

[Making it Fashionable to Walk Through Fire](#)

Category : [May 1996](#)

Published by Anonymous on May. 02, 1996

Making it Fashionable to Walk Through Fire

Archana Dongre, Los Angeles

She lives in seclusion in a tiny hut surrounded by elms and oaks in the forested outskirts of the small town of Asheville, North Carolina, USA. The day I interviewed her, her biggest joy was spotting a red cardinal in the waning winter days of February. At age 45, she's already had enough of worldly pursuits. Now, Brahmacharini Maya Tiwari's days are spent in the deeper studies of Vedanta and Ayurveda, and in imparting knowledge gleaned over the years to the students who come to her a few months of the year.

"I was born a Hindu," she told me, "and I will die a Hindu. I strongly believe in the Sanatana Dharma. Not only am I Hindu, I am a brahmin, and I live in the brahmin way of gaining knowledge and disseminating it."

Tiwari's studies and practices have culminated in her unique philosophy of sadhanas, sacred activities performed with the presence of a gentle mind in harmony with nature that revive and awaken our deep cognitive memory as humans. There are elaborate sadhanas of natural food, those of breath--like moment to moment awareness of breath--and also of yoga,

pranayama and sound--locked up in the pure vibratory fields of Vedic mantras. Tiwari travels around the country for four months a year disseminating wisdom in workshops. Her two books on Ayurveda, *A Life of Balance and Secrets of Healing*, published by Lotus Press, have seen the light of publication in 1995, and more books are on the way.

Life didn't start out so blissfully. In fact, the deep calm of sadhana is a complete 180 turn from where she had been, and who she was, just 20 years ago.

High-Fashion Priestess

Tiwari came to New York to study law at age 15, after attaining a college equivalent of a London university degree in English. "Although driven for success, inspired by my visionary father, my life was shaped by my early days growing up in Guiana," Tiwari told *Hinduism Today* [see sidebar, below]. Once in New York, instead of pursuing a career in law, Tiwari followed her instincts and joined the Stella Adler Conservatory and studied the European plays of Steinberg, Ibsen and Chekov under the tutelage of the great dramatist, the late Stella Adler. After keeping close to Tiwari for many years, Adler observed, "The experiences Maya endured and survived while still very young have made her bigger than life. She is a truly remarkable person and the only one I have known who has been able to achieve real happiness."

"I kept the fact about my deviation from academics a secret from my family because I had no courage to express it," Tiwari revealed. Although she loved classical theater, the roles for an ethnic face were limited. Leaning on her training in designing

costumes for the classical stage, she ventured into fashion design. "Being a free flowing thinker has been my bio throughout my life," quipped Tiwari.

"Due to my lack of formalized training, I could go beyond the barriers, introducing revolutionary clothing," Tiwari said. A force of fashion flowed from her. She designed not only stretch clothing but also special machinery to manufacture it. Her designs were touted as the American fashion. Before that, the fashion scene had copied Europe. She put the wealth that poured forth into expanding the wholesale and retail business empire.

The decade of the 1970s saw her as the top fashion designer in America, opening at age 20 a bustling boutique called "Maya" on Madison Avenue in New York City. This "high priestess of American fashion," as she was then called by her peers, clothed clients the likes of Princess Diana, Jackie Onassis, Sally Kirkland (then head of Lifemagazine), Katie Murphy, Diane Vreeland, Nancy White and countless others. "Almost every high ranking fashionable woman has lived in the clothes I designed in those days," Tiwari confided. Her successes include her own stores, plus departments called "Maya," within Bloomingdales, Neiman Marcus, Saks Fifth Avenue and other fine stores all around the country.

Over two hundred of Tiwari's original designs are featured in the Curator's Hall of the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York, as an inspiration to young designers. Sally Kirkland later said of Tiwari, "If I should ever write a sequel to Great American Designers, which included Claire McCardell and

Norman Norell, it will be incomplete without featuring Maya as our most innovative designer."

Cancer: A Cure to Worldliness

Without warning, directions pivoted and her choices transformed. Right when Tiwari was riding high on the wave of fame, at the ripe age of 23, she was struck down by cancer. "Cancer knocked me down to get me out of my own way. The core of my cancer was that I was building a mask to hide my insecurities --not only of my childhood, but also from the isolation from my family, away from the life currents that had nourished me. Moreover, I was then a 20-year-old workhorse acting out the maturity of a 40-year-old," Tiwari confided.

"My success in business was a superficial success, not a human success. I would never have found the divinity, the source of wisdom within, if I had not walked through that fire of cancer. The business just eased out of my life when I looked beyond the superficiality of success to find the significant rhythm of life. I wanted to find the stream of life. To quote a Sanskrit poet, 'The same stream of light that runs through my veins runs through the universe and dances in rhythmic measure.' I was out to find that stream of light, to make my broken body whole again. Cancer was my greatest teacher."

The cure for her disease involved radiation therapy to burn the malignant masses that had developed in her liver and next to the kidneys. After her 10th surgery in the fifth medical facility that she inhabited, during the falsely warm embrace of morphine, Tiwari realized that she must escape from the medical therapy and deal with the pain, anger and frustration

inside on her own effort, to audit her life and rescript her agenda for it, examining every detail of the past with a microscope.

In search of her own inner being, the 26-year-old isolated herself for three months in a small cabin in the stark white winter of Vermont. "I just kept the wood fires burning. I did not eat much. Sleeping little, I reviewed my life," Tiwari recalled.

She "walked through the fire of cancer," as she puts it. Her cure and healing were catalyzed by a meditative internal cleansing as well as holistic methods of living. "The emotional cleansing: crying, weeping, praying to God--the exquisite feeling of unburdening my soul became a turning point."

"The grace of the Lord cured me," Tiwari says. When she came back to the city for a check up after three months, she found that the inoperable tumor had stopped growing and others had dissolved. After some advanced and aggressive treatments from her oncologist, who, according to her was also a deeply spiritual man, Tiwari rid herself of cancer in the early 80s.

No Turning Back

Life's events had ignited her yearning to learn holistic medicine. Her studies began with Aveline and Michio Kushi, of Kushi Institute in the areas of natural farming, oriental herbology and acupuncture. During this study, in 1986, she met her greatest teacher, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, a sage and scholar of traditional Vedanta and Sanskrit. Under his tutelage at the Arsha Vidya Gurukulam in Saylorsburg,

Pennsylvania, she studied Sanskrit, progressing into the Upanishads, Shankaracharya's Vedanta, Vivekachudamani and Tattvabodhi, for about two and half years. For the next five years the Sanskrit learning facilitated studies of Ayurveda, namely the Charak and Sushruta Samhitas, Madhava Nidanam and other texts.

"I never intended to become an Ayurvedic physician. I was a spiritual aspirant and guide gathering the knowledge to gain clarity of the subject," Tiwari explained. Her self studies were guided by Swami Dayananda and other knowledgeable people in India during her visits there. She also visited Kerala, where the panchakarmacleansing methods are still practiced at several institutions in strict adherence with the ancient traditions.

She became competent as a spiritual healer. "I know herbology and herb energies in depth and in a dynamic way, much deeper than prescribed in any courses," she admits.

Her initiation into the Brahmacharini order in a simple, dignified milestone ceremony of about 20 minutes of mantras and strict vows took place in 1990 on the banks of the Ganga in Rishikesh, at the feet of her guru Swami Dayananda Saraswati. "In 1986, when I saw my father cremated in Canada, it was a turning point when I had felt renounced. My renunciation had also begun when I had lost my organs--my womb, part of my kidneys and lungs--to cancer. Every human being loses a little life moment by moment. I died in chunks," she said.

"Also, I did not take renunciation until my relationships were healed. I had not kept any communication or contact with any of my family members for 12 years upon coming to New York. That isolation also contributed to my cancer. I reunited with the family right after curing. After the initial emotional cleansing, there were seven years of constant communication. My younger siblings had imbibed my parents' pain of losing a child, and I worked with them until that was healed," Tiwari recalled. Most of her family is now settled in Canada.

Living to Give Back

Tiwari has been helping cancer patients, intimately counselling them to induce healing, for almost 20 years now. Over 1,000 persons, two thirds of them women with womb and breast cancer, have been touched by her, in their "journey through the dark night of the soul." "I share my insights with them. I ask them to keep a journal; be honest with their inner self; take time away from the 'structure' of family without leaving them behind; take personal time to look deeply within and take responsibility for the condition by exploring what you have been doing for the last seven years," Tiwari explained. She involves them in satsanga, and harnesses their minds in simple sadhanaslike grinding masalasor cleaning grains--apparently mundane activities that transcend mental afflictions--or planting and reaping in the summer to keep one's closeness to the earth. She also teaches weekend workshops in the healing sadhanasof Ayurveda at the New York Open Center and Omega Center, and travels from place to place for lectures.

Mary Pratt, publisher of the alternate lifestyles newspaper Thought Trends had met Tiwari a few months before Pratt was

diagnosed with colo-rectal cancer in October of 1992. "Through Br. Maya's exercises and coaching of the sadhanas of silence, prayer, meditation, love, compassion and food I ventured into the 'soul approach' to cancer. I learned to let go of the reins and find the intuitive, authentic way to my healing. I first had to re-birth myself, then the medical treatment I chose became part of the process of transforming my life. Her gift to me was life," Pratt shared with Hinduism Today.

A cornerstone of Tiwari's teaching today are the sadhanas. According to her, sadhanas, a Sanskrit word meaning "effective means of attainment," encompass the simple daily activities which synchronize themselves with the rhythm of the heart. Then, all of a sudden, the breath is synchronized in harmony with nature. Tiwari purports that once cognitive memory is awakened and the remembering self begins to function we are able to live harmoniously with nature. She also trains sadhakas as the teachers of sadhanas. Twelve such teachers have been trained all over the nation, while eighteen are in line to join soon.

Tiwari is currently working on The Sacred Book of Sadhanas, wherein she chronicles her life and struggle and the importance and implications of sadhanapractices.

Now living her "second life," and obviously able to achieve her wishes, what else will this 45-year-old venture to accomplish? "I do not seek fame. Most of my ambitions have been honed and dissipated. Now I want others to find sadhanas so that they can become more peaceful and happier in the spirit of nature. I ask for the Lord's grace to seek and find my own complete

divinity in the surrender of my life," she prayed.

Inquiries can be sent in care of: Mary Pratt, P.O. Box 1012, Flowery Branch, Georgia 30542, USA.

Maya Tiwari's books can be purchased from Lotus Press. P.O. Box 325, Twin Lakes, Wisconsin 63181, USA. Tel: 414-889-8561; fax: 414-889-8591.

Maharashtra-born Archana Dongre is a journalist living with her husband in Los Angeles. She has a degree in education and an M.A. in Sanskrit language and literature.

Sidebar: Flaming Memories of Childhood, Unfinished Biography

Maya Ramprasad Tiwari was born in 1951 in British Guiana (which upon independence in 1966 became Guyana). Her ancestors were brought from India by the British in the 19th century. "My grandparents were among the few hundreds who survived from the thousands, enduring the treacherous crossing of several oceans in inhuman conditions on the ships, where women were molested and brothers, husbands and fathers were cast off, left on deserted shores," she related--colonial era facts which have remained shrouded in history. "My ancestors and their peers arrived in Guiana in savagely broken spirits. They had no way to cope with it. Some got riddled with disease, others simply died. That was the generation that fathered my parents' generation," Tiwari detailed of her background.

The turbulent rhythms of her early life had shadows of a silent, deep pain and anger, grief and shame that she gleaned from her close proximity with the elders. The British had demeaned everything cultural that could spell the Indian identity. For example, "Britishizing" of the names: everyone was "allowed" only two names, first and last. Thus her father had to go from Bhagawan Ramprasad Tiwari to simply Bhagawan Rampersaud--corrupting the spelling and pronunciation of Ramprasad. Still, her family kept up their age-old brahmin traditions. Celebrating Hindu holidays, rituals like yajnas and daily agnihotra rites helped them to retain their sanity and vanquish their broken identity. "The surrounding village atmosphere was marked by Indian harmonics, African rhythm and British noise," Maya elaborated.

She saw the villages falling apart, and her parents' sacrifices to build them. "In that chaos I lost some of the glories and innocence of childhood. 'The dancing star within can only come from chaos.' That dancing star later gave me the courage for my 180 turn. There was a lot of fire. Cancer was the fire that I walked through," Tiwari confided. "All diseases are fires," she added.