

## Preface: Let's Be Simple

*“Tis the gift to be simple,  
‘Tis the gift to be free...”*

Thus begins a Shaker song written in 1848 by Elder Joseph Brackett. Shakers are the supreme example of elegant simplicity, the embodiment of beauty in simplicity. For the Shakers, minimalism is a way of life. For a long time, they have been my inspiration.

In my own life, the seeds of simplicity were sown when I became a Jain monk at the age of nine. The religion of the Jains is somewhat similar to the way of the Shakers. For Jains, a minimum of material possessions is a prerequisite for a maximum spiritual life. The more time you spend looking after worldly goods, the less time you have for meditation, for study of the scriptures, and for chanting and singing sacred mantras. Such was the teaching of my Jain Guru.

At the age of 18, I came across the writings of Mahatma Gandhi, another great champion of simplicity similar to the Shakers and the Jains. “Simple living and high thinking” was his motto. He lived in a simple hut which he had built himself, he spun the yarn for his loin cloth and his shawl. He grew vegetables and cooked his own food while leading the Independence Movement of India and editing a weekly journal. Thus he proved that it is possible to meet

our physical needs through living simply and at the same time be socially, politically, and intellectually active.

For Gandhi, simplicity was also a statement of social justice. He subscribed to the ideal that you should "live simply so that others may simply live." An acquisitive and consumerist lifestyle necessitates the exploitation of the weak and of Nature. As consumers, we squander resources and waste our time and effort in chasing after things we do not need. We put greed above need, glamor above grace, and exploitation above conservation. Opulent living produces waste, pollution, and poverty.

My life both as a Jain monk and in a Gandhian ashram was one of utter simplicity. Thus the ideal of simple living became my second nature.

In 1962, at age 26, I decided to go on a pilgrimage for peace. I wanted to speak to the people and politicians of the four countries that possessed nuclear weapons. I said to myself, what can be more complicated, stupid, and cruel than the invention and possession of such weapons of mass destruction. I decided that the antidote to this most complicated weapons system was to undertake a pilgrimage of protest with the simplest of methods: a walk to the nuclear capitals of the world.

So I walked from the grave of Mahatma Gandhi in New Delhi, to Moscow, Paris, London, and Washington, D.C. It was an eight-thousand-mile pilgrimage. To make the journey even simpler, I walked (with my friend E.P. Menon) without a penny in my pocket. No money, no food, and on foot. We were on the road for about eight hundred days. These were the simplest and best eight hundred days of my life, and they changed my whole view of existence.

I became utterly convinced that to live a good, imaginative, and inspiring life we need very little in the way of manufactured material possessions. We can live by the sun, soil, and water, which are all gifts of the benevolent universe. We can live by mutuality and reciprocity, which are gifts of humanity. We can live by our hands, our legs, and our labor, none of which need to be bought from a supermarket or department store.

Living by love and generosity begets love and generosity. To live simply is to live in freedom and to trust that "all will be well and all manner of things will be well," as St. Julian of Norwich said. Simplicity brings us closer to the sublime truth, sustained goodness, and subtle beauty.

Living simply is neither laziness nor inaction. Actually, it is our consumer lifestyle which makes us lazy, deskilled, and inactive. We become dependent on mechanization, industrialization, and mass production. The ideal of elegant simplicity is connected with the arts and crafts, with the process of making, and with the art of living well on less. Simplicity focuses on the quality of life rather than the quantity of material possessions. *Being* rather than *having*, as Eric Fromm puts it.

When I live a life of simplicity, I celebrate the intrinsic value of making and let go of focusing on results or outcomes, achievements or accomplishments. Through arts and crafts, I am able to meet my needs and avoid being a victim of my greed. By being a maker, a creator, and a producer, I am able to find a sense of joy, fulfillment, and pleasure.

Simple living is its own reward. It is also skillful living—learning not only to use our heads and hands, but also to cultivate our heart qualities of love, forgiveness, and the

understanding of the unity of all life. As Lao Tzu said, "simplicity, patience, and compassion are our greatest treasures."

Simplicity doesn't stop at minimizing our material possessions. We also need to cultivate simplicity of spirit. It is easier to give up our material clutter than to shed our psychological baggage. Pride, ego, fear, and anger clutter our souls and minds in the same way that piles of clothes, furniture, and other belongings clutter our homes. Therefore Shaker, Jain, and Gandhian views of simplicity are much more profound and deep than just ridding ourselves of material possessions and downsizing.

This book presents a comprehensive and all-embracing ideal of simplicity. Here I am exploring the ideal of elegant simplicity on the metaphysical as well as the physical level. Simplicity of being is as essential as simplicity of living. This is why I have included chapters on right relationship and limitless love. Straightforward and authentic relationships embedded in the ground of true love eliminate confusion and conflict among family, friends, and neighbors. If we happen to get into hateful and hurtful situations, then it is simpler to forgive and forget than carry the burden of resentment and revenge.

We complicate our lives when we are caught in the duality of good and bad, pain and pleasure, gain and loss. The simplest way to live is to cultivate equanimity in our hearts and join in the dance of opposites. Then we can navigate our way through depression and despair as well as delight and pleasure.

Elegant simplicity is a spiritual path as well as a practical way of life. It is the harbinger of harmony and sustainer of the social fabric. Elegant simplicity preserves natural

habitats as well as protects cultures and communities. Elegant simplicity is as good for the outer landscape of the ecosphere as it is good for the inner landscape of the soul.

The way to sustainability is simplicity. No amount of technological innovation will be enough. We have to simplify our homes, our workplaces, and our lives. That is the way to create a sustainable world both now and forever.

Simplicity is also the way to spirituality. No number of temples, churches, mosques, or holy books will be of any help unless we think simply and free ourselves from the burdens of fear, anger, ego, and greed. With outer and inner simplicity, we can live a life of environmental stability, spiritual fulfillment, and social justice. Elegant simplicity is as much a world view as it is a lifestyle.

That is the content of this book.

— Satish Kumar  
Hartland, Devon



my story:  
beginnings

Human happiness  
lies in contentment.

Mahatma Gandhi





IN THE DESERTS of Rajasthan in India, in a house by a plum tree, I was born on 9th August 1936. There was no electricity, and no radio, no TV, no telephone, no car, and no computers. But there were camels and cows, fields and farms, songs and stories, arts and crafts, dance and music aplenty. I grew up in the care of my kind mother. My father died when I was four years old. My grief-stricken mother found me a source of solace; that's what she said. Although I received a lot of love and longing from her, she could not hide her broken heart from me or anyone else.

My father died of a heart attack when he was 50 years old, and left my mother, ten years younger, to take care of me and my seven brothers and sisters. Though often in tears, she looked after us with enormous courage, and yet, as a small child, I could not help but witness her sorrow, her loss, and her loneliness.

As time passed, I began to notice a change. My mother started to practice meditation. I would hear her singing mantras about equanimity; acceptance of pain and pleasure, gain and loss; of birth and death as existential reality. While meditating, the dark shadow of sorrow lifted from her face and a strong atmosphere of resilience emanated from her whole body. These meditations led her into a deeper state of being. In place of tears in her eyes, I saw a gracious clarity glowing from them.



She would take me to our small farm, walking and talking about trees, bees, and butterflies. She would speak about the healing power of Nature and about Nature as our teacher. I remember those wonderful walks being full of fun and fascination. She would tell stories and sing songs.

I loved the way she walked and talked and laughed. I loved the way she could remember those wonderful long stories which gripped my attention. I always wanted to walk with my mother to our farm. I was happy to think that she was my mother, and that she knew and remembered so much. I was fortunate to have had such a mother; she was my mentor, my teacher, my guru, and my hero. She embodied elegant simplicity.

When I look back and reflect, I am amazed to remember her life being transformed from a state of loss and loneliness to a state of serenity, stability, and contentment. I remember her being a beautiful mother, a good gardener, and a happy homemaker. I remember her as a woman who had dropped her fears, someone who celebrated the present, every moment of it, and someone who trusted the future without doubts or desires. She was hardly ever angry.

My mother had become reconciled to the death of my father, but I grew sadder and sadder. As a boy of seven and eight, I could not forget the days when my mother had been gripped by grief. The days when she used to suddenly start sobbing, and I wondered, "Why did my father die? What is death? Will my mother die too? Will I die also?" Nobody could answer these questions to my satisfaction, not even my mother. "Yes, one day I too will die, you too will die, we will all die. We are caught in an unending cycle of birth and

death.” This was the answer my mother gave me. But these answers made me anxious and discontented.

I wanted someone to tell me, “Yes, there is something you can do to stop people dying. Yes, you can have a life without death.” No one, but no one, uttered such words in my ears.

Then one day I spoke with a revered Jain monk called Tulsi. His name meant basil, sacred basil—so simple and so ordinary—but he was anything but ordinary. Tulsi was my mother’s guru and the guru of our family. The guru of tens of thousands of followers, seeking salvation. People called him Gurudev, Guru divine. People adored him, worshipped him.

When I met him, he was only 30 years old. He was handsome and happy. People thought of him as an enlightened being. Like everyone else, I was mesmerized by him, he felt to me like the father I had lost. But he was more than that, he was the embodiment of serenity and peace. And above all, he spoke the words I’d longed to hear for so long: “Yes, you can bring an end to the cycle of birth and death, you can obtain nirvana, the ultimate liberation, freedom from worldly comings and goings. Yes, you can be free from loss, loneliness, and every other kind of suffering.” These words came from the lips of a man who had discovered the truth and who was believed by everyone.

“What must I do to obtain nirvana?” I asked him.

“You have to renounce the world and follow the way of the monks. Let go of your pride and possessions. Free yourself from the bondage of family and attachment to wealth. You need to live the life of a monk,” Gurudev answered in a firm and matter of fact manner.

“I want to be with you Gurudev! I will do anything to defeat death. I want to be a monk!” These words came out of my mouth without any thought or hesitation. My heart was throbbing. My body was shaking. My mind was overwhelmed with the prospect of walking alongside Gurudev Tulsi. I felt safe with him.

Many people thought I had an old soul in a new body. In India it is believed that we are reincarnated and carry our karma from previous lives. So my attraction to monks may have been something to do with the karma from previous lives.

I was fortunate that my mother—somewhat reluctantly—understood. She said to me, “If that is your calling and your destiny, then who am I to be an obstacle to your spiritual seeking?” Other family members and some of my mother’s friends were not so open or generous. “How can a boy of nine know what is his calling or his destiny?” This was the argument my brothers made, and the answer my mother gave them was filled with emotion and conviction: “I know, I know. It is hard for me to let this little boy leave me, but a child is not an underdeveloped adult. If we dampen or discourage his desire to seek a spiritual life now, how do we know what will be the effect on his tender soul? It is not easy, but on balance, we have to let him do what he wants to do.”

My brothers were amazed, but my mother’s words gladdened my heart. She loved me but did not want to possess me. I believe it was she who laid the foundation of courage and activism in my life by being bold and selfless enough to let me leave home and follow the path of peace. Eventually, I even persuaded the most skeptical of

my brothers to give his permission and allow me to become a wandering sadhu.

I left my home behind. I let go of the ties of love with my beloved mother. I held a begging bowl in my hand, taking food only once a day. I walked barefoot chanting the sacred mantra, “Om...Om...Om.”

“Pay no attention to worldly affairs. Read no books other than the sacred scriptures of the Jains. Learn the holy texts by heart and meditate upon them day and night.” Thus spoke my Gurudev. “Burn up all your lingering negativities from the past by the austere practices of asceticism.”

So I took no bath for nine years. My thick black hair was plucked out by hand twice a year. I fasted for 24 hours, then 48 hours, then three days every month. I sat in silence for two hours in the morning and two hours in the evening focusing on *atman*, my intimate and eternal self, merging with *paramatman*, the ultimate and boundless spirit of pure light.

After listening to my guru and reading some of the Jain scriptures, I started to look at my body as bondage, the world as a trap, and my meditation was to free myself from pride and greed, from anger and ego, from desires and doubts, so that I would be cleansed of all sins.

This went on for years and years. It felt like a long time of longing for that elusive liberation, or *moksha*. I was entering my teenage years, I was 14, 15. I made my meditations last longer and my fasts more frequent. I went walking in solitude, searching salvation. Then I was 16 and 17. “I must try harder to find freedom in my soul,” I said to myself. “What more can I do? Oh god of death, Kala, come to me, come soon and free me from this sinful body, free me from

this weary world," I begged. I remember that period of despondency vividly. I wanted to die, and never return to this world.

Then a lay disciple, Kishor, having sensed my state of turmoil, dared to give me a book by Mahatma Gandhi. I was not allowed to read any nonreligious books, including Gandhi's, but I read this book in secret. It challenged my troubled mind. That night Gandhi came to me in a dream. He was walking up a hill, I was down below. Then he sat down. He waited for me. When I reached him, he said, "To find salvation you don't have to forsake the world." He stood up and said, "Come with me." He walked a few steps higher and continued, "Practice spirituality through serving the world, not renouncing the world. Renounce your passion, your lust, and your desires; and thus transform your life and find salvation." As Gandhi spoke these words, a light surrounded him and lifted him up until he disappeared into clouds, as if he had attained nirvana.

I woke up sweating. It must have been past midnight. I kept tossing and turning in confusion. What did Gandhi mean?

In the morning, I decided to go for a long walk to calm my mind. I walked out of the town of Ratangarh which was surrounded by sand dunes. I crossed one dune after another, going nowhere. I thought of my Gurudev; he was very dear to me. He had taught me much about the futility of worldly affairs and about the art of renunciation. Gurudev was gracious, benevolent, and learned. But he was teaching me to let go of something—the world—which I didn't know. Suddenly a deep desire grew in my heart. I wanted to embrace the world and love the world. I wanted to plant

flowers. I wanted to grow and cook food instead of begging for it. I wanted to hold a beautiful woman in my arms and touch her lips with my lips. I wanted a home where I could live without moving on constantly, and sleep in a soft bed rather than on a hard floor.

Something had changed in me most profoundly. My fear of death had faded. My wish—my need—to end the cycle of birth and death seemed like a distant memory.

I had walked a long way. I had lost my sense of time. I remember walking for hours and hours and not knowing where I was. Certainly it was late afternoon, the sun was moving westwards. I was tired, hungry, and thirsty, and there was no one in sight. I had never been in this part of the desert before, I did not know my way back to the town. I was lost within and I was lost without. I was walking in circles, looking this way and that, trying to figure out which direction the town might be.

After a while, which felt like an eternity, I saw a man with a camel in the distance. With a sense of relief, I called out to him, and he stopped. He must have realized that I, in my white robe, must be a lost monk. We walked toward each other.

“I am lost,” I said, “and I am very thirsty. Do you have any water?”

The kind camel man smiled at me and said, “You should never travel in the desert without water!” Then he passed me his clay water bottle, which was covered in a wet cloth to keep it cool. I drank and drank the water, then I said, “I nearly died of thirst in this desert. Water is life. Thank you camel man, thank you! Thank you for saving my life. What is your name?”

“People call me Krishna,” he said.

“God Krishna himself, no less!” I laughed.

“My parents wanted me to be as joyful as Lord Krishna, so they named me thus,” said the camel man. “Krishna was a keeper of cows, he was a happy farmer. So am I, I am happy.”

I was touched by the manner of his speech, he spoke with ease and delight.

“Which way are you going?” I asked.

“I live in a small village near Ratangarh.”

“Can I follow you? I have lost my way.”

“Of course. Do you want a ride on my camel?”

“No, no, I am a monk, I have not ridden a camel nor a horse, nor a car nor a train, nor a boat, nor even a bicycle for nine years. I must walk. That is my rule.”

I followed Krishna. He wore a red turban and had silver rings in his ears. His *kurta* (shirt) was orange and made of coarse cotton. The camel was loaded with farm produce: millet, melons, and sesame seeds. I remembered my childhood. My mother used to grow the same. I learned that Krishna never went to school, so he could not read or write. But he could look after camels and grow food for his family. He had built his own house with clay, wood, and straw. His wife milked cows, made butter and yogurt, sang folk songs, and looked after their two children. Krishna explained all this to me enthusiastically. He lived a simple but delightful life.

“Where did you learn all these skills? Would you not have liked to go to school?” I asked.

“I learned from my father and mother, but more than that I learned by doing. I am in the school of nature, nature

is my teacher. I learn from the land all the time,” Krishna replied. It was pure peasant wisdom. He sounded like my mother. Walking with Krishna for over an hour revived me.

“How do you learn from the land?” I probed.

“Just listening to the land and looking around. Look at these sand dunes, they always shift, move, and change, yet they always remain the same. Even in this dry desert, we get monsoon rains. Even in this barren-looking land, we grow millet and melons. I love this land. The sand shines under the moonlight like fields of silver. The land is beautiful and benign.”

I could have listened to Krishna for hours.

We reached Ratangarh. Walking back calmed me, and at the same time, I yearned to be like Krishna, normal and ordinary. Krishna made me think, who am I? Am I defined by my white robe? Am I more than a monk? More than my name? More than my robe and my appearance? Suddenly I saw a clear light. I said to myself, I am free. I saw a bird flying out of the cage of my body.

And I was free.

That was it. My shoulders were light. The weight was off.

I went back to the house where I was spending the monsoon season with two other monks. They were very dear to me. I wanted to let them know my state of mind. We talked for hours. To my surprise and delight, they also wanted to be free of the constraints of the order. The three of us wanted to leave. A few days later, I managed to persuade a woman disciple to give us some ordinary clothes and train fares to Delhi, which she did.

That night, after midnight, when the town was asleep and the streets were dark, we ran away from the confines



of the monastic order. I escaped the prison of my own choosing. I was filled with mixed emotions—rebellion and gratitude. Gurudev had given me so much love, so much training, so much of himself. But now I must find my own inner guru and not be dependent on Gurudev Tulsi for the rest of my life. I was no longer looking to conquer death, I was looking to embrace life with all its uncertainties, ambiguities, and struggles.

Of course, Gurudev was sad and felt betrayed. My mother was upset and angry. She rejected me and refused to have anything to do with me, let alone have me back at her home. (I write more about this in Chapter 10.) This proved to be a blessing in disguise. I remembered my dream of Gandhi and his words about spirituality in the world, in everyday life, in every thought, word, and action.

So I took refuge in an ashram, a community of people engaged in spiritual activism. The ashram was in the sacred city of Bodh Gaya, near the Bodhi tree under which Buddha had been enlightened. It was a perfect environment for me. My wish was not to escape spirituality. Simply, I felt I was moving away from the duality of the worldly versus the spiritual. This was my reunion with the world.

The ashram had been established by Vinoba Bhave, a close friend of Gandhi. He taught that the holy spirit permeates matter through and through and makes it holy. Matter and spirit cannot be separated. Spirituality is not a system of beliefs or a set of dogmas or doctrines. Spirituality is a way of life. Religions and rituals, holy books and temples, may help to open the doors of perception, but we have to go beyond them in order to experience a living spirituality, in the ordinary simplicity of everyday life. For this to

occur, we need to live in harmony with ourselves, our fellow humans, and the natural world.

The words of Vinoba, communicated to me by the ashramites, were music to my ears. Here I was anonymous, no one needed to bow to me, and I had no need to pretend to be holy. I was liberated from my vanity. After nine years, I was touching the soil again. I worked in the garden and in the kitchen. It felt strange and good. I breathed the air of emancipation.

Paradoxically, monkhood had made me feel suffocated and resilient at the same time. By giving up my home, my school, my friends, and leaving my mother behind—and then, as a monk, handling no money for nine years, having no home, and no possessions—I had learned the art of renunciation. Yet I had never felt the lack of anything. I had been detached from desires. As a monk, I had learned that fear is the root cause of ego, anger, greed, and pride. So I must drop fear and trust the unknown. I was grateful for this gift from my guru. Now I was pleased to live without fear in the real world, and not be sheltered in the glass house of a monastic order. I had made the biggest U-turn of my life.

At the ashram, I learned about the four stages of life according to the Hindu tradition. The first 25 years is the period of learning, when the foundation for the rest of life is laid. The second 25 years is for practicing the skills and ideas you have acquired. The third period of 25 years is for committing yourself to the service of your community and society. And the fourth and final stage is for living your inner truth through meditation, reflection, renunciation, and letting go of all attachments to material and emotional pos-

sessions. This ideal pattern of life is one I cherish, and it has guided my actions.

As a monk, I learned the arts of walking, fasting, thinking, and meditating. At the ashram in Bodh Gaya, I learned the arts of making—cooking, gardening, and spinning cotton into yarn to make my own clothes. With Vinoba I learned how to meditate while making and how to be still while walking.

Vinoba Bhave was a peace pilgrim on a mission to bring about a kingdom of compassion. He walked over 100,000 miles, and everywhere he went, he asked landlords to share their land with the poor. I too became a peace pilgrim with a mission to end the nuclear arms race. I walked eight thousand miles to the countries possessing nuclear bombs. In those two and a half years, I realized that pilgrimage is as much a metaphor as it is a literal reality. To be a pilgrim is to live lightly and simply in all circumstances, to embrace both delights and difficulties with equanimity they present themselves. Although I have made many pilgrimages to holy places and sacred shrines of religious and natural significance, but the deeper truth is that life itself is a pilgrimage.



*Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication.*

— LEONARDO DA VINCI