

stillness *flow*

During a Brisbane tour, AYL Associate Editor, Sue Jackson, was able to speak with Prem and Jethro of Sacred Earth about their devotional music journey, and how they have found this journey to be one of exploring stillness and flow.

Finding stillness in the midst of the frenetic lives that we often find ourselves living in may seem like an insurmountable challenge. Yet, most of us have experienced times when we've become one with what we are doing, when time has stood still, and we truly danced with life. Devotional music is a powerful tool that can help bring us to a place of stillness within. Here in Australia, we are fortunate to have the extraordinarily talented musicians, Prem and Jethro of Sacred Earth, sharing their devotional journey through their mantra inspired music.

Sacred Earth has been touching the hearts and minds of Australians since 2003, when they released their first album, *Pamanyungan*. Prem and Jethro recounted how the release of this album was an amazing period of their lives. At the time, they were training to be yoga teachers and had recently been involved in kirtan. Yoga teacher training came after a decision by Prem and Jethro to quit the music business, not wanting to be part of the lifestyle of the Australian pub music scene. To make a living while doing yoga teacher training, they decided to go back to what they knew – music – and so they went back to the streets to busk. “We sat there saying, ‘What are we going to play?’ We decided to try kirtan.” That led to the

recording of *Pamanyungan*, which went on to be awarded Album of the Year by the Queensland Recording Association, and Sacred Earth has not looked back since. Their music is popular in places where feelings of peace and calm are sought, such as yoga, meditation, and massage settings. Anyone who has heard Sacred Earth play live will know the special atmosphere Prem and Jethro invoke when they play their unique music. Listeners speak of finding a deep inner stillness when in the presence of Sacred Earth's music.

Prem and Jethro feel that they have been gifted the music they share with others. “We've never felt that we could lay claim to the music we've made... it's just a gift that we've been given through grace, or through creating space and allowing it to happen and trusting what comes through.” Prem and Jethro trusted their decision to focus on mantra in their music. Introduced to mantra in their yoga teacher training, Prem spoke of finding, in mantra, language that was able to honestly express the feelings of her heart. For most Westerners, untrained in Sanskrit, mantra focuses us on experiencing Sacred Earth's music with our heart, rather than our mind, as Jethro explains: “Our music evokes emotion i.e. feeling an emotion in this moment, without having to connect it with

memory, or some past emotional feeling. No story is attached to it, unlike songs we hear on the radio.” Prem and Jethro view their role as musicians as helping listeners to create a space from which they can get in touch with their inner selves.

Opening up to flow

Creating space, or being open to what an experience has to offer, and trusting yourself in that situation, can open up amazing opportunities. Through such trust, we can let go of worry and self-consciousness, and immerse ourselves in the experience we are having. When we allow ourselves to become absorbed in

is made possible by a discipline of the body.” From a yoga perspective, parallels can be drawn between flow and dharana, both involving states of total concentration.

Balancing challenges and skills

Flow, like stillness, is not an easy state to attain. However, it can be easily understood through the simple model Csikszentmihalyi has developed that explains the preconditions for flow. This model shows that when challenges and skills are in balance, and both extending the individual, flow can occur. Conversely, when challenges are

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the present moment, we can experience total concentration, complete confidence, no thoughts of failure, and a sense of time standing still. Top athletes, musicians, and yoga practitioners can experience these characteristics when they are being in the present moment. What is being experienced is flow, an optimal psychological state.

Flow is a psychological concept with a rich research history. The term, flow, was the name given to the experience of individuals totally absorbed in what they were doing by researcher, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, in the early 1970s. Much has been written about flow since that time, and anyone interested in understanding the concept would enjoy reading one of Csikszentmihalyi's books on the subject. In one of these books, *Flow: the Psychology of Optimal Experience*, Mihaly, or Mike as he is known, writes about the parallels he sees between flow and yoga. Both are designed “to achieve control over what happens in the mind.” Outlining Patanjali's eight step path of yoga, and emphasising how these steps involve building up “increasingly higher levels of skill in controlling consciousness”, Mike suggests that yoga can be thought of as a “very thoroughly planned flow activity. Both try to achieve a joyous, self-forgetful involvement through concentration, which in turn

perceived to outweigh skills, anxiety is experienced. Or, when the order is reversed, and skills outweigh challenges, the individual moves from a state of relaxation to one of boredom.

Prem and Jethro related being open to the challenges presented to them in their journey. They spoke with fondness of the times they spent playing in the markets, where they learnt to “sit in that clear, quiet space” amidst the bustle and noise going on around them. “We had to learn to sit in stillness with all the noise, and present our music harmoniously.” Jethro, in particular, found the market experience presented new challenges. “It was very confronting as a male, to sit in the street, to meditate, and to play music from the heart, exposing the heart element to people who may not necessarily be open to that space and energy.” By not fighting the challenging market experience, they were able to connect with a place of stillness within. They have since helped others connect with that inner space through their presence when playing their music in many varied venues.

Embracing challenge

Flow is dependent on a challenging situation. The key is to embrace the challenge, rather than shy away from the uncomfortable feelings that come from taking yourself out of your comfort zone.

Prem and Jethro have brought an attitude of openness to the ever increasing challenges presented to them, including “driving into Sydney for the first time, being little country bumpkins”, to “driving out of the San Francisco airport for the first time, aahh!”, to playing at major musical events such as the Glastonbury Music Festival in the UK. “It's always confronting. But we put ourselves there and we kind of feel that we end up getting put there, in a place where we will have to grow: a place where we feel uncomfortable, and have to become comfortable in that place.” That's a good description of what being in flow involves.

Jethro relates their experience as ever increasingly popular musicians and the constantly changing comfort zones they found themselves in, to his yoga practice experience. “I remember when I first started doing yoga, it was hard work. Now, what I would have considered hard work is a warm-up. That's the nature of growth.” Having been practising yoga for several years, Prem and Jethro have come to the realisation that the yoga journey is a long one. “The longer you do yoga, you start to realise the subtleties, and you realise you are only a beginner. Mantra is the same. You might think, ‘I've got this figured out, this repertoire of mantras and asanas.’ Then, as time goes on, you start to feel, ‘I am really just starting to scratch the surface of this.’ And that is a humbling feeling.”

Prem spoke of what being in flow while performing meant for her. “For me, there is a flow when I am able to stay centred and I am aware of all the notes Jethro is playing. There is a harmony between our musical communication, and our energetic communication. When I feel our hearts are connected, I feel our music is moving out in a way that is harmonious. It is a feeling I know and I know when it is *not*, as well!” Prem spoke about one of the most rewarding characteristics of flow during a concert, which is being free of the shackles of time. “In concerts, time does not even exist for me”. A song that goes for 10 minutes seems to have a timelessness; it could have been going for three minutes, or 25 minutes. I think

a lot of people feel that too, at our concerts. They are always surprised that it has been three hours.”

The term, flow, was chosen by Csikszentmihalyi to describe the state of total absorption with what you are doing, when you are doing it, because that was how people he interviewed for his research spoke about their experience – of things just flowing, of having a sense of flow in what you are doing. Prem and Jethro know when their music is flowing (or not). “There has to be a harmonious space within, and between us. Or it really doesn’t flow”. Prem resonated with the term flow, recognising this as a time “when I feel completely at one with the music, really absorbed, and it is just happening. I more become a witness. It’s such a lovely feeling, just beautiful, and it is happening more and more.”

Finding inner stillness

Prem and Jethro shared how they find stillness in what they do, and how they are aware that when they play, they are like tools to facilitate, or hinder, others finding stillness. Prem spoke of how

singing helped her find peace and stillness. “For me, I find a lot of stillness when I sing. That is what centres me more than anything. I have a deep peace and stillness when I sing, and when doing my yoga and meditation as well. When I sing, is the time when I feel most connected to Spirit.”

Jethro shared that a lot of practices in his life encouraged stillness, but none so much as how he played his flutes: “The way I play my flutes and instruments is very much that diving inward. A lot of music in the world is about energy moving outward. When I pick up my flute, I have to shut my eyes, I have to turn inward. I think people who listen to our music have that same sort of response. In terms of finding that inner space, I think you are very much influenced by the way the music is played, and what the musician is doing. If I am fidgeting with things on stage, constantly changing things, the audience is going to be distracted by that. It is the same in a recording. If there is a constant shift or change, that is what will happen, the energy is moving outward. But if it is music that slides into that deep



Prem and Jethro.

space, the listener is going to have that same experience.”

In explaining their ability to develop stillness in what they do, Prem related back to their training ground at the markets: “It came from all those years sitting on the street, in that constant noise, learning how to hold that space. It became more and more evident

that that was what people needed – whether they heard us, or visually saw a picture of stillness in us. I am just so grateful for all of those years, and we still go and do it sometimes – go to markets and play – for that reminder.”

Helping others to find their inner stillness

Prem spoke of how the intention they brought to their music performances was critical to whether or not they achieved their goal of helping their listeners to also find that place of stillness. “For me, initially it comes down to the intention that we begin each performance with. That is the intention that our music will touch the heart of the listener in the deepest place. In that place, the listener is then able to connect with their own divinity, their own beauty, in their own heart and their own wisdom; and so then become empowered through their own knowing. I see it so often in this new age spiritual fad that is sweeping the world – in which so many people have the answers for other people. There are so many people searching, and they give

their knowing over to someone else. When really, if we take the time to look inside, we have the knowing inside our own heart. So I feel our music provides the space for the listener to connect with their own wisdom, because they have the answers inevitably in their own being.” While we might not find all the answers we need from turning inward, we are sure to find a wealth of hidden knowledge and insight if we take the time to connect with our inner self.

For Prem and Jethro, their music has become central to their identity. But their music has an important aim – to move the listener inside, “Taking attention inward, and then sharing from that space. It is simple, not complicated.” In closing our interview, Jethro wanted to share with AYL that Sacred Earth are Australian, that they are Prem and Jethro, and that their music, and their lives, are their yoga practice. “Music is definitely part of our yoga practice. Our life has become our yoga practice. Everything requires us to retain an inner calmness, and equanimity, and flow.”

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Prem and Jethro travel throughout Australia offering Sacred Earth concerts and workshops. More details can be found at www.sacredearthmusic.com. Sue Jackson is a Brisbane based writer, editor, psychologist, and yoga teacher. She has also been researching flow since writing her PhD on the topic in 1992. She is based in Brisbane and can be contacted at sue@bodyandmindflow.com, or by visiting www.bodyandmindflow.com