Hindu Side of Hollywood Star
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"The Cosby Show's" Phylicia Rashad is Swami Muktananda Devotee

"I met him for the first time in September, 1980, at South Fallsburg in New York," recollected a lovely Phylicia Rashad who plays Mom Cosby in the US's favorite TV series, The Bill Cosby Show. "He was so beautiful, so natural, so resplendent, that I thought he was the sun on legs. He said to me, 'Beautiful, beautiful. When you sing, sing for yourself, sing for Baba, sing for God."'

Actress Phylicia Rashad is talking about "Baba: Swami Muktananda. Today, although Baba has passed away, she visits his ashram in South Fallsburg as often as possible. Speaking of the Shaktipat initiation that she received from him, she asserts, "It renewed me. I became a better actress, and my work became my worship. What I am today, and what I have, is because of Baba and his successor, Gurumayi Chidvilasananda."

Phylicia's face lights up and her black eyes sparkle and dance as she talks about "Baba." Her speech is soft, often animated and punctuated with ringing, hearty laughter. "I always thought I was born in the wrong place. When I visited India for the first time in 1984, I felt perfectly at home. The surroundings seemed to whisper, 'Do you remember?"'

Her first meeting with Baba seemed destined. "In 1980, I was a struggling actress and had not worked in three years," she confides to me in a personal interview. "I has only four dollars in my pocket and two gallons of gas, but I had an

overwhelming desire to see Swami Muktananada. Miraculously a friend gave me money and I visited his ashram. That was when it all started."

Phylicia is well-known today for her Emmy-award-nominated portrayal of Clair, Bill Cosby's lawyer/wife and mother of five on NBC-TV's top rated series, The Cosby Show. She is also an engaging, unassuming person, almost too simple to be a celebrity. She loves India primarily because of her ten-year devotion to "Baba" Muktananda and Gurumayi. Yet, she was first impressed with Indian culture in her teens.

A Youthful Introduction to Hindu Thought

One of her mother's friends, a physics professor named Dr. Rao, had introduced Hinduism and vegetarianism to the family. "When I was eleven years old, we had our first vegetarian Thanksgiving. Among other dishes, my mother prepared dal and dosai. Imagine that in the sixties!"

Phylicia's family experimented with new ideas. Her father, Dr. Andrew Allen, was a well-known dentist. Her mother, Vivian Ayers, was a writer whose book, Spice of Dawns, was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.

"At 14, I discovered the book, Autobiography of a Yogi, by Yogananda Paramahansa and became aware that the spirit was separate from the body. Around that same time my mother introduced us to meditation and fasting."

When asked about her practice of japa (mantra repetition), she replied, "Oh, my mantra is no secret. I chant Om Namasivaya, given to me by my guru. The mantra gives energy, my mind becomes centered on the sound vibration of the Great Self. If you receive the mantra from a Siddha Guru, it's different, because he or she has realized it, and it has been charged by that power."

Since Muktananda's Mhasamadhi, Phylicia has been a disciple of Gurmayi. "When I

first saw her," she recalls, "I almost fainted. She talked like him, she walked like him. She even blessed me with feathers exactly the way that he did. She has become totally one with him."

Daily Sadhana

As an actress, wife of NBC sportscaster, Ahmad Rashad, and mother of 16-year-old son Billy and three-year-old daughter Condola Phylea, there are many demands on Phylicia's time.

"At 5:30 every morning I meditate in my meditation room for one hour. That helps to focus my mind. Chanting gives me mental energy. I love discipline." Phylicia has seen both Baba and Gurumayi in her dreams and meditation.

On the Cosby show, does anyone share her beliefs? "No," she replies. "Bill (Cosby) is a very generous person and spiritual deep down. But he never talks about religion. He makes jokes on everything. Nobody is safe. Once he started singing a church song, and I said, 'Bill, you are a good boy after all.' He laughed and told me that his grandfather was a minister."

Phylicia says that her daughter Phylea loves to go to India with her. They have visited there three times since Phylea's birth, although they could only stay less than a week each time due to Phylicia's demanding work schedule. One day she wants to travel throughout the rest of India and taker her husband to Kashmir. She's become fond of Indian dress and often wears a sari.

Reflections on India

"I think Indian women are an embodiment of grace," Phylicia reflects. "In India spirit flows through everything. It's amazing what the Indian classical music does to the nervous system. I love the disciplined, graceful movements of Indian classical dance. India itself is a fascinating country. I do not know of any other country that

has such a rich heritage of philosophy. What kind of place is this, where they honor a guest as God? If Eastern philosophy and Western technology would merge, what a beautiful thing that would be."

Even to my critical and objective journalist's eye, Phylicia comes across as a serene, calm, blissful person with spiritual depth. She never makes even a passing remark about any of her awards or honors, even though she graduated magna cum laude from the Department of Drama at Howard University before embarking on her singing and acting career in the early seventies. She starred on Broadway in the top-award-winning "Best Musical," Into the Woods. Other appearances include The Whiz, Dream Girls and Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death. Phylicia is the twice-honored recipient of the People's Choice Award as the most popular female actress on network television. She has also received the NAACP Image Award for "best actress in a comedy series" three years consecutively. Prior to The Cosby Show she starred as Courtney Wright in One Life to Live. Her singing career has included appearances with the Dallas Symphony and Harrah's Atlantic City Hotel. She presented a special solo concert at New York City's Town Hall in honor of Gurumayi Chidvilasananda. Today Phylicia is making a movie in Louisiana.

Phylicia tells a charming anecdote about the time she auditioned for her role in the TV series, One Life to Live. "I went to puja and told the Lord that I needed this job, but more than that, that I wanted to experience Him every minute of the day. Then in meditation I saw a basket of gold coins before me. I shook my head and said, 'No, I am not meditating for money.' Then I saw that my palms were open and bills were being placed in my hands. When the last bill was placed, I heard Gurumayi saying, 'That is not for you, this is for Ganeshpuri.' Later that day as the make up man was putting color on my face, I saw in my mind's eye Gurumayi paining the face of a Lakshmi. I said, 'Oh, you are everywhere aren't you?' after the audition, as I was leaving, the producer excitedly came running to tell me that I got the job. I felt that the treasure of the vision was in my heart. Tears started rolling down my cheeks. I looked at the sky and started singing, 'Jyot se jyot jagao, Sadgur, jyot se jyot jagao' [Master, light a flame of devotion and knowledge]."

Although I came to report on a famous Hollywood star, I left Phylicia feeling a sweet, spiritual bond with a kindred Hindu soul.

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