



ROHANA MERTENS

In the fall of 2008, a week after my forty-second birthday, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. Gone was the assumption that my active lifestyle and healthy diet would guarantee me a long life. Gone was the assurance I had felt, looking at my ninety-year-old grandmother, that genetics were on my side. I had two small children, and when I told them, "I am here for you, no matter what," the words felt empty.

During this time of biopsies and surgeries and pathology reports, I rediscovered the music of Krishna Das, whose low, sonorous voice had been the soundtrack to my weekly yoga class for years. Listening to his CDs calmed me and gave me faith that everything would be OK, even if my worst fears came true.

As it turns out, I got lucky. The cancer was caught early, the doctors were able to treat it, and there's only a small chance of recurrence. As I was recovering from my final surgery, I decided to attend a three-day workshop with Krishna Das at the Ananda Ashram outside of New York City.

Krishna Das was born Jeffrey Kagel in 1947 on Long Island in New York. His parents were Jewish, but as a teenager he began reading books on Eastern religion, and he went on to study meditation in his twenties. In the early 1970s he met spiritual teacher Ram Dass, who told him about the guru Neem Karoli Baba, known to his followers as "Maharaj-ji." Captivated by

quietly. Sitting among the musicians on the stage, Krishna Das smiled shyly, cracked a corny joke. Then he closed his eyes, and they began playing: Krishna Das on his harmonium, others on cymbals or tabla or violin or even electric guitar. And Krishna Das sang. His voice reached deep down inside me, tickling my belly like fingers strumming an upright bass. A kirtan is a call-and-response between performers and audience, and the music can be slow and meditative or spirited and cathartic. Like a kid during prayer at a church or synagogue, I snuck a glance around the room. Most people had their eyes closed. Some were smiling. One was crying. A few were dancing in the aisles. I closed my eyes and listened and sang a little, and soon I lost my inhibitions, my skepticism, my shyness, my fear. I sang freely, shamelessly, and my heart opened to the love that filled the room.

I interviewed Krishna Das after the kirtan. Despite the accolades he's received and the adoration of his audiences, he exuded self-effacing humility. Dressed like the Long Island native he is in a baseball cap and flannel shirt, he seemed profoundly kind and sincere and, at the same time, funny and sarcastic. When asked why he was drawn to kirtan, he answered with a chuckle. "Drawn? I had no choice. I knew it was the only thing that could save my ass."

A JOYFUL NOISE

Krishna Das On Chanting The Names Of God

ALEXIS ADAMS

Ram Dass's stories, Kagel traveled to India to meet the guru and spent nearly three years at his ashram. Maharaj-ji gave him his Indian name, Krishna Das, meaning "one who serves [the Hindu god] Krishna," and introduced him to kirtan, the Indian devotional practice of chanting the names of God. Krishna Das returned to the United States and, over the years, developed his own signature chanting style, mixing traditional kirtan with Western harmonic and rhythmic sensibilities.

Today he stays on the road almost full time, leading kirtans around the world. He has released fourteen CDs and recently wrote *Chants of a Lifetime: Searching for a Heart of Gold*, a mix of biography, teachings, and insights. He has recorded with Sting and sung for Madonna, and the New York Times dubbed him "the chant master of American yoga."

While at the workshop I participated in a kirtan. It began

Adams: How would you describe kirtan to someone new to the practice?

Krishna Das: It depends who I'm talking to, because I don't want to scare people away. If I say it's "meditation with music," some will be put off by that. In India they call it the "repetition of the sacred names of God," but I don't want to say that to someone who doesn't believe in God. I don't even know if I believe in God — not the one described in Western religious traditions anyway. In India people understand that God is within. There are Hindu images associated with God — deities like Krishna, Hanuman, and Kali — but when it comes down to it, these deities are symbols of the divine that lives inside each one of us. Indians are more creative about worship, whereas Christians are generally very tense: there's only one right way to do it and only one God to worship. Of course,

there is only one God in the Indian traditions, too, just many forms to symbolize it. It's OK to worship anything in any way in India, because there it's understood that nothing is outside of us. There's only one God, and we're all it.

Adams: Is it possible for someone like me, who's never been to India and is not well versed in the Hindu gods and goddesses, to genuinely connect with the tradition?

Krishna Das: Do you feel good when you chant?

Adams: Well, it's brand-new for me, but yes, I do.

Krishna Das: Then why think about anything else? You don't need to know all the deities. You don't need to know anything about Indian culture. You don't have to know what the words mean, because nobody *really* knows what the words mean. You can learn the lower, superficial meanings *intellectually* — Krishna did this, and Ram did that — but the real meaning of these chants is our own deepest being.

I've been to yoga-teacher trainings and heard people say, "If you don't understand the deities, you'll never be a good yoga teacher." Bullshit. We're Americans. We didn't grow up with this. It's not native to us. I've spent a fair portion of my life in India and still don't have a clue. It doesn't mean that much to me. There it is: I told the truth.

All these so-called deities exist inside of us, but we don't understand that. We don't know who we are, so we can't know who they are. Find out who you are, and you'll know everything you need to know.

When I lived in India, I went to all the temples and holy places, and I read the history and the stories, but these days I don't really think about all that, because to me the names simply represent the love inside of me, inside of you. Whether we're chanting about Kali or Durga is irrelevant.

Adams: *Flow of Grace*, the CD and booklet you released in 2007, is devoted to the Indian deity Hanuman. It comes with an instructional CD on which you teach the Hanuman Chalisa. Can you tell me about that?

Krishna Das: Hanuman is a Hindu deity who takes the form of a monkey, and the Hanuman Chalisa was the first chant I learned in India. It's a hymn or prayer or invocation, not simply repeating the name of a deity. And it's long. It takes dedication to learn it all. For me the Chalisa is directly connected to Maharaj-ji, because he was worshiped as a manifestation of Hanuman. Many people actually saw him as Hanuman with their eyes open. When I chant the Chalisa, I'm singing to him.

Adams: Do you take a traditional Indian approach to chanting, or is your method more American?

Krishna Das: It's kind of Long Island meets Delhi, or *kirtan* via the Midtown Tunnel. When I was in India, I would try to sing what I heard. After I got back to the U.S., the music I had grown up with began showing through. My melodies are more Western, but the chants are essentially the same as those we sing in India. I sing them the way I like. I'm not trying to



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please anybody, because from the very beginning I understood that I had to do this for my own heart.

Adams: Do you consider *kirtan* to be music or something else?

Krishna Das: It's certainly musical — well, maybe not the way I do it. [Laughs.] Music has tremendous power to soothe and calm us, but it's not going to get us to enlightenment. The way I look at it, when you want a kid to take medicine, you have to hide it in some kind of syrup. With chanting, the music is the syrup, and the Divine Names are the medicine. It's the Divine Names that cure your suffering and free you from unhappiness and help you find your true nature. Music touches the divine at times, but there's no way it can last. The names are the seeds you

plant that destroy your illusions and bring about the truth.

Adams: Do you think chant takes us to a place that other methods don't?

Krishna Das: Things happen more easily with chant, partially because we don't have all the expectations that we do with meditation. We don't feel like, *OK, I have to sit down now and fight with my mind.*

Meditation is misunderstood in the West. It's taught as a concentration exercise, but that's only the very beginning, a way to get you to pay attention. Later the practice changes; the instructions change. In the U.S. meditation is seen as an act of will: you're trying to stop your mind. But you'll never do it. It's no wonder so many people give up. But with chanting, because of the music and everyone doing it together, you don't think of it as a "practice."

Adams: When you're leading a *kirtan*, isn't something transformative happening?

Krishna Das: Sure. I sing; the audience sings back. As the night goes on, they forget about the car in need of repair or the pile of bills on the kitchen table. People begin to let go of the story lines that brought them here and enter deeper and deeper into the practice, into the moment. And when you have a lot of people doing that, a certain energy builds up. We're all here for the same purpose: to let this practice work on us, to find our way home.

Adams: Do you consider yourself a musician or a spiritual teacher?

Krishna Das: I'm a *kirtan* wallah: someone who chants. That's it. I don't know anything. I can't teach anything. I can't even teach you how to chant. You just sing from your heart. You have to figure out what that means for you.

Adams: Can you tell me some memorable stories about people who've come to hear you?

Krishna Das: I remember doing a workshop in California with a friend who's a yoga teacher. She asked everyone to sit in a circle and tell why they were there, which wasn't my style. I remember thinking, *This is a waste of time.* And then the first person to speak said, "On Monday morning I start my first round of chemo. They say I have incurable brain cancer. I

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came here to find some strength." And it just killed me. I saw how much chanting means to people, how much they get from it — sometimes much more than I get. It shut me up, and we had a beautiful retreat. That woman became a good friend. She died three weeks ago.

I get e-mails from people who say my CD got them through a divorce, or the death of a child, or a terrible disease. It brings strength to them, and that really humbles me. I may be the one who's singing, but I'm not the one giving people strength. They're getting it from their own inner being, which they're connecting to through the chanting.

Adams: Does chant ever give rise to pain or heartache or suffering?

Krishna Das: It can. When we chant, we're not trying to get high. We're not "failures" if we don't feel happy. Sometimes healing and connecting more deeply to the love inside of us is painful. It can bring us in touch with something we have hidden from. It's this pain that leads us to deeper questions: What is it we're looking for? What is it we really need?

You know, this is the blues. We're singing the blues. And there's a joy, a strength in our yearning. There's a beauty in our yearning. And tears are not a sign of failure. This is the world of tears. And there are so many different kinds of tears.

Adams: What are the challenges of this work?

Krishna Das: One is to stay healthy so I can continue doing it. I'm getting old, and it's not so easy to eat well and take care of myself on the road. Another challenge is to keep giving 100 percent of my usual 3 percent. [Laughs.] But, by my guru's grace, my *work* doesn't get old. The minute I sit down to chant, I let go of boredom, thoughts, memories, judgments.

Adams: When you first began chanting publicly, how did you find an audience?

Krishna Das: The first place I chanted was Jivamukti Yoga School in New York. I called them up, and they said, "Sure, you can come down on Monday." They had a program for yoga-teacher trainees, and I sang for about twenty minutes before it began. I started doing this every Monday. That went on for a month or two, and then I showed up on a Monday night as usual, and the teachers weren't there. I was told they had gone to India and wouldn't return for months. So I sat down and sang for two or three hours. I did it again the next week, and the next, and more and more people came. Monday night became my night.

Adams: Had you performed before then?

Krishna Das: Yes. When I was younger, I was into the blues, folk music, rock-and-roll. I had always been a singer.

Adams: I enjoyed the Q and A after the *kirtan* tonight. If you were to hold a workshop like this in India, would people be asking you the same questions?

Krishna Das: Yes and no. There are obvious cultural differences, but ultimately everybody everywhere wants the same thing. They may call it something different; it may look different for each person; they may think it's different from what somebody else wants. But the longing for unconditional love, ease, and happiness is the same within each person and each culture.

The tragedy of Western culture is that we're taught to think happiness is something outside ourselves, so we don't know to look for it within. In the East people get stuck in material desires like we do, but at least there is an understanding that possessions come and go; bodies come and go. The principles of karma and reincarnation give them a different view of life's ebb and flow.

That said, I wouldn't say life is easier for them. They have their own problems: poverty, hunger, disease. It's hard to be happy with those concerns. But they don't hate themselves the way we do — or, at least, I haven't found that they do. I think it's because, for the most part, affection isn't used there as a tool to control people. When I lived with my adopted Indian family, they might yell, but no matter how angry they got with one another, there was never any pulling back or turning away. I grew up in an American house where I heard over and over again, "Don't raise your voice!" and, "Don't look at me like that!"

Adams: Was Judaism a significant part of your childhood?

Krishna Das: No, there wasn't any belief in God or religion in my household. I was a spiritual self-starter. [Laughs.] I had a pretty unhappy childhood. I didn't like myself much, but I had a sense there was something out there that might save me from myself. In high school I started reading books on Buddhism. I also read *Autobiography of a Yogi* and *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* and a couple of books on asana practice. There were only, like, one or two asana books out at the time — this was in the 1930s. [Laughs.] I took peyote the summer between my junior and senior years in high school, and that changed everything. All the lights went on. Suddenly I understood the way things really are. And then I came down. It was horrible. I'd had a glimpse of the truth, and now it was gone. I went to see every yogi who came to the U.S., but nothing really clicked — until I met Ram Dass.

Adams: How did you meet him?

Krishna Das: I was living on a farm in upstate New York with some Jungian acidhead mountain climbers. They knew Ram Dass from when he was called "Richard Alpert" and was conducting psychedelic experiments with Timothy Leary at Harvard University. They went to see him at his father's place up in New Hampshire, and when they got back, one of them had light shooting out of his eyes. I said, "Write down the



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directions. I'm leaving *now*." I drove all the way through the night to get to Ram Dass. The minute I walked into the room where he was sitting, without a word being spoken between us, I knew that what I was looking for — whatever it was — existed in the world. At first I thought Ram Dass had it, that he *was* it, so I hung around him as much as I could. As it turned out, he was carrying a tremendous dose of Maharaj-ji.

Adams: You went to India to see Maharaj-ji and stayed for about three years. And then, out of the blue, Maharaj-ji asked you to go back to the States.

Krishna Das: I wasn't asked. I was *sent*: "Go home now!"

Adams: Was it difficult to return?

Krishna Das: It was terrifying. I hadn't worn a pair of pants or shoes for years. I spoke English with a Hindi accent. I'd told myself I was never coming back to the U.S., but Maharaj-ji saw my future differently. He said I had attachments here; I had work to do. Before leaving the temple to catch a plane back to the States, I bowed to him one last time, and as I bowed, I heard a voice in my head — *my* voice. It said, *I will sing to you*. Maharaj-ji had never told me to sing. He'd told me, "Do what you want." It's because he made me find out what I wanted to do that I'm here today, doing this.

Adams: He died shortly after you returned to the U.S.

Krishna Das: Yes, that sent me into a bad place. I was so attached. I thought it was all over. The only thing that had

ever worked for me was to be with him. His love was a light that didn't turn off. I'd never experienced that before. When I was with him, the only darkness was in *me*. So I stayed in the light as much as I could. And now that he had died, what was I going to do? I stayed involved in music and even cofounded a record label, but I wasn't ready to chant yet. I had a lot of deep hurt and anger to work through. It took me a long time. One day, twenty years after he'd died, I realized that if I didn't start chanting, I would never be able to shed light on the dark places in my heart.

Adams: Had you chanted before then?

Krishna Das: In India we'd chanted for Maharaj-ji, and in the States I'd occasionally chanted with people I had known in India. But this was different. I understood that I had to go out and do this with strangers. I had to put it all on the line. I didn't like it, but I knew the only thing that would save me was to chant.

Adams: What was your life like in the years between Maharaj-ji's death and your epiphany?

Krishna Das: Pretty miserable. I engaged in a lot of self-destructive behavior. The overriding emotion was despair. I believed I had blown the only chance I had to be happy, so it didn't matter. I didn't try to hurt other people, but I was hurting myself so badly that the pain spread out from there. I became addicted to freebase cocaine for about two years. Then K.C.

Tewari, my Indian “father” and the best friend I could have, came to North America to visit Maharaj-ji’s Western devotees. He was in Canada, and I went up to see him. I’d stayed up the night before smoking freebase, and that morning, when I walked into the room — keep in mind, this is the first time we’d seen each other in several years — he said, “Promise me you’ll give up cocaine.” It was either say no and lose any connection I had with him or say yes and get the help I needed. I never smoked cocaine again.

It was the first time I’d felt Maharaj-ji’s presence since he had died. A few months later I went to India, and when I walked into the room where he used to sit, I felt as if I’d been hit by lightning in my chest. I saw every moment of every day that had passed in the eleven years since I’d left India, and I saw that he had always been with me. He had never left me for a second, but I hadn’t let myself feel his presence, because I was a stubborn little boy. I’d been too pissed at him for leaving me, too pissed at myself for not going back to see him before he died. I returned to the States and went into therapy. It took a long time. It’s an ongoing process.

Adams: To play the devil’s advocate: is it possible that your problems arise in part from self-doubt and an excessive belief in the power of others?

Krishna Das: No, in my world the guru is all-powerful, but the guru is not *outside* of me, someone I’m giving my power to. The real guru is actually my own heart, my true nature. The outer guru — the person we call a “guru” — is like a mirror to show me this place of love inside myself and remind me to open to it again and again, even when my Western education screams at me to do the opposite. Unfortunately, Western psychology views love and beauty as outside of us, just beyond our reach.

Adams: Do you still feel like a Westerner?

Krishna Das: Absolutely. In fact, it becomes more and more clear to me how Western I am when I see how difficult it is for me to truly live my guru’s teachings. When someone asks the Dalai Lama about compassion, he says the first person who deserves compassion is oneself. We Westerners overlook that important first step.

Adams: Do you still need to remind yourself to love yourself?

Krishna Das: Every day. I need to remember to allow the practice to soften my heart. Westerners tend to build thick shells around their hearts, and their shells are usually made of ego, of an identity: “I’m wealthy,” or “I’m a victim,” or even “I’m enlightened.”

Adams: For many of us in the West, the word *guru* evokes a negative stereotype of a religious huckster who deceives his followers.

Krishna Das: There’s no question people have taken advantage of that role, using it in a way that’s self-serving and abusive. But that wasn’t the case with Maharaj-ji. Can you imagine meeting somebody who is completely, unconditionally happy? Who doesn’t need anything from you or anyone else? Who doesn’t even need you to be there? That just makes you want to be there all of the time, because it allows you to

be yourself. True gurus love you for who you are, not for what you can do for them or give them. Maharaj-ji wouldn’t let us give him anything. People passing through would want to donate money to him, but he wouldn’t accept it. He could not be bought, because he had everything.

Sometimes he looked like just a little old man, but other times he sizzled with radiance. You could barely look at him. You’d try, but he was too bright. You had to look away. The whole universe was right there in him. He was, like, Mister Universe. [Laughs.] He used to say that he had two blankets: the outer blanket that he always wore, but also an inner blanket that he put on to protect us, because seeing the real Maharaj-ji would be like looking right at the sun — you’d go blind. He would cover himself so that he could be in the world with people. We all have that brilliant radiance within us, he would say, but we don’t know it.

Real gurus don’t intend to teach; they teach just by being. The word *guru* means “one who dispels the darkness,” which is different from giving light. Giving light means giving someone something that they don’t already have. Gurus remove the layers of darkness and show you what’s already there. They peel away the self-hatred, the guilt, the shame, the fear. A guru is someone who has truly conquered all of that and lives only to help people. There’s no edge, no harshness, only complete love and acceptance — and a kind of cosmic chuckle because you don’t fully understand; not laughing at you, but saying, “Come on! Get with it!”

Adams: When you were with your guru, did all of your shame, fear, and guilt evaporate?

Krishna Das: Being with him would pull me out of the place where those feelings lived, but when I wasn’t with him, I’d go right back into it — sometimes two seconds after I left the room. The process of being lifted out of it over and over, however, begins to show you what’s possible, and you crave a final release from all of that.

Adams: You had direct experience with your guru. Is it possible to feel that love from an individual who has passed on or lives thousands of miles away?

Krishna Das: It’s totally possible to find that love no matter where you are, because it lives inside of us. I once asked my Indian father, “How can I get closer to my guru?” He looked at me as if I were crazy. “Your guru is what’s looking out of your eyes right now,” he said. “How can you get closer to it? It’s your very breath. It’s your very being.” Only my own heaviness of thought was keeping me from realizing that.

Maharaj-ji is as present to me now as he was then, if not more so, because then, even when I was holding on to his foot, there was still the person I thought I was between us, and that was a huge obstacle to overcome. I had to go through years of despair to get to where I am today.

Adams: During one of your talks this weekend, an audience member pointed out that you speak of seeking “something,” rather than the “nothingness” of Buddhism.

Krishna Das: When I talk about “seeking,” I’m not talking about philosophy. The void, nothingness, emptiness — these are philosophical concepts that are hard to understand. They’re

not really where I spend my time. I'm talking about finding a love that lasts, a happiness that doesn't depend on possessions and the way others see us, and the strength to deal with the hard parts of life.

Nothing versus something: these are the questions that people talk about when they don't have an inner knowing. Trying to understand it with your mind is impossible. It has to be experienced, and when you experience it, it is exactly the opposite of what you thought it was. The part of you that thinks it understands ultimately has to go away before any real truth arises. It's like what the nineteenth-century Indian mystic Ramakrishna said about chanting: "Every repetition of the Divine Name is a seed that's planted." And this seed gets caught by the wind and is blown until it lands on the roof of an old house in the middle of nowhere, where it gets stuck between the clay tiles. And over time the tiles break down, and the seed can take root in the clay. (The clay tiles for the old roofs in India weren't baked in a kiln, so they weren't that hard.) And then those roots grow, and keep growing until they destroy the whole roof, the whole house. And Ramakrishna says that old house that's destroyed is the separate entity we believe ourselves to be.

Ultimately that separateness, that isolated feeling of "me," will not remain when you go deeper into yourself and recognize yourself to be the whole universe, so to speak. You can still function, but once you're not identified with that self anymore, you don't need the same things that you used to in order to get through the day and feel good. You don't need people to love you. You don't need people to honor you or respect you. You don't need to prop yourself up with belongings, because you're in touch with your natural sense of well-being that lives in all our hearts. That's the "something" we're trying to find.

Adams: It sounds as if, in the process of trying to find it, we risk losing ourselves.

Krishna Das: Yes! That's the beauty of it. But we risk losing only our separate self, and the suffering that comes with it. You know, these great beings like Maharaj-ji have a completely different sense of who they are. One time in India when we were all eating in the courtyard, Maharaj-ji turned to Dada, his old devotee, and said, "I'm eating through all of these mouths."

Who is it that's eating through all of these mouths? It's awareness. And the awareness in you is the same as the awareness in him. That's the one who's eating.

Again, we can talk about these ideas, but it's important not to hold on to them. We have to keep letting go of everything: the story lines, the habits, the attachments. And we have to be aware, because otherwise the shadows will come back and haunt us. We have to become aware of them in order to let go of them. We can be free of the shadows and make every day new, but we have to start by asking: Why am I creating all this suffering for myself? Where do these patterns come from, these habits of thought?

If, underneath it all, we have an unconscious feeling that we're not worthy of love, then no matter how much love comes to us, it'll never be enough. First we have to plug that hole in the bucket that the water is pouring through, and *then* the vessel

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can fill up. And the hole in the bucket is all our self-hatred and inability to take care of ourselves. It's not about philosophy; it's about everyday life. The way to become aware of that is to practice, because then you begin to see your patterns differently and stop identifying with them. Eventually you can let go of them, and a natural feeling of happiness arises.

Our lives are full of people, places, dogs, cats, dust in the closet, piles of laundry, dirty dishes in the sink. How we deal with it all — how we greet it — is essential to the way we feel about ourselves. If we see the dishes in the sink as something that's imposed on us from the outside, and we see ourselves as victims of these miserable dishes, then we forget that *we* put them there. [Laughs.]

There's a prayer that goes: "The guru is the one I see right before my eyes. I bow to the guru." Another way of saying it is that the guru is everything in your life right now. Everything you see — the person in the mirror, the dishes in the sink — is the guru. And if you accept everything as the guru, as your teacher, then you learn how to deal with it as best you can, rather than try to fight it.

Adams: You make it sound so easy.

Krishna Das: I can only speak for myself. If I say that I believe chanting and practice help, it's because they've helped me. But the process is gradual. As they say in India, you can't rip the skin off a snake, or you'll kill him, but at the right time the snake sheds his skin. Our patterns, our stories, who we experience ourselves to be — that's our skin. If you were to go from your current lifestyle to living in a cave in India with no TV, no bagels, no nothing, you'd probably go out of your mind. That's ripping off your skin. Chanting is a great practice for me because I'm not going off to a cave to do it. I don't have to wear special clothes. I don't have to be initiated.

We're all in this soup. I'm in it, too, just swimming around with all the vegetables and the noodles and bumping into peas and carrots. Like you, I'm trying to get out of the soup, but after a while it's not so bad. We can float and wiggle our toes and throw vegetables at each other.

When we practice, we're in the game, and that's the main thing. We don't give ourselves enough credit for being in the game. Doing a practice is a rare and precious thing, but no one pats us on the back for it. I do mine because I believe it will work, and that belief is not based on blind faith; it's based on my experiences. A practice should be judged on how you feel. But in order to know how it makes you feel, you have to pay attention to how you feel. And that's a little bit strange



for us, because we're not used to listening to ourselves in that way. We're used to just reacting to life's bumps and bruises, not thinking, *I just chanted for an hour, and I quieted down a little bit. Maybe I'll do it again.* Part of this process is learning to pay attention to what works for you. And then you start to engage with your life as a participant, not a victim.

Adams: But what if, while you're chanting or meditating, your mind is still running?

Krishna Das: Your mind will still be running, that's for sure, but you're chanting. You're meditating. You're doing the practice, which is different than all the other times in the day when your mind is just running full blast on automatic. When you're doing a practice, you're pulling energy away from your mind.

Practice is designed to help us let go, and the first part of letting go is seeing how horrible what we're holding on to really is: *I can't believe my mind is like this!* And that's good. I know it doesn't *feel* good, but that will shift as time goes on. That's why they call it "practice." And, really, you should try to do it every day, even if it's just five minutes. Don't try to stop your mind; that's not going to happen. Just sit quietly and turn off the phone. Turn everything off for *five minutes*. The more you develop the ability to do this, the more you find echoes of it

in places that are quite unexpected. I still think I'm the same schmuck I've always been, but after years of doing this practice, I think that much less of the time.

Damnation is eternal only when you're in it. When it's over, it's over, but when you're in it — *arrgh!* And when you're in the lighter moments, you want them to last, but they go away, too. How we feel is always changing, but the place that the chants come from, and the place that they move us toward, never changes.

I'm still depressive. I still mope around. Every once in a while I do it just for fun: I stay home and say, "Today I'm going to mope." And I mope from one room to the other. It's great, but I can't make it last very long anymore.

Adams: It's like building spiritual muscle.

Krishna Das: You can think of it that way. Once I heard a story about an old Tibetan monk who was imprisoned by the Chinese and tortured and beaten for decades. When he was released, he went to see the Dalai Lama, who asked the monk, "Were you afraid?" And he said, "Oh, yes, I was afraid that when they were torturing me, I would get angry."

The sort of wisdom and strength he had doesn't come through the mind. Never in a million years can we understand it, but we can become it through practice. Practice means learning from life instead of being bounced around by it. Once you know the worst isn't going to run you over, you can look the world in the eye without blinking.

Adams: Last year I was diagnosed with breast cancer. One thing that really spoke to me was your music. I'd heard it before in yoga classes and really liked it, but it hadn't spoken to me the way it did during my cancer treatment. For a while, during the more frightening time of diagnoses and surgeries, it was all I could listen to. I'm not sure why.

Krishna Das: The same reason I sing it: because it works. One of my dearest friends pulled the plug on his kidney machine listening to my CD. I feel that my guru uses me to transmit his blessings and his presence and his love to the world. I also get the benefit, which is why I do it. Nothing touches me as deeply as chanting or straightens my ass out and gives me perspective as quickly. I'll wake up in the morning and start worrying about the day, and then I'll think, *Whoa. All I have to do is sing.*

We have a resistance to truly opening our hearts and letting go, but suffering has a way of cutting through that resistance. When something really scares us, practice then begins to make more sense, because it relieves the fear. When you're really sitting in the fire, things look a little different, don't they? And you do what you can to get out of the fire.

Kisa Gotami was a poor village woman at the time of the Buddha. Her newborn son died, and she went to see the Buddha carrying her baby and asked, "Can you bring my baby back to life?" And he said, "Just go out and find some mustard seed from a home where nobody's died, and bring it to me." So she went from house to house and asked, "Has anyone ever died here?" And they all said, "Of course." Finally she realized that there's no one in the world who hasn't experienced the death of someone close to them. Freed from her grief, she buried her



child and became a nun. She entered the order and became one of the liberated beings of that generation.

We think we have it tough, with our little bit of pain, but these great beings are aware of the pain of *everyone* in the universe. And it doesn't shut them down. It increases their compassion.

A practice like chanting gradually bestows on us the ability to let go of pain in our hearts. But it does take time. It's not an instant pill that you take — I tried that. The pill is good for a while, maybe twenty-four hours at most. And then the pain is worse than when you started.

The path is about finding a way to live with that awareness of suffering and still be open and happy, because you're in touch with what lives within your own heart. This is something that, as it says in the Bhagavad-Gita, "cannot be cut, cannot be wet and does not wither, cannot be killed."

Adams: You represent an Eastern way of thinking that's based in egolessness, yet you have reached a certain level of celebrity here in the West. Is ego an issue?

Krishna Das: People say to me, "You're so humble," but I know who I am and what I do and what I've done. I know my issues, and they're not so different from anybody else's. If anything, the practice breaks down pride, because if you get stuck in that, you feel more separate from people.

Anytime my ego does begin to balloon, something comes along to pop it. One time, when I was touring in Europe, a friend of mine in Denmark invited a friend of hers to one of my *kirtans*. He'd lived in India for many years. "Nah, I'm not going," he said. "Krishna Das is just an American burger with Indian ketchup." [Laughs.] I love that! It's too bad he didn't come, but it doesn't mean I'm a failure. My job is just to offer the practice. Everyone takes it or leaves it as they prefer. Chant isn't for everybody. Not everyone likes to sing in a group, or likes to sing with me, for that matter. Fine. I wish them well. Miserable fuckers. [Laughs.]

But, seriously, my guru was, as far as I could tell, one of the greatest beings who ever lived. He didn't own anything but a blanket. He would sit on the street, and everywhere he sat, a crowd would form in ten minutes. People would just come running, because he was a good, complete human being. That's what I aspire to be, a good human being like that. It's not about being famous. I sing the same way wherever I am and whomever I'm with. I'm not trying to make your life better. I'm just trying to make this six-foot sack of blood and guts OK. People do look to me for help. I can't heal anybody, but because of my practice I'm not so scared of suffering that I can't commiserate.

Adams: Have you done any work with prisoners?

Krishna Das: I chanted at a medium-security prison in Virginia once. It was great. Everybody was chanting along. But as soon as I sang the Hare Krishna, they all stopped. It was like, *Oh, no*, that's *what this is*. It has such a bad reputation, which is a shame, because it's a beautiful mantra.

Adams: You're quite lucky to have your practice end up being your life's work.

Krishna Das: A psychic once told me I was coming back to earth for this birth in India, and I took a left turn and wound up in the U.S. [Laughs.] Or maybe a right turn. I have no idea. Certainly, I can tell you, I wasn't hoping for this or planning it. So I can't take any credit for it — or blame.

I am incredibly lucky. Every time I sit down to chant, no matter what I'm stuck in, it's not a problem by the end. Even if the first two hours and fifty-nine minutes is like grinding my head against a millstone, in the last minute it'll be gone. That's the benefit of the practice for me. Whatever I'm stuck in, whatever I'm thinking about, whatever I'm feeling, whatever heaviness I can't get rid of, it changes. My way of being with myself changes.

I still get cranky: *I don't want to sing. I'm tired. I don't want to do another sound check*. But as soon as I sit down and sing, I'm able to let go of all that. [Snaps fingers.] Goodbye.

I don't experience bliss every moment. That's not what it's about. It's about understanding that you're not at the mercy of everything that happens to you; that you have something you can do that puts you in the right head about things, that gives you a deeper understanding — and not just a mental understanding — of the beauty inside of you. Something that finally lets you love yourself. ■

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