

REVIEWS

“Ma Jaya Sati Bhagavati – Sharing the Heart: A Guide to Caregiving.”

Jaya Communications, Inc., 11155 Roseland Road, Sebastian, Florida 32958. 1995. Videotape. 28 ½ minutes.

“Sharing the Heart: A Guide to Caregiving,” tackles a critically important subject often neglected in today’s self-centered, materialistic society: how can we share our hearts with those who are suffering? Despite the importance of this topic, the video’s content is something that many of those in the helping profession would familiar with. But while the message may not be unique, the messenger most certainly is. Ma Jaya Sati Bhagavati is the colorful spiritual leader of Kashi Ashram, an inter-faith intentional community in Florida. Known for her AIDS activism, artwork, spiritual teachings, and service as a trustee of the parliament of world religions, Ma is a wonderful, one-of-a-kind east-meets-west blend of brazen Brooklynite and thoughtful, introspective yogi.

To see Ma at work is, in a word, remarkable. On her regular trips to nursing homes and hospices, she storms the facilities with an unparalleled flamboyance, showering hugs, kisses, and bawdy jokes, all the while leading a cadre of devoted followers who pass out fresh fruit and more hugs to the startled but clearly grateful residents.

Sadly, though, this video does not show Ma in action. Instead it is a dry, somewhat repetitive question-and-answer session with the camera

focused only on Ma's face as she speaks to the topic of care giving. While the video does little to capture her dynamic spirit or show the audience how she turns her words into practice, the questions are nonetheless important and the information Ma provides is well-worth hearing. Topics include how to embark upon service, how to overcome fears of care giving, how to deal with anger and rejection from a patient, how to get leaders into the trenches, how to get children involved in service, if there is a wrong way to serve, how to deal with burnout, and if you need to have suffered yourself in order to help someone who is suffering.

Ma prefers to use the word "sharing" instead of "service" because she feels that care giving is about sharing one's blessings with others. She says that ninety-eight percent of one's spiritual path should involve sharing one's gifts and blessings with others, with the remaining two percent devoted to traditional religious practice. That, she says, is how one gets blessed in return. In her words, when you help others, "the moment dances with the divine and that is your reward."

Her advice, based on her own multi-year experience in the frontlines of the war against AIDS, appears straightforward and sensible. Yet, occasionally, her responses are a bit puzzling. To the problem of burnout, which is an issue often faced by caregivers, Ma's response is to "do more; you've got more in you to give." Thankfully she tempers this advice by adding that you need to take time "to sit and refresh yourself with the joyous waters of God." While references to God, such as this one, are frequently made, the video does not push any one religious viewpoint. When asked if she worships a particular God, Ma responds that she worships "any God that glorifies kindness."

For those scholars of communities looking for specific information on Kashi Ashram, this is not the video to watch. But it will introduce you to Ma, the Ashram's one-of-a-kind spiritual teacher, and get you thinking about the critically important topic of how to care for our fellow humans. The video reminds us that everybody needs to be loved and everybody has a story to tell. As Ma says, if you take time to learn this story, the person will change in your eyes from a suffering patient into a "beautiful human being." I'm hard pressed to think of a more important message than that.

DEBORAH ALTUS
Washburn University