

# Come Home to Yourself

SADHVI BHAGAWATI SARASWATI



PENGUIN BOOKS

An imprint of Penguin Random House

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Penguin Ananda is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies  
whose addresses can be found at [global.penguinrandomhouse.com](http://global.penguinrandomhouse.com)

Published by Penguin Random House India Pvt. Ltd  
7th Floor, Infinity Tower C, DLF Cyber City,  
Gurgaon 122 002, Haryana, India



First published in Penguin Ananda by Penguin Random House India 2019

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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ISBN 9780143448563

Typeset in Sabon by Manipal Digital Systems, Manipal  
Printed at

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## Introduction

I vividly remember the first satsang I gave. It was about thirteen or fourteen years ago. I had been in India for ten or eleven years by that point, living, doing sadhana and *seva* at Parmarth Niketan Ashram in Rishikesh under the guidance and blessings of my guru, Pujya Swami Chidanand Saraswatiji. One evening, we were gathered in Pujya Swamiji's *jyopri*, the bamboo and gobar (cow dung) hut in his garden, following the Ganga *aarti* ceremony on the banks of the sacred river. Gathering together after the *aarti* was a near-daily ritual. His garden door was open to anyone seeking darshan, blessings or our involvement and assistance in a charitable project. Or, frequently, it was a time for people to ask spiritual questions.

That evening, there was a group from America, and one of them asked a question about anger and forgiveness. Pujya Swamiji turned to me and said, 'Sadhviji.' I waited to hear the rest of the sentence. I expected him to give me some instruction, say, 'Sadhviji, please ask the boy to bring books for this group.' So, I waited. But no further instruction came. It was just 'Sadhviji'. I turned to Pujya



Swamiji. His eyes were now closed, and his hands were in dhyana mudra upon his knees. Suddenly, I realized he wanted me to answer the question. I panicked.

I had already been doing a lot of public speaking, particularly about Indian culture, on tours for the Encyclopedia of Hinduism project and at Hindu temples and events. However, those were situations where I knew in advance that I was going to have to give a lecture. I usually had some time, even if it were just ten minutes on the stage when Pujya Swamiji would signal to me, 'You will also speak.' But here, there was no time to even gather my thoughts.

I closed my eyes and tried to recollect all the knowledge I had about anger and forgiveness. I regularly wrote articles for Pujya Swamiji and had written several on the subject of emotions and the importance of forgiving, forgetting and moving forward. So the topic wasn't new, but I still needed a while to organize my ideas and thoughts. I tried to sift through the index cards stored away in my mind. Growing up, when I had written papers for schoolwork or studied for exams, my parents had taught me to use 3 x 5 inch index cards to put topics, ideas and points in systematic order. It worked beautifully. However, that method was not coming in handy now. I could not arrange the cards in my brain quickly enough.

I squeezed my eyes shut tightly, praying in the way children do, to somehow make this group of people go away. Maybe if I just stayed still like that and prayed very hard, this whole embarrassing situation would turn out to be an illusion. I opened my eyes. The group was still sitting there, staring at me expectantly. I looked again



at Pujya Swamiji. His eyes remained closed, and he was deep in meditation. He was not going to rescue me from the deep ocean into which he had just thrown me.

I closed my eyes once more, this time not to make the people disappear but in full, humble surrender. I spoke to Pujya Swamiji silently in my mind. I told him, 'I'm so sorry. I don't have it in me. I don't know what to tell these people. I don't know the answer. I am so sorry to disappoint you. I don't have it in me.'

As I gently opened my eyes, fully prepared to face my own shame in the eyes of the eagerly waiting group, my mouth also opened slowly and, from somewhere other than my own brain, out flowed the answer. I spoke and spoke to them, and tears filled their eyes and rolled down their cheeks.

From that first satsang, till today, nearly fifteen years later, the truth is the same. I don't know the answer. It is not in me. However, through the grace of God and the blessings of Pujya Swamiji, the answers come through me. What each person needs to hear at a given time and in a particular way simply flows through me, due to no merit of my own. To be used as a vessel, as a vehicle for this flow of graceful wisdom is the greatest blessing in my life.

For more than ten years now, each evening, following the sacred Ganga aarti, I give satsang. People ask questions in person or send them in advance by email or via social media. I am humbled every evening by the gratitude in the eyes of the audience. I am deeply aware that, as they are grateful to me for being the vehicle of wisdom, so am I grateful to God for blessing me with the opportunity to be this vehicle.



Satsang literally means ‘in the Presence of Truth’. It is a time of delving deep into the truth of who we are and, of course, who we are not. The ignorance of our false identification with the body, the ego, our roles and identities is what leads to our suffering. If we can free ourselves from this ignorance by diving deep into the truth, we can learn to live in joy, peace and light. We can even, if our practice is deep and dedicated enough, attain that divine state of self-realization, enlightenment or moksha, freedom, which is ultimately the goal of our life.

The pages of this book are filled with direct transcriptions of answers from the satsangs I’ve given over the years, lovingly transcribed and organized by Shanti Laughtin and edited by my fantastic editor at Penguin, Roshini Dadlani.

As you read them, do not peruse them as you would a text book. These are not just teachings which we can read and say ‘oh wow’ and then forget all about them, have dinner, fight with our family, watch TV and go to sleep. These are teachings for how we should live.

Let the words carry you to the banks of Mother Ganga in Rishikesh, and to the source of truth within yourself. The truth of which I speak in my satsangs is the truth within all of us.



## From Hollywood to Holy Woods

**How did you end up in India, taking *sanyas*? What has living in India taught you?**

Most people go to India seeking enlightenment, or at least advanced yoga studies. I went because I liked the food. Twenty years ago, I had graduated from Stanford and was doing my PhD in psychology, with only my dissertation pending. It was time for a travel break. I agreed to go to India, a place I knew nothing about, only because I was a staunch vegetarian. In India, I knew I wouldn't have to grill waiters in languages I didn't speak about whether there was chicken broth in their vegetable soup.

I was not religious. I was not even one of those people who say, 'Well, I'm not religious, but I'm spiritual.' I had a bat mitzvah to make my grandparents happy. It was just what you did. I was an academic and a hippie. If anyone ever said you couldn't dance all night on Saturday at a Grateful Dead show and still ace a neuro-psychology exam on Monday morning, I would have proven them wrong. I was not consciously seeking or yearning for



God's grace, and yet, thirty-six months after becoming one of the very few students to ever get an A+ in Dr Phil Zimbardo's 'Psychology of Mind Control' class, I was sitting on the banks of the Ganga in Rishikesh, India, with tears of ecstasy streaming down my face.

The transformation happened suddenly. 'I'm going to put my feet in the river,' I said, after we dropped off our bags at the hotel. I wasn't expecting spiritual awakening, but it happened, even before my toes touched the water. They were not sad tears I was crying of course, but they weren't happy tears either. They were tears of the Truth. Tears of coming home.

It was a visual experience, but it wasn't only visual. It was full, it was all of my senses; it was an experience of being in the presence of the Divine.

That which was given to me as I stood on the banks of the Ganga was more real than anything I had experienced in my twenty-five years of life up to that point. It wasn't even a decision to be made. I have always been someone deeply committed to truth, and so there was no way to turn back. Otherwise, I could envision trying to lock up the part of me that had just had that experience, pretending it hadn't happened, and going back. But, being the person I am, there was no way I was going to let myself do that. Even though it wasn't the package that I had ever anticipated happiness or life would come in, it was what I had been given.

I spent the next several days in Rishikesh in meditative bliss. I thought, 'OK, this is where I belong, but where? How? Doing what?'

My connection with Parmarth Niketan, the ashram where I now live, began simply as the pathway for me



to go from the hotel to the river. I was walking through the ashram one day, and I heard a voice say, 'You must stay here.' I looked around to see who had spoken. If there was a voice, clearly someone had spoken. There was no one. Now, in my entire sphere of reference and experience, the only people who heard voices were schizophrenics and, of course, Joan of Arc. But since I definitely was not Joan of Arc and I really hoped I was not schizophrenic, I did what any self-respecting scientist would do: I ignored the voice. If no one had spoken, I hadn't heard anything.

About thirty seconds later, I heard it again: 'You must stay here.' I looked up and noticed a sign that said 'Office'. I went in and told them I wanted to stay. At that time, spiritual India was not very open to foreign women. They were perfectly polite, but they said I needed to get special permission from the president of the ashram, and unfortunately, he was out of town.

'OK, so when is he due back?' I asked.

'Maybe tomorrow,' they said.

Being American, I took their words at face value, and every day, I went back and asked if the president had returned, and every day they'd say, 'Maybe tomorrow', which I only later learnt is code for 'I have no idea' in India. Finally, he did return, and he turned out to be not only the administrative head of the ashram, but His Holiness Pujya Swami Chidanand Saraswatiji, one of the most revered spiritual leaders of India.

'You are welcome to stay,' Swamiji told me.

That was what you could call the beginning. I've spent the last twenty-three years in Rishikesh, engaged in study of the self and in service to others.



So what has living in India taught me? First, stay open. The universe has a plan for you. Yes, of course, we have to choose a path and walk it, but we only do that until we get a sign that says, 'Turn right now.' Look at the caterpillar. It spends most of its life crawling on the ground, and then one day, it hears a voice or it gets a sign that says, 'Climb the tree.' Now, it's never seen anyone go up that tree and come back. Mom's gone up, dad's gone up, but no one has come back. That tree is the Bermuda Triangle for caterpillars. But when it receives the instruction to climb, it does. It gets a signal to go out on the branch, weave itself into a cocoon and sometime later, burst forth, jump and fly away. It has no idea how to fly! It's never flown before, but when it is time to jump, it does.

A caterpillar never misses a chance to become a butterfly because it is too scared to climb a tree, or because it doesn't know how to weave a cocoon, or because it jumps out of the cocoon too soon and plummets to the ground. It never becomes a butterfly that climbs back down the tree instead of flying because it doesn't believe it can really fly.

There is an intelligence in the universe that pervades all of creation, including us. But we have to trust it, and we have to be quiet and still enough to hear it. If the caterpillar spent its entire life bemoaning the fact that the millipede got a thousand legs while it got only twelve, it might miss the call to climb the tree.

The second lesson is that your self is much more important than your shelf. Most of us spend a lot of time and energy focused on filling our shelves with possessions, and we spend very little time thinking about the fullness of



our self. But it is in that fullness that real abundance lies. No matter how much we have, most of us want more. We think, *if I could just have that, or achieve this, then I'd be happy*. But if our happiness were contingent upon filling shelves, then happiness and abundance would always be an arm's length away.

When I first came to India, the local people would implore me, 'Please, please come home for a meal, come for a cup of tea, come for a cold drink.' These were people who could not even afford to properly feed their families, but they would ask till I agreed. I learnt that abundance was not building mansions while others lived in shacks, or eating caviar while others starved. Abundance is connecting deeply with the fullness of our self, recognizing that our cup runneth over and eagerly sharing with others.

Lastly, and most importantly, in service to others, I have discovered the fullness within myself. Not from the perspective of one who has, serving those who don't, nor a humanitarian serving the masses, but service of self to self.

If you trip and injure your right leg, your left leg will pick up the extra weight. We call this limping. There is no need for anyone to say, 'Oh great humanitarian left leg, would you mind picking up a little bit of extra weight?' The left leg does not anticipate an award or a gold star. It does it because it understands that the right leg is self. That is the goal of service—to serve myself in you.

In serving children, I found myself. We build schools and orphanages, run women's empowerment programmes and medical care programmes, and install toilets, hand-washing stations and water filters.



Men seem to be more comfortable urinating or defecating in public. But women are raised right from childhood to protect their bodies from public view.

Across India, many girls and women have to wait for darkness to heed the call of nature. They don't drink water or eat food during the day, because otherwise they will feel the need to relieve themselves. The resultant dehydration and malnutrition wreak havoc on their bodies and, of course, on their unborn babies as well. Every day, across the world, thousands of children die of diarrhoea, simply due to lack of clean water, sanitation and hygiene.

This is why it's a fundamental tenet of a deep, real, true spiritual path to be of service to others, to provide for them as we provide for ourselves. When I open my eyes from my meditation, if my meditation is real and deep, I should experience oneness not only with a formless Creator but also with Creation—our sisters and brothers with whom we share this planet. Thus, we serve.

Pujya Swamiji explains that now, seeing the global crisis around the dearth of clean water, sanitation and hygiene, which is the cause for thousands of deaths occurring each day, we need to shift our focus from building temples to building toilets. So we started constructing toilets and hand-washing stations and teaching proper sanitation. We formed the Global Interfaith WASH Alliance, with leaders of many different religions coming together and agreeing that it is time to expand our definition of peace. It is no longer enough to simply say, 'Thou shalt not kill.' Today, true peace can only exist when our sisters and brothers of all races, religions and species have access to safe, sufficient water, sanitation, hygiene, education



and primary healthcare. Children across the world are suffering and dying. They are our responsibility.

A spiritual awakening does not take us further from the world, it brings us closer. Spiritual awakening does not separate us, it connects us. Spiritual awakening is not about my bliss in the midst of your misery. Spiritual awakening is awakening from the illusion that who we are is based on what we earn, acquire or achieve. It is an awakening into the reality that each of us is an embodiment of the Divine. It is awakening out of the illusion of our separateness into the reality of our oneness, a reality in which there is no place that I end and you begin. It is awakening from a life that is in pieces into a life of peace.