

being there, doing that & wearing the vedic t-shirt!

swamini b shares her life and the wisdom of vedanta

by trudy morrison

Swamini Brahmaprajnananda Saraswati (affectionately known as Swamini B) is a Vedic monk from the Swami Dayananda lineage. Originally, Swamini B trained and worked as a psychologist then sought to improve the lives of India's street children through her charity work. She now dedicates her life to sharing the ancient teachings of Vedanta and dharma.

In 2018, I was fortunate enough to attend her talks at the World yoga Festival in Reading, and was struck by the warmth, humour and simplicity with which she communicates big ideas in a way that makes them understandable and, more importantly, relatable to those taking those first, curious steps along the path of Vedanta. It was a great thrill to me when she agreed to answer a few questions for this issue of *Yoga Scotland Magazine*.

Q: Starting out in your career, did you view yourself as a logical person or a spiritual one?

A: Since teenage years, several friends and family members would seek my advice and input because they saw me as logical and objective. I too viewed and prided myself on being logical.

In my later years as I became exposed to Vedanta I started to see that we are all spiritual beings in that the truth of us is consciousness. Logic is one of the tools we have been given to

assimilate this truth. Because I was very logical then I was able to see the limitations of logic as well. Logic, whether you are trying to synthesise, analyse or look at cause-effect relationships, all of it is based on perception through our five senses. Perception is very limited. There are so many areas where logic falls short.

I found that Vedanta, which is a means of knowledge revealed by God, throws light on areas that are out of bounds for logic:

- (a) why good things happen to not-so-good people, why bad things happen to good people: explained by the model of karma (actions and results here in this lifetime and hereafter)
- (b) the interconnectedness and hence sacredness of all forms as they have come from a unitary cause called Ishvara who is the intelligent cause and material cause
- (c) where people go to after their death (svarga – a place like heaven where they can enjoy some comfort but return to life on earth or another plane of existence after their credit is over)
- (d) the results of security, pleasure, wealth, property, children, health, and power that can be obtained by performing fire ritual offerings
- (e) the results of practices of asana, pranayama, dharana, and dhyana
- (f) I am a spiritual being having a human experience. Perception tells me that I have a limited body and mind but the Veda reveals that the content of

the conscious being that I am is consciousness, not subject to birth, death, ageing or taxes, never bound and always free.

Most of the ways in which we know about ourselves and the world including physics, biology, and psychology are based on perception and logic, and we see that certain areas are outside the scope of logic. That's fine. It opens us to other possibilities and makes us receptive to another means of knowledge called the Veda.

Q: You first trained as a psychologist:

(i) What led you in that career direction? Was it something that appealed to you at an early age or was it something that you fell into, like so many young students seeking a path in life?

(ii) Would you say that your background in psychology fuelled your desire to find out more about the nature of mind, or would you say it was actually the other way round – that a quest for knowledge of the deeper nature of things manifested initially as an interest in psychology?

A: In my pre-teen years I had a deep yearning to know God, understand life and even wanted to convert to Christianity. This was fuelled by me studying in a convent school in Mumbai and hence exposure to teachings of the Bible along with a subliminal message received that Hinduism was inferior and could not save me. Thankfully my grandfather said to me, "You can earn your right to criticise anything only when you have understood it. What do you know about Hinduism? Learn more about your own religion and wait until you are an adult to convert."

Sounded reasonable! I started reading books on religion and Hindu philosophy voraciously, along with Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys. While I understood some topics, some of the terse philosophy I could not fathom at all. I was only 12 or 13 then. I postponed my decision to convert and truly believe that Jesus saved me!

If I could not figure out God, maybe I could try to figure out human beings, and so I veered towards psychology. After I finished my Masters in Clinical Psychology I started to practise. While my clients were doing well, I felt unease and a sense of incompleteness. I had mistakenly thought that studying psychology would liberate me from my problems and sense of inadequacy, but it contributed to it. There was always "work to be done", "issues to be resolved", "core issues

to be handled" – I started to feel that the model of the human being in Western psychology is that of a flawed person. Neither Dharma nor God is emphasised.

While I was exploring other healing modalities, it was a blessing to walk into a Vedanta class and know that I had come home. It was very logical and not belief oriented at all. In many ways, life came full circle for me. The spiritual search had a detour as it manifested into a seeking of understanding myself and others through psychology, and returned to being a spiritual search again!

Q: So would you say that Advaita Vedanta offers the opportunity to be both logical and spiritual?

A: The teaching tradition of Advaita Vedanta is not belief oriented but knowledge oriented and systematic, based on three things:

- (i) *Shruti* – which is revealed knowledge by God to the Rishis in the form of the Veda,
- (ii) *Yukti* (logic), and
- (iii) *Anubhav* (personal recognition or validation of the truth)

Let me illustrate how Advaita Vedanta is both spiritual and logical, and the play between the scriptures, logic and your recognition.

The Veda reveals that all the forms that we experience have come from one unitary source called Ishvara, who is both the material and intelligent cause.

But this is opposed to my experience that the creation is always separate from the creator. The farmer is

different from the vegetables he harvests – the farmer does not come along when the vegetables are brought. Although we may say I am wearing Versace, the designer does not come along when you buy any of the products. So, in the light of my experience, the teaching about Ishvara does not make sense.

Then the very Veda which has revealed the truth about Ishvara offers me an example of a spider. The material for the web and the intelligence to construct the web, both come from the spider. In one flash, the logic that the creator has to be different from the creation is blown to smithereens! I can now begin to appreciate that in certain cases like the spider, both the material and intelligent cause could be one being!

My body-mind-sense complex is also shown to come from the five elements – earth, water, air, fire and space. That is why the body

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is bio-degradable and can be burnt, buried or immersed! That the five elements have come from one unitary source called Brahman is revealed by Sruti. Examples are given for me to clearly see that I am a divine manifestation.

So, Advaita Vedanta helps you see that you were never bound, that you were always limitless. You just didn't know it and hence suffered from sorrow. And when you see it, it is your personal recognition. You have come home!

Q: I understand that you became a monk at the age of 40. That seems very young to move into that renouncing stage of life! What was the impetus behind that decision?

A: The actual decision to be a monk was at the age of 25 when I attended a Vedanta camp by Pujya Swami Dayananda Saraswati ji.

By then, I was already studying Vedanta part time with Swami Brahmaidananda ji in Mumbai, but I did not have the guts to become a monk then, plus there was a lot I wanted to achieve. I was very ambitious with regard to the contribution I wanted to make for positive change for the street children of India. I worked very hard in my capacity of Country Head of the Indian programme of Railway Children – which is incidentally a UK-based charity working to impact the lives of 15000 children annually.

After ten years of doing this plus five years of employment in other capacities, I had a sense of deep fulfillment. Yes, there was still work to be done in India. But I had given it my best and the journey in the world of “doing and achieving” felt complete for me. As they say: “Been there, done that, worn the T-shirt!” The work received government recognition and I was featured as a social entrepreneur on public television!

Moving into a phase of renunciation was more of a “growing out of” all dependencies rather than “giving up”. In reality, there was nothing that was mine anyway to give up. At best, I just had temporary ownership of resources. I quit my career and joined the three-year intensive ashram course in Southern India and soon after received monkhood initiation on the banks of the Ganga.

I saw and still see my entire life as dedicated to Advaita Vedanta – learning and sharing while being of service to my Gurus, the many Rishis and wisdom masters who have lit the path for generations. It has been a life of deep blessing!

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Q: In UK folklore, we have the archetype of “the Crone” – the older, “wise woman” who sees and knows all. But as society now places emphasis and status on youth, the idea of being a crone is viewed as an insult. In Indian folklore, is there an equivalent archetype and do you feel there is still a place for the wise woman or sage in modern society?

A: The greatest archetype is the Goddess. She is seen as the very Shakti, power of God. We worship different manifestations of Devi for wisdom and blessings. Additionally, Indian history has enough instances of strong, forthright and wise women. I am not stating them as readers will not be familiar with our epics and the context in which their wisdom and greatness was evident.

Q: And finally, what would your older self tell your younger self if she were just starting out in the world?

A: Relax! You are on the right track!



To find out more about Swamini B and her teachings, visit her website, www.discoveratma.com, or follow her on social media:

Facebook: @Swamini Brahmajnananda Saraswati; Instagram: @discoveratma; YouTube: Discover Atma. We would also recommend listening to Swamini B's excellent "The River of Wisdom" podcast via all the usual platforms.