

Ani Choying: Gratitude and Service by Nipun Mehta

Ani Choying Drolma was a guest at a ServiceSpace Awakin Circle in Santa Clara on June 7, 2017. The following introduction was sent out in advance of her visit:

Steve Tibbetts was meditating in a Nepali monastery, when he heard a nun singing sacred hymns. After requesting permission to record her on his cassette recorder, he was so mesmerized by her voice that he forgot to hit record! "There's a quality in her singing that cuts to the heart of what it's like to be human," the American guitarist said of the Buddhist nun's chants. "That quality, that tonality, just goes right to the center of your chest." Eventually he got a second chance and passed on the tape to a music producer. Today, that nun's dozen albums have turned her into a household name in Nepal and an international celebrity.

As inspiring as Ani's music is, her life journey is perhaps even more so. From the age of five, Ani had to struggle to survive. Not a day went by without a bloody beating from her father, without Ani fearing for her mother's life or her own. The day her father nearly stabbed her to death, she decided to run away—to a monastery, where a kind monk offered her sanctuary. She was 13 years old. "In those days, we all suffered because of my father. But today, I see it as a disease he was suffering from. I am grateful for all that he has inspired me to become."

To support other young women, Ani started Nuns Welfare Foundation. In 2000, she adopted one girl to start Arya Tara School outside Kathmandu. One turned to two to three -- to 80 nuns now. All her music proceeds support her prolific philanthropic work and she was named Nepal's first UNICEF national ambassador. "It is probably impossible to eliminate the world's sufferings, but at least I can try," Ani says.

When the evening arrived a few days later, the living room in the hosts' home was crowded with over 80 guests. After everyone had managed to squeeze themselves in, sitting shoulder to shoulder on cushions, on the floor, or in chairs pressed against the walls, the room became quiet and the evening program began...

Nipun Mehta: [some of his introduction was not recorded and picks up here.] ...It's a real honor to have you with us tonight, Ani. Thank you so much. We'll have some Q&A, but we'd like to begin with a song as an invocation.

[she sings in Tibetan]

Ani Choying Drolma: Namaste. Very good evening. Thank you so much for the invitation. And thank you for such a kind introduction. I don't know if I fit into all those nice, kind words, but yet I deeply rejoice. I have a song talking about -- in English you have this

saying "beauty is in the eyes of the beholder" -- and this is what the song is saying, also. The conceptual resource of the song is from the Dhammapada, where the Buddha is teaching that we are what we think.

So it's your kind perception toward me that's made you speak these kind words about me. But the question is there, will I live up to that or not? [laughs] I do question myself at times. I don't know if you've met another Buddhist nun who sings and who has been called a "rock star." [she laughs and audience laughs]

I'm a very controversial figure, but I have no regrets. I'm happy because most of the time I've seen my effort has been able to make some impact of bringing smiles to people's faces. I enjoy that so much. It brings joy to my heart.

I always took my singing ability as a blessing. Since a very young age, I always enjoyed singing and humming. But when I took refuge in the nunnery, my spiritual teacher in the monastery, every morning and on every special occasion according to the lunar calendar, would ask me to sing at various ritual ceremonies. These are learned not as entertainment, but as part of meditation—techniques that we use to unite the mind with the sound of mantras. I was never taught and never learned anything formally. I would never give a concert! I never had that idea.

But one day an American guitarist named Steve Tibbetts came to Nepal. Steve was visiting from Minnesota and came to our nunnery to study with my teacher. When he heard me singing some of these melodies, he asked me to record something for him—which I did, without any hesitation, because I used to do that to help others learn the melody.

Americans are very creative. They always come up with different ideas. After Steve went back to America, he mixed my singing with his own guitar and percussion and other electronic music. He sent me a sample, asking, "Would you be interested to make an album? Because there are record companies who are very interested. They think this is a very good idea and want to publish a CD."

I really couldn't imagine what was happening. He sent me a CD he'd made and I'd never heard such music, so it sounded a little odd at first. I went to my teacher and asked him what he thought of this idea to make an album. He didn't have a CD player in his room, so he couldn't listen to the CD, but I explained the idea and he said, "Do it. It shouldn't be a problem, because whatever you are singing, these are not ordinary songs that people would listen to. These are songs, hymns, that are filled with positive energy, full of blessings. So whoever gets to listen to them— whether they are believers or non-believers doesn't matter—they all will benefit." That was good enough for me, so I immediately sent a reply back to Steve and said, "Yes, let's do it."

To record, Steve had to come to Nepal. I could not travel to America because my teacher's health was not good at the time and I was serving him as a nurse. I'm not a qualified nurse, but I learned how to check his blood sugar, blood pressure, urine, prepare his medicine, and even give him the insulin injection on time and write down the reports. Then occasionally, I would talk to the doctors who were monitoring the situation. So I was there all the time with him and would even sleep in the same room with him on the floor.

So Steve came. An hour a day, during the lunch break, somebody would take my place and I would go and record for him. But first, I would sing it to my teacher and he would

happily correct some of the places where I needed correcting. Then I would go and record. And somehow I did all the recordings—as many pieces as he needed. Then he left Nepal.

I was still in Nepal when my teacher passed away. And I was totally involved in the process of the ceremony and everything that was supposed to take place. In January 1997 I was told the CD was published worldwide. I received a copy and that's it.

I was excited, to be very honest. I had no idea about what it would mean having a CD published worldwide and so on. And after a couple of months I received a thick envelope of reviews from different magazines. In those days I really had no idea of these magazines. But now I do. I'm aware of Rolling Stone and Musical and Cosmopolitan and ELLE, and all these magazines.

So I just put the reviews aside. But then things took place that, if I'd known then, I think a little excitement would have been there. And in 1997 at the end of the year, Steve asked me if I would be interested in doing a concert tour with him in America. There were many invitations to perform. And I was like, "Wow, I'll get to see America!" That was the only reason that popped into my mind—of course besides McDonald's. I used to watch Hollywood movies—it was one of the ways I improved my English and it helped me improve my listening—and in the movies, I saw McDonald's and hamburgers and so on. So I said yes to Steve.

Steve sent us the visas and so on. Then he asked me if I wanted to bring two other nuns. I said, "Yes." And we were excited. For the first nine days we were in Minnesota going from Steve's house to the studio. We hardly even saw any people walking on the street. We were feeling like, "Nobody lives in America." And the worst part was having to eat the same food!

Steve and his wife have triplets and they didn't have much time to prepare food every meal. So they cooked enough for one week in a big container and put it in the fridge. Then every time, they would heat it up in the microwave and give it to us. We were so bored. We thought, "Is this really happening to us?"

We really missed our food and somehow we had the courage to ask Steve, "Do you have grocery stores where we can buy fresh vegetables? And, can we cook?"

He said yes and took us to the supermarket. We were like, "Oh my God! It's so huge!" Everything looked so bright and big and packed. Back in Nepal, of course, when we buy vegetables, it's outside in the open and not as fresh as it looks here. We were excited. We bought everything we wanted and started cooking every day. We took care of the triplets when we were free. And we cooked. And everybody enjoyed the meals. Then after nine days when our concert tour started, it was fun because we saw different places. And when we reached New York, then we finally felt like we were really in America because we saw people walking on streets, so busy.

Besides that, after every concert, I received checks. And the checks were for a good amount. I was like, "Wow, I can make money!" Before that, I never really could make money. In our culture, we depend on the offerings of people. But then the question started growing: "What do I do with the money now?"

In one month we performed 22 concerts in 22 different cities. And during this time I was interviewed by different radio stations and papers everywhere we went. We were performing at some very reputed music festivals in America.

I was sometimes asked "What is your dream?"

My dream was always to see women and girls in my country being educated. I always wanted women to be strong. That was my dream—women enjoying their freedom to express themselves. My dream was for my people to understand that it is important to send their daughters to school, as equally as they think it for boys. It was a very hidden dream, but it was very strongly growing in my heart. This gender discrimination is so ignorantly and strongly practiced in our society. And that was one of the reasons why I wanted to be a nun. Even after I entered the nunnery, I saw gender discrimination there too. I would not say it is intentionally practiced, but ignorantly followed. The thinking is that this is a tradition that has been there since long before, and who are you or who am I to change? So that was again another saddening reason for me.

I used to question why. We see monks as scholars, but very rarely, next to nil, are any nuns called scholars. So that was another thing that was deep inside my very strong desire, my fantasy or dream. So whenever I was asked, I said, "My dream, my wish, my future plan, is to educate girls." When I went back to Nepal with the money, the first thing I did was to register the organization, Nun's Welfare Foundation. Then I started planning how I could start a school. That was in 1998. In 1999, the first year, the money was not enough. I continued touring the next year, one month in America and another in Europe, and so there was again more money.

Then in the year 2000, I started the school with seven students. I rented a house and brought together these girls who wanted to become nuns or wanted to study and would otherwise not have had the chance. And I hired a teacher. At times, I gave lessons myself because I at least know how to teach A B C D—very basic things. I started with that, but then, as is human nature, the more we get, the more we want. I wanted to educate more kids. I couldn't afford to go out and look for them, so I just spread the word around a bit here and there. That was good enough to get a few more in. Then it grew from seven to 10, 20, 35. Today I have 86 kids. And some of those who started from very basic A B C Ds are now completing the acharya degree from Banaras University, which I am so proud of.

When I was young I really wanted to study too, but somehow due to circumstances I could not. And today I feel so deeply satisfied, like quenching your thirst, seeing these kids being educated and then graduating. I had never before witnessed any other nuns being acharyas, which is equivalent to getting a master's degree. It makes me feel so good. In my younger days, even seeing a woman driving was something so exciting. Like, "Wow, she's free, she's independent, she's capable." And when I watched Bollywood movies, I would see an actress play the police woman beating up all the bad guys, and it would make me feel so good.

So my biggest desire or wish was to empower women in our society. I come from a family where domestic violence was very strongly experienced. My father suffered from a disease, which made it difficult for him to control his aggression, and he became very violent. Because of that, my mother and I, and less so my younger brothers, experienced a lot of unpleasant moments in life. As the daughter, the most difficult thing for me was witnessing my own mother, who I loved so much, being beaten in front of me. That was the worst part for me.

Somehow it started growing in my heart: "Why does a man have to treat a woman like that?" And at the same time, there was fear in my heart of having to get married in my

future, because I could not imagine a life other than what my mother had. Slowly, the fear became so bad, I started having fearful fantasies. One day, I was beaten up and was crying. My mom was caressing me and said, "Don't cry, don't be sad. He's your father, he loves you. Don't worry." And I just asked her, "Do I have to live like you also when I grow up? Have a husband who beats me up?" I had seen her giving birth to my brothers right in front of my eyes and saw how she went through life and death, and she was almost dead.

All these experiences created so much fear and anger at the same time in my heart. That's why I chose to become a nun, because my mom said, "If you become a nun, you will never have to get married." That sentence was so sweet to my ears. I didn't think about anything else. I didn't become a nun because I was very religious or very spiritual. I just wanted to escape. But today I am so grateful and feel so fortunate and blessed that I made that decision. After I became a nun, I had another man in my life who was the most beautiful example of a man—my teacher. So I always tell people two men changed my life. One was my father, who really beat me like a dog. You don't beat dogs here in America, but back in Nepal or India, people loved to kick the dogs. That was my experience of my father, and in those days, I thought man was the worst creature on earth. But then I met another man who was the most beautiful being on earth.

My teacher was the most beautiful being on earth, and to whom I am so grateful. And today I'm at a stage in my life where I'm equally grateful to my father. Because when I look back, if he hadn't given me those unpleasant experiences in life, I probably wouldn't have thought of escaping and looked for an alternative. And if I hadn't looked for an alternative way of life, I probably wouldn't have become a nun. If I hadn't become a nun, I don't know if I would have met such a guru, without whom I probably would not be who I am today.

What admiration I receive, whether for my singing or for activities I do to find meaning in my existence, it is the blessing of my teacher—the love and kindness he raised me with. That is what healed me and helped me realize my potential to heal others as well, whether through my singing or through understanding someone else's difficulties, and cultivated my desire to help them minimize their pain and difficulty. I don't know if I have the power to totally eliminate their suffering, but I somehow gained the confidence that I do have the power to minimize it. Because of these experiences, today, I know what domestic violence can be like, and I can relate to some of these women. And I can always be ready to provide whatever kind of help or service to make them feel safe or supported, or not feel alone or feel scared.

I'm the least academic person in here. My academic background is only until fifth grade. I don't know what I can say to you all, because you all seem to be highly educated and intelligent people who come together to do this meditation. How wonderful! I deeply rejoice. But then I thought, there is a saying in our language: when the stupid speak, the intelligent learn. I can possibly be so. Please forgive me if I'm trying to sound too smart or too anything. I'm simply trying to share a story of a little girl who one day had a different way of life. Same as you, I also wanted to be happy in life. In my earlier days I was a little bit unhappy. Today I'm a little bit happier, and I want to be more happy. That's what I'm in the process of practicing through sharing my music, through sharing my stories. I don't know how much of sense it would make to anyone, but...

Nipun: It makes a lot of sense to us. Before we go to Q and A with everybody, I was wondering if we could request a song. Did you ever dedicate a song to your teacher?

Ani: Of course, a lot.

Nipun: Is there one that comes to mind?

Ani: Sure. One day my composer called me asking for a little help on one of his projects, and I went. I couldn't help much, but then he sang a song that immediately brought tears to my eyes and gave me a very deep joy. I asked him, "Can you please compose another song for my Guruji?" And he did. That's how our work started. But I want to share one incident. Once I was in Japan and my friend was driving me around. She played a song by Celine Dion and as I listened I couldn't think of anyone but my teacher. Such a beautiful song. I said, "Oh, what a beautiful song for my Guruji." And she looked at me. "Are you crazy? This is a love song." I said, "Yeah, the perfect song." I don't know if you guys know "Because You Loved Me." It's the perfect feeling that I have for my teacher.

Nipun: People have questions. So we'll pass the mic.

Question: It's such a joy to be in your presence. And when you described your earlier childhood and how that filled you with anger and fear, and now I see that there's some way you have managed to deal with them. And how did you do that? What can you give us to help us deal, conquer those feelings?

Ani: Well, let me continue my story. There was my teacher's kindness—the compassion that he showered me with, without making me sit down, as if he were giving a class. It was in day to day life, how he would deal with me. Once I took refuge in the nunnery with my teacher, I realized for the first time that I was just a child. Before that, I was never told that I was a child and it was okay to play. Every time I went out and got distracted by other kids playing, I always had one of my brothers on my back.

My father would drag me home by my hair and then would ask me if I had done my dish washing or laundry or my cooking, and so on. But in the nunnery, suddenly I didn't have to do any dishes. I didn't have to do laundry. I didn't have to cook. Somebody else cooked for me. Someone helped me to do laundry and someone even helped me do dishes, even my own dishes. And my nun friends and my seniors were all looking at me because I was the youngest at that time in the nunnery.

I suddenly realized I could just run around and play anywhere. I became like a wild child—I was everywhere. I became so naughty that my seniors started going to my teacher to complain about me. Every time, I'd hear him say, "Leave her alone, she's just a kid." That slowly pacified me. I felt good about me. I didn't realize that I was being healed, but when I look back, I can see how I was being healed.

Quite frequently, when he would have this special food prepared for him by one of the nuns known for her delicious cooking, he would hide a few pieces under the table, without letting the senior nuns know. Then he would look for me from the balcony and say, "Come up, come up." He would make me close the door and then he would bring out the food and have me eat without letting the senior nuns know. He would always do that, and it made me feel so loved. Not only that, but occasionally he would sit me down and ask me, "Do you know any songs? Did you sing or dance in school? Would you show it to me?" And I would sing for him, and I would dance for him, and slowly those activities relaxed me.

Occasionally he would talk to me about my home and my experiences. Every time I talked

about my family, I would have some bitterness towards my father. My teacher realized that. One day he asked me, "Is there anything good you can think of about your dad?" He made me think. I said, "He works hard." Then I said, "But he beat me so badly." My teacher said, "Do you think he enjoyed beating you?" I thought, and of course I never saw him happy beating me or my mother. I said, "No, he wasn't happy." Then my teacher would not say much more about it. Nowadays, I consider him the best psychologist or counselor. He really knew how to do it.

There was the time when he asked me, "Do you think that he worked hard for himself?" Then of course, "No, he worked hard to earn enough to feed us all." One thing I remembered very clearly was that he always had really good food for us. Tibetans love meat, you know. So he would make sure that we had chunks of meat to eat all the time and that there was always a lot food. He always fed us well, so that's something. My teacher made me think of good things about my dad, and slowly there was something. Then I could think of good moments with my dad.

The most memorable conversation I had with my teacher was on what I would do if I saw someone in pain or really in need of help on the street. I said, "Of course I'd go and help this person."

He said, "Really? You would help this person?"

I said, "Yes."

"Even if he's not related to you?"

"Yes, I would still help."

"Even if it's someone you don't know at all?"

"Yes, I would help."

"But don't you think that your father needs your help the most?"

It made me think. It was not an overnight thing, of course—the process of transformation happened slowly over 10 or 12 years of my life.

As I started loving my teacher more and more, I became more aware of how I behaved. I would always see the seniors going to complain to him about me, disturbing and nagging him. I felt bad about that, but whenever the seniors were a little bit rough on me I would rebel and not listen to them. I felt like I couldn't be scared because the big boss was with me. I was very happily and arrogantly spoiled.

But over time, I became conscious about how I behaved, and occasionally when I had some disagreement with the seniors, I really tried to control myself from talking back. Sometimes I would do the most funny thing. Our monastery is in the middle of a kind of jungle, so I would just run into the jungle and scream as much as I wanted to. I would scream out all the anger and disappointment over whatever disagreement, because I really did not want them to go to my teacher and nag him because of me. I started to see how strong love could be.

Then it made me really start to think about my father as well. I slowly felt like my father needed help. My father not only gave precious life to me, but he made sure that we

always had food to eat. He worked hard for that and when he beat my mother, it was not because he hated us. It was a disease that he suffered—that he had no control over—so he was suffering from it. So some part of me felt like I needed to help him. I started to think of how I could help, because as I started thinking good thoughts about him, I slowly started to feel good about him.

I tried to connect with him slowly, more and more. I'm sure my father loved me. I don't doubt his love towards me, but he didn't know how to express it. But I fell in love with him. I really loved him like my own child. Our relationship changed at the end of his life. I became his mother and he became my child, and I'm so fortunate that I was able to take care of him to his last day. The day before he stopped breathing he looked at me and said, "Thank you. I'm so lucky to have a daughter like you. The [obstruction] between you and me is cleared." Yes.

After he passed away, I felt for some time like I had become jobless. He loved chilled Coca Cola, and every time I went out I would bring back drinks for him. He also loved alcohol, and occasionally I would bring alcohol for him. The most funny part is that every time I went abroad for a tour, before I returned I would call and ask him, "Is there anything you need or want me to bring for you?" A lot of the times he'd say perfume. He loved perfume. He was a very good looking man, actually, and before he left the house he'd make sure to look clean and very attractive. He'd dress up nicely and make sure he smelled good so that if a woman passes by he can just have a look.

One day when I asked him, he said, " Maybe you should bring me a good watch."

I said, "What kind of watch?"

And he said, "An Omega or a Rolex would be fine."

I said, "Dad! Those watches are really expensive."

He said, "I know, that's why I asked. Why would I care to wear such watches? If I wear expensive, good watches people will think well of you guys. People will honor you guys, you know, if I wear this."

So it was for honor. In incidents like this, my father could be so cute. But getting back to that stroke of aggression, it was so hard to control him. As I grew older and closer to him, he would tell me that hearing my voice made him feel as if the aggression was the fire and I was the water that pacified him. He'd feel tranquilized and good, so that was my relationship with my dad. That's why today I say whatever good I have been able to do in my life, I'm totally grateful towards both my teacher and my father equally.

I regret that sometimes I have to speak of him as cruel and brutal. When the book was first proposed, I was very worried. How do I portray him? Because that image is like a forgotten image, but when I tell the story I have to be very honest. That particular experience at that stage of life, and how I felt, I have to tell very vividly. I even rejected the proposal from the publishing company. I didn't think I should write this book of my life. But they were very pushy.

To be very honest, they were offering me a good amount of money, and that was around the time when I wanted to do something about the people suffering from kidney disease in Nepal. My mother was going through it and dialysis was expensive, and no transplant

services were available in Nepal. The nearest place for transplants was India, and that was so expensive. There were almost no facilities to take care of these people, and they were suffering.

I thought, "Maybe I've been given this experience to understand that there's something I need to do about it." I promised my mother I would do anything within my capacity to start a hospital out of my love for her. And today, this hospital exists. Not only have we been able to bring transplant services to Nepal, but we also lobbied the government to make transplants and dialysis free for poor people. Today, the numbers of relatives who donate their organs is greater than ever, and recently we have been able to transplant kidneys from people who have died in accidents or are brain dead. That was only possible because of the lab that we established in our hospital—the only lab in Nepal that can do this particular kind of test. So I really feel blessed.

I feel that experiences such as sickness, difficulty, and pain can be blessings in disguise, if only we can learn to perceive them correctly. When I didn't get to study, I developed the desire to educate other kids, and the joy I get from seeing these kids being educated is so wonderful. And because I experienced domestic violence, today I can relate to the pain and difficulty of women who are suffering from domestic violence, and I can be of some service to these people, and it makes me feel so good. Because my mother suffered from kidney failure, I understand the difficulties of people with this kind of disease and was able to develop facilities to help them.

Too much pleasure isolates you, and you become lonely. When you have pain and difficulty, it connects you to people everywhere around you. It's wonderful at times, but I don't mean to wish that people suffer. I hope I didn't talk too much.

Nipun: No, that's great. I would just like to know the name of your guru.

Ani: Yes. My teacher's name is His Eminence Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche. He actually belongs to both the Kagyu and Nyingma traditions.

Question: You lived in Nepal for a long time and then you came to America. I was wondering, what surprised you most about people living in America or in other developed countries? Are they on the right track?

Ani: Who am I to judge? I'm not in a position to judge anyone's lifestyle, but what surprised me most is how when I came to America, everything was about pressing a button. And people all seem to be so busy. They say, "I'm busy, I'm busy, I'm busy. I'm so busy."

Nipun: That's 98% of the people here. [laughter from the audience]

Ani: Well, the funniest thing I remember is before I left for America, my teacher's elder son, said to me, "So you're going to America?"

I said, "Yes, so please bless me."

He said, "Just be careful. Very interesting people live in America."

I was curious and asked him, "Why do you say that?" I remember his answer very clearly. He's very funny and makes people laugh a lot.

He said, "The people in America love to suffer before the suffering comes."

Question: Is there a book about your guru?

Ani: Yes, many books from the Rangjung Yeshe Publications: Rainbow Painting. As It Is. Blazing Splendor.

Nipun: And you've got a book titled Singing For Freedom.

Ani: Yes.

Nipun: Can you share a little bit about the title itself?

Ani: I'd say intellectual people shouldn't get this book. It's just a simple story of a girl who chooses not to suffer in her life. She looks for an alternative—a transformation. The reason I titled it "Singing For Freedom" was because of the journey I made to free myself from my own anger towards society—especially towards men. The frustration and hatred that grew in me, burning me, was my own struggle to free myself. I don't know how much freedom I've been able to bring to others, but this was my journey to freedom.

Through singing as a spiritual practice, meditation practice, the impact on those who listen to my singing, and the resources it generated towards facilities to educate girls, I began to make myself lighter and lighter—more fulfilled, I should say.

I'm still in the process of healing and freeing myself. Some people have the wrong notion that a shaved head or red robe means someone is totally enlightened. Trust me, they're not. According to our culture, we expect people to bow down to us and make offerings of the best foods. But we are sometimes in worse danger of ignorantly developing an arrogance for being someone who does good. Being a nun means refraining from evil deeds, or rather engaging in virtuous deeds..

One experience made me feel so filthy. We were having puja, a big ceremony, and our sponsor was arriving. Some of my nun friends and I were discussing, "Who is the sponsor of today's rituals of puja?" And then I was saying, "Oh yeah, he's a good one and makes good offerings with good food!"

Suddenly I thought, "Oh my God, what is happening? This is so not good." And from that experience I asked my lyricist to write a song on understanding the worthlessness of wealth and power. I had renounced it all, but in the name of renunciation I had developed so much arrogance. I was deceiving myself.

Now this song will be as my gratitude towards you all. I'm so, so honored, really, to be among you and to share this moment with you. So this song goes like this: "I wish you victory. I wish you auspiciousness in life, but may your heart always remain tender. May your wish for happiness be a wish not to hurt the slightest bit to anyone. In your happiness may I rejoice. I wish you victory in life, I wish you auspiciousness in life, but may your heart always remain tender." (she sings)

Question: I'm delighted to be in your presence. You spoke about people and circumstances creating grievance and misery. And then you said that all this came into your life only to serve you, or for the better good. Could you share some thoughts on how one can have equanimity with people or circumstances that bring us suffering?

Ani: We human beings are so intelligent, Our analytical abilities are so wonderful. There are times when you have a very strong desire to be freed from that suffocating or unpleasant feeling of being in some circumstances. When you really try then to analyze the whole situation, you find there is no real substance to cling to. That helps you to ask, "What am I hanging on to? What is it that really makes me feel like this?"

I'm not in a position to teach you the exact methods to free yourselves because I'm not a qualified teacher—I'm still learning, but disappointment is a part of our lives. We suffer from what we cannot accept.

When you start to dig deeper into the reasons for your suffering, you want to be able to find something solid and say, "This is it," and then crush it. But you don't really find this in the end. It can make me feel so stupid at times. So when I feel that someone is making me angry, I try to think, "Am I perceiving this correctly? What if I were in that other person's shoes? If I look at it myself in that way, would I still think this?" I try to change the angle of my thinking or perception of whatever incident or conditions I am in. I really try to think.

Sometimes you find no reasons, yet the unpleasant emotions still exist inside, and it feels kind of itchy, like you want to scratch and scratch to the point where you create your own wound. Then you cry about that wound. We are so used to seeking sympathy from other people. We love when people show us sympathy and say things like, "You poor guy, it's not your fault," and so on. And at times we think, "So what?"

When I look back, every incident in my life seems to have had a reason, whether to give me a sign or to help me understand what was happening and bring new opportunities.

Two years ago, we had a really bad earthquake. Everyone thinks earthquakes are the most disastrous thing, and people are still upset about it. Many people were traumatized, many lost their lives or were injured, and so on. What happened, happened. You can't undo these things. There is grief. That's part of the process of life.

After the earthquake, I was so happy to see how a disastrous moment was able to invoke so much kindness and compassion in people's hearts. It was so beautiful! Normally you would not see it on that scale. People are usually busy running around, thinking only of their own survival and how to make more money for themselves and their families.

After the earthquake, everyone started behaving like everyone else was family. And this is what we actually dream of experiencing in normal life. We have to struggle really hard to invoke such behavior, feeling, and attitude towards life and the people around us.. Of course that doesn't mean there were no regrets for injuries and precious lives lost. But at the same time, I also found so much opportunity to serve. I was like, "Wow."

Before that, I didn't have the courage to think of adopting 125 children affected by the earthquake—victims who lost parents in one way or another. I was happily taking care of educating 80 to 90 girls. After the earthquake, I built up the courage, with the help of my little nun there [who is present at the gathering], to take care of 125 children and put them in boarding school. And today we've been able to do that.

Every situation in life has certain opportunities that you can grab. I'm not saying this from an intellectual standpoint. I just experienced it and was able to take it in this way. It made me happy, really happy, that I had the opportunity.

Nipun: One of the things that seems apparent to me in just our few interactions is that you are non-calculating. You're not asking, "Is this a concert hall, or is this just a home?" How do you stay true to that non-calculating nature in the music world, where it's very calculating?

Ani: I do calculate sometimes. I've learned to do that. This is one of the very early experiences in my life, when I first came to America. Every time before I went on stage, Steve asked me, "Ani, are you nervous?"

I was really not nervous at all. But he kept on asking me every time before we went on stage. He said, "Are you nervous?"

Slowly, I began to think it's important to be nervous, so I learned to be nervous—but of course a little less nowadays. It depends who is in the audience. When some of my respected teachers are there, it makes me feel a little nervous—especially because of our cultural thing. Our teachers are always highly regarded in very respectful form. But in the auditoriums you are always on a stage, which is higher than the audience, and the audience is down there, and in the front row are some of my masters, my teachers. Then I feel like, "Oh my god". Yeah, that makes me nervous.

But regarding calculated things, when Krishna organized this tour. I was a little bit concerned for him whether he would be able to sell really well or whether he would lose money. It costs a lot of money for us to come here, and of course there's a certain amount he has to raise for us to go home with.

I'd heard that ticket sales hadn't been that satisfying, especially in San Francisco. I really didn't want the organizers to lose money. In one sense, we say, "Money is not so important". But then money sometimes is important. It does play a role in bringing some convenience or in lessening your concerns or worries. I am a little bit concerned about that. For that reason I do some of the calculations. When I have concerts in Asian countries, I am so relaxed—I don't have to worry about anything. But here in America, calculation is there.

Question: Did you ever have this question for yourself: "What's my purpose in life?" What was your answer for that?

Ani: Rather than asking about myself, nowadays I more frequently experience deep gratitude towards life—what has been, and what is in my life—and what is on the way. I'm so grateful I've been able to develop such a perception towards life that brings me more joy than disappointment. I know it's possible to bring in joy just by making small changes or modifications to your angle of perception.

At times, due to some habitual pattern in our life, we are not immediately able to perceive correctly. But then I'll think, "Maybe this could be the better angle to look at it." When I try to do that, the results are much better. I'm very grateful for that ability.

When I see the smiles on people's faces after I sing to them, it makes me feel like I'm useful—my existence in this world is meaningful. It gives me a wonderful sense of joy, just feeling that I'm useful. I don't really question what exactly I'm supposed to be doing, how much I should do, or for how long.

Life is very impermanent. Just from one earthquake, I can see that any moment could be

our last. My teacher says, "Our life is like a little lamp in the wind. It is always in danger of going out at any time." I try to focus more on what I can do rather than how much, for how long, or on what scale I am able to do.

Question: You were talking about the spiritual ego—the arrogance that sort of creeps in from time to time. Do you have any specific practices that you do to work with that, besides just noticing it when it comes and bringing awareness to it?

Nipun: Can we just have the next question right now? The first question was around specific practices.

Question: I feel so blessed. I'm from China and this is my first trip to the US, just the second day. I'm interested what you experienced when the money started coming in. Did getting money cause you any emotional disturbance or trouble? How did you handle that?

Ani: I'm happy to see a Chinese brother here because nowadays I do travel a lot to China, and the hospitality that I experience in China, nowhere else is it like that. Every day makes me feel like it's my birthday. So I'm grateful, really. And the question earlier was ...

Nipun: The first question was around practices and the second was around relationship to money.

Ani: In the early stages, it made me happy to have money because I knew where I needed to use it. But the most confusing and difficult thing to deal with is the banks and taxes. It's beyond my capacity of understanding. And there's Internet banking. I'm really bad at that. Sometimes the bank calls and says, "Would you like to invest your money?"

I say, "I don't know, I don't understand these things."

They say, "Your money is just lying there. You must invest!"

I say, "Okay, what does that mean exactly?" That just brings in more confusion.

I feel really happy when I have the money to give to my hospital or to buy things for my school and my children. Right now, I'm looking for a laptop for my three students who are becoming Tibetan doctors. At my last meeting with these students, I said, "What do you guys need?" And they said, "It would help us if we had a laptop to keep records of herbs, pictures, and so on." I said, "Okay, I will bring you a laptop."

And I need to buy an iPhone, too. Last month, the doctor with whom I established the hospital project called me and said, "Ani, congratulations! We succeeded in starting the category donors."

What this meant was that one brain dead patient could donate two kidneys, reducing the need for live donors. This could also mean that illegal human organ trade would go down. And in the processing procedure, we always give women priority because women have children to take care, so they need to be saved first. That doesn't mean we think of less of men.. But I still feel that women need more help.

When I got this news, I was so happy I wanted to give a big hug to the doctor and I said,

"Doctor, I want to give you a gift. What do you need most?"

He said, "I need an iPhone."

So to fulfill such things, money is wonderful.

Question: What sort of practices would you recommend for everyday people?

Ani: How did I deal with things I've had to face. That's what I want to share. There was a time when I felt distracted. I experienced being carried away. You see, when you are pampered, admired, and praised all the time, there are moments when you really start to believe, "I'm really something." I think these moments are natural. But when my teacher comes into my mind, my heart becomes humble. He is very highly regarded, a guru of gurus—mahaguru. As a highly respected master, people would come to learn from him and would prostrate themselves before him. But he would always say, "Please, you don't need to prostrate yourselves. I'm just an old man."

When I think of these things I am really humbled. The older and wiser I grow, the more I feel his presence in me. In every beautiful melody I hum, I feel his presence. In every kind thought that comes to my mind, I feel his presence. In every kind word that I speak mindfully, I feel his presence. There are times when I miss him, but when I'm able to reflect, I see that he's never separated from me. Every word of kindness, every thought of kindness, every melody of kindness in my life is nothing but his presence and his blessing. And I'm very sure that that is what I'm able to make people feel—the transmission. That is what transmits through me to the people who listen to my music and who feel positive energy and aura that calms them down or makes them feel good. It is nothing of me but his blessing. I rejoice that I can share his blessing with more and more people around the world. So I feel so fortunate that I am able to experience such thing.

In general, the practice of mindfulness is the real antidote for our arrogance. But for me, thinking of my teacher is the best medicine—my pain killer.