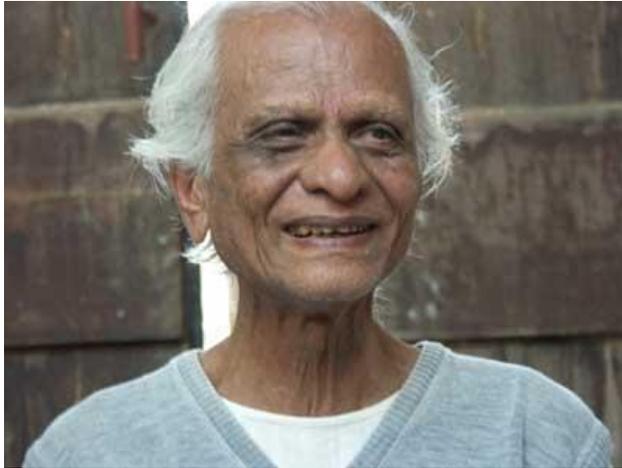


For this family of five, Rs. 100 (\$2) was the daily income. At the end of our interaction, the mom offers us a bunch of fresh grapes. When we tried to offer money, they quickly pushed our hand aside: "Sir, this is from our hearts. No money can come in between."

A bit later, a few kids came up to us begging for food; we fed them those grapes from the heart.

# A Tireless Stream

Mar 5, 2005



It was an unusual first question: "How long have you been doing this?" After being in complete awe of his work, within minutes, it's the only thing that came to mind. He smiled, then almost laughed and said, "Many lives."

At the time, I didn't know Kanti-kaka had received the highest honor in India -- Padmashree -- as a sculptor or that his 15 foot carvings were anonymously placed in places like Union Square, or that he had lived with the likes of Mahatma Gandhi and Vinoba Bhave.

All I knew was that I was standing in front of a simple, 80 year old saint, from whom I had much to learn.

To see inspiration, you first have to open your eyes. So we walk 2 hours to meet Kanti-kaka, as is now our habit. Journey people that we are, we also don't take any appointments; if it's meant to be, it will be.

And today was meant to be.

We walk into a simple home, with abundant chikoo trees and about two dozen peacocks freely roaming under them. Kanti-kaka's wife passed away many years ago and he had no kids, so he stayed with his sister in a simple home with an adjoining warehouse that served as his workshop.

First thing you notice is the strikingly high ceiling. Almost immediately after that, you see the 15 foot statues, lined up one after another ... each with its own unique expression. And then, you feel a deep sense of peace.

A thin, frail man with bright eyes, slowly walks up to us and greets us. Very quickly, we start sharing stories. From meditation to spirituality to anecdotes with legendary souls, Kanti-kaka is solid, inside and out. It's obvious why this man carries such a strong presence.

"If a child asks you, what's the purpose of life, what would you," I'm cut off as Kanti-kaka retorts: "Purpose is in the future. Why do you need a purpose? Whatever is in front of you is your purpose."

"You see, there's a story from the Upanishads. A young man comes back from college, thinking he knows it all. His father tells him to find a branch of a Banyan tree and find that tree's source. The son brings back a seed. The father then asks him to break open the seed and find its source. The son declares, 'There's nothing.' 'Well, son, it is from that nothing that everything has emerged. If you don't know that nothing, you don't know anything,' the Dad concludes."

All of us share a nice laugh.

"You have spent time with so many saints, so many have visited you, you have worked with so many others. Who have you benefited most from?" I asked. "There are many gurus, but very few sad-gurus. What all sad-gurus point to is your ultimate teacher -- your own soul."

I really felt like he was reflecting what was on my mind. So I keep on firing questions: "You have a meditation room. Do you meditate?" With a sagely yet innocent look, he says, "Yes, I love to meditate. I sit in silence 30-40 minutes everyday. But whenever you meditate, you have already made a compartment about what is non-meditation. Meditation has to be a constant stream for 24 hours. Real test of meditation is how you handle your life situations. If you have preferences, and you cannot accept life as it comes, you aren't meditating."

Clearly, to me, this man is speaking dharma.

Then Kanti-kaka describes a time when he travelled all the way to New York, only to be denied entry. He sat there for almost 18 hours at the airport, in the same spot. Eventually, he had to return back to India. Turns out, it was an error on their part. "Whatever the case, you have to have the ability to be still, to be able to tell yourself to sit down and be quiet," he added.

Anandamayi Ma, a famous India saint with millions of followers, comes to Kanti-kaka's house to find that 'quiet'. "Whenever I need peace, I will come here," she told him once. There's nothing special about the place, except that it's Kanti-kaka's lab. Every piece is an act of worship, an expression of his soul. Although he was tempted once, none of his work bears his name. He has no benefactors; everything, every single thing, he owns will be donated to the country after his death.

Before we left, I had to ask him the big-A question. "Kaka, what advice would you have for us?" He laughs, "Advice? I have no advice. How can I give advice? You have find your own answers, within the depths of your own soul. It's all there, waiting to be discovered."

There it is. Everything about Kaka's humility, wisdom, and dignity is summed up in one response.

On the side, Jayeshbhai ruffles the newspaper in his hands. We had kept Kaka too long; he was pumped-up, we were pumped-up but it was obvious that he needed rest. (Incidentally, Jayeshbhai was holding an article by Kantikaka: "Truth, God and me. Just like Water, Steam, and Ice.")

"Kaka, we had better go. You must be getting tired." With an ever-true smile, he concludes: "A stream never gets tired of flowing."

For a few moments, we got to be in that flow too.

# Ten Minutes at Ten PM

Mar 7, 2005

"Let's do something outrageously kind. Right now. And let's do it without money," I randomly yelled as five of us were walking down a busy Ahmedabad street at 10PM.

Within minutes, we notice a crew of women and men, in their 50s, sweeping the streets. Oh yeah, baby. Anjalee, Guri, Mark and I approach them spontaneously: "Can we give you a ten minute break?" Despite the initial what-in-the-world response, we snagged the brooms and started sweeping!

After a few quick lessons, we were in full effect.

Such a simple act, it was radical. Soon enough, a crowd of more than 50 folks circled us. Rickshaw drivers stopped with confused looks, late night college students crowded around with curiosity, families stopped by on their scooters with congratulatory remarks, nearby slum dwellers looked on with a half smile, and one onlooker even started to sweep with us!

Jayeshbhai took the sweepers to a nearby stall and treated all of them to a "lime soda". They do this everyday till 4AM, but today, they got a ten minute break from unexpected friends.

Ten minutes at 10 PM. Smiles all around.

# Just Another Day in Paradise

Mar 8, 2005

"Sahib, some money?" I hear a voice behind me, as we were waiting for food from a "chinese-punjabi" street restaurant. It's a young kid begging for some money.

Typically, people just wave their hand, shrug 'em off rudely or ignore them entirely. But I was sitting next to the Goodfather, so all bets are off. :)

Sure enough, Jayeshbhai invites him to dinner. 25 of us and a 6-7 year old boy off the street, sitting right next to me. For the next five minutes, the kid can't stop himself from jumping up and down, fidgeting, banging his fork on the plate. The shopkeepers generally hit these kind of kids, so they wouldn't hinder other business; but no one was going to kick him out today. And he knew it.

"What's your name?" we ask. "Dinesh," he says in a muffled voice.

We had ordered some soup, to start off our meals. Mine was tomato soup. Jayeshbhai takes a spoonful from my bowl and offers it to Dinesh. "What is this?" Dinesh asks. "Soup. Try it." The adventurous little soul dives right into it the soup spoon. And right away, he cringes and almost sprays some of it out. "This is horrible," he explained as we all laughed up a storm.

"I want those long, long noodles," he declares before we serve him soup again. "Those long, long

noodles." First he tells Jayeshbhai, then looks to me and repeat it and goes around our corner of the table repeating it until we inform the waiter! This kid is a royal riot. :)

When the food was served, Dinesh starts chowing down like there is no tomorrow. "Hang on, hang on," we yell together. "The food is really hot," I tried to explain. But no. Dinesh was gulping it all down in a hurry, as if it was going to run out.

And then the next item is served -- mushroom chowmein. We serve a bunch on Dinesh's plate. Dinesh had never seen mushrooms but he is curious to learn more. Putting his fork on the side, he decides to dig into the mushrooms with his own hands. With the funniest expression of disgust on his face, Dinesh looks around to see if anyone is looking. Since he didn't notice Anjalee and myself looking at him, he decides to toss those chopped mushrooms from his plate onto the ground.

This six year old was no longer a beggar. He was behaving like a six year old.

After the meal, Jayeshbhai asks him, "Did you like the food?" "Yes." "Then, don't beg anymore today, ok?" "Ok." And off he goes.

A couple minutes, we see him begging again. So Jayeshbhai asks him why and he honestly replies, "Sahib, it's for my mom." In a compassionate tone, Jayeshbhai tells him: "Don't worry. Your mom will have enough for today. You got out and play. Go, play." And off he goes again.

Soon after, a couple of us go out to hunt down some filtered water. On the way back, who do we see again? Dinesh himself. Begging again. When I see him, I pat him on the back and put my hand on his head. "Dinesh?" He started laughing, realizing his mistake.

He must've been about two and half feet tall. And I'm six feet. So I get on my knees, on the streets, and slouch so I can see him eye to eye.

"Dinesh, do you know who God is?" I mean, I myself didn't know the answer to that one, but what the heck. He nods his head. "Oh really. Who is it?" And Dinesh replies innocently, "Om Namoh Shivay."

"Can you do one thing with me?" I ask him hesitantly. "Yes," he says without a doubt. "Let's say 'aum' together. Repeat after me: Ommmmmmmm." By this time, he is on his own knees, half seated, hands folded improperly, head tilted to the sky, eyes 70% closed.

He repeats after me. Twice. Now, his eyes are fully closed. The third time, we chant "om" together.

As Phil Collins would say, just another day in paradise.

## Random Act of Prayer

Mar 9, 2005

"Yes, yes, let's definitely stop the car," Ishwar-kaka said.

A 94-year-old, homeopathic doctor was in the hospital, for a surgery. A very simple, devout and loving man, he was only able to have liquids for the past 15-20 days and everyone in his family was getting

worried about his future.

Dada, as people called him, had never taken allopathic medicine; this was his first time in the hospital. So when we were passing through that hospital, Ishwar-kaka said that we should stop no matter how late we are.

All dozen of us, in two cars, stopped.

It turns out that he was in the operation theatre, right when we walked in. Partially not knowing what to do, all of us and nearby staff members made a big circle in the lobby and prayed. After about five minutes, we departed in silence.

Not only was the operation successful, but right after it, Dada came out smilingly and said, "Bring me tea!" Everyone was thrilled. Much to shock of family members, he even had a meal!

Sometimes cars stop, even when you're late. Just so you can be on time.

## When Dirty, Shower.

Mar 10, 2005

"Let's go get 25 kids today," Jayeshbhai tells me in a pumped-up tone. The previous day, he brought home three poor kids from the streets after being moved to tears by their living conditions. Today, 25 more.

Now it's one thing to give money, hand out food, build websites, write stories, even go volunteer at an orphanage but who would want to pick up filthy kids off the streets and bring them home?

Apparently, Jayeshbhai. We created a connection in the morning, picked 'em in the afternoon, gave 'em nice showers and clothed them with new clothes, fed them, danced with them to live drums, and dropped 'em back home.

Below is the first time I gave a shower to someone else:



# Clockwise India

Mar 11, 2005

Greg Kennedy is an interesting guy. He travelled around the periphery of India, walking by day and railroading by night. Inspired by his experiences, he came back a second time to write a book, "Clockwise India."

On one of his nightly train rides, he heard a quote: "You have to work hard to get what you want, otherwise you will be forced to like what you get."

We laughed, because it was the exact of opposite of the quote I had just shared with him: "Saint is he who takes what is given, and gives what is taken."

# Ghostbusters!

Mar 12, 2005

Ouch! A woman threw a pot down in anger, and its side skinned my ankle. I was slightly bleeding and not-so-slightly hurting, but then I decided to stay equanimous. I smiled. After all, it was just before Wednesday meditation began. :)

Couple days back, three ladies working at the "Khakhra Center" saw a larger than life "ghost" in a dark room. Totally scared, one of them urinated. Another one ran out. And none of them could sleep that night.

So we thought we'd meditate there this Wednesday. About 35 folks meditated and most everyone felt really good about their meditation. After sharing some thoughts, we all ate dinner. And then, I had a bold idea.

"Let's go in the forbidden room," I declare. Practically all the ladies who work there during the day, take three steps back after hearing the suggestion. "Do you know what that thing was?" I ask them. All of them think it's a ghost, but no one knows anything about it. "Well, then, why assume it's negative? Why not go in there with love, instead of fear?"

I didn't really mean to appeal to their rationality, but something shifted. The woman who had urinated the earlier said she'd go down there with me. That's really all I was hoping for. But she manages to convince three of her friends too!

Very quickly, I ask around to see who else will go down with me. Mark and Sheetal jumped in. And all of us head down into the no-light room, down the stairs.

Right as you enter, you can almost taste the dirt in that room. There was old stuff lying around, that you inevitably will run into. We all get down, the woman next to me -- the one who urinated (sorry, I don't know her name :)) -- is shaking inside out. Holding her hand firmly, I tell her that it's all okay. "Can we all hold each other's hands and say aum?" I ask innocently. Everyone agrees. In the dark, all six-seven of us hold hands and breathe together. Aummmmm. Aummmmmmm. Auuuuu. And right as we

were about to finish the last one, one of the ladies next to Mark drops on the ground.

She faints. Everyone is sacred but no one screams. The woman next to me is shaking more than ever. We bring her up gradually to the main floor.

"Kamlaben, Kamalben," everyone whispers with tears rolling down. They think she might be possessed since she is shaking uncontrollably. She doesn't let any guy come near her, but allows me to hold her hand as I sit near her feet.

A car drops her home. All of us are confused. What this the right thing to do? Is everyone more scared now than before? They tell us not to tell anyone, because they're afraid of the community chit-chat.

It turns out that Kamlaben had a heart condition, and the chanting, combined with the dust and the fear, probably caused her to faint. Others looking on in confusion probably only added to the tension.

The next day, Mark and I went into that room to clean it up thoroughly. It was our excuse to reconnect with all the ladies that worked there. Our plan is to get it painted and in good shape. As we did that, lot of folks looked on to see if we would be okay going in and out of the room. We were. :) In fact, the lady who was most scared of going in the previous night, even came to help us move the junk out of that room. "I am no longer afraid of this room," she casually remarked. Huh? I didn't understand how that happened. But it's all good. :)

About Kamlaben, she is an interesting story. Various people went to visit her and check up on her. She was especially touched when Anarben, a founder of Manav Sadhna, visited her personally. It so happens that while she never complained about her living situation, her family of four living in a small room without any doors! Anarben immediately got doors added to her house and added a few other Anarben touches to it.

I'll keep checking up on Kamlaben, and while I don't know if she's cool with that room, I'm curious to find out.

I once told my friend, James O'dea: "That which doesn't end in love, keeps on repeating itself until it ends in love." Kamlaben was the same woman that nailed me on my ankle. If I wasn't deeply equanimous at that time, I'm quite certain I would've missed this opportunity to resolve past ties.

That which doesn't end in love, keeps on repeating itself until it ends in love.

## Just One Sentence

Mar 13, 2005

"I have never purchased anything in my life," she said.

Sometimes, just one sentence like that can knock you down. Especially if you realize that person saying that is an almost-80 year old Gandhian who has walked 40,000 kilometers trying to inspire the spirit of service.

[Nirmala Deshpande](#), largely known as "Didi", is a legend; she walked with Vinoba Bhave during the Bhoodan movement, people like Indira Gandhi used to follow her, Dalai Lama has never refused her invitation, President Musharaf of Pakistan gives her a huge welcome for talks on non-violence.

I knew I was going to meet her early on in my India trip. But I didn't know how. Well, it just so happens that four of us went to pick her up; she needed a pass for the next day's Dandi March and the booth at the airport was a chaos. As others are attempting to secure her pass, Nirmala-didi says that she wants to rest. We take her to the car. Soon, it's just me and her.

It turns out that everybody else got stuck for an hour, and while Nirmala-didi and I spent quality hour taking about dharma. She asked me what I was doing in India, and I told her whatever I knew. And she told me stories about how she has "made it a habit to never carry any money and trust the universe."

When you don't plan meetings, the universe does it for you. I love it!

## **Pilot Project**

# Searching For the Good

Mar 13, 2005

We're off. 20 of us. Starting at Kabirwad, day after Dandi March, March 13.

Searching for good, searching for God, or something like that.

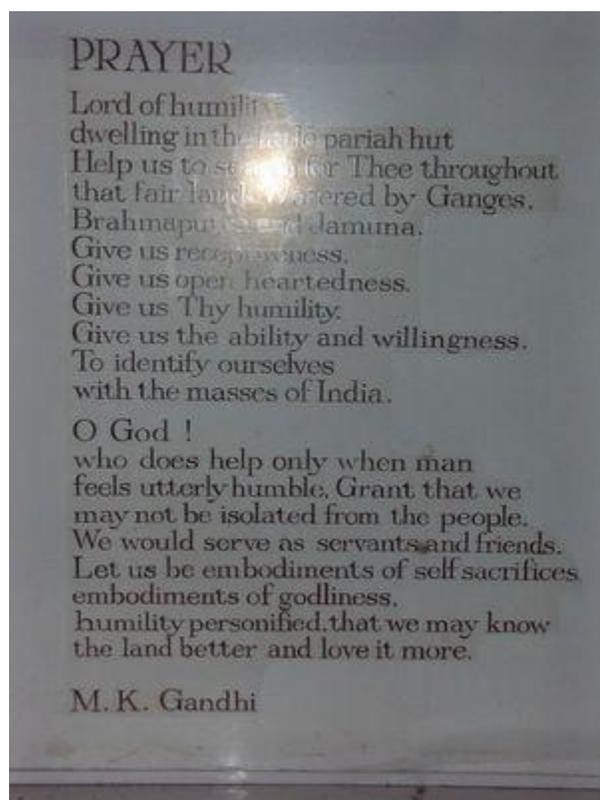
Whatever it is, I feel like I'm in the right place at the right time.

May all beings be happy!

P.S. If you want to see pictures, here's [Guri's blog](#).

Thursday, March 31, 2005

Starting on the Journey



Nipun and I woke up around 4:30 even though we didn't sleep until almost 1:00 'clock the night before. We were both excited and ready to go by 5:30 and although I told them not to wake up in the morning, several people got up to say goodbye and wish us well. Jayesh-bhai walked us to the Gandhi Ashram where we were starting our journey, while it was still dark with the moon above as the only other witness.

As we walked up the stairs of Gandhi's old house to pray, I had to hold back tears. This was it. Sitting in the place where Gandhi slept, I thought about the principles, with which he lived his life and how he must have felt before leaving for the Salt March, never to return back to this house again. We did the Sarva-dharma-prarthna, a beautiful prayer written by Vinoba Bhave. He took words significant to different religions and combined them together in a prayer to remind us of the interconnection between all faiths. Jayesh-bhai gave us his blessings and bid us farewell on our journey. Before leaving, he pointed out the prayer next to Gandhi's photo, which seemed perfect for our journey (The photo didn't come out well but the gist of the prayer is there, so I'm attaching it above).

Full of excitement and wonder we walked off like school children, not knowing what to expect from the days or even months ahead. As we walked through the streets of Ahmedabad with the moon still above us, the homeless on the streets were just starting to wake up. This was probably the most peaceful time on these busy streets and intersections. The sun was just starting to rise as we made our way out of the city. Parts of our walk in complete silence and others planning or rather wondering about the days to come. Exactly two months after leaving the U.S., we were leaving on a journey on foot, to search for the good in the world. All that we had with us were our basic necessities: three pairs of clothes, few toiletry items, towel, water bottle, a couple of first-aid items, map, and a journal. We also brought our tools of service: a laptop, camera, and an audio recorder between the two of us. Once we started walking, even this felt a little heavy at first. We are definitely going to have to get in shape real fast.

As we walked on the outskirts of the town, we realized how much of Ahmedabd we missed out by traveling in cars and rickshaws. We knew we were out of the city when people started giving us second looks. I guess a foreign looking guy and a girl walking with backpacks isn't all that common here. We decided we'd stop for five minutes every hour just to put our bags down and to stretch out. In a small village, there was a temple where we sat down for a minute only to be approached by a curious looking man wondering what we were doing. Nipun explained to him in Gujarati that we were walking to meet and interview people in India who were doing seva (service) related work and to highlight the good in the world. He insisted on buying some tea for us and chatted a bit longer. Thanking him for the tea and saying goodbye to couple other people who had gathered, we walked off and got onto a highway that would take us to Aslali, a total of about 18 km from the Gandhi Ashram. We were hoping to reach there before it got really hot in the afternoon, asking for directions every now and then just to make sure we were going the right way. At one point, it started getting really windy and the dust was blowing right into our eyes. It was the worst when trucks passed by but both of us were pretty balanced. Neither of us expected this to be easy.

We finally reached a beautiful Swami Narayan temple by the lake. Our hope was to spend the night here as one of our three stops before reaching Chikodara to interview Dr. Doshi. There was no one around so we decided to meditate for a while. At noon, someone came to close the temple and when we inquired about spending the night, he said there were no facilities. After asking a few more questions, he told us that there was a bigger temple about 3 km ahead that might have accommodations. Since we were tired and sore, we decided to stop for lunch before walking further. Worse comes to worst we can find a good

spot under a tree to sleep on. Luckily, we were saved from that for now since the larger temple had a room and dinner. We got there pretty late and since everyone takes the afternoon off and naps while it's hot, we couldn't help but do the same. The priest said there would be work later in the evening. We took the time out to clean-up, nap, and meditate. There wasn't too much to do in the evening and it was a little too late to connect with the villagers so we joined the evening chant and did a little sweeping at the temple and basically just tried to recover from the 22 km walk.

Let's see what tomorrow holds. =)

posted by guri mehta @ [1:44 AM](#)



## Onwards to Kabirwad

Mar 14, 2005



As soon as the Dalai Lama went there, he decided to sit in silence for four hours straight. When Peace Mother visited, she said she hadn't seen a place like that in India. It was from the same place, the "prayer ground" at the Gandhi Ashram, that we departed.

Thirty-forty friends gathered at 7AM to pray together and to share in each other's merits. For having just showed up to India, without a rhyme or a reason, it felt like an incredible blessing. As twenty of us walked out, others split up on two sides to chant "Vaishnav Jan" to bid us goodbye.

Our plan was to take a bus to Jadeshwar, and walk to Kabirwad. Why Kabirwad? As the story goes, two brothers were seeking enlightenment. In hopes of gaining wisdom and finding a guru, Sukl and Tirth went to Kashi by foot. While both of them learned a lot, they didn't find a teacher who exemplified the traits they were looking for. When they reached home, they hit up another game plan: serve anyone that comes to our place as if they were our teacher. They had also brought home a branch of banyan tree, which they planted in the ground. One day, a holy man walked into the grounds. Like they did with everyone else, they served him; when they washed his feet, they poured that water into the banyan branch. The next day, that branch bore some leaves and Sukl and Tirth had found their teacher. Today, that place is known as Kibarwad.

When I was trying to explain the new paradigm of a movement and the relevance of decentralization in this world, Jayeshbhai promptly summarized it -- "Just like a banyan tree." Indeed. Banyan tree starts with a root but when any of its branches hit the ground, they become roots too. In a short period, it's impossible to figure out the original root, and it's also very difficult to remove a banyan tree.

So we decided to start at Kabirwad. After our decision, we had various occurrences of Kabirwad in random ways, which further affirmed our place.

Sixteen of us walk to a local bus station. Some others drop us off in solidarity; couple of them cry with tears of joy. Three others are in a car with all our luggage, grains, cricket bats and things of the sort.

On the bus, I stand way up front; first thing I notice is an old man giving up his seat for a young man who was sitting on the bus floor, looking a little pale. With all the conversations, prayers, silence, and the spirit, everything feels right for me. Right place, right time, right thing.

Boarding the second bus is set to be a challenge. We ask the first bus and we had to board a second bus, which was set to be a difficult task. But the first bus we inquire in, is the right bus. Sitting in front of us, is Ranchod-bhai (it's one of Krishna's names too) with a nonstop smile. And he tells us that he is getting off at the same exact spot as us and he'll guide us to Kabirwad. "Krishna is dropping us off," I thought myself.

Everything just fits in perfectly.

Ranchod-bhai gives Jayeshbhai his Gujarati newspaper and Jayeshbhai reads me a story of a group of people who went out and picked trash as a symbol of spreading the good word. At the next "tea stop", John started picking up a few pieces of plastic from the shop where Mark was drinking his Mazaa and within minutes, all of us were down on the ground, picking up the bits. At first, the shop keepers were amused but when they saw the whole place cleaned up in five minutes, they were a bit ashamed that they didn't do it themselves.

The bus goes on. We arrive at Jadeshwar, 12 kilometers away from Kabirwad. Our plan is walk in the 33 degree Celsius heat, with our caps and bandanas on our heads. Life is good. :)

We make friends on the way; the way makes friends with us. At each kilometer, we learn new things; obvious things become obvious again. Incessant city horns are absent, no one is in a hurry to get anywhere, chirping of the birds is heard, kids are playing without a worry, farm are in full harvest.

A little tired and a lot excited, we arrive at Kabirward. To get to the banyan tree, we have to take a 10 Rupee boat ride across the holy Narmada river. And we do.

At arrival, we have three items to secure -- shower, food and sleep. The river is good enough to bathe in, and we find an open spot by the temple to sleep under. We didn't know about the food, but we figure some door will open.

Nothing is certain; but certainty is nothing anyhow.

## Sweet Sugar Cane Juice

Mar 15, 2005

"Hey, hey, hey," he yelled. Viral, Ish and Ami turn around and see a man coming at them with sugar cane juice. "Here, have some fresh juice," he declares.

It was an act of business that is welcome on any hot summer day. Except that this was an act of kindness. They tried to pay for it, but he wouldn't listen. So they eventually parted ways, with big smiles.

Next time Viral saw him, he treated him to tea. Not to be outdone, the "juice man" takes the next opportunity to bring a dozen glasses of sugar cane juice for a whole bunch of us, sitting under the Kabir banyan tree.

Viral gives me a look. Such kindness from a guy who made \$2 today?!? It was time for us to step it up. I go up to him with the intention of dropping a 100 rupee note on him. "How are you, Maheshbhai?" I ask him to start the conversation. Shortly thereafter, we become friends and we are talking about the spirit of service.

It was pretty clear that this wasn't a 100 rupee kind of guy. We would have to work a lot harder to make his day.

"I'm going home at 5PM today. Do you want to join me? I have my own boat and I can drop you back by night time and we'll have a great time doing sat-sang," Maheshbhai tells me, getting excited about his own idea. "Umm, yeah, ok," I speak while wondering if I should abandon the rest of the crew. "Can you fit two people in your boat?" I counter. "Oh yeah, just come, it'll be no problem," Maheshbhai spoke, as if still under the intoxication of his invitation.

Within a couple of minutes, Viral and I get ready to go. With four-five of his other vendor buddies, we load up the non-motorized, wooden boat. On the ride up, one kid is responsible just for taking out the water that enters the boat through a leak.

With a crate of Thumbs-up and Limica in our hands, I get off with Viral and follow Maheshbhai and the crew. We make it to his simple yet clean house and insist on sitting on the cow-dung based floor that

they are used to. Soon enough, all his neighbors and family come visit us with genuine warmth.

"How long have you been here?" I ask innocently. They all laugh as Maheshbhai says, "All my life. I was born here and I don't intend to go anywhere. I'm happy."

One story after another, conversations are lively ... probably because we met in the spirit of service. Before long, I gaffle down eight of the most awesome tasting 'bateka wada' (potato dumplings) with some very-sweet tea made from their own neighborhood buffalo milk. Maheshbhai shares stories of how he met his guru, while serving sugar cane juice at Kabirwad; how his younger brothers make fresh flower garlands and sell them for 5 Rupees each; and how his oldest brother died when a truck ran his over as he was selling those same garlands.

"Who is your God?" Maheshbhai ask Viral and I. "Everyone is God, isn't it?" I say. "Well, that's true but everyone has their favorites. For instance, I believe that my first God is my mother. And my Dad, although he's drunk all the time, is my second God." Wow.

Soon, it's time for prayers at a local temple.

Many from the neighborhood gather for the prayer and sit around the temple site. Since we are new, people start asking us what we are doing. "About twenty of us are at Kabirwad; we just cleaned it all up yesterday. We are on a pad-yatra (pilgrimage on foot) and your Kabirwad is our first stop. The universe has given us so much, so we want to give something back and do some seva," I say.

It's generally a challenge to connect with the context of random people, but these people were in tune with us. "Yeah, I saw you guys on the road the other day," one young kid says. "You guys should come and stay with us. We would love to host you," another offers. "Twenty people's food? That's no problem for us," a third person brainstorms. By the end, they were all pumped-up to host us. All in the spirit of service, no strings attached. Unfortunately, I had to tell them, "We are honored to hear of your hospitality. If God wills it, we'll come. There's twenty of us on the other side, so I'll have to talk to them before committing."

As we leave the temple, Maheshbhai takes us back inside and shows us a secret spot, a spot where water keeps on flowing from the ground. For them, it's a sign of God.

On the way out, I ram my head into the low-ceilinged temple bell. Dinnnnnggg! "Even unknowingly, I'm ringing the bell of God's door," I silently communicated with Viral. We both smiled.

At Maheshbhai's home, we talk a bit more. They talk about all the aspects of life, openly and without restraints. At one point, they even show us their cute family piggy bank where they put in a couple of saved rupees, here and there. I asked to see it and snuck in the hundred ruppee note that was destined for them. They didn't really know how much it was, and they never will.

When we left town, a bunch of ladies gather around us. I hear anonymous yells in the background: "Tomorrow night is here, tomorrow night is definitely here."

Five homies from the village come to drop us off in the boat. By this time, it is pitch dark in the river, especially with scarce electricity. With bright stars, a beautifully crescented moon, the sounds of the boat oars creating mini waves in a holy river, and the company of not-really-strangers, we arrive on the

other shore.

We didn't end up going there the next night, but my guess is that if our paths ever cross again, we'll recognize each other instantly. After all, they helped us go from one shore to another.

## Conversations With God

Mar 16, 2005

"God, why are you doing this to me?" she screams as the doctor applies some scary looking, purple antiseptic to her intense wounds. "God, why do I have to go through suffering?"

It's almost as if Rinku is having a conversation with God. Quite literally. And she is two years old. Jayeshbhai bursts into tears himself.

When we walked into Batha, a village near Kabirwad, we didn't know anyone nor did we know where we would stay. As we entered the town, the first person we met was Rinku's mom; within minutes, we investigated the screams from the back and found Rinku with a serious skin infection on her legs.

The next day, we stuff twenty village folks, including Rinku, into one Tata Sumo car and made a trip to a nearby hospital. It turns out that another kid was put in ICU, a kid who would've died had we not been at the hospital that day.

I have seen many buildings known as temples, but today I saw a true temple inside the heart of a 2 year old.

## Garland of Awareness

Mar 16, 2005

A group of four chanters sit down with us, under a Neem tree outside a temple. We start chanting. An radiant old man, a travelling monk, sits on a ledge at a distance.

Seeing him, I go sit next to him and say hello. He walks with one bag of belongings; in it is a picture of his teacher, that he found while walking. He never ask for anything; he eats whatever he gets. Like us, he plans to cross the river to go to Kabirwad on the other end. I offer to pay for his 10 Rupee boat fare, but he says, "Tomorrow, not today."

As he joined us for chanting, he said, "Mathura, Vrundavan are inside you. If you don't find it here, you won't find it there. It's all there in each breath. Every breath is garland of awareness."

Then he left, never to be seen again. I never got the chance to pay his boat fare.

# Give Me All Your Money!

Mar 17, 2005

Almost out of nowhere, he says: "How much money do you have on you?" I don't know if it was serious question or not. But the chief saint of this ashram repeats the question: "How much money do you have on you?"

"Some," I say somewhat timidly. "Well, you can't find God if you have money in your pocket," he declares emphatically. "Come, put all the money on this bench."

"Are you serious?" I ask with a comical smile on my face. No one has asked me such a ridiculous question before. I walked into this ashram by myself, five minutes ago. As I walking through the back, I noticed an old man dressed in all white. "What are you doing here?" he asked me, while still sitting on a plastic patio chair. "I came to get your blessings," I said while bowing down to touch his feet.

"When I was chanting here yesterday, I cried. So as I walking by today, I thought I should come and visit the ashram," I said. "Come, let's sit there. What are you doing here?" he asked again, this time in front of four five of his disciples, as we headed to a nearby bench.

"I am in search of Good, of God," I declared in a committed way. "About twenty of us are here, on the other side of the river, and we are walking through villages trying to serve in whatever ways we can -- cleaning the streets, playing with the kids, taking the sick to hospitals, doing bhajans with them at night, and really trying to find the good in each of them and inside each of us. We sleep on the ground, we bathe in the river and we rely on the people feeding us. Without a real plan, we live wherever we are."

Without reacting to my statement, he shared a few thoughts on God and some really awesome stories from the Ramayana about Shabri, Dhruv and Ram. "God is not on the outside. You have find him on the inside," he concluded.

And then he popped his drop-all-your-money question. Ironically, I had two conversations about the same topic earlier in the day and both times, I was myself trying to convince others that ultimately, if you want truly want to be-the-change, you have to trust.

The universe was speaking to me, no doubt.

"Well," I stall as I reach into my pocket to grab my wallet. I myself didn't know how much was in there. I open up my wallet and take out the three hundred ruppee notes in there.

"Looks like I have three hundred ruppee notes," I tell him as I drop all three of those notes on the bench.

Part of me thinks this to be a silly exercise, but the larger part of me understands this as a test from the universe. And there was no way I was going to flunk this one.

"Well, actually, I have this one ruppee coin and two ruppee coin too. Should I give those too?" I ask

innocently. "Yes, yes, everything," he says. I reach into my pocket, grab my wallet and turn those in too.

He smiles.

Then, all of a sudden, he turns to other side to some onlookers and disciples and speaks in an uncharacteristically loud tone: "You fools, look at this kid. You can't let go of anything but see this. And if you ask him for money, he won't give you anything. He only gave this to me, but he knows deep down inside that I don't care for this money, that I don't even touch me."

Couple of other guests come in. I request to leave his company. "Come again. Bring all your friends. You can stay here and eat here," Swamiji said while all of us were still under the influence of his pumped-up statements. "It's not in my hands, but I'll do my karma and pass on the invitation," knowing that tonight's plans were already set.

I bow down again, and he gives me three solid good-job-and-may-God-bless-you whacks on my back. :) It feels like a real blessing.

As I put my shoes on, he adds: "Don't be against money, though. If someone gives you money, nothing wrong with keeping it. But don't ask for anything. Take it all as God's prasad."

I smile and turn around. I raise both my hands up towards the sky and walk on.

## Temple Without an Idol

Mar 19, 2005

It is 1AM. After a big dinner at [sugarcane juiceman's](#) village, we need to cross a section of the Narmada river that is controlled by a few people. Interestingly enough, I had struck up a friendship with that boat driver, so I jump onto Jeeta's new scooter-like motorcycle to find him. Perhaps he'll hook us up big time.

After some effort, we find Mukesh engaged in a 24 hour chant at a local temple. He's been very inspired by our trip and never charges us for any boat rides (about Rs. 200 every time); and as I anticipated, he's game to take us across even at 1AM.

Mukesh grabs a couple buddies, and with Jeeta, they all leave to make some arrangements. I am told to stay "right here", which incidentally, is in front of a temple.

I'm a sucker for devotional chants. Considering that I don't even know what "God" is, this is a curious part of my personality that even I don't understand. But here I am, at 1AM, stuck in front of a temple. A group of villagers had comes together to do an all-night chant, to pray for someone in need.

And these villagers chant like there is no tomorrow. Just when you think that the skinny drummer would tire, or the lady singer would get winded, or the buffed-up "manjira" player would lose rhythm of the fast-pace chant, they kick it up to another level. The crowd joins in the rapture, in chorus, pumping everybody up even further.

It's hard not to walk in. So I take off my shoes and enter the small temple. At 1AM, it's easy to close your eyes, but I'm wide awake inside. Seeing the devotion of these simple village folks can make anyone come alive. They are enthralled that a non-villager would join them. With a prayerful heart, I am with them -- body, mind, and spirit -- for a few minutes.

As I leaving, a hefty old man approaches me. "Sir, sir, I don't know if I should say this. I feel very bad about it, but sir, I'm just doing my karma," he said in a very hesitant tone. "Kaka, we are in a place of God. We are all brothers. Tell me, what's on your mind," I say, comforting him by putting my hand on his back and leaning down so we are eye to eye.

"Sir, I borrowed a lot of money in trying to build this little temple. It's been something I've always wanted to do," he said. "Oh boy, a money ploy," I thought to myself.

"But as you can see, we don't have a 'murti'. I will pay back my debtors, but I don't want to borrow money to get my God's idol," he said as if he was ashamed. I turn around to see that indeed the temple had no idol, but just some flowers in it's place.

"Sir, can you help? You look like city-folk, so I thought I would ask. I'm just doing my karma. I hope I didn't make a mistake in asking you," he said in a very apologetic tone.

Moved by his humility, I said, "Well, do you know where to get it? how much would it cost?" He innocently says, "I don't really know. I hear that you can get it from Ambaji and maybe it cost a three, four thousand rupees." Ambaji was 500 kilometers away; clearly, you don't need to go there to get an idol. My sense was that he really didn't know.

Coincidentally, or not, this was same night I [gave away all my money](#). "I don't have any money, but I tell you what -- I will pray for you," I tell him. I really wanted to tell him more, but couldn't figure out a way to communicate it.

And then I saw his pack of cigarettes. "Kaka, but you have to pray with me. And for your prayer to be effective, you have to sacrifice your ego. You have to let go of something you like. Like your cigarettes. Will you try to reduce your smoking or perhaps stop it on days that you have these chants?" I ask him.

"Yes, yes," he says as if the idea had never struck him. "Promise?" I question him. "Yes, definitely," he adds with smile. I don't know if he'll stick with his promise but as the old man would say, I'm just doing my karma. :)

Jeeta is back, waiting on his motorcycle. So we hug and part ways, as I make a mental note of the exact location of this temple without an idol.

I plan to get an idol and drop it off anonymously, at that location. If you'd like to contribute in getting the idol, please PayPal me.

# Begging A Beggar

Mar 19, 2005

In one swoop, Deepak digs into his pocket and hands over 25 rupees.

Practically no one would look at him, but the [Goodfather](#) held him in his arms and learned that this 8-9 year old had polio in his left arm, a truck ran over his right leg, and he lost his parents when he was a toddler. He had no choice but to beg. While speaking with him, Jayeshbhai cut his nails and Jagatbhai ran to his bag to give him one of his own pair of his own clothes. Then, spontaneously, Jayeshbhai asked him, "I don't have any money to get to Nareshwar. Can you give me some money?"

This kid, without hesitation, hands him 25 rupees. It is his "earnings" of two whole days of standing out in the heat, getting rejections one after another, and pleading incessantly for an open heart. He had absolutely nothing else left. Still, he gave it all.

Jayeshbhai made it obvious that he wasn't giving the money back but still, Deepak insisted on donating all he had. Moved by his incredible generosity, Jayeshbhai asks him: "Why are you giving me everything you have?"

Deepak responds, "Because you spoke to me with love."

# The Village Life

Mar 23, 2005



We spent four days in Batha, a village that you can't get to by car and a village that had never seen any visitors. Like all our plans, this wasn't by our design. We just walked from Kabirwad and after a kilometer through the fields, we run into Batha.

We didn't know anyone, we didn't have any plans. Perhaps because of that, we experienced pure village life.

As we walk into Batha, in a single file line of 20 people, we greet people along the way and immediately keep an eye out for serving others -- like [Rinku](#). Some villagers offer us a small hut, as a natural part of playing host. Then they see us picking up plastic and cleaning the temple area, with all the brooms and hoes we carried with us, and another drunk villager gives us an "upgrade" to a larger hut (which is about the size of most kitchens in the US). Throughout the day, we pick up tons of plastic that's peppered throughout the village. And you'll be surprised how much you can learn from people's trash -- tobacco wrappers, plastic bags used for liquor, biscuit packaging. We interact with any and everyone, diagnose the ill patients with basic first-aid, attempt to rest in a fan-less room with 35 degree celsius heat, and play frisbee with the kids in the evening.

Ah, the good life.

By night time, it seems like half of the village knows us. Seeing five white faces amongst us is a real fancy for them; some of them have even heard of America and Canada but none of them have seen an airplane. We have a "bhajan" singing session, past 10PM, with about 50-60 villagers, outside the temple grounds.

With a shawl, some of us sleep on the cow-dung prepped ground while Gaurav gets a bullock cart as his bed. Mosquitoes are part of everyday life but Viral and Jayeshbhai's night included bed-bugs. While city folks buy alarm clocks that mimic rooster sounds, we wake up to loud "coook-de-cooooo" hymns in our ears. And Guri was a happy camper because each morning is inaugurated by tea with fresh goat milk from a goat standing next to the front porch.

Accumulation of wealth is accumulation of sin, Gandhi used to say. And one can easily imagine why Gandhi loved villages. Everything is in the present. Everything is fresh, including the daily-picked vegetables that you eat for lunch. Although everyone has to work seven days a week to survive, no one is in a rush. Not everyone is overflowing with compassion, not all are deeply religious, but there's a strong sense of natural humanity to all of them. Walking through the acres and acres of farm land, it's easy to find peace. Because of intermittent electricity and minimal infrastructure, you see the moon and stars hovering over you instead of light bulbs burning at 3AM.

In this particular village, everything is quite literally impermanent. Every monsoon, all their homes get washed away and they have to go to the other shore. As a result, they live simply, don't get attached to their material things as much, and ensure maximum recyclability. Using the fields as toilet is manure, burning waste generates heat that is used for cooking, ash is used as detergent, the coconut covers turn into dish scrubbers, the kitchen waste becomes compost, and so on.

This is not to say that Batha doesn't have problems. Many men are hopelessly drunk by night time. Even in a small village with 100 families, there is a section where the "poor" people that stay. Many homes have TV and some even get color TV, which introduces them to all kinds of soap-operas. Women aren't empowered. The youth isn't inspired to take any leadership; many of them feel "stuck" because they weren't educated or failed and dropped out. Surely, that's all there. But for all its intelligent models and cutting edge technologies, the cities problems seem far worse than the villages.

On our third day there, Jayeshbhai gave us an interesting assignment: go find your own food. That meant, connecting with a family, providing some value, and sharing a meal with them. Everyone did different things, some cheated :), some didn't eat. Maria and I went to farming, with two kids that I

met the previous night's "garba" dance; they were really good people, so I thought we'd connect.

Within one bullock cart ride, we became fast friends. Not only did we eat lunch with them, but as we left 20-year-old Munnabhai says, "Nipunbhai, I'm getting married next year. Will you be able to make it? I would love to have you there."

Just one afternoon with someone, and they love you like a brother.

We can learn a lot from our villages.

## Paraspar Devo Bhava

Mar 24, 2005

*Everyone is unloading the steamer but Ram-Tirth stands there without anything. A man comes up to him and says, "You have travelled all the way from India; don't you have any luggage?" "I don't have any luggage. I go wherever God takes me," Ram-Tirth responded boldly. "How did you get here?" "Someone gave me a ticket." "Where are you going to be?" "I don't know." "Do you know anyone here?" "Yes, I know one person. And that one person is you." Flat out stunned, that Mayor of San Francisco not only hosted Ram-Tirth but set up all his lecture and paid for his return trip, years later.*

Maybe it's me but wherever we go, I seem to see the same darn message: don't ask for anything, be a true instrument of the universe and watch the magic. And Nareshwar was no exception.

After walking for eight hours through two more-than-knee-deep rivers, gorgeous farms and super friendly people, 20 of our tired bodies and inspired souls arrive in the holy land of Rangavdhut Maharaj. When we entered the town, we didn't know anyone but by the end of the trip, we had become the talk of the town. At the age of 8, young Rangavdhut met his spiritual teacher whom he never physically met again. In his late teens, he joined Gandhi as a freedom fighter and then eventually went to the Himalayas in search of the good, err, I mean God. :) By his late twenties, his search ended under a Neem tree on the bank of the Narmada river. Inspired by Ram-Tirth, Rangavdhut Maharaj also never asked for anything; he took whatever came to him and he always had enough. After almost a dozen years in continuous meditation, people started flocking to him. Even the leaves of that Neem tree lost their bitterness and instead of growing up, the Neem branches touched the ground -- both anomalies are signs of humble reverance, devotees say.

You feel blessed to be in such a land. And when you do feel blessed, the immediate response is to serve and share the merit. Fortunately, in India, you don't have to look far to find volunteer opportunities. When we were assigned our two rooms (for twenty of us :)), we first cleaned those rooms. Next day, we cleaned the entire residential campus with our shovels and hoes that we were carrying and painted the walls with beautiful quotes and messages; we even named each of the rooms like "Non-violence," "Truth", "Service", and so on. At night, we swept the temple thoroughly and deep cleaned the dining hall floor -- first time ever, we were told -- that fed thousands of people every month. And on the third day, we whipped the monks quarters into shape and did some beach cleanup. Mark and John even cleaned up a bus stand, after inspired by a passerby who criticized this seemingly unsustainable work. Everywhere we went, we were on fire. Cleaning inside, cleaning outside, no

difference.

There was such a stark contrast between the before and after that everyone started talking: "Why are you doing this?" "This is amazing. How can I help?" "We have seen millions of people walk this land, but never people like you." A politician from Ahmedabad even came up to me and said, "We politicians just talk, but you guys are the real deal."

And to think that all we did was cleanup. :)

Of course, whenever you try to share your merits, double-fold comes back your way. Couple of us experienced very intense meditations; the chief priest called Viral in and offered a small bottle of Mount Kailash water that he had preserved since his pilgrimage days; after one aarti, the priest asked for me (although I was sitting way in the left field), snuck me in front of the crowd, and offered me some grapes with a smile; the beggars on the streets all knew us and instead of putting a hand out for some change, they had conversations with us. When we wanted to share some ideas for sustaining the momentum of this work, our comments fell on deaf ears; but it just so happened that the managing trustee -- Dhirubhai Joshi -- was visiting that night and he not only heard all our comments and visited our work, but even made time to sit with us at length and share some awesome personal life stories with Rangavdhut Maharaj. "Once Bapji asked me to read some scriptures in Marathi; since I didn't know how to read, he read one and half pages and translated in Gujarati. Then, he put the book to my head and said, 'Go you will now know Marathi.' Sure enough, I was fluent in Marathi since that moment. Just yesterday I finished translating another book," 70+ year old Dhirubhai said with an umph that can't be expressed in words.

On the last night, Jayeshbhai, Jagatbhai and I went to sleep next to the Shiva temple -- a tiny mat under us, a shawl on top of us, with a grateful heart. It is said that when Bapji first came here, he woke up to the music of celestial beings; when he later saw a peacock and a cobra playing together, he decided to stay under that neem tree. I didn't quite experience any music, unless of course, you count the loud, wake-up-entire-neighborhood 4:30AM aarti. :)

If Bapji had a message, if the ashram had a theme, it would be summarized by one quote that is prominently listed everywhere: 'paraspar devo bhava'. It translates to "I bow to the divine in all living beings."

Search for the good. At every step, that seems to be the message from the universe.

## Seven Barefoot Saints

Mar 25, 2005

"Can we touch your feet?" It was a simple question to seven 65+ year olds. And out came a simple answer, "Yes."

Jayeshbhai and I had walked into a room without any doors, where a group of seven had just landed. They looked poor, but they felt holy.

We asked them what they were doing in Nareshwar and they said, "We are on a pilgrimage to circumambulate the holy Narmada. We met each other along the way." My curious self asks them

further: "Why are you doing this?" The oldest of them, with a very dignified yet innocent face, responded promptly, "So we can find God in people like you."

These were illiterate people, walking barefoot without a purpose, with no money in their pocket and ultimate faith in the universe, all in search of God. For the past four months, they walked with one small bag of belongings, and prayed all day. This was no travel-India, feel-good field trip ... it was the real deal. We asked them, "So what are you going to eat today?" "Well, we don't know. Today we are fasting but God usually sends something or another." Unbelievable. Moved by their sincerity, we tell them that we'll get them fruits that they can eat today. We walk and walk to find fruits, but nothing. On our way back, we run into a potato vendor; so we buy some and ask a random neighbor to cook "suki-bhaji" for us. "It would be my pleasure. That way I get to do some good too," said our willing neighbor after hearing our story.

"Do you need anything else?" we probed the oldest man. "No, we take whatever God provides," he said. A little later, Jayeshbhai asked his wife the same question and she said, "Well, I don't have a saree so I'm using my husband's dhoti."

All of sudden, you felt like a fool. It was evident that she was wearing her husband's clothes. "All the stores are closed right now, but we'll get you a saree tomorrow morning," we said. "But we leave tomorrow at 8AM," she said in a slightly saddened but uncompromising tone. We shrugged our shoulders and simultaneously thought that it really would be a shame to miss this opportunity. I whispered to Jayeshbhai, "Can we give her that 'lungi' you have? Perhaps it's a little short but maybe they can use it?" He agreed and offered them a lungi, which they gladly accepted.

Possibly touched by our sincerity, they allowed us to touch their feet. One by one they stood up from their prayer mats and gave us their blessings with broad smiles on their faces.

The next day, walking barefoot on the hot sand, I almost burned my feet. Right away, I flashed-back to yesterday's encounter with the barefoot saints. My feet felt a little better just remembering them.

I also realized that we never asked their names. And they never asked us ours.

## 12 Hour Chant

Mar 26, 2005

"How do you serve your community?" I ask the bearded man. "We chant. 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year." "Hmmm," I mumble. "Yes, we have doing that for the last 25 years," he adds to see my jaw drop wide open.

25 years of non-stop chanting? Holy smokes. What kind of place did we arrive at? Within a minute of arriving at this tucked-away-in-corner ashram, we all feel at home. "It's like a little piece of heaven," Sheetal adds as we rest amidst "Asopalav" trees, a river front view of Narmada, and the gentle breeze.



"You see, this place has been used by many saints for their 'tapas' and that's probably what you are

feeling right now," the bearded man tells us as he confirms free room and board for us. The day before, 10 folks from our crew had returned to Ahmedabad. The remaining eight of us, all rookies in such work, decide to venture onwards to the unknown.

We cross the river once again and walk to a nearby village; our immediate objective is to find a place to sleep that night. Once we secure the floor outside the temple as our bed, we split up into teams to survey the village, meet its people, understand their needs and see how we can help. And of course, see if someone will make food for us. In the process, we make tons of friends. When we recover, though, most folks felt that the village was in decent condition, was a bit unsafe and that we should walk further into the unknown.

So we do. Sporting a serious tan, we walk, walk, walk with luggage on our shoulders, heads and anywhere in between. "There's a temple on the other side; near there, there's an ashram. Villages near there really need help," someone tells us. We get distance estimates anywhere from 10 kilometers to 1 kilometer to right around the corner; after a while, we keep asking just to humor ourselves as we continue walking. On the way, we sing, we chat, we offer help to ladies balancing huge haystacks on their heads, we enjoy the unique type of birds whizzing past us, and keep telling ourselves, "This is it."

Before sunset, we arrive. We don't know where, but somewhere. It ends up being a holy place, a place of non-stop chanting, a place called Assa on the banks of the Narmada.

By the next morning, we all have ideas: Maria wants to interact with the nearby village, Parbat wants to help clean the ashram, Mark wants to play frisbee with the kids, I want to chant, and so on. Viral and Mark hook up with a school next door that invites everyone to speak about the trip; at one point, they ask everyone (I wasn't there), "What can we do to help?" John runs outside and picks up some plastic. Someone else asks, "Who are your role models?" Another person asked, "Why can't you do this in America?" All awesome questions from village elementary school kids. And Viral, the chief translator, whipped up responses in his usually charismatic way. By the end, the kids are fired up to do a community-clean-up slash fun-n-games project as Guri and Maria rally kids from nearby villages.

Since the ashram was hosting (and feeding) us for free, we want to offer them some services. "Can we clean up your kitchen floor?" I asked the good-ol bearded man who seems to have answers for everything. "Yes, by all the means, that would really help," he said. Not satisfied with his answer, I pressed further: "What else can we do?" And he say one word, "Chant."

Almost immediately, I decide that I am going to chant. For 12 hours straight.

I toss the idea to the group and someone says, "Let's do a collective 24 hour chant perhaps." After exploring various options, we decide that I should start off the chant by myself while the rest of the folks interact with kids and local community.

At noon, I go in the main temple hall. Devotees are assigned 3-hour rotation slots, and they chant one phrase continuously: "Hare ram, hare ram, ram ram hare hare; Hare krishna, hare krishna, krishna krishna, hare hare." So I join in. No one is playing the drums, so I jump on it -- this being the first time I have attempted to play in a public setting.

First chanting state: I'm sleepy, from all this heavy lunch. Just keep chanting. Second state: this guy chanting really has no rhythm, it's kind of annoying. Just keep chanting. Third state: the 'manjira' sound

is really really loud. Just keep chanting. Fourth state: the pigeons are listening, especially the one that has been sitting on top of the center idol for the last five minutes. Wishing compassion the pigeon, I cry. Just keep chanting. Fifth state: I have been drumming for six long hours; my fingers feel like rocks, my legs are stiff, my back is sore, I'm exhausted; if I don't stop now, I will regret it tomorrow. But this is the real test, yeah baby. Just keep chanting, just keep chanting. Sixth state: two more hours left, when will it finish? Don't give up now. Just keep chanting. Seventh state: life is good, and I ain't stopping anytime soon. Bring it on, bring it all on!

Just keep chanting. Outside of two breaks -- one dinner and one administrative -- I chant till midnight.

I come out of the temple, with the chant buzzing in my head, with a relaxed smile on my face. A stray dog is sitting straight, on its hind legs, almost as if waiting for me. I go to him and pat him on his neck, after which he goes away. I put on my sandals, stretch my hands towards the sky, and see the luminous full moon stretch its radiance through the vast lands.

It's [full moon](#). It's holi, my first holi since I had left India 18 years ago. Holi is a festival about devotion to Rama, and here I was -- rather accidentally -- stepping into holi from a temple of Rama.

With a half a tear in my eye, I walk back to my room.

## Blindfolded Love

Mar 29, 2005

I was talking to a woman today, who has been working with the deaf and dumb for the last 23 years.

"How did you start on this journey?" I asked her.

"My husband and I blindfolded ourselves for 6 months, to experience what it is like to be blind."

## Another Bold Experiment

Mar 30, 2005

Howard Thurman once said, "Do what makes you come alive, because what the world needs most are people who have come alive." In that spirit, our next experiment is to "walk" paths we're inspired to take, letting groups naturally self-organize around it, all the while staying together as a family bound by the values of service, spirituality and love. Sounds almost like a mission statement. :)

- Guri and I are walking per our original inspiration from a year ago, without much of an external goal: in search of the "good", within and without, we are heading South of Ahmedabad to profile inspirations that we encounter.
- Mark and John are staying in Ahmedabad, to address sanitation on the streets (a la [Ten minutes at 10 PM](#)). Using themselves as an example, they hope to create a widespread movement in the community.

- Viral and Eric are heading to Kutch, to explore spirituality of the region, it's people and culture. Both of them are going with a loose focus, but primarily motivated by their gut feelings.
- Sheetal is going in silence for a bit and staying open ended beyond that.
- Jayeshbhai, Anarben and the ManavSadhna/Indicorps crew are continuing their existing work, while showering their full support to everyone on all journeys.

We hope to recovene, and create some repository of inspirational service journeys, that people -- many who want to join -- could plug into or initiate in different parts of the country. Long back, I envisioned a distributed iJourneys; perhaps this could be that. Or not. :)

## Let's Get on With the Show

Mar 30, 2005

"We use mosquito nets because at night, unconsciously, we might injure them," he says. It takes a moment for that statement to hit you. Most people use mosquito nets to protect themselves, not the mosquitoes!

But of course, this is a wandering Jain monk who doesn't use fans, electricity, or chairs and has spent 34 of his 42 year life walking from one place to another.

It's rather random that I'm in front of him, asking shameless questions, especially when there's a Wednesday night meditation going on with 30-35 people. But such were the circumstances, the night before I am about to take off on the boldest pilgrimage of my life.

"What have you gained by walking?" I ask him, with his disciples seated around him in the moonlit light. "Walking is a very humble activity, that allows you to connect with the most common man. And when you walk with full trust in the universe, you learn to accept everything that comes. Good or bad, you see it all as karma," the monk said.

"Your disciple tells me that you got hit by a truck while walking, many years ago. What went through your mind at that time?" I press him to relate theory to his personal life.

"Prior to the accident, I had a feeling something bad was going to happen but you don't know how it will manifest. So I was ready to take whatever came. When I was hit by the truck, I was unconscious for six hours. After I woke up, they told me that they have the driver who hit me and I immediately told 'em to let him go. He made a mistake. It's ok. This was my pending karma," he said in a very matter of fact way.

Touched by his be-the-change life, I ask him: "So really, we should all just walk out on the streets right now. Sooner or later, if we have to face our karma, why waste time rotating in maya? Let's just get on with the show, right now." He smiles and adds, "Yes."

## Walking Pilgrimage Starts

# Known to the Unknown, Day 1

Mar 31, 2005

It's our first day on the pilgrimage. As we leave the Gandhi Ashram at 6AM, [Guri](#) and I share repeated looks: "This feels so right." Seven years ago, neither of us could've guessed that we'll get married, leave everything, and walk with a simple back-pack on us, smilingly heading into the unknown in search of the "good".

But here it is, right here, right now.

Today, our plan is to walk 22 kilometers to a small village outside Ahmedabad. We plan to sleep outside if no one hosts us, use water from temples and other public outlets, budget dollar a day for any other expenses including food, meditate two hours, reflect for another hour, and connect with the "good" in all life. Next couple days are more of the same (universe willing) till we get to Dr. Doshi's in Chicodra.

It's a humble (and slightly scary :) journey, a walk from the known to the unknown. Our first stop is at a temple. An onlooker looks at us and I befriend him. "What kind of journey are you on?" he asks. "A journey to remove our lens of 'maya' (illusion)," I tell him. Somehow, he immediately signals the tea stall guy to get us a cup of tea as we start our five minute conversation. Guri and I smile in cognition that this was our first offering.

At the second stop, another lady comes and asks us, "Going to Jatalpur?" A little surprised I say, "Yes." With a dignified smile, she circumambulates the temple. I look to Guri and ask, "How did she know? Maybe everyone here goes to Jatalpur?" I turn around to see the lady load a huge bag of trash on her head and walk off.

We are quite confident that things will work out. But then we get to our first destination -- Aslali -- and ask if we can sleep on the Swaminaryan temple floors at night. "No, we don't allow that here," came the reply from the temple "pujari". Um, oops. Plan B? None. We eat some awesome 10 Rupee food, and keep walking in the noon heat.

On the way, Guri says with a noticeable smirk, "So we don't know where we are going to sleep at night. I'm ready to sleep under this tree right here." With a complimentary smirk, I retort: "You mean, with our buddies, rats and dogs and bugs?" Both of us knew it could come down to it.

We keep walking, not so confident anymore. :)

In the next town, we run into an ashram that is willing to host us. After asking what we're doing, they chit-chat amongst them a bit, and then the chief saint hands us a key with a "VIP" keychain. It ends up being the nicest room we have had in India thus far. And they even feed us awesome dinner.

"Cosmic joke is on us," Guri adds as our exhausted bodies go to sleep, with an alarm for set for 4AM.

# Two Potters of Bareja

Apr 1, 2005

"To: Bareja, Ghansyambhai, near Rameshwar temple". "No, no, no, just write Kheda Taluka." "Ok, give the number of your friend in Narol." "Ok, ok, To: Bareja ...". After about five minutes of group brainstorm, the family comes up with a mailing address. It is obvious that they have never received mail before.

On the second day of our walk, we pass a series of potters. Guri stops to say hello and the next door neighbors call us to see if we need water. "No, but thank you," Guri responds with a smile. "How 'bout some tea? Can we give you some tea?" It's hard to tell if they can afford the milk for tea but it's not so hard to see their enthusiasm; I hesitantly blurt, "Not for me, but my wife is big tea fan, so she'll have some." (Incidentally, it was Guri's tea time anyhow. :))

It turns out to be quite an inspired family: two brothers in their twenties, their wives and their parents, all living in a one room hut, making pots and earning about 40 rupees per day. None of them drink, smoke, chew tobacco, or anything else. And it's obvious in the quality of their presence. The older brother, Ghanshyam, doesn't even have tea.

"We are lucky that we have enough, and we can stay together as a family," Ghanshyam says as Guri places a candy in the mouth of his mute 2-year-old daughter. He tells us how he quit school to learn pottery from his mom, teaches us about pottery himself, and explains the economics of how the city middle-men take most of the profit from this.

And then things get spiritual, as Guri sips her tea from a dirty saucer. We talk about sincerity, devotion and trust in the universe. They are awed by our journey and ask us questions before collectively saying, "See, this is the right kind of journey. The Dandi-yatra that passed through here couple weeks back wasn't all that deep. There was a board on one of the buses that quoted Gandhi about not smoking and right underneath it, one of their own men was smoking. People think we are villagers who can be manipulated, but we are not that dumb."

It's hard to explain but both Guri and I separately felt like we were really connecting with this family. We wanted to give them something but we didn't have anything. It's a weird feeling, especially for me; but it's great because it consciously forces you to dig a little deeper than your wallet. Around about the same time, Guri takes out her camera and takes a photo, which gets them all excited.

Fifteen minutes were up. We had to keep walking in the early hours of the day, if we were to make our 26 kilometer day. Before we can initiate the goodbyes, Ghanshyam reappears in the mix with two palm-sized, glazed, pottery pieces. "These are for you, with our best wishes for your journey to see God." Here we are, feeling indebted by their kindness and here they are putting us even deeper in thankfulness debt. We touch the feet of the father and mother of the house, as they verbalize very kind blessings, and accept smaller of the two offerings.

"Are you Hindu?" the father asks me, right as we are about to leave. Almost immediately, both the brothers and the mother of the house yell, "What does that matter, Dad?" I agree and add, "All paths leads to the same destination, indeed. But yes, I was born a Hindu and my wife is Sikh. And we are both human." The innocent Dad was possibly drawing conclusions from my ever-growing beard and

bandana on my head, but it was a very cute moment nonetheless.

"Can you please also bless our sons that they may also progress in their own paths to God," the Dad says as we were passing the rows of pots that will be sold in the monsoon season. I turn around and raise my hands, almost in jubilation of our shared connection, and say my piece: "May all good things come."

## Profile: Govardhan "Ironman" Patel

Apr 1, 2005

You can't find a single tea stall or a paan store or an alcohol bar or a gambling joint in Navaagam, a village outside Ahmedabad. There's one primary reason for this clean, literate, and inspiring village; his name is Govardhan Shambhubhai Patel.



On March 13, 1934, second day of the infamous Dandi Yatra, Mahatma Gandhi stopped at Navaagaam. A prayer hall was organized for him, but when the clock hit 6PM Gandhi was still on the fields; so he halted everything and did his prayers right there on the farm. Fourteen year old Govardhan happened to be there with him. Later that night, Gandhi gave a talk at a public gathering and Govardhan was there as well.

"I used to be a pure Brahmin type: do your prayers every morning, don't touch the untouchables and what not. I even thought that English people were superior somehow. But then I heard Gandhi-ji speak," 90-year-old Govardhan recalls. "He talked about freedom, not fearing the English prisons, and so on but I think something about his face just transformed me. I decided right then that I was going to serve others."

When he was a year old, his mom passed away. When he was in fourth grade, he dropped out of school to serve his Dad who had just contracted polio. Out of sheer will, he studied at home and managed to pass 10th grade.

During this time, he teamed with 4-5 buddies and decided to serve his own town, with a population of a 1000 at that time. One by one, they would pick problems in their community and get them fixed up during their spare time; everything from riding the village of mosquitoes to creating awareness about health issues.

Soon enough, word got out about his leadership, influence and sincerity. Madhavlal Shah and Raojibhai Patel, two prominent Indians at the time, asked him to serve nearby villages. He refused. "Why?" everyone asked. "I'm in debt. I have to continue to farm to survive. So I will continue to stay here and serve Navaagam."

And then an amazing thing happened.

"All the town people came to me and said that they will farm for me, if I would go out and serve. So they literally divided up my farm into manageable sizes and collectively did my farming and gave me all the proceeds from the farm," Govardhan-kaka recalls with a sense of love in his eyes.

He would be out 355 out of 365 of the days. He went throughout the villages, affiliated with political parties and created solid social change. Everywhere, he would propose solutions, the naysayers would yell 'impossible', and he would prove them wrong. Again and again.

Partially, it was Govardhan-kaka's intellectual might. But in large part, it was his indefatigability: "Sleep, food and rest are three things I never think about. I had to set a certain time to eat, otherwise I would just forget. Quite literally, I have gone days without eating, simply because I forgot." And anyone who sees the 90 year old man move as if he was 55, would believe his statement.

Arguably the most interesting part of Govardhan-kaka's persona is that he applies his intellectual, physical and mental ferocity to everything. Including God. Seeing the contradictions of all the God-men, of all the saints in nearby temples, he quickly lost faith. In fact, he became an athiest. "I have one principle: whatever you don't like in others, make sure you don't do that yourself. That's it. No karma, no God, no after life, nothing doing," he says with an umph. In his later years, though, he admits to have known of a higher energy form but about God, he still thinks it's necessary to label it as such: "Serve and you'll be served. If there's a God, you're in good hands; if there isn't a God, society will take care of you. Either way, just serve."

Funny thing is that while he speaks out against many spiritual giants, all of them love him. "I once publicly told Pramukh Swami that he is not doing the right thing by creating all these saints. That is not what the world needs today. If he has a tried and true person of character, put him into politics and see his is able transform our political system. Pramukh Swami and I have very good relations and he's never disagreed with me. When I spent time with Ranghavadhut Maharaj, he knew my views on God and all the so called devotees but he would just smile and say that I was on the right path."

Govardhan-kaka is very clear that he is not doing 'seva' (selfless action) nor has he made any sacrifices. For him, being-the-change is just simple common sense.

"You have to be useful to others, even if it is just a word or two of advice to someone in need," he adds. If there is no opportunity to serve, he won't accept any temptation; his three daughters live in the United States but when they got him a green card, he rejected it because he is of use in Navagaam. He doesn't buy any gadgets either, unless they help in doing good work. "Anything you have should only be used for the good. I have a telephone, it is only for doing good. I can receive post (mail) here, it is only for good work. But I don't have a car or a scooter, because I can easily take the bus," Govardhan-kaka notes. And he is the same way with money. In 2004, Govardhan-kaka received the prestigious 'Vishwa Gujarati Samaj' award; he added 25% to his 100,000 rupee award and donated it to a local school that needed it.

Every evening, Govardhan-kaka sits under a particular tree in the village. All the villagers know to go there, if they want to talk with him. And after having spent most of his life in that village, everyone knows the essence of his advice: "Do what you can, to serve wherever you can. Whoever does good will have good."

Still, people visit him under the tree. Just to be with him.

# Visnu in Vasna

Apr 3, 2005

Our plan is to walk 26 kilometers to Matar. After spending the afternoon in Navagaam, we are confident of journeying the remaining 10 kilometers before dusk and sleeping at the [Balavdhut Ashram](#) there. Instead it's 7:30PM, we are well past 10 kilometers and we don't even know we have taken the "long cut".

"How far to Matar, bhaiya?" "Just keep walking straight down, it's another 4 kilometers." And then couple of the youngsters form a little circle and start talking: "Well, you have to cross the river with knee deep water and there's all these 'waghris' on the other side, who will bother them for sure. We'll have to send someone with them, if they really want to go."

Alright, it's not safe. But once again, no plan B. And no one is offering to take us safely to the other shore. What to do? Just keep walking. The other complication: we are hungry! While talking about fear and uncertainty on the way, Guri and I got pumped-up and decided that no matter what, we will not ask for (or buy) any food tonight. We won't even have any Parle-G's in our bag. If we get an offering, good; otherwise, tough luck ... err karma. Just keep walking. We come to a village looking place. At the corner is a temple; there are no lights, except the small candle in the mini-shrine. A couple of girls are around and we decide that we shouldn't go further. This was our place; we'll just sleep on the ground there and we had some water to serve as dinner.

"Is it ok if we sleep here?" we asked the passerby's whose face we couldn't see. "Here? Yeah, sure." After a minute or so of curiosity, they started helping us. "Well, you could just sleep in the school; no one will say anything. And there's a water faucet there." "Ah, ok, thanks."

Right then, a gentleman comes by. He actually feels like a teenager. "You are not really going to sleep here, are you?" he questioned. "Um, yeah, we are," I respond curiously. "No way. You can't sleep here. It's impossible. All the bugs will eat you up. And my sister (referring to Guri), she can't sleep here," he said in a very caring way.

I thought he was going to offer to host us, but instead he suggests, "Are you Jain? Because there's a guy here who hosts Jain monks." "Hmmm, no, we are not Jain," I respond with a slight glimmer of hope. Silence for a while. All the girls are looking at Guri, wondering how she made it walking so far and how she was planning on sleeping on the ground there. "You know what, let's go there anyways. Come, I will take you," that young voice declared. We agree.

So this random stranger is taking us to another random stranger's house. And we haven't had any food and we weren't about to ask for any either. Life doesn't get better than this. :) If the universe is alive, if we have karmic debt to pay, here it is baby -- bring it on.

On the way, this guy starts asking me questions about what we are doing. I give him an idea of the spiritual nature of our trip, something I felt he could relate to; and he says, "Well, I have a small house; why don't you stay with us?" "Oh yeah, sure, we can sleep on your front porch. We don't mind anything." "No, no, don't worry, just come. By the way, have you had any food?" "No, but we were thinking of just having water today since we walked so much," I say in the spirit of not burdening him too much. "That's not right. Let's see. We'll arrange something," he says.

Now, all of a sudden, we are walking to our newly-made-friend's house, through all the lefts and rights in the dimly lit paths. We have no choice but to trust what the universe brought our way.

We walk into a house; a slim woman greets us with a generous smile. Pretty soon a bunch of others come through. They offer to get us chairs but we park ourselves on the ground. Everyone is smiling,

jovial and curious. Within ten minutes, we're all like family. "Do you want to shower?" someone asks us. When we said yes and told 'em that we were ok with cold showers, they were taken aback again. While Guri sneaked in a cold shower, my bucket was luke warm. Of course, I didn't know that I would have to take a shower in the "back" with a candle light in a distance. :)

Vishnu is the name of our stranger friend, who farms for a living. One of his two older brothers delivers milk every morning at 4AM. All three of their wives and children lived together in two houses; two of the wives were even sisters! It all made for a very tight knit family, that seemed very innocently geniune.

By this time, they figured out that we were low maintenance and high energy. They asked us to dinner -- "Will you eat with us? We eat rice and real spicy daal. Will that be ok?" "Of course!" we said with our grumbling stomachs. As soon as we realize that they are sharing their own dinner portions with us, we eat little but feel deeply satisfied.

Over the next hour, the entire neighborhood comes to visit us one after another. All the kids came in and sit in the room, as if some TV show is on, but it is the adults who control the conversation. "What caste are you?" one of the young adult asks me. "Oh, I'm not really sure but just figure that I'm a harijan." They all smirk and I insinuate a conversation about it. "Yeah, it's true that we are all equal but they get all the benefits from the government; we work just as hard but we don't get the jobs," one of the elder said. We even talked about women's empowerment; Visnu's oldest brother remarked at one point: "You know, our women work doubly hard. They not only do the kitchen work but they also help us on the farms. They deserve all the power."

Interestingly, none of them figured we are from America. To them, whether you are from the city in India or a city in the US, it was all a novelty.

By night time, they tried to give up their beds for us. "No way, boss. We are fine on the ground. Here are our shawls even," we tell them. After much argument, they let us sleep on the ground but only after tossing some serious padding on the ground. But, of course, before that, we had a round of tea to keep the conversation going. "You know, in our town, people are very innocent," Visnu says in his trademark innocent way. "It's because we don't have a lot of money."

Next morning, we wake up, meditate a bit, and join them for tea. To treat us right, they even bring out cups (instead of just saucers); I am in awe of their hospitality especially when I notice one of cup handles is broken.

As we say our goodbyes, we share the [potter experience](#) and hand them the decorative gift we had received the day before.

To top it all off, Visnu decides to drop us off all the way to our next stop ... 4 kilometers away. By this time, he has taken a real liking to us. He calls Guri his sister and says that if she ever needs anything, his brother is right there for her. Visnu carefully takes us across the knee-deep Narmada river and drops us off to Matar. While he knows he has to return back to pick tomatoes for the day, he keeps walking with us. And then finally says: "Nipunbhai, my mind keeps wondering when I will see you again? Will you come again?"

"Visnubhai," I pause and put my arm around his shoulders. "Last night, we didn't even know each other; today we are like family. How did it happen? It happened because you took the chance to serve someone in need, because you reached out your hand of friendship. Right?" Visnu agrees. "Then the same force that connected us last night, will connect us again. Right?" Visnu agrees again, but he adds, "But next year, it's my daughter's wedding. You have to come then!"

It's time for Visnu to leave. Guri and I both touch his feet and he says, with half a hidden tear in his eyes, "May all the forces be with you to accomplish whatever you want to."

Reason no. 94 for this [pilgrimage](#): reconnect with long lost brothers.



## Profile: Prahlad Dada

Apr 4, 2005



"Dear Mom and Dad, I am leaving everything to find God." Fourteen year old Prahlad Patel left that note for his parents and took off. Before Prahlad could find God, though, his parents found him.

"My parents weren't upset at me, though," 81-year-old 'Dada' laughs heartily as he recalls his childhood. "They were very spiritual themselves and in a way, they understood this intense desire to find something greater than the self."

About an hour ago, as Guri and I were entering the small town of Matar through the barren river-side road, we speak of Sri Aurobindo. Almost within ten seconds, we read a board on our right -- "Auro Center". Compelled by serendipity, we cross the front gate to find the main office.

It is not only silent, but very peaceful.

An old man, dressed in all white, slowly walks down the stairs and greets us with a radiant toothless smile, "Welcome." After a minute of hello-ing, Dada tells us that this ashram is taken care of by Mother and he points to a picture above him. "She has never let me down," he says only to be stopped by tears in his eyes.

Seeing an 81-year-old man cry, I tear up myself. In the presence of his pure devotion, I think to myself: "Whoever this stranger is, I would feel privileged to be of service to him." Not knowing how, I make

something up: "Dada, I would like to profile you. But, really Dada, it's just an excuse to be at your feet and learn. Can I ask you about your life?"

Dada cracks up. "If you want to know about me, no need to ask; just watch my actions for two days and you'll know all you need to know." True to his grandfatherly fashion, though, he happily fields our questions. And practically knocks us out with his responses!

Although he doesn't know it, Dada has one thing in common with Reebok: life is short, play hard. Outside of a small piece of remote land, Dada doesn't own anything and doesn't have a source of income; he put every single penny he had, all 65 lakhs worth, into this 3 acre Auro Center. And he has no fears about tomorrow.

"How did you become so convinced of this center?" I ask. "Mother granted me a vision in 1993: go start an ashram where there is no pollution, is amidst nature's beauty, and is near a river; it will be a place for the most sincere seekers of God." It is a vision that has never left him.

With the help of an engineer, he drew the detailed architectural plans from his vision. After almost seven years, he found a piece of land suitable for such a place. He had no experience running an ashram, in architecture or construction or fundraising, and neither did he have any resources handy; yet, in 2000, he put it all on the line to start the construction. "Mother has kept me alive to do this work," Dada says with confidence.

"Aren't you worried about what will happen tomorrow?" I pose a layman's question. "No," came the saintly response. "This is Mother's will. I'm just an instrument."

At the age of 25, when Dada first visited Pondicherry Ashram in Southeast India, he met 'Holy Mother' at the Aurobindo Ashram. "I would watch her for hours and hours and not get tired," Dada recalls with a prayerful glee. "And whatever I would ask her, she would give me -- chocolates, blessings, her ring once, you name it." It was during that trip that Dada made a silent pledge that has shaped the rest of his life: "From this moment, I give you all the responsibility for my material and spiritual well being. I am your instrument of service."

He later got married, and had two sons. Because he was farming in a remote area, he started a small school to educate his kids; Mother named it "Mirambika" and today, the school is still running in Ahmedabad with 3000 students. Unfortunately, one of his sons passed away at the age of 42. "What was your response when your son passed away?" I pose the question with curiosity. "I was sad, but I didn't cry. I don't know why, but perhaps because I understand that birth and death are inevitable parts of life. Incidentally, he passed away while he was visiting the Pondicherry Ashram, several thousand miles away from his home," Dada says.

Dada's life is full of unusual happenings. Once on a farm, he woke up with a poisonous snake in his bed; the snake had been there all night but didn't bite him. In his twenties, he picked up 'Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna' and everytime he tried to read it, he couldn't stop crying. So he finally gave up on reading it but holds Sri Ramakrishna as a revered teacher. When he went to buy land for Auro-Center, the person selling it was in such an unusual situation that he had to donate the entire piece of land. One after another, Dada's stories can captivate anyone for hours.

Two mentors of Dada's life were Govardhanbhai and Dixitbhai, both of whom were central elements of his spiritual path. Govardhanbhai, his Dad's friend, hosted him when he was in college; while there,

young Prahlad volunteered for one curious job -- he would serve water, tea and snacks for a group of 6-7 folks, including Govardhanbhai, who would meet regularly to discuss the writing to Sri Aurobindo. "I didn't understand much, but whatever little I picked up, I was impressed by Aurobindo's thoughts," Dada remembers.

Dixitbhai, his other mentor, was the first person he met when he initially walked into the Pondicherry Ashram. While Dixitbhai was very close to Sri Aurobindo and Mother, 25-year-old Prahlad didn't know; they just naturally became friends. "Slowly, I realized the power of Dixitbhai. One time, he told me to read a book and he was sleeping next to me, snoring. My mind wandered off a little bit and I made a mistake in responding to one of the questions; he woke up and told me exactly where I had faltered! This happened again and again with him. I think he was aware all the time." While it was not in his character to prophesize, he did make one prediction: "Dhananjaya, Ambalal and Prahlad will surely gain self realization." All three were true disciples of Sri Aurobindo, according to him.

"Do you pray, Dada?" Guri asks him. "Yes, everyday." "What's your prayer?" Very sincerely Dada says, "No set prayer. I let it happen naturally. First, I make a full bow to all the realized masters and ask them to help me realize my true nature. Then, I sit in silence and let prayer happen." Dada sleeps from 9PM to 1AM; after waking up, doing some exercise, he's in prayer from 4AM till dawn.

"Do you have any fears, Dada?" "No." "Really?" "Why fear? Mother is there." "What if someone comes and kills you?" "Then let them." "What if someone drowns you in a river?" "Why would anybody want to do that?" "So, seriously, you have no fears?" "I used to, when I was younger, but now I know better."

In front of someone holy, it is natural to ask: "Dada, what can I do for you?" Without any teeth, or dentures, his lips curl down on his gums and his whole body joins him in a gentle smile.

The answer is almost predictable, but it's almost good to hear it again: "I don't need anything. I am just an instrument."

## A Melodic Blessing

Apr 5, 2005

In the Himalayas, the yogis call him in their caves to hear the flute of "Krishna". In the cities, large audiences gather to hear him and famous artists like Hari Prasad Chaurasia learn from him. Elsewhere, if he plays the flute in public, people will call him into their house. Suresh Parekh started playing flute at the age of 5. Five years ago, at the age of 69, he decided to only play for 'God'. No more public engagement, paid or unpaid. "Nipun, today I have given you one lakh rupees worth of time," he said of our storytelling session during his afternoon nap time. After he played his magical flute for the three of us that evening, I joked: "Now, I have taken five lakhs worth of prasad from you."

As we were leaving, he opens his bag and give us a tiny booklet: "I have done sadhna with this for years. It is the Bhagvad Geeta in Gujarati. If you are ever in need, open this up to a random page and



it will guide you. In this small book, you will have the blessings of my years of sadhna."

## Quenching Our Thirst

Apr 6, 2005

Day before yesterday, we walked 40 kilometers with almost full water bottles. Today, we are on kilometer 20 of 30, and no water in sight.

At the next big junction, I look to the left for water but here a voice from behind me. "Come, come, I'll get you some water." Guri and I turn around and see an old lady motioning us to head towards her.

"Hang on, I'll go get you some cold water. She goes in the back of a tea stall and comes out with a broken-rim, mud pot. As two tired pilgrims on a hot day, we sat on the ground holding our bottles as she hunched her back and poured it from a bronze container. It is indeed cold water.

"Where are you headed?" she inquires. "Petlad," I say in brief, trying to conserve my energy. "Pilgrimage?" "Yeah, pad-yatra." "Where are you coming from?" "Nadiad; but originally from Ahmedabad." "Memdavad?" "No, Ahmedabad." "Oh, Memdavad." "No, no, Ahmedabad. We've walked about 130 kilometers to get here."

A man behind the scene, with a big U-like tilak on his forehead, comes out and casually says: "As soon as you say what you're doing, it's over." Sensing a profound comment, I look to him to confirm my hypothesis. While frying something in a pan, he repeats himself, "As soon as you say what you're doing, it's over." He was telling me to be selfless. Wow.

Before we can finish sipping our water, the lady comes back: "You want some tea?" "No, but thank you," I tell her. "Oh yeah, you want some tea. Come on, have some tea. Here, I'll get you a cup," she says while turning around to get some tea in a very motherly way. Seeing no escape, I hedge my bet -- "No, no, no. Just wait. Ok, one cup for her. None for me. Seriously."

First comes the tea. And then within another minute, the old lady surfaces again with a plate with two 'papads' and many 'pakoras', "Here, here, eat." "No, no. Are you kidding? We can't eat this stuff," we say just because it was definitely over the top. "Come on, just eat," she pushes the plate in such a way that we have no choice.

It was such a generous portion that we could barely finish one-tenth of it.

When it was time to go, I offer to pay. After all, this was their business; and they probably made very little on a daily basis. Considering our dollar-a-day budget, we normally wouldn't have had this but the mother-like hospitality is priceless.

I dig into my back pocket to pull out my wallet and out comes the old lady in full force and stuff it back into my pocket. "No way," she says. Her husband, who had earlier told me to be selfless, says: "This is all God's. He is the one giving and he is the one who is taking." Another comment, way out from the left field.

After a few more futile attempts to pay, we give up. Instead I say, "Well, in that case, we will ask for

your blessings." Guri and I spontaneously go down to touch the old lady's feet and in a very motherly way, she places one hand on each of our heads and showers us with kind prayers.

We turn to the old man and before I could touch his feet, he bends down himself. At first, I didn't understand what he was doing, until I felt his hands on my feet. He was asking for my blessings!

Anyone who is remotely familiar with the Indian culture, knows this is NEVER done. No grandpa-like figure will touch the feet of someone who could be his grand-son. But here it was. Not knowing what to do, Guri and I touch his feet as he shares his blessings.

With the song of humanity in our hearts, we leave.

Within a minute, we meet a really old man wearing a torn shirt and worn out sandals. He has a few vegetables on his cart and is pushing it very slowly, along a highway. It's hard to imagine how he will make any money.

We pass him, but then quickly I turn around to visit him. Guri understands and tells him, "Dada, can I get some tomatoes?" Excited, he walks around his cart where the tomatoes are and helps us find tomatoes. Guri gets two tomatoes. It's time for me to pay and empty out all the coins I have, about 10 rupees.

"This is too much. It was only two rupees," he says. I ask him to keep it but he refuses. Then I explain it to him: "Dada, there were a few holy folks in the other town; they treated us like their son and daughter. We wanted to share that spirit with someone, and so we just wanted to give you this. This is not from us. It is from them to you." Dada folds both of his hands together in a prayerful pose, with ten rupees in change in his hands, and accepts with a smile.

Neither Guri nor I will forget that old man's deep eyes. We continue walking in silence.

## Churn and Burn

Apr 6, 2005

The back-pack on my shoulders feels really heavy, my kurta is drenched with sweat, the mosquito bites on my feet pale in comparison to the peeling skin and aching joints, my calves are about to give in completely. This is kilometer number 24, in the noon heat, and the bandana on my head isn't helping much. But most of all, uncertainty hurts most. We don't know where we will eat lunch, let alone where we will spend the night. Just the thought of sleeping under some tree somewhere in this condition is tiring.

And you have to be constantly vigilant. One unaware move and you can get in deep trouble, through these remote terrains.

"So, what sensations are you feeling?" I ask Guri. Simply looking at Guri is a source of strength for me; she's shorter than me and has walked the same amount, proportional to her body weight she's carrying much more weight, and no matter what comes up, she's always focused on digging deeper. This is no longer just will power, it is in-your-face cultivation.

"Oh, I'm feeling a lot of gross sensations right about now," she jokes. "Yeah, I guess this is the real test. We have to be equanimous to all this." Ok, ok, let's try to meditate while walking," I speak out-loud, really talking to myself.

We find an intriguing temple (will write more about it later), whose resident saint, somehow, immediately invites us to lunch and lets us rest in the temple shade. I sleep on the marble floor for an hour as Guri meditates. :) In the afternoon, we head to Swami Satchidananda's ashram that someone had told us about; he invites us to spend the night at the ashram and we accept.

I wake up at midnight. I'm exhausted, I'm sweating despite the fan on high, I have a complicated physical situation that takes me to the bathroom every couple minutes, and the mosquitoes are circling us in full force. I'm feeling burning sensations. "This is it, Nipun. No way out, buddy. You asked it and here it is." I fumble in the dark to find the bathroom and flip the light switch. Couple of bugs welcome me. After a couple trips, I lay on my cot, feeling horrible. To top it off, I'm worried about tomorrow -- what if I get sick? We have no home. Where am I going to go?

All of sudden, the "trust in the universe" idea isn't so appealing anymore. :) I look to the other cot, and see Guri sleeping safe and sound. "This is just happening to me. Churning and grinding, my internal junk coming out. Just go with it," I try to give myself a pep-talk. It doesn't work. After a while, I just give up. My arms fall loose, I lie down on my back, and I close my eyes.

Hari-om.

I wake up at 6AM to a knock on our door, refreshed and in perfect health.

## Haircut on the House

Apr 7, 2005

"Kaka, where is the nearest barber?" I ask, rubbing my fingers across the three week old beard. "Oh, right there, on the other side of the street," he responds.

We cross the street, wait a bit, and then have the barber go at it. "Just have a seat right there, and rest your head here," the barber says. As I assume my position, I'm sitting right smack in front of a photo of Shirdi Sai Baba. "Yeah, just make my beard look like his," I joke but he takes me seriously. ;)

Instead of the typical Bollywood music, the barber is playing some spiritual music through an old tape player. At that particular moment, the words went a little like this: "I came with nothing and I will go with nothing." Hmmmm. Inspired, I make a bet with the universe: "Dear whoever you are, am I playing games with myself? If you can hear the prayer in my heart, make this hair cut for free."

I know it's silly, but hey, pilgrimages are short, play hard. :)Guri is sitting out on a wooden ledge-like bench, looking after our back-packs that are stacked on top of each other. It's obvious that we are two pilgrims doing something nutty; we start talking about things spiritual, the barber and I. "Sahib, I have bhajans on all day, from the beginning to the end. Here, feel this radio. It's so hot because it's always on," he says as I appreciate his choice of music.

Just then, a squirrel comes whizzing past the roof and peeps in, from a crack in the thin aluminum

roof. "Hahhaah, these squirrels, they're lovely. This is everyone's shop. I don't bother them. They're been here since day one," the 35 year old barber tells me. "So, you're an animal lover," I comment. "No, no, I love all life. If a poor person comes to my shop, I cut his hair for free. If someone is in need, I do my best to help. If a dog is hungry, I give him some of my food," he says in a matter-of-fact way.

Then comes the big moment. "How much is it?" I ask. "Bhaiya, no money from you," he tells me. "What do you mean no money?" I ask with a disbelief on my face (largely because of my bet with the universe)! "I'm not gonna take anything from you." After a few tug of wars with my wallet, I give up seeing the big smile on his face. This is his contribution to our journey.

Partially, I feel bad because I know he doesn't make much money and my faith really shouldn't be playing dice at his cost. "Sureshbhai," I say, now knowing his name, "I will feel bad if you don't take some money from me." "Ok, give me that 5 rupee coin," he motions for my coin and goes to the shop next door. He comes and hands me the 4 rupee change. "Just to keep you honor, I will take my cost, 1 Rupee," he says with another big smile.

A barber in Petlad is now a part of this pilgrimage. I prayerfully look to the vast blue sky, as if to say, "Bring it on, man. I don't know how I will carry them all, but bring it on, my shoulders are getting stronger by the day!"

[...]

Update: the next day, we happen to be passing by the shop. I quickly turn to Guri and say, "I really want to do something for that guy." "Whatever you do, it should be anonymous," she tells me. "Yeah, but what? I can't give money to random strangers, because they'll just snag it. What to do?" We can't think of anything.

Just as we walk upto the shop, we see that it's closed. "Ah, great," I said. We walk over, tear a piece of paper from my notebook, put a 50 rupee note and slip it through the door cracks. In my broken Gujarati handwriting, I scribble a few simple words on the paper: "He who gives, lives in God's hands." Put a little "aum" on top and passed it through the cracks.

"You understand that's more than a day's budget," Guri reminds me knowing my foolhardy nature of giving beyond my capacity. "Yeah, I know," I say with a smile just as big as the barber's, the previous day.

## The Path Under My Feet

Apr 9, 2005

If there is frequently asked question, it is this: why walk?

One, to observe reality at a human pace. Move over palm-pilots, it is time to go at the speed of two feet. Everything is slow, deliberate and intentional. Todo-lists turn into undo-lists. Lighter your load, wider the smile. Arrogance of security loosens its grips and



slowly gives birth to humility of the unknown. The more you unwind, the deeper you experience. In place of wasting energy figuring out your plans, accept whatever comes; because in the end, each circumstance is a mirror of what is already in your heart.

Two, to experience moments not events. Instead of pressing on the accelerator, yield to the cows and admire their grace; instead of being an absent minded consumer, greet the vegetable vendors as fellow pilgrims of life; instead of ignoring the stare of kids, smile at the little ones who have never seen grown-ups with back-packs; instead of ignoring poverty or shelling out a rupee of guilt, connect with the source of that poverty within you. An uninterrupted, commercial-free play with nature; it is you and your consciousness together at last.

Three, to deepen your awareness. Witness that you are not separate from your pain or the celestial hues of sunlight that cross the fields at sunrise. Learn how nature works with abundance, without any need for accumulation; the crows skip with two feet, the camels bob around without moving their heads, the monkeys stare as if it's a new show each time. Need, not greed. Understand the simplicity of cause and effect. You serve, you get served. No images, no theories, no complications. Just instant karma. When you put it all on the line, there is no choice but to go deeper.

Yet, walking is painful. Your feet hurt, your body aches at the thought of not knowing if you will have lunch, the bag on your back feels heavier than it is, the soles of your feet are hot even with your sandals on. You are frustrated but don't know the source of your frustration. You miss the comforts of home, or even a plain ol' city. Everyday, you start from scratch. Every person is a new encounter. No business cards, no glory from the past to rescue you. This is you and your mind, facing off. There is no victory, no defeat; and ultimately, there is no reason left to even do this.

Then you breathe. You take another step. One foot rests while the other moves forward. Then you breathe a real breath.

## Running into Nadiad's Pope

Apr 18, 2005

Walking into a huge beautiful temple, after 28 kilometers of walking, I semi-walk into a room, and notice the back of a chair with two elbows on the side. We walk around and walk in, to find the Pope-like figure of this temple -- Santram Maharaj -- who happened to be accepting audiences at that time.

Not knowing any protocols, we walk in. Within a minute, he calls us to the front and almost immediately says: "Know Thyself. If there is one thing you remember from me, it is that. Can you sit cross legged?", he asks me pointedly. "Yes," I say. "Then you meditate," he tells me. A totally off-the-wall statement from a guy with a huge temple, where people think God is in the idols.

But first he sent us off to lunch. Then, during a random conversation, per Guri's nudging, I ask to interview him. He agrees, surprising all around him. I bust out my laptop and he asks me to put it on the short stool where he generally places his feet (and which is considered holy by his devotees). Everyone cracks up.

The half an hour interview flows effortlessly. Instead of us asking him for more time, he would look at

us jokingly and say, "Ok, go ahead, one more question." And we laid it all on him, including "If you want us to know thyself, why entertain these huge temples with idol worship?" and "What makes you smile?".

Santram Mandir has a fascinating history, millions of devotees across all faiths, and crores of rupees dedicated to service of mankind. Ramdass Maharaj is the 8th successor of the seat, and till his death, he will not leave the temple premises. To see him, you have to come there.

Twenty years ago, my grandma had brought me here once. And today, Guri and I are back. Funny business. Both of us instantly felt that he was the "real deal". Just as we did when we came in, we ran into him on the way out: I folded my hands together, with my shoes hanging from the side, and did a semi-bow. From a distance, he smiled and so did I.

## 500 Rupees From a Monk!

Apr 18, 2005

They say it's hard to find him, but we walk right in. In fact, we had put 35 kilometers on the line for it. Fortunately, he is rocking on his swing as we walk in. After a minute of introduction, he signals one of the bookkeepers: "Go bring them 500 Rupees. They will need it on the way."

A renounced Swami giving us 500 Rupees?!? Gee whiz.

Perhaps it was because he could relate -- at 21, he left everything searching for "enlightenment" and stayed an entire year while walking across India. Today, at 65, he was a fearless speaker on many things, author of over 50 books, and a revolutionary who has roamed more than 70 countries.

He didn't want us to leave the ashram, but when we were about to leave, he asked us again: "Take 500 Rupees. You will need it." We bowed silently and said, "Thank you, but all we need at this time are your blessings." He smiled as we parted ways.

## A Fellow Pilgrim With a Bidi

Apr 18, 2005

I turn around to see smoke coming out of a random building, along the highway. From a cot inside, I see a hand waving at us. Another look and it's an orange-robed man calling us in.

The whole scene looked a little sketchy, to be honest. Plus, we had to cover 48 kilometers today! Not quite the best day to make such random stops, but hey, if we wanted to make "best decisions" we would be in the US pulling cushy salaries.

We walk in.

It turns out to be a loving, clear-faced saint, smoking a bidi. Schooled by the NGO sector, Western sciences and idealist spirituality, it's natural to judge an orange-robed smoker as someone with a shady character sketch. But I was wrong.

"Are you pilgrims?" he asked. "Yes, Swamiji, we are walking to profile inspiring people," I tell him in Gujarati as Guri sat cross legged on a mat to my left.

After some introductions, we learn that this monk has done almost a dozen pilgrimages! Instead of walking, though, he does one step, one bow. He goes with nothing except the pair of clothes he's wearing, and one of his pilgrimages can last over three years.

"Wow, are you serious?" I ask like a little curious kid, remembering Rev. Heng Sure's intense three steps, one bow pilgrimage.

Of the two gentleman in the vicinity, one goes indoors to grab a frame with newspaper clippings. Sure enough, he had done these rather unbelievable pilgrimages. "Since I was a kid, I was very devotional but then the calling inside got stronger and stronger," he says.

"Don't you think it's a little extreme?" I ask, knowing very well that many think even walking like us is a bit crazy. The Swami smiles, almost if to say that everyone will understand when their time is ripe. "It's all devotion," he adds.

"Now, imagine you have a bungalow, your own house. You have to pay electricity bill, don't you?" "Yes." "And what happens when you don't pay it? Your electricity is cut, isn't it?" "Yes." "Now, have you paid your bill for sunlight? Have you paid your bill for the water? Who do you think provides all this for us?"

Swami-ji stops the barrage of questions and explains, "God is giving us so much. And we're just busy taking. Take, take, take, take. We have to give back. It is our duty."

"And to top it off, you don't even own your own house! You are just a tenant in this body and that rent check is overdue too," he says with three times the volume of his previous statement.

The smoke from the other room is practically bringing tears to our eyes. One of the gentleman explains that they are in the middle of a 9 day prayer and that today was an auspicious day for them. "I am very happy to see both of you today," he tells us.

We share similar gratitude for having run into him and bow down to touch his feet. "Our pilgrimage is about finding the good, find that God, in everyone, and in that spirit, we bow to that divine in you." And then, I turn around to the other two gentleman and touch their feet. Everyone is somewhat taken back, and pleasantly surprised to see our statement put into action.

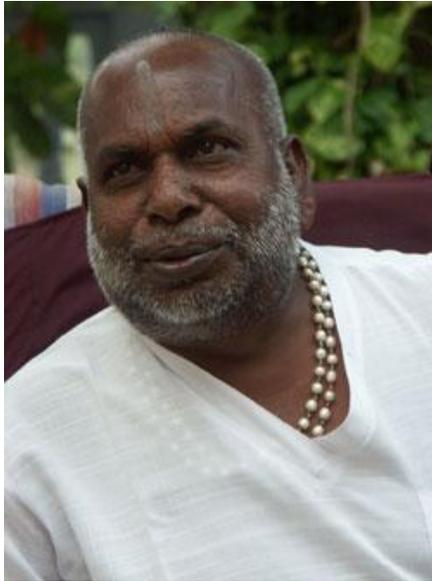
They fill up our water bottles and we hit the road.

A bit ahead, while crossing a bridge, we notice a man mumbling about 20 feet in front of us. Thinking that he was drunk, we didn't pay much attention. But as we crossed him, his mumbles somehow turned into a coherent statement: "Go! Whatever you have set out to do, it will be successful."

Unfortunately, we haven't set out to do anything but I get the sense that we are in good company. :)

# Temple on the Highway

Apr 18, 2005



Indian spirituality is not the Kumbh Mela. It is neither brainless devotees chanting the same old name nor is it saffron robed men pulling stunts to gather attention of your wallet. Perhaps the accidental spiritualist might encounter such touristy piety, but Indian spirituality runs way, way deeper.

Perhaps it is because we are off the beaten path, or perhaps it is for some other reason we aren't conscious of, but we keep running into absolutely sincere cultivators of truth. Saint Harisevakdass is one such example.

After being raised by wandering monks, he did deep meditations for many years. Eventually, he felt like he wanted to serve the entire world. He sat under a tree in the middle of nowhere. Today, there's a temple around him that manages to bring deep smiles to all passerby's like Guri and myself.

## In Search of the Good ...

Apr 19, 2005

This is where we are posting the profiles that we write up:

[www.ijourney.org](http://www.ijourney.org).

We hope it becomes an open-source like repository of good stories.

## Booking Window

Apr 20, 2005

*[Written on a bench in Waghodia]*

Hot, sunny day;  
No rest on the way.

Finally, an old train station,  
But far from a pleasant sensation.

A sick, feeble man is coughing,  
We lay on a dirty bench, wobbling.

Couple of drunks are gambling,  
No cigar puff is appealing.

It is all me and mine,  
For today, it is just fine.



Booking window is closed, though;  
Leaving now is a no-go.

Me and mine will soon show-down;  
Then, only the good will be left in town.

Hot, sunny day;  
No rest on the Way.

## 24 Hours in Gotri

Apr 20, 2005

Maybe it's because their name starts with a "V". But Viral, Vivekananda, and Vinoba influence me heavily. One is my brother, another has inspired all corners of the world, but third is a little mysterious.

Today, as I lay on the floor staring the ceiling fan rotating in full force, I am thinking about the third V: Vinoba. We are at the end of the road, in every aspect. It's 2PM, we are leaving this place at 5:30AM tomorrow, and we have absolutely no idea where we will be going, or anything else. You know, the usual gut-wrenching unknown.

Just then, a surreal feeling takes a hold of me. I feel at home. This is, after all, the Vinoba Ashram in Gotri.

On the previous day, Guri and I showed up at this ashram, without knowing anyone or anything. The board outside read "Nature Cure Center" but the mailing address at the bottom read "Vinoba Ashram", so it seemed like our destination. We walk into the small reception room, that feels like a hospital lobby, and ask for the only name we had heard of -- Jagdish Shah.

Sizing us up as two vagabonds, the receptionist asked us to wait in the lobby. Tick tock, tick tock. Just as we guzzled down some tap water, a man whizzes past us. The receptionist asks us to follow him. It's the doctor of this 'Nature Cure' center, Bharat Shah.

"Given that Vinoba walked across the country for decades, you gotta figure these guys will be sympathetic to walking pilgrims," I think out loud to Guri. Bharatbhai turns out to be a very compassionate guy, and after hearing about what we are doing, he invites us for some accommodations and food.

This whole introduction process is humiliating, at least for me. I mean, let's face it: I could easily bust out money from my own labor to stay wherever I want, however I want. But no, instead I have voluntarily left myself at the mercy of the universe, to realize our interdependence, and to put the "I" in check. It's the thing to do, but man, it's painful especially when you have to do it again and again, every single day. You feel so small.

"Jadgishbhai is on a pilgrimage himself. He just came couple hours ago and is leaving again tomorrow. It'll be very tough to see him," Bharat says, after telling us that is his Dad. Despite his seeming unavailability, we were taken by the coincidence of him being there.

After settling in, we learned more about the activities of the Vinoba Ashram: Nature Cure center and organic farming. About 15 families lived on the clean, serene campus and it was the center of much Gandhian activity in the country through "Bhoomi Patra" newsletter.

Sure enough, we ran into Jagdishbhai. Although he only had five minutes to spend with us, he acted like we had eternity. Immediately, he's comfortable with us and tells us to join him in his pilgrimage. By now, we knew that this man had dropped out of college at 19, and walked thousands and thousands of miles, without any money in his pocket, to support Vinoba Bhave's "bhoodan" movement. So we countered, "Unfortunately, we are walking. We haven't paid our dues like you, that we can ride in cars." He smiled but still tried to convince us.

Next day, there was a meeting of Sarvodaya Trust. A 96 year old man, Siddharaj Dadda, was little antsy that the country he had fought so hard is struggling with some basic values; so he had called everyone together. Fortunately, we happened to be right there as we heard stories from some of the most incredible leaders in social development work.

Getting Jagdishbhai's time was still an impossibility, although he was really taken by our spirit and wanted to help us.

So it's 2PM, I'm looking at the ceiling wondering what will happen next. While Guri takes a short nap, I decide to randomly walk out of our room. I know that Jagdishbhai leaves in an hour, so if there's any hopes of getting his advice on where to go, what to do, it's gotta be now.

I go down and he's coming out of his room at the same time. We chat it up, as he is adamant on us joining him. I ask him some questions, and he gets into helping us. We walk into his living room and sit

down. Pretty soon, Guri comes down and Jagdishbhai's whole family is with us as well. We share some of our experiences, they learn a little bit about our past and get a sense of our sacrifices that brought us to their door.

"From the moment I met you, you felt like my own son and daughter," Jagdishbhai says as he gives us his own map and gives us a few suggestions on what routes to take. "I'm really worried about you. In this day and age, you can't do something like this. Why don't you just come with me in the car? I will introduce you to some of the most amazing people you will ever meet." Once again, we politely refuse with the help of his wife. :) And he actually appears to be slightly impressed with our conviction.

Over the next hour, everyone comes together to share stories and brainstorm ideas about where and how we should proceed. At one point, Jagdishbhai confidently says, "You go ahead and use my name wherever you want. It's a license to get in anywhere." And although we don't know of his whole life story, just from the hearing tidbits from other inspiring people, like [Hamidaben](#), it is obvious that we are in front of a living legend.

Jagdishbhai leaves, with about a dozen others on the campus. But the conversation continues in full swing, with others in the room. Then, at one point, Bharatbhai says: "Would you mind giving a talk tonight? I think our staff and patients would be very inspired." We agree.

Within the hour, we give an impromptu talk to about 70 folks. Everyone is pumped, partially in awe. By the end of the talk, couple of youngsters in the room are ready to join right then -- we told we're not ready yet; couple of older folks ask about how we are able to walk so much, about marriage, about what our parents think about this; two folks, one from the UK and US, come up afterwards just to shake our hands and say, "All our blessings are with you." Another youngster finds us afterwards and asks us all kinds of questions about life. Many conversations are buzzing around.

Next morning, Baa (Jagdishbhai's wife and also the cutest grandmother-like personality) wakes up just to say goodbye; Kapilbhai's wife makes us tea and a special treat from their cow's first milk after birth (Guri saw a calf that was an hour old, the previous day); Bharatbhai writes us brief directions to get to our next location, 40 kilometers away. As we say goodbye, Baa sweetly remind us, "Beta, if you don't make it before lunch, don't worry. Just take a break in between."

Everyone is with us in spirit.

Of course, this ends up being the toughest walk Guri and I have taken. It's hot, the walk is slow, we get caught in between destinations, it's hard to find shade, we have unusual -- and identical -- pains that came out of nowhere. But we manage. We rest at an old, rundown train station and start walking again at 4PM.

At about kilometer 33, we see an ambulance pull up on the other side of the road. We keep walking. The ambulance honks its horn, and out comes Jagdishbhai from the back! Incidentally, his "yatra" was on the same route and he had been keeping an eye out for us, on the road. He races out from the back door, to first grab Guri's face in his palms and kisses her on the forehead. "Beta, I was so worried about you guys. I have searching for you all day." Like a true grand-parent, he asks us if we have had any problems. We actually did, but after this dose of love, it all seemed trivial.

"Ok, ok, do one thing," Jagdishbhai says. "Please just accept this rule in your pilgrimage. If someone offers you a ride, without you asking and without you paying a single dime, you should accept it." Basically, he wants to give us a ride. :)

We smile. He doesn't even expect a response; he knows we are gonna keep walking. We bow down to touch his feet, and request his blessings.

Twenty four hours after my 2PM-what-will-happen-tomorrow, I am alive like there is no tomorrow. Just keep walking, just keep walking.

## Courage Under Fire

Apr 21, 2005

The scene is tense. February 27th, 2002. Communal riots are spreading all across Gujarat, and the government has imposed a national curfew to contain the situation.

One week passes, second weeks passes. Things are under control in many places, but in various Muslim pockets across Gujarat, tensions are mounting. Many are being burned alive, many are walking in open public with swords, policemen appear to behaving in random ways, no one was feeling secure.

In one such city of Baroda, one woman is fed up with the unease. Hamida A. Chandul had seen almost 500 mobsters coming to attack one Muslim youth; she had known women being raped; she had heard gun shots while praying with other Muslim women, not knowing if she will be alive. And now, she has had enough.



"We cannot live like this. Either Allah will take us to him or he will rescue us," she tells her friends. What they do next is so bold, so radical, so gutsy, that no one could believe it.

Instead of hiding from the bandits, she went straight to them.

"The night before, a bunch of Gandhian activists were at my house. No Muslim was accepting them, but I had spoken to them once before, so I sort of trusted them. I called them in for tea and they slept the night at my place," Hamida recalls.

At 4AM, Hamida secretly goes into town to get some milk for guests. Most households are scared to go out to buy vegetables or supplies; they pay a little bit extra to have some entrepreneuring youth who take the risk. No one had much money, but everyone was praying that the situation would improve soon.

On the way to get milk, Hamida meets another friend. It turns out that a young Muslim man, Hamida's friend's relative, was just killed. In fact, mutilated. Because Muslims are in a serious minority, they can't even dare to go out on the streets to ensure a proper funeral for their deceased loved ones.

It's a little past 4AM, and this is the final straw for Hamida. Instead of getting milk, she calls home and wakes up her Gandhian friends. "We can't live like this. Either we are going to die or live with dignity. This is not right," she says.

"We are thinking of doing a non-violent protest, a rally on the streets. It's dangerous, it's risky, and anything could happen. But we have to do it. Will you join us?" the Hindu man on the other side of the phone, Jagdishbhai Shah, proposes a seeming solution to all this irrational mob behavior. Jagdishbhai is himself a fearless legend, having walked thousands and thousands of miles with Vinoba Bhave.

"No Muslim would initiate such a thing, but someone has to take the risk. You are good Hindu people and if we don't support you, we will be practically doomed. I would rather die than to have this for my kids, my community," Hamida thinks out loud on the phone.

"YES! I will do it. Let's start right this morning," Hamida exclaims on the phone, not thinking about how her husband or two kids will react.

"You understand that we will be in full silence, no matter what others say. If someone does something, we will not react and behave in a completely non-violent way. Anything can happen," Jagdishbhai warns Hamida, from his decades of experience with such rallies.

"Yes, I'm ready to die. Or anything else. If we all keep on fighting, we will all kill each other. This has to stop, and I'm ready. You have my full participation," Hamida agrees with her whole heart.

She buys some overpriced groceries, to ensure that there is food for the day for her family and rushes home. There is no way that her husband, Abudrahim B. Chandul, could stop her. "She is very motivated. And the kind of fear we were living in, something had to be done," Abudrahim says.

The rally starts. 25 men, 25 women. Hamida was able to convince a few other women and men. Admittedly, lot of the men were in full rage and plotting other violent responses but most did keep an open heart for this to work.

"Instead of the mobsters coming to hunt us down, we are going to them. We'll make it easy. We are here. Go ahead, do what you want. We will not do anything in return," Hamida says of the spirit of the rally.

50 people isn't really intimidating, considering that the Hindu mobs were numbering in hundreds and hundreds at time. But 10 out of 50 were themselves Hindu, 40 were Muslim, half were women, and all 50 were committed to a non-violent response.

Their argument of interconnectedness and peace is so compelling, that not a single soul is able to do anything on the streets.

The rally proceeds for half an hour, until they notice a mass movement up front. It's the police.

"I have never seen that many policemen in my life! I mean, we are only 50 non-violent people but here were hundreds after hundreds of police coming for us," Hamida says with a slight glee.

Police had come to arrest them, for "disturbing the peace". Jagdishbhai instructs the crowd to not cooperate with the arrest. They all lock their hands, and sit down. Quite literally, there are more than 10 policemen -- with all kinds of weapons -- for each one of them. It's a real scene.

One after another, each of them is picked up from the street and thrown into the police van and taken to jail. By the end of the day, their friends get them released.

And the next day, another rally starts. This time with a different group of 50 inspired people. They are also arrested, and released by night. And again, the next day, another rally is initiated.

For six straight days, they rally in the thick of the tension. No one, not one person, retaliates. All the local newspapers write about it, and there's a huge buzz about it on the streets.

Hamidaben recalls, "It actually worked! People saw that we were humans too, and it created a possibility of living together in peace." Following those six days, tensions in the neighborhood started easing, Muslims actually went out to buy their groceries, and Hindus and Muslims spoke to each other.

"To this day, unfortunately, there's still some tensions that remain. 80% is removed, but 20% is still there," Hamidaben says. "People have to be better educated. We can't do some crazy things because someone gives us 50 rupees. But ultimately, if true peace is to be achieved, we have to, we have to realize our common humanity."

May all the Hamida Chandul's of the world stand up.

## April Clouds

Apr 22, 2005

Bahadarpura, 10 kilometers. After 17 kilometers, another 10 doesn't seem so bad. Except that I jacked up my left knee at kilometer number 5 and I've been almost dragging my foot for the last couple hours (and acting out scenes of 'Karate Kid' to Guri). Despite applying "Moov" and wrapping my bandana around it, the pain continues.

Incidentally, we've taken a short-cut today. So all we see are beautiful farms on both sides of the road. And very few people. You forget that India has 1 billion people crammed in the size of two California's. It's all open, free. The curves of the trees, the twists of the branches, the flight of long-tailed birds ... everything reads like Nature's majestic poetry.



But oh yeah, the pain. "Everyone talks about miracles on pilgrimages, but how come I have yet to experience one? I wouldn't really mind getting my knee healed right about now," I ask myself, very insincerely. Of course, nothing happens.

Way up ahead, I notice an old lady just sitting comfortably in the dirt. It was really odd, really out of place.

As we cross her, Guri instinctively says, "Nipun, ask her what she's doing here?" The old lady says she's just sitting there. Hmm. Then she sizes me up, and finally settles her glance on my water bottle. "What's in there?" Water, I tell her. "Ok, give me some," she says as if she's doing me a favor by asking! I open my bottle and start pouring into wrinkled hands that are cupped in front of her lips. Half of the water spills through her fingers and I think about how scarce water is on these roads, but then I observe her and feel a strange sense of compassion for her. "What are you doing?" she says. She repeats the question again since we couldn't understand her muffled voice. "We are on a walking pilgrimage," I tell her. "Ok, good," she concludes as if trying to sneak in some good wishes while we aren't paying attention.

No matter how you look at it, it's a privilege to quench someone's thirst.

Fifteen more minutes of slow walking, and barely one kilometer is knocked off. Only way to survive is to focus on each step, just like I did when I started a cross-country race too fast.

Meditation comes naturally when you are walking for six, seven, eight hours. But it's an art to pay attention to the observer, without losing the observed. Within a few minutes, I strangely start to feel better and even start walking normally! The pain is still there, but it's no longer overpowering me. I feel different sensations. 5 kilometers are left, I'm feeling unusually pumped-up again.

As usual, we have kept a fake destination in mind, but no one is expecting us there so anything is fair game.

In a distance, we see an old man with a hand towel on his head. When we pass him, he squarely looks at us with his big eyes and asks us where we are going. "Well, you seem to be God's people; can you come to our house, our village?" he asks us. Guri and I do a what-do-you-think check and within a second agree to spend the night at this random man's electricity-less home, in a village of 40 families.

It's April 22nd, the month of high summer. Somehow there are clouds up above. In fact, they have been giving us shade all day!

April clouds are singing. The joy is in the journey.

## Soul Food

Apr 25, 2005

He practically doesn't have an income. With his son and wife, he lives in a small, hand-made hut. There's no electricity in their house. All the grains come from their small farm, the drinking water from a well 2 kilometers away, and milk from the cows. Whatever is left over, they try to sell and survive.

That is Udeshi-kaka's situation. Yet when he sees Guri and I walking on the way, he says: "You seem to be God's people. Can you come to our house, our village?" We don't know anything about him, but his sincerity compels us to accept his invitation.

After 3 kilometers on dirt roads, we make it to Ranchodpura, a 40 household village.



Udeshikaka's wife greets us with a genuine smile, but she has a worried look on her face. Her suspicions are confirmed when Udeshikaka tells her: "God has sent us these people today. They are going to eat and stay with us tonight." She gets a little fidgety and fumbles a bit because she knows there isn't enough food in the house; yet she keeps smiling.

Soon enough, we get comfortable with them. They know that we know about the food situation. "Kaki, don't worry about our food. We aren't that hungry. We'll just have what you are having," I tell her. "No, no. We'll make whatever you have," she tells us. Within two minutes, we settle on a simple menu -- rice and daal.

While food is being prepared, we continue talking to Udeshikaka on the "khatlo" outside.

Of all things, Udeshikaka is an infrequent meditator and urges us to go within. "Meditation happens best when it's at 4AM. Everything is quiet. You can go deep within," Udeshi-kaka says while looking around to see if anyone else is listening. Then he whispers, "And when you go within, you see this incredible white light everywhere. You have to merge yourself with that. But you know, we can't talk about this kind of stuff around here. Only those who understand, understand."

Now, it's very difficult to find meditators in India. It's a land of unconditional devotion and prayer, more than anything else. To get a meditation lesson from a random villager, walking down the street is really quite unusual. Guri and I have been meditating daily, but we don't really know much about it ... so we listen to Udeshikaka, with our ears wide open.

It turns out that his father was a serious closet meditator: "Everyone would think he is sleeping or resting, but he was an intense meditator. All these people, they can't understand it. But six months before, six months before he died, he told me the exact date and time he was going to die. And he also told me that my mill was going to close down and that I would lose my job. And I did, twenty years ago. I learned a lot from him."

In light of his circumstances, Udeshikaka's perspectives are thoroughly inspiring. I don't know many people who would invite "God's people" into their home even when they don't have enough food for their own dinner that night; I don't know many villagers who can give sermons of meditation from first hand experience; I don't know many people who go through intense material discomforts and still say, "My pilgrimage is my life. I am put in these situations, and I have to endure it with a smile."



Lunch is ready. Bunch of rice, very thin daal, and Kaki has made an extra dish, which she calls "prasad". After short, gratitude-filled prayers, Guri and I start eating.

Since I have a sweet tooth, I first toss the "prasad" into my hungry mouth. Much to my surprise, it is very bland. Ah well, that's how they eat it. Both Guri and I keep eating. Within a couple of minutes, Udeshikaka blurts out, "There's no sugar in this prasad." He's embarrassed but he also understands; he looks to his wife and explains, "You have to keep a stable mind. I know you forgot because you were a little stressed out but these are God's people. We have to give them the best we have." Kaki brings her jar of sugar and pours lots of it on our prasad, to make for her honest mistake.

This is a really hard process. In fact, really really hard. At one level, you don't want to take anything from these hand-to-mouth people. But then this is their opportunity of service; whenever I have given up something for others, I have always benefited in the long run. Still, at another level, you don't want to deepen your karmic debt; but then again, you don't know if you are allowing others to be free of their karma. And then, there's my usual -- I just want to give them all the money I have. Or that I'll get a job and give 'em this money. Or the good ol' NGO perspective: let me learn about their situation and help them in a sustained way.

When the universe gives you such a naked gift, you are caught off guard. But I suppose that's the purpose of a pilgrimage.

In truth, all those internal thoughts are confused. We are simply journeying through our own minds. There is no long term, no short term. Udeshikaka is not hungry, my soul is starving. Kaki doesn't need more sugar in her kitchen, I need more love in my heart. Udeshikaka isn't a random meditator we met, I am seeing the reflection of my own mind.

After lunch, Guri and I crash on the floor at Udeshikaka's brother's house (who has a fan, at least while the electricity is running :)). About ten of us are all sleeping in awkward positions around the room and on the front porch. Interestingly enough, we hadn't slept that well for a long time. No worries about luggage, no thoughts about tomorrow, just here and now. "Oddly enough, I feel like I have come home," Guri says right after she wakes up.

Indeed, we are at home in this vast uni-verse.

# Between Guri and God

Apr 26, 2005

"If God gave you a choice between God and Guri, what would you pick?" she asks me, straight up. Whooa. Almost 200 twenty-something -- guys on the left, girls on the right -- are anxiously awaiting my response.

Of course, this part of a series of pretty awesome serious of questions from farming school college students, whom we have known barely for an hour: "Why come all the way to India to serve? What inspired you to start in this journey? What challenges have you faced while walking? What have you learned about India from staying in the villages? How did two people from different religions get married? If you parents didn't give you permission to come on this pad-yatra, would you still go? Do you see the same response to service in India, as in America?"

Wow. Three hours ago, we walked into this place not knowing a single person, not having any agenda. Couple hours ago, Udeshi-kaka came to drop us to off to Mangal Bharati. He was worried that we didn't know anyone and that perhaps he could help since he was local. Yet right as we were a block from this farming-school campus, two people were waiting for us. Courtesy of the beyond-fiber-optics network of India, they had heard we were coming. Not only that, chief of the school came from another town to meet us and they arranged for one talk with all the staff and another for all the college students who weren't yet on their summer vacation.

We go with the flow, considering that none of this is by our design anyhow.

As instructed, we walk out to a tree. Huge rows of twenty-somethings, are all seated in silence. Guys on one side, girls on the other. While everyone is seated on a tarp, under the tree shade, we get to be on cushioned benches. Guri and I exchange glances, a bit nervous if we will live up to the expectations.

And then, baam. We are just given the stage with an almost "ok, now talk" instruction. Given our broken Hindi and Gujarati skills, it's not so easy to make a fool of yourselves either. But we manage. :)

By the end of the hour, we are in deep doo-doo with their heavy questions. So we launch a counter-offensive of our own: What is your greatest obstacle to serve? What the most inspiring Hindi movie you have seen? Who are you role models? How do you stay away from negative influences?

Guri, of course, is the ringer on our team. Anytime she says anything, I mean anything, there's an applause! I fake a jealous look, and everyone cracks up. It's part deep philosophy, part comedy, and all inspiring.

Time runs out. But the kids want more.

At night, we arrange for another session. The next day, another. Next night, another. Students would come to our rooms, they would wait outside if we are talking to school administrators to personally introduce us to their friends who weren't at the talks. Guri's fan club brings her all kinds of things from hand-made bouquets to peacock feather "lucky charms" to hand-plucked fruits.

At night, couple of the school thugs came to meet with me too. They said that they wanted to ask questions earlier but all the school administrators are always looking to frame them, so they all stayed quite. But afterwards, they had come to touch my feet but I told 'em that they could only do that if I could touch theirs. So then, we hugged. :)

Under the full moon night, we chat honestly. My attitude is pretty clear: I don't really care if you change or not; I'm just offering suggestions from my experience and I'm trying to learn from you. They tell me that all the teachers are afraid of the boys, that no one really studies and most students have a very uninspiring education in college. But they have no choice. Most of them will grow up to be farmers and barely survive. About 90% of them chew tobacco, 70% of them drink, and they all generally wreak havoc on campus. Having hobbies, like playing a musical instrument, is out of the question since they can't afford it. Doing service, similarly, is a tough because they are barely trying to survive.

"Nipunbhai, you won't believe it, but no one has ever sat with us like this. We have never met someone like you," one of the leader in the group says.

I share my thoughts on karma, seva, and awakening a deeper strength within themselves. One of them says that he doesn't have much, but before he dies he wants to donate his eyes to the needy. Another talks about how much sacrifice his parents have made to get him there, and he really cares to take them out of it. I tell a third one, who seems to be the class comedian, about Patch Adams.

One guy comes and says: "I have been drinking since 8th grade, everyday. For you, I'm going to stop drinking from this Poonam day." I said, "Good. Try. At least think of me, everytime you drink." "No, no, Nipunbhai, I'm done. Never. I won't drink again."

These guys are inspired and deep down inside me, I want to give them an opportunity to serve. Then it struck me.

"Hey guys, do you remember I told you about this [guy in Ranchopura](#) who kept me at his house in Ranchodpura?" I ask them. They nod, so I explain further: "Well, he has very little food in his house. Can you figure a way out to anonymously drop off some grains to his place? I mean, no one can know about this conversation. You have to figure out who he is, where he stays, and buy some grains and drop it off." They are tuned into the challenge. I reach out to my back pocket and take out my wallet. "I'm gonna give you all the money that's in my wallet." I do a little prayer with a kind wish for Udeshekaka, and these kids. I place one hundred rupee note and two 2 rupee coins on the lawn. "This will be food money that your bhabhi and I are sacrificing, so make sure you do this with your full heart." Pumped-up, they say: "Nipunbhai, don't worry about a thing. We have our ways to figure out his contact information, in ways that no one finds out. We will do it, we will do it first thing tomorrow morning."

Just by being there, sharing our presence, and giving with everything at our disposal, magic happens. None of these guys knew about our history, what we done, or what we are set out to do. It didn't matter. They just saw fellow pilgrims who were genuinely extending their arm for a handshake of hearts.

In small groups, people would come up to us and offer us poems, kind words, and just comments: "From today, we are all your sisters and brothers." "We will never forget you." "When I grow older, I will start an effort to serve others and when I do, I will first think of you." "I wish that you live a hundred

years and serve and inspire others, and that both of you stay together for a long long time." "All of us guys want to come and drop you off to the Dabhoi, 20 kms away." "We have never met anyone like you." "Please come back." "Wherever you go, our hearts will always be with you."

It's 10PM, students have exams tomorrow, but they don't want to let us go. Since this is their last chance to meet with us, dozens and dozens of kids surround us under a tree, to get "autographs". I tell them that I would sign with an embedded wish: that they serve, and that they experience 'God'.

Oh, and "What if God asked me to pick between God and Guri?" Nice try, but wrong question. God doesn't divide. God and Guri are the same, just as we are all one.

## Sunday Special

Apr 29, 2005

Every full moon turns to be interestingly unique. Two full moons ago, we went out to look for an '[old man to serve](#)'. Last full moon, I ended up doing a [12 hour chant](#). This full moon, I was with college kids sincerely in search of the "good".

And incidentally, Times of India also published a big "[Sunday Special](#)" story about our pilgrimage today. Although we are really curious how they found the pictures, or those quotes, or information about CharityFocus, it seems that lot of people have read the story. My cousins even think that we're famous because we're "in the paper". :)

Like with CharityFocus, I don't pitch stories to the press. If it happens, fine; otherwise, fine. Our job is to serve, seek and share. Rest has to happen of its own accord. We are not out to create movements, attract attention or solve problems. The biggest movement is from the self to the selfless, the easiest marketing is done by laws of nature, and only problem to solve is the one in your own heart.

For many, this doesn't make sense; for me, it's been my experience. And this article was no exception to the rule.

As Guri is sipping chai on a coffee table in Baroda, I am reading a copy of Times of India. Getting news is always an act of randomness for us. For so many days, we will be totally unplugged; and then, we'll get some news, which all seems trivial in the larger picture. Nonetheless, it's good to know what Bollywood movies are playing, read editorials on why politicians are fighting, and contemplate the impact of communal harmony on India-Pakistan cricket matches.

Recently, Guri and I have been talking about youngsters. "We should profile some youth leaders, so others are inspired and it becomes "cool" to give," Guri and I would conclude. But in a country where 750 million people -- 3 times the population of America -- live under the poverty line, it's hard to find such dedicated youth. Survival is always a big concern, and you can't blame them. Unfortunately, societal pressure transforms that need into greed, and before you know it, you're 65 and counting-down to death.

While I'm leafing through "page 3" of the entertainment/gossip/movie section, on the bottom, I read a small yet inspiring article on a young journalism student trying to make a difference.

"Wow. It would be awesome to get in touch with her. How do you get in touch with her?" we wondered

out loud. Bhabhi, sitting across the table, tells us to call Times of India.

We look up the number in the phone directory and try calling. "Sorry, call back later." We call another listed number. "Umm, yeah, who do you want to talk to?" "Sir, Paarth Joshi, who wrote an article in the paper today." "He won't be in till 6PM. But this is not his number. Call him at this number." Ok. No one has told me to call a business office in off-peak hours, but oh well. We forget about it.

At night, we randomly think about it and figure we should at least try. And baam! We got through to the reporter. I ask for the contact information of the girl in the story and he asks me why I want this information. I describe what we are doing, and he proceeds to ask me a few questions.

"I would really like to do a story on your pilgrimage," the reporter tells me. "Thank you. We don't really want to focus on ourselves, though," I tell him. "But this is really inspiring. I have never heard of anything like this. Just imagine, how many people it will inspire," Paarth Joshi, the news writer, pleads on the phone. He is bent up on doing the story now.

After some discussion, Guri and I agree on meeting the next day. The reporter is sincere in his approach; having spent three weeks on the pilgrimage, we are qualified to speak about it; and receiving so much from the universe, we felt an obligation to share the inspiration in the hopes that it may light other candles along the way. Plus, this is slated to be a small, 250-word, local story to be published two days later by a reporter who was himself a college student.

Following the interview, Paarth Joshi himself told us, "If there is anything I can do to support your journey, please tell me anytime. It would be my privilege." Whenever I have [spoken to reporters](#), for me I am sharing stories with the primary intent of getting him/her to pick up an attitude of service; so this is my text book ending for any interview.

We were gonna leave town within a day or so, so the odds were that we wouldn't even get to read the story. And so we keep walking.

Couple days later, Paarth emails with, "I've sent you like a trillion messages. Where are you guys? I need to get a hold of you ASAP." We were out of phone range, so we didn't have access to any communication. Paarth goes on to add that his editor is really taken by the story, wants to really help and wants to give it the most prominence by featuring it in the "Sunday Special". His editor even agrees to put "[ijourney.org](#)" website in the story, as an exception to their journalistic rules!

Before we read the story, we get messages from family and friends around the state, telling us about the photo in the story. That night, some of my local cousins hunt us down to spend the day doing service work; they also bring us the hard copy of the paper. We still don't know who leaked all the pictures (none of which were on the web), or the info about CF and the awards. Maybe we have Google to blame for this too. :)

But the story seems to have inspired many folks. Last night, an old gentleman came up to us and said, "I read about you. Thank you for doing what you are doing. Hats off." I replied, "We are just trying to change the eyes through which we see the world. Still very much a work in progress."

# First Class Karma

Apr 29, 2005

It's a Ranghavdhut temple in the village of Thuvavi. In the back, there's a prayer room with a fan and two windows. Courtesy of a stranger we met at lunch, we were allotted this space for the rest of the evening. No amenities, except running water and a fan subject to sporadic electricity.

Oh, and there's a toilet. But no shower. :)

It is also Sheetal and Veena's "initiation" day. Since it's their first day on the pilgrim tour, we pass on an offer of pre-made accommodations in favor of "bring on the karma". And winging it on 50 cents per day either spells trouble or adventure, no matter what your karma. :) After 25 kilometers in the heat, bumping into this place seems like "first class" karma. There's a nice river in the back, it's relatively cool and quiet, with some trees in the back.

Guri, after about an hour, says that she wants to shower. We have water but there's no place to shower. We all brainstorm and come up with a brilliant plan -- shower in the toilet itself! (Indian toilets do have faucets, so it's not that bad.) After about fifteen minutes of cracking jokes, we go in one at a time. Guri is first. Then goes Sheetal. He walks in and immediately walks back out with a dumbfounded look: "You have got to be kidding! That place looks like frogs could jump out of it anytime." :) When he finally finishes his shower, he says, "I never ever even imagined I would do something like this. Never." We laugh for ten more minutes. :)

The sun sets. Since we have used up our 50 cent daily budget by lunchtime, we are ready to fast in the evening. Although dollar-a-day type limit is arbitrary, such rules really force us to cultivate a deeper perspective on the unknown. In mundane life, it's easy to think one way and act another; on a pilgrimage, everything has to be in tune or you'll be mentally, physically and spiritually fried. You can't read explanations about life on your cozy bed, you can't chat it up with friends at a coffee shop, you can't escape it by rotating in other dreams. When you are on the edge, things happen in the now. You can't cash-in your "blessings" to run away from unknown; neither can you explain away random occurrences to chance or coincidence or serendipity. Stuff happens. And your mind will keep on bothering you with the same darn question -- why? And dealing with the question is, ultimately, the entire purpose of a pilgrimage.

So, we plan on fasting. Buying, asking, wishing is all out of the question.

Every so often, couple people come in to say hello. One is an older gentleman who invites us to tea at 9PM. Another is the cross-eyed temple priest who wants to make sure things are ok. Another is a twenty-something, jock-like youngster named Viru, who is wondering what we are doing. When Viru learns about our walk, his eyes immediately light up -- "I have always wanted to do something like that."

After some conversation, Viru asks us if we have had dinner. We tell him that we're fine. He presses further and then finally just insists, "I have a friend at a restaurant. Wait here, I'm gonna get you some food." Sure enough, he brings us some food. Then, he realizes that we don't have any vessels, so he runs home and gets us some vessels along with home-cooked bread and curd. He tells us to eat it by

the time he returns at night, after electricity comes back. :)

Before four of us eat in the candle-lit room, we do prayers. At times like these, prayer and gratitude come naturally. Four of us eat, without any plates, from two bowls of vegetables and some bread in our hands.

Viru comes back at 10PM, and this time, with four of his buddies. Initially I wanted to meet with them outside, so others can sleep but then we just went in the back and ended up sitting under a tree, next to a river that was reflecting the almost-full-moon. Viru opens and says, "I told my friends that there's some people they should meet. You guys have walked so much with so little, maybe you can share some of your experiences."

We chat for a while. They share stories about the "Kalpa-Vruksha" tree under which we were sitting, and monks and nuns that their families are associated with. All of them seem to be very sincere twenty-somethings. One of them is chewing tobacco, so we chatted a bit about that. They told me about how the politicians try to bribe their votes by giving all the folks free alcohol around election time. "Everything is about greed, now-a-days," Jigar says. "We are in shambles. Even youngsters, it's not their fault, but they're addicted. All our friends too. The only we have going for us is that famous saints have all graced our village, Thuvavi."

Our conversation is quite engaging. I talk about service and dharma, whatever little I know, and they talk about their life situations, aspirations and God. Viru, a strong, muscular, confident youngster, is slated to go to the army. "You gonna go to the army, Viru? Kill people?" I ask him, to make him think. Viru, who is never short of an answer, immediately says: "Yeah, I want to serve my country. I have always wanted to do that. See, if we don't keep the bad guys away, they won't let people like you do any good in the country."

Few more questions later, it's 11:30PM. I initiate the goodbye process, knowing that we have to leave at 5AM tomorrow morning. Viru is convinced that we have met before and that we'll meet again; he repeats something he's said almost half a dozen times by now: "My only thought is -- when will we meet again?"

As we are wrapping up, they tell me what's coming up for them in a week. "We are headed to Bombay." "Bombay? Wow. Why?" "Well, we have heard of it but we've never been," the villager kids told me. They are graduating this year, it's their last chance to be together, and this is their big trip that they have all been saving a little money for. They want to know what it's all about.

"You want to see women in short skirts on the streets?" I ask them unabashedly. "No, no. We want to see good places. Places like Swadhyay's machi-maar village where the entire town is converted from drunks to respectful adults who pray three times a day. Maybe Pune too." They don't know where Pune is in relation to Bombay. :)

I think about *Third Class Ticket*, a book about one landlady's service to the community of giving everyone a free third class ticket to roam the entire country. Simply by the exposure, the community naturally self-organizes themselves into radical progress over the next five years.

They even told me about their financial plan: "When we get there, Jigar has heard of a place where they sell vegetables so we are all going to go there at 4AM, buy some and then sell it, so we have some

money for the day. See, that kind of stuff, that's our speciality. We can do that anytime, anywhere," they said in a young-proud sort of way. :) "Nipunbhai, we have always talked about doing something like what you are doing, with full faith in God. And this trip is our little experiment, maybe we'll get bolder next time. I think it was God that made us meet today."

We say our goodbyes and hit the sack (err, I mean floor). Bats are roaming around our room, big ants are crawling on the ground. It's all meant to be, our first class karma.

## A Nine-Year-Old's Gita

Apr 30, 2005

At 9, his mom tells him: "Son, I want to read the Gita." Her obedient son goes to the library and get her a couple of Marathi translations. And she says, "No son, I don't like these. I want to read your translation!"

Scholars after scholars have spent entire lifetimes deciphering the [Bhagvad Gita](#). But here is a unschooled, village woman asking her nine-year-old son to translate it. Sure enough, that kid starts to translate it. He gets to the end of chapter 2 and tells his mom, "Mom, I don't understand this yet but I will keep trying."

22 years later, he finished the translation of the Gita. That nine-year-old now had become a spiritual gaint by the name of Vinoba Bhave.



## A Hundred Rupee Note

May 1, 2005

In one big swoop, he grabs the hundred rupee note on the ground. Eight grader Avinash finds a hundred bucks while walking on a busy street! To find hundred bucks like that is more random than hitting five straight black-jacks in Las Vegas. It's unheard of.

An hour ago, when four of us were leaving the Vinoba Ashram for an 11 kilometer walk to the Gandhi Katha, three other kids decide to spontaneously join us. One of them is Medha, a 9th grader girl whose grandfather had walked for six years with Vinoba Bhave. Two other are brothers, Avinash and his older sibling Jigo. It is only an 11 kilometer walk, but it feels like a mini-Vinoba pilgrimage of the next generation.

As seven of us are walking in the heavy, 3:30PM heat, one of the adults throws up, gets a heat-stroke and has to return in a rickshaw with another walker. The remaining five of us keep going.



And then Avinash finds the hundred rupee note. The question now is -- what will an 8th grader do with this jackpot?

From the beginning, Avinash is pumped up about doing this walk. "I won't get tired at all," he tells me to show that he's got the stuff. "But it is pretty hot," I counter his enthusiasm. "Oh yeah, no problem. I play cricket in this weather, all day!" We smile and I swing him around, surround his neck with my arms, and give him an inverse hug.

So when Avinash finds the hundred bucks, he sort of knew that it was a result of his intention for this mini-walk. He doesn't know what to do, so he lifts his head up such that the bill of his cap faces the sky; his big eyes are looking to me for advice.

"This is your test. God is trying to see how much you love money," I say, knowing full well that he is somewhat excited at the prospect of having 100 rupees in his pocket. Previously, his Dad had given him one 2-rupee coin to put in his pocket for any emergency on the journey.

When you meet Avinash, you can just feel that he's got a huge heart. So I try to push him: "Maybe you can return the money back to God? Maybe you can give it to someone else along the way?" He immediately agrees, much to my surprise. Rubbing his head with my palm, I tell him, "Keep it in your pocket. Some need will come up on the way."

And again, we keep walking.

Since we don't know the way, we have to ask for directions every two minutes. Instead of mapquest-dot-com, India relies on human beings. That's bad in some ways, that's inefficient in certain other ways, but it's heartwarming in few very important ways.

"Bhaiji, kareli baag?" we ask a random stranger. The man instructs us to go left, then right (actually, his hands are showing left and right, but verbally he's just telling us to go straight, as is the tendency in India :)). Those directions concur with our previous information, so we head in that direction.

Just then, an old man yells out to us from the back. "Eedhar aaa-au, eedhar aa-au," he calls us in Hindi. We turn around to see that he's indeed calling us. He's a really old man, single handedly pulling several hundred pounds of weight on a bullock cart. His frail, weak physique is almost hidden in the aura of his bright face and clear eyes. "Come here, I will show you a short cut," he says in an inviting way.

"Listen, don't go that way. It's very long. You guys are walking so just cut through this park. It will save you a lot of time," he tells us as if he's offering us a jewel.

We thank him and head in the direction he pointed to.

I look to Avinash, and he knows exactly what I'm thinking. That hundred rupee note in his pocket is itching to get out. He nods his head, effortlessly puts his hand in his pocket, and we turn around to find the old man who is already heading in the other direction. "Dada, Dada. One more thing. We found this on the way," we say together, while showing him the note. "It's a gift from the universe, and we think it was meant for you."

Without saying anything, the old man graciously accepts it. And we part ways.

Everyone is pumped-up, especially because this whole ten-minute episode fit in exactly with our topics of conversation along the way. Instead of buying something material with that money, we made an old man smile. "Did you guys see how happy that 'dada' was?" the kids start to talk amongst themselves.

Guri decides to encourage their altruism by buying ice-cream for all three kids, from our dollar-a-day budget. We are all excited to see each other so genuinely happy.

When we meet up with other "adults", people get to know about our experience. Everyone is proud of Avinash and his buddies, and the kids repeatedly tell others about how happy they were to see the old man smile.

People offer tons of stories about the role of money in the lives of sages. Gandhi said, "There is enough for every man's need, not every man's greed." One famous saint saw a big note on the ground and because he didn't want his wife to get tempted, he covered it with dirt; his wife sees that and says, "What's the point of covering dirt with dirt?" Ramakrishna Paramhansa never touched money; one time, as he sat on a cushion, he immediately got up as if a scorpion had just bit him. He says, "There's something under the cushion," and sure enough someone had left some money there. Vinoba Bhave also went for decades without touching any money.

If Avinash would've bought ice-cream with that hundred rupees, the story would've dissolved right then. Instead, Avinash gives it away, feels a deep joy in seeing the "old man smile", shares the merit with all of us who were walking with him, creates conversations about need and greed amongst the adults who hear about it, and feels encouraged by his proud parents. Giving begets more giving.

To have the heart of an eight grader, is to know that giving is natural.

## Smallest Big Story of Goraj

May 5, 2005

It's the big story. A village woman with 7th grade education goes to the Ramakrishna Mission to become a nun; they reject her because she doesn't have a college education. So she finds another teacher, who has been in silence for 12 years. He instructs her to serve the world. Without any money, without any house, without any other resources, she builds a hut on a wasteland and invites a few village kids to

play everyday. That woman was Anuben Thakkar, that year was 1978, that project was called Muni Seva Ashram. Twenty five years later, Muni Seva Ashram is a 300 acre social service project that is known throughout Asia.

That's definitely a big story. But there's an even bigger story that is so small that it almost can't be seen.

It is the story of Vikram Patel, a young doctor who comes to Anuben's hut just as she is starting the Muni Seva Ashram. As a medical school student, he agrees to come every Sunday to do health checks on the kids that come to Anuben's hut.

Vikram is the third oldest amongst four siblings, and by far the smartest one. In every exam, he's a guaranteed first; no matter what the challenge, he's ready to take it on. "If he's in front of car, he would be the best mechanic. If he's in front of the patient, he would give the best diagnosis. He was good at everything," Vikram's father recalls. Parul Patel, Vikram's younger sister remembers, "His thoughts were always different since his childhood. He would trade in my comic books in the library for books by Vivekananda! As a elementary school student, who would want to read those books? Only Vikram."



With his stethoscope around his neck, Vikram would sit on a small stool under a tree every Sunday. Medical check-ups and medicine prescription for one villager after another. One day, during a routine visit to see Muni Maharaj -- who had inspired Anuben to start this project -- Muni Maharaj tells Vikram's mom, "Don't let your son leave Goraj. This is where he belongs."

### ***Migrating to a Village***

Turns out that Muni Maharaj is right on. A year or so later, when Vikram graduates from medical college, Anuben asks him to stay in Goraj to work with her. And Vikram agrees, much to the surprise of everyone. Instead of living with city comforts, he would live in a village hut without any running water or electricity; instead of making lots of money, he would be a volunteer for a project that isn't guaranteed to survive even the next year.

"People are greedy because they don't know their real needs. Man's real need is joy. When you lose that joy on the inside, you start looking outside," Vikrambhai confidently says when asked if he misses comforts of security.

By 1982, there are two huts on the Goraj wasteland. One is residence quarters, and another is a kindergaten during the days, kitchen during meal times, and hospital during the other times.

Since the Muni Seva Ashram doesn't operate on pre-meditated plans, its programs evolve based on the forthcoming needs of the community and the available resources. Once-a-week patient check-ups for Vikrambhai turns into an indoor facility where patients can stay, which over time expands into a pathology department. When they received a sewing machine donation once, they start an employment program for the village women who are 10th grade graduates. Unfortunately, no one comes because there are no such graduates; very quickly, Muni Seva Ashram expands it's education program to 10th grade.

Bit by bit, Muni Seva Ashram programs evolve and grow beyond anyone's wildest imagination.

In 2001, Anuben unexpectedly passes away. No successor is named, no plans are made. "For Anuben, she was just an instrument of service. This was Muni Maharaj's ashram and he would guide its direction, although he had passed away," Dakshaben says. In a quiet corner at Anuben's funeral, a few very well respected saints brainstorm for a few minutes and name Vikrambhai as the next leader of this ashram.

### ***Ashram's Evolution***

Today, the Muni Seva Ashram operates programs focused on agriculture, education and medicine -- a nationally renowned cancer hospital, a senior center, several schools from kindergarten to 12 grade, agricultural programs to free farmers from market forces, a school for the mentally challenged and a cow-shed to name a few. It's also quickly becoming an impressive model for sustainable use of technology. "In India, we are big into recycling. An old saree becomes a towel, an old towel becomes a napkin, an old napkin becomes a cleaning rag. Similarly, at the ashram here, we make use of everything from the cow dung to leaves on the trees to wasted water," Vikrambhai says. The ashram produces its own grass; cows eat the grass and produce milk; cow dung is used to produce bio-gas that is used to cook farm-fresh food; superfluous water is used for irrigation, plant and human waste is used to create manure for the farms, and so on.



A whopping 70% of the resources needed on the 300-acre campus are generated in house. "In five years, I am quite confident that we'll be 100% sustainable," Vikrambhai says of his technology brainchild. If you go to the bathrooms, you will see automatic sensors on the taps to conserve water; if you visit the cancer hospital, you will see fully air-conditioned patient quarters run with wood-gas gasifier; if you will go to their office, you will find wireless Internet access. His passion for technology benefitting humanity is obvious and he sees no problem in the combination of science, technology and spirituality. Vikrambhai notes, "Man shouldn't lose his focus. We have to build technology for humans, not the otherway around. But there's nothing wrong with appropriate technology that helps us, that reduces our burdens."

At the Muni Seva Ashram, you can find humanity, technology, and spirituality. But there's one more unique element that is immediately evident as you enter the premises: beauty.

"Gandhi provided the emphasis on satya, Truth. Vivekananda provided the focus on spirituality. And here, Anuben added a third dimension to our work: beauty. She took great care to make sure there was a sense of natural beauty at the ashram," Vikrambhai says.

That aesthetic element is strikingly evident throughout the ashram. With 60 foot palm trees, nicely cut grass everywhere, beautifully architected buildings, elegant decorations, anyone feels good just by being there. But many utilitarian social workers argue that you could use these large areas of natureful trees, to farm and feed the hungry. To that argument, Vikrambhai counter back, "We are here to give joy to people. Who is to say that the joy which a dying cancer patient feels in a serene atmosphere is less than the joy of giving a farmer an extra egg plant to sell?"

### ***Pay-what-you-can!***

To top it all off, perhaps the most striking feature of the hospital is this: nothing is free, but every service is on a pay-what-you-can basis!

Villagers come here to get free help, international patients travel thousands of miles to get cutting edge medical care, and city folks in dire situations can even get shuttles to make it here. Naturally, there are cons who take advantage of the system but Vikrambhai says that 20% of the clients will end up paying 50-100 rupees, 50% request about 50-60% concession, and 30% pay whatever is suggested. All the deficits are made up for by donations. It's hard to believe that such a large scale operation can work in this way, but Vikrambhai sees no big miracle in it. "I always knew the value of money. I know what it's worth but I also know what it's not worth," he says.

Whenever bills would show up, the resources would miraculously appear through some person or another. "It's kind of weird. No MBA's can explain how this multi-crore institution survives, but still it's here," says Tusharbhai, a neurologist at the Muni Seva Ashram hospital.

Dakshaben, who was the first teacher to volunteer with Anuben, remembers: "In the beginning, we had absolutely no money. For years, we would go out every night to the villages, explain what we're doing and ask them to give us some money. Ten rupees, fifteen rupees, whatever. It was very painful." But one day, Muni Maharaj gave them a rare piece of operational advice: "From tomorrow, you will no longer go to the villages asking for money." Sure enough, they stop and interestingly enough, from that day, money has continued to flow from different sources. Today, the ashram is worth many hundreds of crores with a daily burn rate of more than several hundred thousand rupees; all clients pay-what-they-can and a few others donate. Still, no one is worried about how the ashram will survive. They believe.



### ***Bottom Line is Joy***

Within seconds of entering such a mammoth institution with larger-than-life decorations, all very elegantly placed, you wonder if you've entered a corporation or an ashram. Within seconds of leaving the humble ashram, you wonder if perhaps all corporations can be ashrams like this.

Vikrambhai has never taken a dime in salary in his 23 years of service. He only eats two bhakri's for dinner and sleeps on the floor every night. He never married so he could serve the needy. He only owns two pairs of clothes, which are given to him by his friends. Few years ago, he adopted two 'adivasi' (native) daughters that he takes care of. His spirituality is very unimposing and practical, yet he meditates daily. And when he stands up from his "chief of the ashram" chair to say goodbye, you notice that the seat of his chair is torn in many places. You feel his humility, straight in the gut. And the most humble factoid: he didn't mention any of this in his interview. In fact, outside of this story, he has never agreed to a profile about his journey.

"Our bottom line is joy. We are here to share our joy in the world," Vikrambhai declares with a glee that clearly shows that he's being the change he wants to see in the world.

Vikrambhai Patel. The smallest big story behind the Muni Seva Ashram.

# Bells of an Ice-cream Cart

May 6, 2005

Behind me, I keep hearing faint bells. Thinking them to be bells around some cow's neck, I don't bother to turn around. Plus, it's kilometer number 32 of 35 at 12:30PM; I could care less where those bells are coming from.

At the next rest stop, four of us find a shady spot to rest for a couple minutes. Everyone is exhausted as Sheetal declares, "I'm now officially tired."

Just then, I see a young man pushing an old ice-cream cart, wiping the sweat off his brow. "Ting, ting, ting," the bells keep ringing from his cart. He pauses momentarily, looks to me as if to say, "Do you want to buy some ice-cream?"

"No, bro, we are on a walking pilgrimage. We can't eat ice-cream," I tell him. He nods and keeps pushing the cart.

Couple of minutes later, all of us start walking again.

As I stand up, I wonder if I can "turn it up". So many times, in my moments of inspiration, I feel incredibly heroic and then I always end up saying to myself, "Yeah, but can you feel this way in your weakest moments?" Fortunately, or unfortunately, I am reminded of that feeling and say to myself, "Here it is. Here's your test." Part of me is anxious, as if I'm about to jump onto a crazy Disneyland ride. Yet a bigger part of me is pumped-up to knock down the fear and laziness.

All of a sudden, I forget about my busted knee, hurting toe, and thirsty throat. Instead, I remember my tennis playing days where you often have to dig deep within to find that extra juice. I reiterate my "put it all on the line" mantra for this pilgrimage.

A gush of energy passes through me and I start walking fast. Incredibly fast.

Pretty soon, I start hearing bells again. This time it's in front of me, the same ice-cream cart that had passed us earlier. As I am walking towards it, I visualize a nice, cold, Indianized Vanilla ice-cream topped with fruity sugar syrup on my parched tongue. Heaven for my sweet-tooth, especially on a hot day.

For so long, perhaps longer than I can remember, my senses have always gotten the best of me. But right now, I'm pumped-up. I'm ready. All bets are off.

I cross the road so I'm right behind the cart. And right in the next moment, I start pushing the cart. The young man pushing the cart looks to me quizzically, as I explain: "It's really hot and you've been pushing this heavy cart for a while. Allow me to push it so you can take a little break." Not knowing what to say, he lets go of one of his hands on the cart and lets me push.

We start chatting. His name is Naginbhai, he has two kids, and lives in a nearby village. By moving his cart for about 12 kilometers everyday, for about 12 hours, he manages to make upto 200 rupees per day.

In the middle of exchanging personal life information, I pop in a weird question: "Naginbhai, do you like ice-cream?" After thinking about it for a while, he says: "Yeah, I like it but I generally don't eat it."

"Do you have good ice-creams? What all do you got?" I ask him as if we're old buddies by now. Perhaps thinking that he's made a customer out of me, he eagerly says, "Oh, oh, lots of them. There's this 1 rupee ice-cream, this mango ice-cream and this 15 rupee chocobar too."

"Naginbhai, today, I want to buy you an ice-cream. Will you eat it?" I catch him off guard. "Um, ummm," he mumbles and rearranges the cap on his head that seems too small for his head. I explain further, "I can't have an ice-cream but it would give me great joy to see you eat an ice-cream. We are brothers, aren't we? So whether you have it or I have it, it would give me the same joy. Go ahead, go ahead and grab your favorite ice-cream."

I stop the cart that I've been pushing. Convinced by my argument, he opens the refrigerated compartment of his cart and grabs one ice-cream. I tell him to pick his absolute favorite one and he exchanges the one in his hand for another one. It's a 5 rupee Raspberry ice-cream.

With a wide smile on his face, he slurps away the ice-cream on this hot day. No one has ever bought him an ice-cream before.

By sharing a simple act of ice-creaming, our conversations take a spiritual turn. None of his hands are holding the cart now; he is busy trying to eat the ice-cream before it melts. I casually place a 5 rupee coin on his cart.

"Do you pray, Naginbhai?" I ask him point blank. Instead of looking up ahead at the road, he turns his head to the right and looks at me squarely in my eyes: "Oh yes. Every single day." In that moment, it was almost as if he silently connected our experience with that part of his being.

My three kilometers are up. Like old tree leaves whose time had come, my physical complaints and ice-cream fantasies fell on the ground, somewhere along the way. The cart rests at an intersection where Naginbhai is to go right, and I am headed left. We part ways.

As the cart departs, I hear the bells jingle once again. This time, the sound is neither behind me nor in front of me. It's within me. I'm so happy to be alive.

## Two New Profiles

May 11, 2005

[Guri](#) shares an [iJourney](#) profile on Shurtiben Shroff:

*It is a routine first-class train ride. Atul Shroff turns to his wife and tells her, "There's a 3-acre proposal to start a hospital in a village where we are building a new plant. Are you interested in leading it?" Shrutiben Shroff gives him an answer that would change both their lives forever: "No." [ read full profile: [Tick Tock, Tick Tock](#) ]*

I wrote one on Jagdishbhai Shah:

*It's 2AM. Police are blocking off entire streets, newspapers haven't yet printed these headlines yet, fear is quickly spreading throughout the city of Baroda. Communal riots, between Hindus and Muslims, have just started in Baroda in 1993. While most are asleep, one man wakes up and heads out to the worst affected area to do a non-violence march. It's one thing to protest after an event takes place, but it's another to go right into the eye of the storm.*  
 [ read full profile: [Experiments in Grace](#) ]

Hope you get a little flavor of what we experienced when we met them!

## Birds Leave No Traces

May 11, 2005



Insults heard today: I can't speak dharma to you, because you're dumb. Since you carry money, you will never find God. It's pointless to profile people, because you're just building their ego and your ego. Walking around like this doesn't serve you nor anyone else; go back home!

It hurts. But really, who hurts?

Later in the day, a monk takes us to bath in the holy Narmada. It's as if all our physical and mental tensions are cleansed by the rippling water, overcast sunset, surrounding mountains and the gentle breeze.

A bit later, we meditate on the banks of the Narmada. Peace. Deep peace.

In a distance, a bird is gliding through the empty skies. Birds leave no traces as they travel.

## Q&A with Rajeshree Muni

May 12, 2005

"Can you record what you are saying?" we ask humbly. "Why?" Rajeshree Muni responds with even greater humility. "So we can spread the words you are saying." "I'm not interested in spreading my words. The world functions of its own accord."

Rajeshree Muni is a very well-respected saint, who had an "order from Shiva" to go and "serve those whose food you have had for so many years". So he came out of his intense meditations for seven years and by next year at this time, he will go again into deep sadhna, never to see anyone again. His devotees think he is very close to true liberation.

Like every other place, we had just showed up at the Kayavarohan temple. Rajeshree Muni is hard to get a hold of, but he shows up the day we are there. He speaks very little to people and can only be seen by others at specific times, yet he breaks his rules to spend 3 hours responding to our questions. :)

His responses to our questions are deep, thought provoking and profound, and very direct. Below are few Q&A, per my understanding of how he responded:

- What is the biggest obstacle to finding God?  
Overcoming your body. We have three types of bodies: our physical body, our subtle body and the inner-most body where the soul resides. Ultimately, we have to overcome all three of these bodies!
- Why is there so much suffering in the world?  
It's the kalu-yuga. You can't change that. Just change yourself, that's good enough.
- Why are your thoughts on Seva?  
It's a good action, but not good enough. Finding God within you is the truest action.
- Why do you serve others, like us?  
I got an order from God, so I have no choice. (laughs) In 1993, on my birthday, he gave me 'darshan' and told me exactly what to do.
- Can you chat with God whenever you want?  
I wish. :) He decides when to give me darshan.
- Shouldn't we serve others?  
There are three kinds of positive deeds. One is 'subh karma' -- you do good things and collect such merits; you'll be materially well off, but then you'll be back in the cycle. Second is 'punya karma' -- you do things in support of dharma; this will create suitable conditions to cultivate truth. Third is 'dharma karma' -- you cultivate truth; this karma will never deplete and has the highest merit.
- How can we tell what kind of karma we are doing?  
You can't. You need awareness for that to happen. Until then, you are just shooting darts in the dark.
- How can you get that awareness?  
You have to work sincerely. Still, you can wire the whole house but unless you turn on the power, you won't get electricity. In the same way, you need to turn on the power. To turn on that power, you need the grace of a Guru.
- How can you find a Guru?  
You can't find a Guru. You will get a Guru, only if it is written in your destiny.
- Who is enlightened?  
Someone who doesn't die. That is, when they die, their body disappears. It doesn't go anywhere but we can't see it; it stays with us forever. Kabir, Mirabai, Jyaneshwar are all examples of enlightened souls.
- You mean, Buddha and Christ weren't enlightened?  
I didn't say that. All I said was that if they haven't overcome all of their bodies, they aren't enlightened.
- Are you enlightened?  
No.
- Can you see your past lives?  
One who can see isn't interested in such things.

- Is there a purpose to a pilgrimage?  
Yes, there's a lot of benefit. But if you don't do it right, it becomes just another physical exercise.
- Thank you for your time.  
It is all destined that you would come here on May 6, 2005.

## Arriving as Pilgrims, Not Guests

May 12, 2005

"This a very bad area. Naked people live here. Ten, fifteen of them will attack you at once and take all your stuff away. Everything. And when they see women, they start thinking about other things too. It's a very bad area," a random teenager tells me.

I slow down to make sure Sheetal, Veena and Guri catch up to me and translate some of what this teenager is telling me. All of a sudden, we are all walking together in a bunch, rather fast. :)

How this 19-year-old drunk kid found us, walked 8 kilometers with us, and took us through a bad village, is a trademark trait of this pilgrimage: luck. But I prefer another word: grace. Last couple days have been rough. From Kayavarhon to Chandod to Tilakwada to Garudeswar, we survive. As the native speaker, it is generally my responsibility to create and sustain random connections to get food to eat, a place to stay, and what not. Ultimately, this is an exercise in letting go, but my ego is so strong that before I submit myself into the hands of the universe, I have to endure a lot of pain, fear, and anguish. Not only am I feeling bad, but I'm afraid that pain will create more problems unless I stay balanced; of course, being afraid is no good either. It's a horrible feeling. Throw in a couple of insults from randoms, couple of bad breaks, hot weather and a dirty, dark, electricity less room for the afternoon, and you are talking a tough day's work.

As we are leaving Garudeswar, I tell Guri, "This is where the real cultivation begins. This is it. Let's make it even more hard core. I don't want a plan B, or a next pilgrimage. I am ready to die now." Guri is facing her own internal challenges, but she smiles at my rants because she knows it's all a reflection of our own thoughts.

On our way out, we buy some tea for random pilgrims who were circum-ambulating the Narmada river, barefoot. The tea stall guy tells us that we have two ways to go -- left or right. "Both will make it, but go left," he tells us. "Why?" I said. "Well, you can go right too, but go left." Huh? But okay.

We go left. We are going to Gora, but we don't know anyone there, don't know how we will get our food tonight, or where we will sleep. In a silent single file line, we walk through the late afternoon hours.

Just then, we see three, slightly shady twenty-somethings on the left. Two of them go into the gully and the other comes towards us. I say hello and try to connect with him, "Hey, how are you?" He nods his head and asks, "Where are you headed?" "Gora. Is this this way?" I reply back. "Oh really? That's where I'm going. Yeah, this way, straight ahead."

The kid looks back for a rickshaw to hop into. It's full, with almost 15 passengers. He tries again but

this rickshaw doesn't stop. Almost disgruntled, he keeps walking by my side.

We keep talking. Now, I can clearly smell that he's just had a couple of drinks. We chat about his father's recent death, the odd jobs of working on the farm and delivering milk every morning, his school that's 15 kilometers away, and an upcoming wedding in the village that all 1500 locals will attend.

Soon, he gives up on finding a rickshaw home. He decides to walk 8 kilometers with us!

Over the next hour, we practically become friends. I ask him about his drinking habit; he honestly defends himself, "No this is just on days of celebration. I don't drink everyday." He tells me about his left leg that is broken because he fell off a tree once. "Oh yeah, I would never walk this much. Ever. It's just today, we were talking and I just feel like keeping on going."

At one point, he asks us, "So where exactly are you going in Gora?" I said, I don't know. "Is there a temple where we can sleep outside?" I ask. "No, no. My uncle works at this place called Ashok Vatika. You should go there. They will arrange for everything there," he says, excited that he can help us. "You see, in our village, everyone is really good. You can knock on anyone's door, even at 3AM, and they will host you. This is our culture."

"So what's in Ashok Vatika?" I ask him. He tells that it's a round bungalow where they do some service work. Lots of people can stay there. All of a sudden, I remember a name that was suggested to us a long time ago. "Actually, there is one person we could meet. Joshnaben, I don't know her last name. In fact, I don't know her at all, but I remember her name," I say. "Joshnaben? The nun? Oh yeah, she IS the person who runs Ashok Vatika! I deliver buffalo milk there every morning!"

It turns out that Raju -- we finally exchange names in the second hour of our conversation -- is down with the service scene in the area, partly because of his milk delivery "internship" that he does in the summers. He reminds me of all the names in the area that have been recommended to us by others in the past. It's a pretty darn amazing welcome to an unknown place, by a random stranger.

At one point, our conversation even gets overtly spiritual; very innocently, nineteen year old Raju thinks out loud, "Today, when you need me, I'm here to help. Tomorrow, when I need help, God will send someone for me too." It was almost as if a drunk guy is speaking to himself. I reaffirm his hypothesis: "Raju, of all the things we have talked about, just think of this whenever you think of me -- what you do to others, you are doing to yourself. Be kind and you will receive kindness. Help others, and you will be helped." He nods, and I know he understands. I hug his shoulders from the side, with my left arm, "Buddy, try to drink less too." He nods and smiles.

As we traverse through Kevadiya and surrounding areas, Raju is almost an unofficial tour guide. Or perhaps an official dharma instrument. That's when he tells me about the community of naked natives, that everyone stays away from. He leads us through it; it helps a lot to have a local with you through these areas.

\*Right\* as we finish crossing that danger zone, all of a sudden, he runs up ahead. "Take the bridge", Raju yells while pointing to the bridge without turning back. He has spotted some friends on a motor bike, so he runs to jump on it and snag a ride, presumably. No goodbyes, no see you later, no nothing. It is almost as if he's scheduled to spend 2 hours, 12 minutes and 32 seconds with us. After that, his time is up and he's outta there.

We head to the round house. At one point, we are lost in the dark with no one to help us. But today, we have no fear; we are feeling lucky. Sure enough, we find the "gol bungalow" and knock on the door. It ends up being a house of pilgrims, many who had walked with Vinoba himself. We had landed up in good hands. We all cook together, at the 8PM hour, and immediately become good friends. It turns out that Joshnaben, whom we were to profile, is there only for that night. She has to leave at 4AM the next morning, but she stays up very late to spend a lot of quality time with us.

At one point, they ask us why we didn't use our connections to announce our arrival, and we said, "We wanted to arrive as pilgrims, not as guests."

Thank you, Universe. I know you are alive.

## Blogging Blessings

May 13, 2005

"I pray for you and Guri every night before I sleep." That's what I read in my inbox last night.

So many readers write to us that they are moved to tears by the personal stories, by this unrehearsed journey, by an all-out search for true reality; and today, I want to say that I am moved to tears by your tears. Thank you.

And the larger thank-you goes to two people who insisted that I keep a journal: my mom and [Rev. Heng Sure](#). As of yesterday, this blog is getting 20,000 hits everyday; couple organizations post daily entries on their office walls and make it mandatory staff reading; [Akanksha](#) is compiling a book of these stories, for the 8000 Bombay slum children that they serve; Profiles are reprinted in many places, folks want to translate this blog in couple languages, press is writing stories we can't track. And so on.

Personally, I'm not much of a writer. Many of my sentences don't have subjects and predicates, I don't remember what gerunds and appositives are, and I hardly check for typos. Not to mention run-on sentences. But I write with my heart, in the hopes that it connects with other hearts.

For the couple hours that I'm connected to the "web", it's a nice affirmation of what my heart already knows -- we're all connected.

Your kind wishes is what keeps us going. Thank you for making this your pilgrimage.

## Lifting Loads, Pushing Cars

May 16, 2005

Paras and I are talking about pain. "It isn't about enduring pain, but rather about understanding it. The more you feel your sensations, the more the universe around you comes alive. That's been my experience," I tell him.

About 500 meters ahead, an old man is looking out into the fields. Through his torn shirt, you can see his six-pack stomach. In front of him is a huge stack of freshly cut farm crop.

Paras is dead tired, on his first day on the walk. While others are walking ahead, we take a little break. Incidentally, it is under the same tree from which that old man is gazing out.

I start talking to the old man, as if we're old friends. He asks me what we are doing, and I tell him a bit about it. It turns out that he's taking a break from carrying the super-heavy load on his head.

"What's your name?" I ask him. "Dadu," he says.

Dadu is super sincere. He's old, but seems really strong. Dadu gives us an overview of who owns which farms, tells us about how he makes more money during sugar cane season, and about his family of four sons.

After a few minutes of conversation, as Paras and I put on our back-packs again, my eyes veer towards that bulky looking package that was lying on the road. "Dadu, what do you think is heavier? This back-pack or your load?" I ask him rather genuinely. He laughs, but still tries to feel my back-pack's weight and responds, "Definitely, this bulk here."

Rather spontaneously, I ask him: "Dadu, let me carry your weight for you." "No, no, no," he says while covering his crop with his hands. "Oh come on, Dadu. You are like my grandfather. I can't let you carry this." With my forceful insistence, Dadu eventually concedes.

Paras looks at me as if I've gone crazy.

At first, I thought it would be cool trade back-packs with Dadu but then, I just went for it both. Oh yeah, baby.

Before we ran into Dadu, I was telling Paras about how each physical sensation is a neurological signal for the brain, and it is our habit patterns that classify it as pain or pleasure. So technically, there is no difference between pain and pleasure.

And now, it is time for me to practice that physics. :)

Paras and Dadu lift and drop the heavy load of crop onto the white bandana on my head. It's not only heavy but about eight times the width of my head. Within ten seconds, my neck is being stretched in umpteen different directions -- all of them painful. The good news is that I can't even feel the weight of my back-pack anymore.

Dadu is super happy, though. He shares beaming smiles with those we cross, and feels that God sent us to help him. By this simple weight-lifting act, all villagers become instant friends; some are smiling out of sheer shock, some ladies are laughing at my antics of attempting to balance the load without my hands, some are trying to make conversation with me. To all, I say the only thing on my mind: "Hari Om, Kaka." "Hari Om, Masi." "Hari, Hari." Everyone is happy.

Although my neck, head and shoulders are hating it, I'm pumped-up. "Dadu, this is my friend who has come from a long ways to be with us today. Can you tell him about God?" I frame Paras. :) Dadu says a few things, keeps waving hellos to passerbys, and keeps lighting up the highway with his smiles.

No one has ever done something like this for Dadu. Ever. And he can't hide his joy. He asks us to join him for lunch, but unfortunately, we have 14 more kilometers to go and no time to rest.

Within a few more minutes, Dadu signals that he has to take a right turn. I transfer the load to his head, and I look straight in his bright eyes and clear face. "Dadu, thank you for allowing your son to help you today," I say and bend my back to touch his very dirty feet.

Dadu immediately stretches his palms to find my forehead and says, "You will receive a lot of blessings." Paras also touches his feet and he repeats his kind blessings. Then, turns to me again to bless me, so I went down to touch his feet again. :) It is a powerful moment, both for a six-week pilgrim and a first-day pilgrim.

For many people, blessings is a religious currency for creating some future condition. But for me, it's something far simpler. It's a state of reverance for life in front of you, where you are compelled to share the greatest love you are capable of. Whether you are a "giver" or a "receiver", both benefit in that very moment. I don't take care if I will meet Dadu again, I don't care if I profit from my labor of carrying his load, I don't care if he was a saint or a sinner. I just know that, in the moment, both of us shared a space of love. He gives, I receive, and both of us smile.

As Dadu turns around to leave, he keeps chanting, "Many blessings, many blessings." His figure fades out but his words keep ringing. Both Paras and I exchange looks, in total awe.

We keep walking. Half an hour later, I notice another old man stressing about his car. His car just stopped working. With another stranger, we try to push the car into motion but the engine doesn't start. So I tell him to wait for my other friends on the way; as we wait, he is taken by the spirit of our pilgrimage and almost forgets about the stress of his car. When all five us -- including our random friend, Gulab, who joined us for 30 kilometer walk -- start pushing the car, the old man says: "No, no. I should be serving you pilgrims, not the other way around. This is so bad." I spot the "Raam" sticker on his 30 year old car, and tell him, "Kaka, this car says 'Raam' and any vehicle of 'Raam' is ours." He smiles and gets in the car, as we push the car long and hard. Sure enough, it starts! The old man, almost with tears in his eyes, greets my hand through the windows. It is obvious that he is seeing the good, the 'God', in us as we are in him.

Paras is dead tired, will throw up three times in the hot day and eventually be forced to take a rickshaw for the last two kilometers. Yet for the opportunity to lift Dadu's load and push Raam's car, it is well worth it.

## 700 Kilometers of Lessons

May 19, 2005

Here is my not-really-top-ten list of lessons experienced during the 700 kilometers that Guri and I have walked to date:

- We are not alive in the universe; the universe is alive in us.

- Nature is our teacher.
- It's pointless to endure pain. It is liberating to understand suffering.
- Pilgrims don't walk on paths; they travel patterns of their own habits.
- I am not my ego.
- Those who have less, give more.
- To greet another soul, you must first walk in through the door of goodness.
- Human minds cannot grasp the destination of their journeys.
- Winds of grace are always blowing. Just open your sails.
- You won't solve all the problems of the world. But make sure you aren't a problem for the world to solve.

## H-two-O, H-two-O

May 20, 2005

Right as we finish getting the directions from Anandbhai, I randomly look to Gulab and say, "Gulab is coming too." As his host for the next month, Anandbhai looks to Gulab with a question mark on his face. Gulab spontaneously says, "Yeah, I'm going to walk with them." He almost doesn't know why he says yes, but he does. "Thirty-four kilometers of walking?" Anandbhai asks. "Oh yeah, no problem," the third year college student confirms.

Growing up on farms, Gulab has attended schools on scholarships and kindness of others. A hard working student, he has come to help his mentor for the two summer months.

"Gulab, are you ready?" I ask him minutes before we leave. "Oh yeah, absolutely," he says with a smile that lights up his partially cross eyed face.

We all walk and Gulab is the least tired. "I am a farmer's son. We are used to the heat and labor," he says proudly. For much of the walk, we travel in silence. But I want to make sure Gulab benefits from this, so I speed up ahead to chat with him.

Before I could tell him anything, he says: "So, Nipunbhai, what exactly are you doing on this pilgrimage?" I tell him that we are trying to build our soul force, by removing our lens of ignorance.

"Why do you walk?" he questions innocently. "Walking is a very deep process. Today, we are going to Kantibhai's house. He doesn't know us and until last night, we didn't even know we were going to be there. Yet, there is some connection between him and us, and that's why we are headed there," I start to explain.

"So, right now, we could've taken the bus, but we're walking. It's a little sacrifice of sorts. Along the walk, as we think good thoughts in our heart and help those we can along the way, we gather some merit through our sacrifices. All of this merit is offered at the door of Kantibhai, whose house we are going to. So, this walk, is actually a sort of cultivation for the benefit of our host, whom we don't know," I conclude.

Gulab looks to me sincerely, as if he is hearing these kind of thoughts for the first time. "Although we don't know him as Kantibhai, by the time we get to his house, our hearts will already be connected to his. We won't tell him all this, but it is our silent offering at his door step. He may or may not offer anything to us, but we unconditionally offer it to the unknown. This is what our pilgrimage is all about. Silent offerings from one step to another."

The words seem to penetrate through Gulab's consciousness. We chat a bit more, then share thoughts on life in general, and then about his school. He is studying Chemistry, and depending on his results in the third year -- which will be out within a month -- he will decide where to go next. Service is a

natural part of him, though. Well aware of his scholarship based education, he also eventually wants to give back.

Oh, and Gulab knows English. We practice a few words but Gulab's most frequently used word is "Okaaaaay" with a huge laughter following it.

We had two awesome opportunities of service, along the walk. Gulab observes one of them from a distance, and participates in the other. He also naturally decides that since Paras is walking far behind in the back, that he will stay with him in case he needs any help. By the end of the day, Paras is deeply touched by Gulab's sincerity.

At one rest spot, Gulab tells me that he is really inspired: "Nipunbhai, at first, I thought you guys were on a field trip of sorts. But this is really something. Thank you for taking me with you."

Over the next day and half that all of us spend quality time at Kantibhai's place. We cook, eat and clean together. We beat the wheat out of its husk, we pluck Papayas, onions and mangoes from trees and eat 'em up, we help Kantibhai work on the farms, we crack jokes about how Gulab can polish off any amount of food, anytime!

One time on the farm, as we were digging, Gulab initiates a conversation about giving and taking. So I tell him, "You are Chemistry expert, right? Ok, so you know what H-two-O is, right? Water." He nods his head. "So in life, just remember this: two parts giving and one part taking. Give twice as much as you receive." It was a simple, imperfect metaphor, but Gulab loved it. He kept repeating it. "H-two-O, yeah, H-two-O".

As he is about to leave, he comes looking for me. I'm sitting under a tree in a 4-acre farm, trying to find a spot where I can get any remote sign of an Internet connection. :) Gulab, standing up, extends his hand out and says: "Nipunbhai, I have to leave now." In my usual, excited manner, I get up and slam my right hand into his and tell, "Areh yaaar, leaving so soon? I'm so glad that you were able to make it. It wouldn't have been the same without you."

Still holding the hand-shake firmly, he looks at me and with his characteristic sincerity, he says, "Nipunbhai, I will never forget this." We silently trade hugs. "H-two-O, Nipunbhai, H-two-O," Gulab says as his final words.

Two parts giving, one part receiving. That's a good life.

# Putting It All On the Line

May 20, 2005



*(Photo courtesy of Sheetal and Guri, from early May)*

# My Crazy Jewish Brother

May 21, 2005

Sitting at a fancy New York restaurant, with some important people, he notices a person falling off a building. Stunned, with an open jaw, he doesn't know what he just saw. But indeed, it was a suicide.

He can't sleep that night, so he calls me up at midnight (3AM, NY time). "Hey man, I can't sleep. I've been thinking about death and all, and I think I really want to do some giving. I want to get involved with CharityFocus," he'll say with some four-letter expletives thrown in between.

I crack up. But that's the kind of friend he is. Every so often I get a call at midnight, or a once-in-a-year email, but almost always it is at a turning point in his life. On one hand, he'll talk about meditation and service and on the other hand, it's about alcohol, cigarettes and women. Still, he's a magnet for spiritual people; he'll share stories about a mystic he met in a remote basement of New York or a yogi he ran into on the roads of Idaho or a secretary who ended being a palmist that told him his future or his desire to visit India at least once "just to see what happens".

Every email or phone call of his had two things in common. The opening: "My Dear Indian Brother." The ending: "Your Crazy Jewish Brother."

Yesterday, I got a note from him with those two phrases, and couple lines in between -- "Bro, I got called to Iraq. I want to talk to you."

While I didn't get to talk to my 'crazy Jewish brother', a part of him is walking with me and a part of me is headed to Iraq. Sometimes I wonder if we're all the same pilgrimage, but don't know it yet.

still haven't had the chance to email majority of my non-bayarea friends about this pilgrimage, so he probably didn't know that I am foot in India right now. But "My Crazy Jewish Brother, I'm walking right there with you."

## No, Not My Water Bottle!

May 22, 2005

Wrapping up Guri's sprained ankle, I left my water bottle at the tea stall that lent us their chairs.

We walk little less than a kilometers, and I turn to Guri and Veena and say, "Shoot, I forgot my water bottle." I drop my stuff and head back.

On the way, my first thought: "Darn, I had to make a mindless mistake on the day we are walking 42 kilometers! My body is gonna pay for this." Second thought: "That water bottle is a little banged up, but man, it's one of those unbreakable Nalgene bottles. Life will be so hard without it." Third thought: "The water bottle would've made for a nice memoir, if it survived the end of the trip. I really should've been more careful."

Fourth thought: "Hahahahaha. Attachment is so funny. You could only have five things, but if your heart is impure, you will latch onto those five things." Fifth thought: "I don't learn the easy way, so that's why I need this grueling pilgrimage. Walk on, pilgrim, walk on."

The water bottle is in the same spot, with all kinds of kids playing around it and unknowingly protecting it. I pick it up and walk back in silence.

## Stares and Smiles

May 22, 2005

I'm a missionary today. I have decided to convert stares into smiles.

It's 4:50AM. A man on bicycle, riding hands-free, is singing devotional songs; I feel a current of positive vibrations as he passes. I smile. A bit later, four guys jogging -- two of them without shoes -- at a 10 kilometer/hour clip; they are easy converts and smile back at my smile. Then, a cow stares. So I smile, fold my hands and do a half bow. Unfortunately, the cow keeps staring. :)

Inviting stares, threatening stares, i-am-confused stares, get-lost stares ... it doesn't matter. I'm going in, head first, to do my job.

Candidate number 17, probably: a semi-toothless man standing outside a *Hanuman* temple at 6:35AM. I match his stare with a rock solid smile. But he's a tough one to crack. He keeps staring. So I pull out other tricks up my sleeve. "Kaka, how are you?" I ask him. Still no response. He nods his head, as if too lazy to speak. I wave. Still nada.

Ok, time to pull out all the stops -- "Is this is the right way to Madhi?" Three others are far in front of me by now, and it's a straight road, so it's a really stupid question. But what the heck. Still staring, the old man in his kurta and pajama finally makes a sound, "HMMMMMMMMM."

I smile real big -- and I mean real big -- do a half bow to him and start walking. "I guess you can't win 'em all," I say to myself. But this is good business, because in the worst case, you are left with a smile

on your own face.

You see, In India, people love to stare at anything that is remotely different. Partially, it's people's dissatisfaction with the present that creates that curiosity; partially it's the non-stressed life that allows them to look around; and partially it's their inclusive spirit that compels them to make everything their business. In America, you can live for decades without knowing your neighbors, but in India, no one will let you pass their street without getting to know you.

We keep walking in a single file line. A couple more candidates here and there and I'm feelin' good about the 90-percent conversion rate this morning.

After about 30 minutes, I hear a car honking from behind. It's an old, grey fiat (the kind they don't make anymore). Outside of cricket and Bollywood, honking the horn is India's third favorite past time. I instinctively move to mud pavement, to make way.

But then the car stops. It's that same old man in the car, I think with some tobacco in his mouth this time. He motions his hand to call me towards the car. I cross the road and greet him, "Kaka, how are you?" This time, he smiles half way. He puts his hand in the left pocket of his *kurta* and takes out a couple of things.

Noticing a small notebook, I think to myself, "Wow, this kind wants my phone number? That is really something."

"Where are you going?" he asks while fumbling with a few pieces of paper falling outside his notebook. I'm just happy he is speaking and I respond energetically, "Technically, we're heading South without a destination but because no one understands that, you can say that we are going towards Shirdi."

"Oh, Shirdi? Ok, good take this and do something good with it," he says while placing a 50 rupee note from his notebook into my right hand.

I am stunned. I mean, we've been offered 500 rupees by [Swami Satchiananda](#), we have found [a hundred rupee](#) on the streets, but no one has just dropped a 50 on us. Let alone a non-smiling old man, who drives in his car to fulfill a missed opportunity.

"Kaka, what is this? Are you sure?" I ask, not knowing what else to say. "Yeah, yeah, take it. Go have some tea or anything. Keep walking. Go, go" he says. With a big ol' smile on my face, I start walking again as he zooms off.

It's one thing to earn fifty bucks, and do something nice with it. But it's quite another to walk diligently until the universe warrants you to be an instrument of service. That 50 rupee note was burning a hole in my pocket, as I am itching to pay-forward the blessings of a smile-less old man.

Up ahead, Veena wants her fruit-fix for the day. Watermelons. We go to a small room looking place, which appeared to be a melon distribution house, and I ask for one; he offers it to us and gives us a knife, "I don't have any fingers, but here, take the knife and help yourself." We do.

The watermelon seller is a good guy. When I notice almost hundred alcohol bottles on the right, I ask him: "Kaka, you seem to drink a whole lot?" He cracks up and says, "No, no, I don't drink. It's just a side business of recycling bottles when the melon sales are slow."

When it comes time to pay, as expected, he doesn't take any money. He's figured out that we're pilgrims, about three of his friends are in heated debate about which is shortest path for us to walk to Vedchi, and there's no way he's gonna accept our money. I go to the back of his shop to find him and place the 50 rupee note in his finger-less hand. He immediately tries to push me and my 50 away but after I tell him that I'm just paying-it-forward, he somewhat accepts it.

Four of us wave our goodbyes and walk out. Behind us, we hear more mumbles. The watermelon seller is running at us with another watermelon. "Take this with you, take this with you, one for the road," he says as if pushing the watermelon in his left hand towards us. "Kaka, no, it's too heavy to carry. Can you just make sure you feed someone else with this watermelon?" I suggest with a what-a-good-guy smile.

After a few futile attempts, I see that he just wants to give something more. I attempt to bow down to touch his feet and say, "Kaka, give me your blessings." Moving back with humility, "Who am I to give you blessings. God will give you his blessings." We thank each other and part ways.

Smiles or stares, all human beings unfailingly respond to love.

## 2005: State of Gandhi's Khadi

May 24, 2005

Khadi. It's a hand-spun cotton cloth made famous by Gandhi's promotion. Fifty years ago, it had a greater market share in India than any other material and today, willing converts are left searching for reasons to wear it.

Many Gandhians like khadi because Gandhi liked it. Most government officials propound it because first, it's their job and second, it generates some employment for "poor". It's questionable if consumers like it, considering that Khadi is less than 1% of the national textile usage, but some are known to wear it because the material is porous.

Today, I ran into the one of the heads of India's Khadi Commission. After a rather confusing series of arguments, I decided to look deeper into the topic. Beyond the emotional, short-term and material reasons, my goal was to understand the rational.

I sit down with a very interesting personality -- a super smart athiest, who is also the grand-daughter of Mahadevbhai Desai, whom Gandhi called his sixth son. Umaben Desai's logic is neither emotional, nor spiritual, nor Gandhian; it's just facts.

Here's the inside scoop on khadi ...

Gandhi promoted Khadi for self sustainability. He wasn't trying to generate employment for the country and neither was he out to create a market about "help the poor" charity. His whole premise was that everyone, rich or poor or in between, should have access to food, shelter and clothing in a self-reliant way. That is, they shouldn't create dependencies on cities, government or economies, lest they get corrupt.

That was Gandhi's ideology. Decentralized units of self-sustaining ecologies. Simple, long lasting, and corruption free.

With cloth, the idea was to use hand-spun Khadi. The process would be all organic:

1. Farming: pick your own cotton.
2. Ginning: remove the seeds and roll up a sliver of cotton.

3. Spinning: use the sliver and a manual "charkha", to create yarn.
4. Weaving: weave the yarn into cloth.
5. Stitching: tailor clothes from the yarn.

Each person needs no more than 25 meters of cloth per year, which can make 3 pairs of clothes, a towel and a sheet. If a person spins for 8 hours a day for 3 days, you will have enough yarn to make your annual quota of 25 meters of Khadi. Then, a community weaver, will weave the yarn into cloth and a local tailor can stitch the clothes. (For the ambitious, weaving and stitching can be learned in a matter of couple months.) Since no part of this process requires fancy gadgetry or non-local materials, each of the 700,000 villages of India can be self dependent for their clothing. That is, of course, the theory.



Khadi, over the 50 years, has taken interesting -- and I should say irrational -- twists and turns.

First myth about Khadi: it helps the poor. According to Gandhi, the poor don't really need your help. But for argument sake, let's say that the city folks want to wear khadi; they don't have the time or the inclination to spin it, but they want to buy it. So, government steps in and says, "Ah, we can do employment generation with khadi." Annually, 600 crores (6 billion) rupees of Khadi is purchased by consumers, so perhaps that money can employ the 40% unemployed villagers of India.

If we stopped there, it could be pitched as a reasonable argument. Of course, we didn't. In our insatiable quest for efficiency, the question we asked next was: how can we increase the production of Khadi? Unfortunately, people asking the question weren't thinking about self-sustenance, but rather of competing with the textile mills that held 99% of the market share.

Since you can't motorize hand-spinning, experts in the field decided to innovate the "charka" (the spinning wheels) that are used to create khadi. *Ambar-charka* is the name of the latest spinning wheel that is still hand-powered but 8x more efficient because of its 4 spindles.

Because the *Ambar-charka* wasn't coupled with an 8x increase in khadi demand, it simply killed 8x of the villager jobs. And in fact, it not only killed the jobs, but also the villagers themselves. In cities like Nagpur and states like Andhra Pradesh, hundreds of weavers and spinners committed suicides in the late 70s.

Technology, innovation, efficiency is not to be discarded. But if these advances are created in profit-making silos, it annihilates the cultural fabric of an ecosystem and eventually, runs the risk of destroying the entire ecosystem itself.

When most people think of cotton, they think white. No one in this generation will even remember that cotton naturally grows in many other colors like brown and yellow. Because of the heavy textile demand for white cotton, all farmers started producing white cotton. Moreover, the heavy cotton consumption by the mills created an imbalance in the natural ecology; as a result, 80% of all pesticides used in Indian farms are used on cotton farms! Eighty percent.

To "efficiently" transport cotton to centralized mills, it is compressed. Then, at the farms, lots of energy is spent in carding the cotton to make it fluffy again.

Most khadi producers now use "new and improved" *Ambar-charka* in India. You can't blame the producers in a land where more than 350 million people live on less than a dollar a day; they are just trying to survive. But the confusion of the government policies, technologists and pundits are creating these weird hybrid solutions that are simply not khadi. Not only are *Ambar-charka* machine parts hard to maintain, it also requires long-staple cotton sliver that is used by textile mills. The same long-staple cotton that has increased the use of pesticides, destroyed cotton bio diversity, and created many subtle forms of inefficiencies. So this kind of a khadi movement is far cry from Gandhi's vision of self reliance.

Government provides rebates to subsidize the cost of hand-spun khadi; but greedy institutions have now created a hybrid khadi-polyester that also qualifies for the rebates. Consumers, as a result, don't have a clue as to why buy Khadi. Khadi propaganda says that Khadi generates employment for the poor and that it's a material that "breathes". Surely, Khadi is thick to provide insulation in the winter and porous to provide ventilation in the summers; and it feels good to wear. But when I spoke to various youth groups around the state of Gujarat, they told me the most practical reason for not buying khadi: it's expensive.

At present, Khadi is a bit more expensive today and that can change with the right policies and better marketing; still, just as an original painting will never be as cheap as a print, hand-spun khadi and block printing won't ever be able to compete with a 80 rupee t-shirt made from synthetic material. But if production of the chemical dyes used to color our t-shirts will ruin the rivers, if the mass cotton production will ruin the land, and the lack of jobs will ruin the lives of the common man, the questions really is: is it worth it? No. No one in their right minds will think so.

Root of the problem, though, is that "khadi" itself is in a state of mess. Gandhians have become idealists whose message is largely disregarded by the consumeristic mainstream. Village producers are just trying to make their daily livelihood. Consumers are getting mixed signals from the government policies, propaganda and competition attempts against the textile industry; to top it off, no one has paid any attention to fashion in khadi. Government is trying to increase jobs and provide rebates but the head of Khadi commission himself admitted to me, "Our biggest problem is that we don't know how to get the help to the right person." That is to say, there is no infrastructure to implement policies.

Khadi stood for decentralized sustenance. But with the *Ambar-charka*, and lack of accompanying increase in wages or jobs or khadi demand (all of which can potentially be blamed on the government policy), khadi was left neither here nor there. Khadi pundits came out and declared, "Khadi will soon take over the textile market." Instead of remembering the principles of Khadi, they started creating extravagant shows, setting up huge infrastructures, and entering a centralized marketing system that they were ill-equipped to fight, that Khadi never stood for. Not only are they losing the fight, but they are in the wrong war.

Gandhi once said, "Live simply, so others can simply live." His interest wasn't in selling khadi and marketing consumerism. He wanted the common man to be self reliant, to be free from market forces to think for himself, to be alive in ways that are natural to them. Perhaps Gandhi's message is too revolutionary for our times.

## Full Moon Fast

Jun 2, 2005

It was a silly game. With a few kilometers left to our destination, I turn to Veena and Guri and say, "Ok, the milestone will read how many kilometers to Dharampur?" Guri says 6, Veena says 5, and I go with 4.

"Alright, if you win, which saint are you going to send a shout out to?" I ask, pretending to be a DJ on hip-hop station.

"I'm going with Shirdi Sai Baba," Veena says since Guri had just shared his life story over lunch. Guri thinks a bit and adds Kabir in the mix. To go out in the left field, I bring up my homie Nag-Mahashaya (a little known disciple of Ramakrishna).

We are walking. And walking. Then, I propagate the game in my mind, "What if I win? I can't just call on saints like that. Ok, if I win, I should fast for the day." But on the tail end of 80 kilometers in two days, with much food, I'm really hoping to lose.

Unfortunately, I win. At least according to me. :) But darn, I really don't want to fast so, after some mental squabbling, I happily give up on the idea. But it turns out that the universe had other plans on this full moon day. Yesterday, we walked thirty five kilometers on few hours of sleep, stayed up late at a random person's house in Bhinar, got up at 4AM to start another 40 kilometer day that ends at someone's house whom we don't know.

We leave the house at 4:30AM, while our hosts are asleep. Our host is a young couple, with super-active 4 year old son; although the drunk head of the house offered us meat and alcohol at first, by the end of the night he was talking about his stories of service. Having never met anyone like us, they feel it to be a "meant to be" event in their lives.

With the moon shining bright, we are on the roads early to avoid walking in the 2PM heat. It's nice, hilly walk through foresty areas and by 9AM, we make good progress on our mileage. We are all tired, but as is our practice, no one talks much about how much about their body aches; it's an understood and accepted part of the trip.

Along the way, I notice an old man walking slowly in front of us. It's a barren road, primarily populated by trucks, so seeing a feeble man with a stick is a rather odd sighting. As I am about to cross the hunch-backed old man, I ask in a jubilant tone, "Dada, how are you doing?"

He mumbles something. I look to him to ask him another question and quickly realize that he's blind. The red sand on his feet is covering his torn sandals, his bamboo stick is too big for him, his clothes are practically rags. "Dada, where are you going on this lonely road?" I ask with silent tears in my eyes. He doesn't know; he finally says he's going to work and then plans to come back by night, but I think he just made it up. How am I to help him? Helpless, I do my little "may-all-beings-be-happy" prayer and walk with one thought in my head, "Why so much suffering? Why this suffering in front of my eyes?"

As Guri says, to quote *Finding Nemo*: just keep walking, just keep walking.

A bit later, a young priest on a motorcycle stops by Veena to ask some questions. Veena, not understanding him, points to me, 400 meters ahead. Like the dozens of daily curious passerbys, the young man dressed in all white inquires about our pilgrimage. "How much have you walked thus far?" "8-900 kilometers." His jaws dropped and he made a rather unusual comment while staring at my feet, "Wow. You are sooooo lucky."

Lucky?!? My shoulder blades are messed up and my arms almost numb, from carrying a laptop-weighted backpack. With the constant heat, I bet if I carried some grain on my head, it' be solar-cooked by the end of the day. Despite drinking any-water-is-good-water every other minute, it's not enough in comparison to the constant sweat dripping from every pore of your being. I don't know this is ideal situations to be jealous.

Still, the motorcycle priest is right. To experience pain, discomfort, unease, and the inevitable uncertainty, in the spirit of dharma, is certainly a privilege. I am lucky. With watery eyes, I keep walking.

We get some cheap lunch on the way, and the shopkeeper is nice enough to let us rest there for the afternoon. We take turns taking naps and reading a book of Shirdi Sai Baba's life.

Then, along the way, I come up with my silly game to guess the distance on the next milestone. Technically, everyone won because we saw a 5 on a board, 6 on a milestone on the side road, and a 4 on the way up ahead. I should fast, per my intent, but I am way too tired and way too hungry to pretend to be a tough macho pilgrim. So I just keep going without saying a word.

With almost 3 kilometers left to Dharampur, we cross our fifth wedding party of the day. Full moon days are big days for weddings. With one loud speaker, a keyboard and some electronic drums, one man is singing up a storm on his karaoke mic. Women are lined up to check out the show on the left and men are crowded around this musical 'lahri' (cart) on the right. Weddings in the villages are big deal.

We walk together -- Guri and Veena don't get howled at if they're with me -- across the thick of the dancing to get to the other side. Music is upbeat, young men are dancing. I saw one particular kid dancing like there is no tomorrow, with his two hands flying up towards heaven, with his feet stomping on mother earth, with a big smile on his face that appeared to extend across the road. He is a poor kid, but today, in his fancy outfit and free spirit, he is living it up. What joy!

Immediately, I forget the irrationality of poor villagers spending a hundred thousand rupees for wedding, when their annual income is 18,000. I forget about how commercialized and consumeristic the village wedding has become. This is their celebration and they're happy. It's all ok.

With yet a tear of joy on my cheek, I walk on. It's a good day to be a pilgrim of life.

We end up at our destination. We interact with some people. It's difficult to be cheery night after night, after walking so much, but that's what every host expects. So I muster up all my enthusiasm, in the spirit that our host, and anyone else there, can share in the merits of our pilgrimage. We talk with a bunch of friends, but our lady host is absent. This lady is a friend of another friend who had hosted us in an earlier town; she had also started some 25+ year old nonprofit organizations, we were told.

We are shown to the place where we can bathe. Ah, a shower never felt better. A few minutes later, the bell rings. A man walks in and says, "We have six guests tonight. Would it be ok if you guys go to a hotel?" Immediately, I say, "Oh, don't worry about us. We'll be fine with our food." The kind, middle-man, relayed the information and showed us a way to get some food.

Of course, these people didn't know that we only have 25 rupees (50 cents) per day (per person) for all our expenses. And we weren't going to tell them. If it is offered, you accept it; if it isn't offered, you accept it. Surely, I could easily pull so many cards to impress the daylights out of anyone, but what's the point? I'm here, not to take what I want, but rather to take what is given.

We all drag our tired legs to the market to see what we can afford. Veena has a glass of 5 rupee mango juice, and Guri and I share one. We come home empty handed. It's especially hard on my stomach since I've been known to polish off a dozen bananas in one sitting. :) All of us are a bit stunned by the lack of hospitality by our lady host, but none of us say anything, even amongst ourselves. She must have her reasons.

It is a full moon night. Nag-Mahasay not only made an appearance on my milestone, but he gave deep strength to my weak intention -- I fasted.

# Guava Uncle of Kantidara

Jun 2, 2005

"What are the inspirations in your life?" I ask him. "The sky because it is so infinite." After a pause, he smiles big with half a tear in his eye: "My mom. She gave me all my values." Then he concludes, "And the sea. It can take the burdens of everyone and still flow effortlessly."



You might not expect those spontaneous answers from a 36-year-old farmer in a very small village of Bharuch. But Kanti Kalola's entire life is something of the unexpected.

"So do you have a spiritual teacher?" "Everything is my teacher, even an ant," he says. I test his answer, "Really. How is an ant your teacher?" Without hesitation, he says, "An ant carries more than twice its weight and yet it works collectively with its community."

Fifteen years ago, a twenty-something quit his city job and moved into a small village, in a hut without any electricity. He had no money, no agenda, and no idea of what to do. His plan was rather simple -- live a natural life amidst the poor. Today, if you go to that same hut, you will still find that same Kanti, unencumbered by the mundane baggage of life and steeped in the natural exuberance for life.

## *Growing Up Fearless*

Kanti grew up in dire circumstances. "My family wasn't very well to do, materially," he recalls. His college tuition was on a loan; he wouldn't come back during vacations to save on bus fare; he wouldn't live in hostels because it was expensive. Yet Kanti somehow managed to attract kindness. Someone gave him a small place to live in, others gave him some vessels, a stove and miscellaneous items for a barebones, college student room. Every Sunday, he would work odd jobs to pay off his food expenses for the week. "I was second in class, because the guy who was first could study on Sundays," he says while cracking up into a hearty laughter.

Despite having many opportunities to strike it rich, Kanti decided early on that pursuit of money wasn't for him. He wanted a good life, where he operated with a natural sense of ease. No narrow-minded manipulations when interacting with people, no future plans coming from insecurity, no tensions of unending goals. "Most of all, I wanted to be natural," he says.

One day, an unknown saint came to their doorstep and dropped off a copy of the Bhagvad Geeta, a Hindu scripture. He didn't say anything, do anything or expect anything in return. As he walks off, Kanti ran after him to offer him tea but he was nowhere to be seen. Considering it nature's guidance, Kanti and his mom have prayed the Geeta regularly since then.

His mom, through the Geeta and her personal life stories, taught Kanti about the values of truth, kindness and fearlessness. Once when he was a kid, ghost sightings were a talk of town. "On the way to school, I had determined to confront the ghost once and for all," Kanti says. In the dark dawn hour, he saw something ghost-like. With all the hair on his body standing up in fear, he moves forward chanting every paragraph of the Geeta that he had memorized and aims to hug the ghost. Inching forward, he does the boldest thing he could dream up -- extend his arms to hug the ghost!

The ghost turned out to a scarecrow but Kanti says, "Since that day, I have never been scared of anything in my life."

### ***Tale of Two Friends***

After graduation, he worked at a nonprofit organization for a year and a half, but then decided that he neither wants to report to someone, nor does he want to have someone report to him. On Sundays, when he didn't have to work, he would chat it up with like-minded friend, Anand Mazgaonkar. Anand himself is a very bright intellectual, who sees major contradictions in the industries polluting the environment, government controlling natural resources, and people working like automatons. Both Kanti and Anand would encourage each other to take the plunge to "do something."

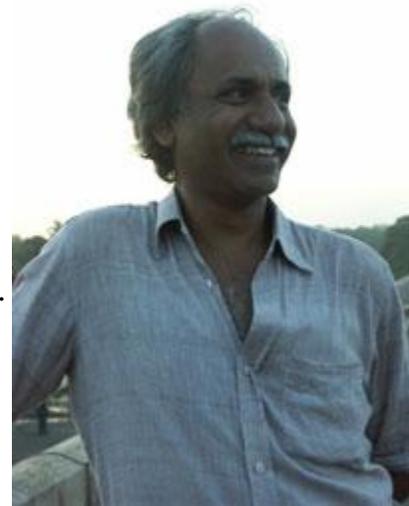
"Those who were educated would leave the village for more money, and those in the villages would quit school to work on the farms. So villages always lose out," Kanti remembers.

So, one fine day, Kanti and Anand took the plunge. Both of them quit their jobs and moved out to a neighboring village. Eventually, they moved to an even smaller village, Kantidara, with two other friends.

"Progress has to be natural. The hand-me-down service model just doesn't work. You can't go to a community with pre-meditated ideas of helping. Once you become part of their community, you become them, you can be part of the process that brings forth some solutions and some problems," Anand lays out a revolutionary concept in a very non-chalant way.

And they did just that. For the first seven years, there was no electricity or running water in the house. They sustained themselves by doing hard labor on the fields, and getting paid in-kind with grains. "In between, we would naturally end up talking to other laborers about things like cigarettes, alcohol, and tobacco," Kanti says.

Many villagers were suspicious of them, initially. "Some people thought we were from CID, that they will go to jail if they were caught smoking cigarettes with them. Some people thought we were with some organization trying to promote their message. Some were even apprehensive at first. They would tell us that we can afford to drink milk, to which we had to say -- 'Yes, you spend 10 rupees a day on cigarettes, we spend on milk.' It was a fun time," Kanti recalls with a smile.



They would also interact with the kids, help the villagers resolve their problems without going to courts, and fight with the government to get clean water in the villages. Bit by bit, they assimilated into the village scene. Everyone learned from their example. Kanti says, "We were all guys, and we would do everything around the farm from washing clothes to getting water, which were typically female roles; at first, they were shocked but then they started adopting our habits too."

Perhaps the biggest example of their selfless spirit is that they organized without an organization. As a result, they would let go of mini, measurable victories in favor of the process. For instance, when they won some hard-fought legal battles, part of their condition for the victory was that the villagers accept responsibility for the proposed solution. When the villagers didn't cooperate, they dropped their case and accepted the legal defeat. Even when it was easy to implement the solution themselves, they stood by their principle of villagers taking ownership of their local issues.

"We are deeply committed to the process, an ongoing evolution, and so we organize without an organization. I think we have seven different names for our network by now," Anand laughs. Whenever under-dog groups are in trouble, all locals know which number to call. Almost immediately, Anand and Kanti can activate like-hearted individuals to rally behind the cause.

One day, while watching how villagers make jaggery (brown sugar), Kanti and his friends ask the laborers if they can make it without chemicals. They said they could, if they had a 80-90 kilogram order. So Kanti and his other friends decided to go for it, and try to sell it at an organic fair. It sold like hot-cakes. So they ordered more and sold that too. The first year, they sold 12,000 kilograms; the next year 47,000, and then 75,000 kilo in the third year.

They could've made a serious profit from it, but they decided that they will take a profit of no more than 1 rupee per kilogram. "If the farmers and the laborers, who work day and night to make the jaggery, make only a rupee a kilogram, why should we take more?" Kanti says. It was chemical-free, organic jaggery, and by far, the cheapest price in town. Although Kanti or Anand are not directly involved in the jaggery project, it still continues as a successful project.

### ***Natural Evolution***

When it was time to marry, Kanti was ambivalent about the decision. He made a list of five of his friends who were married and five who weren't; then, his plan was to ask each one for recommendations and decide at the end. He asked the five unmarried friends first, and all of them unanimously recommended marriage. Kanti laughs, "My decision was simple. I never had to ask the other five!"

In the early 90s, Kanti married Yatra, whose name appropriately means pilgrimage. Yatra's father had traveled 33 countries without any money in his pocket; he would simply do odd jobs and survive one way or another. Yatra and Kanti, today, also have a 4 year old daughter named Maitri. Maitri, incidentally, means friendship.

A couple of years back, when Kanti was swimming in the Narmada river, he almost encountered death. "I thought it was a short distance to the other shore, but I underestimated it. Half way through, I yelled for help, but my friends on the other shore thought I was asking them to join me. At one point, I knew that these were last couple of breaths. I conceded that it was my time to die." But then, something happened. Kanti doesn't know what or how, but his body managed to effortlessly swim to the other shore in an almost unconscious state. Outside of shedding his fear of death, Kanti light-heartedly jokes about a practical lesson learned: "I am not as strong a swimmer as I used to be."

Kanti continues to learn from every experience. "Whatever I need to learn, nature provides the lessons for me. It's part of my evolution."

### ***Sharing With Everyone***

Today, Kanti and his family of three live on the farm. The entire 4 acre farm is tilled and managed entirely by him, and yet he almost never seems to run out energy. Even if you wake him at 5AM, he is abruptly seated on his bed, ready to move into action. "He works harder than four people put together," his friend Giren Shah says. "I don't know if it's possible to work harder than him."

Yet it's not just the hard work and enthusiasm that symbolizes Kanti. It's his caring spirit, underneath all this work.

As I am on a bench facing Kanti's organic farm, an older gentleman and his son come in. "We have heard that you have a cow to sell?" they ask. "No. I do have a baby calf but I'm not planning on selling it." They exchange some thoughts. At one point, Kanti blurts, "Plus, I don't just sell my cows. They are like my children. I go and visit the house where they are going to be kept, I make sure they have enough to feed them, and I make sure they are caring people. Plus, this calf won't give milk for another 8 months, so it won't be useful for you anyhow."



Kanti's compassion for all things is obvious. When he is washing dishes, he carefully spills out the water if it has ants in it. It just comes as second nature to him. "The first year, when we came to his barren farm land, there were fifty scorpions that we took out, one at a time. There's no point in killing them. One of them even bit me," he shares as if it was nature's joke on him. Actually, Kanti doesn't even use pesticides on his farm, and neither does he protect his farm crop from the birds and other animals. "Out of every crop, I account for a certain amount that the birds will eat. It's ok. This is their farm too. God has given me so much, why can I not share a little with plants and animals?"

On his farm, you can find everything from fennel to bananas. If you stay with him for a day, you might even get to pluck your own papayas, make salad from fresh onions and unripe mangoes, or eat curd made from fresh cow milk. And at night, you can sleep outside under the stars and wake up to the rising sun. "Of course, I can make more money if I go to the city. But nature is my teacher. I belong in nature. I wouldn't trade this life for anything," Kanti says.

No matter who it is, no matter what time of the day, Kanti is ever ready to serve up his enthusiasm for life. It's something he's learned from nature. As we are sitting with him, a visitor came to say hello; it turns out that even he has a story about Kanti. "Do you know what all the kids, even my kids, call him? Gauva-uncle," he says. Gauva-uncle is what the city kids call him because every monsoon, he invites neighborhood kids to come in and pick their own gauvas. "I want them to experience the joy of nature," he says.

Kanti sows the seeds and invites others to pluck the fruits. He wouldn't have it any other way.

## Carrying Your Own Thorns

Jun 4, 2005

Walking up the hills of Maharashtra, I feel a prick in my right toe. Ouch. I can't seem to find the thorn, so I keep walking. In couple minutes, again, ouch. No thorn. A third time, it happened and this time, my toe was bleeding. Talk about some serious bad right toe karma!

It turns out there's a small but sharp thorn in my sandal.

Sometimes we suffer because we carry our own thorns.

# Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid?

Jun 4, 2005

A bunch of tribals call us into their home to give us water when they see our parched throats and empty water bottles. This is not just regular water; this is water that they walk several hilly kilometers for, between midnight and 2AM, when the water level in the wells are high. Yet, they insist on filling up our water bottles.

Such kindness can take your breath away.

It takes your breath away for two reasons: one, because it's such pure, unadulterated kindness and two, because it's unclear how long this tribal culture will actually survive.

The same, innocent villagers whose spirits are so wide open, are practically being suffocated by us educated, city folks. Amul Dairy, one of the biggest in India, recently initiated small, rural co-operatives to gather their milk; although villagers now got cows that gave them milk, it made absolutely no impact in the mal-nutrition amongst the village kids. In the cities, you see people lining up to get their Amul milk for 22 rupees a litre; in the villages, you see mom-and-pop farmers bringing their little cans of cow milk in exchange for 7 rupees a litre. Furthermore, to deliver their milk "on time" for the cities, cows are milked at irregular times, not in tune with nature.

So there is some income generation for the villagers, lots of income generation for Amul, much discomfort for the cows, and no change in the village mal-nutrition. Yes, there are short-term benefits of purchasing power as the villagers become service providers for the cities but it's limited in its scope.

First issue is that Amul-type corporates generate more income for themselves than the villagers; but let's excuse that as a consequence of trickle-down economics in a free market. Second, much bigger problem is about what villagers will do with this extra money. Another big corporate gaint will market to the villagers to "show 'em the good life". One corporation provides money, another sucks the money away. Market expansion, village contraction, culture destruction.

Milk is just one thing. But the deeper question really is: does it make sense to mess with cultural fabric of the village, and make it a mini, underprivileged city? They are the ones who provide us grains; they are the ones who care for the forests that give us rain water; they are the ones who have a tradition that is in tune with nature; and they are the ones who have an authentic link to a very ancient heritage.

C. K. Prahalad, a very prominent business intellectual, has written a book called "Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid". I'm still trying to figure out the title. Does he mean, go and grab the pot of gold from the poor?!? Perhaps he's simply relaying what is already happening in the industry.

In fact, I've seen it with my own eyes while walking through the villages of Gujarat. Businesses are asking this question: if we can thrive off the 250 million middle and upper class Indians, can we tap into the 750 million, lower class market? Maybe. Step one, of course, is to create the need. In the cities, because of the existing infrastructure, the recipe is simple: throw in billboards of Aishwarya Rai drinking Coke or Michael Jordan wearing Nike shoes and blast Amitabh Bachchan ads on all TV stations and the city population is willingly mesmerized. In the villages, though, it still needs work. You first have to educate them, so they can read all the advertisements and recognize the brands. Then, you have to bring in TV's and radios with centralized programming so the marketing icons are recognized. And if you can't bring theatres to the villages, at least give 'em all cheap cassette players which can blast the same Hindi song again and again and remind them of what they're missing because they're poor.

Getting this pot of gold from the 750 million Indians is a complicated proposition. Consequently, businesses are having to work real hard to reach their jackpot. It is not uncommon to see Jeeps riding through the villages, with a microphone yelling the same ad on repeat: "2 rupee soap, 2 rupee soap. First one is free, come and try it." In the cities, at least you have a choice of turning on your TV to get your daily dose of consumerism. But what are villagers going to say? One wonders if they are kept unorganized so it's easy to "divide and conquer", so they can't wage strong opposition to any policy.

Furthermore, this 2 rupee soap to wash your clothes, 3 rupee cold-cream to beautify your skin, and the 5 rupee toothpaste to replace your 'datan' all has many subtle costs. For example, villages survive on a biodegradable infrastructure; human waste is manure, tooth brush is a tree branch that will disintegrate on any farm, dinner plates -- banana leaves -- are food for the cows. But now, these new "must haves" come in neat plastic containers and the villages have no trash cans to remove them, no centralized trash collection system to gather them up. Villagers either ruin the environment by burning it, or breed disease by keeping their streets dirty. Lose, lose.

The "poor" are in these situations, one can argue, because they are illiterate, inefficient, and uneducated. I can definitely do more calculus than a villager; I can think up more ideas in a minute than they can in a day; I can communicate in a more intelligent manner than they can think. It's true, at one level. But that argument has a very faulty premise. It assumes that intellect is the king of all domains, which is only valid because intelligent robots (yes, us city folks) have designed systems where intellectual capital is the master. Intellectual quotient (IQ) is what gets paid big bucks when you graduate from college but what about emotional quotient? Compassion quotient? Study after study routinely illustrates that what we measure isn't really all there is to success. So, if the rurals play by urban rules, of course they will be deemed "poor".

In all fairness, though, you can't point all fingers at centralized businesses and top-down pyramid infrastructures. Much of the blame rests on the shoulders of the villagers too.

Even within the existing systems, rurals are at fault too. It is the weakness of their character that they allow alcohol to propagate their unemployed lives, that they spend more money on cigarettes than milk, that they sell tobacco at their vegetables stall. The final revolution, the only revolution, will be evolution of the human spirit. Only when the women will refuse to let their husband take their child's food money for their alcohol, when the farmers will refuse to just plant cash-crops so they can subscribe to an additional TV channel, when the young adults will take a stance to walk the road less traveled, only then, will there be true freedom from artificial forces.

Sigh.

Will we ever design a system that can facilitate a holistic growth, which will self-correct with the evolution of our collective conscience? Maybe. I think so. But even if there is no set answer, it's still worth asking the question again and again.

As a city guy who has stayed amidst the villagers for the last couple months, I have come to one conclusion: no human being is at fault, urban or rural. In a way, everyone is a pilgrim in search of his/her happiness; some of our "experiments in truth" succeed, while others fail. If, on this ongoing journey of the human spirit, we can evolve systems that don't propagate as much greed and selfishness, I would like to be that change; and if not, I will do the one thing I know is possible -- touch the heart of the matter, the spirit of each soul, of my own soul.

Oh, and if I had to write a book at this very moment, I might title it: "Greed at the top of the pyramid." I hope the tribals will always continue to give water to thirsty pilgrims.

# My First Bow

Jun 5, 2005

Today, I'm really tired.

I'm tired of walking without a destination. You never arrive. Every halt is a pit-stop to momentarily catch your breath. Then, back to the grind. Your mind has to rest in motion, through all its commotion. Finding peace in the middle of war is a daunting task, but there is no other option. You have to trudge along, pay off all your debts of greed that have been silently accrued in your mind. Where am I really going?

I'm tired of all the pain. The pain in your toes might go away after couple weeks but then you never anticipate the thorns, blisters or the bug bites. Spiritual teachings tell us that the pain in your left knee is impermanent, but they don't tell you that after your knee, it will be your back and after your back, your shoulder blades. There is no 'Beginner's Guide to Pilgrimage'. No one warned me that a pilgrimage is a natural walk through your own physical knots and mental tensions. There is no escape. How can I be still through it all? I'm tired of paradoxes. Nothing makes sense, if you have the guts to dig deep enough. People are unhappy everywhere, environment is in bad shape, governments are corrupt, institutions are powered by greed. Many great souls have lived and died but we are still in the same place -- we are destroying ourselves. With our overwhelming intellectual capacities, all we have been able to do is change the shape and size of the problem and call it progress. Why am I alive in a time like this?

I'm tired of fear. At every step, I am afraid of what will happen next. I don't know anyone, I don't know the language, I don't know the weather. I don't know who will nourish my soul, who will console my insecurities, who will let me rest with my illusions. Deep down, I know that the resilient human spirit always survives but I'm afraid I don't have that much faith. I'm worried that I will die. What is life, if you haven't understood death?

I'm tired of carrying my baggage. The ego has reigned supreme for too long; and it isn't in the mood for resigning anytime soon. I always want my way, I always want to win all arguments, I always want to show people why I am superior. I, I, I. I don't want to lose, I don't want to pay the real cost for my actions, I don't want to face the harsh truths. When you strip yourself bare, all you see are your self-inflicted wounds. It's a lot of weight on your shoulders. When will I learn to travel light?

Yesterday, Guri and I spot a Gurudwara on the way. Two days before were rough, with 100 kilometers of walking and not very favorable circumstances so we're happy to spot a holy place. Some Sikh brothers show us the way to the main prayer hall; we walk into an abnormally serene peace with a light background chant of "Wahe Guru, Wahe Guru". Guri goes to right side of the room, and I go to the left. Our intention is just to pay our respects and leave; but as soon as my head touches the ground, my ears hear the meaning of the chant -- Wahe Guru: I pay homage to the dispeller of darkness. Tears start rolling down my cheeks. In fact, they kept on rolling for the next half an hour.

Guri gets up from the female section of the prayer hall and translates a Punjabi quote written overhead: "Whosoever's head rests in the lap of Truth, what misery can come his way?"

I finally know what it means to truly bow down.

Keep walking, pilgrim, keep walking.

# No Doors, No Locks

Jun 7, 2005

There's a village in Maharashtra where there are no doors, no locks. It's a tribal village, close to the holy city of Shirdi, named Shinapur.

People of Shinapur believe that if you steal, you will go blind. So no one steals, no one has doors, no one locks anything and no one is afraid of losing anything.

Ironically, the city goer who told me about Shinapur also shared another interesting opinion: "But, you know, the people of Shinapur are really backwards."

Perhaps backwards might be more forward than forwards. :)

# Four Motorcycles on Wilson Hill

Jun 9, 2005

Until recently, there was no electricity in the tribal town of Pindval. Although it gets 150 inches of rain every year, there is a water shortage in the hilly terrain. People are poor. And, there is absolutely no phone connection.

I'm sitting alone on top of a remote Pindval hill, after a long 4 kilometer uphill hike in the mid-afternoon heat. No people anywhere, just trees and mountains. Outside of the light cross wind ruffling the leaves, there is no other sound.

Then, all of a sudden, vroom-vroom's of multiple motorcycles breaks my period of silence. Four motorcycles, seven youngsters, and seven bandanas either around their necks or heads. I am leaning against a pillar of an old temple ruin. Four motorcycles are parked all around me, and its drivers are now headed out to the wilderness somewhere.

A little relieved to regain the solitude, I open my laptop and attempt to get an Internet connection. For eight years, I have never missed sending out the [thought of the week](#). Due to technical reasons, I wasn't able to outsource this before I left on this pilgrimage, so I took it as a message from the universe and lugged around the extra duty. And today, that duty meant walking 4 tough kilometers in the hottest part of the afternoon.

Unfortunately, no Internet connection but those random college kids were coming back from their brief hiatus in the wilderness.

I just want to be alone, in peace. So I just sit there as the twenty-somethings start their charades. They start making fun of each other, they play and replay some obnoxiously recorded messages on their cell phone, they tease one guy about how he won't say anything bad about anyone. The typical scene. None of them seemed to be harmful, but all bets are off with a handful of youngsters.

And then they play that one obnoxious message all over again.

I somehow flash back to my own, oh-soooo-far-away, :) college days -- the stress of doing good in school to find a job, the tension of society imposed insecurities of the future, and the cultural pressures of marriage and family norms. In the middle of all this, imagine a glimpse of freedom from everything on top of a remote hill. What are you going to do? The only entertainment you know is seen

on TV and the only purpose in life you are taught is making money and grabbing power; you've never thought of an over-arching meaning of human existence nor have you ever experienced silence from the nonstop commercial bombardment. So, of course, on top of this hill, you are a bit puzzled, a bit flustered by this sudden splash of freedom.

With all these thoughts, I saw myself in them and pondered about our chance encounter on this peak known as "Wilson Hill."

I introduce myself to my brothers. They are all med school students -- at present, the toughest college major in India -- from a college over 1000 kilometers away. While attending a classmate's sister's wedding in town, they ended up on the hill to "get away" from the whole hectic scene.

I ask about their life and they talk about how difficult school is and how they get absolutely no time to do anything else. They ask me about my life and I show them some pictures on the laptop and share stories. I tell them that I'm gonna lay something on them that no educational system ever taught me -- if you want to be happy, serve someone; serve anyone. Openly, I told 'em my tendencies of greed and the futility of success I had with it. And then when I contrasted that with our radical walking pilgrimage, I think it created an avenue into their hearts.

We started talking about ways they can serve. One of them, I forget his name, says, "Nipunbhai, we want to help others, but we just don't get time. Even after we become doctors, we will have to worry about families and earning for them." I wondered why no one challenges the norm of having families? What's the point of doing it if you aren't consciously going to enjoy it? If it's a burden even before you start, why bother?

One of the kids ends up being from a village; he knows the plight of his people. He says, "Education is a really big thing. Most of the people in my village don't have any opportunities. Unless you study, you just don't get any opportunities." I ask him if he will ever come back to serve his village. He was ambivalent but when I propose the idea of helping just one person in the village, he felt it was within his reach. "If each one reaches one, we'll be in good shape," I say to their mutual agreement.

These were smart, educated, perhaps rich, kids. Yet none of them had heard of Vinoba Bhave and all of them knew about Google and why 'Bunti aur Babli' is topping the Bollywood box-office. So I start talking about one of my favorite Hindi movies -- Munnabhai MBBS, movie about a fake doctor who makes it "cool" to serve.

Roars of laughters and light applause. All of them had seen that movie. "Oh and that Circuit character!" I join the party as everyone remembers couple scenes from the movie.

I tell them stories of inspiring doctors, like Patch Adams, Dr. V. and Paul Farmer, who used their medical skills to serve the world. They hadn't heard of any of them.

After a while, one kid gets pumped-up and says, "Nipunbhai, I really want to do something with the kids. What can I do?" I gave him some ideas and told them to visit some NGOs that I knew of.

No one wants to leave but we are all late. I reiterate my message, "Look guys, we all may forget each other as these personalities, but if you ever think of Wilson Hill and chance encounters, remember this: serve. Serve someone, serve anyone, serve anyhow. It'll make you happy.

Since I'm gonna be another hour before I walk back down, I request them to deliver a message to Guri and company down the hill. Guri later joked, "Those kids, they were so nice and super courteous to me, as if they were talking to someone so very important."

Four motorcycles on Wilson Hill, one laptop looking for mobile reception, a true connection of the inner-net. Who would've thunk it?

# Thousand Kilometers, One Conclusion

Jun 11, 2005

After a thousand kilometers of observing and serving on this pilgrimage, I've come to one conclusion: I can't help others.

In fact, it doesn't make any sense to help others.

The human heart will unfailingly respond to the ills of the world with compassion, but unfortunately, every solution will be incomplete until that human being has knowledge of the whole. I'm a technologist. I understand that nuclear energy is a kind of power that solar energy is not; genetic research is curing many lethal diseases that allopathic doctors can't grasp; privatization is an efficient delivery mechanism than working with the politics of masses; robots are removing the mundane, inhumane jobs and assisting physically challenged people; neurological technologies are quite literally giving eyesight without eyes. And I can write essay after essay on why the web is our coolest invention to date.

Yet I'm also human. I can also see that faster and faster communications has created a lot of stress that is corrupting the family fabric. Uncontrolled power of the media has commercialized our education systems and is spitting out ad-mimicking cartoons in place of evolved human beings. Cut-throat competition in our bigger, better, quicker drive has propagated unparalleled greed in our corporations. Satisfaction index of the world, if there were such a thing, hasn't progressed much despite all our material advances.

Take toothbrushes, for example. Surely, any modern dentist will tell you that you should brush your teeth everyday; and if you go to tribal villages of India, they will all think you are confused soul from outer space to pollute the environment from that plastic when you can use a branch from a Neem tree that is known to have medicinal values. If we can have a reasonable argument about something as simple as brushing your teeth, really how evolved are we?

For every single step "forward", any John Doe can easily cite twenty different problems. Einstein once said that you can't solve a problem at the same level of intelligence that created the problem. I think that's the crux of the matter: in our unrelenting search for solution, we have forgotten to evolve our Intelligence.

I want to take Einstein to the nth, though. By induction, you can't come up with any true solution unless you have intelligence of the whole. While we always like to think we have knowledge of the whole, we are typically just passing time before the next bomb explodes. :)

So the real question is -- is it possible to have knowledge of the whole? And because the "whole" is something that can't be fathomed by the intellect (or in quantum terms, it can't be observed without affecting the observed), this becomes a fundamentally spiritual question.

In looking back at my adventures in service to date, I realize one tendency I have always had -- helping others help others. I was never comfortable in helping others; what are you going to help others with? How do you know what is right for them? Yes, it's better to teach a man to fish than to give him fish, but just because someone has fish doesn't mean he's happy. What's the holistic solution? If there is one, how come no Nobel Laureate speaks about it? So, my approach was (and is) to always unconditionally support the awakening of any soul, on any path, towards any destination. Howard Thurman's quote -- do what makes you come alive because what the world needs most are people who have come alive -- has been the dictum of my service journey thus far.

Today, I realize that it's impossible for me to help others unless I have knowledge of the whole. To

have knowledge of the whole, you have to expand your awareness to encompass everything. And to encompass everything, you need a heart that has no room for the ego.

Until the heart is free of the ego -- let's face it, this is not an easy thing to do -- what do we do? Serve. For sure. The only caveat is that you serve with the full understanding that this is not to help others but to open your heart wide enough so you can contain information of the whole.

Although I can't confirm this experientially, it is my belief that once you have information of the whole, you are merely an instrument of the universe. You become a channel of action for that higher intelligence to function naturally and whether you are doing the most mundane thing or the most complex development task that seems imperfect, it is for the true collective good.

For those willing to look, there is tons of evidence supporting this hypothesis. Weeks before the revolutionary Dandi Yatra, Rabindranath Tagore asked Gandhi about his future plan, to which Gandhi replied: "I don't know but you can be sure I'm constantly praying." Gandhi called it his inner voice. Mother Teresa, time and time, again said it was "God" leading her. Vinoba Bhave said that it was the universal voice that instructed him: "Go ask for land. Don't be afraid. Go ask for land. That's your work." Martin Luther King, Jr. on many occasions gave inspired talks: "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the Lord." Dalai Lama similarly was at Gandhi's grave when he felt an inspiration inside him to lead a nonviolent movement against China. Vivekananda roamed all of India, and then meditated on the rocks of Kanyakumari where he realized that his work was in the West. And so on.

Is Gandhi's work, or Mother Teresa, or Vinoba's or Dalai Lama's perfect? Far from it. But you see, they would all argue that it was never their work. They were mere instruments of the subtle-yet-real collective intelligence that functions through all of us, that guides us to true progress. It is through the hands of these that humanity progresses.

Before we started our pilgrimage, a group of kids once asked me the purpose of our trip. Rather spontaneously, I told them that my purpose is to move from the ego plan to the divine plan. I have thought up and implemented many ego plans in my short life; I could do that forever and feel really good about it, but something within myself is calling me to evolve to a higher level of intelligence. I'm satiated with this level of awareness and it's time to move on. I don't know if I have the heart to go forward, but I'm certainly ante-ing up my life behind that calling to reach "divine" plan. Whether you call it divine plan, knowledge of the whole, realization, God, Universe, Lord or whatever, the point is that it's not the ego; it's something far bigger than the ego.

My purpose in life, then, is clear: to be an instrument of nature. Until I purify my heart to become that instrument, I will be grateful if I have an opportunity to serve. But it is only after that blossoming of awareness, if what the sages say is true, "I" will truly serve.

## Q&A With Kanti Shah

Jun 22, 2005

A saint sees a devoted young man sitting in the back of the room. He calls him up and says, "Young man, let me read some Gandhi to you." The young man humbly gets up and sits at the feet of the saint. As the saint grabs a book, he says, "You should read this translation in Gujarati." The young man simply nods his head as the saint reads half-hour worth of excerpts from that book.



That young man was Kanti Shah, that saint was Vinoba Bhave and that book was "Vinoba on Gandhi". And Kantibhai had himself written the book! He humbly remembers, "Seeing underlines and various hand-written notes was deeply satisfying. Vinoba had thoroughly read and enjoyed the book."

Of his biography, Vinoba said he couldn't have done a better job himself. JayPrakash Narayan said the same thing of his own biography that Kanti Shah wrote. Over the course of the last several decades, he has written more than 100 books that have been translated in dozens of languages.

To meet such an intellectual and spiritually grounded soul is indeed a privilege. Below is an edited interview with Kanti Shah:

*How did you commit yourself to service?*

I was born in a middle class, Bombay family. When Vinoba Bhave started the Bhoodan movement in 1951, I wanted to leave home but since I was the oldest sibling, I decided to wait till both my sisters were married. And indeed, in 1960, I left within six months of my sisters getting married.

*What did you do after leaving home?*

I went on a pad-yatra with Vinoba. It turned out that they needed help with some transcribing some of his talks and issuing a regular newsletter (*Bhoomi Pootra*), so I took on that responsibility. I carried that for 50 years, until two years ago, when I handed it off to the next generation.

*So, you're retired now?*

[Laughs]. Retirement is such a bureaucratic concept. A true Gandhian never retires. Work continues, but now I don't decide if my writings go in the newsletter or not. That's the only difference. Vinoba used to say you have to act with the spirit of inaction; inaction without action is just laziness.

*You've been running the Sarvodaya Trust in Pindval for decades. How did that start?*

In 1968, I met with two sisters -- Kantaben and Harvilasben -- who had also decided to dedicate their life to service. Vinoba told us, "Don't go to Bhavnagar, go to Abhavnagar". That is, go where no one else will go, where there is dire need. So we decided to serve the extremely tribal areas. Another doctor friend of ours, Navneetbhai, also decided to join us on our routine trips to Pindval; at the time, Pindval was an area without any running water or electricity, an area that was (and still is) 99.9% tribal.

In 1974, all four of us moved to Pindval to provide various services for the tribals. We started a free medical clinic, then started giving employment to the locals by making khadi, and eventually tried to get them the basics of life: food, cloth, shelter, health, education and culture. We gave ration cards for grains, where we would subsidize its cost by 50%. Many years later, we also started a residential school for about 200 children. Since Pindval gets 150 inches of rain every year, we improved agricultural practices of local farmers, built check dams and gave very low-cost roofing tiles. Now, we serve about 150 neighboring villages, see 40,000 patients annually, and provide 25-40 lakhs of khadi employment for the tribals.



*From what we hear, your work is extremely well appreciated by the people. How do you manage to get funding in this remote place?*

We don't take any government funding or accept money from big foreign agencies. Our humble donor base, about 1500 supporters, keeps our 70 lakh annual budget going. More importantly, this is all very pure money. Not all money is pure.

In 1966, a young engineer regretfully came to us to donate his entire first check: "I hope you will accept such a small amount." Of the 465 rupees, Kantaben told him, "This is not a small, it's too big. Instead of giving us everything, decide to donate a certain percentage for upliftment of society (to any NGO), from every pay check." After some discussion, they agreed on 10%. Last year, that same

engineer, came to deliver a check of 20 lakh, 10% of his annual income. He now jokes, "I really don't want to give this. It's that darn 10% commitment I made to Kantaben." *[Laughs]*

Another time, Kantaben had gone to give a presentation to a group of women in Bombay. The maid overhears the conversations and begrudgingly says, "These people you are helping seem to have less than me. I have 11 rupees. Will you accept it?" She did. Every year, that woman sends odd amounts of 11, 20, 25 rupees. See, this is not just money; it's emotion, it's heart, it's spirit, all put together. Kantaben's talking point was always, "We all spend money for offering to temple idols. What about human idols? What will you do for them?"

*How do you define spirituality?*

*[Laughs]* I'm allergic to the word spirituality. People use it to control others. It is used and abused by the intellect, not heart. Sure, you can compare notes on spirituality but you can't really talk about its essence.

*What is India's biggest need?*

We need to learn to be true to ourselves. Everyone is blindly copying the West. Instead, we should have a first hand experience of life. We must greet life face to face and see it with open eyes. Nature is our biggest teacher. Hindustani's [Indians] have lost the pride of their culture and heritage, in the name of progress.

*What do you think about globalization?*

What is globalization? If you have money in your pocket, you should be able to buy anything and if you have made something, you should be able to sell it in any corner of the world. **Our most pressing question really is: do you want a global market or a global family?** In a global market, big fish eats the little fish; in a global family, the handicapped child gets more attention than the normal one. Competition versus love. Where do you stand on it? Our culture hasn't even framed this question yet.

*How can we achieve a global family?*

We have to change our lifestyles, our default track. It's a vast task, but many forces are striving for this. We must make this change at the depths of our being. Wolfgang Jacks put it best at an 'Another World is Possible' conference: "What is required today is not a bit of green tarnish; what is required is the greening of the mind." Just being an environmentalist is not enough. The conscious mindset has to penetrate in every part of our life, of our society.

Today, unfortunately, we are stuck in this mega-mania. Everything has to be bigger and bigger, including temples. And then there's machine mania and the have-more mania. We have just focused on material comforts through intellectual knowledge. **It used to be that necessity is the mother of invention. Today, invention is the mother of necessity.** Factories make something and then manufacture the need through advertisements.

*What is development, then?*

Development mania started after World War II. Truman gave a lecture on radio saying that it is America's burden to share our progress with the rest of the world. With that one single statement, he made countries like India under developed. Everyone started thinking that America is developed, and what India has is underdeveloped. This resulted in the rat-race that you have seen for the last 50 years. I'm not saying that material doesn't have any value; there's a threshold of material gain, beyond which we get happiness. But we cannot have unlimited wants. They have to be controlled. India is not under developed, it's just a different lifestyle.

*How do you define progress?*

It's a very difficult thing to define. Like this chair you are sitting on, I have four pillars that encapsulate Gandhi for me:

1. **Blossoming of the human personality:** what is in us, should come out. Whatever helps this blossoming, Gandhi would be for it. Machines, for example, aren't to be opposed by itself, but if it hinders this blossoming, then he is against them.
2. **Blossoming of human relationship:** we must go deeper into man's relationship with man. It shouldn't just become a customer-producer relationship. Everything can't be a transaction in life. Today, we don't even know our neighbors in many parts of the world. Your thoughts should be global, but you have to act locally. If I do some work, the question must be asked: how will it affect my fellow man? Without this question, we can't have progress.
3. **Blossoming of man's relationship with nature:** why do we have nature? Is it just so we can control it? Is it just there for our consumption? A child rests in the lap of the mom when he is young; if he gets older and smarter, mom is even older, wiser mom. Today, we have environmental, ecological problems because of this broken relationship between man and nature.
4. **Blossoming of man's relationship with creator:** we talk about our technologies, but consider the intricacies of the whole human body. Our digestive system, our delicate cerebral system, how everything works together like clockwork. You can program computers, but can we do something like this? Sure, we can put some genes together to make a nose, but that's nowhere close to who we are. You have to ask the question: who made this? How this thing called human being manifested? I'm just here for 75 years; what happens after that? If you break the relationship with this question, or label it all as luck, then there can be no progress either.



*If Gandhi were alive, would he use a computer?*

[Laughs] Forget computers, he would even use robots. Gandhi is not against machines. But we must ask the question of why machines? We have to use it with discretion.

*So, you would seriously use robots?*

Oh yes. I think we can use robots for four D's: Dirty work, Dangerous work, Dull work and Delicate work. In India, there are still people whose livelihood comes from picking up human feces; this is dirty work. Miners get trapped because of gas and mud slides, which is dangerous work that can be done by robots. When people are forced to do repetitive work, their minds shut off; robots can do this work. And then if you want to send a rocket up in the sky, it's requires incredible precision; it's delicate work that robots can easily do.

Yet if we setup a cloth mill in Pindval, I will strongly oppose using robots because it will take jobs away. **Machines should not rule man, man should rule machines.** You cannot let the horse take you amuck; you should know how to ride it.

*What is the state of Gandhians today?*

Today, Gandhians are all frustrated. They are all sitting on a platform, waiting for death. There is no movement, just stray thoughts. With a glorious past, we have done a lot ideologically. But now, there's no momentum and lack of serious leadership. We have all committed 'sati' on the funeral pyre of Gandhi. The spirit of Gandhi is not imbibed in the common worker, who just doesn't have enough trust or clarity of thought.

You know, back in the ancient days, when the flag on the king's chariot goes down, everyone goes numb and entire armies stop fighting. Today, there is no flag on top of the chariot. Yes, ultimately, everyone is a leader but a people's movement still needs leadership. That is lacking today.

*By traditional definitions, you have lived a 'Brahmachari' (celibate) life, isn't it?*

Yes, but this is where I disagree with Gandhi and Vinoba. Celibacy has its place, I am myself celibate, but everyone should have a choice. There can't be a standard rule, a higher or lower gradation. I think sex is natural. My assault on Gandhi and Vinoba is that they tried to take man to the Gods but in reality, they took them towards animals. Gandhi's position on sex was that you have physical contact only when you want to have kids. This is just like animals; they are instinctive, but they only mate during mating season. Nature has given full freedom to man, we don't need to wait for a particular season. Gandhi and Vinoba's stance steals the freedom of human life and without that freedom, you can't go towards Godhood.

My second issue with the man-woman relationship is that of male domination. We haven't really explored a true male-female relationship. Until man and woman are at par, all we have is a form of friendship and not a true union. Men have to understand the futility of domination, and women have to stop copying men; females should have their own identities and not be measured by how well they can copy men.

Talks about the male-female relationship stop at the biological. But in its true sense, they need to penetrate into the cultural and spiritual.

*You have written so many books. What is your favorite one?*

Every one. A mother has no favorite son, does she? [Laughs]

*Did you write a book on the miracles that Kantaben experienced?*

Ah, yes. Three of us, Kantaben, Harvilasben and I have known each other for a long time, since 1960. Kantaben and Harvilasben, you can say, were twins. In fact, Vinoba even started addressing them jointly as "Harish-Chandra" and Pujya Mota, a spiritual saint in Gujarat, even let them stay in the Hari-om Ashram together where typically only individual retreats are allowed. Kantaben faced a lot of tribulations growing up, but that led her deeper into her spirituality. Her path was simple: to chant the name of Raam. But sometimes, she would chant for days and days without any food or water or any knowledge. Sometimes, flowers would manifest in her hands, sometimes chandan, sometimes roses. In Amarnath, one time, an anklet appeared on her ankle and another matching one appeared on the *shiva-ling* that she was praying to. Often, people in her immediate radius would experience very pleasant scents.

But Vinoba was also very clear on these miracles: when a child is learning how to walk, parents generally encourage him/her with adulations. This is just God doing the same to you, early on in your path. If you get stuck there, your progress will stop.

*Your 'Vinoba on Gandhi' book was translated in all languages in India, in English, Italian and many others. How did that come about?*



People like Vinoba and Gandhi didn't sit down and write books like Karl Marx. They take a thought, practice it for 8-10 years, evolve it and perfect the ideas bit by bit. So I read 300 lectures of Vinoba on Gandhi and tried to understand all his thoughts as they progressed through time. The book was a result of that. After the English translation, I got an inflamed letter that said: "How can you say that these are authentically Vinoba's thoughts?" I took that letter to Vinoba and he responded to the gentleman saying, "I have read the book, from beginning to the end, twice. I wholeheartedly stand by it."

*Is it true that Jayprakash Narayan gave your book to Indira Gandhi?*

[Laughs] Yes. In 1973, JP went to visit Indira, in the middle of heated and intense political disagreements. He said, "You don't understand me. If you want understand me, read this book," and left her a copy of my biography on him.

*Do you have a particular author that you like?*

I think I have read all books of Eric Fromme, and even translated and edited some of them. *The Sane Society*, *Art of Loving*, *Revolution of Hope*, *Beyond the Chains of Illusion*, *Anatomy of Human Violence*, these are all some of his titles. He must've been a saint, to have gone deeply and profoundly into all these topics. Although the Freudians don't agree with him, he has taken Freud to the next level. I also like Fritjof Capra's *Tao of Physics* and *Turning Point*. A while back, I translated *Turning Point* in Gujarati. Elvin Toeffler's *The Future Shock*, *The Third Wave*, and *The Power Shift* are also great reads.

*Is there an experience from your life that left a lasting impression on you?*

[Pause] In 1969, on a *Dandi-yatra* reenactment, we all decided that we will eat at the house of harijans (untouchables) tonight. My engineer friend and I, we paired up to go to this one particular house. They made some basic food for us, but the untouchables also had this particular tradition of going out to beg for leftover food every night (this is before refrigerators overtook their cooler role and became godowns). So after we started eating, the oldest lady of the house walks in from the back and puts all this meshed leftover food in front of us and says, "Bapji, please help yourself to this food too." My first thought was a repulsive one: "How can we eat this?" But in the second minute, I put myself in their shoes and realized that this is what they eat everyday. If I say no them, it's an insult to their dignity. So, I ate it and realized what it really means to be equal.

Now, years later, when I wrote about this experience, I got one flame mail: how can you accept that food and propagate that behavior in the world? My response to that is that if two people are standing face to face, what authority -- ideological or not -- do I have to reject his offering? Whether you take it or not is really a test of how equal you treat him or her to be, in that very moment.

*What gives you joy?*

Everything, even in seeing you. In spirituality, 'brahmacharya' is a popular word; it describes a person who steadfastly walks the path of 'brahma'. I have coined a new word: *anandcharya*, someone who steadfastly walks the path of joy. If racing cars at 150 kilometers per hour gives you joy, that's great too. That activity might evolve, but so long as you are doing what gives you joy, you are on the right track.

*What will happen to your work, to your organization, after you pass away?*

[Laughs]. I have absolutely no worries because I believe in reincarnation. There were some big people before me, so they all have to be reborn somewhere. [Laughs] They will come back and do this work. I'm not worried at all.

*What inspires you most about life?*

Diversity. Everyone is after career, after money. In every generation, there will be a certain percentage of people who will push the bounds. Like you guys, who bucked all traditional pressures, to walk across India. I get inspiration from knowing that there will always be those who authentically push us to the frontiers of human existence.

*How do you define 'service'?*

Seva is not just your surface level action. Seva is how we face people, how we interact with all of life; seva is reflected in your everyday actions, everymoment actions.

*Thank you so much for spending time with us.*

## Monsoon Meditation

Jun 22, 2005



*A casual stroll  
From meditation  
into nature.*

*Couple tears  
To see beings swim  
from ignorance to bliss.*

*A simple prayer:  
Make me a ferryman  
when I grow up.*

*Just then ...*

*Monsoon's first rain  
Heaven's teardrops  
flow into mine.*

## Ripening of a Mango

Jun 23, 2005

It was a joke. Or so we thought.

Sitting under a tree in the remote tribal hills of Northern Maharashtra, I turn to Guri and randomly ask, "Ok, seriously, what if someone just came upto you and handed you mangoes? I mean just handed them to you, out of nowhere, without wanting anything in return. What would you do?"

Veena and Guri share a good laugh. I persist, "No, come on. What would you do?" Chewing on some *thepla* and jaggery that our previous host had packed for our journey through these barren lands, Guri mumbles, "If that happens, then you will cook for me for an entire month." More laughs.

Today is a big day. We enter the state of Maharashtra from the far eastern tribal hills of Gujarat. Our previous host, Sujataben, gives us a huge package as we are about to leave: "Here, take this. You'll need it." Despite our refusal, she packs us over a dozen *theplas* (bread), some jaggery, and some spiced up puffed rice.

Sujataben didn't know of anyone crazy enough to cross the river, walk up through the hills and enter Nashik 110 kilometers later. But we have no choice since we are journeying by foot. She calls one of the local tribal folks to give us \*very\* approximate directions. Good news is that we know we have to follow the sun rising in the East. :)

We take off at 5AM on what promises to be a true adventure -- we don't know anyone, we don't have a place to rest the night, it's hilly and tribal, and we don't speak the language. To top it off, many pilgrims have warned us that Maharastans aren't as hospitable as Gujaratis. ;)

Onwards we charge, through these dimly populated hills.

No doubt, it would've been the toughest day to date but fortunately, nature cooperates with us. We don't see the sun all day! Not even a single peek through the thick clouds. So we just keep walking and walking, hoping to spot villages that we are told are on the way.

There's no food (or tea!) on the way. At about 2PM, Guri rolls out her shawl under a tree and instructs us macho-wanna-be's to snack on Sujataben's food offering.



Seeing a man climbing a 50 foot mango tree to grab some mangoes, I look to Guri and Veena and ask them what they'd be willing to ante up if the universe provided them an offering of mangoes. Mangoes sound really tempting, in comparison to the dry snacks we are having for lunch, but both Guri and Veena think it's a ludicrous impossibility so we just joke it off.

After a hilly 30 kilometers, we are hoping to walk another 10 kilometers to get to the village of Nanasi. They are said to have a government school where we might be able to spend the night. Going into uncertainty like this is typically nerve racking, but today, we're too happy to be in another state. :)

On the way, through [thorn insights](#) et al, I keep the pace by walking up ahead. Veena and Guri are about a quarter kilometer behind.

All of a sudden, I hear a huge yell from behind me -- "Nippppunnn!"

It's Guri lifting both her arms jubilantly up towards the sky. There's something in both her hands. Behind her, Veena is lifting both her hands too. It turns out that couple guys were picking bite-sized mangoes off a farm; when they saw Veena and Guri, they ran upto them and dropped off enough mangoes to fill all four of their hands. Then they took off. Just like that.

We sat on the side of the streets, cleaned the mangoes with our precious water-bottle water, and um-um-um, ate bunch of them. And then all of sudden, Veena remembers the prophetic joke: "Wait a second, mangoes? We didn't ask for it, someone just came up and gave it to us without any rhyme or reason and then just went away." Ooooooh. Our mango ecstasy pauses for just a brief moment, as if we got a glimpse of the universal aliveness.

If the story ended there, it would be a nice ending. But there's more.

The next day, as we were walking into Nashik, we take a five minute water break. I pull out my lone remaining bit-sized mango to sip away all its sweet juice.

Just then, a dark middle aged comes out of the nearby house. He inquires about us, offers us water and starts chatting with us about our pilgrimage. "Yeah, my wife saw you from the fields and asked me to come all the way out here to greet you," he says. Because he's Gujarati, we have an extra "home team" kind of connection too.

As I spit out the remaining mango from my mouth, he is curious about it. I tell him how some kind folks gave it to us on the way and how we loved mangoes. Something shifted in him as he invites us into his small, one-room-one-kitchen den. His wife comes in as we all talk about spiritual principles and how people come together in random ways to teach each other lessons. They serve us some wholesome lemonade, which we gladly accept.

While they look like an oddly matched couple, they both seem happy and kind. "Our marriage was just like yours. We are both from very different family and religious backgrounds but it was meant to be," the wife tells us connecting herself with our Punjabi-Gujarati marriage.

Then, it's time to leave. We still had a few more kilometers left (actually, we walked another 24 kilometers that night!). The husband turns to the wife and tells him about how he caught me eating bite-sized mangoes that someone offered on the way. Almost immediately, she takes off inside and brings three huge mangoes! Not one, not two, three. We, of course, refuse such an over-the-top offering, but she quickly shuts me up with, "I am your sister. Can you ever refuse something from your sister?"

Wow, well, what can you say to that? With all of us smiling, we take off with one mango each.

If the story ended here, it would be a nice ending. But there's more.

While Guri and Veena eat their mangoes, my mango stays in my backpack for the next two days.

Day after that -- by this time Veena had left for Hyderabad -- we end up staying at another amazing place on the outskirts of Nashik at the "ashram" of Srikanthbhai and Niruben, a brother-sister combo who have committed their lives to service.

During dinner that night, we learn that today is 18th birthday of one of the caretakers -- Sangeeta (pictured on the right). As all eleven of us in a circle wish her a happy birthday and tease her (and her husband), I tell Sangeeta that I have a special birthday gift for her after dinner. Guri gives me one of those oh-no-what-is-nipun-gonna-do-this-time looks. :)



As we eat, they ask us to share stories about our walk, the lessons learned and our "wow-what-a-life" experiences. It's a good time.

"This is an offering I received from a sister along the way; it comes with a lot of love. And I think it has your name written all over it," I tell Sangeeta (who is also like my sister by now) as I hand her my mango from the previous day, that incidentally happens to be in my pocket! It is a perfect ending to all the stories we shared during dinner.

The next morning, while we are all eating a sweet dish -- *rava*, Sangeeta whispers into my ear, "Did you taste it?" Quizzically I respond, "Um, yeah, it's really tasty. My mom makes this for me all the time but I haven't had it once on this trip!" She innocently says, "We also put the mango in it so we can all share the kindness." I took another bite. Sure enough, the slight hint of mango is now obvious.

Sangeeta's eighteenth birthday gift was a second hand mango. But what I really passed on was a pearl of kindness from one sister to another. And because she immediately shared what she received, I knew that she looked inside the shell.

## India's Favorite Spiritual Excuse

Jun 25, 2005

As we step into a home, our host -- friend of a previous host in another city -- immediately says, "You know, I don't understand this 'leaving everything' business. It's nonsensical, if you ask me."

Why, nice to meet you too. My first response is to strike back with my ego and put the guy back in his cage. But then you realize that you rely on the kindness of strangers for your survival, and very directly the man in front of me is hosting and feeding me tonight. Mustering up all my humility and compassion, I respond, "Yeah, such pilgrimages don't always make sense; but sometimes doing things out of your comfort zone gives you a new perspective on life. Do you have a spiritual path you follow?"

"Absolutely. I am Karma-Yogi. I believe in living in the world, and taking care of my duties and not running away from them," he says as if launching another scud missile. :)

Ah, the infamous "I-am-a-karma-yogi" line. India's favorite spiritual excuse. It used to be that you have to renounce the world to be spiritual, to realize "God", to be "enlightened". And then, thank God for Karma Yoga; now, I can be spiritual while staying in the world. I can indulge in mindless entertainment, I can hoard money, I can show off my power, I can fashionably drug myself up with intoxicants, but if I'm somehow providing for my family and reading the Bhagavad Geeta two times a week, then I'm a Karma-Yogi doing my duty in the world.

Um, not quite.

As the conversation progresses, I ask our host, "Are you happy doing your duties?" He says, "No, but that's the challenge of Karma Yoga. You get what you deserve and you have to accept it. You can't run away."

Karma is an interesting concept. The way I understand it, it is the lingering residue from each action. If I respond to my host with anger, even if I get my way, I am leaving a trail of negativity in my mind.

Over time, these traces consolidate to form our personality and subtly create favorable or unfavorable circumstances for us to experience.

"Do you think it's possible to run away from your karma? If I go on a pilgrimage, or live in the Himalayas, or stay in this bungalow, does it really make a difference?" I ask him.

"My question is why go do all these crazy things? Why not just accept what you are given, and do the best you can?" he counters.

"Are you able to do the best you can?" I counter his counter question. By now, the conversation is more sincere and open. Since I'm able to stand my ground rationally, I seem to have gained some credibility in his eyes.

"You shouldn't be greedy with doing good. Just do what you can. Be content. God has given you the ability to a few things, and you should be satisfied in doing them."

I absolutely detest this argument -- I am greedy in all aspects of my life, but when it comes to removing that greed, I want to be connnnteeennnttt. Ha! But I take a practical example to explain the concept in another way. "You know Vivekananda, right? When Vivekananda went to Ramakrishna, he wasn't content with the world; he wanted to see, experience God, and he wanted it right now. Do you think he was greedy? Not really. There was simply a sense of urgency, an immediate calling to see beyond the illusions of the mind."

"Well, I believe you should accept whatever your karma is."

"Would you recommend the same to a robber?"

"No, I think you should do good. If you have money, help people with money; everyone needs it. But if you don't have anything, how are you doing to help anyone?"

His arguments were starting to get really loopy -- climb the corporate ladder in the name of taking care of your family but practice contentment when it's comes to the spiritual ladder; tell a robber to be good but learn to accept everything as your karma.

I try to conclude, "Well, I'm personally not very happy being greedy after money, power and fame. It doesn't satisfy. So I try to stop it. And when I can't stop it, I go out to cultivate more tools. That's what this pilgrimage is about, that's what my life is about."

"Let me be up front with you. Kids your age should be taking care of their parents, starting a career and family life. What is all this walking business? You sound like you could make good money; you should earn and give people what they really need -- money. No one cares for your pilgrimage. And how are you going to help others, when you can't even help your parents?" he finally lays out the prejudices that he's been meaning to lay out.

Yeah, baby. If I was single, I bet he would've said I should get married; if I was walking alone, I bet he would rag on me for being a bad husband; if I was ten years older, he would've told me about having kids. But for now, he talked about my parents. This time, though, I laid it down on him hard and cold. I told him that my parents weren't narrow minded, self centered or insecure -- instead of having me stay next-door in the well-lit island of my past merits, they want me to travel to the farthest frontiers of

my consciousness; instead of filling in their bank account with security, they want me to fill unknown hearts with love; instead of getting ahead in my life, they want me to 'stay behind' so I can serve the world many times over. When we left, they sent us with their full blessings.

For the first time in our conversation, our host is silent for a few minutes. Then he changes topics again. :) We had been talking all the way through 1AM and it was actually a decent conversation by the end. The next morning, before we left, he jokingly admitted that he "sort of" understood what this was about. :)

Karma Yoga, most eloquently described in 18 chapters of the [Bhagavad Geeta](#), is the art of selfless action. Its essence is quite simple, pure and practical -- act without regard for the outcome of that action. Just like a bird leaves no traces when it flies, a *Karma Yogi* makes sure there is no lingering residue from any of his/her actions.

To understand and transform the residue of your past actions requires meditation; to work in the present without leaving any traces requires a still awareness; to put to rest any worries of future conditions requires an awakened wisdom. All of this put together is a *Karma Yogi*.

A true *Karma Yogi* is no weak person who accommodates his spirituality to justify a confused lifestyle. A true *Karma Yogi* is no lazy person who shies away from looking at his faults until bombs explode. A true *Karma Yogi* is no scared person who stays away from uncharted territory. No, sir. A true *Karma Yogi* is one who walks boldly into the arms of his/her karma, with full determination to leave no traces behind.

Maybe they should've put a warning label on Karma Yoga -- do not try at home. :)

## An 80 Year Old Hand

Jun 27, 2005

Big, round flashes of light blind us for a moment. Loud, honking sounds zip past us. The howling, almost-monsoon wind pushes us from East to West.

Just then a faint plea reaches my ears: "Son, I can't see too well. Can you hold my hand?"

It is the voice of Biharilal, an 80 year old man who is looking for his six cows that hadn't returned from their grazing. With his crooked walking stick in his right hand and my right palm locked in his right hand, we aimlessly take one step after another through the dark farmlands along the Bombay Highway.

"Dada, I don't think you'll find your cows like this," I make a rational plea after walking for a while with him. In his calm, confident, and cracked voice, he replies, "We must still look."

Soon enough, I will realize what a gift the universe has delivered, quite literally, into the palm of my own hands.

While many lives are at the mercy of uncontrollable circumstances, there always seem to be those few exceptions that can mess with destiny as they please. Biharilal is one among those few.

In his teens, Bihari was a brilliant high school student but his father didn't see the value of education. He would rather have him run the family shop. Convinced that he wanted to get a college education, Bihari left home at midnight one night and took off for Bombay. It was a gutsy move: he didn't know anyone, he had absolutely no idea what he was getting into, and as a farmer's son, he had never even been to a big city like Bombay. But he went. Not only that, he managed to get admission into a work-study college and worked exceptionally hard to survive. Bihari slept in a corner of an onion and potato warehouse, ate bananas, groundnuts and jaggery for meals, studied in libraries and under street lights ... all to finish his education. Soon after securing his job, he happily reconnected with his family. :)

Biharilal's yearning, though, was for something much deeper than getting a job. He wanted to live life fully. In his ongoing search, at the age of 22, he took off again! This time his destination was the Himalayas. He would walk and walk, without any money or any resources, completely in the hands of the universe for over two years. He ate jaggery and nuts, met and stayed with many saints and many kind householders, and learned a whole lot about life. Dada likes to say, "You see, I was a migratory bird." After a slight pause, he bursts into a huge laughter: "I still am and always will be." It's his nature and he's proud of it.

As he was getting older, he pondered about spiritual life, marriage and settling down. Once again, Bihari was intent on coming to conclusions based on his own experience; so he went hunting for more answers. He decided to spend a year with four 'brahmachari' saints whose writings and thoughts he respected: Rabindranath Tagore, Vinoba Bhave, Sri Aurobindo and Tukdoji Maharaj. "I wanted first hand experience about their spirituality," Dada remembers.

Of course, these are larger-than-life saints that millions would want to spend time with but no challenge is too big for Bihari! He not only managed to spend extended time with each of them, but he left a lasting impression at each of their ashrams. Vinoba picked Bihari to help him initiate the Bhoodan movement and even gave a lecture on his spirit of service to inspire like-minded folks. When Tukdoji Maharaj -- a Maharashtra saint who would easily have hundred thousand people lined up for any impromptu talk -- was on his deathbed, he insisted on having Bihari next to him. Mother, at the Aurobindo Ashram, knew Bihari really well; two of Bihari's sons and a daughter were born at the ashram (some still live there today) and Bihari's wife passed away at the ashram in 2002.

Involved with the freedom movement, Gandhi's Satyagrah movement, and many other movements, Biharilal's life itself makes a statement. He got married at 35, had six kids, and lived a self-reliant life on a farm of Igatpuri. When his wife was eight-months pregnant with their last child, Bihari made perhaps his most irrational plea -- "Let's go to the Aurobindo Ashram." Everyone in his extended family thought he was crazy to travel a few thousand miles with an eight-month pregnant wife; but he told them, "*Mother* is going to die soon at the Aurobindo Ashram. I want my last child to be delivered under the grace of her blessings." With 4 young kids, 17 bags and one very-pregnant wife, Bihari relocates his family to Pondicherry. Sure enough, a week after Puneet was born, *Mother* passed away just as Bihari had predicted.

Biharilal never had a lot of money when raising his family, but it wasn't about that for him. He trained them to listen to their inner voice -- today, all six of them have different occupations ranging from a lawyer to an artist to an entrepreneur -- and be bold enough to follow that voice. And his life was his greatest testimonial. When his youngest son, Puneet was interested in learning the flute, he got him a flute; when Puneet's teacher said he needed a "better" flute to advance further, Bihari got him that also. But because he didn't have the money, he fasted for 3 months to save meal money for his son's flute.

Such is this man Biharilal.

And here he is looking left and right across the Bombay Highway for his cows. "One of them has dots on it, her name is Radha. Another one is just a calf. Another was named by a poet friend of ours -- Gauri," he goes on to describe all the cows. He loves his cows.

Dada has a very cute habit -- in the middle of describing something, he will quiz you on it. "Ok, now you tell me, why do we eat? It's a six syllable answer." He will nudge the answers in the right directions, until it's the right one. "Ah yes, exactly. We eat so we can use our bodies to serve others."

"Dada, dada," I say in an excited tone, "I see a bunch of cows crossing the road, up ahead." Curious he asks, "Where, where?" He can't see them in the dark, but I point to them in a distance. "Nipuni," Dada's even got a nickname for me by now, "I will wait here, but you take my stick and try to turn them around. Go, go." Just before I go, he yells, "But be very careful. Don't go too far."

An engineer-turned-pilgrim-turned-cow-herder? Bring it on!

Through the dark, pot-holed farms, I go behind the cows. At one point I think of turning back, but then I see Dada sitting confidently on a small stone, looking fearlessly at the blank horizons he can't see. I remember his statement, "Still, we must look." Regardless of the outcome, still we must do our duty. I try to use my stick to guide the cows back, but the closer I go towards them, the further they run. For a good half an hour, I try and try. But no luck. With a disappointed tone, I come back to inform Dada, "Dada, I couldn't even get near them." Reassuringly, Dada tells me, "Don't worry. They must not be our cows. They must be late in going to their own homes, so they were probably running."

Eventually, we decide to end our search. Dada walks very slow and we're quite far from where we started. To speed things up, we opt for a short cut. No lights, no pathways, but even at 80 fearlessness hasn't left Biharilal. We walk for about ten minutes. With his stick, he feels something in front of us -- barbed wire. "I haven't been in this area in ages. Wow, they have put up wires now?" Dada says. We are royally lost with a metal fence in front of us, late at night, with a grandfather who takes three seconds to move one step forward. This is not good news. But then this 80-year-old man's life flashes in front of me. If you ever want to be lost, this is your man.



"Let's go left," he says. Right then, in a faraway distance, we see someone flashing a light. Without wasting a moment, Biharilal exclaims, "See, God sends us help right when we need it. Always, always."

We are safely led to the Biharilal's house. It turns out that someone else found the cows, who had indeed lost their way, but they are now safe in their sheds.

Before Dada loosens his tender-yet-firm grip on my right hand, he quizzes me again: "Nipuni, you tell me, what is the Truth about life?" After a few guesses, he kindly offers the answer: "Whatever happens is the truth. That's it." And then he laughs, as if he's one-upped the Nature by unraveling its secret. Dada loves to laugh.

Simple, bold, wise. Biharilal Chundak of Igatpuri.

Just like that, it all flashes in front of you: I was holding a hand that has worked for decades to stand up for principle, a hand which has served humanity at the risk of its own livelihood, a hand that has touched the feet of dozens of legendary saints. His are hands that have held many a precious and sacred gifts from the universe; yes, but, his are also hands that have had the wisdom to let go of all of them so it can hold even greater truths.

Dada lets go of my hand to walk peacefully into his home. I follow him inside. He is our host tonight.

If Dada quizzed me again, "What did you learn today?" I might respond: "Don't ever be tight fisted; you never know what might fall right into your open palms."

## Finding Nipun

Jun 28, 2005

Couple years into this life, I start to be known as Nipun. Everyone calls me that, so I believe them. "Hi Nipun", "How is Nipun doing today?" "What will Nipun be when he grows up?" It's an overload, to be honest, but you get used to it after a while. In another year or two, Nipun is even ascribed a unique personality: content, quiet and never cries. It's quite a charade -- this Nipun character has got a body, a personality and at least a hundred people who buy into the show.

A few more years and the Nipun show gets old. "Ah, two hands, two legs, one mouth. He's just one of the six billion others on the planet." It's no longer good enough to be Nipun. You've gotta be different. You've gotta be top in your class, you've gotta be the coolest kid on the block with the latest toys, you've gotta stand out with your antics. "Wow, Nipun is the third fastest, under-12 roller skater in the country." Now you're talking. Nipun is bigger and badder than ever before. It's a big show and no curtains will close without the applause. People appreciate your illusions, you appreciate theirs; that's how this game is played.

What we call society are all inadvertant players in this massive game of hide-and-seek with ourselves. In fact, at 16, they give me a license that certifies my identity: six feet tall, black eyes, brown hair, this is our Nipun. It's surprising that they don't list the name of my designer clothes, the brand of my sunglasses or the number of girlfriends I've had; probably because technology hadn't gotten far enough to list that on a 3x5 plastic card.

In complete ignorance, I build a strong confidence in the inscriptions on that plastic card. Deep down, I still have my doubts if Department of Motor Vehicles has the authority to identify Nipun but after a few more plastic cards, placards, certificates and medals, I am sold. I really am Nipun, I am unique, and I will promote this image so everyone else knows this truth. All in favor of this image of Nipun are the good-guys and all who oppose it are the bad-guys. I will build walls so I can secure me and mine. Most of my life's budget will be spent on defence because after all, if I lose Nipun, I will lose it all.

I never knew myself beyond Nipun.

Fortunately for me, Nipun had moments where his identity broke down. 1989 earthquake: Nipun thinks he's going to die and he spontaneously starts chanting Aum. Where did that come from? Who am I really? Instead of studying for finals at UC Berkeley, he would be reading books on religion, quantum physics, God and the Universe. Still, nothing satisfied. A chance encounter with a Korean monk in a monastery, a Japanese mystic on an airplane, a Himalayan yogi on a busy street intersection, two

American monks in his own living room. There's something there, but what is it? "Seek and you will find." But seek where, seek from who, seek what? Plenty of God-men and their yes-men are lined up with so many cookie-cutter paths, but I'm not interested in "Nipun II". I want something else. No satisfying answers, only questions remain.



Finally, Nipun hears a knock on his door. It's me. Someone he's known a whole lot longer than Nipun.

If Nipun opens the door, he's afraid his whole story will end. In truth, that's when his real life will begin. "Knock, knock. Anyone home?"

## My Nominee For Nobel Peace Prize

Jun 30, 2005

When we walked into town, not knowing anyone, we knew that this is the place that gave birth to a mini revolution around the world. But we didn't think we would be able to experience it first hand.

Through our host in town, who asked his son, who knew a shopkeeper, who knew a coordinator, we get admission into a ten-day Vipassana [meditation camp](#) in Igatpuri. We are told that these tickets go like hot cakes; for 650 slots, almost 3000 folks apply every ten days. Lodging, food and everything else is paid for by some anonymous donor from a previous course; all you have to commit to doing is sit in silence for about thirteen hours of the day, per their schedule that starts at 4AM, and not read, write, or talk for the entire duration.

It's an interesting offer. On one hand, it's counter intuitive to commit ten days to just sitting cross legged and not doing anything! On the other hand, what an experience to sit in silence for dozen hours of the day with hundreds of other people and without a single material worry in the world!

We not only took the offer, but felt fortunate that we got admission on a one-day notice.

The whole story of this place is quite interesting. S.N. Goenka, a leader of a business empire in Burma, India and many parts of South Asia, had it all -- money, power, fame, respect. He sat on the boards of 20 organizations, he knew the who's who in the continent, and he was a leader in the religious and social community. Unfortunately, one fine day, he started experiencing these intense migraine headaches. Leading doctors from Switzerland, Germany, Japan, England, United States, and all across Asia billed it incurable. The only way out of the unbearable pain was routine morphine injection and Goenka knew the inevitable doom of that addiction.

Back in his homeland of Burma, one of his friends suggested visiting a local meditation teacher named Sayagi U Ba Khin. Desperate for anything, Goenka goes. When U Ba Khin asks Goenka about why he wants to sit the meditation camp, he honestly replies, "To get rid of this migraine headache." "Well, then, this is not the place for you," U Ba Khin tells him in strong language, "This is a place for very sincere meditators." Goenka still stays. It ends up being a decision that would change his life and the life of millions others.

Goenka's migraine gets cured, he learns about meditation and he is deeply intrigued by this meditation technique called [Vipassana](#). For next ten years, he stays at the feet of Sayagi U Ba Khin and becomes a meditation teacher. To fulfill his teacher's desire, he comes to India and conducts his first meditation course with a handful of people, both his parents included. Judging from the results, people asked him to conduct one more ten day course, and then a couple more. Today, those courses are continuing in a hundred centers around the world, with millions of people from all walks of life getting a real taste of an ancient Indian technique of meditation called Vipassana.



What I like about Vipassana is that it's not religious or theoretical. You don't have to believe in this or that, you don't have to bow down to him or her; it's rooted firmly in your own experience. After a couple days of watching your breath, you quickly realize that your mind doesn't listen to you; after a couple days of equanimously watching your bodily sensations, you notice that it actually is transient. A few more days and you experience that your body is not really the solid stuff that you think it is, but it's actually a sequence of subtle vibrations that science tells you it is. It all becomes obvious from your own experience.

Yes, there are also things I don't like about it. The top-down teacher hierarchies, lack of attention to the physical body, a narrow focus on just meditation that may not be suitable for all householders. Many old students come out thinking that enjoying life's vitality and color isn't conducive to real growth and then end up acting with guilt. But, to Goenka's defense, you can't please everyone when thousands of people from all backgrounds are sitting courses daily. You pick and choose your battles and I think Goenka has picked the right ones.

With Goenka's setup, there is absolutely no room to worship him. The whole show continues just fine without his physical presence and that's how he wants it. You will not see his picture anywhere on his campus nor anything named after him. Secondly, everything is free; I don't know of any other equivalent pay-it-forward model where anonymous donors are inspired to pay for housing and lodging for so many millions of people around the globe. It's absurd, if you think about it. Yet to give householders an opportunity to partake in such unbridled kindness is in and of itself an incredible offering. And finally, the biggest reason why I like Goenka's infrastructure is because it's hard core; most of the spiritual, new-agey stuff that talks about ending your misery is just superficial hog wash that leaves you feeling good for about two minutes after the retreat. With Goenka, the minimum commitment is 10 days, dozens of hours of meditation. No taste treats here. You and yourself for ten days; you become well aware of your unnecessary baggage and whether it's good or bad, you quickly learn to deal with it.

Although Goenka's revolution is an individual and internal one, its diligent work for decades has yielded many noteworthy, quantifiable results.

The government of Maharashtra gives any of its staff paid time off and travel voucher to attend any Vipassana course; they have noticed a drop in corruption and other malpractices amongst those who are meditators. In the award winning documentary, 'Doing Time Doing Vipassana', there's the widely broadcasted case study of 1000 prisoners in the worst jail of India doing ten days of Vipassana; murderers came out that camp repenting for their actions and apologizing to their victims! Big corporations like Mahindra & Mahindra allow entire departments to take paid time off for attending ten days; they have noticed a rise in productivity. One Times of India newspaper office has so many meditators that the company officially invested in setting up a "meditation" room on campus. A business school in Pune has made it a requirement for all students to sit at least one ten-day course before they graduate; they consider it a step towards socially responsible business. And then there's tons of individual cases of transformation, like a billionaire from UK flying into Igatpuri for a course and saying he's a changed man or an alcoholic who's able to kick the habit after decades of internal torture, or the founder of Zee TV who takes a course and is so thankful that he decides to put Goenka's lectures on TV everyday.

Still, what amazes me most is they never 'market' any of these facts; ie. I found out some of this information in chance encounters with very senior teachers. The institution relies primarily on word of mouth for 'dharma' to spread.

It's definitely a silent revolution that no one will be able to truly measure. My sense is that Goenka really doesn't care to measure it either. His book, Art of Living, has been published in 18 languages; in fact, one of his ex-students even started a spiritual organization by that name. Goenka's ten-day discourses are also translated in all major languages of the world. He has personally given talks to anywhere from the [UN Peace Summit](#) to the Rotary and Lion Clubs of the world. Goenka could do, say and affect so much in the world. Yet he is steadfast and unrelenting in his message: give ten days of your life to this experiment in meditation and then you be the judge. Even at the ten day, his message is simple and clear: equanimously observe sensation on your body. Senior students, old students, it doesn't matter; they all do the same thing. It's simple. In fact, it's so simple that it takes people decades to actually "get it".

Such a no-frills, no-nonsense, non-material spirituality is what you might expect at a Buddhist monastery on top of a Himalayan mountain. Thanks to Goenka, though, it has reached a big city near you whether you live in Switzerland, New Zealand, or the United States.

Goenka's way is about peace; at the course, all students vow to observe rules of no talking, no stealing, no sex, no intoxicants and no killing. Goenka's outcome is about peace; people come out of the course learning how to be more balanced with the positive and negative experiences of life. Goenka's own life is about peace; for the past 35 years, he has wholeheartedly dedicated his entire life to this quest.

If world peace starts with me, and my peace starts with stillness in the heart, then courtesy of one S. N. Goenka, Planet Earth has experienced millions of hours of silence and made true strides toward peace.

If I had to nominate a person for the Nobel Peace Prize, hands-down, it would be S. N. Goenka.

At the monastery

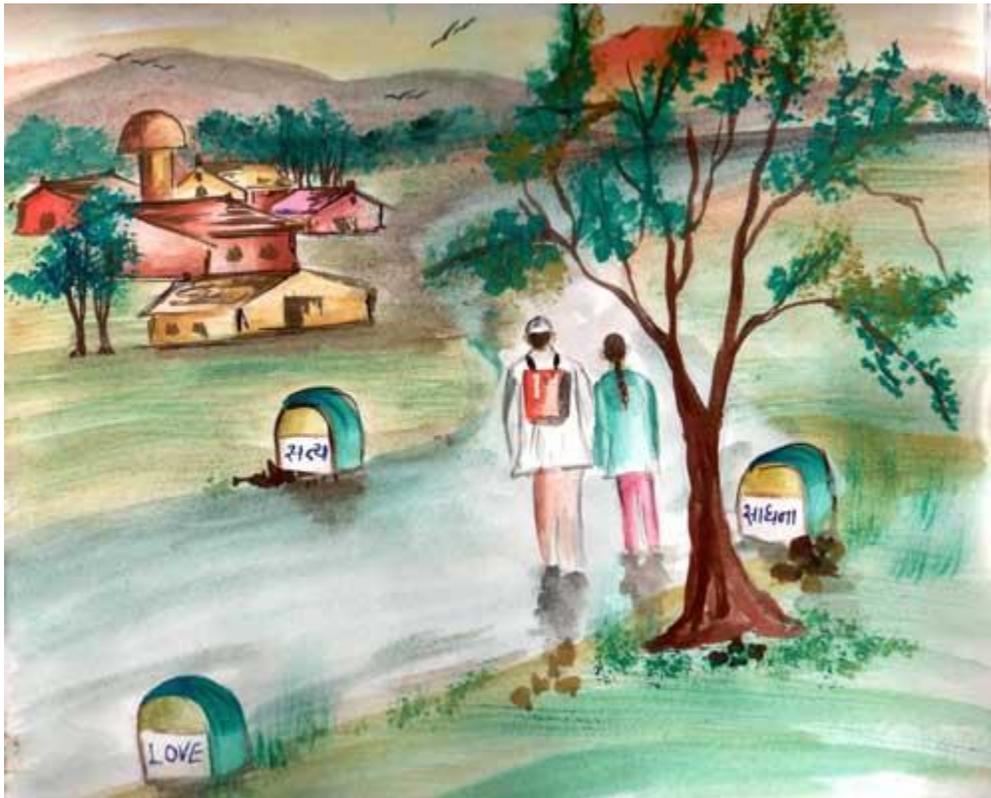
# Crossing Milestones

Jul 1, 2005

A few minutes back, I got word of a secret plan brewing at Ahmedabad's Gandhi Ashram. A group of friends are heading out on a one-day pilgrimage at 5:30AM; their plan is to walk to prayer places from all different traditions -- a Church, a Mosque, a Temple, a Monastery and so on -- and spend the day doing small acts of service.

Today, it will be a year since Guri and I publicly exchanged our [wedding vows](#).

As if that weren't enough, those same Manav Sadhna friends also presented us with the painting below (the milestones read: love, cultivation and truth) to commemorate 1000 kilometers of our walk:



Only a soul brother like [Jayeshbhai](#) can think up an offering as grand as this.

Thank you, Jayeshbhai. Thank you, everyone. If we ever cross the milestones of love, sadhna and truth, we are dragging all of you with us. :)

# An Inevitable Coin Toss

Jul 3, 2005

I once asked [John Robbins](#), "In your experience, how much of service is internal and how much is external?" Some would say 50-50, some would say 90-10, some might even say that's an irrelevant question. Very spontaneously, John responded: "Hundred, hundred."

When we walked into Igatpuri, we didn't have an admission into the popular 10-day meditation course. A fortunate halt at [Biharilal's house](#), though, and circumstances gave way for us to be cross-legged in complete silence from 4:30AM to 9PM for almost two weeks.

After walking through 1000 kilometers of rough Indian terrain, this is a very intense walk through the depths of our own minds. For the last two months, everything has been impermanent for us: new bed every other night, new people at every corner, new conditions to experience at every blink of an eye. Changing, changing, changing. The more you try to grasp something, the more it slips away. After two and a half months of that kind of training, we come to complete halt. No reading, writing, talking, walking, moving. Stillness. Such a sharp contrast can do you in, if you aren't careful. Although Guri and I have done many such, this definitely feels like our most intense one.

On the 11th day, Guri comes out thinking we need to go deeper within and I come out ready to walk till the end of dawn. By the 12th day, we flip entirely; I am fired up to take on the meditation challenge and Guri is ready to hit the slippery roads. By the 13th day, we are both confused. :)

We are back to the question I asked John: how much of change is internal, and how much is external? If it really is a 100-100, do we meditate or walk?

So many questions, absolutely no answers. In fact, these questions were always there, even before we left for our pilgrimage. But instead of ready-steady-go, we just go, hopefully steady and ready someday, if at all. If we waited to answer all our questions, I would still be writing page 342 of the CharityFocus business plan. :) In the end, you just gotta do it. Now. And now.

So we did the only thing left to do: a coin toss!

We find a 2 rupee coin and turn it upside down in our hands. Front side has a king, back side has a map of India. "Ok, Kings we meditate. And the map of India, we walk."

A coin toss is an interesting experiment. Just when you think you don't care one way or another, all your hidden fears arise moments before the toss -- the jitters about unconditional acceptance.

First doubt: can you really let "luck" determine your destiny? Seriously, though, is it luck that an eight grader walking with you finds a [hundred rupee note](#) on the ground, or that a 20 pound iron bar falls just a few steps in front of me, from a truck moving at 65 kilometers/hour, or that a drunk teenager walks 8 kilometers with you through the [worst part of town](#)? And if it is all luck, then what's wrong with one more roll of the dice?

Ok, fine. Coin toss it is.

But wait, more doubts. So many people are waiting for us in Bombay and beyond, we have lined up an entire press conference and public talks that have the potential to inspire so many more, and there are folks anxiously waiting to join us on the walk. Is it responsible to drop all that? On the other hand, all of this can easily build subtle forms of ego; do we honestly have the tools to battle it and stay real? At the end of the day, any selfless act can be seen as selfish and any self-centered act can be billed selfless. Ego hides in between the cracks, lurks where no one dares to look, and plays hide and seek with the best of your awareness. So what to do?

Guri and I look to each other, with the 2 rupee coin still in my hand. Ok, coin toss it is. We triple check our gut -- "Whatever happens, we do it with our full heart. No ifs, ands or buts. No other way."

At this point, we truly don't mind accepting any outcome. Walking in the monsoons is going to be painful, and sitting in complete solitude for weeks and weeks is going to be painful. Nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. Only one player in the game -- it's you on this side of net, it's you on the other side of the net. It doesn't matter. Bring it on, bring it all on.



We close our eyes for a brief prayer to let the universe guide us in being its instruments. I flick the two-rupee coin up in the air and it lands squarely in the palms of my right hand. After a momentary pause, largely for dramatic effect, we peek at our destiny.

And the verdict -- meditate!

Meditation it is. We've journeyed the roads of India, now it's time to journey the pathways of our own minds.

Without an iota of doubt, we immediately walk to the monastery to see if they will grant us an exception to meditate for a longer period. [Dhamma Giri](#) gets 3000 applications for 650 capacity slots for each ten day course; allowing random visitors to stay an indefinite period is not an easy proposition. We ask one passerby by the entrance gate, who calls out to another passerby, who connects us a third guy passerby -- Jayeshbhai. Just like that.

The moment you meet a person like Jayeshbhai, you feel happy. I don't know if it's his non-stop, radiant smile or what but he's just one of those guys.

Taking him to be an administrator, we share our story as it is and inform him of a coin toss that brought us there. :) Interestingly, Jayeshbhai asks us very irrelevant yet intriguing questions: have you heard of Mota's Hari-Om Ashram, have you been to Nareshwar, have you visited Akshardham? My grandfather built the first room of the Hari-Om Ashram and Mota married my parents; Nareshwar is the place where we first piloted our pilgrimage; the founder of [Akshardham](#), Pramukh Swami, offered me monkhood when we first met. Then, Jayeshbhai shares a story of a senior Vipassana meditator who circumambulated the Narmada river -- something we had been discussing for the last couple days. Guri and I curiously wonder what kind of administrator dude this Jayeshbhai really is?!? He's reading us like a second grade textbook!

We get full permission to stay and meditate as long as we want, whenever we want. During my meeting with the "male manager", I curiously ask about Jayeshbhai. The manager responds, "Jayeshbhai is practically the senior most teacher of Vipassana after [Goenka-ji](#)." Unmarried, a monk in plain clothes, teacher for very senior meditators, Jayeshbhai guides all the Vipassana centers of Western India. The

male manager adds, "You are very lucky that he has allowed you such a privilege of sitting as many courses whenever you want. As you know, thousands of people want to sit in each ten day camp. It's a very rare thing to get such an acceptance. I hope you make best use of it."

Alright. Grace continues to flow.

So, 1000 kilometers of walking. Now perhaps 1000 hours of meditation? Jayeshbhai did warn us, though: "You know, an hour of meditation is much harder than a kilometer of walking." We nod our heads in agreement. Darn, that coin toss! :)

It's truly a journey without a destination.

*[ P.S. The week after we took this decision, it turns out that Western India was hit with floods; courtesy of a coin toss, we were neatly tucked away, meditating in isolation. ]*

## Two Thoreaus of Sakwa County

Jul 5, 2005

"I don't need designer glasses," Dhirendra smiles, his sharp bright eyes shining through the wide-rimmed black glasses. It seems like he bought the glasses twenty years ago before moving into this village. His long pause following the casual statement makes one think about the superfluous nature of our world compared to his exceptionally simple life. Dressed in a long home-spun cotton shirt and shorts, he comfortably sits on the freshly resurfaced cow-dung floor chopping vegetables, as his wife Smita comes in and out of the kitchen to respond to our questions as she prepares lunch. Just looking at her glowing skin you can tell that the village life has been good for her. The cool breeze easily flows in and out of the many open windows in this simple, two-room house.

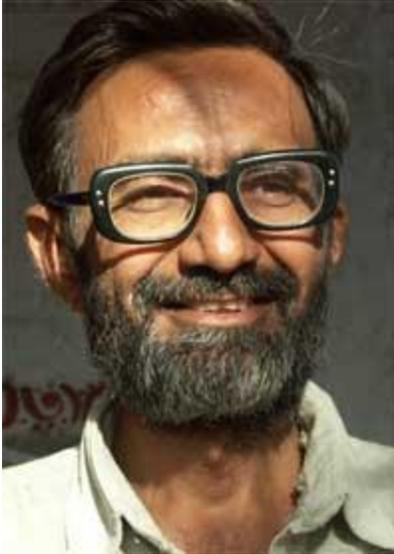
"Why are the onions hanging on the ceiling?" I ask. Fifty three year old Dhirendra explains, "Oh, they're from the farm. If you arrange them like that, they can last for a year. Of course, only if they're organic"

Their home looks almost like any other house in a 400-person village in rural India, except for a few specialized tools: like a hand-made oil press and the silver and yellow windmill on the roof which the villagers tell us to look for while giving us directions to their house.



### ***The Inspiration***

Looking at both them, it's hard to believe that they were both professors at an Engineering College in Ahmedabad. Or that he has a degree in Engineering and she studied Physics and Space Science in college. The story of why two PhD's dumped a city life for tribal one, traded in their teaching careers for a shovel and a hoe, and opted to live on 12,000 rupees (\$300) a year is an inspiring tale that almost leaves you with a "Duh!" feeling.



"In the cities, you have no choice in your lifestyle. Your water is chlorinated, the chemicals you use pollute the environment, and there is rampant greed," Dharendra warmly explains their motivation to search for a simpler, more natural lifestyle. Both Dharendra and Smita wanted to live a natural life that was deliberately based on their value system.

With another couple, they started brainstorming. They didn't know anyone who had attempted bold experiments to address these concerns, at the time in 1983. Four pressing issues, they realized, were of great importance to them: 1) Can we live a sustainable and conscious life? 2) Can knowledge, work and devotion to life be combined together as a lifestyle? 3) Can humans coexist peacefully with animals? 4) Can we be the change with our own lives?

After a lot of discussion, they felt that the city life was very artificial. "We did not want to exploit -- or be exploited. In the city you inadvertently take advantage of the environment and end up exploiting one section of the society or another. We wanted to get away from it all," Smita says. They wanted a way out of the cramped flats, polluted air, impure water, stale produce. And most importantly, they wanted a way out of the "more" mindset that creates so much mental instability. "If we want to have a stable mind, we have to be with nature. For example, if we use a fan or an air conditioner, our bodies don't self-correct," Dharendra says.

One year into their marriage, Sonejis arrived at a simple conclusion: the best lifestyle is one which is in tune with nature.

### ***The Simple Life***

Instead of just talking about their values, the Sonejis decided to make the boldest move of their lives. In 1986, a year into their marriage, they bought two and a half acres of land and moved into a small tribal village named Sakwa. Most family and friends thought they were crazy, but for Dharendra and Smita it was a no-brainer.

From scratch, they built their own house (including a bathroom) and embarked on an entirely different lifestyle. No electricity, no vehicles, no running water. Instead they would work on farms, eat fresh, pesticide-free produce and their own cow's milk, and live with the rhythms of nature. "It's just natural to wake up at 4AM," Dharendra says in a matter-of-fact way that makes you wonder about late-night TV programming.

For the tribal life, their PhD's weren't all that useful. They struggled initially. For three years, Dharendra got tutorials from local farmers about managing his crop. Because they didn't have running water, they could only farm in the monsoons and they were only able to fulfill sixty percent of their needs; Dharendra had to earn some supplemental income by doing several small projects, like installing bio-gas plants in villages and training locals to work in oil mills.

After five years, though, it was a different story altogether. Dharendra and Smita started thinking up creative, organic solutions for common tribal problems, they dug up a well, they installed a bio-gas plant to utilize cow-dung for basic electricity that would use power tools like a flour mill for the entire village, they experimented with a wind mill and solar cooking. And they came up with tons of farming innovations, from water development to land management to crop rotation, which increased their efficiency with locally available resources.

Today, they produce over 200 kilograms of crop annually: oilseeds, pulses, spice and over 50 varieties of fruits and vegetables, all grown with organic manure. "Each month we have different fruits and vegetables," Dharendra proudly smiles, as he gives us a tour of their farm. Walking through the two and a half acres, you can spot everything from mangoes, papayas, lemongrass, cucumbers, potatoes, sweet tamarind, eggplant, to vanilla right here in their own backyard.

What about money and other expenses? "Our yearly budget averages to about 12,000 rupees (less than \$300)," says Smita, "that comes from selling a sweet-sour cold drink powder made from a plant in our farm, some Ayurvedic medicine, and hand-made organic soap from a Neem plant." That budget is not just for the two of them; it also includes their 19 and 17 year old sons! More than half of their expenses go toward travel and books and the rest are used for clothes, shoes, some food items that they don't grow, like salt or jaggery. To keep all the wheels moving, everyone averages about 4 hours of work daily.



One might expect a lot of excitement around the Soneji's natural, four-hour-a-day work, seven-bucks-a-month lifestyle with fresh food, clean well water, organic shelter, hand-spun clothes and some entertainment like books and travel. But unfortunately, there has been little response from the community. Sonejis do what they can to share the good word -- they issue a regular newsletter with best practices and new lessons learned, they constantly innovate useful solutions like a hand-powered oil press and share it with the villagers, and they speak about their experiences at various conferences in big cities.

At present, though, it seems that the world will take some time to believe that this really is possible. Dharendra says, "Demographically speaking, one acre of land is every Indian's due. And that's really all that one person needs to survive."

### ***Raising Children***

The two Soneji sons were both born after they moved to Sakwa. Vishwain is 17 and Bhargav is 14 today. Arguably, the biggest challenge for the Sonejis came when Vishwain became of elementary school age: do we home school or send him to an institutionalized school?

For six months, they deliberated back and forth. Dharendra wasn't too keen, "There is a huge difference between information and knowledge. The current school system fills people with information but doesn't necessarily give them knowledge. And they provide no values." Although they didn't want to send their kids to school just for a diploma, they also didn't want to jeopardize the future of their children. Their discussion probed into many other deeper questions like: what exactly is knowledge? What is science? Sonejis do believe in science but in the natural kind, not the technological kind; instead of spending time learning computers, they would rather spend time learning about wind motion and earthquakes. But they acknowledge that everything is a double-edged sword.

In the end, they concluded that knowledge is that which is useful to society and you don't need government's stamp of approval for that knowledge. Vishwain and Bhargav would be home schooled.

On top of home schooling in the basic subjects, they focused the education on practical matters.

"Wouldn't you have been able to write an essay without taking your board exams? Couldn't your friend learn to take good pictures without passing



high school?" Dhirendra asks rather seriously. School teaches you how to learn, but because of the overly institutionalized approach much of what you learn in school is never applied anywhere in life. For the Soneji sons, their upbringing would include repairing a clock, riding a bicycle, painting the sunrise they wake up to, discussing solar energy, and playing Chess in the afternoon shade. There is no such thing as vacation and everyday is an ongoing education in life's school.

Despite not having a formal education, both of their sons seem to function at a much higher level than their counterparts in the city. Vishwain speaks four languages, can help build a house, and tell you the physics of how a fan works. His parents let him decide what he's interested in learning and then encourage him in that direction. Bhargav, the younger son, gets regular lessons using books and real-life tests from both of his parents. Recently, he took apart a broken bicycle to see how it works and then, of course, fixed the problem.

What about college? "No one asks Birla (a millionaire) for his college degree," Dhirendra laughs, "but we're open to it, if the boys decide to go." It seems like they'll probably end up being entrepreneurs while living on the farm. "It's really their decision," he adds. The kids are free to decide to if they want to go to the neighbors to watch TV, if they want to start using a scooter, if they want to have food products that their parents might not eat, or if they want to enroll in a college. The four of them have a very close relationship and everything is talked about openly on a regular basis.

### ***Service And Spirituality***

Interestingly enough, the Sonejis don't believe in doing service. "We help the villagers as much as we can. But we are not into social service. We believe that our own life is of importance and has to be lived without causing harm to anyone else's. If, while living our life, we end up helping others, that's fine. But that's not the main purpose," Smita says.

In fact, they strongly argue that these religious and development organizations who "help" actually create more problems than they solve. By giving hand-outs, they encourage a sort of sedate laziness that hinders any promotion of actual grassroot solutions. Furthermore, they super-impose their "solutions" and their ideas of progress that not only don't jive with the tribals but don't even work in the cities!

Sonejis believe in natural action. No service. No big buildings. Just help those you can touch. From all the leftover bamboos, they created a guesthouse - "Aum Kutir" for the many guests they host routinely. Instead of using pesticides to kill unnecessary bugs, they copied nature and dug up an aqua-pond; every monsoon when the big bugs come out, the frogs also come out and everything self-corrects itself. Their farm doesn't have any scarecrows either. "There's enough for us and the birds to eat." For many, such decisions are a result of their spirituality, but Dhirendra says that it is a natural progression of their lifestyle: "We want to develop truth, non-violence and love within ourselves and stop the violence, anger, and greed. That's our spirituality. That's it."



Last year, when they were out-of-town visiting relatives, heavy rains hit their neighborhood. In the process of getting out of harms way, one of their cows slipped and died from the strain of the rope around her neck. When Dhirendra and Smita saw the horrific site, they wondered about tying up animals. They asked, "Why do we tie up animals? It's not natural." A few months later, when milking another cow, Smita noticed a curious habit she hadn't been conscious of -

putting the mother's calf in front of her so she gives milk. Again they asked, "To use up a mother's milk for our benefit is almost like theft. Man is the only animal that does that. Is that really natural?" For them, it wasn't and since that day, more than a year ago, both Dhirendra and Smita have turned vegan.

Henry David Thoreau once said, "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, to discover that I had not lived."

If there is ever a doubt if Thoreaus exist in this day and age, if there is ever a doubt if it is practical to lead a life in alignment with ideals of simplicity, if there is ever a doubt that two PhD's live a natural life on seven dollars a month, go visit the Sonejis in the village of Sakwa. You will believe.

## More Stories Coming Soon

Jul 16, 2005



*Guri and I have been in meditation for a bit. I'll add some blog entries as I can. In the meantime, you might want to check out the [iJourney newsletter](#).*

## Latest Communication Technology

Jul 21, 2005

From the emails I received, Viral delivered a stunning talk to an almost 5000 person audience at the National Jain Convention in early July. Not being Jain and being 26 years old, it was a great privilege for him to have that opportunity to be of service.

His keynote address, after Dennis Kucinich (the 2004 presidential nominee), went a little something like this:

Namaste -- in India when we meet and greet, we say Namaste, and Ram Dass gives a beautiful definition: Namaste means I honor the place in you, where the entire universe resides. I honor the place in you, of love, of light, of truth. I honor that place in you, where if you are in that place in you, and I am in that place in me, there is only one of us.

There are so many things that I want to share, and I figure I can't go wrong starting with Albert Einstein, who often seems to be more mystic than scientist. He once wrote, "Our task must be to free ourselves from our prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all humanity and the whole of nature in its beauty." Too bad he isn't around now? he would've been a perfect candidate for helping us "Extend Jain Heritage in the West."

If he Were around now, I wonder what he would think about our recent advances in communication: do they make it easier to be compassionate? Certainly, we live in accelerated times: It took the Radio 38 years to get 50 million users. TV did it in 13 years. The Internet, 5 years. Hotmail? Less than 1 year. The internet age is here, and it is changing the way we communicate.

So we can shuttle around more and more bits and bytes faster and faster, but there's another type of communication that's going on, and Not many people are talking about it. It's the subtle communication that's going on between you and the people around you RIGHT now.

Recent scientific research, some of it documented in the Harvard Business Review, shows that when people touch or are in close proximity, one person's heartbeat signal is registered in the other person's brain waves, and vice versa. They also found that our emotions are reflected in the patterns of our heart rhythms. So what does that mean? It means that we are communicating very significant information -- information that affects us -- without even realizing it!

So if we are happy, if we are peaceful, if we are loving, then that actually makes a difference to the people around us, on a very physiological level. And it's not just our words and our actions that create these effects outside, but even our Thoughts, emotions, feelings, All these things actually make a tangible difference too.

There's another principle from science that helps us better understand how this works: In 1982, a meteorologist from MIT was simulating weather systems when he came upon what is now called the Butterfly Effect: A butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil can create a tornado in Texas a week later! Wow, if a Butterfly's actions can have such an impact, imagine what each of our actions can do!

Now this really deepens our definition of what it means to serve others in a radical way. So often we think that if we can't go work with the poorest of the poor in sub-Saharan Africa, that it's not really service. But even science is showing us now that our actions, and Even our thoughts and feelings, have an impact now, and later. Service, then isn't a static state, but rather a series of dynamic decisions that always start Right Now.

If you think about it, it doesn't matter what car we came in, what university we graduated from, or who we know. And where we'll end up tomorrow is unknown, and a function of what our decisions are right this very instant. So Really, our entire lives have come to this very moment, and we have some choices. Do we want to be in a space that's good for us and good for others, or do we not. And nobody says, "I don't want to be in a good space." The times we aren't in that space are the times when we aren't even Aware that we have a choice.

To our credit, there are many things distracting us: After all, we live in a culture of taking. Taking is all around us, and so often, that pervades our inner reality. But with this new age of communication, I believe we can work to make the age of the inTernet also the age of the INNER-net: the vast, highly inter-connected, network within. And there Are people who've tapped into this INNER-net.

A few months ago, I was fortunate to spend some time with one of them, a service legend by the name of Dr. V in South India, someone who has personally given sight to over 100,000 people, most of them for free. He was asked once, "What are your gifts?" Dr. V. replied, "People thank me for giving them sight." This humble revolutionary considers his gifts not to be the things he has, but the things that he has GIVEN others!

The great thing is that is that Each of us has This type of gift, because Each of us can serve. Whether these gifts are those of skills, resources, connections, or simply presence, whatever our privilege is, when we actually start to use our gifts as tools to be used for giving, we start to access this vast INNER-net, and the shackles of the prison Einstein talks of start to break off.

So this journey of service starts with a simple choice, a choice that starts with our own inner space, a domain that we Can have control over. A choice that can be made Now. And Now. And Now. Perhaps it's just a subtle shift, but when we increasingly choose to remain in that space of service, we start seeing things we might never have seen before: the needs of the current situation become clearer, we become instruments of a greater order, and consequently our actions become more effortless.

I remember a time when I was walking down a street in Berkeley, and out of nowhere, I see a quadriplegic man in a wheelchair, stuck in the middle of an intersection. Turned out his wheelchair battery had died. I can't remember even Thinking the whole time that I pushed him back home. For those moments, the needs had been met by my "Gift", which at that time was simply the ability to push a wheelchair.

Many of the youth will have the chance later today to actually experiment with this in the service activities that the organizers have worked hard to put together. I encourage you to make conclusions from your own experience of giving, because those are ultimately the ones I've found actually stick. The rest of us can play with that same shift in awareness, this latest 'communication technology,' and it may just manifest in holding the door open for someone, or greeting the person who happens to be in the elevator with you in the hotel, or simply wishing for someone else's well-being.

What I've shared with you is perhaps a different definition of service, one that I learned a while ago from my brother: service doesn't start when you have something to give; it blossoms naturally when you have nothing left to take.

Thank you listening, and for giving me the opportunity to speak. Namaste.

## Belated Wedding Offering

Jul 22, 2005

It would've been the ultimate conspiracy: take monastic vows, for a short period, on our wedding day itself! It was the only offering good enough to express our deep gratitude for the officiant of our blessing ceremony -- [Rev. Heng Sure](#).

But then, Guri and I figured it would be a little too much shock-and-awe for our already shocked-and-awed family and friends. :) Instead, the universe afforded us the opportunity to cook for all the monastery monks (and Viral), for our first month together.

We didn't forget our debt to Rev. Heng Sure, though. You can't, even if you want to.

An American Buddhist monk, Rev. Heng Sure is a personality beyond words. One could rave about his mind-blowing [three-steps-one-bow](#) peace pilgrimage across the California coast, one could talk about his vows of sleeping in meditation posture every night or not touching any money or not eating food after noon, one could appreciate his high-tech, activist approach for compassionate social action, one could sing along with his heartfelt guitar songs or be mesmerized during a story-telling session. Really, if I didn't know him in person, I would have a hard time believing that someone like him actually exists on this planet.

Rev. Heng Sure doesn't do weddings. But he made an exception. Just like he and Marty made an exception to speak about their pilgrimage, after more than twenty years, on a Wednesday night in our [living room](#).

But what can you give a man who can carry everything he owns, who spends his days thinking about spreading compassion in the world, who has dedicated his entire body, mind and soul to serving others? Whatever people give him, he returns it back, multi-fold: you give him food, he gives you words of wisdom; you give him a guitar, he makes your heart sing; you give him open ears, he shares dharma you can understand.

To have found each other, to have understood "dharma" together, to have the guts to be pilgrims, Guri and I feel incredible gratitude for many souls like Rev. Heng Sure. We know it's impossible to repay kindness, but we still keep trying. And today, it is Rev. Heng Sure's turn.

*Dear Rev. Heng Sure,*

*Last year on July 1, we were at a monastery. This year, on July 1st, we are at a monastery. Funny stuff. ;)*

*It's turning out to be "rains retreat" of sorts. Guri and I currently live in full segregation, observe the five precepts, take what is offered, wake up at 4:30AM and average 8-10 hours of meditation, spend half of the days meditating in full solitude, provide humble service to those seeking dharma, and largely cultivate a heart of compassion in silence. I also don't eat after noon, but instead of shaving my head, I'm growing my beard. :)*

*It's hard work to change the ignorant habit patterns of the mind. But it's gotta be done sooner or later. Sooner, rather than later, for us.*

*Perhaps the greatest lesson you have taught us, by your example, is '[Dedication of Merit](#)' -- to give away all the good you have.*

*Today, we dedicate our couple months of monastic livelihood to you. It's a year late, but we offer it with interest. :) If we do gather any merit through this cultivation, we offer it to you with a humble bow of gratitude.*

*May all become compassionate and wise. May all become compassionate and wise.*

*In walking the Way,*

*Nipun and Guri*

# Attention, Please

Jul 23, 2005

I've been thinking about attention lately. Samadhi is what the ancient yogis called it, mindfulness is what modern day monks call it, and market share is what marketers call it. And I'm afraid none of us really have really have a handle on it.

Somewhere along the way, we messed up our equations; instead of technology keeping pace with humans, human beings frantically started multitasking to keep up with technology. If computer chips can double their performance every 18 months, why can't we do the same? Move over Moore's Law, we are now working on Moron's law. :)

Linda Stone, who quite her VP role at Microsoft for a children's librarian job, recently coined the phrase "continuous partial attention" -- keep top level items in focus and keep scanning the periphery in case something more important emerges. We don't want to miss any opportunities, we want to be a live node on the network, we want feel alive by being busy, busy, busy. Maximize contacts, get connected, cash-in before someone else does. This is the age of Friendster and LinkedIn, where the more people who know you the higher your rating. So much social networking, so little time.

Speed, agility, and connectivity are at the top of everyone's mind but now we're over-stimulated, over-wound, unfulfilled. We ignore call-waiting, companies have [email-free Fridays](#) just to see if employees will be more creative when they discuss things face-to-face, executives disarm you of your "blackberrys and cellphones" before you enter the meeting rooms. Our technology is getting in the way. Dan Gould recently said, "I quit every social network I was on so I could have dinner with people."

It's not just technology, though; it's a cultural problem. In the name of Attention Deficit Disorder or Sleeping Disorder or This or That Disorder, we spend millions of dollars in tranquilizing ourselves for some relief. At the same time, marketers continue pumping \$620 billion (note, billion) to blast each American with over [2500 ads per day!](#)

*Not too long ago, the average American was exposed to over two thousand advertising messages in the average day. Today, you probably get that many before breakfast! Everyone is trying to build a brand. This season, the networks have added one more minute of commercials per half-hour, and that is just the beginning. Have you seen the ads in golf holes, in bathroom stalls, on grocery register receipts and even in the sand on the beach? It's everywhere.*

With so much input, of course, our generation will be confused, distracted, and unsettled. Prozac, Valium and Ritalin sales can be in the billions but that is no solution. Problems keep getting worse. When children see [50,000 commercials per year](#), is it a surprise that we need Adderall to control their "Attention Deficit Disorder"?

It's not just children. It's everyone. It's you and me. If you don't believe it, try sitting down for an hour to observe your breath. Heck, try it for ten minutes. *Close your eyes, tell yourself to pay attention to your breath and see how long you can go, before you're interrupted with another unwanted commercial break. It's humbling and sad.*

We need to take back our power. Tools need to serve us. Necessity should become the mother of invention again. False advertising needs to stop. The facade of being "busy" needs to be ripped apart

and seen as the distraction that it truly is. You are not the center of the world; nothing you have to do is good enough to justify adding stress in the world. We have to dig a little deeper and pay attention to the Now without scanning our digital devices for mindless inputs. It is no longer a choice; our survival depends on it.

Without attention, we will never experience our true nature. And without understanding ourselves, we will waste our entire lives in paying off debts for our ignorant actions.

It's time to be still. It's time to come alive. It's time to pay full attention to the present moment.

## "Form" Checking Adventures

Jul 24, 2005

I have had the opportunity to eat lunch with a homeless man, to console terminally-ill patients on their deathbeds, to stand on busy street intersections with a "Got Smile?" poster, to bring home a slum child and give him a shower, to approach a nun at an airport and give her my spare change, to bind books for a Tibetan peace ceremony, to dial a random room number at the intercom of a senior center and spend couple hours with an aged woman.

Each of these service opportunities has its own feeling, a soul satiating stillness.

Today, though, I did something for the first time in my service life. I volunteered to serve a group of 320 male students who would be meditating for ten days. At first, I got pulled into doing strategy and organizational development stuff, but after I insisted on "cleaning toilets", they let me. :)

My first task was "form checking". A mundane task, I figured.

Most of the applicants haven't done anything this radical in their lives -- give up ten days of their lives to do nothing but sit there in complete solitude! The general process for each new student is to register and fill out a two-sided form in Hindi or English. Following that, you get to be screened by a "form checker", i.e. me. :)

Form checking is just as it sounds. Make sure every applicant has filled in all the fill-in-the-blanks, crossed the t's and dotted the i's, and signed off in the right places. Outside of a lunch break, I'm gonna do this for 8-10 hours straight, so I expect a mental challenge.

I get "trained" by another senior volunteer. What I didn't realize about this role that it's actually a fun-yet-delicate role. I have to sternly ask all students to turn in all their reading and writing material -- books in the lockers and newspapers in the trash; yes, during the breaks everyone leafs through the trashed Mumbai Times, Mid-Day, Times of India, Economic Times, tons of Marathi papers and even a copy of Business Week to get their rare dose of worldly gossip (I read that Manmohan Singh gave a stunning talk in the US). I also have to confiscate each student's religious objects whether they are beads around their necks, threads around their wrists, rings around their fingers, or idols in their bags; sometimes if threads are tied too tight, I offer them a pair of scissors. Beyond that, I even get to play bad-cop as I attempt to look in their eyes and ask 'em (sometimes six times) for all their drugs like tobacco snuff, alcohol, cigarettes and any other kind of intoxicants.

Everyone is forewarned about all these things, but of course, that doesn't stop 'em for sneaking it in "just in case". :) Some get a little anxious when they have to turn it in, others are scared, and some smile because they saw it was coming.

At first, I wasn't really sure I could play this role. I mean, most of these people are double my age and I prefer playing good-cop over bad-cop. But then, I kind of start enjoying it. :) By the end of the day, it even becomes a group project with signals coming in from the gate, "Hey, hey, there's a man coming up who was just smoking outside the gate."

So I am really getting into my job. I'm enjoying what was supposed to be a chore.

Through all the fun, though, somehow, somewhere, something started changing inside me. I didn't see it coming until an innocent farmer looking guy came up to my table.

"Sir, any reading or writing material?" I asked him as a formality. I could sense he was illiterate.

"No," he says mildly.

"You didn't fill out this part of the form," I tell him pointing to the last question on the second page. As I had predicted, he can't read the form nor can he write. He turns around, slightly scared, and starts looking for help. Another man, a city looking guy with a small duffle bag on him, comes to the table and helps him fill it out; in fact, it turns out that he came here to drop him off and specifically help fill out the form. That's fine. You don't really need to know your ABC's to meditate in silence or to radiate compassion.

The thirty-something farmer comes back with a completed form.

Knowing that he can't read or write, I have to ensure that he understands the code of discipline and all that. I ask him all the questions from scratch. He softly responds to all of them. I wanted to tell him that I'm no cop, but just another volunteer, another seeker of the same Truth that he's after. Since I couldn't verbalize my sentiments in that context, I hoped that my presence would speak in silence.

*"Do you have any reading or writing material?"*

*"No."*

*"Do you have any beads, threads, rings or religious objects on you?"*

*"No."*

*"Are you sure?"*

*"Yes."*

*"Do you have any tobacco on you?" (He didn't look like a smoker or an alcoholic. Actually, he didn't even look like a tobacco guy but anyways).*

*"No."*

*"Anything else?"*

*"No Sir."*

I put a check on the form with my initials to officially ok it. I didn't know this guy, but somehow, I just felt like he was really good guy, a humble seeker of truth and someone for whom good things ought to happen in life. I got different "feelings" with each different applicant, but I didn't really have the time to analyze them in any detail so I just made it a habit to smile wide, say their first name (it is written on the form) and tell them to proceed to the next counter for getting their accommodations.

I am about to do that ritual with my farmer friend, when he interrupts me.

*"Sir, sir. I do have a thread on me."*

*"Huh?"*

*"I do have a thread on me."*

*"Well, no threads are allowed at this camp. So I'm afraid you'll have it to take it off. But if it's valuable to you, you can save it in the safe-deposit over there."*

He looks a little confused, so I ask him to show me his "thread". Hesitant at first, he lifts his shirt up from over his pants and shows me a thread.

Oh man! His thread was serving as a belt to hold together his oversize pants that he probably found somewhere. He had a little piece of scrap wood tied into it for extra support too.

In front of me was a really poor, illiterate man who, with an innocently shameful demeanor, shows me his "belt" to make sure it isn't against the rules. He's poor, illiterate, and simple. And he's honest, seeks stillness, and wants to experience his true nature. Although we're in different physical circumstances, we are on the same journey. He IS just like me.

That realization hit me like a ton of bricks. All of sudden, I was no longer the form-checker ok-ing his thread but a seeker looking at his own brother. Tears gush into my eyes, out of nowhere. How can you not cry when you have a cloth belt around your waist and your brother has a piece of thread? I kept telling myself, "It's not fair. If he is truly my brother, than I wish he would always have more than me."

I am ready to trade him belts, but then I stare down at the form to hold back my tears. Bad-cops can't cry, especially not on duty. I frantically try to distract my mind, thinking of some newspaper headline that I had read earlier. It doesn't work, so I keep looking at his form, turning it over and over, until I regain my balance.

Then, I proceed with my ritual. I look him in the eye, smile and tell him, "Sir, have a good meditation course. You can proceed to the next table for getting your accommodations."

There's no time to rest when you have to process several hundred forms of male students, so I keep going. But now, I have new eyes.

I ask one guy, "You left your profession field blank. What do you do?" "Sir, I'm a coolie." Ok, he picks up bags at the train station to get a few bucks everyday and he has taken ten days off to get a slice of dharma. Alright, one more brother. Another guy said he was a rickshaw driver. I remember a warm dinner that Guri and I had at a rickshaw driver's house the week before (that's another story altogether). Someone else said they didn't know what a phone number was. Yup, these were all my homies.

And of course, there were the rich and famous. Youngsters around me start signaling like crazy when they spot a famous Marathi movie actor (I forget his name) come to the table. There were senior executives from corporations, political leaders, foreigners, monks, you name it. I saw one student write on his form, "I am sitting this course because I have a serious anger problem." Another middle-aged man wrote, "I can't get along with my wife." A traveller wrote, "I am seeking purpose in life. I need clarity." One rich looking executive comes in an hour past the deadline and before I could even ask, he says, "Yes, I just had a cigarette an hour ago but I'm ready to give it all up now."

One after another after another -- the rich, the poor, the filmmaker, the politician, the husband, the son, the professor, the student, the sick elder, the healthy army general, the weak cancer patient, the strong teenager -- every "form" is a repeated reminder: "I too am a brother on this journey. I too want to rest compassionately in serenity. I too am a brother in our shared human experience." It's an almost overwhelming realization.

Sure, we might wear different belts around our waist, but we're all aboard the same train.

## Running Into Myself

Jul 25, 2005

I ran into myself, while doing a Google search recently. Very zen.

It was a couple year old interview that apparently got published in Sun Magazine in November 2004. It always interesting to read your old interviews ... to see if your path has changed.

Skipping the [introduction](#) by Preeti Lal, the rest of interview goes like this:

**If I have a mantra in life, it is  
"I don't know" : Nipun Mehta  
*Sun Magazine, Nov 2004***

**What brought the idea of Charity Focus -- to make websites for non-profits?**

We were in the heart of the Silicon Valley in the height of the dot-com era. Everyone knew the power of the Internet, but if you visited a homeless shelter, for instance, they weren't even thinking about it. For nonprofits, any web solution was too expensive, not relevant, and often incomprehensible. They were stuck in a Catch 22 -- if they had more resources, they could get IT but if they had IT, they would free up more resources.

In parallel, Silicon Valley had created a vicious default culture -- bigger, faster and better. For so many, it was thoroughly unsatisfying and there was a desperate need to be selfless, to serve without any conditions. We put two and two together and came up with CharityFocus. Our first project was with four friends, all of whom are still actively involved with CharityFocus.

**To begin with, what did you think would be the basic advantage/reach? Did you begin with the larger picture in mind, or did it emerge as more people joined and the more you reached out?**

We had one plan -- be the change. The rest would happen as it must. We had done our research, we had a strategy, a structure, and plan for scaling but we weren't attached to it. At all. Instead of achieving outcomes, we were determined to enjoy the process; instead of becoming human doings, we

wanted to stay human beings. We would go where the wind blows because the joy was, ultimately, in the journey.

It's great that CharityFocus is changing so many lives and is so "successful", even by business school metrics. But even if we just did just one project, that would be fine so long as we put our heart into it. We never expected thousands to join, and we don't really know what tomorrow will hold. If I have a mantra, for life, CharityFocus and everything in between, it is this: I don't know.

**Tell me about your journey -- its beginnings, its important milestones.**

For me, the search has always been for understanding truth. During college, the momentum was in favor of ambitions, achievements and accolades. But as I got a few glimpses of that, I realized it was hollow. I did a survey of people who I thought had "made it" in the world; very quickly, I realized that not all of them were genuinely happy. Then I saw simple folks, studied people like Gandhi, looked at the lives of sincere monks and nuns -- they didn't have much but they were so darn happy. As I understood more, I realized my metric of "success" was unconscious; I was just going after money, status and power without knowing why.

So I experimented with the opposite. Instead of getting, I tried giving. I started giving in little ways; started with money, and moved on to time ... very quickly I saw how much I enjoyed that. Even if it was anonymous, it was awesome to make people smile.

**Such journeys are always are fraught with pitfalls, how easy was it to walk this path. Weren't you ever tempted?**

Temptations come up everyday. It's the true Mahabharat, within myself. You win some and lose some. When I quit my job, people couldn't understand it. Everyone thought it was a great thing on the side, but walking straight into insecurity, when security is right around the corner? Work all day, get no money in return, live a very simple life, and then wake up the next morning to do the same? Very few understood it. But the way I worked, I always left the doors open -- hey, come and check it out yourself. Try a little bit of giving and then you tell me if I'm crazy.

That success isn't about CharityFocus or me; rather it's a testimony to the nature of things -- selflessness sustains life. It may take a while, but love will always triumph over greed. At some point, I was determined that that's how I wanted to live my life. Everyone talked about practical this and that, but I wondered if I could just challenge the universe -- what if I just jump and trust that nature will open its vast arms to contain me? What if? And then I did it. And I'm still smiling.

**Every time the media talks about you, Gandhi's adage, 'We must become the change we want to see' always comes up. When did you start thinking, believing that you could become the change you wanted to see?**

It's impossible to catch the precise moment when a flower blooms. In a way, it's a result of past conditions but in a way, it's instant. I'm the same way. In the past, I've had many aha-moments, but the ultimate aha-moment is now. My job is simply to stay awake.

**Where does CharityFocus go from here?**

We started with building websites for nonprofits, moved on to web solutions, expanded into other services (like PledgePage and cShops), and evolved into building local chapters in various communities. All along, our business model has been simple -- give it away. And now, we want give away CharityFocus itself. We want to create Service Space, an incubator of compassionate action, where resources and needs can be met, using the infrastructure and organic culture of CharityFocus.

If a butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil can set off a tornado in Texas, why can't an act of love set off a Napster of compassionate action? If Everyday Joes can come together to create a free, open-source encyclopedia with 198,083 articles, why can't we create a repository of good news? If MIT can give away every lecture, every handout, every quiz, why can't NPOs share their best practices? We can and we will.

### Where does Nipun go from here?

I am only interested in one thing -- service. Fortunately, I can do that everywhere I am, whether I'm meditating in the Himalayas, surfing in Hawaii, or staring at a computer screen in the Silicon Valley. So life is very simple for me, like that. Give what is taken and take what is given. Keep working from a space of "I don't know" because that's when you are fearlessly open to life's infinite possibilities.

## Thinking of 'Guri'

Jul 26, 2005

Today, I was missing Guri. I've seen her for a few minutes over the last several weeks. Technically, I think, missing your wife is illegal at a monastery but shhhh, I don't think anyone noticed. :)

My first thought was, "Hey, who am I really missing?" Who is Guri, after all? Am I missing giving her a high-five, am I missing watching the majestic mountains with her, am I missing sharing a joke with her, am I missing smelling the mildew on the leaves with her, am I missing hearing her insights about life? Sort of, but not exactly. Then, what am I really missing? I couldn't figure it out.

So I sat there asking that same question, again and again. I mean, we all know that one day everyone dies. Guri will die too. If I'm still alive, what will I do about my "missing Guri" syndrome then? It's an unavoidable question, especially when you've been meditating a lot.



As I sat quietly with my discomfoting question, I traced it down to a "feeling" in the center of my chest. I track it down further and I notice a throbbing sensation in the same place. Like one is trained in meditation, you watch it and watch it with ultimate patience. So I did. And the sensation eventually went away.

I no longer missed Guri. Now, I was simply thinking of her. It's a subtle yet significant difference that becomes obvious with the unexpected smile on your face.

Like all things aggregate, Guri and Nipun will surely decompose but we have a shared quest that is so magnetically intertwined that it cannot be pulled apart. Deep down at our core, ours is a quest to experience the dynamic reality of each moment with such clarity that we don't take ignorant actions, to live life with such fearlessness that we don't remember could-have's or should-have's on our deathbeds, to love with such reckless abandon that even the heavens start raining.

Today, I unexpectedly smile for all that and more, which improperly gets labeled with one Proper noun: Guri.

Keep walking, Guri. We're going all the way!

## Rescued By a Coin Toss

Jul 28, 2005

Bombay had 37 inches of rain today, the most ever recorded in India. Trains are jammed, buses are stuck, cell phones are dead, lives have come to stand still, hundreds have died, millions are stranded.



Thanks to a "random" coin toss, Guri and I are in contemplative silence on top of a hill 100 miles from Bombay.

## The 4AM Lemonade

Jul 28, 2005

If life gives you lemons, make lemonade. Sometimes when you get lemons, though, you run out of water and sugar or can't find the lemon-squeezer tool. Life certainly has an uncanny track record in shelling out exactly you need but we mostly lose the opportunities because we're not ready.

Take, for example, my volunteer job at the meditation center. At the end of the first day, everyone is distributed into different shifts. I really didn't mind doing anything, except waking up at 4AM. And of course, came the announcement: "Nipun Mehta: Group A, Open the Halls at 4AM." I get to sleep last at 11PM, wake up first at 4AM and work with drowsiness for the rest of the day. ;)

I've happily signed up for many all-nighters and odd-houred sleep schedules, but never for ten days straight! It's lemonade time. :)

Three of us were in this Group A. By itself, waking up at 4AM isn't so bad. Unless you have to close at 11PM too. And unless you get off at 7:00AM, eat breakfast in the next half hour when it's available, and shower in the next fifteen when there's hot water. Having slept five hours the night before, you try hit the sack during your couple hour break at 8AM but you can't sleep since you just ate and showered. You're not awake, you're not sleepy. Middle-man's land. So then, you have lunch and finally you ready to get knocked out. Of course, that's when our second shift starts. 11:30AM to 2:30PM! Hooya.

For a day or two, all three of us in Group A woke up and did our jobs. Then, we decided to improvise. We took turns waking up. Until the fourth day. Due to a family emergency, one of our group members had to leave abruptly. So that left two of us. When the "course manager" asked us for "hall key" ownership, both our eyes hit the ground to avoid the responsibility. It's a big deal because if you somehow sleep in, there'll be 320 silent meditators waiting outside the door!

My other group member was a good guy, but bit on the lazy side; his attitude would really frustrate me sometimes. Fortunately or unfortunately, I remembered a quote by Herman Hesse: "You only experience that which is within you." That translates to -- if I didn't have a latent greed for comfort, my friend's laziness wouldn't frustrate me.

So I took out my frustration ... on myself. I grabbed the keys and emphatically declared, "From today, I will wake up every morning." "Are you sure?" "Yup. And not only that, no shifts. I'll do it everyday."

Laziness is subtle phenomena. By mundane standards, I'm far from lazy; I do a ton, and then sign up for more. That's a very superficial measure, though. At a subtler level, our greed is for status-quo; we are either afraid or lazy to change patterns. We want ride a groove, again and again. And again. I might be super active 20 hours of the day, but underneath it, I could be active just to avoid changing my old habits. It's one of those paradoxes -- I'm busy to be lazy, simply playing hide and seek with myself.

First morning, I hear my alarm at 4AM. It's raining, chilly, and I don't have snooze on the cheap alarm clock. I know I have to get up but my body aches for the warmth underneath the shawl.

Right then, of all things, I remember an episode from Ajahn Chah's life; a Thai meditation master, he once told a sleepy disciple, "When you wake up, just jump out of bed right away." Wow. He's right. Most of our life goes in diddly-daddling. Doubts, snooze, laziness, five more minutes. We are yo-yo's of our confusions, predictably swinging up and down to the rhythm of our sensations. And then, one fine day, we die.

"Noooo. I want out of that game." I swing right of bed, as if Ajahn Chah is giving his sleep-sermon right in my own room.

Day in and day out, this pilgrimage has been about ripping open everything I feel. I mean, if I just go to the core of the matter, depth of the sensation, what's gonna happen? What, I'm afraid I'll die? Even that's fine.

The more I dissolve the apparent knots, the more subtler stuff arises. It seems like an endless yet worthwhile journey. Endless because whenever I get lemons, I'm hardly ever ready to make lemonade; worthwhile because those few times when I'm ready at 4AM, it feels as if I'm the commander of my ship once again.

It's time to wake up.

## Best Compliment Ever?

Jul 29, 2005

Conversation at breakfast, with my newly made Canadian friend -- Louie.

*Louie:* Hey, good morning.

*Me:* Gooood morning, Louie.

*Louie:* So did you sleep well last night?  
(*He knows about my 4AM shift!*)

*Me:* Well, no. :) Why, do I look really tired?

*Louie:* No, not really. (*Takes a second to inspect me further.*) You look happy.

It turns out, I actually am happy!



## Rat Race II: The Karma Edition

Jul 30, 2005

Spiritual volunteers are a rather curious bunch. I recently asked one of them why he serves; he noted, "Well, Buddha said that the greatest gift is the gift of dharma. And this is dharma, so I come here to give that service." Extending a helping hand to a slum child or lending an ear to a lonely elder or reaching out to an abuse victim isn't as interesting for him.

No arguments with Buddha's quote; after all, to give someone the gift of dharma, the gift of happiness, is indeed an ultimate offering. But my problem comes with the "And this is dharma" part. What is dharma? This concept, this meditation, this establishment, this teacher? Can you grab dharma in your hand and show it to me?

The real problem, yet again, is the ego. Instead of giving the gift of dharma, people subtly play games with the concept of Karma. In theory, Karma says that for every action, there's a consequence; whatever intention you sow, those fruits you will reap. Simple and elegant. Unfortunately, in practice, people start counting what can't be counted: 1 good-merit point to smile at a stranger, 3 points to give a meal to the homeless, 5 points to give eye sight to the blind, 11 points to go to a temple, 15 points to meditate at a monastery, 50 points to serve monks and nuns, 100 points to help give the gift of dharma. The more points I gather, the merrier my after-life. Rat-Race, the sequel.

As the famous story goes, a leaf falls down and a monk becomes enlightened. Is the leaf keeping track of its karma points, is it trying to give dharma, does it have a grandiose plan of personal enlightenment? Or is it simply an instrument along its own journey?

Dharma, of course, is neither here nor there; it's hidden at the bosom of each of your actions, it's latent underneath the materials of our mundane life, it's in constant motion to the ocean of our collective consciousness. Dharma can't be captured nor can it be given; it has to be experienced. Lao Tzu eloquently says what all sages have endlessly repeated, "The Tao which is spoken is not the eternal Tao."

If we keep score while doing an action, even subconsciously, it's simply a waste of an action. Far from the eternal Tao.

My definition of dharma is a rather simple one: that which puts an end to all suffering. Actually even just one word captures it: happiness. Being alive as human beings, pain and pleasure will exist, but those with dharma won't suffer. Religions, then, are simply interpretations of that same dharma to lead us to a place of satisfaction within ourselves.

To give someone the gift of no-suffering is, clearly, the ultimate gift. It's the gift of happiness that surpasses all material, emotional and even spiritual offerings. Sure, someone might think that chocolates make them happy or meditation makes them ecstatic, but eventually they will see that it's unsatisfying and keeping seeking elsewhere until they stumble into something truly enduring. And in that way, our shared human experience, is one of going towards happiness.

From that view, every individual is in the path of "dharma"; some take u-turns after u-turns, some stop for extended period at a vista point, and some are unrelenting in their commitment to driving. Whether you drive fast or slow, whether you stop for a flat-tire or a putting on your snow-chains, whether you're into zig-zaggedy-zen or one-lane-wonder, it's all on the same road. Eventually, we all get to the same place. It is the nature of the ego to think, "Ah, this path that I (capital I) am on, is the best path." Maybe it is, maybe it isn't, but who really cares? If you're happy, good. If you're not, find something else. We're bound to meet at the end of the road.

So, if we are all on this highway to happiness, what gets the most karma points? What is the best help?

It's impossible to say one kind of help is better than another and it's equally foolish to give all credit to the "last straw that broke the camel's back."

You can be the dirty fertilizer for a seed, you can be the flowing water for the shrub, you can be the mighty sun for the plant, you can be the free-roaming oxygen to nurture the tree, you can be the masked scare-crow to protect the fruits. Each is a part in an inconceivable matrix of interconnectedness. The help doesn't start in the garden nor does it end in the garden; it's simply an open-handed gift to whoever receives it.

There are no karma points.

Ego is suffering, selflessness is dharma. Granted that some things are more expedient in achieving real happiness but in this infinite continuum of our shared experiences, it's impossible (and pointless) to maintain a ledger for help-credits and hurt-debits. When asked if he believes in "karma", Nisargadatta Maharaj once said, "If it helps you quiet your mind, it's good. Otherwise not."

The reward for our action is the action itself. Right now. That's it. It is only the ego that wants to project the fruit of its action into the future.

Playing the karma-game to minimize this or maximize that, to go to a monastery to serve while ignoring a family member in your own home, to write large checks for a temple but walking past a beggar on the streets ... that's just rotating in our own illusions.

Instead, the world belongs to those who radiate a genuine wish for others' happiness from the center of their being, for theirs is not a gift for their ego's security but an unconditional offering to the present moment.

One of my monk friends was once stopped by a homeless person for some food. Not having anything, the monk kindly replied, "My friend, I can't offer you food, but can I give you a prayer." The homeless man sat still as the monk stood on the sidewalk and sang a silent prayer from his heart.

Perhaps real dharma is simpler than what our ego makes it out to be -- be real, wherever you are.

## Unstuffing An Envelope

Aug 2, 2005

Almost two years ago, I received a stuffed envelope. It's still there in a hidden corner of my brother's drawer. I just opened that envelope few days ago.

After a meeting of some like-minded folks, an almost-80-year old man follows me to the exit door and gently places a stuffed envelope in the top left pocket of my half-sleeve shirt.

"Nipun, here, I want you to take this. It's from your uncle," he said very compassionately.

"What's this?" I ask, cracking a curious smile. I figure it's a thank-you letter from him or perhaps a project proposal for review. He puts his right hand on my left shoulder, swings me around and tries to push me out the door, "Just go. Open it later." With all my curiosity, I swing back around and ask him, "No, come on. What is it? Can I open it right now?" Without waiting for him to answer, I childishly grab the envelope from my pocket and open it in front of him.

Now, I don't know how exactly to describe this man. The first time I met him, rather randomly, I experienced a rather strange yet powerful sensation. Throughout our hello-nice-to-meet you type of conversation, my head was pulsating with a peculiar sensation that originated right smack in the center of my forehead. At that time, I was maybe 23, and I didn't exactly understand the cause of that feeling but I still vividly remember it. I ignored it at the time, but both of us felt deeply connected to each other.

Although we rarely met over the years, he would unfailingly give me something every time we met. One time, when I gave him a ride, he pulled out a can of cashews from his small hand-bag; he stutteringly told me the story of Sudama, a very poor friend of Krishna, who would give little offerings to Krishna with great love. Then, he'd innocently say, "You know, you can keep these in your car and whenever you get hungry, just eat one or two. They're roasted cashews. I think you'll like them." Hoooya. Another time I went to visit him at his house, when he was sick, he reaches out to the back of a paper pile and brings out a pen with a logo of some conference. "Do you think you could use a pen? I received this when I gave a talk in Belgium recently and I have been saving it for you. It writes really well, see ..." as he opens it up carefully and demos the pen. Just receiving one such pure offering can change anyone's life.

Every single time, he would give me something. I asked him why and he'd shrug it off with, "Because I just feel like doing it", almost as if to say, "Oh, you won't understand." Yet it was such a genuine expression of love, that I made it a habit of accepting all his gifts (something uncharacteristic for my nature).

The first time I went to his house, we meditated in a corner of his house where he sits everyday; then he cut me some mangoes as I quizzed him about his life story; his is a quiet life of anonymous service --

he is somewhat famous, his work has directly affected tens of thousands of lives around the globe and his meetings with incredible saints has given much inspiration. Most of what he has earned over the years, he has creatively given away for benefit of mankind. Yet one got the impression that he rarely shares this information (and so I am not writing his name or other details) in the interest of humility.

And he's always deeply supported everything I do. I spoke to him before I quit my job at Sun Microsystems and he gave lots of practical advice but urged me to surge forward towards my "destiny". Throughout the years, he has opened many critical doors for me without even knowing it. Lots of people come to help after something is successful, but his was an unconditional support in solidarity of my spirit of service. I have always counted on it.

So, back to this envelope. Here is my old friend, someone I call "uncle", a fellow pilgrim, giving me a random gift yet again. I have to open it. And I do.

It's money! Hard, cold cash. A whole bunch of cash stuffed in a bulging envelope.

"What is this?" I ask him. I mean, gifts are already over-the-top and here is straight money from a simple, 80-year-old man! "There is no way I can accept this," I tell him as I place the stuffed envelope back in his hand. Using all his might, he says, "No, this is for you and only you. There is no way you can refuse it. It is very pure money, very honestly and sincerely gathered, and it is meant for you. It's not very much but it comes with all my love." And again he put his left hand on my right shoulder and swings me around to push me out the door. I was a little awe-struck. Not knowing what to do, I accept it. When I reach home, I saw that it was the largest cash gift I have ever received in my life. I safely secure the envelope; I have a feeling that there will be just-the-right-time to open that envelope again.

Couple days ago, then, as I was silently walking to the breakfast hall after a few hours of morning meditation, I had this random thought about my "uncle" friend. In my mind, for legitimate reasons or not, I thought that his time of death is nearing ... that perhaps might I not see him again. In thankfulness for all that I have share with him, I stood still for a moment, closed my eyes, and sent out the strongest prayer of my heart for his well being.

Then, for a brief moment, that stuffed envelope came alive once again. And this time I noticed something I hadn't seen before -- the envelope wasn't neatly organized with crisp notes of one or another kind. There were crumpled dollar bills, five dollar bills, ten dollar bills, twenty and so on. He clearly didn't just go to a bank and bring that cash. I got the sense that he had been collecting that money, bit by bit, for a while and must've accompanied some serious sacrifice along with it. Tears started rolling down my eyes -- "Thank you, my fellow dharma pilgrim. My best will always stay with you, wherever you are, wherever I am, on this voyage to our center."

Many times on this pilgrimage, we wonder about the "just in time" events that save us from much suffering. The answers are perhaps covered in stuffed envelopes thousands of miles away.

## Temple of Accumulated Error

Aug 2, 2005

My friend Wavy Gravy has a great line for his introduction: "I am a temple of accumulated error."

Our physical body is, quite literally, the keeper of all our suffering and wisdom. Unfortunately, we are like the beggar who sat on a box everyday to beg for spare change without realizing that his box is filled with gold. Instead of looking within, we keep extending our hands and hearts outside for a little piece of that happiness; and instead of glowing under the fountain of boundless joy, we drown in the sorrows of rejection and dis-satisfaction, as beggars for our senses.

It takes effort to churn through the accumulated errors, but sooner or later, we are bound to get a glimpse of our templehood.



In the ever flowing rivers of our pure consciousness, we have ignorantly created icicles of rigid tension. Icicles are pointy edges that block our own vibrant flow and unnecessarily hurt others around us. The only thing left to do, then, is to melt our own icicles, become nimble, and return to innocence.

Whether you are walking on the sidewalks of India or sipping coffee on the busy streets of New York, whether you are climbing the corporate ladder in the Silicon Valley or volunteering in shanty towns of Guatemala, whether you are watching your breath at a Thai monastery or working the night shift at Hyderabad call centers, ultimately, the Work must be done.

Till the end, a bow to all temples of accumulated error.

## Most Inspiring Blog Entries?

Aug 2, 2005

On this pilgrimage, we've shared several dozen stories and experiences through our blogs. Unlike journalism, we don't go out to find or create stories; rather ours was a process of sharing whatever happens to us -- sitting, walking or even sleeping :) -- with the simple hope that gives an extra umph to the reader's own journey.

Often, we find ourselves in position of finding the "top ten" stories that people have found value in. You can't always gauge by the number of comments or the number of hits or the number of emails, and it's impossible for us to rate 'em; so I thought I'd just ask the readers -- which story (or stories) inspired you the most?

Please consider all the writings on this blog, [Guri's blog](#), and [iJourney.org](#). Inner-net stories also have a [chronological listing](#). Following that, just post a [comment](#) on this thread or [email](#) your inputs.

Thanks for you readership; it's a big support to know that others are with you.

[ P.S. My blog will return again after two weeks of solitude. :) ]

# An Invisible Pilgrim

Aug 14, 2005

It was March 30th, the night before we left. Guri and I were leaving into the hands of the unknown, within four hours. No one knew the plan; we were just gonna take off "south" with a back-pack. Mark Peters, the night before, gave us a guess that was as good as anyone else's, "Hey, we'll see you next week."

We wake up at 4:00AM to find a note on our door with a huge smiley face (from one of the two Anjali's sleeping over that night): the force is with you. It definitely felt like it. Viral asked us to wake him up, so I reluctantly did; he woke up immediately as we exchanged our brotherly, always-together hand-shake.

Jayeshbhai and Anarben, whose house we were at, also insisted on waking up. Jayeshbhai was going to walk with us to the Gandhi Ashram, where we were to meditate at Hriday-Kunj (Gandhi's residence) for a few minutes before officially launching ourselves into the abyss. Anarben stood at the gate waving goodbye, with unstoppable tears in her eyes. I valiantly lifted both of my hands up in the air, to inform the forces around us: "We rest in your hands now."

Three of us turn the corner and I notice the license plate of an oddly-placed motorcycle. It said, "Viral". I couldn't believe my eyes! I have never seen such a license plate in India. Turning to Guri and Jayeshbhai, I excitedly tell 'em, "Hey guys, in case you had any doubt, Viral is right here with us." Right after we read it, a man comes out of nowhere, climbs on the motorcycle and zooms off onto the barren streets in those early morning hours. We had an invisible pilgrim amongst us.

After four months, yesterday, that invisible pilgrim became visible once again. Guri and I saw Viral again. All three of us were so happy to see each other; it felt like a familiar reunion that's been happening for eons. :)

Today, Viral is gone again. He will be in a meditation cell for the next 30 days, penetrating the depths of his being. Thirty days of no reading, writing, talking, or any other contact with the external world. Unless you are steeped in virtue, you will go crazy if you try to attempt this. But this is, of course, Viral. I'm not worried at all.



In the Mahabharata, before an epic war between the Kauravas and Pandavas, Lord Krishna asks both sides about the distribution of his resources: do you want Krishna, an embodiment of virtue, or leagues and leagues of armies? The leader of the bad guys gets the first pick; he says, "What am I going to do with one man? Give me all the armies!" And sure enough, he loses the war.

Viral is no Krishna (yet :) but still, if you put all of the world's resources on one side and Viral on the other, my scale will always pick the invisible pilgrim.

Meditate on, bro. Always together on the Way.

# Inspiring Billboards

Aug 16, 2005



For a long time now, I have loved the idea of inspiring ads and media. CharityFocus's [Inspiring Messages](#) does it in a small way, and so does [Foundation For A Better Life](#). But I think much, much more can be done in this area.

In fact, Indu-Aunty (who teaches slum children on railroad platforms) was recently featured in PBS's premiere of the [New Heroes](#) project (also featuring [Dr. V](#)); it's a project by an eBay founder to use video to profile good people doing good things.

If you have related ideas, or know of other efforts in the same arena, I'd love to hear about it.

# Sweet Samadhi

Aug 16, 2005

Just as we finished the last 10-day meditation course, a new student yells, "Oh man, I really miss ice-cream." On hearing that statement, I cracked up.

For the last six months, our diet has been ... well, not much of a diet. Not one sip of Thumbs-Up, Mazza, or Pepsi. Not one ice-cream bar (except for one night stay in Mandvi three months ago, where our host insisted we have two ice-cream bars each after our 42 kilometer walk). And most importantly for me, no regular input of sweets!

Now, the menu at the monastery here is set. Every four or five days, you can expect the same item. No onions or garlic or tasty spices either. Since I don't eat after noon, sometimes I wonder if the good stuff is saved for dinner. :)

But then ... but then, there's this one breakfast item served every alternate four days ... sweet "laapsi". Oh, I love it! I would look forward to it everytime. And then right before I take the first bite, I would pause for a moment just to smile right before I dive right in and just before ending my feast, I would setup a countdown timer for my next dose. Sometimes it was day or two off, and I think I started having withdrawal symptoms. ;)

One time, I got real greedy and took so much that I could barely finish it. As I was trying to finish it, I said to myself, "Don't you love this item? Why are you stopping now?" Then, I started analyzing the

mathematics of it all. I waste so much energy in hyping up to the dish of 'laapsi' and then when I get it, it's almost a let down. Kinda like the good movies that get awesome reviews and you are left expecting something more.

So, two months of laapsi ambivalence later, I don't think I really look forward to it anymore. I still enjoy having it, but I don't count down or get greedy when I see it.

Until I walked down the street two days back ... oh, the aroma of so much tasty stuff. And I saw a bakery proudly showing off a chocolate cake. Hahahahaha. I will never learn. Life is so much fun, isn't it? ;)

## iJourney, We All Journey

Aug 16, 2005

Since the beginning of this pilgrimage, we have received many notes from people inspired to start their own journeys. Any sincere action is its own reward, but to help others through it is certainly icing on the cake. :)

Today, I got an email from the ever-so-happy [Madhusudan Mittal](#). He's an independent filmmaker, who has started journeying around the Himalayas to interview saints; his first stop was the Dalai Lama in Dharmasala. On Dalai Lama's birthday, Madhu got to be up close with him and asked, "How can all the religions of the world work together?" Dalai Lama smiled and responded, "Well, we can start by going out to lunch together."

[Raj Kanani](#) and [Sameer Sampat](#) are two roommates from UCLA who also took off on their own journey two weeks back. They plan to travel around India to profile progressive nonprofit organizations.

And of course, there's the creative [Mark Peters](#) and [John Silliphant](#) duo, who are unleashing their acts of service in Ahmedabad under the guidance of [Jayeshbhai](#). Their most recent act was delivering 4000 "love letters" from India to Pakistan on Independence Day.

All their blogs are also included in the [Tao Jones Ticker](#) and their submitted works will be posted at [iJourney.org](#).

May we all walk together in service.

## My Design Principles

Aug 16, 2005

It dawned on me recently: I'm a designer. Throughout the adult part of my 29 years, that's what I have done. It feels natural to me. They even have me designing things at the meditation center here. But today, I was thinking about the principles behind design.

In 7th grade, I got a horrendous paper route where most carriers lasted a maximum of one or two months. I redesigned the entire route for efficiency, "acquired" nearby routes to soon quadruple my daily delivery, converted everyone to automatic billing, and did some outreach in particular areas to

maximize throughput. By the end of two years, I had "subs" delivering papers and I was making money sitting at home. All I did was design. And my design principle was utility.

In my first (and only) "real" job, I got the task of optimizing the C++ compiler. I had to make things run faster; again, I was in a group of half a dozen PhD's, three of whom had helped design C++ programming language (which is the base of hundreds of billions of software industry business), so this isn't quite your textbook work either. The job was not just to think out of the box, but to crush the box, send it to the recyclers and innovate from scratch. Interestingly, I wouldn't classify any of my ultra-smart teammates as intellectuals; one of them was into dancing, another into horse-back riding, another into Japanese art, another into languages and calligraphy and so on. Raw intellect sits in a cubicle for \$100K a year with a supervising manager; but this was about innovators who aren't told what to do. They just do. :) And the major design principle here was what I could call "creative intellect."

And then there's [CharityFocus](#). When we started CharityFocus in April 1999, everyone was skeptical of the strength of a distributed, moneyless organization. It was new. No one had previously created a web-based organization for service, without any overhead. My design challenge here was organization itself: how can you harness all this positive energy into action without the beauraucratic overhead? In the last six years, CharityFocus delivered millions of dollars in services. And I feel it can be improved even more. Key design principle? Spirituality. In my talk at the Sante Fe Institute several years ago, I called it '[Ancient Wisdom, Modern Application](#)'.

At each step, I would keep learning and today, I have three major design principles in my repertoire: utility, creative intellect, and spirituality. Utility comes from the ability to see things as they are without projecting your dreams onto it, creative intellect is the fusion of left and right brain such that you can seamlessly step inside and outside any box, and spirituality is the ability to draw lessons from nature itself.

Now, here is my aha-moment for today -- when I go deeper within myself, I am affecting all three of my design principles very directly: see reality as it is, master your mind and be in tune with nature.

## Pain is All in the Mind?

Aug 23, 2005

It's day six of one of the [ten-day meditation courses](#) that I'm signed up for. Half an hour into my 1PM, half-lotus meditation sit, I am about to shift my posture slightly to give myself some much needed relief. With numb calves, sore quads, and aching knees, it's a natural response. But then, is it?

Over a decade ago, I remember repeatedly telling all my friends that "pain is all in the mind." To be honest, I would come up with all these wild conclusions that somehow "felt" right, and then hunt for rationalizations for it. Quite the inverted process, but it always made for good conversation. :) One of my very good friends, Paul, would argue back in his characteristically vulgar language, "Alright \$%@\$\$, you stand right here and I'll run my car right over you. Then let's see how real pain is." :)

Well, alright, I personally wouldn't take a chance with a car :) but if Jesus can wish compassion for people driving nails into his body and if Gandhi can bless the assassin who pummeled his thin frame with three rapid-fire bullets, come on, there's gotta something else going on.

Pain, actually, turns out to be a very intriguing phenomena. This is what science tells us about it:

*When we stub our toe, it hurts ? but only because our brain says so. Damage-detecting sensory neurons flash a message to the spinal cord, spinal cord neurons relay the message to the brain, and the brain decides (a) damage has occurred, (b) it has been inflicted on the toe, and (c) something needs to be done (we start hobbling, raise the foot, utter an expletive). It may feel as if our toe is throbbing, but the experience is all contained within a mental projection of the condition of our toe within our brain.*

Now, neuroscientists note that each time we react to a sensation in a particular way, it reinforces that "neural pathway" in our brain; ie. the next time we experience that sensation, we will react in an even stronger way because we have taught ourselves that. Our pain -- and pleasure -- then, is just a conditioned response aggregated over millions of experiences. Science stops there, but sages invite us to go a step further: step out of your ignorant patterns of dis-satisfaction and see what happens.

What would happen if we didn't react to the sensations we feel? Would they go away? What would happen next? What exactly remains, when we uncondition our brains of all its neural patterns? Perhaps an unconditioned mind was what prevented Gandhi and Jesus from not uttering a single cry for help in the face of intense pain?

I don't know what it is, but today, I am in the mood for some serious investigation. Maybe it is the culmination of our meditation binge or the solitary lifestyle or the bland diet or the commercial-free thoughts or the resurfacing of some past life as an Himalayan ascetic. :) I don't know, but today, I am going to unflinchingly stare down my pain, mano-e-mano, and see what happens. Sometimes in life, you gotta pull all the stops and on pilgrimages, those sometimes come a little bit more often than usual.

My lab is the 3x7 foot meditation cell, my instrument is this body labeled as Nipun, and my experiment is to finally test my decade-old, "pain is all in the mind" hypothesis.

Deep breath. Another deep breath. The next eight hours, from 1PM-9PM straight, would be one of the gutsiest experiences of my waking life.

Barely thirty minutes into the 1PM sit on a cushioned mat on the ground, my legs start dying on me. Pain. My calves are numb, my right quad feels like a tow-truck is pulling on it, my right knee has a sharp shooting pain. The good book says that all sensations are transitory, so ok, I'm hoping that this goes away. I stay still in observation mode. But ten more minutes and my misery is rapidly multiplying - - oh, the pain! Please change. Darn it, change! Now! But no. The top of my foot feels like someone is burning coals on it, my thighs are going out fast, and now my back and shoulder blades are complaining with unrelenting throbbing sensations.

I don't know what to do. Really, there are only two ways out: unlock your posture, get up and stretch or stay with the pain until it passes away. Our whole life is about adjusting, twisting and turning to run away from the pain. So what's one more time? "Come on, Nipun, just adjust a bit. You're playing silly games with yourself. Don't try to be macho. You are a computer scientist, not an ascetic yogi. This is not the middle way." Fancy people have fancy justifications for their actions -- doubts, thoughts, rationalizations -- and I tried them all.

While I usually get mobbed by the echoes of my own thoughts, today, nothing was coming back. I'd yell but no echo. I couldn't believe it; my pain couldn't believe it!

Somehow I survive the stillness. After the first meditation sit, when I release my half-lotus posture for a few minutes, I notice my entire mind gushing to that opening of "relief". Instead of reacting, I again try to observe what feels like ultimate bliss. :) And of course, the pain returns! I am in pain, but by now, I'm also seriously curious if this pain will actually go away if I sit longer.

Over the next meditation hour, I eagerly watch my sensations equanimously to see if I can uncondition my neural pathways of blind reaction. Secretly, I'm hoping that the pain goes away. Nope, rapidly increasing pain. Raw pain. I want to quit, but I tell myself, "This far into the experiment, you can't bail on me. What if it's just on the edge of a radical mutation?" I decide to go for another hour of locked, upright stillness without absolutely any movements.

The [Buddha taught](#) that if we simply stop reacting to sensations, we loosen our old habit patterns and take a step towards experiencing the joy of impermanent reality as it is. It makes full sense to me. I even remember seeing it scientifically articulated in [What The Bleep Do We know](#) (a docu-drama on Quantum Physics). No expression, no suppression, just observation of the ongoing flow of sensations -- pleasure or pain -- and you will change your brain patterns and thus, your experience of the world.

In theory, I am sold. In practice, I am dying of pain.

I release my half lotus posture just to check for any serious physical damage. I'm surely roughed up but still okay. Part of me says that the physical pain is an accumulation of the last four of continuous meditation (with maybe a couple minutes of rest to travel from one hall to another). But then, a larger part of me says that every moment is a different experience and my theory of accumulated pain is actually just a projection of my own mind. A minute or two later, I'm back in my half lotus posture. Round 4, buddy.

By this hour, although the "pain" doesn't vanish, I clearly see it transform from numbness to heat, from throbbing to pulsating, from stings to sharp tugs. Alright, so there is sign of life. :) I walk from my meditation cell to the 6PM sit, about a minute away. Yet another hour. I feel like I'm being operated on, without anesthesia! This time, though, it dawns on me that my awareness is drastically sharper; when we say, "my quad is hurting", it's actually never your full quadricep. It's just that the pain is so overwhelming that you are blinded to other, subtler experiences. Once the suffering goes away from the pain and the pain becomes what it is -- just a sensation -- you experience it in some isolated spot on the body, next to which are so many other kinds of sensations. Your whole body starts to come alive.

To write about my six hours of meditation in a couple of paragraphs is to almost trivialize it; what takes one sentence to describe actually feels like an entire eternity in hell. Maybe not hell hell, but close. :) Because this kind of equanimity goes against everything we have done for our whole lives (maybe even more), everything in you starts revolting vehemently. Doubts, tensions, unease. You sense some gooey stuff underneath your "sole" and walking with that glue is rather cumbersome, especially after you become aware of it. Yet your weak mind responds with, "Not now. Later." Every moment we refuse life's incredible invitation for true joy and we procrastinate our own freedom. Why? Because we're too busy with our todo-lists, we're too caught up with our achievements, we're too blinded by our senses. This is the unfortunate yet humorous story of our lives.

Sooner or later, though, your "not now" has to turn into a "right now". And my 'now' arrives just in time. Today, my inner voice wouldn't let me quit.

In such a state, though, your will power is on bankrupt and all your beliefs are thrown out the window. Concepts can't save you now. It's you and your absolute deepest convictions.

Curiously, I discover my two biggest allies: science and service. Science provides the rational backdrop to quiet my mind, and service provides the experiential inspiration to keep marching. It's a very interesting combination. Science informs me that this is not just your extreme-sport thrill-ride; it's about unconditioning the wired patterns of your brain so you witness life as it is. Service tells me that selflessness is joy, ego is pain, and sincerity alone is not enough to remove the ego. You need insight and until that insight awakens, ego will keep on creeping into your actions. Furthermore, this wisdom isn't a function of will, but rather of patient observation. Wisdom blossoms naturally when the conditions are ripe.

So, really, all that is left to do is be still in the face of everything and anything. It's the ultimate adventure, if you think about it. Alright, pain or pleasure, I'm gonna sit another hour.

I'm pumped-up like there is no tomorrow. I always had a sense that all this pain was inside of me, but for once in my life, I didn't want to escape it. Still, I'm also truly humbled. By no means, am I expecting an [Eckhart-Tolle-like](#) experience of enlightenment. It's quite clear that I have miles and miles to go before I sleep ... I mean, wake up. :)

Eight hours after my rather unexpected stint of grit, it is time for the meditation hall to close. I'm definitely at the end of my rope, in terms of my physical and mental strength. Before getting up, there's a small phrase chanted three times -- bhavattu sabba managalam (may all beings be happy).

Wishing happiness for others, in the midst of so much pain, is a quite a trippy experience. "May all beings be happy." And then almost spontaneously, "Ah, I'm so sorry to have inflicted all my subtle pain-bodies onto all life, for so long."

Like a beat-up, roughed-up soldier, I hobble to my room. I have never ever consciously experienced so much pain in my life. Never. I'm sure if any of the assistant teachers found out about my unrelenting determination sits, they would think I'm on some crazy trip; but it feels just right to me. My clock has struck.

Because our minds are preoccupied in the dense material experiences of life, we have lost our sensitivity to experience our own aliveness. Our bodies are practically dead. Fortunately, we hold the trigger to sharpen our own awareness. And once we fire, we can bear witness to the magic of the rapidly changing sensations on our bodies and uncondition the neural pathways in our brain. It is only when we come alive in this way that we can serve with selfless compassion, act with pure non-violence, and breathe with boundless gratitude in our hearts. The rest, as they say, is elementary.

I lie down in bed. I can't sleep sideways or on my stomach, because my knees are royally busted. I look at the ceiling in my room. I haven't had electricity for the last nine days in my room but today, it simply doesn't matter. I have nothing left in me to disagree with anything.

Before closing my eyes, one last time, I valiantly lift my hands up in the air -- I maybe down but I'm far from out. It is said that Gautam Buddha worked for 4 incalculable eons before he became fully liberated. Well, 4 incalculable eons minus one day for "Nipun Mehta"? Long ways to go but one step closer.

Pain is, I'd still tell Paul, all in the mind.

*[ My eyes open at 3:30AM the next morning, way earlier than usual. In the shock of my life, my body feels perfectly fine! Inspired, I pull another 1-9PM on the next day. Sensations do change; it's not so bad after all. :) ]*

# The Blind and The Kind

Aug 25, 2005

It was an absolutely compelling sight -- a 35 year old blind man holding a shoulder of an unknown volunteer, being escorted into the meditation hall. For the next ten days, that volunteer will take this blind student from his residence to the meditation hall to the dining hall to everywhere else he needs to go. They have had no verbal introduction.

What a vivid metaphor of inter-dependence to see a blind person's quest for "vision" supported by the kindness of a seeming stranger, and to see a kind person's search for compassion supported by the need of a blind man. What beauty of a shared human existence!

Oddly enough, just a week ago, I had read an inspiring story of a blind roommate, retold by William Brody in this year's [commencement address](#) at Johns Hopkins:

*There is a trustee of Johns Hopkins who I'd like to tell you about. His name is Sandy Greenberg. In his youth, Sandy was a very good student, but he came from a poor family. And so he went to Columbia University on a scholarship, and there he met his roommate, who also was receiving financial aid.*

*Now while he was a sophomore at Columbia University, he contracted an eye disease that eventually proved to be glaucoma. But the trouble was, it wasn't detected early enough, and as a result he became legally blind, while still a student at Columbia. I ask you all to imagine for a moment having been sighted all your life, and then all of a sudden being faced, in a very competitive school, with losing so much sight you could no longer read. This is what happened to our trustee, Sandy Greenberg.*

*But something else happened to Sandy that may surprise you. Sandy said that when he lost his sight, his roommate began to read his textbooks to him, every night.*

*So I'm going to put you in that position, in a competitive school like Columbia, or Johns Hopkins. If your roommate had a serious disability, would you take the time to read textbooks to him every night, knowing the more you spend time reading textbooks to your roommate, perhaps the less well you might do with your other activities? That's not as easy a question as it first appears.*

*But luckily for Sandy, our trustee, his roommate did. And as a result, Sandy went on to graduate with honors. He got a Fulbright Scholarship, and he went off to study at Oxford. He was still quite poor, but he said he had managed to save about five hundred dollars as he went along.*

*His roommate, meanwhile, also went on to graduate school. One day, Sandy got a call from him at Oxford. And his former roommate said, "Sandy I'm really unhappy. I really don't like being in graduate school, and I don't want to do this."*

*So Sandy asked, "Well what do you want to do?"*

*And his roommate told him, "Sandy, I really love to sing. I have a high school friend who plays the guitar. And we would really like to try our hand in the music business. But we need to make a promo record, and in order to do that I need \$500."*

*So Sandy Greenberg told me he took all his life savings and sent it to his roommate. He told me, "You know, what else could I do? He made my life; I needed to help make his life." So, I hope you'll remember the power of doing well by doing good. Each of you, in your own lives, will be faced with challenges, with roadblocks, with problems that you didn't anticipate or expect. How you are able to deal with adversity will be influenced, to no small extent, by how you deal with others along the way. What you get will depend a lot on what you give. And that's the end of the story of doing well, by doing good.*

*Ah! I almost forgot. You probably are wanting to know who Sandy's roommate was. I think you've heard of him. Sandy's roommate was a fellow by the name of Art Garfunkel, and he teamed up with another musician by the name of Paul Simon. That \$500 helped them cut a record that eventually became "The Sounds of Silence." Recently, we had the pleasure of going to Sandy's daughter's wedding, and it was Art Garfunkel who sang as Sandy walked his daughter down the aisle.*

Perhaps most people will remember this story because of the Art Garfunkel wow-factor. For me, though, I won't be able to forget that simple volunteer offering his shoulder, for ten days straight, to an unknown blind man seeking an experience of truth.

Sometimes I wonder if it's more satisfying to serve the seekers or seek the source. In between the two, my life flows. :)

## A Whisper At My Doorstep

Aug 29, 2005

"Nipun-ji," I hear a voice. It's the crack of dawn, my room is way out in the boonies, and no one is allowed to utter a single word in this area. Who is calling my name? I shift in my bed and look at the window to notice that it's dark.

Perhaps I'm hearing things. After all, I slept at 2AM the night before, talking to a meditation student having suicidal thoughts.

Ten seconds later, in a crackling, timid voice, "Nipun-ji". Ok, someone really is at my door. How could that be? Only a couple people know where I stay and they would never speak around my room.

I open the door, with my eyes half open. It's Sri, the 34-year-old guy I was counseling just a couple hours ago. Dazed and confused, he says, "Nipun-ji, I couldn't sleep again. Nipun-ji, please help me. Please do something."

I am one of five people signed up to serve 240 meditation students in "Dhamma Hall 2". With 240 students, most of whom have never taken 10-days to look within themselves, you're bound to get some drama. But this is going way above and beyond the call of duty I anticipated.

I scratch my eyes, just in case I'm dreaming. No such luck. It's Sri for sure.

Sri is a young guy taking a 10-day meditation course on the recommendation of another friend. He is happily married with a 2 year old daughter, runs a business with three of his brothers, is heavily involved in the community and even gives regular talks at local clubs on leadership. All in all, a well settled young man. He has no real imposing reason to learn meditation, except to grow himself in a different dimension. Instead of one of those self-reinforcing, confidence boosting seminars, this Vipassana camp ended up being a inside-out overhaul for him.

After four days of silent meditation, Sri just couldn't take it. Yet he's too self conscious to quit. So he goes up to the assistant teacher to ask a question; unfortunately, there's a queue of people waiting to ask questions. Incidentally, I'm standing in watching distance, and I notice Sri shriveling up his questions as other nosy ears try to tune into his problem. Sri abruptly ends his conversation with the teacher.

As he walks out, I follow him and whisper with folded hands, "If you'd like, you can speak with the teacher in private at noon tomorrow." With half-tears in his eyes, he keeps walking, "No, you just don't understand. You just don't understand."

I, uncharacteristically, follow him outside. Again with folded hands, I ask, "Is something wrong?" This time, he breaks down. "I don't know what's wrong. I don't understand anything. I just want to kill myself," he says with clenched fists that mirror anger, frustration and confusion, all at once.

Stunned, I am for almost ten seconds. Volunteers generally don't speak to students but this is clearly a special case. I ask for his room number and assure him that some senior teacher will be in his room within the next half hour. And sure enough, he got a tranquilizing dose of calmness from Jayeshbhai that night.

At 1AM, as I was chatting up Buddha stories with another great meditation teacher, we spot a student in a distance. No student should be out of their room at this hour, and after a closer look, I notice that it's Sri again.

"I can't sleep again. This is the second night in a row. I keep on having the same thoughts. Why is this happening to me? I was fine before and now I'm so scared. Will I get better?" Sri asks in a rapid-fire manner, as if he had twenty seconds left to live. After an hour of counseling and a sleeping pill, he calms down and returns to his room.

Quite honestly, I have never had the occasion to deal with a suicidal mentality, within or without. All of a sudden, I have no choice but to look deeply into it.

Suicide is the second most common [cause of injury](#), after road-accidents. Yes, it comes before all the casualties of war or interpersonal violence. It is, unfortunately, a common phenomenon. But why in the world do people want to kill themselves? I'm no psychologist but my guess is that it's because they want an escape from their experience of intense pain and suffering. People with good lives can't quite fathom such a scenario because they've never experienced such overwhelming pain. But take a moment to think about some of the most tragic situations of constant abuse and violence, and think if you would be able to preach the sermons of peace to yourself? Personally, I'm not so sure I would.

Sri's situation is rather unique, though. Four days back, he had a great life going for himself. Last week, he probably would've lectured others about being in control of the mind but somehow, he has gone astray today. He wants to bail and return to the "normal" life waiting for him at home, but he is now scared if he will ever return back to his original state. And that fear is paralyzing him further. It's like

you bite your tongue accidentally, and refuse to release your teeth because it hurts. You are deepening your own misery, but you don't have the wherewithal to see that. From a third person point of view, it's truly sad.

I suppose that's what sages must be feeling all day, looking at the human condition. When Swami Vivekananda spent two years walking India by foot, as a complete hermit, he would cry every night (for a couple months) after witnessing the self-imposed sorrows of mankind. What I feel when I see Sri is probably what the Dalai Lama experiences when he sees me -- "Poor Nipun, he is ignorantly creating his own misery."

If you really break it down, if suicide is an escape from suffering, aren't we all suicidal? Wouldn't "I'm so tired, I am going to go the movies?" or "I really need a vacation?" qualify as suicidal thoughts? To most of us, that conclusion might sound a little extreme, but that's generally because we are so dense that we need huge buildings to blow up before understanding that there's a problem. In truth, we all have a little bit of Sri in us. Well, I don't know about "we all" but certainly I have always been playing hide and seek with my suffering, so much so that I will subconsciously slap a mosquito to death even in my sleep.

Because I recognize the seed of Sri's condition in myself, I feel a whole lot of compassion for Sri when I open my door to the call of "Nipun-ji, Nipun-ji" and see a face of misery reflecting directly in front of my eyes.

"Sri, what's wrong?" I ask him in a quiet tone so as to not disturb other neighbors in this early morning hour. "I don't know. I couldn't sleep again last night. That's three nights in a row. I keep on thinking about ..." Sri breaks down and throws his face into his palms. Sitting on a ledge, he looks up at me and asks, "Nipun-ji, please help me. Nipun-ji, please do something. I need your help." Of course, I haven't the foggiest idea of what to do.

I grab my umbrella, and without turning back to wash my face or check my hair in the mirror or realize that I am wearing shorts in a no-shorts-meditation zone, I walk out the door with Sri.

"How did you know where I stay?" I ask him, trying to divert the topic. "I woke up the doctor who gave me the sleeping pills last night and he said you were in the J-block, so I went around the block and whispered your name, hoping you could hear me," Sri says. He was in serious pain and desperate.

That whole day, I did double duty: taking care of the hall and Sri. Other teachers came in to speak with him. We spoke with his brothers and wife at home they all unanimously said, "Ask him not to worry. We are all perfectly fine and hoping that we can sit in the meditation camp next." Sri was happy to hear that message, but it was short-term relief. Other fears would take a hold of his mind. I would take him to empty halls, use my broken Hindi to share some parables, and play some inspiring DVDs. At one point, I went to the bathroom and he got on all fours and started banging his head on the floor. I came in and he just started weeping like a little child. He just wanted out from this whole pain. Unfortunately, there is no quick fix. Not having slept for three days, he was in bad physical shape too; he couldn't even eat much and was a little disoriented.

That night, Sri insisted that I sleep in his room. I did. Within minutes, he was snoring. And for the first time in my life, I was happy to hear my roommate snore. :)

Sri's struggle is that of addiction. He is addicted to a stream of negative thoughts. Then, he multiplies his misery by creating a myth that he isn't strong enough to drop that addiction. To complicate the

matter, he's super-imposed an ideal of what he was in the past, someone "free" from all this negativity. Between the present moment truth, the myth and the ideal, Sri feels like he's sinking in quicksand. Without the myth and the ideal, the present moment problem isn't so bad. But alas, either said than done.

At times like these, one needs a personal answer to life's basic question -- why do good things happens to bad people and bad things to good people? If you haven't created a solid answer that fits your own ontology of life -- karma, God, evolution, whatever -- then you're in real trouble. You might survive fine for a while but when your merits run short, when your conditions become unfavorable, you simply won't have a context to accept the suffering. The why-question will sink your spirit. Of course, ultimately, those mental theories are still superficial band-aids; a deeper solution, in my opinion, comes from the service of others -- first, it forces you to find the needy, then to witness the inter-connectedness of that need in your own self, and finally to experience humility for having no real solutions. Service work, in its purity, simply shows you that you're caught up in the charades of your own ego and that ignorant arrogance incapacitates you from experiencing real love. And in the words of *G. I. Joe*, "Knowing is half the battle."

During the night when we were roommates, Sri woke up several times in a state of panic. One time, his whole body froze and as he described it later, "I couldn't speak anything or move any part of my body or even open my eyes. But then, I refused to give into this and out of sheer will, I just pushed myself physically to get up. I was fed up. And surprisingly, I got up."

The next morning, Sri is in better condition the next day and is given permission to leave. He feels like a "loser" for quitting: "I haven't quit anything in my life. I don't know why I can't do this, when hundreds of others are able to survive just fine." "Sri, just because someone can survive ten-days doesn't mean anything. Perhaps you were the one who actually meditated and were willing to dig up some of your stored negativity. On this long path of purification, you're bound to fall. That's no problem. You just have to be determined to get up again," I reassure him. He is happy to hear it and I told him that I thought he would be back again someday. With a smile, he says, "Definitely."

Before waving goodbye, he tearfully adds, "No one has ever had to take care of me in my life. But I troubled you so much. And I don't even know you. I will never forget you. Thank you. I will consider myself lucky if I ever have the chance do something for you."

In truth, Sri already did a lot for me. His whisper at my doorstep was loud enough to wake up many sleeping giants of compassion in my own heart. Sri doesn't have my contact information nor does he know my last name; we will probably never meet again but one last time, I wave goodbye, with a silent wish for his well being for a long time to come.

Sri will be just fine.

## Day 0, To Be Like a Coconut

Sep 3, 2005

"If you had to had to be fruit, what would you be?" That was the question that several of us were discussing, couple years ago. I don't remember what I said but Guri said, "I'd be a coconut. Hard on the outside, soft on the inside, empty at the core."

For the next ten days, I have to be like a coconut. I'm facing one of the most unique challenges of my life, as I get ready to serve the next ten-day meditation course for college students.

Among the 300 male students for this course are 120 college students. About 40 of those students are coming because the college authorities "convinced" them to come. Past experience shows that these 120 will be a handful; they won't wake up on time, they won't be able to stay silent and will disturb other meditators, they will organize into small groups of mischief, they will call each other on their mobiles to pass time and lock each other's room to escape meditation hours, they will disrespect those who serve them, and basically, create a serious racket in a typically peaceful meditation center. Despite the hefty price tag for creating this opportunity for youngster, it's a very worthy exercise because many willing young minds will get a taste of themselves and possibly change the course of the rest of their lives.

The entire operation is unlike any other course. Specially trained "meditation corps" are being called in from around the state; seven assistant teachers are on hand to do all kinds of things from 4AM bellring to counseling to teaching; close to thirty other servers will be around to manage the course; everyone who comes to serve this course knows that they will be pushed to the limits. One teacher recently told me, "If you can survive these 10-days with a smile, you can do just about anything else." :)

For the last three months, I have been alternating sitting and serving a course; this was my course to sit but I don't know how I ended up in the thick of this challenge. Actually I do know. His name is Sudesh Leal.

At 13, Sudesh's mom forced him to attend a 10-day course in the UK, with Goenka-jj; at 21, he went again of his own will; by 25, he told his parents about his inclination to dedicate his life for service -- "How can I just turn my back on dharma?" He left his 8 month old stint as a Math teacher in the UK to come to this meditation center in Igatpuri. Sitting two 45/60-day courses per year and serving rest of the time (with his thick English accent :)), he has spent the last seven years in that spirit. Now, he's a senior meditation teacher who manages tons of activities on the 100-acred campus called Dhamma Giri. One striking character trait about Sudesh is his radiant joy; in the midst of all kinds of non-stop, chaotic activity, he is always full of joy at absolutely any moment of his 18-hour work day. It's hard to find any hooks in his personality.

Since I've been here at Dhamma Giri for the last couple months, I have been granted the power to implement some major projects, make systemic changes and design new initiatives. Much to everyone's surprise, it has all worked out immaculately and for me, it's been a very satisfying service experience. It's all a result of so many inter-twined conditions, but Sudesh was one of those conditions that I felt grateful for. Being on the lookout for expressing that gratitude, I finally stumbled upon an answer.

It was either me or Sudesh who had to take on the bad-cop responsibility for this course, so I took it in the hopes that Sudesh gets a little breather. Because Sudesh will on the "dhamma seat", teaching and playing Mr. Good-guy, :) he's been prepping me for my role -- "You see, this is what I do. Right before I have to discipline a student, I stand outside the door and wish for their well being for a minute. Then, I knock on their door, let 'em have it, and right as I leave, I make sure I have a smile on my face."

The next ten days promises to be an interesting challenge for me. My job is to be Mr. Bad-Guy-in-Chief, who enforces all the rules and expels the trouble makers. My "meditation mafia" team is probably gonna be the most unpopular by the end of the course. But that's ok. We're just gonna try to be like coconuts: enforcing discipline on the outside, wishing compassion from the inside, and ultimately just being empty instruments of nature.

Ironically, this is how I would hope that I treat my own self -- no tolerance of external laziness, compassion for the repeated, ignorant mistakes, and surrender of all outcomes to the flow of nature.

It's funny how everything becomes a mirror, when you're seriously cultivating.

## Day 1: Speech and Silence

Sep 7, 2005

Today is the first of ten days of the college meditation course. If I had to take a guess, I would say that these 22 year olds have never woken up at 4AM, nor have they ever been silent for a whole day.

Our primary purpose today, as the "dharma servers", is to establish authority and set a culture of strong discipline, to essentially create an environment conducive for meditation. Yet I can understand their difficulty, especially the silence bit.

Purpose of noble silence -- no reading, writing, or talking -- is a rather subtle concept to grasp. In theory, many people will say that if you don't babble your usual dose of few thousand daily words, you deepen your awareness. For these kids, though, it's a daunting task. Being from a competitive premier institution, where 120 students are selected from 40,000 applicants, the students simply don't understand how it is useful to spend time "doing nothing" and that too, in complete silence.

To be honest, I don't think I really understood noble silence or noble speech until recently when I broke silence after 10 days of meditation. Somehow that day I naturally started listening to myself speak. After the whole day of deliberate talking, the sharp contrast between my deep, meditative silence and shallow, idle speech created a temporary void in which the interdependence of speech and silence became vividly clear.

That night, as I was meditating, I came face to face with my white lies -- all unannounced visitors in my conscious mind, with repeated streams of half-truths said for this justified reason or that selfless outcome. While watching the charade, the only question that came to mind is this: where exactly did I learn to stop being fully honest?

Ever since I was young, I've had two good habits: first, I am brutally honest with myself, and second, I don't lie to others. The first habit I have kept intact, but I now realize that I have manipulated myself out of the second habit.

I certainly don't lie to others, but I also don't speak the full truth. And I know that because of my first habit. :) In my own defense, I would argue that the full truth is often tactless and inexpedient; while that maybe a good defense for an enlightened being, it's a lousy one for a seeker of Truth like myself. It's a lousy excuse because those half-truths cloud your experience of present moment reality. With lies, you have keep track of the context so you don't get caught in contradictions; maybe we can play chess with a hundred or two hundred lies, but beyond a few thousand of them, we lose track and start living unnatural lives. Furthermore, all that extra baggage creates a subtle-yet-distinct internal static that is clearly heard during serious meditation.

If you break it all down, lying is a very curious habit. To lie is to fabricate the truth, ultimately because we don't have the guts to face reality as it is. We will manipulate the truth for a personal sense of power, exaggerate the facts to reinforce the images in our mind, exploit the weakness of our

circumstances for multiplying self-benefit. It's all a rather silly game we play with ourselves because we are afraid of accepting the reality of each situation. And over years of deception, not only do we keep rotating in our confusions but we also can't recognize the grand illusions that we've created.

So, as I sat and watched my stream of thoughts unwind on my 11th day, I randomly recalled the beginning of CharityFocus.

When I first thought up CharityFocus in January 1999, Viral and I invited about 20 of our like-hearted friends for a [pizza meeting](#) in our living room; a few months of work later, 4 of us helped a homeless shelter setup a website as the first official CharityFocus project. Some more people joined as we all did a few more humble service projects. At one point, someone asked me how many volunteers CharityFocus has. I knew the exact count. It was 26. And I said, "About 30".

About 30? Why didn't I say 26? Ok, I was barely 24 at the time, I had never led an organization and I might've been a little over-zealous in wanting to make "my" effort look successful. But unfortunately, the problem runs a whole lot deeper than that. One white lie begets another and it all starts adding up. By the end of a decade, you might've built a mighty institution but all you've really done is confined others in the shackles of your own hallucinations. In truth, of course, no one gives a hoot if CharityFocus has 26 or 30 volunteers; it's just a game you play with your own mental projections. In ignorance, if you positively reinforce that behavior pattern, the grooves run deeper and deeper.

That was just one example. Crowded by so many personal examples, one after another, I wondered where exactly I picked up this habit. For one, it's steeped in our global media culture. Kids see 50,000 ads per year (and till they're 8, they can't even differentiate between regular TV programming and commercials), and we all know how honest ads are. According to E magazine, advertising budgets have doubled every decade since 1976 and companies now spend about \$162 billion each year to bombard us with print and broadcast ads. That's \$623 for every man, woman and child in the United States to show us how we can look better, feel superior, do more and be successful. In a world where a child recognizes [McDonalds](#) before he can even speak, where we have to struggle for a [commerical-free childhood](#), is it any wonder that we grow up without a clear understanding of honesty?

I mean, is BMW really the ultimate driving machine? Is Chevy actually built like a rock? Is Visa everywhere I want to be? In our greed for being number 1, to be the omnipotent power to grow bigger and badder, we over-hype, dramatize and sensationalize the truth. Pretty soon, we become numb to these kind of half-truths and we start adding fancy fine-prints and hiring top-notch lawyers to cover up our lies.

That cultural corruption, though, eventually boils down to personal responsibility and commitment to one's own values. For most folks, the individual bottom line has this logic -- everyone does it, so I also need to do it to survive. Unfortunately, there is no easy way out of this logic. I have myself used that excuse so many times, albeit to inspire other people to serve (which is no justification). It is only when we realize the true opportunity cost of playing the lying game that we will end the game. Lies, half-truths all add up as mental tensions in our minds and collectively, they create a unnatural culture for others. At a subtler level, they widen the barrier between our image of reality and the reality as it is; and this ignorance unnecessarily puts us in position of playing dice with our happiness. Our challenge, at a personal level, is deepening our awareness to see that.

When I see these college kids having a \*really\* hard time with nobel silence on day 1 of this 10-day meditation course, I think about the difficulty I have with nobel speech because ultimately, silence and speech are two sides of the same coin. Everytime I fold my hands with a subtle bow or place my index finger on my lips with a "shhhh" whisper to request silence, I'm actually reminding myself to stop all

my white lies, to drop all the baggage of images, and boldly accept life as it manifests in each present moment.

Dishonesty, however subtle, is an expression of dis-satisfaction with your current world view. We think lying will help us create favorable circumstances but that conclusion is a result of a confused intellect that has been built upon an accumulated pile of lies. In practice, if we just cultivate a heart of simplicity, our contentment will bring nobel speech to our lips and noble silence in our minds. Then, we will stop wasting our lives in weaving through the imaginary maze of white lies, and actually start being the change we wish to see in the world.

## Day 2: Dharma Works

Sep 9, 2005

"Guys, we leave for Goa after b'fast tomorrow morning. Collect ur laundry, pack and meet outside the dining hall. We leave at 7:00AM sharp."

That was the introduction to a page-long note that was anonymously circulated on day 2 of this college meditation course. One of our "CID" volunteers -- cop in disguise :) -- impounded this note that he saw a student reading outside his residence footsteps.

My guess is that this kind of silly behavior has never ever been seen on this meditation campus. But this is an unusual case. The principal of this school "gently coerced" at least 20% of the class into attending this course, and whenever those students come face to face with their bottled-up negativity, all they can think about is how they were compelled to do this. For precisely this reason, dharma always has to be received with a two-folded-hands request; you simply can't ram dharma down someone's throat.

Whatever the cause, our job now is to deal with the ramifications.

The note also timidly said, "All those agreed to the plan, assemble outside laundry area after dining tonight, 5:30-5:45PM. No words will be exchanged. This is just to understand how many people are going. If there are less than 15 people, the plans stand cancelled. We disperse at 5:45PM. Don't be late."

When we first read this note, we started laughing. I mean, why go through these elaborate plans to leave? Just walk out. If you don't care to purify your mind, feel free to leave anytime. But, of course, the students are all afraid of the consequences from their principal and they want to take refuge in numbers.

We aren't sure whether we should disperse the group at 5:30PM and not let them see their full strength, if they have it, or if we should just take it head on. Rather than playing games with them, we decide to play it straight. Let 'em do what they want and we'll see where nature takes this situation.

Two of us stay in the main office. Everyone is told to be on alert, because our primary purpose is to make sure none of the other almost 600 meditators on the campus are disturbed by the behavior of this handful.

Sure enough, by 5:45PM, about 20 hostile twenty-somethings crowd into the course office. With Ashit-ji, I am ready in the course office. Ashit-ji, a senior assistant teacher of Vipassana meditation, is quite a remarkable personality and is incidentally, the perfect fit for handling such a stressful situation. After graduating from IIT-Delhi, he did his Masters in the US, worked for a few years, and eventually dedicated his life to understanding the principles of nature (ie. "dharma"). Super smart yet super humble, always calm yet unflinching in his principles, sincerely open to all views yet deeply committed to his experience of Truth. He's a real enigma that can't be boxed into one category yet he can neatly fold himself into any context. It's hard to describe his personality, but it's quite admirable. No one can tell that he's 48 years old, and in this course, everyone refers to him as the "green eyed coordinator".

So me and the green-eyed one divide and conquer. He takes half and I take the other half. People have all kinds of issues: "This is great but our principal forced us, so I want to leave." "I just can't take this anymore. I'm too young to do this kind of work." "You know, the guy in front of me smells really bad." "My back is killing me." "I have so many more important things to do, like studying for job interviews, than watching my respiration." "Why don't they turn on the fans during meditation?" We address all their concerns, with the primary goal of making sure they don't leave with a block against meditation and spirituality. They all understand and most of them say that they'd like to try meditation again at a later point, when they're ready on their own.

Right when we give 'em all permission to leave, three of them abruptly change their minds and stay back.

For the remaining 17 students, we give them 20 minutes in between the meditation hours to silently go to their rooms, pack-up and meet us at the front office (outside the meditation campus). All of them are thrilled, as if they have just been released from prison. :) Everyone turns on their mobile phones and starts calling up their significant others, friends and parents. Two of them even go out to grab a bite to eat (there is no dinner for students on this campus).

At about 7:30PM, the students are ready to leave after our amicable goodbyes. But then, one of the guys doesn't have his valuables -- his wallet and cell phone. The key to "valuables" is with a woman who is in meditation till 8:30PM, so they are stuck waiting. While they wait, we informally chat about life and morality. Now, it was no longer one versus another; instead it was two human beings sharing thoughts. The veils had been lifted.

We ask them their experience of the last two days and they open up with all kinds of problems. Two years back, one of them was about to drown with another friend and he had a choice either to save himself or his friend; his friend died. Another's Dad passed away and he has been trying to work with his mom in figuring out their life. Another comes from a very poor background and just wants to get rich so his parents never have to worry. Yet another was wondering why he can't keep any friends for a long time. Most of them had serious problems, but their approach was -- "Look, I have worked a couple of years to cover up these problems and fill my life with other things so I don't have think about these things. These two days brought it all out and right now, I needed to focus on getting a job and not these things."

Ah, one can't help but feel sorry for them. Growing up in this millennium can be such an ordeal. You have to live up to the mask put on by yourself, the projected images of your family and friends, and cultural baggage of society at large. Most youth aren't revolutionary enough to realize their innate power to say "game over". As a result, their whole life is constrained in the prison of their fears and hopes. Yet the irony of the whole situation is that the youth are most open and impressionable. If you speak sincerely with them, they are willing to be transformed almost immediately.

By the time the lady with the "valuables" key comes, we are all in deep, small-group conversations. Then, an old grandmotherly lady, also a senior meditation teacher, requests permission to speak to all of the students. None of them are really interested but some of them oblige her due to her age. Right then, the director of the college calls just as a routine check-up. He is furious to learn of the plans of these 17 students; he blatantly informs them that they will be expelled from college if they return. Expelled.

Everyone is scared. The grandmother is still talking to them, when yet another phone call from a "senior" at their college comes through. He recommends that they stick with the course because their director is in a bad mood and if they get expelled, not only will they lose their valuable admission here but they won't be allowed to enter another business school elsewhere.

And everyone at the meditation center here is in full agreement that such a scenario should never ever happen again. Fear simply can't be the motivation for meditation. In fact, fear shouldn't be the motivation for anything.

Four out of the seventeen, have a change of heart all of a sudden. Why? "Because of what the grandmotherly woman said," they told us. But none of us are that naive. We tell them that no one is allowed back in the course once they have decided to leave. All of them fall silent, with this remorseful face. They go and huddle for about twenty minutes, and so do we.

It's been a long day. It's past 9PM. Everyone else on the campus is about to hit the sack but our night is still young.

Some senior teachers and Ashit-ji decide to interview each of them to see if they should be given a second chance. Our interviews go on till 1AM. At some point, we just feel sorry for them but yet with a firm hand, we give 'em a chance with proper scolding and warnings. Some of these guys were clearly pranksters with discipline issues but we still withheld our judgments and gave 'em a chance. They were asked then to turn in their mobiles, books and cigarettes (two of them were heavy smokers) and allowed back in with a stern, final warning.

By 3AM, we were all physically exhausted. Although the students probably didn't realize it, the half a dozen of us involved in handling the situation gave so much of our time, heart, mind and spirit. It was truly a genuine wish that these students come out of their miseries that were so evident. Not only did we work to help them through their mental blocks and fears, we relayed the stupidity of this scenario to their director (who had promised to drive 8 hours to visit us the next morning).

I don't know how everyone else felt but for me, the situation was a constant reminder of the miserable state of the human condition. Always controlled by one force or another, we simply can't be free; liberation has been such a foreign concept that most think it to be impossible. The good news, though, is that nature is constantly pulling us in back to our core, back in harmony with the rhythm of life. I went to bed smiling at the serendipity of so many random yet perfectly timed events that allowed us to create a bridge of compassion with these students and somehow compelled them to stay the duration of the course.

It was a strange day for a serene meditation campus, but in the end, dharma works. :)

# Day 4: From Power To Force

Sep 12, 2005

"I have learnt one thing today: power rules. Instead of getting a job, I've decided that I will only do my own business," one of the meditation students told me on day 3 of his 10-day meditation course, with a strong sense of frustration.

As promised, the director of the school showed up today. Two of us walked with him to show him the campus. All his 120 students saw him and one could feel the waves of fear arising in them. Because he controls their college lives and their future job placements, everyone is afraid of him. Students are happy to hype up negativity by talking behind his back, but very few have the guts to face the consequences of standing up against him on principle. And even those few are always looking for strength in numbers.

To that power-craving student, I responded, "If you can't control your own mind, do you really think you can have any authentic power over anything else?"

In today's world, power is mostly equated with money. During a conversation with a very influential venture capitalist in the Silicon Valley, I once said, "Quite frankly, I just can't understand people's obsession with money." It was a direct challenge to his profession of investing and re-investing money into profitable businesses. Speaking to a 23-year-old at that time, he blankly responded, "Money is power. Without money, you can't do anything in the world, good or bad." It's a good thing I didn't listen to him, because at that point, I was starting CharityFocus. :)

Sooner or later, though, we have to ask the question about money, the underlying need (or greed?) for power, and the command-and-control organizing culture.

First, we should understand money for it is. [Bernard Lietaer](#), a chief architect of the Euro, defines money as the information about the way we exchange energy. Today, we have started to add value to the convention of money so much so that we define ourselves by it, by our "net worth". Lietaer says that, "Economics theory teaches us that people compete for markets and raw materials; I think, in reality, people compete for money.? Considering that 95% of the currency transactions are motivated by speculative profit and less than 5% for goods and services, I would have to agree with that conclusion.

Second, we should understand our obsession with money. Most economic systems are built on the premise that there is not enough to go around; ie. something is considered to be valuable to the degree in which it is scarce. Because of this presumption, we have designed money in a way that it is always scarce. In fact, the job of the central banks is to create and maintain the currency scarcity. Consequently, we constantly experience scarcity and feel like we have to fight with each other simply to survive. Thus, in large part, society's insecurity for money is fueled by an imperfect design.

We, the people of the world, produce enough food to feed everybody today; we, the people of the world, have enough work for everyone to do in the world. So what's the problem? We are waiting for the money to arrive! Any astute observer will tell you that a system with such a bottleneck is simply a flawed design.

Fortunately, we the people of the world have now started experiments to see if a "gift economy" can actually be a viable option to greed and cut-throat competition. In Europe, there are now [Give-Away Shops](#) where people can take stuff for free; their slogan is Gandhi's quote: there is enough for everyone's need, but not for everyone's greed. In the US, the [freecycling](#) movement has spread to hundreds of cities. And on the Internet, the 600 billion web-paged Internet that has created stellar examples like [open-source](#) software movement and a free online encyclopedia called [Wikipedia](#). Moreover, communities are now leveraging into self-organizing units to issue "complementary currencies" that strength local community and sustainability. In Ithaca, New York, there is a currency called [Ithaca Hours](#) that can be used with your local plumber or at the town's best restaurant; some people even pay part of their rent with it and the landlord can go to the farmer's market to buy his vegetables and eggs. In Japan, there's a private currency system called the [Fureai Kippu](#), that is used for any care to the elderly that isn't covered by the national health insurance. Edgar Kahn's tax-exempt [Time dollars](#) lets people convert their personal time into purchasing power, by helping others in the community. And so on, there are over 5000 examples of working complementary currencies around the world.

Still, though, there's another crucial component to our obsession with money -- our greed for power.

Several years ago, I was walking through an aisle of a bookstore when I saw an intriguing title -- "Power Vs. Force". I was so struck by the title that I even forgot to pick up the book from the shelf. All of a sudden, a veil was lifted in front of me: power is what ego provides, force is what nature provides.

Generating power is an incredibly exhausting task of lining up all the ducks in exactly the right way: set up an image, manage impressions, network in places of leverage, show off your work to regenerate the cycle, and then finally expend that power to recover from the stress of the whole process. And by definition, only a few members of every group will be successful in their quest for power. The remaining majority will fail.

Then, why are we still unrelenting in our pursuit of power? Because we are afraid of being powerless. Instead of addressing our fear, we try to continue on our losing parade of power. That's our biggest flaw. Ironically, it is only when we are powerless (and hence, fearless) that we are open to receiving force. Force is an authentic state of being, where there is nowhere to go, nowhere to hide, and nowhere to be; it blossoms with the simple realization that everything you need is contained in the ever-changing "present" in front of you.

So much of our lives are wasted in just acquiring, managing and spending a conventional medium of exchange, ie. the currency note. My guess is that the student, the principal, the venture capitalist and the 23-year-old questioner who are all operating under the influence of "power is everything" premise are actually just confused due to lack of any serious investigation.

When the source of strength is based on our impermanent circumstances, we become insecure and crave power. Instead, if our foundation rests on our ability to stay still through each changing condition, we give rise to authentic force that can actually move mountains.

## Dirty Pond, Beautiful Lotus

Sep 20, 2005

Guri and I sat in a train today, from Igatpuri to Bombay, escorting my sick brother for some medical tests.

It's been about six months since we sat in a moving vehicle. All the landscapes, its people, the subtle cultures, everything flashes in front of us as if it were all one big commercial. With a smile, Viral remarks, "Hey guys, did you see that naked 2-year-old with an umbrella?" No, I didn't because the rickshaw had long since zipped past it. A bit later, on the train, Guri says, "Oh, look at that lotus in that dirty pond?" Sorry, missed that too since we were going 70 kilometers/hour too fast. On the walk, we probably would've made a few funny faces to make that kid smile and we might've sat down next to the lotus to reminisce at the irony of beauty in filth; for now, though, my awareness flickers past the life in front of me as I hear echoes of nature laughing at my fast-paced moves.

We arrive in Bombay. Our taxi drives past a charade of Bollywood actors and actresses plastered all over the sidewalks, billboards, and car windows. Loud honking horns and push-and-shove traffic are a sharp contrast from the serene meditation center that was our home for the last three months. It's a tough world, to live up to the expectations of all the images in our confused mind. I can understand -- but not accept -- that the taxi-driver attempts to rip us off for a few rupees; he probably needs a few extra bucks to survive.

Soon enough, we get to the hospital. After a ten minute consultation with the doctor, we have to pony up 7000 bucks for some repeat blood tests and the doc's time. That's more money than my entire six month pilgrimage budget, all spent in the time it takes to sip a cup of 'chai'. My cousin, a Bombay native, innocently addressed my timid awe, "That's just how it works in Bombay." Hmmmm. It would take months of hard labor for my farmer homies -- who housed us in their simple huts and open hearts -- to have even a 1000 rupees to spare. Farmers trade in, by choice or not, their extra stash of cash for a life that is in tune with ground-zero truths of nature; most city industrialists, on the other hand, drive their cars through the daily city smog, walk past the beggars underneath the hi-rise buildings, and breathe in conditioned air while calculating ways to get ahead in conference rooms. Perhaps I'm giving too much credit to the farmers, but I wonder if it is the "poor" farmers or the enterprising Bombayites that need more help.

In the hospital patient line behind me, two girls are talking loud enough that I can hear them. "Hey, that hand bag is so cute, isn't it?" "Yeah, I saw it for sale the other day, but without the leather straps." In my mind, I was thinking about a paralyzed patient, who apparently just had an epileptic seizure and another pale-white patient glued on a wheelchair with her head permanently looking up towards the ceiling. Numb to the suffering all around us, we're occupied with the next big sale at the local, err global, marketplace.

On the train, I had casually asked Guri: "So what did you learn from the pilgrimage?" Among many insightful comments, she says, "Before the pilgrimage, I was a seeker and I am still a seeker. But now, I have more strength to share my merits and take others along on this journey."

Before the night's dinner at our newly-made diamond merchant friend's larger-than-life house, I go to the train station to get our tickets for the night train. On the way back, I chat with the cab driver about the lifestyle of a cabbie in Bombay. "Sir, I tell you there are a lot dishonest drivers in Bombay but there are still some honest folks left. I just want to make an honest living for myself. In the end, we will all get our fair share," he says. In a soft-yet-sincere voice, he adds, "I believe that." Actually, I believe that too.

During the late evening hours, there's a loud 'Ganpati Visarjan' parade -- a walk to immerse a holy Hindu deity in water, after 10 days of prayer. People are dancing to loud trance and hip-hop music, while sipping something from brown paper bags. Disco devotion with a shot of vodka. Interesting times.

For the last six months, we ante'd up everything to walk within and without. Our lives will never be the same again. I seriously doubt that the world has changed its patterns in the last six months, but in our unending "search for the good", we have developed new eyes. Good is everywhere -- it lies latent in the suffering of drunk disco devotion, it shines brilliantly through virtue of an honest cab driver, it can be seen in its unadulterated purity through the worry-free swirl of a naked two-year-old's umbrella. A dirty pond to show the beautiful lotus, the compassion of nature to guide us back to our center, what more can we ask for?

Such pilgrimages have no end, no pause buttons, no commercial breaks. It's an ongoing journey into the heart of the infinite. And now it's clearer than even before that there was never even a beginning. It keeps starting, and restarting, in every moment.

Onwards!

## Post-pilgrimage

# Baroda's Smiley Street

Sep 26, 2005

Sep 24, 2005

It is Guri's birthday tomorrow. My 15 year old cousin asks me, "So what are you getting her?" Her mom adds more pressure, "Yeah, what are you doing for her? This is like your first birthday after marriage."

"What can one possibly get for a person like Guri?" I counter. Last year, her birthday was an excuse for us to take time off from our normal routine and spend the day just kind of "being". As I was walking at night to pick up something for Guri, I heard a faint harmonica sound; I approached the sound only to see an old man playing his heart out. No one was listening to him, so I just sat down next to him as if we were old friends. All of a sudden, you could hear his elated spirit singing through the vibrations of his harmonica sounds. I got up after five minutes and placed all the cash from my wallet -- one twenty dollar bill, I think -- into his empty bin. When I came home, the smirk on my face and the red in my eyes (blood rushes to my head when I give) gave it away. Guri retorts, "What did you give now?" That was her gift last year.

Most people don't seem to understand, let alone appreciate, such things. And certainly, my 15-year-old Indian cousin isn't gonna get it. She hasn't seen it in any of the TV shows, read about it any of the newspapers, or heard about it from any of her friends. Yet, it kinda rocks to give a gift of kindness, so communicating its value was the challenge in front of me.

Fortunately, inspiration struck. With a sheepish smile, I say, "You know, I know something we all can do for Guri." Within no time, the whole family was out on the streets of Baroda.

Our plot is simple -- make random people smile. And creatively share those stories with Guri on her birthday.

We figure that the simplest way to put a smile on someone's face is to merely ask them about the last time they put a smile of their face. To make things interesting, we even took an unobtrusive audio recorder with us to capture some of the moments.

Two girls outside a shopping mall -- "Excuse me, can we ask you a simple question?" "Yeah, sure." "Can you recall something kind that has happened to you?" "Huh?" "Something kind, anything kind, something that makes you smile? We are asking random people this question; it's a gift for my wife." "Oh, I see. Well, hmmm. I don't know. Actually, I don't think anything kind ever happens to me." "Really?" "Yeah, it's true." "Well, have you done something kind for someone else?" "Hmmm. [Interrupted by a friend on a scooter -- "Actually, she gets me angry all the time but I maintain my cool and I'm still her friend. Isn't that kind?" "Yeah, yeah, that's definitely kind." Lots of smiles all around.

A middle aged couple is next. No response. They probably think we're doing some kind of a prank and we can't really blame them. :)

Four of us -- my uncle, aunt, cousin, and I -- huddle on the side to brainstorm ideas and clarify our mission statement. We are all a little tentative but increasingly gaining confidence.

A woman in her forties is walking down the streets with a shopping bag in her hands. "A kind act? Oh yeah, I'm in the middle of one right now. My pregnant maid was going through a tough time with her family, so I invited her to stay at my place for three months and now, I'm taking care of her and her new-born."

A watchman overlooking some haphazardly parked cars is next. In Gujarati, I ask him, "Sir, what makes you smile?" He smiles big. In fact, biggest smile we've seen thus far. And then silence. "Sir, nothing makes me smile since my wife died six months ago." "Oh, so sorry to hear that." "Yeah, I took her to [Goraj](#) and me and my three kids tried everything, but nothing worked." To lift him up a little bit, I ask him, "But you really gave us the most genuine smile we've seen this evening." With a smile, "Yeah, well, that's because you guys came with such smiles on your faces. I get happy when I am with people."

All of us are becoming increasingly clear that the journey is the outcome here.

Two upper-middle-class seeming men were smiling away so we thought we'd ask them what made them smile. "A stupid joke really makes me smile," one of them says.

Two young twenty-something guys on a motorcycle. "What makes you smile?" "Hmmm. A rose." The second guy clarifies -- "A red rose." Before a romantic novel starts, I interject a tangential question: "What about something kind? Has someone done something kind that has made you smile?" A pause. A rather long pause. "Have you given someone a ride, changed someone's flat tire, helped a friend in need?" "Well, one of my friends, she saved my life." "Really, how?" "She got me to stop smoking." Again, his husky friend in front of him adds, "Liar. You just smoked one today." Laughs all around. "Ok, she saved half of my life. I'm working on the other half." I ask the guy in the front, "What about you?" Now, the guy in the back seat says, "He's actually a really good person." "Have you ever helped someone?" "Yes sir." "Can you tell me one story?" "Well, recently, I saw an old lady fall down and so I offered her a ride on my bike." "Wow, really? That must've felt nice. How did she react?" "Well, after I dropped her home, she was so thankful that she blessed me for a long, long life. It was a really good feeling. She also gave me blessings that I find a great wife and all that." The guy in the back quickly retorts -- "And he's still looking." Again, laughs all around.

The motorcycle interaction was perhaps the most wholesome interaction of the evening. We were practically friends, in a matter of minutes. My uncle says, "You can be sure that by tomorrow at least 50 of their friends will hear about our experiment." For sure.

Now, we get a little gutsy. We approach a man with a frown on his face. My intimidated cousin and I walk through some puddles to greet this man with a question: "Sir, can I ask you a question?" He stares at us as if to say, "What do you want?" "Sir, we want to know what makes you smile?" Immediately, he cracks a short smile on his face. He investigates our motives and then he starts firing. "Some people like to laugh, someone people like to make others laugh. I get joy when I see a nice thing, when I buy a purse or something, when I go to INOX (a movie theatre), when I see a friend or a relative." "What about doing things for others, does that bring you joy?" "Oh yeah, that's the best kind of happiness" he says, transported into that space in himself. And then he goes off again about tons of stories.

Sometimes just listening is an act of service.

We see a lady with a kid, return from some vegetable shopping. At first, she looks like the type who will ignore us but we were getting bold anyhow. "Ma'am, what makes you smile?" Much to our surprise, she says, "Oh, I'm always smiling. This morning, a random person came all the way from the other side of the street to help me get a rickshaw. Just a random person who didn't want anything in return."

I ask the 12-year-old kid with a goofy cap and buck teeth. "What makes you smile?" As if he's on TV, he says, "Generosity and kindness." All of us are pleasantly surprised and press him further. "Do you do any kind things?" Without skipping a beat, he says, "Well, I help out my mom with chores and stuff. And I also help my Dad in the garden." Although none of us said it, all of felt like saying, "Awwwwwwwwwwwwww".

One girl we spotted said it is shopping that makes her happy. Another said it was flowers. A third person said it was working for his boss. And one after another, we felt like we were on Smiley Street.

Couple of energized hours later, my uncle treated us to a nearby McDonalds -- my first fast food experience in many months -- where we just couldn't stop talking about our experiences. And just naturally, we kept on scanning the room for more faces and smiles. Unfortunately, we saw lots of dazed faces looking out in the oblivion as if life is a numb chore.

"We need to do this more often," my cousin declares. My aunt says, in perhaps the biggest turnaround of the day, "You know, I think we should think of something like this for her birthday too," proudly pointing to her own daughter.

The next day, a bunch of us gather to give Guri a couple of small material gifts, several different kinds of cake and lots of sweets; in between are some audio clips from the previous night and lots of personal reflections. It is Guri's birthday and everyone is full of joy, the kind of joy that multiplies when shared. Somewhere in between, Guri and I exchange a glance -- she smiles. :)

## India Today: Sex, Drugs, and Sports?

Sep 28, 2005

In a quick leaf through my Uncle's September archives of weekly [India Today](#) magazines, I spotted these headline stories:

- **Sex and the Single Woman:**

In 2003, 73% condemned pornography; now its 29%. In 2003, 57% said premarital sex is wrong; now it's 46%. In 2003, 78% were against extramarital sex; now it's 66%. For more than 72% of the populace, their first sexual experience was before the age of 21.



- **The High Rise:** "With cocaine and ecstasy crowding the menus at parties, nightclubs, pubs and even coffee chains, the upper middle class is hooked to a new high. Stressful lifestyles and easy money are creating a fresh profile of drug abusers across the metros."

"These days people don't drink at parties, they don't even want sex. Designer nights today are all about chilled water, energy drinks, senseless humour, trance music, and shooters. And shooters are no swipes of Vodka laced with flavours; they are shots of cocaine and heroine taken intravenously."

- **Sania Mania:** "the plucky 18-year old with her attitude, aggression and ambition electrifies the world, wins handsome endorsements and emerges as India's hottest new sporting icon." The

story shows photos of some of the tennis phenom's t-shirts: "I'm cute. No S\*\*\*", "Whatever", "You can either agree with me or be wrong." It also proceeds to mention that "Brand Sania is now worth 1.5 crore", the second strongest in India behind Sachin Tendulkar.

It's disappointing to see reputed magazines market sex, party-going youth accept a culture of drugs, and corporations branding anything that is somewhat successful. I wonder if cover stories on sex affect next year's survey result, if the upper middle class knows that Rs. 4000/gram of cocaine costs more than the annual family income for a Bombay slum dweller, if people (or even Sania) understand that Sania gets 1.5 crores in sponsorship because corporations think they can use her to sell stuff worth 15 crores. I really wonder.

They say India is poised to become a super-power in the next decade. I can't tell if that's good news or bad.

## So, What Did You Learn?

Sep 30, 2005

Some friends came to visit us the other day. Interestingly enough, it was their chauffeur that laid down the inevitable question -- "So Nipunbhai, what did you learn from your pilgrimage?"

Almost about seven months ago, this driver and I were doing a 5:00AM run to pick up my brother from the train station. At one point, he abruptly stops the car at a tea stall, looks to me point blank and says, "I've been dying to ask you this question -- can you tell me what meditation is?" Throughout the five minutes that I spoke, I don't think his eyes fluttered even once. So, in a way, this is round 2 in that sincere questionnaire series.

I take a second to think. "I think the biggest lesson I learned was humility," I say.

Just in that instant, I realize that pausing a moment before responding is, in and of itself, a growth in humility. Before, I might've jumped to fill the void with my intellectual answers; now, I pause to admit my lack of an answer and to show reluctance for repeating cookie-cutter or self-aggrandizing wisdom. Instead of answering a question, it is now a joint journey of discovery. A simple pause, subtle growth.

"When you go on a walk like this, you have no choice but to accept your complete lack of control over circumstances," I continue.

That unconditional acceptance, almost a resignation of the ego, is an ongoing process. When a bus load of drunk boys whistle at Guri or two shady-looking guys start following you on a lonesome dirt road, at first, you respond with a futile-yet-macho attempt to cover up your fear. Soon enough, though the kids become what they really are -- kids. I see my own younger self in them and at one point, I even started dancing and laughing with them as they rode off in a distance. It's all ok. Similarly, the foreboding thugs appear to me as manifestations of my own ego patterns; I manage to crack a smile because it's all kind of humorous after a while.

If I wanted to build fences, protect and hide, I would be at home playing games with my ego. I'm here to put it all down, so here it is. At home, we use our merits to control everything but on a pilgrimage, you're naked. All your fears, hopes, desires, everything is out there for everyone to see. It's obvious that you're hungry, it's obvious that you're lost, it's obvious that you are vulnerable. There is just no

way around it and in fact, that's exactly the purpose of a true pilgrimage. Either you cry with anguish or smile with acceptance. I did both and realized that I prefer smiling. :)

"When you're walking, all your interactions are momentary. You talk to someone, meet someone, help someone and boom, the next moment, a new scene entirely," I tell my driver friend, as others tune in.

Our conditioned response is to collect and gather, for security in an uncertain future. Kids collect toys; teens collect self-affirming trophies and report cards; college students collect line items for their resume. Gather, gather, gather. Lonely souls gather friends, weak souls gather power, poor souls gather money. Just in case, of course. When you are walking, though, the collection frenzy hits a dead end. No palm-pilot to gather contacts, no cell phone calls to get rescue help, no encumbering possessions that can't fit on your shoulders.

You just keep walking, anonymously [lifting loads and pushing cars](#) along the way. At first, it's humbling. Then, it's kind of liberating, actually.

Initially, the rapidly changing scenery is a stark contrast from our preserve-and-persevere culture. You are humbled by realization that life will get along just fine without you. Slowly, though, you start to loosen the blindfolds around your Eyes. Life starts to become an awesome ride on ever-changing waves of the natural flow. You haven't got a clue how you will survive the night and you end up meeting a [grandfather](#) who practically adopts you or a [brother](#) who refuses to let you leave or a [drunkard](#) who walks 8 kilometers with you. Heck, you want [mangoes](#) and they appear, as if out of nowhere. Everything becomes an awesome adventure of the spirit, a mind-walk to discover your own illusions.

Of course, the deeper your me-me-me grooves, the longer it takes to see the beauty of life's joys and pains. Everyone wants to think they're good, pure and almost perfect but mostly, we're just masquerading under the guise of phony acts of cultivation. One after another, nature's compassionate slaps granted me the chance to pay off some of my [overdue fines](#).

When a [coin toss](#) led us to stop walking in favor of meditation, we knew that our "stories" wouldn't be as interesting to read. Again, it's humbling to feel that you're not providing any value-add to the world for affording you such a pure opportunity to grow. I'll be the first to admit that it's rationally difficult to cancel a press conference, ignore major TV station interviews, and refuse speeches. It's difficult because a part of the pilgrimage responsibility is surely to share the inspiration. Yet, at a subtler level, Guri and I didn't leave home to "save the world"; we ante'd up our reservoirs of inspiration for the world to save us. As Eckhart Tolle once said:

*To meet everything and everyone through stillness instead of mental noise is the greatest gift you can offer to the universe.*

Any pilgrimage, I would argue, is an attempt to cultivate our innate gift of stillness. Ours certainly was. And once again, it ended up being an exercise in humility!

In perhaps my humblest moment of the pilgrimage, Guri and I sat on top of a terrace overlooking a huge Jain temple. We were hungry but there was no food, we were tired but there were no beds for that night, we wanted to believe in our lofty ideals but we were left with our own karma. If you try to win on a pilgrimage, you always lose. Always. Instead of feeling the



beautiful breeze or seeing the magnificent roof-top sunset view, my ego was dying in the face constant instability. I felt horrible and worthless, without knowing why. In a way, such moments are the jewels of all pilgrimages -- burn-out or burn-through. I meditated. With the full understanding that this state will soon pass, I sat equanimously until the stone of ignorance was polished into a tiny jewel of wisdom. Silently, one can't help but take vows to not carve out such ignorant grooves in the future.

By and by, all the states pass, another dawn always emerges and you tread a little lighter. It's humbling at first, liberating in the end.

My good friend, [James O'dea](#), would say that the purpose of life is to be cooked. Cooked so you be supple, supple so you be had by Life.

As the story-telling session comes to an end, I conclude, "In the end, I would say I got a little cooked."

# 50 Items That Should Change the World

Oct 6, 2005

I ran into an interesting [book](#) by Jessica Williams: 50 Facts that Should Change the World.

Below are those fifty facts and some of my notes from the book:

1. **The average Japanese women can expect to live to be 84. The average Botswanan will reach just 39.** During the Roman Empire, life expectancy was just 22 years; 1500 years later, it reached 33; now, Japanese have the highest life expectancy that is predicted to increase. In Central and South Africa, though, US Census Bureau predicts a drop in life expectancy in 51 countries ... primarily because of the HIV/Aids pandemic. [ [more](#) ]
2. **A third of the world's obese people live in the developing world.** Obesity related conditions cost the US \$118 billion in the 1990s, more than double the \$47 billion attributable to smoking. The type of diet we intake is cited as the chief cause.
3. **The US and Britain have the highest teen pregnancy rates in the developing world.** For every 1,000 American women aged between fifteen and nineteen, there was 52.1 births, compared with 2.9 in Korea and 4.6 in Japan. UNICEF indicates that a key factor in reducing teen pregnancies is equipping young people to make informed choices.
4. **China has 44 million missing women.** For every 100 baby girls born in China in 2000, there were 116.8 baby boys. In China and India, sex-selective abortions are illegal but still common. China's 'one child' policy has meant that many births go unreported; these unregistered children won't be able to, for example, go to school or receive state-funded healthcare.
5. **Brazil has more Avon ladies than members of its armed services.** 450,000 personnel on active service, and 700,000 revendedoras (a.k.a. Avon ladies). Global beauty market is \$95 billion and growing 7% every year. Avon's own research shows that 90% of Brazilian women considered beauty products to be a necessity, not a luxury. [ [more](#) ]

6. **Eighty-one percent of the world's executions in 2002 took place in just three countries: China, Iran and the USA.** Gallup poll in 2003 showed that 74 percent of Americans support capital punishment for those convicted of murder. In China, most executions take place after rallies in front of massive crowds, and prisoners are often paraded through the streets on their way to their final destination. [ [more](#) ]
7. **British supermarkets know more about their consumers than the British government does.** Loyalty cards, aimed to save you some bucks at the grocery counter, gather sophisticated information about your spending patterns. The problem? Such information is then sold, or used against you in court or taken by the government without your permission.
8. **Every cow in the European Union is subsidised by \$2.50 a day. That's more than what 75 per cent of Africans have to live on.** World Bank reports than Japense cows get \$7.50 per day. Of course, government costs are passed onto the consumers in terms of milk and beef prices.
9. **In more than 70 countries, same-sex relationships are illegal. In nine countries, the penalty is death.** Nine countries include Mauritania, Sudan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Chechen Republic, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen. Since the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, more than 4,000 homosexuals have been executed. [ [more](#) ]
10. **One in five of the world's people live on less than a \$1/day.** Through the 1990s, there was a 7% improvement in poverty. Poverty, as it turns out, is completely avoidable. For less than 1% of the income of the wealthiest countries each year, the worst effects of poverty can be greatly diminished. At least four times between 2000 and 2003, rich countries pledged 0.7% of their income and poor countries promised political reforms for accountable implementation. As it turns out, rich didn't follow through on pledges and poor are plagued with corruption. [ [more](#) ]
11. **More than 12,000 women are killed each year in Russia as a result of domestic violence.** That's one every 43 minutes. In America, by contrast, that number is 1,246 women killed by an intimate partner in 2000. It seems that massive economic and social upheaval in the post-Soviet era have left men demoralized. In general, women are five to eight times more likely to be assaulted by an intimate partner than men. [ [more](#) ]
12. **In 2001, 13.2 million Americans had some form of plastic surgery.** The number of prodecures has more than doubled since 1997. More than 70% of plastic surgery patients now earn less than \$50,000 per year. The industry now even boasts its own TV show -- *Extreme Makeover*. [ [more](#) ]
13. **Landmines kill or maim at least one person every hour.** All around the world, more than 100 million remnants of conflicts past and present lie quietly in the ground, waiting for action. In more than 60 countries, landmines litter the earth. They are said to be popular because they're cheap to install. People killed and maimed by landmines are largely powerless and the countries most heavily mined are among the world's poorest. [ [more](#) ]
14. **There are 44 million child labourers in India.** Worldwide, the UN Labour Organization estimates 246 million child labourers aged between five and seventeen. Of those, 171 million work in hazardous conditions; roughly 8.4 million are involved in what ILO calls 'the unconditional worst forms of child labour.'
15. **People in industrialised countries eat between six and seven kilograms of food additives every year.** In 2000, the food industry spends around \$20 billion on making our food look prettier, taste nicer and last longer. Food additives are chemicals meant to keep our food fresh longer to prevent frequent trips to the market and reduces our time in the kitchen via 'convenience' foods. Worldwide market in flavourings is worth \$3.6 billion a year. Artificial sweetners are another profitable sector.

16. **The golfer Tiger Woods is the world's highest paid sportman. He earns \$78 million a year -- or \$148 every second.** 71 of that 78 million comes from sponsorships. Tiger Woods is paid \$55,000 a day to wear Nike caps; a Thai worker is paid \$4 a day to make them.
17. **Seven million American women and 1 million American men suffer from eating disorder.** Most common is anorexia, whose psychological nature wasn't uncovered till early 20th century. Top fashion models now weigh 25% less than the average American woman. Average Hollywood starlet now wears an American size 2 dress on the red carpet -- which has the same measurements as a dress made for a ten-year-old girl. [ [more](#) ]
18. **Nearly half of the British fifteen-year-olds have tried illegal drugs and nearly a quarter are regular cigarette smokers.** Those smokers consume an average of 50 cigarettes per week. Britain's teenagers are also drinking twice as much as they did a decade ago. 49% of American 12th graders said they had drunk alcohol in the last 30 days. Underage drinking costs the US \$53 billion a year. [ [more](#) ]
19. **There are 67,000 people employed in the lobbying industry in Washington DC -- 125 for each elected member of Congress.** Lobbyists spend their day trying to influence government policy. Corporates, non-governmental organizations, and special interest groups, all have lobbyists who were paid \$1.55 billion in 2000 to sway politician votes. [ [more](#) ]
20. **Cars kill two people every minute.** In 1930, a million cars on the Britain roads led to 7300 deaths; in 1999, 27 million cars led to less than 3650 deaths. Same with the US. Now, people most affected by road accidents are world's poor; 67% of road deaths occur every year in developing countries and 67% of those killed are pedestrians. New cars with safety checks, safety components like airbags or ABS breaks, well-maintained roads, laws against drinking and driving, are all cited as reasons why developed countries aren't as affected.
21. **Since 1977, there have been nearly 80,000 acts of violence or disruption at abortion clinics in North America.** [ [more](#) ]
22. **More people can identify the golden arches of McDonalds than the Christian cross.** Survey of 7,000 people in six countries (including the US) showed that the Shell oil logo, the Mercedes badge and the five Olympic rings were recognized far more widely than the Christian cross. In Britain, less than 20% said they were influenced by religion; churches complain consumerism is replacing faith. In America, 92% believe in God and 33% attend a place of worship at least once a week.
23. **In Kenya, bribery payments make up a third of the average household budget.** A request for 'kitu kidogo' (something small) is common in Kenya; Kenyans say its hard to get anything without bribery. Corruption further hurts poor countries because it deters foreign investment. [ [more](#) ]
24. **The world's trade in illegal drugs is estimated to be worth around \$400 billion -- about the same as the world's legal pharmaceutical industry.** About 200 million around the world abuse drugs. In Netherlands, marijuana is sold through 'coffee shops' and the amount sold to each customer is regulated by police; interestingly, while 37% of Americans admit to using marijuana, only 16% of the Dutch had done so. [ [more](#) ]
25. **A third of Americans believe aliens have landed on Earth.** Not just the US -- a 1999 poll in Britain showed that 61% of British teenagers believed in aliens and UFOs. 80% of Americans thinks that the government is hiding information on this topic. UFO visits, interestingly, have only been widely reported in the last 50 years -- a mere blip in a planetary history that spans 4 billion years.

26. **More than 150 countries use torture.** That's more than two thirds of all the countries. [ [more](#) ]
27. **Every day, one in five of the world's population -- some 800 million people -- go hungry.** Incredibly, this is not caused by food shortages. The world produces enough food each year to feed all its inhabitants. Healthy diet requires 2,500 calories a day; an American consumes 3,600 calories a day while a Somalian gets 1,500. Nobel laureate Amartya Sen says it's because poor people have no money to secure a constant food supply, and no resources to grow their own food. [ [more](#) ]
28. **Black men born in the US today stand a one in three chance of going to jail.** In June 2002, the number of people behind bars hit 2 million and the US overtook Russia as the world's largest prison population. One in every 37 Americans has spent time in jail, up from one in 53 in 1974. For children born in 2001, a white male has 1 in 17 chance of going to jail; hispanics are 1 in 6, blacks are 1 in 3. Black people make up 12.9% of the US population. Sentencing project also reports that 70% of those sentenced in state prisons were convicted of non-violent crimes, of whom drug offenders were 57%. Drunk driving is the most frequent category of arrests in America with 1.8 million each year; drunk drivers kill 22,000 people, yet punishment for drunk-driving is a misdemeanour (punished by fines) while possession of drugs gets upto 5 years in jail. It costs the US \$30,000 to keep a prisoner in jail for a year.
29. **A third of the world's population is at war.** In 2002, 30 countries around the world were fighting in 37 armed conflicts -- a combined population of 2.29 billion people. In Congo, for example, a conflict often referred to as 'Africa's world war' claimed more than 3 million lives between 1998 and 2002 -- either as a direct result of fighting or through disease and malnutrition.
30. **The world's oil reserves could be exhausted by 2040.** Oil's biggest role is power generation. Most electricity in the developed world is generated using coal, natural gas or petroleum; but British government, for example, has said that by 2010, at least 10% of its energy needs to come from renewable sources like water, wind and sun. In the US, automotive fuels account for more than half of US oil consumption; in 1999, Americans drove a whopping 2.6 trillion miles -- enough for 14,000 round trips to the Sun.
31. **Eighty-two percent of the world's smokers live in developing countries.** Every year, nearly 5 million people die as a result of smoking. It is the number one preventable cause of death in the world. 500 million people alive today will die of tobacco-related diseases. In 1955, 56% of US men smoked; today it's 25%. Before import of tobacco-based products in 1996, 26% of Taiwanese had tried smoking; now, it's 48% and quickly rising. WHO reports that tobacco advertising in Cambodia rose 400% during 4 years of the 1990s; in Malayasia, 20-25% of all advertising is now tobacco related. Women and young people in developing countries are the current targets for tobacco companies.
32. **More than 70 per cent of the world's population have never a dial tone.** Researchers estimate that 800 megabytes of information is produced every year for every person on the planet; the average American spends 46% of their time in accessing that information; in 2001, more than half of the US population used the Internet and over 600 million users worldwide had access. In Africa, though, less than 1% of the 800 million even had a computer, 1 in 4 people own a radio and 1 in 40 have a telephone. Finland, with a population of 5 million, has more Internet users than the whole of Latin America. In the US, 86% of families earning over \$75,000 per year has Internet access, whereas just 12% of households earning less than \$15,000 per year had access. On the flip side, within just five years, 60% of South Korean households have broadband Internet.

33. **A quarter of the world's armed conflicts of recent years have involved a struggle for natural resources.** More than 5 million died as a result of these conflicts in the 1990s. Congo had deposits of gold, diamonds and mineral ore named coltan (used in mobile phones and computers). President of the rebel group in Rwanda: "We need to maintain the soldeiers. We need to pay for services ... we raise \$200,000 per month from diamonds. Coltan gives us more: a million dollars a month." In Colombia, fights are over the annual \$400 million annual cocaine trades. In developing countries, 90% of fresh water is consumed by agriculture and many predict that water will be a source of much tension in the future.
34. **Some 30 million people in Africa are HIV-positive.** By 2050, the disease may have claimed 280 million lives. Life expectancy in some sub-saharan countries is currently 30! China refused to acknowledge it's AIDS problem till 2002; till then, 30,000 was the number of those living with HIV in China but after that, it jumped to 1 million. Of the \$70 billion is spent each year in researching new drugs, less than 10% is spent on finding solutions for 90% of the world's health problems. [ [more](#) ]
35. **Ten languages die out every year.** There are about 6000 living languages in the world. Professor Steve Sutherland of University of East Anglia calculated that the past 500 years have seen 4.5% of languages die out, compared with 1.3% of birds, and 1.9% of mammals. [ [more](#) ]
36. **More people die each year from suicide than in all world's armed conflicts.** WHO estimates that about a million people die each year from suicides; two thirds of them are depressed at the time of their deaths. A survey in Aids-stricken region of Uganda showed 21% of residents as clinically depressed, while another survey of a Pakistani village showed 44%. Women are more likely to attempt suicide, but men are more than four times as likely to die. By 2020, WHO predicts that depression will be the second largest contributor to the global burden of disease. [ [more](#) ]
37. **Every week, an average of 88 children are expelled from American schools for bringing a gun to class.** Nearly one in three American households with children have a gun in them. In a study of 37 school shooting incidents between 1974 and 2000, two thirds of the students involved had taken their guns from their own home or that of a relative. Death rate from guns in the US is by far the highest in the developed world. Of the 639 million small arms worldwide, nearly 200 million are in the homes of Americans.
38. **There are at least 300,000 prisoners of conscience in the world.** These are folks who have peacefully expressed their own beliefs and not broken the law in any way.
39. **Two million girls and women are subjected to female genital mutilation each year.** Barbaric practice of cutting genitals of girls and women has to be stopped, but the complexity of the problem and secrecy surrounding it call for a very careful approach. Surveys indicate the prevalence of FGM -- most commonly found in Africa -- fell from 95% in 1995 to 89% in 2002.
40. **There are 300,000 child soldiers fighting conflicts around the world.** Children under 18 are fighting in almost regions of the world, in close to 33 countries. Burma is believed to have more child soldiers than any other country with more than one fifth of its 350,000 national army listed under 18 years of age. [ [more](#) ]
41. **Nearly 26 million people voted in 2001 British General Election. More than 32 million votes were cast in the first season of Pop Idol.** In 1950, 84% of Britons turned out to vote; in 2001, 60%. Worldwide, younger people are not voting. Most youngsters feel that "voting is not going to change a thing" as politicians keep on playing their games. In 2003, German government debated a proposal to allow parents to vote on behalf of their 12 years and older children to vote. The use of mobile phone and Internet are also being used to make it easy to vote; in

Democratic primaries in Arizona, turned jumped 600% when the Internet voting system was introduced. [ [more](#) ]

42. **America spends \$10 billion on pornography every year -- the same amount is spends on foreign aid.** More than 200 new adult films are produced every week, and there are over 300,000 Internet sites on the topic. 1.5 million US hotel rooms can show adult movies, which accounts for around 80% of hotels' in-room entertainment profits. [ [more](#) ]
43. **In 2003, the US spent \$396 billion on its military. This is 33 times the combined military spending of the seven 'rogue states'.** In 2002, the world military budget was \$794 billion. America's military expenditure is more than 33 times the combined budgets of Cuba, Iran, Iraq, Libya, North Korea, Sudan, and Syria. In 1985, at the height of the Cold War, the world spent \$1.2 trillion; the 90s saw a decline, but post 9/11, the trend has reversed; the US administration plans to spend \$2.7 trillion on the military over the next six years. It would cost \$15 billion a year to provide basic primary healthcare to all the world's people, about \$2 billion to fund famine relief and sustainable agriculture programs and about \$5 billion to provide a basic education for all. [ [more](#) ]
44. **There are 27 million slaves in the world today.** Bonded labor is now the most common form of slavery, affecting some 20 million people around the world. Anti-slavery groups estimate that slaves exist in every continent except Antarctica, producing goods that we in the Western World use everyday. Average slave in the American South cost \$40,000 in today's money; today, a slave costs an average of just \$90. [ [more](#) ]
45. **Americans discard 2.5 million plastic bottles every hour. That's enough bottles to reach all the way to the moon every three weeks.** Every hour, British households throw away enough rubbish to fill the Royal Albert Hall. Each year, America produces enough plastic wrap to cling-film the state of Texas. Each Christmas, an additional 5 million tons of rubbish is generated -- 4 million of that is wrapping paper and shopping bags. China produces and discards more than 45 billion pairs of disposable chopsticks every year and cuts down 25 million trees to do it. In Bangladeshi capital Dhaka, more than 10 million plastic bags are dumped every day, clogging the city's drains. It is now said that there are two man made structures that can be seen from outer-space: the Great Wall of China, and the Fresh Kills landfill near New York. A landfill closes in the US everyday, and experts say that the country has 18 years of landfill capacity left. By 2005, 250 million computers will be obsolete and 130 million mobile phones will be discarded every year. [ [more](#) ]
46. **The average urban Briton is caught on camera upto 300 times a day.** Nearly 3 million closed circuit TV's are monitoring the UK, sending images to flickering screens. With an estimated 2.5 million Britons now captured on the national DNA database and the British government's decision to press ahead with iris recognition schemes, it is possible that we may never be anonymous.
47. **Some 120,000 women and girls are trafficked into Western Europe every year.**
48. **A kiwi fruit flown from New Zealand to Britain emits five times its own weight in greenhouse gases.** To get us off season fruits, our food is travelling a long ways. Those kiwi fruits, for example, have travelled 20,000 kilometers, either by plane or road. Increasingly, we're becoming more and more dependent on the fuel it takes to get them to us. In the UK, 40% of all road freight is food. For every calorie of lettuce imported to the UK from America, 127 calories of fuel are used; in other words, a kilogram of California lettuce uses enough energy to keep a 100-watt light bulb glowing for eight days.
49. **The US owes the United Nations more than a billion dollars in unpaid dues.** [ [more](#) ]

50. **Children living in poverty are three times more likely to suffer a mental illness than children from wealthy families.** Nearly 4 million British children -- one in every three -- live in poverty. That's three times below the poverty line in 1970.

That's a lot of bad news. :) Perhaps we need to make a list of 50 mind blowing people who are addressing these issues in innovative ways.

## Simple Truths

Oct 7, 2005

My uncle is on a lose-two-kilograms-by-Nov-13 competition with my aunt. So I suggest a brilliant idea: "Let's go on a walking pilgrimage."

Now, my Uncle is exactly the type of person to not appreciate such acts of random spirituality ... which is why I was teasing him. :) As we were all cracking up, I spice up my proposition further. "We could even take money. And maybe even someone to massage our feet," I say. We all laugh more. Stating the obvious, I add, "You know, money really makes things easy."

With a loud smile showing on his face, my uncle sarcastically quips, "Simple truths. That's what pilgrimages are for."

Indeed, pilgrimages are for discovering simple truths. In this case, though, the simple truth is this -- ease of money comes with the complexity of security.

## Servant Leadership

Oct 8, 2005

In Herman Hesse's *Journey to the East*, a band of men are on a mythical journey. Leo, the central figure of the story, accompanies the party as a servant who does menial chores and also sustains them with his spirit and song.

He is a person of extraordinary presence. When Leo disappears one fine day, the group falls into disarray and the journey is abandoned. The group cannot make it without the servant. The narrator, one of the party, after some years of wandering, finds Leo and is taken into the Order that had sponsored the journey. There he discovers that Leo, who he had known first as servant, was in fact the titular head of the Order, its guiding spirit, a great and noble leader.



Inspired by Hesse's writing, Robert Greenleaf wrote an essay in 1969 titled '[Servant Leadership](#)' which later turned into a non-fiction best-seller.

In *Journey to the East*, Herman Hesse writes:

*I perceived that my image was in the process of adding to and flowing into Leo's, nourishing and strengthening it. It seemed that, in time ... only one would remain: Leo. He must grow, I must disappear.*

*As I stood there and looked and tried to understand what I saw, I recalled a short conversation that I had once had with Leo during the festive days of Bremgarten. We had talked about the creations of poetry being more vivid and real than the poets themselves.*

When the work becomes more important than the worker, the leader naturally turns into a servant.

## Shop Till You Drop

Oct 10, 2005

"It's time to upgrade my pilgrimage clothes," they all have been telling me. Ok, fine. Guri and I decide to go shopping at some recommended stores.

We walk into the first store -- a Macy's-like store in Baroda -- and man, I am totally uncomfortable.

I complain to Guri, "I feel like I just don't belong here. Can we go now?" Guri, of course, laughs it off as we try to orient ourselves in the store. On the streets of India, there are no maps or signs, no mapquest.com; instead of static sign posts, India has dynamic human beings that are willing to show you the way at almost every intersection. "Hey buddy, where do I go?" "Oh yeah, just go from here to here and ask someone there." Held by a rosary of beating hearts, Guri and I walked a thousand rural kilometers without ever getting lost. But here, inside this store, we fumble around till we find the right billboard-like placard: men's section, left arrow, kids, right arrow, women's showroom, 2nd floor.



Almost every couple minutes, I spot some guy cleaning the floor with an upright broom, or some teenager wiping the railings on the staircase, or someone wiping the windows squeaky clean. I'm all for cleanliness, but this just seemed like an artificial facade of beauty, a plastic surgery to cover up the dirty defects. In a way, India is a filthy place -- cow dung everywhere, smelly beggars on the footpaths, polluted air, bad water. Yet in another way, this mess is a manifestation of our collective mind that harbors inequities, chaos and dis-satisfaction; many parts of the world offer cocoons to run away from this filth but India, to date, still offers straight-up reality. After all, it was on these same Indian streets that Gotama the Buddha saw old age, disease, and death and was inspired to walk on the path of full liberation.

Anyhow, we get to the right section. Everything is very modern and stylish, and I must admit, fashionably impressive.

Unlike the road-side mom-and-pop stores, this store is huge. Amidst the sea of clothing apparel, I spot a cool-looking looking shirt that I sort of liked. I lift the tag to check for size, and then the second tag to check for price. Large. And Rs. 400. After some tag-lifting experiments, Rs. 400 seems like the minimum price at this store. With the right kind of mathematical gymnastics, perhaps you can make a case that its worth the price but I recollect my dialogues on [Khadi](#) and wonder how much gets taken up by enterprising (and corrupt) middle-men.

Another fact also becomes quickly obvious -- there are five, six, seven (sometimes more) copies of the same exact design. Cookie-cutter mass production. When Guri and I were walking, I remember receiving a gift from some [potters on the street](#). With such joy, the family of potters showed us how they made each pot. Every one of them was unique, with its minor defects. I kinda of liked it. It was human. Guri and I were touched by gesture, not because it was high quality art piece with a high market value but because it symbolized the unbounded spirit of the human heart. None of that here. All I see are mannequins of commercialized behavior.

To top it off, the price of the half-sleeve shirt is 400 rupees. That's half a month of survival for two pilgrims living on 25 rupees/day and for more than 200 million other Indians below the poverty line.

I don't know.

In disbelief, I pass the mirrors next to the cosmetics section that are meant to make one feel incomplete without the gold plated accessories, I see the uniformly dressed up salespeople behind all the counters as if this was some sort of a game, and again, I spot the sweeper boys who diligently clean your mess to preserve my cocoon of beauty. No one is doing this to make my day; by buying from that store, I'm paying them to create this illusion for me.

In a blind-leading-deaf world, I always find it difficult to find a person to blame. Ultimately, it's all us. Personally, I'm not really for or against the clothing chains nor do I want to launch a rally for khadi. No. For me, I want to fight another fight. As Vivekananda would say, "Have you ever wondered why YOU are alive in a time like this?" Yes, Swami Vivekananda, I sometimes do wonder and I'm still looking for the answer. That's my fight. Me vs. Me.

"Ah, thank God for the heat," I semi-jokingly tell Guri as we walk out the two-storey, air-conditioned store. Until I got out, I didn't realize that A/C was actually nauseating me in some subtle way.

I recently read a popular quote, "Give us courage to change what we can; the patience to accept what we cannot change; and the wisdom to know the difference." I would put it this way:

*Give us courage to be the change we wish to see;  
the humility to accept our role in that we cannot change;  
and the wisdom to keep serving without any expectations.*

On the way back, our rickshaw driver greets us with an unusually broad smile. He says, "Sir, do you remember me? I gave you a ride yesterday." A simple reason for some genuine joy. "Oh yeah, wow. Is that you again? ... What's your name, brother?" "Raju." With a pat on his shoulder, I add, "Rajubhai it is great to see you again." Really, it doesn't take much to be happy.

It turns out, I would run into that same rickshaw driver, three times in the next three days in three different parts of the city. Sometimes I feel like I am running into everything over and over again.

## 400 Rupee Tip At the Seva Caf

Oct 18, 2005

I've never waited tables at a restaurant. So I pretend to play that role on the opening night of my friend's restaurant inauguration.

I force a couple of friends to be my mock customers. All of a sudden, within the next ten minutes, the entire roof-top restaurant is filled with people and the guy holding the pen and the piece of paper -- me -- becomes the defacto waiter.

Seva Caf?, as it is appropriately called, is no ordinary eatery. Like [Analakshmi's](#) chain of restaurants, you don't get charged for your food here. Your food is served by volunteers and paid for, as a gift, by a past guest whom you don't know; after your meal, your voluntary contribution keeps the chain of gifts alive by paying for a future guest. Instead of our current 'exchange' economy where you give in order to receive, here you are radically altering that paradigm by first receiving unconditionally and then sharing that experience with someone unknown.

"Isn't this a risky proposition?" an entrepreneur-like guest asks me in a matter-of-fact tone. Indeed, it is an extremely expensive wager by [Jayeshbhai Patel](#) and his Manav Sadhna team to see how far you can really stretch the Pay-It-Forward model. The C.G. Road location is prime real estate, the operational costs are heavy in a city like Ahmedabad, and the return on investment is practically guaranteed to be nil (or less). Yet, Jayeshbhai's response is: "In the worst case, we have fed people with our hearts."

Sitting under the bright moon at 2:30AM, the night before launch, I ask, "And imagine just \*one\* guest being truly moved by our offerings and carrying that forward into the world?" In a way, that became our silent promise. I waited tables for the next three days, from its 7-10PM operational hours, and at the end of the day, Jayeshbhai would ask me about the miracle-of-the-day.

Sure enough, I had a story for each day.

Day one. A group of five sits at a table. Two professional looking women, one twenty-something with a cap, one Australian girl on an exchange program, and a twelve year old girl named Sachi. "Do you know about the concept of the Seva Caf??" "Sort of. Can you explain it again?"

As I learned from experience, Seva Caf? is a difficult concept for which to have an elevator speech. About 37 years ago, Lewis Hyde wrote a seminal work that coined the word "[gift economy](#)"; like your local blood bank and many religiously inspired projects, there are many examples of gift economies, but the strength of this one is that the risk is born entirely by an everyday hero and not a high-profile guru or a million dollar foundation. And outside of two chefs, everyone is a volunteer: hosts, waiters, servers, cleaners, and most of the cooks are volunteers.

I explain the concept. Within a couple of minutes, the twelve year old interrupts me, "Can I volunteer?" "Of course. What would you like to do?" "Well, I can cook." "Oh really. What can you cook?" "I can make desserts, pasta, ..."

"Pasta? Really? Well, this gentleman on the table next to you has volunteered to cook pasta next Monday. Would you like to join him?" I ask. She looks at her mom, already beaming with joyous pride, who gives her the nod and they trade numbers. That gentleman was none other than a CharityFocus volunteer named [Mark Jacobs](#). :)

Day two ends up drawing more people than day one. At the inauguration, I had spoken to three youngsters who had started a youth organization named Yuva. They do service projects, throw parties, and somehow attract a lot of attention. When we spoke, we really connected. Today, about 15-20 of them gathered, as we discussed service, money, happiness, and the spirit of coming alive in every moment. And after that, I invited them to eat at the Seva Caf?. It was a perfect set-up. :)

In a way, they were shocked to see me go from a "guest speaker" to a "waiter". One of the Indicorps leaders, Dharmesh, also said, "It feels so weird to see you as a waiter." Guri, of course, was complaining that I'm not delivering her water quick enough and that the placement of the fork wasn't right. :) But it all felt perfectly natural to me! By the end of the meal, two of the Yuva youth got up and started waiting tables and committed to doing so once a week. Their charismatic founder, Amitabh, said their group would like to volunteer for the entire Seva Caf? two days of the month. Everyone gets pumped to know that such a space could exist in a me-versus-world culture.

And then there was this one unassuming twenty-something girl who came up to me right as she was about to leave.

"I'd like to give you this," she softly says while dropping a stack of folded hundred rupee bills in my hand. "Thanks for the donation to Seva Caf?. You can just leave it anonymously in that envelope and be sure that it will reach the right place," I respond. She quickly responds, "No, no, this is for you." "For me?" "Yeah, I was wondering if you could do something good for someone, on my behalf, with this money?"

Wow. For a second, I didn't know what to say. In the whirlwind of bodies moving left and right, orders from this table and that and questions from all kinds of puzzled faces, this came as a stunning surprise. After a moment of stillness, with my jaw half open, I look deeply in her eyes to see what I could say. Although my typical response would've been to rebound ideas to get her to engage in some acts, I felt like she was a sister attempting to connect our journeys over a bridge of service. Very spontaneously I say, "Thank you."

A bit later, I pay-forward that 400 rupee tip to four youngsters. (More stories on that later :)).

Day three, more of the same goodness. Every day is a different yet small menu prepared by many volunteers. While the mouth-watering food is elegantly presented, Seva Caf?'s draw is its concept. While talking to a friend on the phone, I told him about the space: "It's a roof-top restaurant where you can't pay for your own meal; next to it is a cooperative shop of nine nonprofit organizations selling rural artisan goods; in an A/C room we even hope to setup a pay-it-forward style Internet caf?. The whole point is to send out ripples of goodness in the world." After some further explanation, he asserts, "I'm coming to Ahmedabad next week. Tell me how many computers you need for the caf?. I'd like to donate them."

In the back corner of the restaurant is a very jovial guest, who turns out to be the CEO of a very popular brand of spices which are imported world-wide. By the end of his meal, he tells me, "If you train me, I'd like to volunteer to be a waiter." Absolutely shocked by his offer, his wife and friend on the table says, "Please, please, sign him up. We will invite all our friends that day too!" Indeed, it's happening this Friday. (His wife also volunteered to lead the cooking, but she insists on being a guest on the day her husband is waiting tables. :))

One after another, people naturally respond to the caf?'s trust in the power of compassion. At the end of the night is a birthday celebration for one of the guests; we gather all the guests, pickup a few gifts from the store (aka 'Gramshree'), and take several photos as memoirs for him. Touched, birthday-boy Pankaj jokes, "My parents will be shocked to find out that I have so many friends in India!"



Day four. A stylish woman in her forties comes up to me and challenges me in a confident tone, "Gandhi said that you should act while thinking of benefit for the poorest man. How do you think such a place on C.G. Road is helping the poor?" Immediately I say, "Through you." "Through me?" "Yeah, the whole idea of the place is to radically shift people from a give-to-receive attitude to a receive-and-express-gratitude mentality. When anyone does that, it addresses the source of all human inequities ... in our own hearts. Without that shift in mindset, we will never be able to address poverty." She looks to me and says, "Who are you?" "I'm a waiter," I tell her with a straight smile. "I mean, what do you do during the day?" she counters. "I used to be in the computer field and now I'm focusing on doing some seva," I say. "No, I'm asking because I run a chain of clothing stores and I'd like to get your perspective on how I can include spirituality in business." One more ripple goes out in the world.

Day five. More good stuff. The owner of a designer *Pepe* store comes up to visit on his birthday; he had come the day before and now he brought his brother, wife and best friend just to "show them that such a place exists." The guy who runs an auditorium on the third floor also joins us with his wife; by the end of his meal, his wife volunteers to make a dessert for the next day and expressed a sincere desire to feed all Seva Caf? volunteers at their house. Ripples start inside out, not the other way.

Jayeshbhai, Anarben and I were eating pani-puri and sharing stories about the 400 rupee tip, the shock-value reactions from unexpected guests, and the newly engaged volunteers. By and by, I also learned that the carpenter who helped build the store has stopped charging for his services. His excuse: "I just like being here." We think he has voluntarily volunteered to be a volunteer. :)

In one middle-class shopping joint of Ahmedabad, goodness has planted a deep seed. Like Manubhai the carpenter, I also just like being here.

## Unspoken Contract With a Rickshaw Driver

Oct 21, 2005

"Where to?" the rickshaw driver asks me with his mouth full of tobacco. "Vijay Char Rasta," I say. I'm headed to meet [Sampat](#), [Raj](#) and Archana to talk about the purpose of life and things like that. :)

After some light conversation, the rickshaw driver and I quickly become friends. "Are you from Ahmedabad?" he asks me. "No, I'm just visiting a friend." "Just a visit?" "Yeah, he's opening a restaurant and he wanted my parents to inaugurate it. I'm helping him launch the caf?."

"Caf?? You mean, it's like a Barista?" he asks showing his knowledge about the trendy coffee joints in town. "No, not quite like Barista. It's called the [Seva Caf?](#)." "Oh, what's that?"

"Well, it's a place where everyone is a volunteer, and no one gets charged for their food. It's going back to our cultural roots, where each person is treated as a part of you and not a customer: *Atithi Devo Bhava*. We start each relationship by giving, and not by thinking of receiving."



As we talk more about the Pay-it-Forward model, the rickshaw driver progressively gets more and more blown away. "I can't believe that such a thing can exist in a world like this. Today, everyone is after

money. No one gives. Corruption is everywhere, even in our government. The world needs more people like your friend."

"What's your name, by the way?" I ask the pumped-up rickshaw driver. "Mohan. Don't call me 'kaka' (uncle). I'm like your brother. Call me Mohanbhai."

When I press him a bit about his own life, Mohan goes on to describe his own bad habits. "Sahib, what can I say? It's hard. I know it's bad for me, I've seen all the tobacco related cancer patients in the hospitals but it's hard to let it go." I suppose we're all in the same boat with our bad habits, but Mohan has got honesty working for him.

In between the loud honking horns and the exceptionally noisy rickshaw, Mohan drives slowly in the side of street so we can converse. He even starts singing some poems, in praise of human virtue (I wish I could remember them :)).

"How long have you been in Ahmedabad?" I investigate. He says, "My whole life. We used to have a farm and all in our village, but now I just drive a rickshaw. It's good money."

"About how much money do you make everyday?" "Oh, 200 to 300 rupees daily. It's really good."

Throughout the pilgrimage, this is one thing I noticed -- people with more money are more self-conscious about it. I can't imagine any of my middle or upper class friends volunteering their exact salary information; either they'll fake it to pretend to be "successful" or they'll try to hide their net worth in fear that someone will somehow steal their jewels. For Mohan, though, it was 200-300 rupees a day (minus the operational costs, which he didn't figure in).

Thus far, our conversation has been in pure Gujarati. And then, just out of nowhere, he says, "I am B-com graduate. I speak English." Whooa. And then he reads a couple of the English billboards to happily brag about his skills. A college grad driving a rickshaw? "Oh yeah, this way I take home about 3000 rupees a month for my family. Nothing else gives me that kind of money," Mohan explains.

"How many people in your family?" "Two daughters, one son and my wife," he says with a smile as he describes his loved ones.

On the face of it, Mohan's red-colored teeth, a fake-looking-weird-yellow dyed hair, big eyes and tattered clothing can present a daunting image. But in this conversation, we had entered another dimension of our realities. By now, Mohan and I were almost brothers in service; I was excited to be given a window of insight into the heart of a rickshaw driver and Mohan was enthralled with our conversations on the need for good in the world, examples of meritorious acts, and the heroic experiment of my friend's Seva Caf?.

Soon enough, my fourteen minute rickshaw ride came to an end. It was time for me to pay for the ride.

"How much?" He checks his meters and reads, "23 rupees."

I look in my wallet and notice that I have the exact change of Rs. 240. That's only 10 rupees less than his daily turnover. Spontaneously, I say, "Mohanbhai, here's 240 rupees. Will you drive your rickshaw in the Seva Caf? style, today?"

A moment of stunned silence.

I explain, "For the rest of the day, just drive the rickshaw as usual but when it comes time to charge, tell your customers that someone else before them has paid their bill for them and if they want to continue the chain of kindness, they can contribute whatever they want. See what happens."

Mohan still is awestruck. Shaking his head in disbelief, he says, "No sir, no sir, I can't take this." "Why not?" "No, no, sir, you don't understand. I'm a terrible guy. How do you know I won't just take the money and run?"

"Mohanbhai, if I didn't trust you, why would I give you the money?"

"Sahib (boss), don't trust me. I'm a very bad person. No one trusts me," he says while rejecting money and downplaying himself for the next couple of minutes.

To his several minute tirade, I respond with a one-liner and an extra-broad smile on my face: "Too late. I already trust you."

Again, a moment of stunned silence. Mohan doesn't exactly know what to do.

"Ok, sir, tell me your name. I will come and tell you exactly what happened with this money."

"Too late, Mohan. I already trust you fully. You don't need to tell me anything. It will be an unspoken contract between you and the world," I say. One got the sense that he had never experienced such a blatant act of irrational faith. :)

Still, Mohan felt a need to reassure me that he will live up to the faith I had placed in him. After fumbling around for a bit, he gathers money from all the hidden pockets of change; "See, see, I have Rs. 312 on me. You have given me Rs. 240. I will do my honest best today. You can be sure of that. I won't let you down today."

It's hard not to be elated after such encounters. Rs. 240 is worth less than a movie in the US; no movie has ever left me feeling this connected with life.

Right as I was about to go, Mohan throws in his final condition: "Sir, I won't let you go without giving me your name and address. You have to. You can't leave without telling me."

"Mohan, I tell you what. You and your family, you come to the Seva Caf? some day. You've seen the Reebok building; it's right on the fourth floor. If you come in the next week, I'll be your waiter. Otherwise, ask for Jayeshbhai and tell him you're my friend. He'll know."

He grabs a newspaper from one of his bins, pulls out a pen from under his seat, and writes down a few things in Gujarati. "One day, bhai, I will find you and tell you all my stories." Almost silently, he whispers, "Thank you."

"See you, my friend," I say while walking off. He smiles, snaps his fingers and lifts his right index finger towards the sky. I don't know what it meant, but maybe it was the seal on our unspoken contract.

# A Tribute to a Teacher

Oct 27, 2005

Several years ago, I was at the 50th birthday party of a friend. To open the party, he asked everyone a simple question: "Which teacher has changed your life?"

Everyone eagerly responded with memorable stories. Some couldn't decide between two teachers, so they gave two stories. And then when it was the birthday boy's turn, he wiped a tear from his left cheek and said, "Today, I want to announce that I'm changing careers. I'm going to be a teacher." Most of the people in the room knew that the 50-year-old man in front of them had tested positive for HIV; by now, most also knew that teachers change the world, one life at a time.

Today I learned that one of my most influential teachers passed away.

Chandraben, as we called her, was the principal of Amrit Jyoti where I studied from Kindergarten to 7th grade. Together with Bhartiben, Chandraben founded this holistic school after studying educational systems around the world. Back when I was at that school, it was new, small and unwavering in its values.

In a country where the focus is on getting the highest marks on a few set of standardized tests, Amrit Jyoti radically stood strong for a well-rounded education. We had 32 subjects, I think, ranging from cookery to horse-riding to gymnastics. Music was given as much importance as Maths, elocution competitions were a part of English class, we learned three languages simultaneously (and Sanskrit starting in 6th grade!), and meditation and yoga were subjects on which we were graded. There were no set fees for the school, either; people paid according to their family's income. But perhaps the most radical concept at the time, though, was absolute parity between the guys and girls. I remember knitting a cap (I still have it!) just as I remember doing push-ups on my knuckles with my female classmates in Taekwondo classes.

Amrit Jyoti was fun, but it was also a lot of hard work. From early morning hours to late evening, we were constantly occupied (and pushed). Our tests were difficult, standards were high, and a strong but healthy sense of competition was always there. And some of the principles were non-negotiable. When I secured a very difficult berth in the national roller skating championship, the principals flatly rejected my proposal to adjust the upcoming exams. I'm not sure I still agree with their decision, but their commitment to their values was admirable.

Most students were scared of Chandraben. In fact, I remember some boys talking about how it was impossible to look at her bright, big eyes without squinting. One day, I was determined to not look away when I saw her, so when I bumped into her next to the water stand on the second floor, I squarely looked in her eyes as she looked into mine. It was strange but my eyes started watering, as if I was just staring at the Sun. Whether it was the respect we maintained for the position of the principal or whether it was something else, I don't know, but she had an uncanny sense of power about her.

Of all the bold new avenues that Amrit Jyoti students had access to, my favorite ones were the assembly sessions. At that time, I didn't know how Websters defined "assembly" but for me it was a time when the principals called all the students in and talked to us about spiritual topics. I used to love thinking about those things (and I suppose I still do :)). In fact, my classmates would still brand me as the guy who asked all these "life" questions; after reaching the United States, in my first letter back to the class, I asked 'em to send me the "assembly notes"! I still remember one question I never quite

asked Chandraben, because I thought it was too silly: "If you do meditation with your eyes closed, how is that different from sleeping?" :)

Technically speaking, Chandraben was never my teacher. But it is through the creative genius of Amrit Jyoti's values that I see Chandraben's contribution to my life journey. For example, I don't remember how late I stayed up for my Algebra exam, but I still recollect the late night I spent on painting my "Fun-N-Games" poster for a school stall. I don't remember any of my teachers' outfits, but I still vividly recall the tie I wore for "Teacher's Day" when it was the students who conducted all the classes. I don't remember attending many religious ceremonies, but I very easily remember that Chandraben would always ask me (a 10 year old kid) to do the 'havan' (fire ceremonies) for the school.

Thank you, Chandraben. I wouldn't be the same person without your labor of love, Amrit Jyoti.

Our class at Amrit Jyoti is still in close contact with each other. Everyone has taken different routes, but whenever we do something good, we often find ourselves joking, "I still have a little bit of Amrit Jyoti in me." Some say those pure values were lost in the bureaucracy of managing institutions, but if that ever happened, it must've been after I left the school in 1987. For me, Amrit Jyoti will always stay an A+ and for me, Amrit Jyoti will always have shining exemplars in Chandraben and Bhartiben, two women who dedicated their entire lives (choosing not even to marry) to the service of young journeys.

Last February, as I was shuttling to an airport exit, I bumped into [two ladies for two minutes](#). It was Chandraben and Bhartiben, my two principals whom I hadn't seen in decades. Nature afforded me one last chance to say thank-you. I am so glad I took it.

[Pause]

Thank you, Chandraben. I bow to your spirit that manifested in Amrit Jyoti, I bow to your lifetime of service for young minds, I bow to your wisdom in planting saplings in fertile hearts that will bear fruit for years to come. Wherever you go, may you find the boundless joy that you shared with so many of us.

## A Brilliant Journey

Nov 3, 2005

At practically every meeting we've attended together, I inevitably end up telling Larry how much I've learned from him. And almost always, he cracks up and tells me how he needs to surround himself with youngsters like me who look to him with admirable eyes. :)

From a 26-year-old doctor who signed up to deliver a Native American baby on the occupied Alcatraz island in the 60s, to a bus journey to the East with the likes of Wavy-Gravy, to doing service at a Himalayan monastery for years, to leading a team of 150,000 doctors to eradicate smallpox in the world, to starting [Seva Foundation](#) (with the help of Steve Jobs and Grateful Dead) for the blind, to creating the technology that gave birth to the first online community (pre-Internet), to launching several business ventures, leading Google.org (and being on the [cover](#) of Rolling Stone along the way), Dr. Larry Brilliant's life truly reads like a movie script. And the story is far from over.

Although Larry has probably made the covers of all major media, I had yet to read an article that did justice to his spirit. But thanks to a recent [GBN](#) interview, here is Larry in his \*own\* words.

## Dr. Larry Brilliant

I was your standard antiwar doctor in the '60s. I'm from Detroit. I went to undergraduate school in philosophy at University of Michigan, then medical school at Wayne. Then I came out to California for my internship, at what's now called Pacific Medical Center. I was going to be a surgeon. But shortly before my internship finished I developed a cancer of the parathyroid gland. I had to have surgery myself. I finished the internship, but I couldn't go straight into my residency. I was going to take some time off while I healed.

Then I got the strangest call in the world. I had heard that Native Americans had taken over Alcatraz island in the San Francisco Bay. And that one of them, a woman named Lou Trudell, wanted to deliver her baby on Alcatraz. Alcatraz represented a mystical reconquest of native lands. It was the first piece of land that had been retaken by the Indians after so many years of the white folks taking over Indian land. So it was a big deal. And she wanted to have her baby on that piece of land. Had there been a vote in the Bay Area, I think that 125 percent of people wanted the Indians to live there. But it wasn't just our vote. The Coast Guard had ringed the island. There was no water, no electricity, very little food, and no medical care. So I volunteered to go out there. I was the only white guy on the island. I lived there until she delivered her baby, which is another very long and wonderful story. The father of the baby, John Trudell, has become a good friend. The baby was named Wovoka, after the great Paiute/Sioux medicine man who had created the ghost dance religion.

Anyway, I helped deliver the baby. When I got back to the mainland, there are all these movie and TV crews. They all wanted to know about Indians. My entire knowledge base about Indians was the two weeks I was on the island. But I suddenly found myself on TV and on the front page of the Chronicle as an Indian expert. Then I get this weird phone call from Warner Brothers saying they'd seen me on television, and did I want to be in a movie and play a young doctor. This was very heady stuff for a young kid from Detroit, Michigan.

They said they'd build a free medical clinic on the island to compensate me if I acted in this movie. So I agreed to act in this absolutely terrible movie. It might be the worst movie ever made; it was called "Medicine Ball Caravan." It turned out to be about hippies and about rock 'n roll bands, so I met Wavy Gravy and the Hog Farm Commune and Stewart Brand and Ken Kesey and the Grateful Dead and Jefferson Airplane and Dave Crosby. I became the doctor for a lot of these rock 'n roll bands. So I went from being a pretty straight-laced medical student in Detroit to being in the absolute heart and center of the cultural revolution that was San Francisco. And I don't think I've ever recovered from that.

Well, it only makes sense if you live it chronologically. The movie was to show how rock concerts were done and how hippies lived, so the Warner Brothers movie took us on all these buses. We had about 15 psychedelically painted buses as we went cross country and then to England, where we ended with a big Pink Floyd concert in Canterbury. When the concert was over, Wavy and a bunch of us looked around and said, "What are we going to do now?" And Wavy said, "Let's get two more buses and go to Nepal."

I was still recovering from the surgery, and I didn't really want to go back to work. So my wife and I got on the bus. We were on the bus for the movie and then we really got on the bus?the same bus that Stewart Brand was on, which was now Wavy's bus. We spent two years, from 1970 to 1972, driving from London to Katmandu. The idea was sort of "there's a cyclone in East Pakistan, let's bring some medical supplies to East Pakistan." We lived for those two years in Afghanistan and Iran, Turkey to the Khyber Pass, India, Nepal. Wavy and I and our wives walked from India all the way up to the Tibetan border to Mustang. We had two porters, one carrying his toys and one carrying my medical equipment. After awhile, I barely remembered that I was a doctor. My primary identity at that time was as a traveler. Then one day, after we came back down from Mustang, we walked into the American Express office in

New Delhi, which was where everybody went in those days to get mail. In front of us in line was this fellow Baba Ram Dass. He had just gotten a copy, the proof, of *Be Here Now*, this book that he'd written. He gave it to Wavy and we sat there and read it. We were transfixed by it. Just as so many people in our generation remember exactly where we were when John F. Kennedy was killed, we also remember where we were when we first read *Be Here Now*.

So my wife, God bless her soul, decided that she wanted to meet Ram Dass's guru, thinking that it wasn't Ram Dass that was the magic but his teacher. She went to go see him, and then she dragged me to go see him. That's how it came to pass that in 1973, we were living in the Himalayan monastery of Neem Karoli Baba and studying Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. We did Buddhist meditation and visited Hindu pilgrimage sites. For the better part of two years, we lived a very monastic existence. We'd get up early in the morning and pray and sing and chant, and in the afternoons we'd read the holy scriptures of Hinduism and Buddhism and the Bible and the Torah and the Koran. We'd read the Dhamapada and the Tao Te Ching. We were part of a community of serious students of the convergence of religions.

One day, while I was trying to meditate off in the corner, my guru called me aside and said, "It's time for you to leave the monastery. You are to go down to Delhi and join the United Nations as a diplomat. You're going to be a UN doctor, and you're going to help eradicate smallpox. This will be God's gift to mankind because of the hard work of all of the health workers that are trying to conquer smallpox."

Now a number of things are interesting about that. First, I didn't know what the hell smallpox was. I had never seen a case of smallpox. I barely remembered that I was a doctor. My primary identity had shifted again from traveler to religious seeker. Second, the idea of working for the UN was preposterous to me. I'd never had a job in my life. I'd gone from medical school to traveling. So I said, "Marahaji, that's silly. I can't do that." And he said, "Go!" He kicked me out.

So I went down to the World Health Organization office. It took me 17 hours. I walked into the UN office wearing a long white robe and sporting a beard down to the middle of my chest. They said, "What are you doing here?" I said, "Well, I've come to work for the UN. I'm here to help eradicate smallpox." It was clear they wanted to call in the gooney squad, but they were very nice. "Thank you very much. We'll call you, don't call us."

So I went back up to see my guru. He said, "Did you get your job yet?" I said, "No, Marahaji. There's no job." He said, "Go back again!" So that same day I turned around and went back out. The next day I showed up at WHO again. They said, "What are you doing here again?" I said, "My guru said I'm supposed to come here and get this job." I did that a dozen times? 17 hours each way, each time. After a while, even a stupid guy like me begins to realize that I ought to lose the monastic robe. So I cut my hair and trimmed my beard and put on a suit and tie. I wish I had a time-motion frame of all the different concessions I made to modernity. But after 12 times, I looked fairly respectable. I walked into the office again. They were pretty tired of seeing me. While I was sitting in the waiting room, a tall American guy walked in. He had a big smile on his face. He looked like a football coach. He said, "What are you doing here?" I said, "I'm here to work for the smallpox program." He said, "That's great. Who deputed you here?" That was a word I hadn't yet heard, but basically you don't just go to work for the UN; you're deputed by a government. So he was really asking what government had deputed me. I said, "I've been deputed by a guru who lives in a Himalayan monastery. He said smallpox is going to be eradicated, and this is God's gift to humanity." Then I asked him what he did. He said, "Oh, I'm the head of the smallpox program. I'm here from Geneva. I'm here to see Indira Gandhi because there is no smallpox program in India, because the Indians don't feel that it's a priority compared to diarrhea and tuberculosis deaths." He said, "We've eradicated smallpox in all but four countries, and the worst is India. I wish we had a smallpox program here." Then he said goodbye and that it was nice to meet me. That was D.A. Henderson, who became the dean of Johns Hopkins and the head of bioterrorism and the

head of the smallpox program. I later learned that D.A. wrote a note in the WHO record: "I have met Dr. Larry Brilliant. Nice kid. He appears to have gone native."

I went back and told my guru that there was no job and no smallpox program. He looked at me with his big smile and said, "Go back again." So I did. And I was hired. I was hired as the mascot. I was 26. I think I was probably the youngest medical staffer in the history of WHO, the youngest medical officer in the history of the United Nations, and the first WHO medical officer not to be deputed from a monastery instead of a government or a laboratory or a university. It violated all the rules on local hiring. You never hire an American in India?you hire an Indian in India. But I didn't know all that. I thought they had hired me because I could type and I spoke English. I don't think they even knew why they hired me. So I started off, having never seen a case of smallpox. And I had the most amazing experience a human being can have, which is to be part of the eradication of the first disease in history. I did that every weekday for years, and on most weekends I took a bus ride up to the Himalayan monastery to talk to my guru about it.

What does it mean to eradicate disease? What is suffering? What is God's will in the context of this mortal disease? How should we organize our lives when there is such suffering? What does it mean to challenge God's existence? I had over 5,000 little babies die in my arms or around me from smallpox. Mothers would come up to me when they saw the WHO seal on my Jeep, and they'd say, "Please help my baby," but the baby was often already dead from smallpox. How do you keep your heart open in hell when you're faced with buzzards flying away with little arms with spots on them? Or rivers clogged up by dead bodies? What kind of a world is it? What kind of a species are we? What are the ethical mandates on us? How do you deal with that?

I was lucky. I could go up and talk to my guru while he was alive and then other mystics and Buddhist teachers and Hindu teachers and a bunch of Jesuit priests in India. I could hang out with a spiritual community and talk about what I dealt with every day with the United Nations program to eradicate smallpox.

So I started off as the mascot. Nicole Grasset, a phenomenal Swiss-French doctor who had been one of the leaders of the Pasteur Institutes, was the only staff person in India when I showed up. She built the program from one staff person to a program of 150,000. It was the largest UN program in history at that time?something like 500 doctors from 35 countries came. Because I was third or fourth person hired in the program, even though I didn't know anything about smallpox when I started, I eventually wound up running most of the program in India.

I think it's fair to say there's never been anything like it in history. On my first day, I walked into a meeting of what was called the Southeast Asia Regional Steering Committee. It happened to be "counting day." Once a year, every country was asked to report the death rate in their country, the disease prevalence. So you had all the health ministers from Mongolia and China and Korea and India and Sri Lanka and Pakistan and Afghanistan, and then all the consultants who were from Sweden and Norway and Czechoslovakia and Africa and America, all sitting around this table. Remember, I was a hippie kid who had been on a hippie bus for two years and then living in a Himalayan monastery. I walked into that meeting, and to my eyes all those faces?from black Africans to white Swedes to ruddy-faced Mongolians?the faces looked like a rainbow. In a mystical sense, when I looked at all those faces, the rainbow of facial hues, it looked like the fulfillment of the promise of humanity. That was, to me, the United Nations. That was what it meant. That was the possibility.

So I was filled with the potential for the UN. I worked on the smallpox program in India and Bangladesh and in Nepal for many years. And then I was on the international staff to the global commission to certify the world free of smallpox in Burma and in Afghanistan. I was the last UN smallpox inspector sent to Iran?in 1978, I think?to look for hidden smallpox.

Smallpox is a virus, and it is spread almost exclusively respiratory. If I had smallpox and I was the conductor of an orchestra and the violins were in the front, the horns were in the middle, and the percussion instruments were in the back, then during the process of conducting a three-hour orchestra I would infect approximately 100 percent of the violinists, 60 percent of the horn players, and maybe 25 percent of the percussionists. The droplets that would come out of my mouth are small enough that they achieve airborne status only for about 12 to 14 feet. So I become a viral transmitter. If I cough, I transmit it further. After a 7- to 17-day period of incubation, they would get sick. For two to four days they would have what's called the "prodrome"—fever, chills, and flu-like symptoms. Then the rashes would begin, mostly on the head and face, then working their way downward.

There's a good description of smallpox in the book of Job, where it says that the devil smite Job with boils from the soles of his feet to the top of his crown. Smallpox is the only disease that does that. There's no other disease that will give you boils on the soles of your feet, on the palms of your hands, all the way up to your face. The boils develop over a four-week period.

There are five different kinds of smallpox: confluent, hemorrhagic, flat, ordinary, and modified. Flat smallpox and hemorrhagic smallpox are 100 percent fatal. Hemorrhagic smallpox has a particularly cruel predisposition for pregnant women; every case of hemorrhagic smallpox that I saw was a pregnant woman who died along with her fetus. Regular smallpox kills about one out of every three. About 10 percent of people who get smallpox are blinded to some extent. That's how I got interested in blindness? so many victims of smallpox would become beggars because they had pox marks on their face and they were blind. About 20 percent of people who have smallpox get pneumonia from it; secondary infections are usually the cause of death.

Smallpox is without a doubt history's greatest killer. It has killed more people than all the wars and all other epidemics in history. To give you an idea of the magnitude, in the last century alone, from 1901 to 1999, smallpox killed 500 million people. My favorite slide that I show—the one that brings my interests in philosophy and religion and biology together—is a list of all the emperors and kings and queens who died of smallpox. The Aztec emperor, the Inca emperor, Pharaoh Ramses III, and Catherine the Great's son all died of smallpox. It makes you realize that we share a common humanity when we share a common cause of death. No amount of wealth, power, or fame can stop anybody from death. In those days, no amount of wealth or power or fame could stop anybody from dying of smallpox. So what does it mean when you've eradicated a disease? when one of the many forms of human suffering is lifted from mankind's burden? It's a very noble thing.

All the nations in the world signed a certificate certifying the world free of smallpox in 1980. 2005 will mark 25 years. That'll be big-time.

*Q: What did you do once smallpox was eradicated?*

Well, I didn't know what to do. I looked at all the other possibilities at WHO and decided the truth was that I hadn't had any training; I was a mascot who had grown into the job. So I went to the University of Michigan and got a master's, and my wife got her Ph.D. Then I joined the faculty as a professor of epidemiology and international health. I taught planning. In fact, my officemate at the University of Michigan was Peter Schwartz's guru, Don Michael. When he was writing *Planning to Learn and Learning to Plan*, we were right next to each other. He was a wonderful man, and we became good friends.

I taught in the international health planning and economic development departments and in the medical school. I was on the faculty at Michigan until 1988. I had started in 1978; the last two years with WHO overlapped with Michigan. But the group of us who had eradicated smallpox, some of the core group, kept in touch as the years passed. We wanted to do that again. I mean, if you're a doctor,

eradicating a disease is like a mountain climber climbing Mt. Everest. But this time I wanted to do it without it being stuck in the bureaucracy and diplomacy of the United Nations. I wanted to do it in such a way that my friend Wavy Gravy and spiritual people like Ram Dass who had such good hearts but no academic credentials could play a role.

So I started the Seva Foundation. In the early days, Seva was this delicious montage of professors and UN bureaucrats and diplomats and people from the Centers for Disease Control and Wavy and Ram Dass and a lot of people from the spiritual community. We decided to go after blindness. The Grateful Dead became our friends, supporters, and house band; we would do rock concerts and raise money to give back sight. Over the last 25 years, Seva's projects in India, Nepal, Tibet, Bangladesh, Guatemala, and Tanzania have given back sight to more than 2 million blind people.

Initially, we'd go into a country, do an epidemiologic survey of what the causes of blindness were, and then build facilities that met those needs. In most of the world the major cause of blindness is cataract. Not cataract like you see it now in a 75-year-old, but cataract in a 45-year-old. We built hospitals and created technologies to make implantable lenses very inexpensive, so that they would meet the needs of the poor and we could give back sight for free. I'm sure that Seva's programs have given back more sight than anybody else in the world. Not Seva, but our programs, because we became a foundation that would raise money and fund other programs around the world. So that's been another continuous thread for me. I'm the chairman of Seva even today. I'm still very much involved in it. One day, as luck would have it, the biostatistician WHO had hired to do the survey in Nepal became ill, and I was asked by the UN to conduct a survey of blindness in Nepal. There had never been a national survey in Nepal?it's hilly, with a lot of mountains, which makes it hard to do a survey. The Grateful Dead did a concert to fund getting me a helicopter. We flew medical teams to all the little remote areas and up to Everest. It was pretty amazing. The pilot, Darrell Ward, set the world altitude record with me as ballast. It was quite an adventure. Then, on the last day of the blindness survey, the helicopter crashed. The engine failed. Thankfully, nobody was hurt.

It happened in a very remote part of Nepal. The helicopter fell like an oak leaf in autumn. When it finally hit the ground, Nicole turned to the pilot and said, "What happened?" Darrell was holding on with literally white knuckles. He said, "Oh, nothing. Just a simple spare parts order?one engine." I was back in Kathmandu. I had to figure out how to get a replacement engine into a remote part of Nepal. Who pays for it? Who flies it in? Who carts it out? It was complicated because the helicopter belonged to Evergreen Helicopter in Oregon. We had gone in through the courtesy of Senator Hatfield's office. But the helicopter was built in France by Aerospatiale; President Mitterrand's brother was the chairman of company. And the U.S. ambassador had helped us get it through India. So I had to coordinate all these different people in order to get a new engine.

A guy named Jacques Vallee had created a piece of software called Notepad, which ran at Stanford University. Notepad was one of the first computer conferencing systems. I had an Apple computer with me in Kathmandu given to me by Steve Jobs, who was one of the people who helped me start Seva. And I had a 300 baud acoustic modem. I signed on to Stanford's computer system?remember, this was 1980? and with that Notepad system I was able to get Senator Hatfield's office, Evergreen in Oregon, the UN, WHO, the Seva office in Ann Arbor, and President Mitterrand's brother all online together. We negotiated who would pay for the new engine, who would fly it in, and when it would get there. It came on PanAm. Seventy-two hours later the helicopter had a new engine. I had never seen anything in the United Nations work so smoothly. So I think it's fair to say that I fell in love with the technology of computer conferencing.

When I went back to Ann Arbor, Steve Jobs came to visit me. He had been giving me money for Seva. And he said something like?and this is not an exact quote?"Why don't you start your own damn company, with your own damn product, make your own damn money, and fund your own damn charity." That's not exactly what he said, but that's the way it felt.

And so I did. I took the computer conferencing system that Bob Parnes had created on the University of Michigan computer system and had it ported into Unix, which became known as PicoSpan. Then I built a company around it, and we took it public. That company created dozens of different computer conferencing systems, one of which was The WELL.

I remember seeing Stewart Brand in San Diego in 1984, at a meeting on electronic communications. I tried to persuade him to co-venture with me to build and run one of these systems. He was pretty dubious. I said, "Look, here's the deal. I'll give you the equipment. I'll give you the software. I'll give you some money. You just provide the labor and the community." And that became The WELL.

The original idea for The WELL was that we would take every item in The Whole Earth Catalog and then people would put their reviews on and that's how the conversation would begin. But what's really interesting is that I started 15 or so different systems like The WELL. They all died, except that one.

The reason The WELL succeeded and the others didn't is because of Stewart and because of the intellectually agile, technically interested community around him. And because of things that Stewart did, like demanding face-to-face meetings, saying "you own your own words," and keeping the price low. At the time, we didn't know about Metcalf's Law<sup>2</sup> that the value of a network increases exponentially in proportion to the number of users. But Stewart intuited Metcalf's Law and did everything exactly the opposite of what all the venture capitalists were telling all of our other experiments to do.

Put money into marketing. Make the price high. Stewart said, "No marketing money, only word of mouth, and keep the price low." The VCs said, "Get lawyers, and make sure people understand the rights and privileges of what they write." Stewart said, "You own your own words." Stewart intuited business principles and organizational principles that were better because they were based on a community and a genuine love for that community.

I took the money I made from starting The WELL and used it to fund Seva. For years Seva was funded by those technology experiments. I was fortunate because that was way before the Internet; it was just about the time microcomputers were getting started. So I've been able to go in and out of technology and medicine and go back and forth. I tell my kids that when I run out of money, I go back into corporate America and make money, and then I give it away, and then I usually count wrong, run out, and go back again. And so it will be until I die.

*[ If you have any comments for Larry, feel free to post below. ]*

## Is She a Pilgrim?

Nov 8, 2005

"How long have you been doing this?" I ask her, as we sit around a circle of half a dozen people. "Oh, it'll be four months on November 16th," she says with her cross-eyed eyes peering through her bi-focal looking glasses.

This stranger -- I don't know her name or age -- has left home without money. She looks about 30 years of age, she won't say where she's from and she travels wherever circumstances take her. She sleeps wherever (mostly on the streets), eats wherever (often goes hungry). She doesn't know what she's after, she's not interested in doing service, and she has given up on "God".

"Why did you leave home?" "I don't know, I was fed up of everyone at home," she says with almost a tear in her eye. She figures that she's probably done more prayers than Gandhi, but then gave up on it; after having spent most years of her life doing chores around her house, she says that she has done enough "seva" for life.

"What have you learned by being out on the street?" "It's hard to say," she says as if she's never reflected on it.

"You are wearing decent clothes and look clean. How's that?" "Oh, Amrut Uncle at the Gandhi Ashram saw me and put me up in a nice place. Last couple of days, I watched a lot of TV and read the newspaper through and through. Yesterday, I even went to the cricket match in Ahmedabad."

"Cricket match? How did you get there? Who gave you the tickets?" "I walked there. It's about 8 kilometers one way. And then I asked the ticket guy if I could get in, and he told me to go around a particular corner and I got in."

"What do you want to do up ahead?" "Whatever. It doesn't matter. Tomorrow, I am going on this walk with Jalaram-Bapu's devotees."

"If you don't serve others, do you think people will care to serve you?" At this sentence, she uncharacteristically stayed silent for a few moments. "No, it's not like I don't do work. I generally experience a lot of burning sensations in my body all the time and I still helped make some *rotis* at an ashram, once."

"What can I do to help you?" "Just pray that I always have enough to eat." "Have you gone hungry?" "Oh yeah, most of the time." "Do people give you anything other than money?" "Yeah, a bus conductor recently gave me 100 rupees. But then someone else stole it." "Did that bother you?" "Not really, because it wasn't my money to begin with."

This girl, she wasn't inspired, humble nor full of effulgent love. Rather, she was angry, a bit annoyed and ungrateful for life. Your average city-goer won't be interested in even looking twice at her. Yet, there is always this connection of a shared human experience.

I left the conversation with mixed feelings. Is this girl a unconscious pilgrim or just a confused wanderer? Is there even a difference? By helping her are people expressing generosity or encouraging her laziness? What exactly is the most expedient way to assist her journey?

## In Search of Sinh-Baba

Nov 8, 2005

Three of us are seated at a table of a "hip, new joint" in the backstreets of Baroda. Unlike most other tables, our table doesn't have a *'hukka'* to smoke from. Average age of our table, like the others, is about college: one third year college girl named Dhvani, her first-year-in-college brother named Chintan and their family friend's son named Nipun. :)

"Hukka? Everyone here smokes?" I ask, in a rather surprised tone. "Oh yeah, but it's not like real smoking. It's not that bad. There's not much tobacco in it, so it's not all that harmful," Chintan explains.

As I ignore a phone call on my mobile, I inquire, "It seems like everyone has mobiles these days?" "Yeah, yeah. Everyone. We all SMS (text-message) each other all the time," Dhvani says. Not only do 90% of urban students have cell phones, but even vegetable vendors, rickshaw drivers and house maids are often equipped with the latest gadget. On a table of four, it's not an uncommon sight to spot two people on their mobile phones. Hip collegians like Chintan, of course, sport phones that look like video game consoles with colorful screenshots, fancy joystick, loud MP3 player and more!

After some conversation about the latest Bollywood movies and predictions about exactly why the just-released *Garam Masala* will be a flop, we organically meander around topics pertaining to college life.

"What are most college students thinking about now-a-days?" I pose an open-ended question. "Money," came the flat, immediate, and assertive answer.

A week or two back, in a roundtable with a bunch of college students, the overwhelming sentiment was that you can't do anything without money. No money, no power. Some of the young men expressed worries that no decent girl would marry them unless they had jobs with respectable income. Status-quo college philosophy reads -- whatever ends up in more money is a good thing, and rest is all insignificant till you have enough money.

"Ok, tell me about yourself. Do you want money?" "Yes." "What for?" "So I can buy things." "Like what?" "I want a Ferrari." Smiles all around the table. "Wow, yeah, Ferrari's are kind of nice. But why do you want a Ferrari?" "I don't know. I like those kind of nice things and I have no doubt that I'll get them."

Ultimately, nobody really knows why they like things. And very few are interested in finding the answer. "I don't know how it is in India, but in the US, they say that an average person is exposed to 2500 commercials every single day. 24 hundred. Now, what is a commercial for? To make you buy things. To make you want things you don't have, to make you feel incomplete with what you have. Masterminds are paid millions of bucks to use mass-media to create these so-called 'trends'. It's a funny game we play, isn't it? :)"

Our dialogues were getting interesting: what has it meant to have high Internet usage in urban colleges? If English is being pushed in all curriculums, what is happening to the vernacular languages of the Indian culture? Is all this "progress" leaving rurals farther and farther behind? What does ethic mean these days? If alcohol is so prominent on college campuses of India, is it a good idea to legalize it?

"Gujarat is a dry state, but alcohol is everywhere," Dhvani matter-of-factly admits. "Years ago, you would stand out if you had a drink; couple years back, you would stand out if you were a non-vegetarian. But now, none of it is a big deal."

These are all real questions that most impressionable youngsters don't get a chance to think about. They live in a conflicted India, where using toilet paper and eating at McDonalds is a sign of the upwardly mobile and taking bucket-water bath and listening to classical music is considered archaic. The college hip-factor is now a function of how many CD's you own, how closely your clothes resemble Bollywood models, how unique your cell phone ring tone is, and how many times you eat out every week. By itself, a change here and there can be justified but its cumulative effect shifts the morale of a culture where blind lead the deaf based on a foundation of commercially-derived values.

"Haven't we just become a pile of images? One story of ourselves, on top of another story, on top of a third? We have forgotten who we really are." I declare in a challenging tone. Chintan didn't say anything, but Dhvani quietly says, "Yeah, it's true. I don't think anyone knows who I really am."

At one point, though, Dhvani turns the tables: "Ok, now it's our turn to ask you questions."

Interspersed with curiosity questions, they start firing pin-pointed queries: "What's the point of the walking pilgrimage? I just don't understand why anyone would want to do that." "How does an appearance on CNN support selflessness?" "What do you do about money? How do you survive?" "Do you think you'll be able to continue this kind of a life when you have a family?" "Is it a good thing to have such strong values?" And then we started getting into personal questions from their own lives. "Good and ethical people can't survive in this world. It's all about competition. Whoever doesn't show-off, doesn't get the job and can't get ahead. Can they?" "How can we deal with immoral people?"

We talk for several hours. They were late, so was I. (I haven't had a [watch](#) for a long time so perhaps I am excused. :) None of us were picking up phone calls either, and it naturally felt like we were brothers and sisters on some joint journey that we weren't intelligent enough to label.

At one point, Dhvani declares that her ultimate purpose is "to serve"; she doesn't know if she will ever get to do that but she likes to help people and that's what makes her happy. Chintan, on the other hand, confidently says he doesn't just want to live and die; he wants to build a legacy, he wants people to remember him as a person who made a difference in the world. After some discussion about people who had impacted the world in various ways, Chintan clarifies, "Ultimately, I want to make a positive change in the world."

The bill is placed on our table. Rupees 411.

As I insist on paying, Chintan conscientiously remarks, "I feel so bad to take a treat from a pilgrim like you. We should be paying." "Oh, no sweat, man. You can't be stuck to simplicity or not spending either." As I'm taking out the money, I laugh at myself while saying, "I somehow have a screw loose in my head about money; for the most part, money is just like a piece of paper for me." I tell them the [rickshaw story](#) from last week, when I had emptied my wallet. As we talk a bit more about the Seva Cafe, Chintan is really intrigued and challenged by the guts of a man to start something based entirely on the pay-it-forward model.

Both Dhvani and Chintan start sharing personal stories of service, and the bold possibilities that open when love replaces fear. I share some of my [waiter stories](#) at the Cafe, as all three of us get more and more pumped-up! Rather spontaneously, Dhvani reflects, "You know there's this one guy that I've always wanted to talk to. He is scary looking and just roams around on the streets and yells at people. They call him the 'Sinh Baba'. I wonder what would happen if someone talked to him nicely?"

Never the one to hesitate in these matters, I propose, "Let's go right now! Let's go find him!" Dhvani tells us the risks of such a proposition but Chintan is gung-ho about heading out in the late-night hours to befriend a scary homeless guy. :) We decide to go for it. "We don't know what will happen; he might spit at us or even hit us, but we have to be unflinching in our commitment to treat him with utmost compassion. Ready?" Yup.

We bolt out the restaurant door, without thinking twice about how unfulfilling the food was, and pile into the car.

"I know a security guard who will know where *Sinh Baba* is," Chintan says. A popular guy (who was recently featured on 'Page 3'), he knows the streets inside out.

We walk up to the security guard and ask him. "Nope, no way to find him. He's a free bird. One day he's here, another day he's there." Dhvani curiously asks questions about him and Thakurbhai affectionately responds to her: "Sinh Baba was a normal guy, with a car and everything but at some point, he just lost it and has been on the streets. But his mom still works in this building."

The security guard turns out to be an interesting guy himself. As we were talking, he ironically talks about some of the same themes that we had discussed at dinner. Very quickly, Thakurbhai-the-security-guard feels like our long-lost-buddy, as Chintan and Dhvani stand in quiet (and slightly awed) observation. He is oozing with wisdom, this random guy.

"The ills of society," Thakurbhai remarks, "are all because we have lost our humanity." When I ask him what the difference is between city and [village life](#), he launches into a sermon. "Bhai, city people all have a level," Thakurbhai says while raising his flat palm over his head. "If you are not on the same level, no one will talk to you. People will throw away their food but they will not feed a hungry one with love. On the other hand, go a village and see, no one will let you go hungry. They care. They know what real love is. They still respect each other."

Dhvani and Chintan are still completely silent, staring at this guy. Lot of their unanswered questions about our walking pilgrimage were being answered live by Thakurbhai.

Within no time, Thakurbhai invites us to his village. He even asks us to speak to the drunkards in his town, who are "wasting their lives". I tell him that Dhvani and Chintan are my brother and sister and that we're thankful for having run into him. As a sign of respect, I bowed down to touch his feet and implicitly compelled Dhvani and Chintan to do the same. "Thakurbhai, take care. We'll see you around."

As we got back in the car, Chintan immediately says, "Did you see that guy? He was practically in tears while talking to us. All we did was just be ourselves for a few minutes." I crack a deep smile. Dhvani stayed silent for the remainder of the car ride back. (Later that night, Dhvani SMS'd me about how this night was unforgettable for her.)

Chintan still wants a Ferrari, Dhvani is still looking for 'Sinh Baba', and I am still wondering how college kids can afford a 411 rupee meal. Yet something shifted somewhere.

As I got home that night, the street light outside my uncle's place was flickering. It is dim, but not quite dark.

## Nadiad Spices, The Mom-and-Pop Way

Nov 8, 2005

He used to sell turmeric, hot peppers, cumin seeds and other spices that are so prevalent in Indian cooking. In the small city of Nadiad, Krishnakant's shop was one of the few mom-and-pop grocery stores that survived several generations.

Today, after many years, I visited the place. Krishnakant-bhai, a relative of my mom's, passed away several years ago as his two jovial sons, Bholo and Munno, took over the operations.

It's a humble shop -- 100 grams of salt for one customer and 30 rupees of spicy masala for another customer. Bit by bit, they make enough money to shoulder their responsibilities. "Now-a-days, the

competition is really fierce around here," Bholo explains with his eyes downcast. "In this small city of Nadiad, there are almost 800 shops just like ours. To top it off, Adani's came in last year and is creating this 'shopping mall' mentality; everyone just goes to the big stores now. And next year, Shopping Bazaar and Star Shoppe are also coming to town. Let's see what happens."

The real story of this small mom-and-pop store, though, is the pop. Prior to Krishnakant-bhai's death, not many understood his spirit of business.

Because he was irrationally generous towards needy customers, he would refuse to tally up his daily finances. People said he was naive. Because he didn't engage in greed-fights with neighboring businesses, he never posted exuberant profits. People said he had no ambition. Because he drew satisfaction from making each customer smile, he would always go the extra mile and stuff more spices into each order. People said he was ignorant in the ways of business. Maybe people were right, but that wasn't Krishnakant-bhai's concern. "My Dad," Bholo recalls with silent pride, "he gave everything to everyone, but still, he never ran out of money. That was God's gift to him. He always had enough."

Not only did Krishnakant-bhai never run out, his cup is now overflowing into the lives of their children.

"Almost every day, still after over two years of his death, one or two people will come and share stories about our Dad," Mrugesh says.

"Just yesterday," Bholo continues, "a banana seller came to our store. When he learned that my Dad had passed away, he told me the story of their one and only encounter. Years ago, it seems that Dad was walking down the streets and saw this fruit vendor with a depressed face. He greets him kindly and asks, 'What's wrong? Why aren't you smiling today?' The vendor honestly admits, 'Sir, I haven't had any earning today. I don't know what I'll take home for my family tonight.' Immediately Dad takes out a hundred rupee note and gives it to him. Just like that."

"That vendor, he just found out today that my father has passed away."

Krishnakant-bhai's sons, they're just finding out that their Dad was dealing in a currency far higher than money and spices. His currency was love.

## Three Steps, One Bow in Gujarat

Nov 30, 2005

Both my palms are held together in front of my chest, my eyes are closed, my heart releases a silent wish for well being of all those around me, and my knees give way such that my forehead kisses the ground.

I stand up, take three steps forward and do another bow. Three more steps and another bow, as the sun sets behind my back.

About thirty of us were seated in a circle, talking about values and the courage required to live by them. In a pumped-up tone, I say, "It takes a lot of guts to put down the old and bring in the new. A lot of guts. Take the story of two American Buddhist monks who went on a 900 mile, [three-steps-one-bow](#) pilgrimage along the California coastline."

By the end of the half-hour story telling session, I challenged them to think deeply about bowing: "Think about bowing. You bow at a mosque, you bow at a temple, you bow to your elders, you bow to mother earth, you bow as a sign of respect and in Japan, you even bow as a greeting. It's an integral part of all ancient traditions, this thing called bowing. Each bow can potentially be a complete offering to Life in front of you and until we can do that spontaneously in each moment, the act of bowing is an incredibly powerful reminder for us."

I stand up to do a demonstration bow. Instead of sitting back down, I announce, "Please feel free to join." I wasn't sure how many would actually accept the symbolic (and impromptu) invitation to let go of the negative and create space for the good.

Everyone joins (as I was later told).

Our circle of sharing, all of sudden, turns into a prayer bead of bows across this beautiful campus in a rural setting near Ahmedabad. No one, absolutely no one, in the group has ever done something like this.

As I am bowing, my first few thoughts are sporadic musings on how the group will reflect on this. For most organizational groups, this would be way over the top but these were, after all, [Manav Sadhna](#) leaders who were already deeply rooted in the spirit of service and eager to "take it to the next level".

A few more bows, and the sweat on my forehead dissolves some of my mundane thoughts. With reverence, I start thinking about the ground, the soil that nourishes all life, the land that I've taken for granted since I was a child. After some more bows, I remember a monk's statement about why he wants to visit India: "India is probably the only place where every square inch of its land has had a prayer done on it." Couple dozen bows later, my reflections turn into a palpable feeling of gratitude; first for my life circumstances, then for the positive influences in my life (like [Rev. Heng Sure](#)) and finally for the ground that is accepting my humble bows of resignation. In its most immediate form, this land -- labeled as Environmental Sanitation Institute (ESI) -- is Ishwar-kaka's labor of love and a legacy to his life long commitment to selfless service. Nestled in nature, amidst hand-planted trees named after different labels of "God", run in an environmentally sustainable way, gratitude just flows easily here.

Perhaps there were a couple of bows where I was still, in a unique sort of a way. And then my legs become jello. I don't know how much longer I can do this and I recall what I had told the whole group before we had started: "Think about the two monks who did this for 8 hours a day for almost three years and survived on offerings from strangers. Think about their commitment to unconditional compassion."

Three steps, one bow. Three steps, another bow.

I never quite turned around to see those behind me, but when I would kneel down, I could vaguely see streams of people in irregular patterns bowing and standing up with prayerful hands. An unforgettable image!

Incidentally, six of us were also fasting that day. Some children at the Gandhi Ashram were cited with stealing some pencils and paper supplies; so Jayeshbhai and I, in our "elder" role, visited them. "How many of you have stolen something from here?" we asked. Ninety percent of the hands went up! Both Jayeshbhai and I look to each other and silently say, "Look at that honesty. May we learn from them." Instead of punishing them to create fear, the coordinators opted to fast on the following day; perhaps

some of the karmic consequences of these innocent kids would be offset, perhaps our love for them will motivate them to be honest next time.

So here I am: hungry, thirsty, and bowing. Nature's designs are really something sometimes. :)

After 30-45 minutes of bowing, and two rounds around the campus, I return to square one and take my seat in the original circle. In the cross legged posture, my eyelids close naturally. Within fifteen minutes, everyone reconvenes to end their mini bowing pilgrimage.

I open my eyes and notice a few tearful eyes. Everyone eagerly starts sharing their reflections.

"Honestly, I have no idea what compelled me to do this. It's not like me to do something like this. But I was so wrapped up in the stories of these amazing monks, that the next thing I knew I was standing up and bowing. It was amazing," Dimple says. (For the next two days, she wasn't able to move. :))

Practically everyone felt it to be a deeply humbling experience. Sunil notes that it made him realize why he bows down to his parents; Jagatbhai (one of the anchors of Manav Sadhna) uncharacteristically breaks down after just saying just one sentence: "I couldn't stop thinking about the kids." Anarben, a founder of Manav Sadhna, is also in tears as describes the "greatest peace she has felt in her life." For some people it was an exercise in determination, for some it was a test of patience, for some it was a reminder of the good in all life.

Sandeep, a youngster who has worked his way out of slum life, says, "I have always wanted to kiss Mother Earth but never did it. Today, with every bow, I kissed the ground that has carried me for so long." Raju notes, "You know, for the first time in my life I realized what it's like to be an ant on the ground! I would bow carefully so as to not step on them." Sureshbhai adds, "I took a vow with each bow to change one of my bad habits." Most everyone made silent, personal vows for themselves; one lady secretly told me that she decided that she won't shop for herself for the entire coming year.

Couple folks just did a dozen bows, most circum-ambulated the campus at least once, and many of us did two rounds. But every single person seems inspired in their own unique ways, in ways that words simply can't describe.

In perhaps the most awe-inspiring statement of the evening, Barot loudly announces, "Today, right now, I have decided that I am going to give up meat for the rest of my life. Never again, I publicly declare, that you will ever see me eating meat." A stunned silence follows Barot's bold declaration. No one can really grasp how eating meat and bowing were related, yet everyone intuitively knows that the simple act of bowing has created space for something deep to naturally arise in all of us.

Rumi once said, "Let the beauty we love be what we do. There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground." Certainly, I saw thirty different ways to kneel and kiss the ground, and they were all beautiful.

May all keep bowing.

*[ Two days later, 23 of us embarked on all-night, "three steps and a bow" pilgrimage. Along the 13 kilometer highway, we collectively offered 10,000 bows on the 13th wedding anniversary of Jayeshbhai and Anarben. ]*

# Congratulations, Viral and Pavi!

Dec 1, 2005

On November 13th, [my brother](#) married a remarkable young woman by the name of [Pavithra Krishnan](#). I could write paragraphs about her accolades and creative talents, but what makes her a perfect fit for Viral is that she is unencumbered by the weight of nature's gifts. Like her grand Uncle, [Dr. V.](#), she's got the shoulders to life heavy loads with picture perfect grace, humility and simplicity.



Congratulations, Viral and Pavi Mehta!

# Lessons From Indian Traffic

Dec 6, 2005

One of my Uncle's American friends once said, "I used to be an athiest. But after having survived Indian streets, I now believe that there must be God!" :)

Indian traffic is, well, Indian traffic. Every intersection has the potential of finding movement in all four directions -- the three wheelers push around the pedestrians and bicyclists, the cars shove their big frames fearlessly through any road block and the scooter and Kinetics use fake truck-horns to get some respect. While busy street corners boast white and beige uniformed traffic police, they are either busy collecting bribes or left wondering when their whistles will be replaced with loud horns so people can actually hear their pleas for order. The rest of India's intersections are left to the mercy of the almighty AutoPilot.

One would imagine that chaos would render the roads useless. But no. Traffic actually flows through, rather efficiently.

In place of long, mechanical lines of robotic machinery, Indian traffic feels more like an art gallery. Every intersection at every signal is a unique formation. Consider what happens when a signal turns red. Loads of cars and trucks and buses attack the front of the line from all kinds of irregular angles; in between them, the rickshaw driver sweeps left and right turns to cut ahead by two feet or sometimes

four inches, the bicycle driver boldly squeezes into the gaps in between the three wheelers, and, of course, the enterprising vendor on foot will shuttle his q-tips and Maps of India and other random items from one car window to another.

To top it off, India has the most humane speed breakers -- cows. What no traffic cop can do, a cow can easily do. When the sacred cow feels the inner urge to roam the streets, every moving vehicle has no choice but to hit the brake-pads! :) While the cog-in-the-wheel human is looping indefinitely from one pre-meditated departure and arrival to another, it is the cow that has the last laugh.

It's so comic, it almost feel cosmic. After a while, the comedy of errors dissipates into a subtle understanding of Indian culture.

When big cities like Bangalore tried to Westernize their public space infrastructure in geometrical shapes they could grasp, ie. a single file line, they created lots of traffic jams and required ongoing "road expansion" projects to force many folks out of their generations-old homes. Don't get me wrong. I understand that there has to be some threshold of order for chaos to work; surely, we need good traffic police, ample parking space to combat the rising car sales, ear plugs to cancel the noise of competing horns, :) strategies to mitigate the high death rate in small accidents. Yes yes to all that, but let's not lose our chaos all too soon.

Indian traffic is continuously self-organizing into dynamic optimal behaviors, much like all of Nature. Whether it is animals roaming through the roads or old trees peering through the center of tall buildings, India's natural order is inclusive of all life. And instead of a cookie-cutter, mass-produced, robotic solutions to order traffic, perhaps localized chaos represents the art imbued in the Indian blood.

Roads aren't just meant to get from point A to point B. When the journey is the outcome, every intersection holds a creative joy of something beautiful. That's the Indian culture I see when I drive on the streets.

## Your Son Has No Fear

Dec 6, 2005

[ *A true story.* ]

A child is sent home with a note for his father. The father opens it up and reads, "Your son has no fear. Please see me."

Unsure whether it's a compliment or a complaint, the father inquires further. His son tells him, "I sat on a seat that was marked for the teacher. I told the bus driver that I would relinquish the seat when the teacher came, but he didn't listen. And neither did I."

The father goes to see the principal and sure enough, the principal reiterates his complaint, "Your son has no fear. That's his biggest problem."

Perhaps someday we will rule by love, instead of fear.

# One Rupee Ethics

Dec 8, 2005

It's a common phenomena in India. You hop in a three-wheeler rickshaw, to get from one doorstep to another. And the rickshaw charges you an extra rupee or two, or more.

Now, incomes of city-goers (in all strata of society) are usually far lower than their perceived needs, and enveloped in this sphere of insecurity and fear, people are always enterprising new ways to make more money ... even if those new methods of getting that extra cash involve some corruption, some lying, some stealing. "Everyone does it and so why not me? Otherwise, me and mine will just get left behind in this man-eat-man world," people rationalize to themselves.

And rickshaw drivers are no exception. Unfortunately for them, their ethical breakdown is very visible and prominent in the public eye. It's not always easy to like them and that, for me, is always a [challenge](#) I'm up for.

The other day, Guri and I went on a routine rickshaw ride. The driver says, "10 rupees." I know it should've been eight so I tell the guy, "Are you sure?" He rudely retorts, "Yeah, ten." I ask him again, "Is it really 10?" With a impatient anger, he says, "Didn't I already tell you?"

I hand over a ten. I peer through the front of the rickshaw, look inside and whisper to him, "You know, I don't want those extra 2 rupees you're after. But I don't think you want it either." He's a bit taken back, so I continue: "You cheat me today and your left pocket has two extra rupees. Tomorrow, someone else will cheat your own right pocket and it'll all be even in God's mathematics. This is not about me versus you. It is about you versus you. You choose the games you want to play." Having suffered through my own gross forms of greed and insecurity, there is a strong sense of confidence in my voice and a genuine wish for the rickshaw driver's well being.

The driver starts his rickshaw, as I smile and turn around to catch up with Guri (who is all too familiar with my ongoing antics :)). He sincerely heard me, so I am content with our interaction.

Just then, he calls out to me, "Sir!" I glance back. His hand goes into the top right pocket of his shirt and manifests a coin. Like a child eager to show off his report card, he holds up the coin and says, "Sir, this is only change I have."

He hands me a one rupee coin, avoids eye contact and rides away.

# An Encounter with Sri Lanka's Gandhi

Dec 8, 2005

A large, SUV-like car rolls in and half a dozen people get out. As a part of the host committee, I need to spot Dr. Ariyaratne among the guests. Having never seen a picture of him, I wasn't sure how I'd spot such a celebrated personality but I anticipated a garland around his neck or strikingly unique clothes or a "Gandhi of Sri Lanka" halo or something. But nothing. I simply can't tell.

By any analysis, [A. T. Ariyaratne](#) is a living legend on this planet:

*In the spirit of Martin Luther King, he has led peace marches and meditations with millions of poor people. In the mold of Mahatma Gandhi, he has quieted angry masses through his personal example. Like Jimmy Carter, he has successfully mediated intense conflicts and helped build hundreds of homes. Like the Dalai Lama and the world's greatest preachers, he has an impressive ability to rally ordinary citizens to see the spiritual wisdom of looking beyond their own salvation to help ensure the salvation of others.*

Such larger-than-life personalities, I figure, are easy to spot. But then I remember asking a friend about her impression of the Dalai Lama, after having spent half an hour with him. With a profound look on her face, Jean had responded, "He is so ordinary. Extra ordinary, in fact."

And so it is with Dr. Ariyaratne -- the most ordinary of the lot, a short man with a slight hunch back to match his humility, a simple white-shirt overhanging on his darker pants, and a pair of sandals on his old feet. The motto of his [Sarvodaya movement](#) is a perfect fit for his persona: "We build the road and the road builds us."

"What is your message for youth of the world?" I ask him during an interaction session. Without hesitation, he replies, "To destroy all that is bad." "Nonviolently," he adds after a slight, humorous pause. "We must remove all man-made barriers that separate life. Race is a man-made barrier, caste is man-made barrier. We must work to bring people together."

As we are walking out, Dr. Ariyaratne is asked to plant a symbolic tree on this Gandhian campus. Very carefully, he sits down on the ledge and looks to the sky to find the sun. With folded hands, he tilts his head up towards the sky, as if to request authorization from a power stronger than his own. Then, he immerses the unplanted shrub into the ground and covers up its roots with the rich soil. While washing his hands, he carefully ensures that the water is recycled back to the roots, caresses the leaves in a grand fatherly way, and whispers a few murmurs that sound like prayer.

Since Buddha and Gandhi are the two major inspirations in his life, I ask Dr. Ariyaratne what role meditation plays in his life. Almost as if he was waiting for my question, he clasps his left hand into my right and cracks up with a jolly smile. "This is the role of meditation in service," he says while slanting his eyes towards the newly planted tree. It's actually blatantly obvious but I'm glad I asked because, for those couple of minutes, my hands got to be in the direct company of hands that have touched millions of lives with selflessness.

Right before he's about to leave, someone blurts a question, "What motivates you to serve?" Very simply, in a matter-of-fact tone, he says, "To find myself. Who am I?"

## Secret Service: A Compassion Gang

Dec 13, 2005

"Nipunbhai, can we meet tomorrow? We've got lots of stories to tell you," the sixteen year old voice on the phone tells me. "Yes, of course. Come by at 8AM tomorrow morning," I reply.

It's a call from the compassion gang, an experiment inspired by Viral and Pavi's marriage. It's a simple scheme to create brandless tornadoes of love -- our "secret service" agents walk around the city and befriend those in need; when they find a genuine case of need, they inform another teammate to anonymously drop off an in-kind gift; and a week or so later, a third teammate would visit the same

person and ask him about his experiences with kindness to reiterate the value of goodness. Each story is then written and retold by compassion agents to someone else they don't know.

Sure enough, at 8AM the next morning, four youngsters are seated around a coffee table. After a couple minutes of meditation, we start sharing stories.

RG, the sixteen year old, starts first. "Standing on the streets, I overheard two fifty-something men talking. One of them was a buttermilk seller and he was saying how there is no business in the winter months for buttermilk. Both of them were really poor and one of them says, 'I hope God keeps me warm this winter.' I immediately ran to find two blankets from our stock; when I came back, I handed it to them ... and you should've seen the look on their faces! They said they saw God work through my hands." It's obvious that RG is himself deeply moved.

Incidentally, RG's brother later remarked: "You should see these guys. All they see now-a-days are service opportunities. Everywhere they go, they're sharing stories of kindness and looking for a chance to make someone's day."

The young "secret service" agents had religiously written down each of their compelling stories in a red, spiral notebook. "The stories are getting more and more compelling," VJ says as the coordinator of this four-some group.

Almost with tears in his eyes, HT chimes in with another story: "PT and I were walking down the streets the other day and we saw a really old man sleeping on a torn cloth bag, with a thin shawl covering his body. PT befriended him at first, and when I went up to him to give him an extra blanket, he tells me, 'Son, give this to someone who needs it more. I am cold, but at least, I have this one shawl.' I couldn't believe it. After speaking to him for a while, I was so moved that I asked him if he would give me the chance to give him some food. So I ate dinner with him that night."

When I was young, I would buy the most expensive gifts from stores and give it out to people for no particular occasion. I would buy my brother a gift every time I met him. If I was on a restaurant table, there was no way that any of my friends would even dare to pay. It wasn't that I had a lot of money but I just truly, genuinely loved to knock people out with love.

Over time, though, I stumbled upon a subtler gift, a gift that kept on giving -- an act of service. A simple act of service opens a window of opportunities for love to enter your heart. It sprouts a fountain of joy that knows no end. So now, when I want to give, I create an act of service that creates an act of service that creates another act of service. Everyone gives, everyone wins.

Most "secret service" acts are done in small groups, where each member naturally takes on different roles. "We went to the Civil Hospital rather randomly to look for acts of service," VJ says with a sneaky smile on his face. "Initially we didn't find anyone and it was difficult, but then on the way out, we ran into someone we knew. Then, we learned of a kid from very dire circumstances, who had lost one of his feet and he was in the hospital to get his other leg chopped off. When we went into his room, you should have seen the depression on his gloomy face; he was just staring out at the ceiling. And then we just went in as his long, lost friends and we had a random, third guy deliver a small gift for him. That third guy was so moved, he told us, 'You need anything, any help, in this area, you call me anytime.'"

"How does it to feel to do this?" I ask them, to keep the focus on their internal change.

"On the streets, the other day, all these diggers were working hard all day. At night, we passed by again on our way home and saw that they sleep right on their piles of dirt, without anything to cover themselves. So we got someone else to anonymously drop off some jackets. And now, whenever we go by, morning or nighttime, we see them with those jackets on. It feels so satisfying, there are no words for it," PT says. PT is a very smart twenty-two year old and is blown away by the joy of service.

"We are thinking of going and painting this guy's house in the slums, what do you think?" couple of them ask me as they proceed to explain their detailed plan. "Yeah, go for it. Everyone will ask you who you are with, or who bought you the paint, or which organization is behind it. You gotta be sure you don't start rotating in the stories. Our stories are for kindness and not our ego." They immediately respond, "Yeah, yeah, for sure."

Through their attempts to create smiles, they find many frowns that they don't feel equipped to transform. We talk about an abused child whose hurt hands took an hour to eat a simple meal; we talk about an old lady who tells 'em, 'I'm tired of eating other people's waste food. Today, it's my son's birthday and I am going to feed my son fresh vegetables.' Directly, we talk about human suffering and indirectly, we connect with its source in our own hearts.

After doing anonymous acts, the youngsters start noticing so many different things around them. "You know, this one group always tries to push their own name a lot," HT explains, "and I don't really know what they get out of that." An elder, who had spontaneously joined our story-sharing session, confidently expounds his wisdom: "Some people are in first grade, some in second standard, some in third. But you guys, you guys are going straight to the fifth standard. Your hands are doing meritorious work, without your name, without any credit. You don't know how fortunate you are."

Actually, these guys do know how fortunate they are. And they're not ready to stop anytime soon.

"We've finished all the boxes of our inventory," VJ tells me. "Can we get some more?" "Let's see what the universe has in store for us. Can you guys go on a full day trip, day after tomorrow. We'll explore some options," I propose. "Yeah, let's go," all of them enthusiastically respond.

An anonymous donation funded the initial couple of boxes. Most people thought this is too ludicrous a "business model" to last past the highlight reels. But an inspired lady connected us to a company which has donated a truck, an inspired uncle has given space to store everything in his local godown, and six of us are heading out to get what we need from an organization that sells stuff at a token price. Resources are easy to come by, when the heart is overflowing.

"Before we go, though, I want everyone to come up with two new ideas to make someone's day. Every single person. Tell all the others," I challenge them. "Let's rock the bus, let's rock the city, let's rock ourselves with kindness we've never seen before."

Just as I finish the sentence, RG jumps in: "I have an idea. When we take the bus, day after tomorrow, let's all go with only a t-shirt. We have seen so many shivering people on the streets; let's experience what they feel."

Day after tomorrow, we start at the break of dawn. We don't know what will happen, but we will explore our interconnectedness and "experience what they feel."

# A Full Moon View

Dec 20, 2005

"Hello, CK?" "Speaking. Where are you guys? I've been waiting. All your arrangements are made." "CK, we have a slight change of plans." "What's that?" "We're gonna sleep out on the streets tonight."

A stunned silence.

"Hello, CK?" "Yes," he replies as if he's never heard anything this crazy. He had preponed his flight from Thailand to make it in time to receive us, but now this. "What do you mean?" he asks.

"Well, these guys are saying that they want to know what it feels like to be cold on the streets, before they start putting blankets on cold shoulders. They really want to sleep out there," I explain.

"In this weather? You'll freeze," CK exclaims before sharing the 7 degree Celsius forecast. "And what about the mosquitoes? Come on, don't be silly. Just come directly here. I have made full arrangements. You won't have to worry about a thing." After a few minutes of five-star hospitality reviews and a few more are-you-sure phone calls, CK has no choice but to accept our plans.

Eight of us are on the road. It's the [compassion gang](#), taking off on a trip to reload their ammunition -- blankets for the shivering, clothes for the naked, toys for the young ones, shoes for the bare-footed, you name it. A truck load full of things, to give to people anonymously.

Being the eldest of the gang, I am responsible for making mature decisions. Well, well. :)

On the way here, we were all sharing life stories of each other in the context of service. PN tells us about the faux-scolding he'd get from his mom because he had a bad habit of giving everything away, VJ shares a story of seeing his Dad refuse a 5 lakh rupee cash bribe and how that experience impacts so many of his decisions right now, UP elaborates a story of his most powerful dance performance when "every single person in the hall, including myself" cried. One after another, stories keep flowing through our four hour car ride until at one point, we couldn't hold back the inspiration.

We want to "take it up to the next level" and even right Now isn't soon enough.

"How shall we do this?" I ask the group. We decide to park the car, spilt up into teams of two and head out in four different directions. Our plan is to go out with whatever clothes we have on, and figure out how to sleep outside -- if we find shelter, good; if we sleep outside, good; if we can't sleep, good. It's all good, so long as we attempt to feel the suffering we are hoping to eradicate from the world.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" I repeat the question at least five times being fully aware of the dangers of being hurt, getting sick, etc. etc. Everyone emphatically affirms. "We're just afraid of Guri-didi will say," they joke.

ST puts on three layers of jackets as we get out, BK decides to stay in the car, and rest of us head out with what we have on. VJ takes off his jean-jacket and stick to his only t-shirt idea that he had thunk up earlier.

I walk out in my jeans and *Kurta*. And it's freezing.

As we head out in our assigned direction, I say in an elderly tone, "Whatever your experience, just remember why exactly you're doing this. Don't forget, otherwise it'll just remain an adventure for you."

I'm paired up with UP. After stumbling around, we finally land up in a deserted factory area. We check out a few old trucks, in which we can park ourselves but UP rightly says, "This is iron. We will become icicles by the morning." We keep walking.

"I've never done anything like this in my life," UP tells me as he's getting a little nervous about spending the night in this weather. "Maybe we should just stay up the whole night?" he proposes.

"No, no," I point to an old wooden bench. "Check out this bench, just sleep here." There was only room for one, so I tell UP to sleep there as I head to a nearby sand pit. UP says, "No, no. I'm tough. I'm going to sleep wherever you sleep."

Right as we're walking up there, a young security guard approaches us with full-on hostility. Within the next hour, he is sitting with us sharing his life story -- Ashvin is an 18 year old who works about 22 hours of the day (10 hours in the night shift, where he is a security guard and also sleeps), 7 days a week, without getting any monetary compensation. "My uncle took care of me since my Dad died on a train when I was 1. He promises to get me married, so I just work for him."

Two dogs approach Ashvin. Ashvin picks up a black cloth bag and takes out four 'rotlis' (bread) to feed them with lots of love. It's such a simple act that boldly communicates his spirit of service -- a guy who doesn't get paid, has four rotlis for a dog. "Yeah, I do this everyday. When I quit my last job, this dog there also quit that job. He followed me here. See, there he is," Ashvin points out to a barking dog in the dark, natureful area.

UP and I are trying to catch some zzz's, as Ashvin is squatting next to us, talking about life. It's past midnight, the full moon is shining brightly on top of our eyes and UP is taking a count of almost a dozen shooting stars he's spotted.

Our sandals serve as our pillows, while our bare feet freeze. UP sneaks his feet into his long pants and both of us are locked in our sleeping positions. Ashvin is still sitting there, sporadically striking up conversation threads. By now, he's really comfortable with us.

Just then, he gets up to go somewhere and comes back with two raggedy, torn pieces of cloth. "Hey guys, keep this. It'll keep you warm," Ashvin tells us. "Ah, there is a God!" UP exclaims. :) One of the rags is short and the other one is tall; I give the long one to UP and I cover my feet with the other one.

Another twenty minutes, and we are freezing even more.

Ashvin gets up to sleep on his bench. Oddly enough, there is part of us that is grateful for this experience. We came with nothing, ready to freeze, and a random stranger provided us warmth. All those people who say -- "Oh, I don't give food to the hungry, because I believe in teaching people how to cook" -- well, they should go sleep on the streets once. It feels like a gift from heaven to receive an unasked-for blanket, even if it is a little smelly and has lots of holes in it.

I tell UP, looking up at the moon: "It's not good enough to just experience this. You must take resolve to give up one of your bad habits." For a couple minutes, he stares up at the sky in silence. UP himself admits to being a "very angry young man" and gets into many fights, over the smallest things. "What do you think?" I remind him. "Nipunbhai, I've decided something today with full moon as our witness. Whenever I do it, I will tell you what it was."

Behind us are some train tracks, behind which is a lake. We can feel the chilly wind. I tell UP, "Man, it sure would be nice to have another blanket. But you know, it's a spiritual principle -- you don't ask for things. Your job is to simply accept whatever comes."

Almost as if it was planned, Ashvin returns with a queen sized blanket and says, "Hey guys, I just found this too." We are absolutely speechless!

Both of us share the big blanket and go to sleep in the silent warmth of kindness that has sustained us for the night.

It's a difficult night. But it's ok.

We wake up to dogs barking in our face at 6AM. Very quickly, we hunt for the others. Two of them stayed up most of the night, trying to run away from the mosquitoes; they found two others at 4AM and lighted up a fire to stay warm. Two of the youngest ones were haggled by some security guy and then the guy was so moved that he got them a bed and three regular (regular, as is in the kind without any holes :) blankets! For the next couple of hours, all of us share one story after another, all with one conclusion -- "We will never forget this night for the rest of our lives!"



Along the way, we meet a village saint who only meets couple people once a month. He's been in the same room for the last fifty years, he lives only on liquids, and shuns publicity altogether. His message to us -- don't forget that when you think you are helping others, you are actually only helping yourself. Especially for these kids, it hits home like a ton of bricks. The mysterious saint (who made me promise that I won't mention his name anywhere) was a blessing in many subtle ways that only the invisible eye can perceive.

By evening, our truck is reloaded. It will take a day and a half for the ammunition to reach its destination. And rest will be history. :)

The next morning, I meet RG. He's disappointed he didn't get to go on the bus due to an out-of-town workshop he was attending. In response to his frustration, he gave away his shoes to a young, needy fruit seller as he was walking down the street.

Compassion gang, in full effect. Rock on.

## Back to the Bayarea

Dec 20, 2005

Guri and I will be back in the Bay-Area on Dec 21st.

Thank you for a phenomenal year. We couldn't have done it without your blessings and good wishes.