

FINDING MY RELIGION

Nipun and Guri Mehta talk about their \$1-a-day pilgrimage through India

- David Ian Miller, Special to SF Gate

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It isn't easy living on a dollar a day, even when you're trekking through poverty-stricken India. Just ask Nipun and Guri Mehta, who held themselves to that amount while taking a walking pilgrimage through the country last year.

The young couple, who live in Berkeley, relied on the kindness of strangers and the beneficent nature of the universe to ensure they had food and a place to sleep each night. That was part of the plan, to remind themselves that all living beings are intimately connected and interdependent. They covered roughly 1,000 kilometers during their three-month journey, which ended in July.

The trip is over, but the goals of the pilgrimage continue. The Mehtas decided several years ago to abandon the rat race and pursue lives of service. Both work for Charity Focus, a charitable organization that Nipun founded in 1999 as a way to enable computer techies to help nonprofit organizations. It has since evolved into a global grassroots effort promoting volunteerism in many forms.

Thirty-year-old Nipun and 31-year-old Guri espouse a nondenominational spirituality that borrows from many belief systems, from the religions of their youth to the open source software movement. I met with them last week.

You've said that you went on your walking pilgrimage to increase your trust in the interconnectedness of life. Can you tell me a bit about that?

Nipun: I think we tend to see what's on the surface, and we don't realize how interconnected we are. We get into the illusion that, "Oh, it's me. I earned that job. I made a name for myself. I did it." We forget how much we need the kindness of other people to survive.

You were living on a dollar a day, so I assume just on a practical level you needed help from other people.

Guri: A dollar a day between the two of us. Even in India that's not a lot of money. Although we left home with this kind of "trust in the universe" theme, there was a lot of insecurity. Being raised in the U.S., we are so independent -- the concept of how we are all related in some way doesn't really sink in for us. But we were walking an average of 30 kilometers a day, and within that range we inevitably ran into someone good. It strengthened my faith in humanity.

When you say, "ran into someone good," what do you mean?

Guri: We were writing stories about everyday heroes -- people who were doing great work in their communities, either nonprofit or spiritual work, and in some way they were making a contribution.

We hear so much about bad news happening in the world, but we saw a lot of goodness in people who were trying to overcome whatever challenges they faced. In some ways it's surprising to me, and in some ways it's not, that there is so much goodness in the world. It's just

not something that tends to make the headlines.

There's a question posted on your personal Web site: "Do you have a spiritual teacher?" Your answer to that was, "Yes, you." Is it sometimes a struggle to see everyone as your teacher?

Nipun: I try to see life with reverence -- all life. When we were walking, we learned a lot of things. We learned to see the goodness in everybody, to try to learn from everybody and everything, even if it's just a tree. I mean, when you're walking and it's really hot, and you see a tree and you say, "Wow!" -- it's just there giving shade to you selflessly!

So I try to approach everything with humility. You never know what can teach you spiritual lessons you need to learn.

You were in both rural and urban areas in India. Did you notice any interesting differences between the two?

Nipun: When we were walking in the really rural areas there was all this kind hospitality, and as soon as we went into an urban area, it seemed like everyone was too busy to even look at you. Everyone was on their mission. And so we could immediately tell: We must be in the area near a city now, because people ...

Guri: Because people would no longer be curious, they would no longer stop and chat and see what we were doing, why we were there, offer us water or tea or anything. They were just much more suspicious, much more critical. It was interesting to see that, city after city.

You asked people you met on your trip, "What do you pray for?" and posted their answers on your blog. So let me put that same question to you: What do you both pray for?

Guri: I pray for having the strength to face whatever life throws at me and to use everything in a positive way. Whether it's the challenges of facing somebody who doesn't have the same values as I do or whether it's something positive -- that I'm able to use whatever skills I have for the positive good of everyone around me.

Nipun: I pray that I always have the courage and the humility and the love to greet each moment with reverence, and realize that this is the door through which I will grow. And that's a hard thing to do when you are in the face of danger sometimes. It's hard to do when you are uncomfortable. It's a hard thing to do when you have walked 40 kilometers and you are hungry. And we had many of those times.

Are you going to make another pilgrimage?

Nipun: In a way, I don't feel like the pilgrimage has ended. A pilgrimage is a kind of conscious intention to go from self-centeredness to selflessness, to move from fear to love, from arrogance to humility. I think that process had started for us before the walk in India, although the walk helped us to deepen that practice. And I think the practice continues.

Guri: We could be going through each day doing whatever we're doing and dealing with each encounter, each relationship, in the mindful way that you do while on a pilgrimage. But we often don't, because we forget and we just get so comfortable. That's the only reason why we would

need to physically do another trip. If we can bring that awareness into our daily lives, to live in a conscious way, there's no need to do it.

Tell me about Charity Focus. What's it all about?

Nipun: Back in 1999, during the whole dot-com frenzy, everyone was making more money. More, more, more! There was a kind of greed, you know, that was very rampant in those days.

And at the same time there was a lot of creativity. There was a lot of energy, a lot of youthful exuberance. And I was a part of that culture. There was all this good stuff, but it was going towards greed, and that's just not going to sustain itself. I thought that maybe we could use this energy for something positive, for something a little bit greater than ourselves.

So we went to a homeless shelter and we said, "We're here to help, no strings attached." We ended up creating a Web site for the shelter. It got a lot of media attention, and lots of other people came on board, and so Charity Focus began, this organization that was building Web sites. But really it was trying to connect people to their spiritual hearts -- to their heart of service.

Many people are drawn to a life of service, but they're also worried about supporting themselves. How do you pay your bills as a full-time volunteer?

Guri: We value our time much more than money, so we live very simply and just work enough so we can live the way that we want to live.

While traveling, we realized that even the little we had taken with us -- we had three sets of clothes each -- was a lot. Coming back, we decided that we don't need all these clothes. And we don't need the latest car. We don't need all these gadgets. We think they are going to make our lives easier or make us happy, but they don't. So we live simply and use our time to do service.

You got married in 2004 in what your Web site describes as a "nine-faith blessings ceremony." Why so many faiths?

Nipun: We believed that, just like you can get to the top of a mountain from the east, west, north or south, there are so many paths to take in life. We wanted to honor that in our union because we were getting together in that spirit, to go to the top of the mountain, so to speak.

And so there was a Jain nun that was there, a Buddhist monk, a Sufi practitioner, a Jewish guy, a Christian minister, a Native American, and then my parents did the Hindu and Sikh blessing. We even had an atheist because we wanted to honor all of it.

Nipun, you were raised a Hindu, and Guri, you were raised a Sikh. Do either of you adhere to one particular faith now?

Guri: I take a lot from Sikhism as well as Hinduism. But I also take a lot from Buddhism. I wouldn't call myself a churchgoing kind of person. I think I embrace the values that are tied to all of the major religions.

Nipun: I don't identify myself with a religion, either. I consider myself a seeker of truth, and I am committed to finding who I am at the best of my being. I believe that ultimately everybody is on the same journey, no matter what your religion.

One of your wedding vows is: "When it comes time to part, do you pledge to reflect on your time together with thankfulness for the ways in which you have grown, acceptance that all things are temporary and empty of inherent satisfaction, and joy that you met and shared what you have?" Why interject those not very happy thoughts into the ceremony?

Nipun: I see it as a happy thought. I think change is a very good thing. And I think when you embrace change, there is this constant joy to life. Both of us feel this way, and so we wanted on our wedding day to remember and realize that, yes, we will all die, yes, we will part -- in fact that is not a bad thing. We just wanted to bring it up front and say, "Look! Life has its ups and downs, and we love life!"

Guri: Death is an inevitable part of life. So we don't see it as sad. We see it as, If I remember that I'm going to die, I'm going to live today much more fully. If I think I'm here forever, I'm going to get too comfortable. So I think it empowers us. It makes me appreciate life. It makes me appreciate the time that we do have together.

In your Web writing I've come across some memes about the ethics and practices of open source software development applied to living life in general. Tell me more about your thoughts on open source as a spiritual practice?

Nipun: The two principles of open source that I value are trust and transparency. And I believe trust-and-transparency is a spiritual practice. Trust says you believe, you have faith in the goodness. And transparency says that I'm not going to be overcome by fear, I'm not going to be manipulated.

Give me an example of how that plays out in your life.

Nipun: One of the cool things that we have at our house is an open source bookshelf. Quite literally anyone can take anything and put anything back whenever they want. We have open source Wednesday nights at our place where people attend from all over the place. They will come, and we have an hour of silence, and we share insights for the second hour, and then Mom feeds everybody for the third hour. That's been going for eight years and thousands of people have come.

Do you have any advice for people who want to open-source themselves in this copyright-crazy world?

[Laughter] Nipun: I would say trust. You are not alone, and you don't have to secure everything in your own little silo in the world. Everything changes and there is beauty to that. It's OK if you are not in the 401(k) plan. It's OK if you are not worried about how you are going to survive 20 years from now. So I would say: "Be bold. Greet the change. Live in the now!"

Finding My Religion wants to hear from you. Send comments on stories and suggestions for interview subjects to miller@sfgate.com.

During his far-flung career in journalism, Bay Area writer and editor David Ian Miller has worked as a city hall reporter, personal finance writer, cable television executive and managing editor of a technology news site. His writing credits include Salon.com, Wired News and The New York Observer.

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