Ma Yogashakti
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Yoga Guru Esteemed East and West

"The purpose of life is what you make it," Mataji confides to a close circle of dedicated devotees. "You have to discover it yourself. God-Realization is the ultimate end, but it's a long distance goal and may take many lives. Therefore, make a target now. You many want to be good musician, lawyer or doctor.

Whatever it is, try to be the best." Like many effective spiritual teachers, Ma Yogashakti, affectionately referred to as Mataji, is known for her ability to integrate wisdom into action in everyday life. Her students are attracted to her because she presents crisp, to-the-point, spiritual news they can use. When one of Mataji's long-time devotees was asked what she had learned in her twelve years of study, she replied by stating her Guru's motto: "Truth is our religion. Service is our worship. Knowledge is our breath. World is our family. Yoga is our way."

Ma Yogashakti, age 61, is a veteran in the world of spiritual service and devotion. Even before she took up the robes of sannyas in 1965, she was involved in meritorious work and selfless service. In 1955 she founded a college for girls in Chapra, Bihar State, India, and served as its principal for six years. In 1957 she was almost elected to the Indian Parliament. Now, as a renunciate swami, she teaches yoga, stressing the development of three qualities: purity, control and creativity. Of these three she puts purity first. She puts purity first because she sees it as the foundation for the other two. For the development of purity she emphasizes the practice of bhakti yoga.

"In bhakti yoga we get purity of mind," Mataji told Hinduism Today. "Then we become loving. Loving is being good to each other. Be good and do good. This is all I do."

After purity comes control, Mataji contends. The control of the mind brings the power of the mind which can be put to safe and good use after this bhakti has been established. Within this stable fortress of purity and power, says Mataji, even destiny can be consciously molded and life's ultimate goal earnestly sought.

"We know the power of the mind," asserts Mataji. "We see it in the power of thinking. If you think 'beautiful,' the world will be beautiful. Mind power must be learned. This is yoga. Then we must seek to know, "Who am I?"

Mataji contends that when the mind is controlled in purity and motivated by love, the soul's creativity naturally comes forward. Mataji, herself, is an example of this creativity. Yet, her own view of her work is intensely practical: "If everyone kept creative, we would have very little problems," she says.

Mataji, like many other universalist Hindu teachers (a tradition arising out of the Smarta Sampradaya), believes that although yoga originated as a part of Hinduism, it now stands alone. In fact, she separates yoga from all religions, calling it "the religion of truth" available to all. Yet, at the same time she contends that all religions are one because of a shared source and a common goal.

"I don't teach any of this as an 'ism,'" she asserts. "The Hindu religion was the ancient culture of man and the mother of all cultures. Civilization was founded on it, and at one time it was all anyone knew. Hinduism was not Hinduism in the beginning. It was just Dharma, the culture of goodness. Dharma is our very nature."

Mataji teaches that the paths of karma, bhakta, raja and jnana yoga are separate and not consecutive routes to the same goal, offering a variety of approaches to suit the various temperaments of aspirants on the path. She further asserts, restating her ecumenical stance, that ultimately the yogi realizes that "in truth there were never several paths," that the very idea of a path "implies distance where there is none."

One of the first lady swamis to teach yoga internationally, Mataji has had to face

the unique challenge of attempting to convey Hinduism's ancient mysticism in both Eastern and Western cultures. While many have lamented the challenges of such a task, Mataji says, "to me there is no difference between the East and the West. I believe in only one language. That is the language of love and understanding. The East and the West are two eyes seeing one reality."

Mataji was born into an aristocratic and religious family in the holy city of Benares, India. In early life she was a householder, an educator and a political reformer. She recalls that when her father took sannyas, she became inspired to do the same. In 1965, she renounced the world to become a Paramadesa (a sannyasin who takes up the orange robes without being initiated by another sannyasin) and entered "a life of freedom."

From Mataji's perspective, sannyas is "the only way one can be free," but with the freedom, she firmly asserts, there must be selfless service, for service is the esoteric secret behind the freedom. "We are bound and yet we are free," she proclaims. "I am serving society, not sannyas, since 1965."

Mataji's spiritual freedom is also derived from a humility in which all sense of I, me and mine has been completely released. "In the physical world, the body grows by taking," she states. "But in the spiritual world, the spirit grows by giving. If you humble yourself you will rise high. Trees which are very tall can be rooted out in storms, but the low, humble and soft grass is not affected by the storms.

Mataji does not acknowledge one particular guru. "For me, all are my teachers," she says. "I learn from each and everyone." Although Mataji was not initiated herself, she has initiated a few devotees into sannyas all of whom have since gone their own way.

As for the Mataji's future, it's open. All of her institutions are "registered, chartered and tax-exempt." The rest, she says, is up to the people and God.

Mataji maintains ashrams in Bombay, New Delhi, and Calcutta, India; as well as in Florida and New York, USA. She has also established schools in India and England

and has published a number of books on yoga.

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