Satish Kumar: Pilgrim of Peace
by Livia Albeck-Ripka

Livia Albeck-Ripka on Satish Kumar

During the Cold War, when the world was tense with mistrust, Satish Kumar walked nearly 13,000 kilometres, with no money, through the four nuclear capitals of the world. It was 1962.

The previous year, an 89-year-old Betrand Russel was jailed in Brixton Prison for demonstrating against the bomb. Inspired by Russell and determined to convince the leaders of Moscow, Paris, London and Washington to disarm, Satish and his friend EP Menon crossed enemy lines from India into Pakistan on a journey that would take 30 months. The 26-year-olds left with two gifts from their mentor and disciple of Gandhi, Vinoba Bhave: One, to walk penniless as an act of trust. Two, to go as vegetarians; in peace with every living being on earth.

It wasn't Satish's first odyssey. At nine, he left his mother's home to join the wandering Jain monks. He remained with them until he read Gandhi, and began to believe more could be achieved through engagement with global problems, rather than by detachment. That year, at 18, he ran away to become a student of Bhave's, where he learnt non-violence as a means to peace and land reform.

Now 77, Satish has been a quiet revolutionary for more than 50 years—slowly shifting the social and ecological agenda. In 1982, he set up the Small School, which pioneered a "human-scale approach" to education with small classes and responsive teaching. Eight years later he founded Schumacher College, which offers transformative and holistic education in sustainable living. At 50 he embarked on a second trek, this time for 3000km through Britain—again carrying no money to prove his unwavering faith in humanity. As the editor of Resurgence & Ecologist, he is also the longest-serving editor of a magazine in the UK.

Despite his many achievements, Satish is used to being considered "unrealistic." Richard Dawkins went so far as to call him a "slave to superstition" and an "enemy of reason." Perhaps it's because he believes in holism: the idea that trees possess "tree-ness" and rocks posses "rock-ness" and that they are as deserving of respect as we are. Perhaps it's because this non-anthropocentric world view is so at odds with an economical model of unlimited growth. Perhaps it's because he believes in trust.

When we meet on the cusp of spring in Melbourne, Satish tells me, "I am old, but you are young." He smiles with the wisdom of someone who knows that when spirituality and science come together, we will demolish the current structures in the name of a kind, considered, idyllic society. Realism, to Satish, is an outdated concept. The vast challenges we face now require unreasonable minds.

LIVIA ALBECK-RIPKA: In your twenties, you walked 8000 miles to the four nuclear capitals of the world. You must like walking.

SATISH KUMAR: [Laughs]. Well, there is a kind of nomadic culture in my family because in Rajasthan where I grew up, people had to move because the land was dry—you go wherever there's food. So even though my mother was a farmer and settled, she always loved walking. By walking, you connect with the earth. So from age three I'd walk. My father had a horse. But my mother wouldn't ride it; if a horse wanted to ride on us, how would we feel?

That's very progressive.

Yeah. My mother was very progressive and animal-rights conscious. She would say, "We have two legs. Those legs are given to us for walking." Until age nine, when I became a monk, I basically walked everywhere…

How does a nine-year-old make the decision to leave his mother to become a monk?

When I was four years old my father died. I could not understand what happened. My mother is crying, my sisters are crying, the neighbours are crying. I asked my mother, "Why is father not speaking? Why is father not holding my hand? Going for a walk?" My mother says, "Your father is dead. Everybody who is born dies, like your father." So I said, "That means you will die!" "Yes. I will die," my mother said. I said, "This is terrible. How can we get rid of death?" I became very sad. I was preoccupied by the death of my father.

My family belonged to the Jain religion, and the monks were our teachers. One day I said to one of the monks, "My father has died some time ago now and I still feel very sad. I want to do something to get rid of death." I was only about five. He said, "In the world, you cannot be free of death. You have to leave the world." I said, "Can I leave the world and join you to be free of death?" They said, "You cannot join monks until you are nine. You have to wait." So I waited, and I became a monk. It was all my own desire. It was not forced by anybody.

I wanted to be a monk to find freedom from death.

It sounds like even though your father died when you were four, and you left home when you were nine, your parents had an incredibly powerful impact on you and on the way you went on to lead your life. Your father, who was a trader, said that profit was just a way to keep the business going; his true motivation was in service to the community. Your father was a social entrepreneur before the term was invented!

Yes, exactly. And my mother was an environmentalist and ecologist before the term was invented. For my father, business was a way of making relationships and friendships and serving the community. By having that excuse of "business" he came into contact with people who he would invite for lunch, for dinner, they would go walking together. Many of his customers became his friends.

But my mother had a greater impact on my life. I was the youngest son so she was always keeping me near. When she was cooking, walking, going to the farm—I was always shadowing her. A very deep and profound impression of my mother has remained with me throughout my life. I would say out of all the teachers I had in my life and great people I met, my mother's influence was one of the greatest, certainly.

I want to go back to the peace march. You walked all that way, from India to the United States. Why?

This was in 1961. Bertrand Russell led a great international peace movement against nuclear weapons. At that time the Cold War was very, very hot [laughs]. The threat of nuclear weapons was very alive. There were many scientists and intellectuals around the world who were very concerned. So Bertrand Russell went to the Ministry of Defence in London and said, “Until the British Government declares a ban on the bomb, I am not going to move.” A sit-in, they called it. So he was arrested and put in jail for disturbing the peace.

I was in India at that time. I had gone with a friend to a café. While I was waiting for my breakfast, I picked up the newspaper and read that at 89 years old, Bertrand Russell, Lord Bertrand Russell, the Nobel prize-winning mathematician and philosopher, had been put in jail. I said to my friend, “Here is a man of 89 going to jail for peace. What am I doing? What are we doing? Young men, sitting here drinking coffee!” So we talked about what we could do for the international peace movement. In the end, we came up with this idea: ‘Let’s walk. A peace march, a peace pilgrimage to Moscow, Paris, London, Washington—the four nuclear capitals of the world. Let’s join the international peace movement of Bertrand Russell.’ Suddenly we felt kind of exuberant and relieved. We went to talk to our teacher, our guru, Vinoba Bhave.

He said, “If you are walking for peace, then you have to trust people, because wars come out of fear, and peace begins in trust. Go without any money in your pockets. That will be the symbol of trust. That’s my advice.”

I said, “Without any money? Sometimes we need a cup of tea, or to make a telephone call!” He said, “No. Go without any money.” He was our teacher, so we said, “If it is his advice, let’s try it. He is a wise man.”

Without money? How did you do it?

Walking without money in India was not difficult because people are very hospitable to pilgrims and travellers. We also had a lot of publicity in the newspapers, so people knew. But when we came to the border of India and Pakistan; that was the most critical moment. Our families and friends and colleagues came to say goodbye that last day. One of my very close friends came to me and said, “Satish, aren’t you crazy? You are going without any money in Pakistan, which is an enemy country! We’ve had three wars and you are walking without money, without food, no defence, no security, nothing. At least, take some food with you.” She gave me these packets of food. But I thought about it and I said, “No, I cannot take it. My friend, these packets of food are not packets of food. They are packets of mistrust.” Vinoba had said, “Go without money and have trust in your heart, and that will show that you are for peace and people will look after you.” My friend was in tears. She said, “This might be our last meeting. You are going to Muslim countries, Christian countries, communist countries, capitalist countries, deserts, mountains, forests, snow, rain. I don’t know if you will return alive.”

Were you afraid?

I said to my friend, “If I die walking for peace, that is the best kind of death that I can

have. So I'm not afraid of death. If I don't get any food, I will say, 'This is my opportunity to fast.' And if I don't get any shelter, I will say, 'This is my opportunity to sleep under the million-star hotel.' If I die, I die. But now I'm alive, give me your blessing." So reluctantly, my friend gave me hug. As we cross the border, somebody calls our names and says, "Are you Mr Satish Kumar and EP Menon? The two Indians coming to Pakistan for peace?" I said, "Yes, we are. But how do you know?" We don't know anybody in Pakistan." He said, "I read in my local newspaper that two Indians were walking to Moscow, Paris, London, Washington, coming to Pakistan for peace! And I said, 'I'm for peace! This war between India and Pakistan is complete nonsense. We were one people before 1947.' Let's make peace." So that was the first day. In that moment, I said to my friend, "If we come here as Indians, we meet Pakistanis. If we come here as Hindus, we meet Muslims. But if we come here as human beings, we meet human beings."

Our true identity is not that I'm an Indian, or a Jain, or Satish Kumar. Those are secondary identities. Our primary identity is that we are all members of the human family. We are world citizens.

That was a great awakening moment, that first day out of India. I was 26.

Sometimes it was hot, so we'd rest in the day and walk in the evening or late at night, under the moon. And the Muslims walked with us and gathered to hear us. So it went on! Afghanistan, Iran, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Russia until we arrived in Moscow. We gave a flier to people explaining why we were walking, why peace was important, why we trusted, why we carried no money, why we only took one night's shelter and moved on. When people read it, they'd say, 'Can we help you? Will you come and speak to our school? Our church? Our mosque? Our local newspaper?' So the news spread. We were promoting public opinion in favour of peace. That was our mission. That's how people came to know about us and offered us hospitality.

So for two and a half years, we walked. When you have no money, you are forced to find a hospitable person. And when they give you hospitality, you talk to them about peace, you tell them that you are vegetarian, that you don't hurt animals and you don't hurt people. So you are being peace rather than just talking about peace. Difficulties came Sometimes we did not get food, sometimes we did not get shelter. But I said, "This is opportunity. Problems are welcome."

You must look back now, as a 77-year-old, very fondly on the experience.

Yeah, yeah.

But was there ever a point when you felt despair, or that you had failed in some way?

Yes, there were such moments. One day, we were walking along the Black Sea coast in Georgia. I felt despondency, I felt doubt. I said, "We are walking but who is listening? Nobody's going to disarm. Nobody's going to give up nuclear weapons. And all this snow and the rain and the cold…" By my friend says, "No, no, we will achieve something. Let's carry on, we have a mission, let's complete it." So when I was feeling low and despondent, my friend was feeling strong. And sometimes, if my friend was feeling low and despondent, I was feeling strong. We supported each other. So I think to walk in two is a good idea [laughs].

[Laughs].

That day, I gave this leaflet to two ladies. And when they read the flier, they said, “We work in this tea factory. Would you like to have a cup of tea?” So they made a cup of tea and brought some lunch. Then, one of the ladies went out of the room and came back with four packets of tea. She said, “These packets of tea are not for you. They are one for our premier in Moscow, second, the president of France, third, for the prime minister of England and fourth, for the president of the United States. I would like you to deliver these packets of peace tea and please give them a message from me: “If you ever get a mad thought of pressing the nuclear button, please stop for a moment and have a fresh cup of tea.”

Wow.

“That will give you time to reflect. These nuclear weapons are not only going to kill the enemy, they will kill animals, men, women, children, workers, farmers, birds, water, lakes, everything will be polluted. So please, think again. Have a cup of tea. Reflect.” In that small place; what a bright brilliant idea. I was so impressed with their vision and their imagination, and I said to my friend, “Now we have to complete this mission.”

And did you deliver the tea?

And we delivered the tea! We delivered the first packet of tea in the Kremlin where we were received by the president of the Supreme Soviet. We received a letter from Nikita Khrushchev welcoming us to Moscow.

They said, “Yes, yes, good idea! We’ll drink peace tea. But it’s not us who want nuclear weapons. It’s the Americans. So please go to America. Tell them.” Then we came to Paris. Walking through Belarus, Poland, Germany, Belgium and France. And we wrote to President de Gaulle, but we got no answer. Then we phoned Élysée Palace, and the office of President de Gaulle said, “The president has no time, these are crazy mad ideas. So please don’t bother.” So we gathered some French pacifists and went to Élysée Palace. We were arrested but we said, “That’s fine. We are following in the footsteps of Bertrand Russell.” We were kept in a detention centre for three days and then the Indian ambassador came to see us in the jail and said, “If you don’t move on, we have to deport you back to India.” So, we left the tea in Paris with the ambassador.

Then, over to London, we walked. We delivered the third packet to the prime minister in the House of Commons. And then we met Bertrand Russell. He was delighted to see us. He said, “When you wrote to me from India nearly two years ago, I thought, You’re walking. I will never see you, I’m so old. But you have walked fast. I am delighted to see you.” In the end Bertrand Russell and many other campaigners got together and helped us to get two tickets in a boat, Queen Mary. So we walked from London to South Hampton, and then from South Hampton, sailed across the Atlantic and arrived in New York. And then from New York to Washington, where we delivered the fourth packet of tea to the White House. Then we walked to Arlington cemetery where we ended our journey. We started at the grave of Mahatma Gandhi and ended it at the grave of John Kennedy—to make the point that the gun kills not only some bad person, but also a Gandhi or a Kennedy. Don’t trust the gun, trust the power of nonviolence, the power of peace.

After ending that journey, we also went to meet Martin Luther King. I think that was one of the most important encounters of my life. I was in Paris in 1963 when he gave the famous

speech and we wrote to him. Care of the Indian embassy of Washington we received a letter from Martin Luther King. “Yes, come and see me! I would love to hear your stories. Mahatma Gandhi and nonviolence is my inspiration.” So we went to Atlanta Georgia, and we were with him for 45 minutes. That was one of the greatest experiences. He was profoundly humble, and a great activist. Somebody who was able and prepared to put his life on the line for the justice and for the freedom of black people, for racial harmony and equality. He said, “This was not only for the benefit of black people, but equally for the benefit of white people. If you oppress somebody, the oppressor is as much a victim as the oppressed.” That was such a profound message. I could not have learned what I did about life, about people, about cultures and about societies in books or videos as I did walking. Knowledge is not enough. When the knowledge comes with experience, it gets deep into your psyche and your life. What I learned, I learned there.

You speak a lot about the need for seeing things holistically; in our relationships with other human beings, but also in ecology, in economy, in education. But for a lot of people, these ideas are taboo. Richard Dawkins has even called you an “enemy of reason”! Are you?

First of all, what is spirituality? Spirituality has been misunderstood. Spirituality has been confused with dogma, superstition, with institutionalised, organised religion and theology. The kind of spirituality and holistic worldview I am talking about has nothing to do with dogma and superstition. Spirit is breathing: Inspirare. Expirare. The Latin word. So breathing is spirit. When you and I sit together, we are breathing the same air. Through breathing, we are related. When you’re in love with somebody, you hold somebody’s body in your arms, and you are breathing together.

Would Dawkins agree?

When Professor Dawkins interviewed me, I said, “You don’t believe in spirituality. Don’t you believe in breathing?” Friendship is breathing together. Love is breathing together. Compassion is breathing together. These are the spiritual qualities. At the moment, Western materialism says that everything is dead matter. Nothing is alive. Even the human body is just a kind of amalgam of earth, air, fire, water; some kind of productive biological system. But there’s more than that. There’s creativity, consciousness, imagination, compassion, love, family, community. These are non-material, non-economic values. Unless you take account of spirituality, you will end up genetic engineering, with nuclear weapons, you will end up mining, destroying the planet, with global warming and climate change. All of these problems come because we have no ethical, spiritual guidance. East and West must come together, which means spirituality and science must come together. Einstein said that science without religion is blind, and that religion without science is lame. And that’s Einstein!

Matter without spirit is dead matter. And without matter, spirit is useless.

So how can we change education, to incorporate these ideas?

Children go to school day, after day, after day. They are almost brainwashed. Conditioned. The answer is to de-condition our minds: the process of unlearning through experience, through seeing nature and people with fresh spontaneous eyes. Fall in love every day. Fall in love with your husband, your wife, your mother, your trees, your land, your soil, whatever, every day! The freshness is missing in our civilisation. We have become stale. Wake up every morning, look out the window: new, new, new. These next 24 hours have never been there before! Ever. If you free yourself of this habit, you will have the energy

to relate to other people and to nature.

I want to come back to that idea of fear, as the driver of war, the driver of mistrust.

And fear also causes ill health…

It's poisonous. So how can we overcome our fears?

We can overcome fear. There's no other way than a five-letter-word: trust. How do we overcome darkness? Light the candle. There's no other way. You just have to trust the universe, trust people. Human beings are capable of solving all problems through negotiation, through friendship, through respect, not through self-interest but mutual interest. Mutuality is the key to trust. At the moment, Americans want to negotiate with Iran or Iraq or Syria for American national interests. But what is American national interest if America is all the time spending billions and billions of dollars on armaments? Americans living in fear, is that national interest?

Trust the Syrians, trust Iranians, trust Palestinians, trust Israelis, trust Russians, trust everybody. Go with trust.

Dying in trust is better than living in fear.

But what do we do when someone does everything they can to break our trust? When a country does everything to prove they can't be trusted?

You need to use your creativity, your clever thinking. Those things are necessary, but the backbone is trust. Take for example Mahatma Gandhi. How did he negotiate with the British—a colonial power who killed thousands of people in the movement for independence? He trusted and negotiated, and in the end he was successful. How did Martin Luther King do it? He trusted the white people. White people would not allow dogs and blacks in restaurants and schools. Yet he trusted them. Nelson Mandela? Trusted. And when he came out after 27 years in jail, he said, "No revenge whatsoever." We had many examples in our history, from the Buddha to Nelson Mandela, to Mother Teresa and Wangari Maathai. There are many, many great people who have shown the way.

This is not something Satish Kumar is just talking about for the first time! This is perennial wisdom. Unless we trust, if we live in fear, we will be ill. Our bodies will be ruined, our communities will be ruined and our countries will be ruined. A little bit of fear is okay, like salt or pepper on your food. But living in fear as your mainstay is not healthy.

All the people you just mentioned though are heroes. Most people open the newspaper, they see unemployment, global warming, terrorism, an unmanageable rise in population. It's so easy to to believe that we are simply not like the Gandhis and the Martin Luther Kings. How can we empower ourselves?

I think ordinary people are the greater heroes. Mothers looking after children with great love and care, teachers, doctors and nurses. Millions of people are doing good every day. Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa, Wangari Maathai; these are a few names that we use as a kind of metaphor. All the things you mentioned, global warming, climate change, banks running out of money, population explosion, biodiversity diminishing, all this industrial pollution that we have created… This industrial revolution is only a few hundred years old. It is man-made. What is made by human beings can be changed by human beings. The British Empire did not last, the Communist

Empire and Soviet Union did not last. The apartheid came to an end, slavery came to an end. If those things can come to an end, this materialistic paradigm that we have built can also come to an end. We can create a more sustainable, frugal, elegant, simple, glorious, gracious new society. We can create it.

Will we create it?

We will create it. I am 77 years old, but you are young. You can see, in your life a new change is coming. Lots of people are eating organic food; lots of people are going back to the land, looking for craft, looking for arts, music, painting. I went to the Flinders Ranges and I stayed in a straw-built house. So beautifully made! And local raw material! There is a new awareness emerging. This kind of industrial, materialistic, consumer society, that we have created, we can move out of it and yet live a very elegant, simple, satisfying, joyful, sustainable life. Possible. This is why I'm an optimist. This is why I'm coming here to Australia to talk about it. If I was a pessimist, and if I thought that nothing could change, I would not come here. But I've come here because I do think Australia can be a utopia! You have so much land, so many resources, so much talent, so much energy! New country, young country, you can be an example for the world! This is an oasis!