Gift Ecology: A Conversation with Nipun Mehta
by Elizabeth Denley

NIPUN MEHTA is one of the founders of ServiceSpace, Karma Kitchen, DailyGood, KindSpring and other organizations that successfully work within the Gift Ecology. From a young age, he was inspired by the need to serve others. Early role models like J. Krishnamurti, Gandhi, Swami Vivekananda and Goenka further fuelled that urge so that it has blossomed into a life of joyful, cheerful service. He was the recipient of the Dalai Lama’s Unsung Heroes of Compassion Award in 2014, and appointed to President Barack Obama’s Council on Poverty and Inequality in 2015. Here Nipun explains his motivation and the principles underlying the Gift Ecology to ELIZABETH DENLEY.

Q: Hi Nipun. Welcome.

NM: Hello. Happy to be here.

Q: Your whole focus with ServiceSpace, with Karma Kitchen, and all the other projects that you do is around service, seva, around volunteering. It is all about people sharing. What led you to this? How did it all start?

NM: I was on the journey of success, because that’s what everyone expected of you. I mean when you go to high school, you want to go to a good college. When you go to college, you want to join an even better graduation program or get a great job. Once you have a great job, you want a promotion. Once you get a promotion, another promotion. And I was from Silicon Valley. So it was no longer good enough to just work at a job; you are supposed to start a company. Then, you know, big cars, fancy houses, parties and things – it just seemed endless to me. It was the narrative of accumulation.

I remember in Silicon Valley, in the peak of the dotcom days, there was a billboard by one company that said, “He who dies with the most toys still dies.”

The dominant paradigm narrative of success rooted in accumulation just felt hollow. A part of me was saying: Maybe it’s not about acquiring a lot; maybe it’s about letting go. And I started to let go, bit by bit.

Initially I wanted to give my time. Actually, even before that we would all gather and collect five to ten dollars and say, “Hey, let’s give.” So I started in that way. Whatever I did I would always involve other people, as that was my tendency. As I gave money, I wanted to give more, so I started giving my time. As I gave time, I wanted to give even more. What could I give? I realized that at some point I just want to give myself.

And the reward was that I was changing myself through the process. I didn’t need any external validation. It wasn’t that I thought, “Oh, look at that, I’ve changed your life.” It was more that the act of generosity was just so transformative and regenerative that the
more I gave the more I wanted to give. Love is truly a currency that never runs out. So I tapped into that spirit in myself, and that’s what has continued to propel me.

ServiceSpace was the outcome; it was kind of a ripple effect. We never started an organization: we didn’t know how. We didn’t want to change the world. It was all just this intent of serving to change ourselves, and through that process all these manifestations continued.

We were four people when we started ServiceSpace. It wasn’t even ServiceSpace at that time, just four of us trying to serve. And then, bit by bit, it rippled out. It’s been an amazing journey for me, and I would say that twenty years later I am still rooted in that same idea of ‘give to change myself’. As I do that I feel full of joy, and I just want to give more.

Q: This also resonates very much with some of the traditions in India. So is there something from your background, from your family? Or is this just a reaction against the Silicon Valley culture?

NM: I wouldn’t say it’s completely a reaction. That’s one parsing of it, and that was an influence, but since childhood I was a spiritual seeker – that’s what drove me. I would always go to the spiritual section of libraries and read books from all kinds of philosophical traditions, including esoteric books. Actually, I was fascinated with death; not fascinated, but there were all these question marks.

We build our lives around permanence. We build our identities and say, “This is who I am,” and that certainty is what gives us a kind of strength. And I had my doubts about that whole narrative. Maybe strength could actually come from impermanence? That I’m going to live and die, that I’m changing every moment, is not something to be upset about; it’s something to celebrate. This may be the last time we meet, which means that I should really treat this moment as a holy moment. It took time for me to understand impermanence, because initially there were all these question marks around it, but that helped me.

When I was 17, I went to a hospice and said, “I want to serve.” They said, “By law, you can’t do this at 17. You have to be at least 18.” Then, when I went at 18 they said, “Are you sure? Because you’re going to be with people who are passing away!”

As I served them it helped me prioritize: If you were to die tomorrow, what would you want to be doing today?

And we really don’t know how long we are going to stay. It’s not a switch. I saw that in the people I was with, in the people who would pass away. In their last days they wanted to turn on some switches, but they couldn’t. They wanted to be loving, they wanted to be forgiving, they wanted to be accepting, they wanted to be filled with joy and embrace impermanence, but they couldn’t. So I realized that it’s not a switch that I’m going to turn on at 65 when I retire. You have to do it now. So for me, that ‘nowness’ was very present through that whole process.

Q: You said you read spiritual literature when you were younger. Who inspired you the most?

NM: Lots of people! I read J. Krishnamurti in my teens, and I love everything he says. He says, “Look, truth is a pathless land.” You can only draw a path between two static points,
and truth is constantly changing – it’s emergent, not static. So you can never have a path to truth; you have to live into the truth of each moment. And that just resonated deeply. He was a big inspiration.

At the level of action, Gandhi was a big inspiration for me because I saw him bridge inner transformation with outer service. He was doing this great work in the world, but his journey was really to connect the inner with the outer. You repeatedly saw that in his life. And I thought, “Wow! He didn’t just meditate to be awakened, he didn’t just leave everything. He stayed in that dirty pond to give birth to that lotus and set a remarkable example of the possibility of love for the whole world.”

So they were two of my heroes as I was growing up, and they still are.

Q: So out of all this you developed a Gift Ecology. Can you describe it for us?

NM: I’m very inspired by small acts of kindness, small acts of service, because they change us. And what is of paramount importance is that they change us on the inside. So when we do small acts it’s wonderful, but when those small acts get connected, they really start to create a collective force around them. It changes the way in which we behave with each other.

Imagine I’m giving you a shoulder rub, and you are giving a shoulder rub to somebody in front of you, and that person is giving a shoulder rub to somebody in front of them. And if we’re all in a circle, what goes around comes around, right? It isn’t quid pro quo. I do something for you in a certain way, and maybe the person behind me is doing it in a different way for me. So it’s not that I gave this much and I expect this much back. I’m receiving and I’m paying forward with gratitude. If we let go of that transaction in a one-to-one way, what we get is a circle. It’s a shift from direct reciprocity, which is, “I gave you this so you give me this in return,” to indirect reciprocity. And when we engage in indirect reciprocity what we gain are relationships. That’s becomes a gift ecology – a field of myriad relationships of generosity. In such a field, everyone behaves differently, and our shared experiences lead to entirely different outcomes.

Q: Can you tell us how this works in some of your organizations, say in Karma Kitchen?

NM: I think Karma Kitchen is a great way to understand it. You walk into this restaurant and your check reads ‘zero’. It’s zero because someone before you has paid for you, and you are trusted to pay forward whatever you want for people after you. Will you pay forward? How much will you pay forward? How much is something worth that doesn’t have a price tag? What is your relationship to the priceless? In today’s culture we do not even have spaces, physical or even internal, to ask such questions. Most of us are just busy looking for price tags, and that’s how we determine value.

But here is a space where we change the rules of the game. We trust that we are intrinsically wired to want to connect, to expand in our empathy and to ultimately tap into our compassion, which is what a space like Karma Kitchen does. Because when I receive it, the first thing is, “Wow, I’ve received something from somebody I don’t know!”

So there is a sense of gratitude, and then from that gratitude we are paying forward to
those after us. And that person will never be able to say “Thank you” back. So there’s a trust, an expansion that happens, and if that is resonant, we say, “Hey, I want to come again.” If that lands, we say, “Hey, the meal’s market value might be $5 or $10, but I want to leave $20,” because we are moved in that way. And this kind of mindset can be applied to anything and any place where there is transaction. You can run a rickshaw in India this way, you can run magazines this way, you can run Yoga studios this way, you can run medical clinics this way. So many ServiceSpace members have done all that, and it’s been amazing to see.

Q: What are some of the reactions when people discover this feeling? What is it like to be part of this culture?

NM: The most spontaneous response that you see every so often is that someone walks into Karma Kitchen and is just moved to tears. They may not have the faintest idea about the space, but a short explanation is given to them at the door. Then they come and they are held with love, they are served by volunteers. It moves people. In such a context, different kinds of intelligence are awakened. People say things like, “Hey, you know what? I’m going to pay forward and do 21 kindness acts for strangers over the next 21 days, because this is the kind of world I want to see: where we see the good in people, where we value cooperation, where we’re connected.”

As a society I think one of our biggest problems right now is that we’re disconnected. We’re disconnected with ourselves, we’re disconnected socially, and we’re disconnected systemically. So how do we start to reconnect? That disconnection is very, very costly to society because trust is plummeting by all metrics. No one knows how to solve this problem, because there is no quick fix to trust. It takes many decades to destroy trust, which we have done, and now it’s going to take many decades to build it up. Unfortunately all our systems are skewed towards very quick feedback loops, so we aren’t able to solve this problem. People don’t even trust themselves now, let alone each other and systems.

How do we bring this kind of a capital into greater circulation in our world, so we can increase trust and reconnect with each other? I think generosity is a phenomenal tool to help us to do that.

Q: So do you think that’s why there are are high levels of depression and anxiety today, because of a lack of connection?

NM: Yes, that’s certainly a big part. Technology promises a lot of things. Facebook is supposed to connect us, but actually it has just cheapened our connections. When I was growing up, I would call my friend on the phone. His mom would pick up, and then I would get to know her too. At graduation you meet the parents of your fellow students. It was a much more multi-dimensional engagement. Now you just post some Happy Birthday message on the wall, and it’s almost a chore.

We do have many loose ties in today’s culture, but we have lost the deep ties. The Internet has been great for creating many loose ties across broader boundaries, many traditional boundaries. It’s great, it’s not all bad, but we have lost this capacity for deep ties and deep friendships. As a result we feel alone and that’s leading to many upstream problems.

Q: The gift ecology must have a gifting ecosystem associated with it. What does that look like? For example, the people who work in Karma Kitchen, and the way the whole things
evolves. Tell us about the continuity.

NM: The Buddha said something very profound: “This is a very long path of awakening. On this very long path there is one key resource that you need.” His attendant, Anand, asked, “You speak a lot about this idea of noble friends. It seems like half of the path is just noble friends.” And Buddha said to him, “No, Anand, it’s not half of the path. It’s the full path.”

So many times, we tend to see the things we do in isolation. We live in a monoculture world. You look at a farm and say, “What are you growing?” And the cheap easy answer, if you don’t have attention, if you want to sound bite everything, is that you say, “I just grow apples.” But actually how do we shift to a polyculture farm where we do have apples and we also have plums and peaches? It’s not so easy to just say this or that, it’s not binary, it’s actually multidimensional.

So many people will speak about a gift economy, but in ServiceSpace, we prefer gift ecology, because ecology is a deeper web with many nodes engaging with many other nodes. It’s more of a polyculture, and in a polyculture of relationships, you have incredible resiliency. And in that resiliency, virtues like generosity and kindness and compassion grow. Such virtues cannot be manufactured in a factory, they have to be gardened. But to grow them, you first need to have that field.

The allure of manufacturing is that you have a recipe: you start here, you apply the recipe, and you take it to scale in a certain predictable period of time. But how to shift from that monoculture mindset to polyculture mindset, and move from manufacturing to gardening? With gardening, you do your work but then you can’t say, “Let’s bring the tomatoes on Wednesday.” Tomatoes will arise when the time ripens.

How do we move from that predictability to emergence? Once we understand that virtues grow in a field, we can say, “What are the core elements of the social field?” And that’s relationships. So if we have polycultural relationships, we can grow compassion, we can grow generosity, we can grow kindness. If we don’t have those multi-dimensional relationships, we will not be able to put these things in circulation.

We actually have sustainable micro gift economies in most families. I don’t keep track of how much my dad does for me, or how much I do for my mom. We have a gift economy and we’re all very innately familiar with that. It just needs to be embedded in a larger culture, in this polyculture of relationships, so that it grows at its own pace, in different people at different times in different capacities, and we’re able to hold all of that.

Q: So it’s in tune with nature as opposed to being imposed.

NM: Yes, you’re trusting nature. You are counting on it, because it grows by nature’s order and not by your timeline.

Q: So then you’re trusting other human beings in the system, not to judge them, but to allow them to grow in their own way.

NM: Yes.

Q: How do you manage that process or perhaps you don’t manage it? What’s the model?
How do we move in any group, any family, any organization, from a transactional monoculture-type approach to a gifting ecosystem? How does that transition happen?

NM: The paths from transaction to trust goes through relationships. So if we cultivate such a field of deep relationships, trust will naturally arise. Then the question is: How do we cultivate such a field? I think it starts with small acts of service. It's the small acts of service that create an affinity between us, and that connection over time creates deeper bonds. That's the home for virtue to grow.

Q: Okay, so it's all based on human relationships.

NM: Yes.