

Q&A: Krishna Das

With a new album, *Kirtan Wallah*, the best-selling kirtan singer reflects on language, practice, and the spiritual path.

Is it important to you that the musicians you work with be spiritually oriented people?

I don't think that putting on white clothes and meditating a half an hour a day guarantees that a person is any more spiritual than anybody else. Some people are creating less confusion for themselves, and other people are creating more, but that doesn't mean they don't want real happiness, love, peace, and truth. Everybody wants that—they're just confused about how to get it.

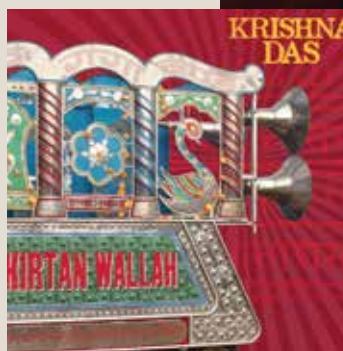
Your guru, Neem Karoli Baba, once said, "I love suffering. It brings me so close to God." Do you think suffering is more useful for spiritual growth than pleasure?

Well, I don't know whether you can say it's useful or not useful. The point is that it's a big part of our lives. Why aren't we happy? Why don't we have what we want? Why is there illness? Why is there disease? That's suffering, and how we deal with it has a lot to do with the quality of our life. If you cling to pleasure, it disappears and turns into pain. The pain also doesn't last forever; it goes back and forth. So I think that's one of the real problems with the way Westerners approach spirituality: they're using it as a drug to try to avoid suffering permanently. But you can't do that. It's just not possible.

When we chant, we simply try to be there with whatever's there. You don't try to push it away; you simply release it and remember to chant, because through the chanting, you can always go deeper than where your awareness is right now.

Does singing Sanskrit mantras affect your consciousness in a different way than singing in English does?

When you speak or sing in your native language, there's a lot of concepts and meaning—intellectual meaning—that are carried by the words. There's a story; it's *about* something, right? And those concepts actually limit you. It's not to say that concepts can't be useful: gospel songs and what they call *bhajan* in India, where they tell stories and sing the praises of the deities and God—that juices us up; that lubricates our hearts, you know? And when it does that, it eases us into a concentrated place. In that one-pointedness, we can



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experience a deeper level of reality. But it's different than the Name. The Name comes from within, whereas concepts come from without.

What changes do you notice in yourself as the result of keeping a steady practice of chanting for the past two decades?

Well, I mope around a lot less than I used to—although, when I do mope around, it's pretty good! It's pretty intense. I think really, you have to look at spiritual work as a ripening process. You can't just push a button and have an experience, nor can you be completely changed by any one experience. Chanting is a meditative practice. It's something that deepens and matures over time, and it's a way of ripening your life, just like putting fruit out in the sun. When you're chanting, you're putting your life in the sun, and that will ripen us and prepare us for a deeper way of living.

—DAMON ORION