

SESSION 2.1: CONVERSATION WITH NIPUN METHA

Living in the Gift

Charleseisenstein.org/gift

Charles Eisenstein: This is Charles Eisenstein with Nipun Metha. I'm not going to do an introduction...

Nipun Metha: We already know each other right?

CE: In the car someone asked me - "Who is Nipun?" and I said - "Actually, I don't know him professionally. I have some idea of service space and stuff."

NM: (Laughs) That's great. That's how it should be. Heart to heart and the rest are just details. Happy to have you here.

CE: We're in Nipun's home - and I've prepared some questions. The first couple might be an invitation to tell story. How did you learn what generosity is?

NM: That's a very fundamental question. I think for me the process of learning in general has been observation - if I were to look at how I learned any of these virtues. I always had a bit of a skeptical mind - or a bit of a mind, I should say. The mind is always skeptical. So I always had a bit of a mind. I would always look and observe and say - "Does this make sense, or does that make sense?" I had an analytical approach. "Should I go and pursue money or should I go and actually give? Am I going to be happy if I have a lot or am I going to be happier if I distribute a lot?"

So I actually studied people who had a lot and I interviewed a couple of them whom I had access to, and I looked at people at the other end of the spectrum - a lot of monks and nuns - and they were kind of happy although they didn't have much, and so it just made me question a lot of this. But if I had to look at generosity as a core value that I have cultivated - initially I was inspired by generosity because I realised that any small thing I do creates this ripple effect. I can't do big things, but I can do small things and something I do touches you and that touches somebody else, and that touches somebody else.

The reason that I got there was because I looked at my life and I saw that there were many of these ripple effects that made me who I was. It wasn't one gigantic "oh my God - this person came and changed everything." I am going down the streets in India with my friend from kindergarten and he's showing off on his new little motorbike and accelerating over the potholes, and I feel like I'm going to throw up. I've got an American stomach now - he doesn't understand. And I throw up. And here are these two teenagers looking totally confused and this guy going by on a bicycle, stops and goes to a stall, buys a lemon, cuts it in

half and hands one half to me. He never introduces himself. We don't know each other. He just came in my moment of need and gave me this lemon and the citrus makes you feel good after you've been throwing up. And then he just left.

At that time I didn't think much of it, but here I am – decades later – remembering him with fondness and realizing that I actually want to be like that guy. Maybe he just needed half a lemon and he gave me half a lemon. And I know many people like that – and I have since that time met many others. At that time maybe I wasn't aware of that. But he took that half a lemon, you know. He didn't say "Here are two pieces of lemon". He took that half a lemon. Even if he needed that – he gave me half of what he needed. And he stopped. And he didn't want any credit. He didn't even want any acknowledgment and I was touched by it and it touched my life, and I say – "Wow, I can be that for other people." And for me just looking at that and saying "Oh, I can do something and it creates that ripple effect, because I have been a recipient of that."

So that was the probably the first stage, and as I practiced more of that I realised that there is an outer ripple effect, but there is also a deep inner ripple effect that - when I'm giving, even that small thing, or a big thing – that yes, it creates something out in the world, but it actually changes me and it creates a transformation in me. And initially I didn't know what it was, but I could feel it. You know, everyone can. You're doing something and you feel – Wow! This has changed me. You may not know how, but over time as I tuned in to what was happening on the inside I realised that in giving I was receiving.

The first stage is giving. The second stage is realizing that I am receiving, in that very moment, in a different way. I may give you a lemon, but I may get some oxytocin in return. Or serotonin is released. Or dopamine is released.

Then I realised the third stage for me was dancing, in the sense that you don't keep track of how much you have given or how much you have received – you just sort of dance. Maybe in this moment I'm giving more, and in the next moment, maybe I'm receiving more – but there's no need to keep track of it because the purpose isn't a ledger – a spreadsheet. There is no accounting that needs to be done. It's just that we're in the dance together. And it's not between two people, it's just humanity.

CE: This makes me think of the second layer of gift. So that man gave you half a lemon and coming back to him was your thanks, your appreciation – it could have been other people seeing him in the act of generosity and so then he turned around and gave that away also. He did not keep those gifts. He didn't give them to you but he gave them to the field. You were saying about not

keeping track - that is also a kind of give-away because sometimes what attracts people to give in the gift is the concept of "I'm a better person, because I'm going to accumulate this ledger of generous acts – so I'm going to be counted as one of the good guys."

NP: Karmic math right? I am going to get good karma from this.

CE: So to give that away as well - that is where the deeper benefits come. For me it's not actually selfless in a certain sense, because for me it's a wellspring of happiness, and that is a gift that comes to me that cannot be given away, even if you try, even if you wanted to.

NP: And it's just a bigger sense of "I". It's not that you're not selfish, it's just that if you are working in the self-interest of this limited structure, or this limited mind, that's going to get you a certain kind of benefit, but as you start to dissolve that boundary you realise your left hand is helping your right hand – that it is actually all just one in that sense. And by feeding into that oneness by your right hand - the left hand - it is serving the whole. If you are identified with the whole, then it is selfish in that sense. So this is the paradox – in being generous we are being selfish, but selfish not for this limited ego but for this giant whole that is truly our identity.

CE: I have noticed the same thing that you were talking about – that people who are really the happiest that I've run into, are very rarely people who have a lot of money and often people who are quite financially poor or materially poor. I sometimes collect stories like this – like "I went into a small village in Afghanistan and the people didn't even have food and they still made tea for me". Someone just told me a story today - about going to Kenya, and this woman who lived in a house that was eight feet square and there were thirteen guests and she gave them all food. These are the people who are so generous and sourcing from some joy.

I'm curious what you think. What do they know that most people here don't know? That makes that kind of generosity second-nature to them?

NP: I have been on the receiving end of a lot of these meals. As you know, my wife and I went on this walking pilgrimage across India where we would eat whatever food is offered and sleep wherever place is offered – and we did this for a thousand kilometers and although we didn't even have a set date in mind, or an end, and we weren't trying to get to a certain point - and to be on the receiving end of that – first of all it transforms you. When you walk into some place and you realise some of these guys have to borrow food to feed you - how do you even process that? Do you say no - or do you take it – or try to cover it later – or do you give them an experience? I mean there are so many different

intellectual ways to parse it, and at some point you just sort of land into the now and say - "Look – just breathe – be here – we are not giving and receiving, we're dancing as a whole." And that is immense.

And then you hold the question that you're asking now - "What source are they coming at this from?" And in India there is a kind of spiritual framework. There is phrase which says "Guest is God" and God can be defined in many different ways and if you think of it as a whole, then you say – "This person, this manifestation in front of me is my connection to the whole, and in that sense, I am going to give the best of what I've got in reverence to that oneness". You have these people who are so materially poor, and you say – "What inspires them to overcome their fear, overcome even their hunger – like these basic Maslow's hierarchy of needs kind of thing." You know, these people should first work on securing all of that. They're by-passing it, and it makes you realise that we have created this framework just to sort of say – "Look you don't have – you first need to suffer like me and then we'll all get there." But they have by-passed that whole hierarchy.

CE: I think it's significant that Maslow's hierarchy of needs was created by somebody who's in this society – I don't think it is universally true.

NM: Yes, it's not at all true, and in fact Maslow himself actually discounted his own ideas before he passed away. I think we've seen so much data that...it's like vitamins. You don't need all vitamins. It's not to discount nutrients but you don't say – "I'm going to finish vitamin C and get to vitamin D." You need them in balance and so you see that, and I honor that. But to that point of - "What is it in them?" - I think it's this overflowing of gratitude.

CE: So now you're getting into gratitude and I do believe it is the source of generosity.

NM: Yes – so if you look at some of these people who you can say materially are lacking but have this immense capacity to give, and you ask – "From what basis are they feeling this abundance?" I think one of the major forces that propels them is gratitude – and the basis of that gratitude, I think, is a deeper awareness and in realizing that you are actually receiving a lot. You may not receive in the way you want to receive, like - "Oh, I want to be super-rich, I want to be super-famous, I want to be super-powerful," but if you let go of your predisposed ideas of how you want to be rich and you just look at your situation, then I think, like these people who fed me when they had nothing. They borrowed food to feed me and my wife, I think what they are seeing is "My God, I am are receiving so much and it is now incumbent on me to pay it forward. I have to give it forward. No matter how little I can give, I am going to continually practice that."

So I think that equation, for those of us that have a very narrow view of what wealth is, of what receiving is, of what abundance is in this form and it's like only then it counts. I think what you see with a lot of these people is there's this joy of being alive. There's this joy that we're breathing. There's this joy... you know I have been in places where they'll be like – "Sunset! Let's clap!" Even sometimes on planes, in some countries you land and everybody starts clapping.

Why do we get de-sensitized to those joys? Why is that not wealth? And if that is wealth and you are receiving, and you genuinely see that as wealth not as an intellectual trick of some cheap form of happiness, how can you not say "I bow down to you and I would love to do what little I can because you have shown up in my life." So I think there's this deep gratitude that's flowing through these people and underneath that there is this mindfulness, this deep awareness, of receiving in so many different forms. In that mathematics, if we are truly looking at all the different kinds of wealth, we are never ahead – we are always receiving way more than what we are contributing with our finite egos.

CE: In on of the first couple of modules of this course I am making, I go into the concept of "Everything is a gift – our breath, our life, our mothers' taking care of us, the sun, water. We didn't earn these things or make them through our hard efforts.

NM: Yeah, I mean even our birth, right?

CE: Yeah - our birth, our physiology, our liver knowing what to do – all of these things are gifts and that means that gratitude is our native state. The question isn't - "How do we achieve gratitude?" or even - "How do we cultivate gratitude?" Because then it becomes just another thing that we're pursuing and culture is so hung up on accomplishment. It's more like identifying what masks gratitude and what keeps us away from this native state, and I wonder if you have thoughts about that?

NM: I think fundamentally it's our lack of awareness that blocks us - that if we really start to look. If we suspend our ideas of what's valuable – and we have a certain predisposed idea of "this has value...this matters...this has meaning...this has purpose...or this counts in a market-sense" - if we suspend all those ideas and just look objectively at things that actually are coming into us, we would surprise ourselves at how tremendous that value is, and I think if we block that – and we block that only with our predispositions and our biases – if we block that, then we feel that – "Hey I'm not receiving anything. I'm being asked to give, or worse – I am being taken from" – then it feels like life is not fair and, so how do you get into that state of realizing that we are all receiving?

And sometimes it's hard - like on our walking pilgrimage, where it's 42 degrees centigrade - well over 100 degrees Fahrenheit - and you're having a bad day, your ego's taking a real beating and you're just insecure. You don't know where your food is going to come from. You've been nice to everybody and still wondering what's going to happen. And in that state, do we have the capacity to generate love? And I failed a lot, but what I realised is that I continually surprised myself. What I thought at that age was the potential of my heart to give - now that potential is much bigger and it continues to get bigger and bigger. I have this increasing, deepening faith in the capacity of the heart.

There are so many people with far bigger hearts than mine but when I was that age I might have thought - "That sounds great", but it was a sentimental idea - but as I have lived into it, I realised that the more you flex, the more you have the capacity to do, and I haven't hit a ceiling yet. I am continuing to grow in that capacity. So I have a lot of faith in that idea, just from lived experience, that we can always expand our hearts. It's possible. It's not easy - but it's possible.

CE: Another part of it is that with each expansion you enter a new territory where you ask "Is this okay? Is this comfortable?" and then you get used to it, and living at that level of generosity becomes safe - and then maybe the next stage is ready.

NM: And it can arrive in a serendipitous way, when you're not looking for it. Just recently I was at a café and I was having lunch with this woman who is very affluent. I don't have her permission so I won't use her name - although I don't think she would mind. She comes from this really rough background - this Puerto-Rican woman, severely abused, extremely poor, at the age of six, wanting to commit suicide, feels a hand on her back, and she has this realization, in her own words, that - "I am much more than this, and all of my experiences are happening to this body and I am much more than that." Then she goes on.

She had never been into a hotel before, and she actually goes inside a hotel and it happens to be one of these prep schools sharing their promotional stuff, and she ends up getting a scholarship there, goes to Stanford, gets a degree on scholarship, ends up getting four degrees from Stanford - goes onto Google, doing all this stuff, and now is a venture capitalist in the Silicon Valley - invested in a hundred and fifty companies - you know, very successful. We're having this conversation and she's juxtaposing life in Puerto Rico when they had very little and now her being a Latino woman in venture capital, in tech, in the Silicon Valley, which is a really exemplary thing. And she's trying to contrast where she wants to go with this, when all of a sudden, like completely randomly, this

waitress that we have, just comes and says – “You know I just want to give you guys this dessert”. And there were three of us and immediately I thought – “Maybe it’s some promotional dessert that they’re putting out.” I thought – “why is she giving us dessert? We haven’t ordered dessert – what gives?” She gave it to us and I thought – this is three different desserts. It’s really thoughtfully placed and it just didn’t have that vibe of a promotional thing. So we called her back and asked – “What’s your name?” and she said – “Barbie.” And there’s Barbie with different coloured dyed hair and different coloured nail polish on all her fingers and I said – “Barbie, we didn’t order dessert. What prompted you to do this?” She says – “You know, just your smile. You guys are all smiling on this table and I just kind of liked the vibe on this table.” She had no idea who was on the table. None of us had ever met her and it was an ordinary restaurant. It’s not like a fancy place or anything. And we said – “You just liked the vibe and you just decided to do that?” And we just honoured her generosity and she starts crying, and we were very moved by that whole interaction and we talked a bit.

And now all of a sudden the conversation on our table starts to skew from a VC to when she was in Puerto Rico – this woman – and then it’s time to pay the check, and two of us were fighting for it, like – “Who’s gonna pay?” and he looks at the check - this other guy, not this woman – there’s another guy, and he’s thinking I’ve done something goofy, because I would do, like go ahead and put it on my tab, because we do these kinds of things just for fun – and he said – “Nipun, what did you do?” I said – “I haven’t done anything.” He said it wasn’t the right amount. It should have been something like fifty, sixty or seventy dollars. It was seventeen dollars.

It turned out that Barbie was so moved that she says – “This is all the employee discount I can get, but I wanted to treat your table”. And seeing this, this woman friend of mine is in tears. This woman who has way more than all of us can even imagine is like – “This is what it was like when we had nothing, but we had everything.”

And all of this happened completely serendipitously. I wasn’t trying to create anything. We were just having a conversation. I didn’t ask for the dessert. It kind of came. It wasn’t like – oh, let’s open up our heart chakras – we were just having a normal Silicon Valley kind of a conversation, and then all of a sudden this lands, and all of sudden we have this deep kind of a thing which meant the world to her.

CE: And who knows what the impact of that gift that the waitress gave will be on this woman? It might be something that tips her into some new level of generosity, or it could be something that has enormous impact, and one thing that it points to for me is....like even with the guy with the lemon...if you hadn’t

had that experience your entire life would be different. And, how can you know? You can't know. It reinforces this view that I have that causality doesn't work the way that we think it does. And that the most powerful people in the world are not the ones who we think, conventionally speaking, are powerful. And like - if I'm going to be influential then I have to meet these people - the people with the big platforms and the big influence - but the powerful people could be someone like that waitress. And that person could be anybody. On a 500 year timescale we just have no idea how this plays out.

NM: This is it. This to me is the most inspiring thought - that this moment we can think that we're talking to these people and it's going to cause this ripple effect - but who even knows man? A few minutes before you got here my neighbour needed something, and she wasn't going to be in town and she's like - "Here's the key to my apartment, will you let workers come in and do this?" And to me that's all part of service space, that's all part of service, that's all part of existence. You just never know what's going to lead to what in the larger scheme of things. And the reason why I think this worldview is difficult is because it requires us to suspend our attachment to the outcomes, which means that you cannot take full ownership - well you don't know what the ultimate outcome of this is meant to be.

That's hard because we want feedback loops. The elders in native communities, whenever they make a decision, they are thinking seven generations down the road. Now our attention spans are like seven seconds. We're not thinking - "Oh my God, this is going to benefit somebody seven generations down the road" - our feedback loops have gotten narrower and narrower and so we want to see the immediacy...and that is what we have to let go of. If we let go of that, and the outcomes associated with that, then we're just in the process. Then we're just in each moment.

CE: And then we can listen to another prompting besides the calculated cost of benefits, and I think that it is important for one reason, because if we are guided only by the calculable cost of benefits, then the situation on this planet is hopeless. We need benefits that go beyond what we understand how to make happen - and to access that level of miracle, that level of causality. It's the only way forward.

NM: It's the Black Swan - that best-selling book right? Where all these major events in the history of humanity have never been... in hindsight, it always look as though that's exactly how it happened, but actually we've never been able to predict any significant events that have altered the course of human history. So I tend to feel that what Martin Luther King Junior said - "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it always bends towards justice" and I would say it necessarily bends towards compassion - that I have that faith that - yes, we

may have suffering along the way – we may have periods of great transition - we may have to go through this metamorphosis – but I tend to think that there is a conspiracy of nature to land us at the doorsteps of greater good.

CE: So, speaking of justice, I’m going to ask you a difficult political question.

NM: (Laughs) And if I can’t answer it I’ll say “Well Charles, what do you think?”

CE: So channeling my inner-curmudgeonly Marxist, I might say - “ Okay, well, all of this about gratitude and being grateful for what you have, etcetera, boy that sounds like an ideology that is custom-made to perpetuate the status quo. Because it facilitates the perpetuation of unjust systems, because the people who are being exploited – well, they can just be grateful for what they have.” Especially if you are a privileged person, by espousing the gratitude – as Thich Naht Hahn says – the gratitude for not having a toothache. Yeah, you’re being ripped off, you’re being exploited, eighty percent of your income is going towards rent, etc. etc...but be grateful. So that can’t be all to the story.

NM: Yes. Absolutely. A lot of people look at this concept of Small Acts of Kindness and they say that it is a great pacifier – not just for the privileged, even for the underprivileged. You can go in a village and say - “You should be happy with what you have. Guest is God. Why don’t you see the divine in all this suffering?” And if they do start to see that, then they say - “Oh wait a second, is this just a pacifier to keep the status quo intact?” This is a very legitimate criticism that a lot of people have, with even the work that we do, and I think that it is a theoretical criticism. I think in your head you can make that and then really the only defense against that is to say “well what do you believe in?” And you go where you believe, right?

But in practice – anyone who has practiced this law...to think that if you awaken this gratitude, that it is just going to help you say – “Oh, leave status quo as is” ...this is a person who has never studied Gandhi, has never studied Martin Luther King, has never studied Mother Theresa, has never studied Dalai Lama or Cesar Chavez. These people were changing the status quo, but they had a lot of gratitude. They were not dissatisfied. They were not coming at it from a place of anger.

And so if I look at social change that has inspired me and I say “Wow – what was the foundation of it?” I see it was actually compassion; it was actually gratitude. It was this awe for something that you couldn’t behold with your mind. It was this reverence for that. And those are the people that have changed the course of history on the planet. So theoretically you can say – “Look, you do small acts of love it will create inner transformation and that is going to stay resident to your little cocoon.” And, if someone tells me that I say “Yeah, it could

be” – but then you immediately know that this person hasn’t really tasted that. Because anyone who has really tasted that inner gratitude – you can only taste that gratitude when the boundaries between you and the other dissolve. And when the boundaries between me and the other dissolve, your pain becomes my pain. And I will resist that.

Gandhi resisted the oppression of the oppressive acts, – but he never resisted the person. He said “This act is wrong and I will resist that – not because I want independence for my country, but this is bad for *you* brother.” This was the basis of his entire movement. This is what he taught people on the salt march. He didn’t say “Go and take a whack from the British and be like a vegetable.” No he says – “Look the guy in the eye and say - man, I know you’re acting in an oppressive way but this is harming you. Certainly it will harm me in the next two seconds, but it’s harming you right now and I have compassion for you. May you be liberated from this. May I be liberated from this. May we both meet in a more wholesome place next time. Bless you.”

And then they whack them on the head, then they get taken on a stretcher to the hospital - thousands and thousands of people who lined up for that. These people had gratitude. They had compassion. They had this reverence for a larger force and they changed the history of the world.

So for those people who say - “We all want change towards this direction, but by what means?” – to me this is the means that inspires me – that speaks to me.

CE: Yeah, in a similar way - one way I think of it is that acts of generosity disrupt the fundamental story underlying civilization as we know it, which is the story of separation. They are an anomalous data point that says that it isn’t each for themselves; that it’s not a war of each against all; that human beings are not motivated by rational self-interest; and it also gives people something to serve – because receiving generosity or kindness, or compassion or forgiveness is a glimpse of the world as it could be – and without that pull, then the push of unjust circumstances, I don’t think, is enough for people to ever do anything but react in circle.

NM: You’re never going to create the exponential, non-linear radical innovation so to speak. You may have incremental changes. What Martin Luther King Junior says – “We sometimes change the nature of the problem and we call that progress.” This is not an exact quote by MLK, but he said something to that effect, and I think that’s sort of the conundrum that you might be left in if you try to push forth with anger. I think what a lot of these amazing change-makers have shown is that you can actually open yourself up to this radical place in yourself which dissolves the boundaries between me and you, and from that basis you are able to resist an action without resisting the person, and not react,

but actually respond to the situation and everyone is better off. That to me is a theory of change that really appeals. I'm not saying that's the only way – you know, if you don't like doing small acts of kindness – great. I don't need to have this feedback loop – I just feel great that I acted in the spirit of compassion here and now.

CE: You were telling me before we started about spending time with Sister Lucy who is serving the poorest of the poor in India – and you were referring to some of the people that she works with – people like orphans, abandoned in a trash can – things like that – and one thing that it brings up is this line of – “Well you should be grateful because other people are suffering even more.” That can become an aggressive thing, and I think that an alternative to that is basically saying – “Listen to this story and trust that, when this story comes into your being, that it will change who you are and you will become a person of more gratitude”. But the story can become an authoring – like here's a data point. And you don't even have to even say that. I think if the story can be presented in a way that is not actually...

NM: ... didactic. Like here is the story...the moral of the story...starting tomorrow.

CE: Yeah – not with that kind of agenda in it, but it is just making available all the data points. One of my favourite sayings in the last year has been something that is attributed to Chogyam Trungpa. He said “If you can hold the pain of the whole world in your heart while never lifting your gaze from the great eastern sun, then...you can make a proper cup of tea.”

NM: (Laughs) That is beautiful.

CE: And I think “a proper cup of tea” means “right action”, “skillful action”, and so to do that you have to encompass all of the data points, and if you are limited just to the horrible stuff, then you are going to be just as crippled in your ability to act wisely and accurately as you will if you are ignoring the horrible things.

NM: Yeah, it can be didactic in that sense. Theoretically you can say – “Oh, feel gratitude,” and then they should feel gratitude. Anyone who has been on the ground and has tried to evoke gratitude in people, you very clearly know that this is not a manufacturing mindset. You don't say “Here's the recipe and this is how we're going to get the whole world to be transformed”. It's actually a gardening metaphor; that it grows when the time ripens. So you have to have the capacity to wait until the time ripens.

Sister Lucy has been taking people off the streets...I'll tell you this story of Sister Lucy. She's going down the streets and she sees this woman who has been

traumatically abused and she's lost her mind, she's completely mute and she's walking naked on the streets. Nobody even wants to come near her. Sister Lucy stops her car, puts a shawl around her and brings her in. Turns out she's pregnant but she can't mother, and she's so traumatized that she doesn't speak a single word. So she can't say anything and she can't mother this child that she has just given birth to, and so Sister Lucy is just going to take care of them both. And she has hundreds and hundreds of such people that she is just infinitely taking care of. Now, do you think she's going to go to that woman who is mute, whom she has agreed to take care of for the rest of her life, and say to her - "You should be grateful, you should serve?" No.

But if you go to Sister Lucy and say "Do you have examples of women that you have taken off the streets in intense duress, in intense pain, and you have just given them love - you have just served them unconditionally - and somewhere, something starts to grow inside of them, and they start to come back to their senses, and they start to go and remember where they need to be. And they then feel this gratitude and end up serving society?" She will say - "Yes".

And I have met some of these people that she has picked up at the age of five and now they are twenty-three, and I ask them - "How do you have such a big heart?" and a lot of them, invariably, will say - "I met this one woman named Sister Lucy..."

And Sister Lucy is just one example of many who work on the ground in this way. So people who do that know that this is not the way to preserve status quo - me giving love to that woman who is so traumatized is not a way to say - "Please, it's okay, everyone can do this." That's a really silly way to view the situation.

CE: It's actually a kind of intellectual escapism. It's the opposite of what the critic says. It is the critic who is perpetuating the status quo by taking refuge in this ideology and not actually acting on what his hearts is telling him to do.

NM: That's a great point. I agree with that. I'll tell you another Sister Lucy story that totally blew me away. There was one kid that nobody knew how to discipline. He was off the streets and they go to this place and no-one can take care of him, and they send him here...finally they said - "Go to Sister Lucy". And Sister Lucy never says "No". The tagline for her organisation is "There's always room for one more". So she took in this kid and it's very hard and the staff has to deal with all these discipline issues. He's in 11th Grade.

One day he comes in - super hungry - and he goes in the fridge. They're all sharing this home, and it's someone's birthday so the cook has made cake for everybody. And this guy opens the fridge, sees the cake and devours half the

cake. The cook is furious – gives him a lecture. The guy is violent and slaps the cook who is more than twice his age – you just don't do that, right? But he can't hit him back. All the staff come together and go to Sister Lucy and say – "We need to throw this guy back onto the streets. If you don't, then all seven of us are quitting this home. (They have different homes all around. This was one home with seven staff and it's very hard to find people to staff such an operation). Sister Lucy talked to the staff and talked to him. This guy is very tough and at some point she looks at him, she gives him a hug. She says - "I want you to know I love you." This guy starts crying.

Years pass. He stayed. He ended up going out getting a job. He came back just a few weeks ago with his first salary. He said "I want to go and give this to the organisation that supported me". He comes back and he's talking to other kids like him and he says "Let me tell you this story." He tells the story and he says - "That day...if I had left this place I was going to join a terrorist group. I was going to get a gun, learn how to shoot and kill all the staff, but you know what saved me? It's that one woman sitting in that corner who gave me a hug and who told me those three words – that I love you. It was unconditional love. I felt it, I cried, and that is the reason I now have a job and I am a law-abiding citizen today. So don't take those small things for granted. Don't take those 'I love you's' for granted."

And this is one of many stories, and you realise that humanity actually...who knows this story – was it on CNN? You've never heard it. I've never heard it. And there are such people on this planet that are continuously tilling this soil for all this virtue. And I think humanity rests on the shoulders of these people.

CE: Totally. These are people who are totally unknown and they are holding the fabric of reality together so that the people we think are important can even do their thing. Reality would dissolve...this world would dissolve into chaos if it weren't for these silent people. Sister Lucy happens to be well-known, but there are people who are way more obscure than that. And another thing that comes to me with these stories is...it's not like she has super-powers. So what she is doing is fundamentally available to everybody. And what if even one percent of the world were acting from a place that she's acting from? The whole planet would be transformed. All of our problems would evaporate, overnight almost.

NM: One hundred percent. And she has 7th grade education. That's all she's studied. So you look at her and think - "Maybe I should have dropped out in 7th Grade."

CE: I often encourage people to drop out (laughs). So the question then – we were talking before about this "accomplishment" mindset. So again, this accomplishment mindset grabs onto this and says – "How can I become like

Sister Lucy?" It becomes this "how to" when all we really need is to take in the medicine of those stories and trust them to enter us and work us. It's that simple. So thank you for bringing those stories to our ears.

NM: And I think that is the conclusion that I also arrive at – that at the end of the day what is the sum total, net effect of all of this? I don't know. You know I've dedicated my life to it. You have too, and we can point to certain things, but ultimately, what it has inspired me to do is to take that next step – with a little gentleness – with a little bit more compassion – with a little bit more mindfulness, that maybe this is a seed for something else, maybe a tree whose fruits I will not be there to witness – and that's okay. And that's kind of liberating actually, right? It's a beautiful feeling.

CE: There are two more things I want to ask you. They're both P.C. So we have that example of Sister Lucy – most people would say – "Well you've got to set a boundary with this guy." So we reference that story - and then what about the woman with the abusive husband and giving him another chance and so on and so forth – and I need to set a boundary?

NM: Yes of course.

CE: So my question is, how do you identify the times not to give a gift; to withhold a gift. How do you make that distinction – to know when to give and what to give?

NM: Even Sister Lucy – there are many cases where that is not the thing for her to pick up and embrace. That's the weakness of a story – when you tell one story you assume that to infinity, when actually it's more what's the ground in which that story is arising and how do we go into that ground? And in this ground what do you see? You see compassion. You see equanimity. You see this great joy. You have this peace – but you also have that ground meeting the conditions of that moment, and the capacities that you are endowed with in that moment.

Like, if I want to do something with money but I've left my wallet at home, I can't do something with money in that moment. So what are you endowed with in that moment? And your intent is there. The feeling in your heart is there. You want to be of service, but maybe you only have certain kinds of capacities in that moment – so where your intent meets your capacities, there's this other thing of skillfulness. How do you be skillful? What does it mean to know the right response in the right situation, and that's contextual. So you cannot have seven steps to skillful action. Every moment has its own skillful action. So how do you tap into that space in yourself where you're connected with your wholesome intent? You're able to be aware of as many data points that are accessible – and

there are a lot, and they increase as your awareness increases, and then to say – “How do I practice so that I can grow in skillfulness?”

And it takes practice. And so there is no recipe for this kind of thing. You know the story of Julio Diez –this is one of my favourite stories around skillfulness. This guy is going home. His name is Julio. It’s in New York, and every day he gets off one station before and always gets a burrito. And one day he gets off to get his burrito and this guy comes up with a knife and says – “Give me all your money”. And he says – “Okay” and he’s about to leave and he says – “Hey kid, it’s a little cold, do you want my jacket too?” And he says – “Yeah, it is cold, I’ll take the jacket.” And he’s about to leave and Julio turns to him and says – “Hey kid, I’m about to get a burrito, do you want to join me?” and the kid says – “Okay, why not?”

CE: How can you say no to that?

NM: And then it’s time to pay the check, and Julio says – “You know, I would pay for you kid, but you’ve got my wallet.” And the kid gives him the wallet. And Julio says – “Can I have your knife too?” and the kid gives him the knife.

Now you take that lesson and you say – “Okay everybody, please, whenever there’s a robbery, give them extra and invite them to dinner.” Wrong lesson. And you look at it and you say – “Look, can any corporation copy this and let’s change all the muggers in New York?” No.

CE: It doesn’t scale.

NM: NGOs – No. Government Agency – No. You’re not going to be able to do this unless you have access to the fertile ground that Julio had access to. And this is not to glorify that one person, because maybe he had access to that skillfulness in that moment, but it doesn’t mean he’ll have access to skillfulness in any other moment. Maybe he goes home and has a hard time with his wife, but he was able to be skillful in that moment. So how do we practice in a way that we grow in skillfulness over time?

CE: That’s a good question, because what I think about stories like that is that they are a kind of medicine that if you don’t jump to – “What is the lesson in that story and how do I do it?” You just receive the story that just prepares the ground from which Julio acted in that moment. And I’m curious what you would say beyond that. What is the practice?

NM: I would say, before even the practice, I think stories – medicine stories as they say – I think stories one received in that way helped create the ground and that’s just one ingredient. That’s just one doorway. If you put a seed in the

ground, how many nutrients does it need? Does it need X amount of sun? Does it need X amount of water? Or does it need a combination of all these things based on these criteria that we don't know? And in that sense – yes, maybe a story is a tipping point. Maybe it's one of the many factors. We don't know. And so what we have to do is constantly be in service to this soil inside of us. And what is it nourished by? It is nourished by all these different examples – by our practices, and by an awakening of our heart – so hands, head, heart. And what happens? "How do we last?" I think is the real question in the practice - when you've planted the seed and the seed's not growing. And there's a certain amount of time and that could be a day, a month, or ten years. How do you look at yourself in year number five and say "Man I've been trying all this but I feel like I'm going uphill. How do I give myself that resilience?"

And for me, what has been a very critical ingredient – and these are actually the Buddha's words. The Buddha said - on this very long path and he's not talking five or ten years, he's talking a long, long time – he says there is one resource that is always going to be helpful to you – only one. Not this method, not this technique not this teaching – it is the company of noble friends – that is the whole path.

So how do you stay in a community of noble friends – of people seeking to be noble? And that will give you the resilience to wait until the seed ripens. And that is where inner transformation also meets outer community, and hence external impact. You cannot be awakened by navel-gazing. It is just not possible.

CE: So enlightenment is a gift too.

NM: It is absolutely grace. Anyone who has been awakened – they all say the same thing. It happens when the conditions ripen. It doesn't happen when I want it.

CE: So I'm still implicitly asking you to offer a practice...

NM: So I think community is the practice. If you want to go deeper inside - if you want to learn to reconnect your soil with your talents and allow that to manifest in a skillful way in each moment– I think the way you get there is by learning how to wait. And the way you wait is not by your own infinite patience – I mean if you have that, fantastic, then you don't need to listen to this (laughs) – but if you don't have that, what the Buddha recommended is to be in a community of noble friends.

What does it mean to have a community of noble friends? Which means be in service to other people. If you are in service...if I give you anything...if I give you tea, and you receive my tea, there is an invisible bond that is created. If

you are in a web of these invisible bonds then when you fall, you won't fall on the cement where it's going to hurt so much and you'll have to get up, it'll be more like a trampoline where you fall and...boom...you rise back up, way higher.

And so you look at it and you say, how can I be of service? And it's not to be in service to noble people – it's to a noble intent in that person. Even if that person has done all kinds of things that you wouldn't approve of - in that moment, by a certain happenstance, maybe that noble mindset has arisen. And I'm going to be in service to that. I offer something to that part of you. And when I offer it to that part of you, I'm actually doing myself a favour because now I created that bond to that. So for me the practice to grow in skillfulness is to stay the course for continuing small acts of kindness, until creative wisdom arises - and to stay the course you need to have community.

CE: I've been offering seed questions and seed mantras in this course. Some of them are along the lines of "give attention to the part of you that is gratitude" or applying it to someone else too. Like with Julio – he saw something in that teenager, and spoke to that, and invited that. So what you were talking about – cultivating this community of noble friends – a community - it depends on being able to see that. Perhaps the practice is to practice seeing the gift, or the desire to give, or the innate gratitude and generosity of other people who you come across – to see them as a divine giver – to see yourself as a divine giver. So it's a practice of seeing.

NM: It's a practice of seeing. I would agree with that, and I would say it's a practice of honoring that through a small act of kindness. I saw a Native American elder once. He was a very big personality and something in me moved, and I said – "Look this person is a very noble person and I want to be in service." So right after his talk we were all going to lunch and I went up to him and I said – "Chief, can I carry your bag while you walk to lunch?" And he looked at me and he knew exactly what I was doing. Through serving him, I was serving myself, and he let me carry his bag. And it is allowing me, because he didn't need to, but he said – "Okay, I will be that one extra invisible strand of service".

So the practice is in seeing that in other people when they are in that state, when that part of them is activated and in honoring that, through a small act of service. And in this sense, it's like your practice is small acts of service and your resiliency to stay on the course is actually small acts of service – so it's a virtuous loop that just keeps on reinforcing itself. Because the more I do that act, the more resiliency I have to do those acts and it becomes this virtuous loop and everything changes – as you know and as I know. So to me that's the practice.

CE: I feel you may have a little bit of a mis-impression of me. I don't think I am anything special as far as gift, or small acts of kindness, or generosity goes.

NM: Well you talk about gift – so I'm guessing you practice those small acts of kindness, right?

CE: Well, to some extent, but not to a degree that would impress me.

NM: (Laughs) Well maybe you have high standards. I don't know.

CE: I'm learning and, like I was saying before, I'm kind of in this territory and getting familiar – and is it safe? And cultivating the habits of being in that territory. I'm not trying to be excessively modest here – the truth is that in certain aspects I am very highly developed and in other aspects, totally shrunken and...petty.

NM: And who isn't that true for? Unless you're awakened like the Buddha, we're all going to have parts of us that are still developing and parts of us that are strong, but I feel like bringing that mindfulness of recognizing that every small act is a deposit into the same whole – into that same field of consciousness – seeing that more and more clearly.

Look – like you started by saying you didn't know anything about service space. We've known each other for a long time now, and if I wanted to, I could lead with that, but if you had to say – "Look, I know the kind of person he is. I know the kinds of things he values, but I don't know the kind of work he does." And I've been doing service space for twenty years, right? And even after the talks I would give, you can frame them in so many different ways. It's not hard to get people to...the take away is they want to volunteer for service space. Or that service space is amazing. But for me the take-away is the compassion is amazing – that compassion is our resonant state – and if we align with that and just see every moment as an opportunity – and it doesn't mean we're going to take all of them. I'm not ready to see everything in that way either.

For me it has been a very empowering way to look at life, much more so than achieving stuff, creating more organisations, getting awards, doing this and that. I mean that is all there and it creates its own ripples, and whatever's given to you, you make skillful use of it, but ultimately – like Mother Theresa said – you can do no great things, only small things with great love, I've really come to see the value in that through all my little experiments. And to me this is as great as anything else.

Even if I pass away tomorrow, or tonight, it's great that we were able to look each other in the eyes, share this hour together, smile and bless each other.

And it's not like I'm perfect or you're perfect, but there is a part of us that is capable of that kind of love which is selfless, and when it meets, I think one plus one is greater than two. There is something else that arises and that goes to the field. It may not come back to you or to me, and that's good enough.

CE: Yes. Beautiful. Thank you.

NM: Thank you. Honoured. With a thank you to all of you as well.

CE: I just wondered...we could end it with this, but does anyone have a burning thing you want to say?

Guest 1: It's beautiful. In a way it's very interesting because I almost feel like the message was just for me, but of course this is going out to everybody and in a way – the way that you guys are communicating, and what you guys are talking about – at this time right now it is for me, and everybody to hear. So I appreciate the message that you guys are giving out there.

NM: And through words it's sort of captured here, right? But the presence that we all feel here...there are no bounds to this. You can't put this in somebody's pocket. And maybe it's not that great – who knows? – there's that possibility too. Who knows? To be in just that state of surrender to whatever grace is going to flow through.

CE: I don't know. Maybe the camera was off the whole time. It was such a good one you know...

NM: (Laughs) That's really great.

Guest 2: I have a question before we close. Maybe without going into a specific story, but if either of you could explain to some of us new to the gift economy – because there seems to be this stream of miracles that happens, the synchronicities. You start giving and it opens you up to more guidance, and you receive more. Is there anything from that perspective?

CE: That is one of the questions I was going to ask you actually. I have a theory about it. Basically, when you step into the gift then you are stepping into a different universe with different operating principles. So synchronicity is something that is meaningful, but you didn't make it happen. You didn't exercise a force on the world to make it happen, therefore, it happened as a gift. Synchronicity is a gift. I think it comes along with a letting go of being in control of the results of what you're doing, and often a lot of people experience synchronicities when they either voluntarily, or involuntarily, let go of control of

their lives. And they're in a position of vulnerability, and then amazing things happen. That's part of the way I understand it.

NM: That's beautiful. I think, from my experience, to add to that – when you give you are shifting from “me” to “we”, implicitly. Because I'm giving to you, which means a part of me is really honoring that “we” – and when we fall into the “we” there is this deep sense of interconnection, and that really quiets the mind. And when a mind is quiet, it doesn't need other things. It's content. In that contentment, and in that blurring of the lines, you start to surrender to that, or you start to allow grace to flow through. And there is the synchronicity of – “Hey, I was looking for this, and this happened, and it's amazing.” But that is still a one-to-one sort of view of synchronicity. Like - I needed money and somebody just dropped a hundred on the streets and that's amazing synchronicity.

But what if you actually got some suffering in return which then led to another whole ripple effect which ended up creating...you know - Gandhi's thrown off the train. He's not happy about that, but all of a sudden, that ends up changing the course of the world. So to just see everything as synchronicity – that even if you are not the recipient, or even the doer...maybe you are somebody who facilitated something – that it's all in divine order, in divine time. That everything is perfect as is, or as Suzuki Roshi – the Zen master – said it really well - “Everything is perfect as is, and it could use a little improvement”. And I feel that is really true...when you see everything as this grand, unfolding of grace, then it is synchronous. There is no other. You can only have synchronous if you have non-synchronous. You could only have a miracle if you didn't see everything else as a miracle, which means that you have a bias to see certain things, as - “Oh my god this worked out!”

And a lot of people in the gift economy, they ask – and I'm sure they ask you as well – “How do you make this work?”

CE: Yeah - “It's not working.” Right?

NM: And there's no such thing. In the sense that it's helping you - you do small acts to the degree that you are capable of doing – to the degree that you have the conditions that allow you to act in this way, and you trust that that ripple effect will at some point create equilibrium. And when that will happen? I don't know.

CE: I think that it also is a stage-by-stage unfolding, because you might enter a new level of living in the gift, and perceive synchronicities where they hadn't been there before, but if I take more familiarity with even a bigger territory of gift before the miracle of everything at every moment becomes apparent to

you...So this isn't something to say like - "I'm going to try really hard to see the miracle in everything." I would say that that perception also comes as a gift.

NM: I agree. And maybe perception isn't even the right word. That "experience". I think the way you're calling it – it's a multi-dimensional thing. It's not just that I perceive this as a miracle, I perceive this as a oneness – it's actually a much more multi-dimensional engagement with that moment, and you can say "experience", but maybe even words fall short there.

CE: I want to say one more thing about doing it to Gandhi – and "it's not working". I think that it might by-pass something to say – "Well, it is working but you just don't know it." What I've discovered is that the things that might happen that I could interpret as "it's not working" can reveal contradictions within myself. So if I'm not fully unattached, and suppose I give a workshop as a gift and you pay what you feel is right, and nobody's donating anything...and I know that guy is really rich...and if I feel that resentment then that clues me into know that maybe it wasn't really a gift to begin with. Maybe I was just doing this because I was not daring to charge money for this because I didn't really feel that it was worth it. So the "not working" results can be a gift in the sense that they are showing me something about myself that had been invisible before.

NM: Absolutely. And that's the way in which it's constantly working. And it's not just the gift. I think this is just our life – it's taking us to the doorsteps of greater good through every experience, every moment. But I think the onus is on us to tune in and to say - "Am I ready to learn the lesson from this moment?" Even if it works out incredibly in your favour and you're on CNN live tomorrow...

CE: Then you know it's not working out...

NM: (Laughs) well, whatever, if you find a million bucks on the road – can you hold it on the same ground as everything else and say "Am I really learning the lesson from it, or am I just reacting to a certain craving I had for a predisposed destination that I really badly wanted to go to?" Can I just look at it and say "Okay?" There are so many times in my life where I have actually let go of the golden handcuffs, so to speak – where it seems like everybody else wants this, and it's like - "Wow that's amazing Charles! You got here," and you're thinking, - "Well, I'm not so sure that I need to hold on to this," and you let go and you actually arrive at an even grander place in yourself.

So really I think that the onus is on us to look at each moment in that way, and say - "Am I really experiencing this to the greatest of my capacities? And then can I deepen that awareness a little bit more?" And I think that to the degree that we embrace each moment in that way – that's a miracle. And that's grace. We allow grace to then flow through us.

As Mother Theresa would say, "You become a pencil in the hands of God." She says that's prayer. Prayer is not asking. Prayer is actually to become a pencil, to become an instrument for this larger flow to go through us. I think that truly is a miracle and, when we step into that miracle in any moment, I think that's gift economy working out. When we don't, we probably invite a little suffering, and will ultimately lead to...

CE: Which is a gift too. So it's all a gift.

NM: (Laughs) Yeah, but it takes a lot, and I'm grateful that our paths have crossed – all our paths – even you guys here in this room. It's a blessing because we need each other. It's a long way to awaken all those broken parts of ourselves, certainly those parts of myself, and to say - "How do I expand my heart a little bit more?" And if we have all served each other, we'll be able to last a little bit longer. I'm grateful that our paths have intersected for so long and will continue to do so. So thank you.

CE: Yes. Thank you.

Ends