

[The Selfless Life of Serving Siva in All](#)

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WOMEN OF VISION

The Selfless Life of Serving Siva in All

Ma Jaya Sati Bhagavati, AIDS Angel of Kashi

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Did you know that the sacred soil of Kashi, City of Light, lies in America? That the holy River Ganga flows in Florida? Did you know that on its banks is a healing place of respite where those suffering the ravages of AIDS can find love, peace and comfort--and a way to die with dignity?

If all this seems hard to believe, then you haven't met Ma Jaya Sati Bhagavati--a feisty, Brooklyn-accented American Hindu with compassionate hands, a heart dedicated to the dead and dying and a soul that is one with Siva. She is the spiritual teacher of Kashi Ashram, an interfaith spiritual community in Central Florida whose Hindu essence allows it to embrace many religious traditions.

Since 1981 Ma Jaya, 58, has been working with people suffering from AIDS, becoming something of a legend among both the straight and gay communities--and what may come

as a surprise to readers, even to many Hindus. Says she, "I teach my students here at Kashi how to be the caregivers and how to have a Saivite heart, how to take Shiva into the streets. I have always worked with prostitutes and junkies." While Ma Jaya works with the terminally ill, the destitute and homeless, she confesses, "AIDS is my heart--because many people have no one. AIDS is not a death sentence. With proper care and proper belief in oneself, it doesn't have to kill. With proper medication, supplements and vitamins, a person can live. But they cannot live if they are not loved."

Kashi Ashram is headquarters for her diverse projects, including the River Fund which offers spiritual and physical support to those with AIDS and other illnesses. The River House is a nurturing place where adults can live and die with dignity, and nearby Mary's House takes in babies with AIDS. Recently, Ma Jaya received a private grant to build a 40-bed care facility at the ashram. She says, "I am my own boss. I answer to nobody but my Lord Shiva, my Lord God."

The River School at Kashi provides nonsectarian education through high school, and all the children go on to college. The 100-plus ashram school children participate in an AIDS awareness program and serve in the River House and Mary's House regularly. The River Fund is also the Central Florida Chapter of the Names Project, the famed AIDS Memorial Quilt. These quilts are taken into hospitals and schools to emphasize the urgency of the AIDS epidemic.

In California, one of Ma Jaya's monks, Laxman Das, runs "Under the Bridges and on the Streets." Members visit

hospitals and hospices and work in the streets, personally feeding and comforting hundreds of destitute people. In New York, the River Fund, under Swami Durga Das, looks after the mentally and physically challenged and those with AIDS. A NY initiative called "A Movable Feast" feeds hundreds of people each week.

Ma Jaya is a trustee of the Parliament of the World's Religions and will be going to Africa in 1999. A year later she will go to India, where the AIDS crisis is building up. Ma Jaya told me: "There is a myth that AIDS is dead. Actually, it is worse. There are 42 million AIDS cases now and in two years it is estimated that we will have 60-70 million. AIDS will eat the next generation. There will be no more young people in India if it is not stopped now. It must be stopped."

Ma Jaya feels it is urgent to dispel the myths about AIDS, especially among Hindus who are misinformed about this disease, and think it can be easily contracted by care-giving. She laments, "Many people are dying in shame, without dignity. Young Hindu girls and young men come to me and say, 'Ma, my mother can't touch me. Ma, my father can't touch me, because I will give them AIDS.' This must be stopped. Hindu children are leaving home after they're infected because they're afraid to infect their family. Children are hiding in shame because there have been so many myths. Many Hindu doctors have said you can catch AIDS from a mosquito, that it's air-borne. It's so sad."

For those dying from lack of love, Kashi Ashram is a final resting place. Ma confesses, "I love my people madly. I love

every person that God has put before me. I am truly that woman that loves Shiva so much that I see Shiva in the eyes of all. I see Krishna in the eyes of all. I can see God in the eyes of all."

Ma Jaya's vital devotion to Hinduism began many years ago, when, she recalls, "I had a vision of Christ, and Christ told me to teach all ways, for all ways are his. Yet I couldn't find any religion that would let me teach all ways. And then, Swami Nityananda appeared to me. I threw myself at his feet. He said, 'This One will teach you, for all religions are the same.' All religions reach out to the same God. Hinduism embraces all. And I knew in that moment by the grace of all that was holy and by the grace of all that was beautiful, that I indeed found that moment or perhaps my religion found me. And in that moment I never let go of the feet of Lord Shiva. For I knew in His majestic beauty He would allow me to serve anyone in need. Because of the elasticity and the boundless non-prejudice and nonbigotry of Hinduism, I am able to go forth into any man's or woman's church, synagogue or gurudwara and bring the word in many different ways because Shiva has given me this."

Ma Jaya tells that when three babies died, the Catholic priest refused to give them last rites because they were Black and had AIDS. She recalls coming home, bowing before her Shiva lingam and praying,

" 'Lord Shiva, I thank you for giving me blessings to go to every human being's religion and bring Your ash in whatever name they want to call You.' Yes, the great Ganga River has many streams. I think, somehow, they all enter my beautiful Kashi."

At Kashi Ashram's center lies a pond surrounded by artful shrines honoring the world's religions. This stands symbolically for Holy Mother Ganges, purifier of all who seek refuge in Her, and holds its namesake's water, for whoever goes to India brings back Ganges water to add to it. In this are lovingly immersed the ashes of countless people lost to AIDS, and in this final act, Ma Jaya lifts those souls abandoned by others, directing them toward light and liberation.

Talking about the unwanted people abandoned by friends and families, Ma Jaya gets emotional. "I'm doing this now since 1981, and there is not a day that I don't shed a tear. I know death is nothing. I am not shedding tears for the death of so many, but for the lack of dignity that they have while they are dying. I will fight for the right of any human being to be able to die with the greatest amount of dignity." When Ma Jaya heard about the unclaimed ashes of over thirty people who had died, ashes lying forsaken in a funeral parlor, she had them released to her, telling the Ashram children, " 'You organize the memorial. You have the ashes of 30 people that nobody wants.' When we received the ashes, I was handed a plastic bag on which was written, 'Baby-AIDS.' You could see the little bones. I've never put this baby in the Ganga. I named the baby Little Krishna and gave him a special place of honor in my rooms."

Ma Jaya's mission is not only to make those afflicted with AIDS comfortable and loved, but also to teach them how to prepare for death. She guides them, "When a person is dying of AIDS and there is no hope of making them well, I teach them the great, wonderful beauty, the light of God and the light that is inside one and how it is their time to acknowledge that great

light.

"If they are Hindu, I find out what sect they belong to, if they are Vaishnavite or Saivite. During that last week, the children gather around them as they are dying and sing songs to Krishna or Govinda Gopala. If they believe in Hanumanji, then I will bring murtis over to them of Hanumanji, and the children will sing the Hanuman Chalisa. If they are Catholic and they want the children around them, then they will have pictures of Christ. You know, whatever a person is, I will enhance it. I will make sure that they learn how to die."

What most concerns Ma Jaya is the lack of understanding and kindness that many Hindu parents show when one of their teenagers gets AIDS. It's total disbelief and an abandonment of the Hindu principles of compassion and tolerance. She declares, "I would like a Hindu mother and a Hindu father to remember the moment of birth, when they cherish that child and that child is everything. When that child goes to the parents and says, 'Mother, father, I am HIV positive,' they say, 'Come here, my son, for we as Hindus love you so very much. We would never betray you and never, ever abandon you, and we as human beings will hold you and show you how to live until you die.' By standing behind their children, these parents can prevent them from roaming the streets or getting deeper into despair, free sex or exchanging needles, thus infecting hundreds of other teenagers." She then adds, "Instead, that child goes to the warm breast of Mother Kali or Mother Durga, through his own mother."

Ma Jaya believes it is best for teenagers to be celibate, but

since one can't control their sex life, it is advisable to prepare them with education, "So what I beg Lord Shiva in my own way to do, is to open the heart of every single person who deals with AIDS and say, 'This is not going against God.' We are taught as Hindus that everyone is God's child. Whether the child is gay or straight doesn't matter."

Ma's audacious manner can veil her depth, but those who know her see the wisdom and the awakening, know the profound place where she abides. Many have joined her. If the Indian proverb is right, that one can tell the tree by its fruits, then Ma's followers, 150 at Kashi in Florida and thousands more around the globe, are a remarkable testament to her life. They are as competent, joyous, devout and dedicated a group as you will ever find, her most enduring legacy to a world in need of examples of selflessness. Living constantly with the dead and the dying, Ma Jaya Sati Bhagavati clings to the teachings of Swami Nitayananda and her guru, the famed Neem Karoli Baba [189?-1973], by accessing a place called chidakash. She explains, "Chidakash is the heart space over the head. I breathe into my heart and I breathe out over the head. There is no emotionalism. I stay there and offer my life, my day and the hideous, foul things, all that I see. I sit always at the feet of my guru, at the feet of Lord Shiva, and I ask them to give me the strength not to crumble, not to let the world consume me. And then every night, of course, I go into meditation. Without this great power of relieving myself of all that I pick up during the day, I would not be able to be."

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