

Singing to God.

AN INTERVIEW WITH KRISHNA DAS



IN THE WINTER OF 1968,

Krishna Das met Ram Dass, who had just returned from his first trip to India and was regaling everyone with stories about his new and wondrous guru, Neem Karoli Baba (Maharaj-ji). Intrigued, Krishna Das traveled to India to meet him and wound up staying three years, spending as much time as possible with Maharaj-ji, and his life would never be the same. While there, his heart became especially enflamed by the intense devotional practice of *kirtan*—chanting the Names of God—and this was to become his lifelong spiritual practice. Then, early in 1973, he was asked by Maharaj-ji to return to America.

"At what would turn out to be my last *darshan* of Maharaj-ji's physical body," Krishna Das says, "I was petrified about returning to the U.S. I didn't want to ask him what I should do in America, but all of a sudden I blurted out in anguish, 'Maharaj-ji! How can I serve you in America?'"

"He looked at me with mock disgust and said, 'What is this? If you ask how you should serve then it is no longer service. Do what you want.' I couldn't believe my ears. How could 'doing what I want' be of service to him? I didn't have that kind of faith. I just sat there, stunned. Then after a

minute or so he looked over at me, smiling sweetly, and asked, 'So, how will you serve me?'"

"My mind was blank. It was time for me to leave for Delhi, to catch the plane back to the States. He was looking at me and laughing. I bent down and touched his feet for the last time and when I looked up he was beaming at me, and asked again, 'So, how will you serve me in America?' I felt like I was moving in a dream. I floated across the courtyard and bowed to him one more time from a distance. As I did, the words came to me: 'I will sing to you in America.'"

WHJ: *Your music is clearly an expression of your connection to God and your Guru, but does it also serve you as a practice in order to deepen that relationship? Is there a progression towards something?*

KD: It's definitely a practice of deepening, because every time you sit down to do your practice—whatever your practice is—you have to once again overcome all the tendencies of the mind, wherever it is at that moment. Because you're trying to open it up, or deepen the moment, or change the space to some degree, or become aware of the

space. Whichever way you want to see it, you're changing the flow of the awareness at that moment from external things to more internal things. So every time you do that, it's work.

WHJ: *Do you ever have an event where you're scheduled to turn everyone on, lift them up, be an inspiration...*

KD: That's the main thing that never occurs to me. I never think like that. If I thought like that I would run screaming as fast and as far as I could. This is never about getting people off. It was never about making money. It was never about becoming famous. I always knew that I was supposed to be singing with people, but I really avoided it and hid from it for many years. I didn't really sing publicly with people that I didn't know until 1994. I mean we were always singing in our extended family of Maharaj-ji devotees from India, and when I first got back in '73 I went out with Ram Dass for awhile, singing at his retreats, but even that was under his auspices, which was completely different.

So there came a moment in 1994 when I just knew that if I didn't get out there and sing publicly with people who didn't know me as Maharaj-ji's *kirtan wallah*, with people who needed to be dealt with directly in that moment, that I would never access certain things in my own heart that were hidden from me and that I couldn't clear myself of. And that was the moment I knew what I had to do.

WHJ: *Was there fear around that?*

KD: Tremendous fear. There was the fear that had kept me from doing it all those years, and lots of different fears. I had been suffering tremendously, especially after Maharaj-ji died, and the singing that I did after that, as well as everything in my life, just dripped with unhappiness. I felt that I had lost my only chance to be happy. And so even though I sang, I was singing from a very broken place. Because I truly believed that I had blown this life completely and I lived as if that was true. You can imagine what the quality of your day is if that's the way you feel. Then, over the years, I had a number of experiences that helped me to realize that maybe it *wasn't* too late for me, and at some point I realized I needed to chant, and that that would accomplish the purification of my heart. So I'm only trying to open up and deepen my own moment, and I'm quite aware that that also helps other people to do the same, but that's certainly not the goal of all this.

WHJ: *Are you ever in a situation where you're about to go onstage and that's the last thing you feel like doing?*

KD: Absolutely. However, over the years, it has become kind of automatic. It's just interesting the way Maharaj-ji has arranged my life. I never could plan anything, and now I'm scheduled a year in advance. So I've surrendered to that—that I'm going to be doing this so many times over the next period of time, and that no matter how dull I may get between chanting, I know that this is coming up and this is what I do. So it's kind of a surrender into the process.

Motivation is the key to all this. If we put ourselves in front of a group of people in order to use that situation to override and avoid dealing with the stuff that we have when we're just "who we really are," or who we really think we are, then that's not healthy, and needs to be examined and dealt with, or you start to get into all sorts of trouble. If your motivation is to run, you keep feeding that energy of running and you develop an alternative life outside of home, wherever home is to you, and you get very split. If you're not paying attention to that, you start keeping secrets, even from yourself, and then from the people who that part of you deals with.

I've been working with this my whole life. I learned how to keep secrets very early on. I had to hide myself and protect myself from my mother, and I had to be me secretly, and give people what they wanted to see, because I was not accepted in some ways by my family and I was hurt many times, as we all are. So I just knew what was appropriate and what was not appropriate, and I lived in my room with my door closed. That was my kingdom. Nobody could come in, that's where I was safe. But when I stepped out of that room, I knew I had to be somebody else. You learn this really early before you even know what you're learning. You don't know what you're doing but you're doing it. And it just kept going in my life and I had a lot of secrets from the people I was close to, due to the mechanics of the way I formed relationships.

So no, I don't have a persona as a "kirtan wallah" for myself. Other people may need to see me that way, but it's just something that I do as my own spiritual practice. I mean, I don't sit around saying, "oh, now the kirtan wallah is watching TV, now the kirtan wallah is going to the bathroom..."

When I went to India recently, in 2001, I was really tired physically, burnt out and kind of depressed. I was noticing



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how singing with people lifted me up, and I wondered if I was using that to override or avoid places in myself, and thought maybe I shouldn't sing with people for awhile, do something else for a couple of years and see who I am when I'm not singing with people.

Because when I started singing publicly in '94, I really began to freak: "This is terrible. I'm not prepared for this. I'm not pure enough for this, I'm not ready to do this." So after about seven months I went back to India, and inside I was saying to Maharaj-ji, "Okay you gotta fix this, otherwise I'm not singing anymore. This is not right, I can't do this, I'm not pure enough—not only am I going to fuck my own life up, but I'm going to fuck up your life, because this is your problem, I'm singing in your name. I can't do this impurely in your name. I can't use this to satisfy all my unfulfilled desires." And I was serious. Because I had seen a lot of people doing that, and it was just horrifying. I couldn't do that—it was such a betrayal of the love and the beauty that Maharaj-ji is to me, and was to me. And he'd been dead for 22 years. After three months there he gave me an inner experience that changed the way I saw my life and everything in it. After that I was able to continue singing.

Until, like I said, more recently, in 2001, when I felt kind of burnt and filled with many of those same doubts and questions again. This time I went to sit with a great old devotee of Maharaj-ji's, and I talked to her about a lot of things, but I never quite asked her about whether I should stop singing. I think I was afraid she might say yes, and then I'd have to pump gas! And she simply said to me, without my asking, "Maharaj-ji is forcing you to sing." So that's the way I see it, that Maharaj-ji's forcing me to sing, for my own sake.

I'm only here by the Grace of my Guru. Everything I do is by His Grace. The fact that anybody comes, that I can actually make a living at it, is just fantastic. I enjoy it, why not? But that's not why I'm doing it.

It's funny—I was in a rock band once, when I was a sophomore in college, and we weren't getting along very well.

They were in high school and just starting to smoke dope, and I was getting out of smoking dope at that point, so I stopped playing with them. Then in the summer of '69 I was on my way to live with Ram Dass up at his father's place in New Hampshire, and I stopped along the way to go to a Jimi Hendrix concert, and the old band was there.

After the concert the guys came up to me and said, "Come back and sing—the guy who replaced you can't really sing well enough for the studio. We have all the tracks down, all you have to do is come sing the vocals, and we have a tour..." This was my dream! This is what I wanted to do! This is who I wanted to be! But I had promised Ram Dass I was coming, and I had my two dogs and my cat and all my stuff in my little car in the parking lot, and after the concert I was going to drive all night to get up to New Hampshire. So I couldn't say yes, even though I wanted to, desperately. I mean I wanted to go to Ram Dass too, but if that commitment wasn't there at that moment, I don't know if I could have resisted doing that.

And so now look: I'm doing the same thing, except it's not about that, it's about practice. It's about opening. It's not about being a singer. And I can do it sitting down! That is so great! Everything I wanted to be, that's who I am, but it's totally for a different purpose. It's completely different; it's in the service of God, in myself and others.

WHJ: *How do you know your relationship with Maharaj-ji now isn't perhaps a spiritual fantasy that may have developed over 20 years about someone with whom you did have a very real connection?*

KD: There's no way you can tell another person *how*. I mean, how do you know that jasmine smells a certain way and roses smell another way?

WHJ: *So it's very real for you in the moment?*

KD: More real for me now than when I was with him, because *I'm* more real to me now. When I was with him physically and holding onto his foot, I had so much neurotic stuff, and an inability to be in the present moment. I'm closer to him now—I used to think he was outside of me, and that he was that body only. Even though I read all the books: "God is everywhere, God and the Self are One, the Guru is not the body"—I read all that stuff, and it didn't mean anything to me, because my gut, emotional feeling was that he *was* that body, wrapped up in *that* blanket, and if I wasn't with him physically then I wasn't with him.

WHJ: *Is the quality of your kirtan noticeably different now than when you started?*

KD: Absolutely. When I first saw Ram Dass after his stroke, I had sent him a tape that I made. We hadn't been close or seen each other much in many years. So after the stroke I went to visit him. We had a great day together, and at the end of the day, I said, "Did you listen to that tape?" and he said, "Oh yes. You're singing..." he spoke very haltingly,

"you're singing with more confidence now. Before, you used to sing with...with..." and I said, "My dick?" and he laughed, "Yeah!" My dick, in the sense of singing from and with all the emotions.

WHJ: *You mean singing with desire for power and conquest ...*

KD: Exactly. And love. All that stuff. You bring yourself with you wherever you go, and every time, you do what you do with the same quality of being that you do everything else. I mean, you're not *really* one person at home and one person on the job—it's the same guy. And that changes over time. Life just changes us, as long as we keep breathing—that's the only thing required.

WHJ: *How do you deal with people who approach you with adulation as a spiritual teacher and who are probably projecting a lot?*

KD: There has to be someone to project it on. Luckily, by His Grace, there's not that much of anything to be projected on. I see what people are doing. I've done it myself. I do it myself—we all project. However, I don't really want anything from it, and I know what they *really* want: intimacy. They want contact, they want the Presence. And so when somebody comes to me like that, I don't have to close off, or hide or be afraid—it's just family. There's nothing at stake: I can't "blow" this—it's not about that.

WHJ: *There are certainly a lot of spiritual teachers who seem to have blown it by succumbing to temptations and sexual possibilities...*

KD: Yeah, well, there's no question that it *seems* that they've blown it. Maybe they never had anything to blow? Just because a person does *asanas* or meditates and does *pranayama* doesn't mean they have it together any more than a rickshaw wallah in India who just rides his bike and tries to feed his family. Maybe the only reason they were doing all that stuff—even unconsciously, if they *were* unconscious—was to *get* money sex and power. Then they haven't blown it at all, they're successful! It's just the naiveté of Americans who think if somebody wears Indian clothes they have to be a saint.

I used to joke that if I was one of these guys I'd just build a big ashram with lots of rooms and put up a huge sign that says, "Come to my ashram. We'll party, I'll fuck your wives, we'll have a great time and make lots of money and have a lot of fun." You'd be doing more business than any other guru in the world. Why don't they do that? Because they themselves are victims. They don't know what's going on or how to help themselves, so they create hell for themselves and everyone else.

But it's really not for us to judge, because we only see the external, we don't see who they are. We don't see what they're seeing. And that person has to live with themselves and with whatever karmas they create, forever. There's no escape—sooner or later, we pay for every hurtful deed that we do. But you can't really judge anybody else, when you



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come down to it. It's not really useful, and nor is it accurate, probably. Because we're only seeing our own stuff anyway. All that being said, you have to listen to your heart.

WHJ: *Do you think there may be some sort of underground resurgence happening now of something we haven't seen since the 60s?*

KD: I don't think the 60s were so great. I was there. There was a tremendous naiveté in the 60s. "We can change the world." A lot of those people don't think that way anymore. A lot of people thought it would be really easy: all we have to do is think it's one way and it'll be that way. That's not exactly the case, as we've found out. Can you will the sun to shine, if it happens to be cloudy? You're not going to make the sun shine by thinking "it's sunny."

The tendencies of the mind and the attachments to our identity as limited beings is very difficult to overcome, and so what was going on in the 60s was like a window opening and everyone said "wow, let's go outside." But you can't stay outside—you come back to who you are. And you never learn how to get out of that. You get a little taste of what might be possible. For instance, Maharaj-ji said, "LSD brings you into the room with Christ." That means that LSD actually gives you an experience of the Christ, what Christ really is. But you can't stay. The only way to stay is love. And the only way to find love is to get *here*, and getting here is very difficult. It means going right into the middle of every dark spot in your heart. And very few people are prepared to do that, or even have any desire to do that. Everyone wants to keep getting a "hit," and then you go up and you crash, and you go up and you crash, and gradually your own will and your own body is weakened. I'm not just talking about acid or drugs—I'm talking about any kind of hit that you get—television—anything we do for escape. So, I wasn't a hippie in the 60s—I was too depressed!

WHJ: *Did you let go of psychedelics and pot and all that?*

KD: Yeah, I did. First of all, Maharaj-ji himself told me not to smoke hash anymore. And I said okay. And then I freaked out. And a few minutes later I said, "Wait a minute! What happens if I'm back in America at a party and somebody hands me a joint, what should I do?" And he just said "Ah! If you can't do a simple little thing like this how will you ever find God?" and he slammed the window in my face!

WHJ: *I've heard several teachers say that "chanting is the best practice for the Kali Yuga." What does that mean?*

KD: They say that there are four ages that the world goes through: a Golden Age, a Silver Age, a Copper Age, and a Dark Age. And in each age there's a whole different way of living. The light is in the Sat Yuga, the Golden Age, and everyone is in harmony with everything. And in the Silver Age, most people are still in harmony, God is still visible and obtainable, and people live long periods of time. In the Copper Age, God is still visible to some degree but it's harder and harder to see. But in the Kali Yuga, the light is very very deep and hidden: people's life spans are very short, they're mostly concerned with external things and the physical world, and very unaware of the light within. And these are enormous periods of time. Somebody said that the Kali Yuga is maybe 500,000 years long and we're just at the beginning of it! Other people say we're at the end of it.

But all of the saints say that in the Kali Yuga, the "Name" is the easiest—and some of them say the only—way to find God, or to become free, liberated, or enlightened. I just don't know what to say about that, except that everybody says that. The Name is very mysterious. Ramana Maharshi said that the *jnani*, the enlightened one, hears the Silent Name arising within the heart. *After* enlightenment.

So the Name must be really deep. And they say that "the Name and the Named are one"—God and the Name are the same. But you and I are stuck here in this physical world, we're stuck in being separate, so when we hear "Ram," we don't see God, we only hear Ram. However, if we kept hearing Ram, and devoted our lives to repeating and remembering the name of Ram, we would see Ram eventually. Maharaj-ji said "Go on, keep singing your lying Ram Ram." One day you'll say it right and BAM.

WHJ: *Is there a different experiential quality for you when singing to Ram or Krishna or Durga and so on?*

KD: No. It all happens within the presence of my Guru. When I sing, I'm singing to deepen my connection, to become more aware of the presence of Presence, and all the names lead me to the same place. I mean they all have different qualities: Durga's supposed to be a beautiful woman riding on a tiger, Hanuman's supposed to be a monkey, Ram is supposed to be a green guy walking around with a bow, Krishna's supposed to be blue and playing a flute...that's not the level I'm singing on. I sing to be in the Presence, and there's only One Presence.

Krishna Das has released many CDs and videos, among them *Breath of the Heart*, *Live on Earth*, *Pilgrim Heart* and *One Track Heart*. They are available at most record stores, bookstores and yoga centers, as well as at amazon.com and www.Anusara.com. See www.krishnadas.com for more information as well as his tour schedule.