

“Teach All Ways, For All Ways Are Mine”

MA JAYA SATI BHAGAVATI

There is a sacred river in India called the Ganga. She is so brilliant in her love, this Mother Ganga, that she continuously flows toward every human being, and everyone that comes toward her is blessed and purified. All are greeted by an astonishing amount of beauty. Even those who are filled with corruption and hate are never judged.

When I first started in spiritual life, my wish was that I could always be like that river. I wished only to reach out with arms that would always hold and hands that would always touch. Now, in this time of AIDS with so much pain in this world, the whole river is in my heart, and the banks of this river overflow.

I have dedicated my life to people with AIDS. I have laughed and danced and cried with these courageous people who live with this disease. I have been the invited guest at many of their deaths. They have come to learn from me, yet I have learned from them.

I am grateful to the people in my life who were my teachers, especially the four homeless African Americans who raised me when I was so young. They lived under the Boardwalk in Coney Island, and gave me so much and asked for so little in return.

Although I am a guru and a spiritual teacher, I never wanted to teach. I only wanted to share my life with anyone who would listen. I spread my life out like an open book. I want my students to know the real Ma and not to make me into something I am not.

Who am I? I am simply Ma. I am a devotee of Neem Karoli Baba, the daughter of the black mother Kali, the chela of Hanuman the god of service, and the poet of the River Ganga. I acknowledge my river in my own way, sometimes with bells and incense and oils, other times with the fury of a woman who faces injustice every moment of her life. I acknowledge my river by meeting those injustices with an open heart and a quiet mind.

I don't tell my story to make idle conversation, or to impress anyone. I tell the story because I want to see you come into her waters, that you may feel her gentle flow and taste her richness. And she will create a moment in

your life that is so full it will go on and on, beyond life, beyond death, beyond fulfillment, even beyond emptiness.

I bring you my history, primitive as it is, my history of learning how to live in a world that is filled with so much hate and, at the same moment filled with so much beauty and love. To understand this Ma, you must understand Brooklyn, New York, which I call the holy city; for it was there that divinity first visited me. As I look over these 82 acres of our Ashram and see the lush trees, the magnificent flowers, the sound of birds, I hear the laughter of children.

How did it begin?

I was born into an impoverished Jewish family. At the age of five I found myself spending part of my life underneath the boardwalk with the homeless people, drug addicts, prostitutes and alcoholics. They were my first teachers. Four homeless African Americans gave this young child a part of their life and a part of their dreams. They shared their food, and their life. They taught me that the true meaning of God is sharing. When "Chews," one of the four that took care of me, was dying of an overdose, she told me to pay back and take care of others. I grew up with her voice riding on the winds of my beating heart. I learned one thing that day and I will always remember; there are no throwaway people. Each person is whole, unique, and complete as God's child. This continues to be the essence of my teaching. I always knew that I had God.

At thirteen my mother was dying in the charity ward of Coney Island hospital. Her body was ravaged by cancer. She lost one breast, and then another and then they wanted to remove one of her legs. I looked at my mother and asked "Why you? Why do you have to suffer?" She slapped me and said, "Don't ever ask why!" "Why?" I asked. She looked at me and said, "Because who is going to answer you?"

I married at fifteen to an Italian Catholic husband and had a family. In the years that followed I became overweight. One night my husband looked at me and said, "Why don't you eat a little." Excuse me," I muttered, "did you say something?" The oil was dripping down my chin. "Why don't you eat a little?" he repeated. Those words changed my life. I just sat there stunned. Right then and there I decided to lose weight.

All my Italian girlfriends were losing weight doing yoga and a special "breath." When I heard this I was so anxious to find out about this special breath, I walked into Jack LaLane Health Spa where the yoga class was being held. There were my girlfriends in their red tights and their long black hair with rhinestones pinning back bangs that were much too long. And at almost 275 pounds, I, too, wore skin-tight red tights and had the long black flowing hair, and fabulous thick false eyelashes.

The yoga teacher in the front of the room was a very thin size two. I

approached her and told her immediately, with my loud Brooklyn accent, to give me the breath. I needed it right away. She said I must sit and join the class, and I must “OM.” I said, “I don’t do that, just give me the breath.” I kept after her until she finally became so disgusted with me that she called me up to her and gave me the breath as long as I promised to leave.

That night in the privacy of my own home, children and husband sleeping, the night air coming through the open window, I began my long journey. Although I began to lose weight, my true journey would be to find God. I did not know God was at my doorstep, right at the door, not even knocking; yet waiting to come in. I came to realize that is always where God is.

I began the breath, breathing in and breathing out. The next morning I got on the scale and had lost three pounds. I continued the breath. In three days, I lost seven pounds. If this kept up I would be thin just like my beautiful Italian friends.

I was so excited. That night I breathed so deeply I thought my head would explode. I practiced the breath for hours. Then I heard a noise coming toward me. I heard a dragging sound. I sat in terror, the sound coming closer. I was almost 275 pounds, with my legs, one on top of the other, in a lotus position. There was no way I could get out of this prison of knees and feet and legs. I began to yell. Nothing came out. I was sweating profusely. I cried out, “Someone, help me, please! I’m stuck!” Then I saw him. Right below me, coming into my foyer, I saw the Christ. I was petrified. There were no words to describe the feeling that turned my blood cold and sent my head spinning.

I screamed out, “Dear God, I am Jewish, please go away!” I said in a whisper, “You’ve got the wrong house.” He smiled and held out His arms to me. I thought I would die right there. I began to climb the steps, on my knees, still unable to escape from the prison of my lotus.

“If you run now you will never know,” he cried out. I screamed back, “I never want to know.” “Teach all ways” he called out, “for all ways are mine.”

I ran to my bedroom and woke up my husband. I screamed and told him that Christ was in the house. He screamed back, “I told you not to screw around with that yoga! Tomorrow I’m getting a priest and blessing the whole house” I looked at him and said “Are you crazy? You want to have a priest come here to bless the house when we’ve got the main man downstairs!”

The next day the priest came to the house. He began to spill holy water on my clean-waxed floors. “Why in God’s name would you spill holy water to protect me from your God?” I asked. He had no answer. “Did you really see him?” the father asked. “See him! I could have touched him! I was petrified,” I responded. The priest continued, “You did not see Christ.” I

said, "Listen, the guy was carrying a cross. Who was he? Moses?" This caused the father to start throwing his holy water at an even more frantic pace.

The priest, who had always called me by my first name, was now, all of a sudden, calling me "Ma'am." It was my first lesson in the aloneness of loving God.

And that was that. I gave up everything. I gave up yoga. Soon I gained the weight back and much more.

I was afraid to breathe even normal breaths. I began holding my breath, getting dizzy. But the vision of what I saw; the light in what I saw began to haunt me. I went about my business raising children and working. My life continued on. During this time the play *Jesus Christ Superstar* opened on Broadway. Everybody was singing, "I Don't Know How to Love Him." I had a realization. I who had been loved so fully; who had served on the streets since a very young girl in the Harlem charity wards on 125th Street and Lexington Avenue; who had known the love of a man, married at 15, had my first child at 17. I who loved my life and my children with such passion, had missed this ordinary man that I had seen for a split second, this man who had said to me, "Teach all ways, for all ways are mine." I missed him desperately from the depths of my soul.

I once again sat in a full lotus with every light on and waited for my lover to come. And indeed He did. Never did I feel such joy. Going up the steps to the bathroom, which was my first temple, He said, "Follow Luke. Luke is the closest to the truth." And that is how it all began.

He told me, "I will come four times and after that I will not appear to you until you become who you are." I noticed that He had something wrong with him. His thumb was missing on his right hand. "Why do you come to me not as a whole man?" I asked. "First of all you are an illusion," He responded. "Can't this illusion be perfect?" I inquired. "You will see," He said.

After the fourth time of extreme, intense teaching and learning, opening my heart, He left.

I felt lost. I stayed up nights. I cried and begged. My business was failing. My life was falling apart. One day my teenage daughter came home and said, "Mommy, there is a place called Mt. Manresa, a Jesuit retreat center in Staten Island, and there you will find the Christ just as you described Him." I ran out, leaving her with the younger children, and followed her directions to my destination and to the rest of my life.

I arrived and knocked on the door. A priest answered the rectory door. He said, "Yes? How can I help you?" I asked, "Do you have Jesus Christ here?" He looked at me and replied, "No, but we have bingo." I looked at him and said, "My life is at stake, the whole of my future." I ran from him. He thought I was insane. I ran exactly as my daughter instructed, up the

hill, down the hill, and into a grotto. It was there that I found the Christ as He had come to me. Only this time his flesh was composed of marble. I looked at his hand and saw that his thumb was missing. Coincidences happen, but not so deep as marble turning to flesh or flesh to marble. I knelt and my heart burst open.

There was no religion that would teach that all ways were His or all ways were the same. I couldn't find one. And in my foolish heart I longed for the moment of truth. What path follows all paths? And then my teacher Swami Nityananda appeared. He taught me of the Chidakash, “the heart space in the head.” I thought Swami was my Guru. “Not yet,” he said, “this one's not your Guru. Your Guru is yet to come.”

“I don't want a Guru!” I screamed out, as he made his throne in my bathroom in Brooklyn and taught me the great teachings of detachment.

I went many times to Mt. Manressa. Father Atherton took me under his wing and taught me of the true Christ who bears witness against no one, who judges no one and who graces everyone.

My life began following a pattern. I was drawn toward the philosophy of Hinduism and it embraced me. In the beginning I did much in secrecy because of my family. I had my children to raise and an Italian Catholic husband. In the early 1970s I met my first teacher. I began to teach in earnest. I taught about the Christ, I taught about Swami Nityananda, I taught about the Buddha and I taught about my Guru, Neem Karoli Baba whose teaching is to feed everyone. More and more people came to learn.

By 1976 I was forced to leave my marriage and the only man I had ever known, not only for my sanity and his but also for the sanity of the children. I was God's bride now. I was a teacher and yet I would not call myself *Guru*. I had met my Guru, Neem Karoli Baba, and now had a deeper understanding of a master of masters. I never could understand why I was alive and that such love embracing my soul and my heart were possible until my Guru appeared to me.

I arrived in Florida with my first student, Dr. Thomas Byrom, my Billy, my Naga Baba, a professor, a don at Oxford University. He was the first to call me “Ma”. We rented seven acres and two houses. There was no stopping the flood of humanity that came. Remembering my childhood, how poor we were and how four black folks raised me under the boardwalk as my mother lay dying in Coney Island Hospital, I taught others how to serve in the name of God. I taught others to take care of people who had less than them. They kept coming. I began to travel. Ashrams sprung up around the country. Ram Dass came. They all came. Always I taught service. Always I taught compassion. I always will.

I look around my Ashram, an Ashram that was actually nothing but sand and woods, and a community where people from every part of the world come to visit and live. We take care of the dying; we operate a

residence for people with life-challenging illnesses, many dying from AIDS. We take care of anyone in need.

This teaching is about love. This community is based on love and service. The school bases its philosophy upon loving-kindness and openness toward everyone. Our children learn to embrace this. It doesn't matter what path, what religion, what expression people use to worship their God. All are welcome and cared for.

We have grown, twenty-five years worth of growth. The Ashram speaks for itself, an interfaith spiritual community that honors many religions and paths. The grounds are sacred with many temples. There is a shrine to the Hindu Goddess Kali, a temple honoring my Guru, Neem Karoli Baba, and to Hanuman, the god of service. There is the Christ Garden made in the image of the Christ who first appeared to me. A Sikh Gurdwara, a Jewish shrine and a Tibetan temple are among the shrines that surround our Ganga pond. There are more temples being planned and we continue to grow.

Service is our foundation. Every day many are fed and cared for. We are blessed to be whom we are, living in the moment. You can see it; you can feel it as soon as you enter onto this sacred Ashram. Twenty-five years of accumulated spirituality and prayer touches you like a gentle caress from the Gods. Twenty-five years of pujas and prayers, and ceremonies honoring our devotion to God, in whatever form God might be.

Why do we flourish? What keeps us going? I only have one answer. The grace of my Guru who taught me in my early thirties that to serve another human being is to serve God. So our service to the poor, people living with AIDS and other life-threatening diseases, ran parallel to our love for God, our love of Guru and our love of humanity.

We love to serve. My Guru taught me how to do this without burning out. The blessing of the Guru is in everybody's heart as it touches upon our sacred soil.

This is my awakening. This is my liberation. I share this with anyone who wants to learn. Everywhere I go, I ask people to wake up. Wake up and know that AIDS is not over yet. Wake up and know there are no throwaway people. Wake up and take care of someone. Wake up to the truth of who you are.