

THE DANCE OF CHOICE AND CHOICELESSNESS

SATISH KUMAR

In his youth, Satish Kumar chose to walk an 8,000-mile peace pilgrimage. Today he is an advocate for ecological and spiritual values. Here are some of his thoughts on making choices within a larger context of acceptance.

Life is an existential dance of choice and choicelessness. In the Hindu temples of South India we find the beautiful figure of Shiva, dancing in the circle of fire. The fire represents the feminine energy; the circle represents the force of nonlinear life itself. Day and night dance together, black and white, feminine and masculine, earth and heaven, and nature and culture are all in a cosmic dance. So is choice and choicelessness. We make choices within the context of a choiceless existence.

I was born in India, but I did not choose to be an Indian. I did not choose my mother nor my father, at least not consciously. I did not choose my brothers and sisters nor my neighbors. I did not choose to speak the language of my mother, it came to me. I was brought up in a given context. I chose to become a monk. Later I chose to leave the monastic order. I chose to work for peace and nonviolence. I could have chosen to work in the family business; instead I decided to walk around the world experiencing the oneness of the Earth and diversity of cultures. So there is choice.

But there is also choicelessness. An acorn cannot choose to be an ash tree. An apple cannot choose to

become a pear. A parrot cannot choose to be a peacock. If someone said to a fish: "Milk is lovelier than water, so choose milk, come and live here in a milk pond," would a fish choose milk? No. Similarly humans have to accept their humanity unconditionally. Such acceptance brings harmony. When we are able to go with the flow, we can let go.

Such choicelessness gives birth to unconditional love. Love is choiceless. I love my mother without thinking; I should do the same to everyone; whites and blacks, Hindus and Muslims, Israelis and Palestinians and all the other groups, races, and religions. I have no choice but to love, respect and help. Love is not an optional extra. To love or not to love is not a matter of choice. I love everyone and everything; all beings, human and nonhuman. There I have no choice and I make no choice. Of course, I can make choices in the ways of expressing my love.

We are born with our own unique gifts; the *Bhagavad Gita* calls it *swadharma*, which means being the natural self. The unity of life manifests in millions of forms but each manifestation has its own particular contribution, each manifestation performs a particular movement of the dance, and that movement is given and yet there is room for choice and improvisation. Choicelessness is not fatalism, it is not passive. It is an acceptance of reality; it is a way to follow my bliss and my vocation. I need to understand and accept my natural calling and then make choices within the given

CHOICE CHOICELESSNESS

Spiritual Perspective



ZOE HERSEY. PHOTO: ALAN CUENCA

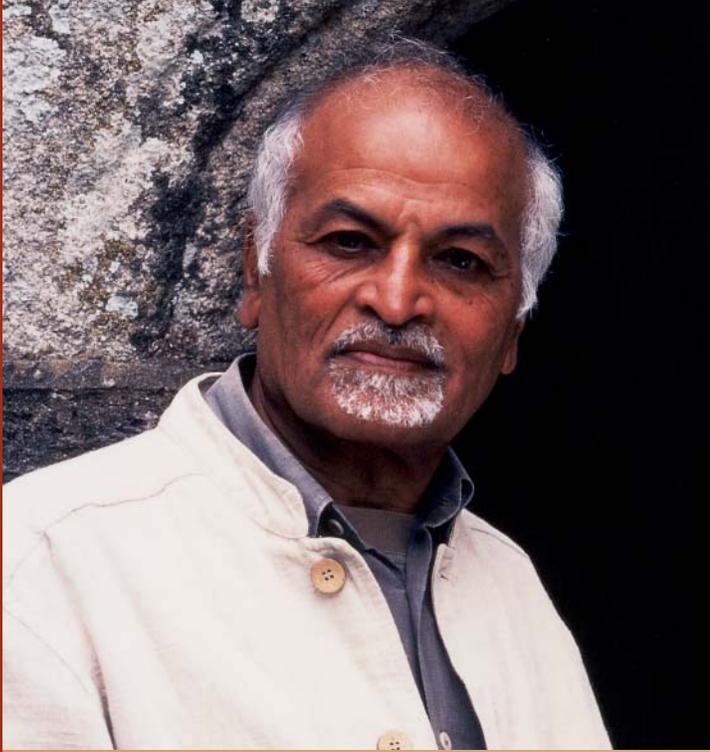


PHOTO: SARAH KING

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When he was only nine years old, Satish Kumar renounced the world and joined the wandering brotherhood of Jain monks. Dissuaded from his path by an inner voice at the age of eighteen, he became a campaigner for land reform, working to turn Gandhi's vision of a renewed India and a peaceful world into reality.

Fired by the example of Bertrand Russell, he undertook an 8,000-mile peace pilgrimage, beginning in India and ending in the US, without any money, through deserts, mountains, storms, and snow. It was an adventure during which he was thrown into jail in France, faced a loaded gun in America—and delivered packets of “peace tea” to the leaders of the four nuclear powers.

In 1973, he settled in England, and took the editorship of *Resurgence* magazine. He has been the editor ever since (30+ years!), and he is the guiding spirit behind a number of ecological, spiritual, and educational ventures in Britain. He founded the Small School in

Hartland, a pioneering secondary school which brings into its curriculum ecological and spiritual values.

In 1991, Schumacher College, a residential international center for the study of ecological and spiritual values, was founded, of which he is the director of programs.

Satish was a co-founder of *Jain Spirit*—an international magazine “sharing Jain values globally” In partnership with Vandana Shiva, Satish established Bija Viyapeeth (School of the Seed), an international college for sustainable living in India, at which he teaches a week-long course on Gandhian Values each year.

Following Indian tradition, in his fiftieth year, he undertook another pilgrimage. Again carrying no money, he walked to the holy places of Britain—Glastonbury, Canterbury, Lindisfarne, and Iona. Meeting old friends and making new ones along the way, this pilgrimage was a celebration of his love of life and nature.

In 2000, Satish Kumar was awarded an honorary doctorate in education from the University of Plymouth, and in 2001, an honorary doctorate in literature from the University of Lancaster.

In November 2001, Kumar was presented with the Jannalal Bajaj International Award for Promoting Gandhian Values Abroad.

Satish teaches, lectures, and runs workshops internationally on reverential ecology, holistic education, and voluntary simplicity.

His autobiography, *Path Without Destination*, was published by William Morrow in the United States in 1999. The paperback edition was printed in March 2000.

The book is published in England by Green Books under the title *No Destination*; and a second book, *You Are, Therefore I AM—A Declaration of Independence*, was also published by Green Books in 2002.

context. This provides me with room for creativity, for imagination, and for improvisation. Emphasis on choice leads to anxiety. But complete adherence to choicelessness leads to passivity. It is the appropriate mix and moment by moment acceptance of choice and choicelessness that creates the most dynamic dance of life.

I don't choose to be compassionate, I am compassionate. I would never wish to be in a situation where I would be forced to choose between compassion and cruelty. I am not compassionate because it is a legal requirement or a social norm, or a political expediency; I am compassionate because I am compassionate. Neither do I have a choice nor do I wish to have a choice in this matter. It is a matter of being rather than doing. Being good is a choiceless state. Doing good is where I make choices. I enjoy the complementarity of being and doing. But my doing flows out of my being.

Doors open, opportunities arise and things happen. I have no control over all that. But I do make choices to enter the open doors and avail myself of the opportunities presented. Falling in love is choiceless, but proposing to marry the beloved, or not, is the choice I can make.

In the Oriental view of life, the basic nature of all beings and particularly human beings is good. We are born in choiceless gentleness. The moment I was born, mother fed me with her breast milk. The relationship between the baby and the mother is a natural relationship of gentleness. Then during the course of life I am influenced by my family, my community, society, culture, religions, education, commerce, and so on. That is where the dialectical dance between choice and choicelessness comes in. Then in the evening of life I embrace death in choiceless gentleness. I am surrounded by my family, friends, doctors, and nurses. All is forgiven and forgotten. Gentleness is all around. I embrace the choiceless death.

Choice is a matter of judgment. Judging is a double-

edged sword. On the one hand, the perennial wisdom of the *Bible* guides us not to judge so that we may not be judged; on the other hand, in day-to-day life we need to make judgments. A life of choicelessness is a life of acceptance. We need to receive whatever is given to us during the process of the universe and the natural order as a gift. We receive it with gratitude and with joy. And we flow in harmony with the natural order.

At present we do not respect this natural order. We have put a great emphasis on the importance of choice. Under the influence of modern science, technology, and rationalism we look at the natural world and find it inadequate and imperfect. We interfere with it and try to alter it to suit our own ambitions and desires. We wish to control nature rather than participate with it. We try to use nature for our benefit rather than celebrate it. We like to choose because we like to be in control. We like to be in charge of our destiny, forgetting that our individual destiny is part of a larger, eternal human and universal destiny. So, moderating our right to choose has become an ecological and spiritual imperative.

In fact, we have no real choice at present between the consumerist path or the ecological path if we are truly concerned about the survival and well-being of the Earth. The apparent choice of a consumerist lifestyle is a false choice because we know that unchecked and unlimited consumerism is putting the planet in peril. The only path leading to environmental sustainability, social justice, and spiritual fulfillment is the path of ecological wisdom. We know it intuitively as well as rationally. This choiceless acceptance to participate in the process of the universe requires a profound trust in ourselves, in people, and in the implicate order of reality. Only with this trust and humility can we face what John Keats described as "being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact or reason." 