

KRISHNA DAS

KD OPENS UP ABOUT THE GRAMMYS, HIS GURU'S GRACE, AUSCHWITZ, AND THE SECRET OF HIS RED FLANNEL SHIRT

THE RECENT RECIPIENT OF THE FIRST GRAMMY-NOMINATED KIRTAN ALBUM, AN INTERNATIONALLY TELEVISED PERFORMANCE AT THE CEREMONY, AND THE SUBJECT OF THE NEW DOCUMENTARY BY JEREMY FRINDELL, *ONE TRACK HEART: THE STORY OF KRISHNA DAS*, THIS "KIRTAN ROCKSTAR" IS KEEPING HIS HEAD SCREWED ON AND HIS HEART OPEN.

Zoë Kors: First thing that I want to say is, congratulations on your Grammy nomination and the performance. How was that experience for you?

Krishna Das: Well, there's the nuts and bolts of the performance, so to speak, and then there's the actual practice of chanting. The performance was pretty interesting because we had exactly five minutes to do the song and we couldn't go over, so we had to plan it out very particularly—what speed we were going to do it, how many times we were going to repeat it. Usually, I go on and on. Nobody can stop me.

ZK: Well, right. You are bringing what is essentially a spiritual practice to the world stage and presenting it as entertainment. People call you "the kirtan rock star." In some respects there is a little bit of a dichotomy there.

KD: That dichotomy is in our heads, you know. We are just here, right? We are just people doing our thing. And the most important aspect of anything we do is our motivation, why we do it.

ZK: And why do you do what you do?

KD: To save my ass.

ZK: Say more.

KD: To save my heart. Every day. This is what I do to keep my head screwed on semi-straight and keep my heart open. Whenever I sing, that's why I sing. Whether it's at the Grammys, whether it's in the bathroom, whether it's in front of 10,000 people or three people, by my guru's grace, my head stays in that place.

ZK: "By your guru's grace." I'm curious about this idea. Neem Karoli

Baba devotees often use the phrase "Maharaji's will." So when we surrender to the guru, are we sort of abdicating our own responsibility for ourselves?

KD: Well, this is a humungous issue. It's not easy to talk about it. Because the concepts involved are philosophical, but there is this other thing which is entirely experiential. We all inhabit our lives in different ways, to some degree. We see ourselves a certain way, and based on how we see ourselves, that's how we see the world. Until you are fully enlightened, you can never know what another person's reality is like for them. All we can know is our own subjective version of reality. That's the way we go through our lives. Everybody.

So when we start talking about gurus, first of all we're starting to talk about something that can't be talked about, in the sense that you can never really know what a guru is as long

as you are imprisoned by your own thoughts and circular ego. The true guru is someone who's transcended all that. And we don't know anything about that. It's as if—how many colors are there? Red, orange, yellow, blue, green, indigo, violet. Seven colors, is that right? There is an eighth color that we don't have the sense apparatus to see or experience.

ZK: I love that metaphor.

KD: Can you imagine what it would be like to all of a sudden see another color that nobody else sees?

ZK: I have goosebumps.

KD: Yeah, it's like that. For instance, the same thing can happen to different people, and they can have a completely different reaction to it. It's inexplicable why somebody can lose a leg and it doesn't effect them at all emotionally; and another person can lose a foot and be destroyed for the rest of their lives. So when we start to talk about gurus, we're talking about beings who actually know what this is all about. They know who we were, where we came from, and where we're going. They are not imprisoned in a selfish or self-centered view of the universe. It gets so complicated so quickly, but simply put, when you fall in love, nobody has to tell you. You know what you feel.

Now, when you meet your guru or a being who knows, who is no longer loving, but has become love, a being who is sitting in truth, and in compassion and kindness for all beings—you know. When I met my guru, I knew. And it was before I met him physically, actually.

ZK: Really?! Tell me.

KD: Yeah, first I met Ram Dass. He came back from India. And the minute I walked into the room with him, not knowing that much about him, and without a word being spoken, I knew that whatever it was I was looking for was real. And this was a really, really, life-changing moment.

ZK: Wow! And you say that you knew what you were looking for, you felt a longing?

KD: I didn't know what I was looking for, but I knew whatever it was that I was looking for was real. There really was something to find. And I didn't know what it was; I wouldn't have been able to name it at that point.

ZK: Can you name it now?

KD: I can describe it now. I can say, "unconditional love." I can say, "unbearable compassion for every being in the universe." I can say, "total, absolute wisdom."



ZK: So Maharaji's Will...

KD: First of all, let me say, everybody who says, "Oh, it's Maharaji's Will"—they might not know what the f*ck they're talking about. It could be a cop out. It could be just bullshit. A way of not dealing with their own hang-ups and limitations. But it could also be a certain kind of awareness of that other color. You never know, and you don't have to know, because it's what your world looks like to you that is important. It's within your world that things will unfold and intuitive understandings will open up. Even if somebody tells us something, the hit, the light goes on inside of

the light comes on for one quarter of a second. And in that instant you see there's a door in the corner of the room. Now you know where to go, and nothing's going to stop you. Until that light comes on, we don't know what direction to go. But once that light comes on, you just know. You don't necessarily know it in your toe or your ear or this chakra or that chakra—you know it in your life, you know it. And then everything in your life mobilizes to get you through the door.

ZK: You described what you are looking for as "unbearable compassion for all beings." I know that you recently visited

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us, not out there. We learn and understand everything within ourselves.

ZK: Where in your body does that light shine inside of you? Where's that spark when you reach that new awareness?

KD: Everywhere. It changes your life. Everything is different all of a sudden. Let's say you wake up in a dark room. You don't remember how you got there. You have no clue. You might knock into the walls trying to get up, because it's pitch black. And then

Auschwitz. Can you describe your experience moving towards a space of compassion in what was clearly a very charged place, where tremendous suffering and pain went down?

KD: Well, there's a lot that I could say about that. But a couple of things. I went to Auschwitz with Bernie Glassman, who's a Zen master. He goes there every year as a spiritual practice of what he calls "bearing witness." We're not talking about getting caught in any particular emotional version of that story

or your reactions to it. This is why it's such hard work. Real compassion is not emotional. Real compassion is based on the experience that all beings, which might appear separate, are actually a part of my own body, and I am a part of the body of the universe. We are not separate. So if one being hurts, I also hurt. If you stub your toe, you don't need to dialogue yourself to be good to your foot, do you? When you see things that clearly, there's no dialogue or emotional manipulation that you need to do to extend compassion to that being, because that being is a part of you, and if that being hurts, you hurt.

Now, there's another very important part, since you mentioned it. When I was there, at one point, it was very clear to me that if I had been born in Germany with a family of Nazis and if I had been raised with those beliefs, there was very little chance that I wouldn't be exactly like all those guards and all those people who tortured everybody. That I was no different than those people, no better at all in any way. It was my karmic circumstance that I didn't have to go through that in this life; I was born somewhere else under different circumstances. But if I had been born there at that time, I can't tell you that I would have done anything differently than those people had done. You can't prove that to me. So what does that lead to? That leads to compassion for the victimizers, also. You see, they were born into a situation, they had no control over that. They themselves are victims.



gathering that might have happened that way. We were so burnt out. I had just come back from India and then got on a plane and done a workshop for the weekend, and then got on a plane and gone to L.A. I was too busy to go at all, but when they invited me to sing, I thought, this is an opportunity that I shouldn't pass up. An opportunity to present the chanting to people, make them more aware of it. And so I thought, well, I better go.

KD: Chanting.

ZK: What makes you feel vulnerable?

KD: Chanting.

ZK: I love it. I love that.

KD: It's the main thing in my life, you know. In 1994, twenty-one years had gone by since Maharaji had left his body, and I wasn't doing anything at all to help myself, and I was in very, very bad shape. I was really sinking, really bad. All of a sudden I knew—like a lightning bolt hit me—I knew that if I did not start chanting with people, that I would never be able to clean out the dark corners of my own heart. I knew it with every cell in my body and mind. It was the only rope being thrown to this drowning man. And that's when you asked me at the beginning—I chant to save my miserable ass. That's what I do. I chant to save my heart. Every time I sit down, that's what I'm doing.

I'm reconnecting, I'm deepening, I'm opening, I'm releasing negativity and negative thoughts and all the limitations I carry around with me—again and again and again and again and again and again. And again! And that's the only thing that keeps me alive.

ZK: And how lucky are we that we get to bear witness to your spiritual practice?!

KD: Well, it takes two to tango! I need everybody to sing with me.

ZK: It's a privilege to tango with you, Krishna Das.

KD: Thank you, Zoë.

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ZK: One of the things that I say: the world is my altar and life is my practice, so whether it's the person who cuts me off in the car or the cashier at the supermarket who's rude to me—in each instance, we are presented with an opportunity to find compassion rather than take the reactive, emotional perspective.

KD: Now, compassion is a college education. It's a doctorate.

ZK: I've been curious to ask you if you ran into any celebrities backstage at the Grammys who were at all interested in chanting or Neem Karoli Baba.

KD: No, I didn't, I didn't meet anybody. Unfortunately, I didn't go to the one

ZK: I'm so glad you did. And I'm so glad you wore your red flannel.

KD: [laughter] It's not a shirt. It's actually painted onto me.

ZK: I have to confess, I picture you getting out of bed in the morning in your red flannel feetie pajamas and padding over to your altar to chant a little bit.

KD: [laughing] Something like that, yeah.

ZK: What makes you come most alive?

KD: Chanting.

ZK: How do you stay centered when you're on the road?