



Dropping Off

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When your child comes home from the school playground, he is bruised, clothes are dirty, his body is caked with dirt and soil, hair ruffled, dirty shoes. You stand him up and remove each piece of his clothing and attire, march him to the bath and hose him down with soap and water, until he is squeaky clean and his sweet innocent self again. Or the story of the emperor who sheds his clothing one by one, until he is revealed in his original, true naked self, no different than the commoner.

When we start on our spiritual journey we acquire many practices, absorb much knowledge and gain much experience. But we shed and let go a lot more. A lot of the old, long established patterns and habits that were clogging our consciousness unknown to us, start dropping off one by one. One starts to feel lighter and lighter, each shedding taking away another burden off our true self. Among the many patterns that shed themselves off for me, one of the most materialistic was the act of giving and receiving gifts.

Right from childhood, we become conditioned to receiving gifts, on our birthday, on festive occasions, on good performance, and sometimes for no reason. Very soon, it has become an expectation. As we grow up and reach adulthood and maturity with family and society responsibilities, the innocence of receiving gifts as a child gives way to major gifting activity; weddings, anniversaries, showers, house warming and any number of myriad reasons. As with all human activity in this day and age, businesses were quick to come up with increasingly more occasions for gift giving; mother's day, father's day and almost every family member day, valentine's day etc. to the point that some people may find themselves receiving or giving a gift each of the 365 days in the year! It has now become a serious activity that absorbs a good

chunk of our time and effort and money. Expectations around receiving and giving have become ingrained. Stress levels around what to give go through the roof. Embarrassments, societal gaffes etc. become commonplace. A good chunk of our precious time is spent on the unnecessary and frivolous. We start to focus more on the tangible and the materialistic and totally ignore the intangible strands of human relationships based on intuition and connection.

When I was still in the USA, a few days after one of the mother's day, my mother asked me why I had not called her on mother's day and why did I never send her flowers or anything like some of my other siblings. I replied, "Maa, they remember you once a year. You are with me all year long. I do not need a greeting card company to tell me when I should call my mom." Emotional and alone that she was, she started crying.

I have a large extended family, and for the longest time I was absolutely diligent in sending cards, flowers and gifts to each person on his / her birthday. Weddings are as common in India, and as much of a nuisance as mosquitoes, and gifts are inevitable. Most invitations have a clichéd line at the bottom, "Your blessings are the best gift". Yet, if you go empty handed, you will turn red with embarrassment as you approach the bridal couple and see the stage laden with gifts of all kinds! You are never sure whether cash is more appropriate than something in kind. If cash, how much? If in kind, what? You might spend sleepless nights pondering over this. And then there are all those odd and sundry invitations for parties, get together, celebrations etc. where you are torn between should you or should you not, i.e. take a gift. You chat and discuss with your family and friends as to what is the right protocol, and whether that ubiquitous bottle of wine would suffice, or should it be something more substantial. Sometimes you may even tear your hair out not knowing what to do.

I had enough of this. One fine day, I sent an email to all my family members and close friends that henceforth I will not be indulging in the act of either receiving or giving gifts of any kind to any one on any occasion, and I would appreciate if they respected this. There was complete silence, not a single response or reaction. Of course most of

these people had already written me off as a wacko for having given up a lucrative career in the USA and returning to India to become a sanyasi! This was yet another of my hare brained ideas. Their silence was bliss for me. It spoke volumes. The message had gotten across, loud and clear.

I made no exceptions. Many occasions came and went. I attended weddings, parties etc. There were births and other joyous occasions in the family. The only issue I pondered is which of my many Fabindia kurtas I should wear (another shedding of another sort on my spiritual journey). There was a tremendous lightness of being. Nothing to receive and wonder what to do with the useless item you just received. Nothing to give. It was yet another aspect of the Zen lifestyle I had adopted, to shed everything that is unwanted, unnecessary, meaningless. There were some who did not understand my philosophy. It did not matter to me. I had the conviction of my heart. And since the heart chakra was wide open, there was no less love and affection than before. In fact, I believe it became more bountiful. It was not riddled any more with the materialistic. It was pure and simple. It had been freed from all shackles. The only giving and receiving now were hugs, hand holdings, healing circles and exchange of energy. Each of these gestures and actions left a deeper impact and a greater sense of being.

This was one of the first and the most difficult shedding that happened along my journey. It has been a few years now. Other sheddings have been easier, mainly because they have not affected the others as significantly as this one. These are not seasonal like the shedding of a bird's feathers or the falling of leaves in the autumn. There is new conditioning, as Ramesh Balsekar would say, and new sanskaras are formed. I keep getting lighter and lighter, getting to the core of my being as innocent and pristine as the day I came out of my mother's womb. There is no going back.

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