

Meditative Story Transcript – Jai Punjabi Soul Curriculum

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ROHAN GUNATILLAKE: This is Soul Curriculum, the companion show to Meditative Story where we reconnect with your storytellers to take a deeper look at the wisdom they shared. In this show, we replay moments of reflection and takeaways, which you can apply to your own life. Brought to you by WaitWhat, I'm your host, Rohan.

Staying connected with our loved ones is not always easy, especially if, like Jai Punjabi, you live far away from home. As a founder of Wait What, the company behind Meditative Story, Jai's work in New York means his once-a-year visit to the family home in Bombay, India is a precious time. Made even more so for the food he eats when he's there with his family. But what makes the dishes so delicious? Is it the ingredients, or the process of making each course? In Jai's Meditative Story, what starts as an attempt to catalog his family's recipes soon leads him to realize that the way in which his family cooks has a wisdom that applies to life beyond the kitchen. And Jai is here to tell us more.

GUNATILLAKE: Hello Jai, great to have you on the show!

JAI PUNJABI: What a privilege to be here. I am so excited that we get the opportunity to do this.

GUNATILLAKE: It's a great opportunity to revisit the story you shared with us about a big idea you had to cook 21 meals across a 7-day visit with your family in Bombay. Where did this idea come from?

PUNJABI: Yeah, it's kind of absurd, but I have this history of pulling off stunts with my family. We only get to spend time with one another for a short period, and I'm always obsessed with the idea of creating something together with them. Food is something that is so seminal to our identity. We are always talking about the dishes that we love, the restaurants that we eat, what we cook at home. And as I started to think about my week in Bombay, it was all about what can we do that will allow us to create something that we love, and cooking just felt like the way to go. Of course, if you cook 21 meals in 7 days, you end up stressing out everyone at home, which I only realized afterwards, but it was a real blast.

GUNATILLAKE: And having gone on that journey, is there any particular insight you have now that you were unaware of before your trip?

PUNJABI: Like I never imagined going down there, that listening to stories that my family would share from the 60s and the 70s and the 80s would help me understand my life in New York the way that it did. Time itself is constantly repeating in a way. You start to feel like you're part of this continuum, that the choices that you're making have been

made by members of your family in different circumstances at different times. I wasn't expecting that.

GUNATILLAKE: Lovely, and the choice we're going to make, Jai today is to listen back to some of the clips from your story where you set about to record the family recipes that mean so much to you. Only you soon realize this is going to be a harder task than you first imagined. Let's listen.

PUNJABI: The king of the kitchen is our family cook, Ramlaal. He's cooked with us for over 40 years. He speaks to me in Hindi. And the first words out of his mouth are, "Baba, I don't measure as I cook. I just use my instincts. Don't worry, the first few times you cook, the dish may not come out right. Keep cooking through your doubts and mistakes. You'll be fine."

He sees me hesitate. I look at mom and Ramlaal as they cook this dish, and they keep going back and forth. They have this chemistry between them.

She says, "It needs more ginger."

He'll say, "No, I already put enough ginger," and then take a taste and nod. He adds more ginger.

"Maybe a little bit more salt," Ramlaal offers. Mom drops a little of the curry in the center of her palm, licks it for a taste, pauses, and then agrees.

They're present to how the spices and flavors are coming together in that moment, how it's unfolding in front of them right there and then, and they're constantly adjusting and course-correcting as they cook. It's mom and Ramlaal's ability to taste what's in front of them and adjust that steers the dish to perfection. I realize for the first time, it isn't the recipes I need to learn. It's the process. Recipes are just a list of ingredients and steps, but what Ramlaal and mom show me is how to create these dishes. They're constantly tasting, savoring, adjusting. It's a way to cook and a way to live. It acknowledges that constant adaptation is a part of creating something beautiful.

GUNATILLAKE: When Ramlaal tells you that he adds ingredients or instinct, you hesitated a little, and it made me wonder what you were thinking at that moment, and I'm interested, why did this idea of instinct over instructions give you so much pause?

PUNJABI: You know, the term that they use in the kitchen is "undas," which is really a Hindi term for instinct. And so they're always operating without measuring. It's just kind of the way Indian kitchens often work. I was thinking a lot about that as I was back there. And what I really started to understand was that no one was gonna operate or do things my way, and so that I'd have to find a frequency with the way in which the kitchen

worked. And that meant surrendering the desire to have the measurements and do everything in a very specific and particular way, and just being present and tasting the flavors as they unfolded. It felt great once we got there, but it was definitely a journey. A lot of ridiculously overly salted dishes. Um, there were a lot of instances like that.

GUNATILLAKE: And I also love here how your mother notices changes that need to be made that Ramlaal initially doesn't. It made me think how having another person as a sounding board can only improve the creative process.

PUNJABI: Yeah. If you look at the kitchen from a certain lens, it feels like, oh, my mom and the cook are just bickering with one another. But if you pause and you pay attention to the way the two of them interact with each other, there's so much patience and opportunity to hear what the other has to say and how they can contribute. There's this lack of judgment, this ability to be giving, and experiencing that in a kitchen reminded me so much of all kinds of creating — whether it's making podcasts or making films, or the work that I do in New York, it was that ability to be giving, realizing that's what I'm really interested in bringing to the creative process.

GUNATILLAKE: And having seen that connection, do you have any advice or guidance for people who might want to apply this practice of continual adaptation to their own lives outside the kitchen?

PUNJABI: There were plenty of moments in the kitchen where it was easy to get heated up, and as soon as anyone got upset, everyone would just burst out laughing. And you can't deny the importance of keeping a smile and not taking yourself so seriously. If you're always asking yourself that question of what can I do next to figure out where I'm going, rather than getting lost in, was the last step that I took the right one: that feels very powerful. That feels like something I still carry from all of my experiences in the kitchen.

GUNATILLAKE: So always building, always moving forward.

PUNJABI: Yeah.

GUNATILLAKE: Great. Lovely. Thank you Jay. And I think the next moment from your story, the cooking of a favorite dish from home takes you back to your childhood. And a life lesson from another member of your family.

PUNJABI: Dish #1 is yellow moong daal, a lentil broth with a trinity of Indian spices: cumin, turmeric, and coriander. The lentils have been soaking overnight. The water they are boiled in blends the spices, garlic, ginger, onions, and tomato. The third whistle from the pressure cooker signals we're done. Standing in the kitchen, sipping the daal, I feel 7 years old. Mom, she loves to tell this story where, until the age of 7, the only thing I ate was daal. I'd eat it with steaming hot

basmati rice and smashed deep-fried potatoes sprinkled with salt and paprika. Mom got curious: "Why is this the only thing that my son's eating?"

So at a family get-together, she finds an opportune time to grab the 7-year-old me by the hand and corner her second cousin, a therapist. She promptly asks him, "Why won't my son eat anything else? Is there something wrong with him?"

The therapist takes one look at me and, with little to no examination, says, "Well, he has plenty of options. Nothing's really wrong, and he's just going to have to find his way."

Every therapist that I've visited since then has given me some variation of the same advice: "You have lots of options, nothing's really wrong, you have to stop listening to what others expect from you, and just find your way."

I did find my way back. I create podcasts and films back in New York. And all I try to do all day with my colleagues is create an environment where they can be vulnerable, take risks. I try to encourage them to see what's in front of them in order to build on one another's ideas. Like Ramlaal and mom, we're constantly adjusting and course-correcting. Always course-correcting.

GUNATILLAKE: Jai, this clip is really striking, I think. How the words of your mother's second cousin — a therapist — really echoes the reflections therapy will give you later in life. Her advice comes in four parts, doesn't it? First: recognize you have options. Second: recognize things maybe aren't as bad as you think. Third: pay less attention to other people's expectations. And lastly, finding your own way. Jai, which one of those do you think you've become best at over the years?

PUNJABI: I think the biggest part of my journey has been finding my own way. I left home when I was 18 to move to New York, which I'd always dreamed of doing, but living there and integrating with life over there, it took me a long time. And I think that ties to my reason for going back to India and cooking in this way. It too was an act of me finding my own way. It just brought me back home, and I started to find myself in New York through the stories that I was hearing at home in a way in which I never expected. So I really identify with that last step that you were talking about.

GUNATILLAKE: And given what you've learned about how to find your own way, is there any advice you could share with those of our listeners who are seeking to do the same, to create their own path?

PUNJABI: Whether it's moving to a new country or going into the kitchen and discovering these new dishes that I found: the first time that you're doing something you end up burning so much fuel, worrying about whether the step that you're taking is the right one, or at least I've spent so much of my life being so caught up in "is this the right

way of doing things?” And I've found that as soon as you start to surrender that desire for doing things right or doing things the way that you've seen other people do them, things start to become a lot more fun. It became more fun for me in the kitchen. It became more fun for me in New York when I didn't feel that pressure of having to accomplish things or do things in a way in which I thought they had to be done. And, for anyone who's breaking new ground, instead of burning up all of your fuel on wondering if you're doing it right, see how much time you can spend getting lost in the experiences that you're having, the surprises that can come out of that. That's something that I feel like I'm constantly doing in every aspect of my life.

GUNATILLAKE: Your mother thought it was a disaster that you ate daal every day for every meal, and yet, in reality, maybe it wasn't so bad after all. In a way she was caught in a bit of catastrophic thinking. Have you developed any tools to help avoid that kind of thing?

PUNJABI: With my mother it's so funny because it continues to exist in our relationship today where there's this kind of obsession to push things: “Why isn't Jay like all of the other cousins that are sitting around over here right now?” And, I love what the therapist brought to the forefront: sometimes things will just take their own time to allow people to kind of develop on their own trajectory.

GUNATILLAKE: And after you'd all made 21 meals in 7 days I pretty much guess that your mother did wish you'd remained eating daal all the time. It would have been a lot easier right?

PUNJABI: Yeah, no, totally. When we cooked it was so funny because 21 dishes forced everyone to their limit. It's like you're pushing them to the edge. Everyone is uncomfortable because there's so much that needs to be cooked and purchased and bought and figured out it's exhilarating. It kind of elevates everyone. But my mother definitely would've been happier if we were just eating daal for all those meals.

GUNATILLAKE: And dear listener, even though you can't see it right now, Ja's wearing a turmeric colored sweatshirt in honor of that daal dish. It looks very fine, too. And Jai, your wardrobe isn't the only place to feel the inspiration of your trip to India. In our next memory from your story, you decide to showcase the culinary arts you've sharpened in Bombay with a dinner party in New York. Let's listen.

PUNJABI: Back home in Brooklyn with my wife, I play back the videos from my trip. I thumb through the recipes which are documented for the first time. And I invite friends over to make one of my 21 meals.

Dish number 20: minced chicken cooked in onion, tomato, and Indian spices stuffed into a wheat wrap. The wrap is lined with a cilantro and egg wash. The meat is laced with a fresh mint and tamarind chutney.

I stand in my modern kitchen on a high floor of an apartment building with views of the city. Large windows let in the magic-hour light, and Miles Davis plays on a speaker in the corner of the room. As I sample the dish to see if it needs an adjustment, I'm instantly transported back to my kitchen in Bombay. I can feel Ramlaal and mom with me. Course-correcting, course-correcting. More salt. More ginger. I can hear a Bollywood film playing on the television in the living room where my father sits telling me some story of how he earned his Boy Scout cooking badge. But what I realize, cooking in my kitchen now, is that no matter how far away my family is, they've taught me how to adapt, how to create something beautiful. And they stand here, guiding me over my shoulder, no matter where I go.

GUNATILLAKE: The ingredients sound so delicious, but it wasn't just food you were sharing, it was also the family philosophy and their creative process. Could you say a bit more about that and how you apply the principles to other areas of your life?

PUNJABI: So much of the work I do is in production, whether it's an audio or video production, and I feel like once you're in that zone, all you're constantly doing is course correcting. I think part of the reason that I do this work is it makes me feel so alive to what's unfolding around us, and we'll have a vision of where we want to go, whether it's with a story or a shoot or an interview. But we have to constantly be listening to what's happening, realizing that there could be something more beautiful that's unfolding right in front of you that you have to meet and tap into. It's why I love production. And what you find in the kitchen when you're cooking ends up translating to everything that you're making as well.

GUNATILLAKE: It feels quite counterpoint to so much of recipe culture, if you like, which is all about convenience and do it quickly — everything being pre-read and pre-packaged for you. Do you think that culture of cooking misses the point in some way?

PUNJABI: For me, The act of cooking is meditative, crushing the spices, spending time with things. I find that time in the kitchen therapeutic, but I don't think that should be anything that prevents someone from diving in and cooking. There are all of these great Instagram accounts about how you can cook Indian food in an Instapot. It's better to do that than to come up with any excuses for not cooking or not creating in the first place.

GUNATILLAKE: Sure there is a point at which whatever works is the most important way to go. And in the way you talk, there's a real sense of community history and shared stories in the dishes you made with your family. How do you continue to cultivate that now that you are back in New York?

PUNJABI: I found that there's nothing more fun and enjoyable than sharing dishes and recipes and cooking with your friends. It's a great way to rebuild relationships with existing friends or get to know new people. You automatically start to share the stories that you heard back in Bombay, but then you start to hear all of the stories that your friends will share from their own lives, and it doesn't matter whether they're from New Jersey or California or London, because food has that tremendous way of being a great equalizer. The act of sharing it feels like something that gives it a whole new life. A home isn't something that you find, but home is something that you can create anywhere that you go. And I lean into it every time that I'm cooking. It's a way that I get to create home no matter where I am. And bringing that intention to the experience allows me to rethink what that home really is.

GUNATILLAKE: Beautifully said. Thank you, and thanks so much for joining us today Jai.

PUNJABI: Thanks so much. This has been so awesome.

GUNATILLAKE: It was so great to speak with Jai today and to be surrounded by the amazing smells and tastes of his family kitchen in Bombay again. Food always carried great meaning for Jay, but thanks to a transformational trip home, he discovered that it was in the process of cooking and collective creation where the real magic was to be found. That, in letting go of recipes and guidelines and the expectations of others, room is created for spontaneity and course correction; adaptation that ultimately leads to a better tasting dish. And who knows, maybe a more fulfilling life. How about before we next meet you could try listening to your intuition, being present to what is in front of you, and building on it. Tasting, savoring, adjusting, adjusting. You might even be inspired to think about the dishes that have meaning for you, and making something unique with friends.

That's all for today's episode. I hope you've enjoyed what you've heard. We'd love to hear from you. You can find us on all your social media platforms via our handle at Meditative story, or you can email us@hellomeditativestory.com. Take care now.