

Interview with Ma Jaya Sati Bhagavati

Interviewer: Deborah Altus

February 2, 1996

Q: This is an interview with Ma Jaya Sati Bhagavati at Kashi Ashram, near Sebastian, Florida on February 2, 1996.

A: [Addressing someone else] Now, no more peeping in. Take the phones off the hook. They'll call me for emergencies. All right. You ready now?

Q: OK.

A: OK, I never was on a spiritual path. I always knew that my whole life was spirituality. I was pretty much on my own since the age of six. I was raised by four black folks, homeless, before it was even fashionable. Underneath the boardwalk, it was Big Henry, Old Hudson, Chicky, and Chews. My mother was my first teacher. She was kind of like my heroine. But she had to work, and we were pretty much left to our own devices. I knew God loved me. Even when there was no food, or eating out of garbage pails, or whatever. I always knew that God existed. It was never a doubt in my mind. As the years went by, I got married very young -- I was fifteen. And I had my first-born at seventeen. She's right there. And I began to have a lot of people around me all the time, especially children. I raised many, many children. Our house was always full; it was never empty. But I was a big, heavy woman -- about 275 pounds -- and I had heard that you could lose weight by yoga. And I went to Jack LaLanne, got a yoga breath right before I got thrown out, (I was big and tough) and consequently, I did that breath for three days and three nights in a full lotus. At that weight, you don't get out of a full lotus easily-- and on the third or fourth night, I saw Christ, the way I'm seeing you. I mean, it wasn't a vision, it was flesh. And I ran away. And he said, "If you run away, you will never know;" and I screamed out "I don't want to know!" So I went upstairs to my husband, I got my three babies and my three dogs, and he said, "I told you don't screw around with that yoga! Tomorrow I'm gonna get a priest to come in and bless the house." And I said, "You're going to get a priest? I have the main man down there, are you crazy?" So I gave it up. And I had already lost faith. So I went back to it, because I also never felt like I did before in the presence of Christ. And, doing the breath, the Christ returned. And he said to teach all ways for all ways are his. And that's how it all started. The only thing is, you can't teach all ways if you follow one path. But Hinduism embraces all faiths. And that's the beginning.

Q: And what led to Kashi ashram?

A: Well, I had many ashrams, small communities -- about fourteen or fifteen, we had in Queens, New York. And then finally I came here to Florida with four or five of my very closest students to be kind of on a retreat, to be alone. And I'd go back to New York every single Friday and see my children and come back here Sunday or Monday. And then I got a brain tumor and I only had a few months to live. So I closed all my ashrams, all over, (by then I had ashrams all over the country.) I chose a hundred people to come home. The next few months, I lived, and they prayed, they had children, and that's how we developed. We started buying more land. Our basic function is to serve. You want to ask me what our religion is? It's kindness, compassion, and service. Everybody here keeps their own religion and their own faith. Kashi has been a place of worship for many, especially the suffering.

Q: Is it important that your students live together?

A: It's something they want. No, not all my students live together. There's only two hundred here. I have thousands of students all over the country. All over.

Interview with Ma Jaya Sati Bhagavati

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Q: Do you think being in community adds something special?

A: Well, this is a celibate community. So those who wish to spend their lives serving, and being celibate, live here. It's a very strict way of life, you know, because we mostly take care of those who are dying. And that's very hard on the heart. But those in surrounding areas, from here to California, a lot of them aren't celibate. The little girl over there, she runs my ashram in California. She's celibate. But the people around them aren't. To live in an ashram, the rules are to be celibate, don't hurt anybody, and don't eat meat. And serve, and never stop.

Q: Why do you choose to work with people with AIDS?

A: I have dedicated my life to people with AIDS. They are the most courageous, most unbelievable people in the world. I'd like a transcript of this.

Q: OK.

A: It's a very hard time right now so you want to catch me with [unintelligible]. There's a lot of sweetness. I told the man behind you a year ago that he would live, and that's not a hell of a lot of T-cells. He didn't even know how I knew that, because right now there is more offered the people with AIDS than ever before. You don't have to die from this disease. But it's bittersweet, because had so many of my people lived one more year they would be alive, too. I have found that the taking hold of one's life that most people with AIDS have done, and taking care of their own, (I don't just mean gay, straight, but actually it was the gay community that did take hold fast and furiously), has saved many lives. I find that their compassion for each other, and their willingness to go out, even on their last moments of life, is so beyond anything I have ever witnessed with any other disease. So much so that I put a tattoo of the red ribbon on my hand forever. That when I die, and I'm on my funeral pyre, people will look at that hand and remember this. I never want to forget. Because I showed you I house the ashes in a very close place, in my Ganga pond. I never want to forget my dead. So I've always taken care of kids with leukemia, people with cancer, and I still do. As you saw -- you were with me yesterday. I take care of the people who are terminal. But AIDS, now, is something else. Most of my people in the beginning days died without dignity or respect, and I'll be damned if I let that happen around here. Why do I take care of people with AIDS? Because I had the first person with AIDS in Florida come to me on this ashram. That's how it started. But I would have picked up this torch anyway.

Q: What do people with AIDS teach you, or what do you learn the most from them?

A: How to die. And how to live, and that's what I teach them, and they in turn put it in action and teach it to me back.

Q: Now I hear that Kashi's about to celebrate its twentieth anniversary?

A: We're about to celebrate our twentieth anniversary here at Kashi, in the South.

Q: Well, what, what do you think is the glue that holds Kashi together?

A: Love.

Interview with Ma Jaya Sati Bhagavati

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February 2, 1996

Q: Love.

A: I couldn't get rid of them if I tried. Most of them have been with me for twenty years. But they come from all over to retreats, they come for one-day seminars, I go to California, I go to Phoenix, I go to New York. I travel.

Q: And how do you spend your day when you're here?

A: Working. All day. From morning to night.

Q: And what is your work?

A: I take care of the dying. I take care of babies. I take care of people who are here. I play hockey, rollerblade hockey, as you saw me today, and I do Tae Kwon Do and I paint. I'm an artist. And I write. I've been working since I'm six.

Q: Do you try and teach through your painting?

A: My paintings are a teaching. They are what we call yantras - each painting is, and was painted, in the early hours, before dawn. And it was my way of meditation. Now they're painted in the early hours and getting on into the day. Each one is a murti, or a sacred image. Now I'm doing a Kali plate. So it's the mother Kali in all her divine madness and glory and joy.

Q: Do you think there's such thing as utopia, and are you trying to create that here?

A: I'm not trying anything. It's happening by itself. When one serves another human being it becomes [inaudible].

Q: What's it, then, like to be an interfaith ashram, interracial ashram in a traditional, Southern Baptist area in the South?

A: I got a southerner here, I can't talk.

Q: [Laughs]

A: At first it was very, very rough, especially when we started dealing with people with AIDS. I'm here for twenty years, but the virus has been around over fifteen. Right now it's sixteen. It's been around a lot longer than that. So my doors were always open and people here are the good old boys. But we've gotten through it -- just our living, and our way of life has let people know we're good people.

Q: And you have school here; why did you start your school?

A: You might as well hear this, there's a letter came from a teacher at Saint Edward's School. Two of our kids' parents were at a meeting there, and they were talking about the beauty of Kashi and the school. I started schools for my children 'cause we offer one of the best educations in the world, small classes, no prejudice, no bigotry. I started schools so children can learn to be with each other, and not care who's gay, who's straight, who's yellow, or who's black. Most schools have this reign of terror against children who are unique or different.

Interview with Ma Jaya Sati Bhagavati

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Q: Who would you say has been your most important teacher?

A: My guru, Neem Karoli Baba.

Q: And what has he meant to you?

A: Anything at all that could mean anything at all. There are not words, and there is no beginning, no end.

Q: And what would you say is the most rewarding aspect of being a leader or teacher?

A: A child's smile. A dying person's faith. And the joy of life.

Q: And what's the hardest, what's the most challenging?

A: The judgment of others that I see in the world.

Q: Would you describe Kashi as a success?

A: Just the name is successful. It can be nothing else. Kashi has gone way beyond my expectations. Way beyond my dreams. To see two hundred people live together, work together, serve together. They grew up as family, with children. Mostly all children go on to college and graduate college with the highest honors. It's a college-bound school. Kashi surpassed, already, and there's many more years. I love the sharing, I love the eating together. I love that people with no homes have a place to come without being pushed aside. It's a paradise for people who are homosexual, lesbians, gays; it's a paradise for people who are having a hard time in the world. They don't run away here; they're encouraged to live in the world, and then they're armed with the tools of self-love.

Q: Are there difficult aspects as well, of living in community?

A: Sure, it's always hard. It's very hard to live together, but it's always overcome. There are trials and errors, mostly it's a waste, with food -- you've got to watch and see that you don't waste food, and yet I want to feed everybody. That's one of my guru's biggest teachings. Feed everyone. Not just food, but spirituality. The hardest is to watch a child die. That is the hardest aspect of this living together. We have a hospice here where a young boy just died. In fact, he would have turned four on January 31st. He was twelve pounds when he died. Twelve pounds. So that's the hardest aspect of living together, but it also makes it easy, because we share our grief.

Q: Um, communal groups, particularly, like ones that started in the '60s and '70s often sort of crashed and burned. Why do you think that some groups are able to stay together, like Kashi does and --

A: And who else?

Q: -- others don't. Well, like, certainly the Hutterites have, have been together for hundreds of years.

A: And they're still going now?

Q: Yeah.

A: I feel every day is new, every moment is new, and living in the newness of it all enables us to serve. Simply by serving others this ashram is being served. And this new breath, the children are new. People

Interview with Ma Jaya Sati Bhagavati

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come here, different people, every week, there's a whole new group of people, so there's new thoughts. We're not afraid to grow, we're not afraid to change, we're not afraid to play roller-blade hockey.

Q: [Laughs] Mmm hmm.

A: It's, it's not fundamentalist. We're not afraid to go to church, we're not afraid to go to the synagogue, we're not afraid to be Buddhist, we're not afraid to be Baptist, Presbyterians, Catholics -- we're not afraid of anything. We love God very much, and when one loves God, they have to succeed.

Q: If a group wanted to live together communally, what advice would you give them?

A: Be free, be open, have no kind of tightness in your brain, listen to all ways, and know that they're all the same. Don't practice one way and an ashram will be blessed.

Q: Thank you.

A: That's it? You got nothing else to say? Anybody else want to ask a question for her?

Q: [Laughs]

A: I got her stoned, I'd claim, with God.

Q: [Laughs] I'm just terrified, that's all, I'm tongue-tied.

A: No, this is God. Uh, come up. Anybody have a question for her?

Unknown: You started talking about guru, about Baba - but I think she probably would like to know the meaning of guru and maybe more of that.

A: Do you?

Q: Yes, that'd be great.

A: Guru means, literally, it means teacher, or dispeller of darkness. Chela - when we use that word, it means student. But a guru would give her or his life for that student. It's just not a teacher-student relationship; it's not even a mother-child. It's beyond any words I can say. There is an attachment there between guru and student that is very detached. A guru is just a shower of the way, one who's been there before. Who lights the path so you can just follow. Another guru disappears and one becomes one with God. So the guru just says "Come on, do this. Come on, do that." Now in this teaching, this guru defeats the ego. So the ego has no place here, only the [inaudible]. That, I think is pretty good.

Unknown: Excellent.