

# science of mind®

A GUIDE FOR SPIRITUAL LIVING

Kids  
Crossing  
Cultures

A Child  
Shall Lead

The  
**FUTURE**  
is **NOW**

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*Imagine a restaurant where there are no prices on the menu and where the check reads \$0.00 with this footnote: "Your meal was a gift from someone who came before you. We hope you will pay it forward however you wish." That's Karma Kitchen, a volunteer-driven experiment in generosity and a project of CharityFocus.*

# Raising the Kindness Karma

*An "experiment in the joy of giving" encourages compassionate action.*

Linda Reppond



**P**ay it forward. Practice random acts of kindness. Give till it helps. Imagine choosing each morning to seek out as many opportunities as possible to serve and offer kindness.

Nipun Mehta, 33, has found it no surprise that the universe serves up dozens of such moments each day. And Mehta is quick to point out that while the acts may be selfless in nature, it is the giver who receives the biggest blessing.

Mehta is a behind-the-scenes leader in the growing global gift economy movement, fueled primarily by young people. It is clear that giving for the pure joy of giving is what he lives for. Humble, joyful, and radiant, he says giving to others, anonymously raising the kindness karma in the world, is his life purpose.



Ten years ago, Mehta was working as a software engineer for Sun Microsystems in California's Silicon Valley, a rising star among legions of young, bright systems developers. A future of promotions, salary increases, and career opportunities stretched out before him.

While he enjoyed his work, he felt a tug to do more, to give back.

## Step Up the Giving

Five years after the gift of the Web site, Mehta quit his job to become a "full-time volunteer." He didn't have a plan for survival beyond six months, but he knew that the things on his daily "to-do" list that involved giving and service were more important to him than those related to his job.

He began by radically simplifying his life. Paring down possessions and releasing a consumer mentality meant that he required much less money than he would have previously considered possible. Occasional contract work in software development enabled him to dedicate most of his time to CharityFocus.

His parents, who now support him fully in his work, were concerned at first. Was he throwing away the best years of his career? Would he have enough money to support himself? What would he do when the rent was due and there was no money?

"When the flow in seems to be less than I want," Mehta says, "I realize I need to step up my giving. It is a karmic flow. So I just give more. It always seems to work." Sometimes the flow is reciprocated by someone who hears about Mehta's work and empties his pockets; sometimes it comes in the form of a donation from someone who has been touched by an act of

kindness. Regardless, the money to pay the expenses of his simple life always shows up.

## Shape a Celebration of Abundance

While Mehta's commitment is personal, his vision is global, and the results have given birth to a movement of generosity that is catching on worldwide. CharityFocus has launched a series of projects that are all experiments in kindness.

Karma Kitchen in Berkeley, California, and Washington, D.C., and the Seva Café in Long Beach, California, embody the spirit of the gift economy by providing meals at

no charge. Patrons are told, "Your meal has, in effect, been paid for by someone before you, and you are

*The intention is to help shape a future rooted in the celebration of abundance rather than fear of scarcity.*

free to leave whatever you like when you are done. All of us working here are volunteers and are providing this in the spirit of service." Patrons are free to pay whatever they feel moved to contribute.

*When the flow in seems to be less than I want, I realize I need to step up my giving.*

So, Mehta says, one day he took three friends to a homeless shelter to "give with absolutely no agendas." They learned the shelter needed a Web site, so Mehta and his friends created one and donated it to the organization.

That first gift of service spawned CharityFocus, a concept and an organization that has changed Mehta's life—launched it, really—and is inspiring millions of acts of kindness around the world. The self-described "experiment in the joy of giving" counts 18,500 members who incubate compassionate action in a multitude of ways; its inspirational Web portals get 100 million hits a year.

*In 2005, Mehta and his new bride, Guri, dropped everything to embark on an open-ended, unscripted, walking pilgrimage in India, to "use our hands to do random acts of kindness, use our heads to profile inspiring people, and use our hearts to cultivate truth." Mehta's mother, who had grown up in India, knew well the hazards of such a journey and was very concerned. Before leaving, Mehta told her, "Whenever you are worried that I don't have enough food, make some food and give it away. If you are worried that I don't have shelter, take in someone who needs a place to stay." Upon his return, he learned from a friend who had stopped to visit Mehta's mother that she had remembered what he had said, and when she was most worried, she would make naan, the Indian bread that was Mehta's favorite, rolling her tears into the dough. She would put the warm bread in a basket, go into the streets, and give it away. Mehta and Guri returned from India with many stories of the kindness of strangers who fed them just when they were the most tired and hungry, of people who had taken them into their homes and given them shelter.*



Many leave much more in envelopes under their plates than they ordinarily would have spent to purchase such a meal.

The vision of Karma Kitchen is more than serving food. The intention is to help shape a future rooted in the celebration of abundance rather than fear of scarcity, in trust rather than trade, in shared com-

mitment rather than selfishness, in connectivity rather than isolation, in participation rather than exclusion.

was launched by CharityFocus to use the power of video and the Internet to demonstrate and multiply acts of compassion, generosity, and selflessness. Using a format similar to YouTube, KarmaTube, with more than 25,000 subscribers, encourages people to capture inspiring stories using digital video cameras. Whether the stories produced are polished and professional or diamonds in the rough, each celebrates the work of local change agents, demonstrating the ways “do-something” moments can be “tipping-point” experiences for individuals and communities. And to make it easy for viewers to get involved, KarmaTube offers simple suggestions to support the action and spirit shown in each video.

Perhaps the largest experiment to date is the Smile card. The size of a business card, one side reads, “Smile, you’ve just been tagged!” And on the back: “Do something nice for someone, leave this card behind, and keep the spirit going.”

A card is left for the recipient of an act of kindness: a toll paid for the car behind, an anonymous bouquet of flowers, change dropped into an expired parking meter. More than 800,000 of the cards, in eleven languages, are in circulation. But because they are often passed on, and then passed on again, it is impossible to measure the full impact of the Smile cards.

Mehta tells of some college fraternity men who kept saying, “Dude! Free food!” as they gobbled up their dinners and left without making a contribution. The next week, they were back with more of their fraternity brothers for more. But the third week, when they returned, they asked if they could volunteer in the kitchen. Mehta says, “This is the power of kindness and generosity. It has a deep effect on people who may start out closed to the concept.”

Another project, KarmaTube,

## The Spirit of Service

All CharityFocus services are free. There is no fundraising. And no one is paid. Work and funds are donated by people who catch the spirit of the idea and decide to contribute. None of the hundreds of people who are actively involved receive a salary, including Mehta, who works more than full time for CharityFocus. Mehta says this keeps participants in touch with their core belief in karma.

What’s next for this kindness entrepreneur? Mehta sees a growing

movement of young people who are responding to the idea of service by taking a year or more to go somewhere in the world and serve, without a job title or a paycheck. Mehta would like to create an infrastructure to support them in this effort. It’s what occupies his thinking of late, between opportunities to practice random acts of kindness.

“Like the Peace Corps, there needs to be a respected path into service for those who choose it,” he says. •

## Want to Pay It Forward?

- Next time you pass through the toll booth, pay for the person behind you.
- Drop off a plant, flowers, or an apple pie at the police department.
- Write notes or bring flowers or goodies to your past teachers.
- Anonymously order dessert for someone at a restaurant.
- Pay for the person behind you at the drive-through window.
- Pay for someone’s gas at the gas station, or put a few dollars on the pump for the next person.
- Leave a note of appreciation for a hotel bellhop, housekeeper, or concierge.
- Take flowers to a hospital ward and leave them for someone who hasn’t had any visitors.
- Open the phone book, pick a name, and send them movie tickets anonymously.
- Write a thank-you note to a person from your past who has made a difference in your life.
- Surprise a neighbor by mowing their lawn.
- Bring home-cooked meals, blankets, a bathroom kit, and/or socks to a homeless person in your community.

*Find more ideas at [CharityFocus.org](http://CharityFocus.org).*

*And download free Smile cards at [HelpOthers.org](http://HelpOthers.org).*