

Audrey Lin: Invisible Kindness by Bela Shah

Invisible service is love made visible.

Love letters on flower shaped sticky notes, vegan chocolate chip cookies that can turn anyone into a cookie monster, a sunburst smile that will light up even the wariest of hearts, and a million and one acts of invisible kindness – there is no simple way to capture the boundless spirit of Audrey Lin.

Her journey is unconventional. Inspired by “Planet Walker” and the stillness in her heart, Audrey once embarked on a three-day walking pilgrimage from Berkeley to Santa Clara’s Awakin gathering. Her fearless quest for truth called her to experiment as a monastic at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas. And her abundance of love led her to serve with the Gandhi Ashram and Moved by Love in Ahmedabad, India. Irrelevant of where she is in the world or how big or small the act, Audrey’s purity of intention and commitment to service gives everything a personal touch that is impossible to clone.

To a casual observer, it may appear as if Audrey was simply born into a beautiful and blessed life. But closer examination of Audrey’s path will reveal a dedicated practice of unwavering faith, deep inquiry, and unconditional kindness. In Saturday’s Global Awakin call, moderated by Birju Pandya, learn more about what makes Audrey who she is for so many in our world.

The Origins

Birju: What was the inspiration for small acts of kindness in your life?

Audrey: I subconsciously came across this concept when I was a little kid living with my parents. They would always do so many acts of love as my parents and I always took it for granted. My mom would come home late from work and still cook us dinner. My dad would always do so many random and beautiful things. I remember when I was three or four years old, we were driving somewhere and pulled over at a store. He went in and came back out a few moments later with two big stuffed animals, one for me and one for my

sister. He had so much joy on his face too!

Later in life, when I encountered the idea of random acts of kindness, especially through Service Space, I started doing small things, visibly or invisibly. Each time there is something inside me that smiles and I receive so much in doing that.

Birju: How did that connection point in finding others that share that value set play out for you? What was the role in connecting in this kind of movement with others?

Audrey: When I was a student, I went in thinking I would study Philosophy or English but then I took an Ethnic Studies class and learned about all these social issues that I hadn't known about before. There was something in me that said, "Wow, we should do something." A lot of it was in the environment around me.

"At UC Berkeley, so many people were trying to save this, help that, or fight for this cause and so I was pulled into it too. Then in my sophomore year of college, I realized, "Wow, everyone is fighting for peace. Everyone is so angry about injustice and things not being fair but aren't we trying to make things better?"

This is what inspired me to learn about Gandhi and nonviolence because it was an example of someone that embodied the change he wanted to see.

I spent that summer with the Metta Center for Nonviolent Education in Berkeley, involved in a nonviolent mentorship program. This is where I learned about all these people that embodied nonviolent practices, such as Aung San Suu Ky, Dorothy Day, and Peace Pilgrim. Their lives exposed me to stories of possibility and along with that internship, I also learned about meditation. Together the two transformed me. Soon I learned about Service Space Awakin gatherings and I kept going back every Wednesday until slowly I started learning about Service Space. It all just felt right.

By the end of that summer, Karma Kitchen reopened and it was such a joyful day for me to try and blow people away with generosity. It was a very different approach than my approach as a social justice activist. It felt very subtle and it was a way of making things peaceful in a very simple and intentional way.

Outer Work versus Inner Work

Birju: Do you feel there is a connection between that place you were exposed to earlier with social justice and this other side of change through nonviolence and stillness within? It seems like Karma Kitchen is not necessarily going in the same vein as social justice work and I'm wondering if you see them as connected?

Audrey: On some level, yes, and on other levels, no. Looking back at my personal experiences, when I had the opportunity to do work through more of a social justice lens, I feel that I had blinders up and I kind of judged people more. I had something inside me that I was projecting outwards whereas when I've volunteered at Karma Kitchen, I've been more open to whoever is in front of me and I felt like my walls came down just a little bit more.

Birju: I would love to talk about this idea of contemplation and sacred walking. One week you walked 50 miles across the San Francisco bay area to the Awakin gathering in Santa Clara. What was the inspiration for that?

Audrey: It was at the end of the Metta Center mentorship program and learning about and meeting all these transformative people. I had a week before classes started again and I didn't know what to do. So I decided to go for a run. Everytime I didn't know what to do back then, I would go for a run.

I asked out loud, "Help me see what I'm supposed to do with this week?" Whenever you put a question out there you see the answers everywhere. While running, I remembered this conversation I had with a homeless man named Ken. One day I saw him handing out Street Spirit newspapers and I noticed that people were just walking by so I decided to ask him if I could buy him dinner. Unfortunately, after asking the question, I realized that I hadn't brought my wallet. He responded to me by saying, "I'm not an entitled person. I don't feel that just because you have things and I don't, that it's unfair. It's all good." I remember thinking to myself, "Wow, that's really interesting."

We started talking about the concept of God and those bigger picture ideas and then he shared a story about a time when he was living in an apartment and he was really craving drugs. He decided to pray and then when he finished praying he had this sudden urge to clean his living room. After he finished that, he had an urge to clean his kitchen, and then after that he cleaned his whole apartment. When he finished there was a knock on the door and standing there was his sister who he hadn't seen in years. He didn't even know how she found him. I remember from that conversation with Ken what he shared in the end, "That voice inside you is always there, you just have to find that stillness to listen to it."

So I was thinking while I was running, "Ken what is this voice inside of me telling me?" Then this thought popped into my head to walk to Santa Clara. I was in college and asking very earnest questions and I remember once while driving to the Awakening gatherings from Berkeley how ironic it was that we would drive for at least an hour to meditate for an hour and then drive another hour back. We're using up all this fuel and creating all this pollution for an hour of inner peace. I thought, "One day we should just all walk there."

At one of those Awakin circles someone had mentioned John Francis, "Planet Walker", who stopped driving after he witnessed a tanker collision and oil spill in San Francisco

Bay. He walked across the country for 22 years and he was silent for 17 of those years. Along the way, he ended up getting his undergraduate degree, his Masters, and a Ph.D.

All these ideas had been seeded in me so during that run it seemed so obvious that this is what I needed to do. It was a Saturday and I emailed the people that I carpoled with to see if anyone wanted to join. Since it was so last minute, no one was able to so I decided to do it alone. That's how that ended up happening.

Birju: Contemplative practice has been a core element in your journey. How have you processed what it has offered to you?

Audrey: I think there were two phases. I first became introduced to meditation through Professor Americ Acevedo at UC Berkeley. He would start each class with five minutes of silence and he called it "arriving". He said, "We're going to arrive by spending a few minutes in silence because we come into this room carrying so much from the rest of our day." It was a very visceral experience for me because I could feel the energy that I came into the room with and then feel it dissipate. After I learned about mediation, a year later I sat in my first ten-day Vipassana meditation retreat.

One of the insights I took away from that retreat was on suffering.

"Before I viewed suffering in a very material way, between the haves and have-nots. Through ten days of meditation, I realized that suffering is everywhere. Even when we have things we're suffering because we want to cling to them."

At that point in my life I was still very much involved in various ways to bring justice to the world but I think slowly through experiencing more into contemplative practices, I started to wonder, "How much am I actually doing?" I started to feel like a wheel that was spinning in mud without moving. I started to notice how much internally I was feeling agitated and unbalanced. I realized I just needed to meditate more.

Then I went in that direction a bit too much and I spent six months volunteering at a monastery in Northern, California. It was powerful and I learned a lot but looking back at it, it's definitely the middle way for me.

"Now my view is that they're not necessarily at odds, it's not either you meditate or you do work in the world. I ask myself, "How can I blend them. How is doing work in the world also a form of meditation and how is meditation also a form of doing work in the world?"

The Language of Love

Birju: I'm thinking back to when you and I were in India together. We were headed to an activity tied to service and I mentioned that it might be difficult since you didn't speak the language. You told me that in this kind of work it's ok because we all speak the language of love. Can you talk a little bit about that? What is that language of love and how have you been able to transcend these cultural boundaries through this integration of inner and outer?

Audrey: Half of it is just being around people with shared values. Things like kindness and gratitude are so universal and everyone can tap into it so the language we speak, the histories we come from, and the cultures we come from become irrelevant in some ways.

I remember one evening we had all slept out in the slums on New Year's Eve and I had been paired up to stay with a lady named Champabhen, who was a vegetable seller. Another person had been assigned to come with me to translate. Later on that evening this person became sick and had to leave so after that I was on my own. When I was shadowing Champabhen selling veggies on the streets we didn't have a common language and it didn't matter because we were connected through our values.

"When I was paired up with her, Jayeshbhai was there and he took me in one arm and Champabhen in the other arm and said, "This is my sister" and " This is my daughter", "So this is your niece." That kind of sealed the deal. There was no room for uncertainty because there was so much trust."

Throughout the next day even though I didn't speak the vocal language, I could see and communicate in so many other ways.

Gayathri: Do you think that money comes in the way or is it an aid for you in your acts of kindness?

Audrey: I struggle with wanting to spend all my money on kindness and realizing that there are so many subtler forms of kindness. It can be easy to say, "Oh I'm going to buy this for this person", but I remember one time when I was living in Boston and working in a school, a co-worker said, "You need to learn not to spend money for kindness." I was surprised because for me it was a blind spot. I was showing my kindness through material love, like buying groceries for someone or tagging someone with flowers, but just your presence and the way you show up for things can be an even greater act of kindness. If you're distracted and not paying attention, then that affects everything and everyone in your space.

"If you bring your whole self and ask, "How can I be of service to this person in front of me?" that doesn't require financial means but that stillness of presence and openness of heart are what make a difference."

Trust Opens the Heart

Harpreet: How do you open your heart and keep it open?

Audrey: I go through my phases and I think what I've noticed is that what helps me open up is being in a community of that kind of love and trust. I definitely think that when I isolate myself, I become closed off and I don't see my humanness in others and their humanness in me. When you connect with someone through kindness, there is a trust there. This summer with Nimo, we saw time and time again where we would be welcomed into people's home even though we had never met before. This is what helps me to stay open, but it's a constant process for me. Sometimes I close off again and then I have to tap into that space of trust. It's like yin and yang; you can't know the light without knowing the darkness.

Bradley: My niece was lamenting about caring deeply for people and being hurt by it when it's not being reciprocated. I tried to turn it around and tell her how wonderful it is to care so deeply for someone. Are there times when you felt like a doormat, like your love is not being appreciated?

Audrey: I've definitely experienced that before but I've learned from spaces like Karma Kitchen. There you start to distinguish the difference between gift and "free". When you're really caring and giving, it's not so much that it's not reciprocated but maybe that it's not valued by certain people and for me, one thing I've learned is to be in environments where there is that circle of trust.

"At Karma Kitchen you're stepping into a circle of trust instead of transaction, you're giving and you're growing internally from the giving. It's a space where the giving is honored and carried forward. Being in that circle recharges me to step into spaces where that trust isn't so strong and then I can be in a setting where it's not normal or reciprocated or honored and sacred and I can still practice kindness and generosity without expectation that anyone is going to respond."

It is the knowledge that there are all these people in the world that do resonate with the kindness so when I get rejected or stepped on I know that no act of kindness is ever wasted. Even if it's not received in a certain way, it's still putting out some sort of kindness in the world and you never know where that ripple goes.

You also don't want to feed a cycle of dependency where you become the giver and everyone else is the taker so it's learning what situations you want to be in and who you want to surround yourself with. For me, I tend to be a bit softer so I have to learn how to be a bit more street smart and the most skillful way to express kindness and generosity.

Humility

Amit: How do you approach humility versus not feeling worthy enough?

Audrey: I remember someone said there is a fine line between humility and lack of conviction and for me, that's definitely an edge. I have struggled with that feeling of not feeling like I'm doing enough or like what I'm doing isn't of value. Those times that I felt that way I realize that it's coming from a place of ego even though you would think it isn't. I'm learning not to ask those questions anymore. It's good to be aware but it's good to not over think it!

“By the fact that we breathe we’re enough; by the fact that we exist on this planet, we’re enough. So why do we get shaken up by not feeling enough so much?”

There would be days in India that I struggled with this. I came from that western lens of doing, I constantly wanted to be doing something and adding value and if I wasn’t, I felt not good enough. Slowly I started to realize that I should just calm down, just being there was a form of value. It’s not about “should I be here” but realizing “I’m already here”. I started to learn a lot about the subtler forms of offering value, like the value of the space we take up and the presence that we offer to a room. I started to see more and more how different perspectives and personality offer so much value and they color life and when we’re just thinking of a to-do list, we forget all of this because we have an agenda.

Prakash: Usually you always start with “I don’t know” and that means a lot. Just by anchoring yourself from that space of the unknown, you accept that reality and operate from a space of possibility with a yearning to know. When you say, “I don’t know”, do you say it from wanting to consciously come from that space?

Audrey: “I think I often feel like I don’t know. Was it Socrates that said, “All that I know is that I don’t know anything”? That has been a foundation for my learning.”

Maybe it’s because when I was growing up I would hang out with my older sister’s friends and I wanted to be like them and I was always the youngest so I was always in that mode of learning. Even as a college student, I spent time with people that had already graduated because I wanted to learn from their experiences.

There is so much in the world that I don’t know, so much that’s a mystery. One of my favorite things is to climb the top of this hill in Berkeley from where you can see San Francisco and the curve of the horizon and that’s really grounding for me. When I see that expansive sky and ocean and realize what a tiny piece of the puzzle I am, there is something that makes me feel really alive. All the stuff in my head that makes me feel that I’m big dissolves and not knowing helps me to embrace the day with those fresh eyes.

Exercising the Heart Muscle

Birju: In talking about the arc of your journey, one element that I notice is the open mindedness that you approach each moment with. There is clearly a guiding light behind it and yet it may come across as something that is different than the journey of most people. Earlier this year you joined Nimo for this cross-country music pilgrimage. What is the narrative that ties this with your time volunteering at a monastery? What holds it all together? Can you share more about the guiding force that brings a clarity that says, “This is the right thing as a next step?”

Audrey: I don’t know if there is always clarity but in deciding to join Nimo, it was an honor. His sincerity in embarking on this music pilgrimage and his intention behind it were enough. Sometimes sincerity offers such a security because it’s almost like you see the world with that sense of trust and that sense of wanting to see the good.

“In choosing to join Nimo, I felt there was so much to learn from the integrity with which

he carried out his intention. I want to grow in my own sincerity and truth and kindness. So any space where that can happen is the right decision for me."

Of course you want to be practical and responsible and I'm working on that too, but in this last year, one of the things that has propelled me is my father's death a year and a half ago. When he passed away I made a promise to myself that I would try not to take decisions based on ego or fear because life is too short for that. Seeing his body dead really impacted me. All those other things, all those fears and egoic thoughts, all of it is so silly at the end of the day.

"What if I die tonight? If that happens, what will it all have been for? So now when I think about what is the right decision to make, I ask myself, "What am I afraid of and are any of my doubts coming from ego or fear?"

Birju: I wanted to connect back with this theme of invisible kindness. How do you stay motivated and continue to be engaged with it? The world really values the big stuff, the stuff that you see and get returns on very quickly. But here I see you flipping it on its head and you're doing it with so much love, but I know it's not easy when everything around you is saying, "This doesn't make sense, it's immature, and it's impractical." What keeps you going in the face of that?

Audrey: "You know the feeling you get when you do something small, even if you don't feel like doing it but you do it anyway? There is something that shifts inside of you. When I do little acts of kindness, it makes me more present and more grateful. Whatever worries or concerns that I'm riding at that moment, randomly doing something kind for someone else puts a stop on those thoughts and opens me up to what's in front of me."

I remember this past summer during the pilgrimage, Nimo and I were driving to Colorado and we stopped at a grocery store and picked up a bunch of flowers in honor of this great person we had just met. We were standing in this Safeway parking lot giving out flowers and there were such a variety of responses. One woman just stopped and said, "Wow you just made my day!" The next person I gave a flower to said "No, no thank you." There was a 60/40 percent acceptance/rejection ratio and I think it's a metaphor for life. Sometimes people understand you and receive you and sometimes they don't; you win some, you lose some. Regardless of the reaction, the simple act created some giddiness in my heart.

A few weeks ago my computer broke. I remember walking into the Apple store for a part that I needed to get replaced and when I got the bill, it didn't cost me anything. This is because when I got the computer, Apple Care came with it. My dad had gifted me the computer and when the customer representative asked him if I needed Apple Care, his response was an immediate yes even though I told him it wasn't necessary. When I received the bill for zero dollars, it was a chilling moment of receiving an act of kindness from my father who had already passed away.

"In the end there is only kindness. At the end of the day we are all going to go, but what stays behind are those small acts; those are acts maybe paid forward by so many others. We never really know where it's all coming from but that's what makes the world go round and what inspires me to keep living."