

TRANSCRIPT

Spirituality & Health Podcast

SADHVI BHAGAWATI SARASWATI

Rabbi Rami: I'm Rabbi Rami, and this is Spirituality & Health Podcast. Our guest today, Sadhvi Bhagawati Saraswati is an acclaimed author, speaker, and spiritual leader initiated into the order of Sanyas in the year 2000 by His Holiness, Swami Chidanand Saraswatiji, one of India's most revered spiritual leaders. Sadhvi also holds a PhD in psychology. She's the author of several books including *By God's Grace*, and *Come Home to Yourself*.

Her newest book is *Hollywood to the Himalayas, A Journey of Healing and Transformation*. Sadhvi, welcome to the Spirituality & Health Podcast.

Sadhvi Bhagawati Saraswati: Thank you so much. It's such a joy to be with you.

Rabbi Rami: I think we're going to have a good time because you and I have I'm just going to say a few things in common. We're both Jews, we both love India, we both love Mother Ganga of the Ganges River, we've both been initiated into one Hindu school or another. I was initiated into the Ramakrishna Order, years ago. And we've both had encounters with the divine mother. Let's work with that one. I was very moved by your description of your first encounter on the shores of the Ganges. Tell us about that.

Sadhvi: It was the moment that transformed my life. I was 25 years old, and I had grown up in a situation, circumstances in which I really had everything. I grew up in Hollywood, hence the name of the book, *Hollywood to the Himalayas*, and had a lot of opportunity, a lot of privilege, really everything I wanted, everything I needed, everything that in this world, people are told you need to be happy, all the things that we run after. Life in many, many ways was beautiful and fantastic, and yet, I also suffered.

I had experienced great challenge and difficulty, and even trauma in early childhood, and had done what so many of us do in dealing with our internal pain which is we try to do something to make us feel better, whether it's alcohol or drugs or food or sex or shopping or gambling. We do that and we realize, of course, it doesn't work and it just ends up making us feel worse, but we don't really know what else to do. At 25, I had graduated from Stanford University. I was in the midst of a PhD in psychology program. On the outside, everything looked really fantastic, and on the inside, I was still suffering. I didn't trust myself, I didn't trust God, I didn't trust the universe. I felt very unworthy on a lot of levels.

I felt not enough on a lot of levels as though there were something inherently wrong with me. I ended up in India with a backpack, not sadly because I was on a spiritual quest. I would've loved to say I was, but I wasn't, I didn't even know that that was something available for me, something I was worthy of. I ended up there because I had agreed to go to India because I was a strict vegetarian. I knew that when India

was suggested as the place for us to travel to, that at least I'd be able to eat happily, that at least I wouldn't be fighting with waiters and languages I didn't speak about the broth of a vegetable soup or something.

Rishikesh was the very first place we went, the city of Rishikesh, right on the banks of the Mother Ganga, right in the lap of the Himalayas. The very first day, after putting our bags down in the hotel, I said, "I'm going to go put my feet in the river." That was really, for me all that it was at that time, I didn't even know the river was holy. I didn't know that this was the mother goddess in the form of a river. I just knew I was hot, I was tired, and I wanted to freshen up. I get down to the banks of this sacred river.

Even before I get my feet in, I had this extraordinary experience, just spontaneously immediately of oneness, and connection, and awakening, and union, and ecstasy, and perfection, perfection of myself, perfection of the universe, perfection of my place in the universe, oneness with this incredible mother goddess. I experienced her, I experienced her presence on every level of my being.

It just blew my heart open. It blew my mind. It blew away every sense that I had had of being sacred. I cried and cried and cried and cried. For the next many, many, many days, even into weeks, pretty much all I could say for a long time was, "Oh my God, it's so beautiful. Oh my God, it's so beautiful. Oh my God, it's so beautiful." I couldn't even articulate it. I still can't articulate it well.

Rabbi Rami: Let me take issue with that. Let me read something from the book about this first encounter, which I think you articulate very well. The image of the goddess Ganga formed out of every color, shape, texture, and aspect of my visual spectrum. Here she was, and here I was. Yet, it wasn't really a her, rather it was an all and everything, and I, I was part of that everything. There was nowhere I ended and all began, there was nowhere she wasn't. I stared eyes open to her form over the flowing river. I had come home. That feeling of coming home as I understand it, is not coming home to India, though, there could be something about that.

Also, I know that my first trip to India, I had this sense of homecoming, but it was a geographic thing, it wasn't spiritual. It's just, "Oh, I love this place. I love the smell. I love the color. I love the noise of it." It's a homecoming in the sense of coming home to the divine in within as everything, it seems to me is what you're saying. Is that fair?

Sadhvi: Absolutely. It's also a coming home to myself, of who I was. Raised in a reformed Jewish family, God had always been something very, very separate. I wasn't even religious, but that was just the concept that I had of God as a being to be prayed to, to be feared, to try to placate in some way through what you did or how you behave, and to experience the presence of the divine in me as me, as her but as her as me, as all as me, it rendered me pretty nonverbal, and in tears.

Yes, in retrospect, we can use words like awakening, but at the moment, it literally just felt like I was swimming in an ocean of ecstasy, nonverbal, nonsemantic, nonintellectual. I remember thinking at the time, laughing with myself, there was one part of myself saying, "I have no idea what this is." The other part was like, "And it doesn't matter because it's so beautiful and that's all that matters." Coming from

someone who was a pretty hardcore academic, that was a very beautiful and transformative experience. It's something that has stayed with me for 25 years.

Rabbi Rami: For somebody who went to India because it was a countrywide vegetarian restaurant-

Sadhvi: Yes, exactly [unintelligible 00:09:48]

Rabbi Rami: -you definitely got more than you bargained for when you got there. I want to pick up on the Jewish piece for a moment only because as a rabbi, I can't not ask you about that. I read the book, and from what I could understand, your parents were not upset by this. There was, like you just said, you were raised in the reform denomination of Judaism. I'm ordained in the reform movement, I was raised in Orthodoxy, but whether it's reform or Orthodox, like you said, the Judaism that I was raised in posited a God out there somewhere who was clearly masculine, clearly patriarchal, someone who had to be constantly praised.

It was not a God that spoke to me at all. I moved into Buddhism first in my spiritual quest. What I'm curious about is, we're not asking you to be judgmental in any way, but it seems to me that the Judaism you experienced was spiritually empty, rich in form, the do this, do that, all the rituals, but it didn't feed your soul.

Sadhvi: Absolutely. Absolutely. By the way, this is not by any means a comment on Judaism itself or even reformed Judaism. It's a comment on the way that I, in my family, as a young sister experienced it. We went to synagogue because it mattered to my grandmother. I was bat mitzvah to make my grandparents happy. Not under duress by any means, I happily did it, but it was never about God. It was about the family and the connection that I had and I still have very deeply to Judaism has been about the history and the Jewish people, a lineage much more so than it ever was about God.

The experience that I had on the banks of Gunga, people say, "Oh, did you convert?" I try to explain to them that the God aspect of my life had up until that moment remained empty. It wasn't that that Hindu version of God came in and kicked the Jewish version of God out or something like that. It was that I had an experience of God, a non-denominational, totally infinite, expansive experience of God that happened to take place in a Hindu place while Hindu rituals were underway. It filled a space in me that had not been occupied. It was much more of an augmentation than one kicking the other out or a conversion.

Rabbi Rami: Yes. I think that's a beautiful way to put it. I would be a little stronger in the sense that I think, because we're talking 25 years ago, something like that.

Sadhvi: Exactly.

Rabbi Rami: Maybe that it's not that much different today, but I like to think it is, that 25 years ago, God really had no place in mainstream Judaism. I would argue, in a sense, that's still the case when we're talking about not the Jewish God who chose the Jews and all the legends and the story, the mythos of an ethnology of Judaism that says, "Oh, God chose us from among all the people," and all that. The God you're talking about, the God that you've experienced, like you said, it's not a Hindu.

God is not a Buddhist. God is not a Jewish God or a Christian God, it's some other reality that is all pervading. While that reality plays a huge role in Jewish mystical circles, it's not something that is taught in mainstream Judaism. It leads a lot of people, Jewish people to think that there just is nothing like that in Judaism. When I teach, a lot of the Jews who come to my classes and I imagine, this is a question, I imagine that's true in your teaching, a lot of people who come who are Jewish are coming with the same spiritual emptiness that you experienced. They're not looking to convert, they just aren't being fed on that level by that all encompassing divine reality. Is that what you find also?

Sadhvi: It's absolutely true, but I would say it's equally true for the Christians who come. I think it's true in general for those who are coming from a Western Judeo-Christian tradition where they're not feeling the presence of God in them. They're not feeling the connection to God in a way that is deep and meaningful and fulfilling, and they're looking for something because our culture these days with marketing the way it is and society the way it is and advertising the way it is is so full of messages to continue to tell us over and over again in different ways that there is something wrong with us.

We're too fat, we're too thin, we're too dark, we're too pale, we're too old, we're too young, we don't have the right model of mobile phones, we don't wear the right brand of jeans, we don't vacation at the right resorts. There is something wrong with us. Now, as a marketing strategy, it's brilliant because if you convince me that I am somehow deeply lacking without your brand of handbag, I'm much more likely to buy it so that I can feel full.

It's a brilliant marketing technique, but the dilemma is that even though we obviously don't buy every handbag or every mobile or every car or every pair of jeans we see an ad for, we do buy the underlying message, which is, "You are not enough." Our education system is rooted in that. You get As, you are a good boy, a good girl. You don't, you are a bad boy, you're a bad girl. We're really raised in this sense of your worthiness to occupy your space on planet earth is based on what you do, what you achieve, how you rank against others and all sorts of randomly determined categories and systems.

The overwhelming vast majority of people move through their lives feeling like there's something inherently wrong with them. The tradition of Hinduism that I have been bathing in for the last 25 years is a tradition that says the very core of who you are is pure and perfect and whole and complete and divine. You have been created not just by the creator, but of the creator. That is your truest nature, and to discover that, to realize that is your truest and highest and deepest calling Dharma purpose in life.

Rabbi Rami: Yes, it's such a shame. Judaism, Christianity, Islam, they all have that teaching-

Sadhvi: Of course, absolutely.

Rabbi Rami: -in their mystical core, but it doesn't make it to the mainstream church, synagogue, mosque, and therefore the mainstream conventional believer. We could talk forever about why that might be, but I think it's just a fact that it just isn't taught. When I meet Christians who have no idea who is Julian of Norwich or Meister

Eckhart, or Hildegard of Bingen when they have no idea about these great mystics who say exactly the same thing that you're saying, it's really sad. On the Jewish side too, if they don't know Abraham Abulafia and dozens and dozens of other Jewish mystics.

Someone is robbing people of the truth with a capital T that is at the mystic heart of these religions.

You write about this. It's not in that context. I want to shift a little bit, something more practical, but when you talk about experiencing the divine, you say you're in the presence of truth. Then the truth that you're in the presence of, you more or less define it in a way that's very clear I think. You're right near the end of the book that everything in the universe is pervaded by the divine.

We just said this. Everything in the universe is pervaded by the divine. There's nothing, no one, no place that is not pervaded by the divine. That includes me and it includes you. That was all a quote from your book. Then, you move on to talk about mantra practice, mantra japa, the repeating of a sacred word or phrase and how that can-- I don't know if you want to say that can bring you to this realization of truth, but somehow it's an important tool for this realization. I'd love to hear you talk about the power of mantra and how people might make mantra part of their practice, daily practice.

Sadhvi: Sure. The practice of mantra japa actually harnesses the power of many different aspects that we already know. On the one hand, it's the power of an affirmation, a subconscious programming that gets repeated and repeated and repeated.

Even just on that most basic level, and I'm going from the most basic to the deepest, even on the most basic level, we know that affirmations work, we know that giving ourselves different narratives, different thought patterns when the mind is jumping around like a monkey and telling you that you're a victim of this, or you're a victim of that, or the universe is against you, or your identity is wrapped up in your size or shape or color or race or religion or sexual orientation or your history. When the mind is telling you all of that, the power of simply having a spiritual affirmation to remind you that you are not that is in and of itself powerful.

However, we then go another layer deeper. The mantras come from of course the scriptures, they are imbued with actually scientific meaning. In the Sanskrit language, the actual meaning of them in the way that the words go together actually has an alchemic ability to transform you. While saying to yourself, "I love you, God," I did this actually before Pujya Swamiji, my guru, would give me a mantra. He made me wait a couple of years before he give me a mantra. I decided that I wasn't going to lose out on the benefit of mantras, I had heard so much about it, just because my guru wouldn't give me one yet.

I chanted, "I love you Krishna. I love you Krishna. I love you Krishna," for about two years, and it was beautiful and it was wonderful and it was powerful. Yet, when the actual Sanskrit matra gets given, there is an alchemic power of transformation to the mantra itself, as well as to the ritual of being initiated into mantra. The third piece going on to the deepest level is the science of sound.

Now, just to orient listeners for a moment, we know that, for example, you could take a whistle and you could blow it and it could be a whistle with a certain frequency that none of us would hear, but it would make a dog go crazy on the other end of the room, or you could blow a whistle at a certain frequency on one end of the room and shatter a glass on the other end of the room. That energetic power of sound is actually something that travels through the universe and impacts the universe we live in literally like shattering a glass with a high pitched sound.

In the same way with that science of the energy of sound, the mantras have actually been developed, harnessing that science. The sound of the mantra itself, in addition to the meaning, in addition to the words themselves, has that very sacred alchemic power to energetically go in and transform you. For me, the mantra has been an incredible gift. I have used it like a life raft throughout the last 23 years. I've been there 25 years, but it was two years in that he gave me a mantra, and whenever my mind is spinning or someplace I don't want it to be, the mantra's that life raft. It pulls you out of it and pulls you back into the divine awareness.

Rabbi Rami: Is your sense that a mantra has to be given by a teacher or can people find them on their own?

Sadhvi: Yes and yes. Can you find one on your own? Absolutely. Will it have the power to transform you? Absolutely. 200% do not not do mantra japa just because you don't have a guru who has initiated you into it. If you do have a guru or should you come to have a guru in the future, the power of being initiated by a guru into it gives it a whole new level because it's said that when a guru gives the mantra, you actually get the shakti, that energy, that spiritual energy of all of the sādhanā, the spiritual practice that the guru has done. Here's a way of thinking about it. Let's say you've got a headache or a stomach ache.

Can you go to the health food and find yourself some really good ayurvedic medicine for it? Absolutely. Will it help you? Absolutely. If you had the opportunity to go to an expert ayurvedic doctor who felt your pulse and was able to, through feeling your pulse, understand why you develop headaches or stomach aches and therefore is going to give you exactly the right blend of herbs that you need, not just to alleviate the symptom of headache and stomach ache, but actually to bring back balance to your system. I think about it like that, where they're beneficial anyway, they're powerful anyway.

If you've got the ability to have a guru who actually doesn't have to put his fingers on your arm to feel your pulse, who just looks at you and feels your spirit and knows what mantra is going to be the right one for you, that's even doubly more powerful.

Rabbi Rami: Do you give mantra?

Sadhvi: I have.

Rabbi Rami: It's not the one that you were given.

Sadhvi: No, no, no, of course not, of course not. Depending on where it is and what the situation is, I usually try to bring people into my guru to get their mantra from him. Even people who are quote-unquote disciples of mine, I would really prefer for them

to get their mantra from him just because it feels like whatever power I've got has come to me through him. If they're with us in Rishikesh and I can facilitate for them to go and to receive that initiation from him, I always really prefer that.

Rabbi Rami: My own teacher, Swami Atmarupananda, when I asked for initiation said, "Not from him, we'll go to his teacher, Swami Swahananda." I managed to do that just a few weeks before he died, and he gave me the mantra. Swami Atmarupananda didn't feel it was his place to do that. I guess, especially while this teacher was alive. We are just about out of time. This has been very interesting. I want to end with a commercial. As I understand it, you are the director of the annual International Yoga Festival in Rishikesh.

Sadhvi: I am.

Rabbi Rami: I imagine, and maybe I'm just projecting because I know it's true for me, I imagine lots of people listening to this are interested in yoga, maybe have even heard of the International Yoga Festival in Rishikesh, now they get to hear you tell why it's the most incredible thing and we all should come. I've never been, but I'd really would love to do it someday. Tell us just a little bit about that and when the next one is.

Sadhvi: Sure, of course. By the way, I know time is short, so, I'll do it succinctly, but just to mention that in my book, in *Hollywood to the Himalayas*, you will get so much more about Rishikesh and the ashram and yoga and the yoga festival. Don't worry about the shortness of this particular commercial for it. You will be able to get a lot more of that from the book. The festival, it's so extraordinary because it brings together people from all over the world. We usually have people from around 100 countries. To me, what's so beautiful about that is we come together to do yoga, to pray, to meditate to celebrate, and it really is yoga in the fullest definition and the fullest meaning, which is union.

It's a week-long festival. It's from the 7th to the 13th of March 2022. We are definitely planning on being in person in 2022, God willing, COVID permitting, but that's certainly our intention. We were online, of course, in 2021 but we are certainly planning to be in person 2022. We bring together the top teachers from all over the world and it's asana, it's pranayama, it's meditation, but it's so much more than that. Patanjali gave us these eight limbs of yoga that begin with how we live in the wild, how we live with ourselves, the **[unintelligible 00:31:12]**, and then all the way up to Samadhi, this divine ecstasy.

The week really gives all of that. One of the questions everybody asks is, well, why travelled to India? You can learn yoga on any street corner of any city in the world. There's something very, very, very powerful there. Again, that's where we began today. In any case with regard to the *Hollywood to the Himalayas*, that which drew me to India, that drew me to the Himalayas, and the experience that I had there, and that experience is available **[inaudible 00:31:54]**

It's available for you, of course, anywhere in the world to let go of that which is holding you back to experience freedom and awakening and healing, but if you actually have the ability to travel to Rishikesh, and to stand in the Ganga, for me, the two greatest moments of transformation were the first one that I shared, and then

standing in the river literally giving my pain to the river as my guru had instructed me. The pain of what I had experienced, what I had suffered, how I held onto it.

If you've got the opportunity to actually come there and experience that flow of the mother goddess, to be there in the lap of the Himalayas, and to do it at a time when you can engage in yoga with all of your sisters and brothers from all over the world, absolutely do it. You can see internationallyogafestival.org. That's all one word and spelled exactly as it sounds internationallyogafestival.org to see all of the details about that. You can see hollywoodtothehimalayas.com to see all of the details of my new book or just go to Amazon and it's there too, either way.

Rabbi Rami: All right. You certainly got a bunch of commercials in there, I appreciate that. We are going to have the end with that. Our guest today, Sadhvi Bhagawati Saraswati is the author of a wonderful spiritual memoir, *Hollywood To The Himalayas: A Journey of Healing and Transformation*. Sadhvi, thank you so much for talking with us on Spirituality & Health podcast.

Sadhvi Saraswati: Oh, it's been such a joy and such a blessing to really do this with you.

Rabbi Rami: You're welcome, and again, thank you.

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