



Consciousness & Healing

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and that one thing is not our mind.
It’s not a thought, it’s not our breath,
it’s not our responses, it’s not our actions.
It is the cultivation of personal awareness,
the moment-to-moment awareness of
who we are—in charge of our life,
in charge of our purpose, in charge of our path.”*



SAKSHAT CORBIT

The Everyday Miracle of Healing: A Profile of Mother Maya

by **Catherine Elliott Escobedo**

Illustration by Nicholas Wilton

A PEACE AND QUIET JOY CAN BE FELT in the presence of this striking holy woman. She exudes a gentleness that disarms the deer who join her during her daily meditations and find haven within her forested monastery. Her Holiness, Sri Swamini Mayatitananda, affectionately called Mother Maya, is one of the world’s few female Vedic monks, a preeminent teacher of Ayurveda, and a spiritual mother to thousands. She is also the founder of Mother Om Mission, a charitable organization that teaches inner-city communities practices for achieving health and transforming consciousness [see sidebar,

p. 13]. Slotted to be a keynote speaker at the Parliament of World Religions in 2009, along with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Mother Maya keeps a full lecture schedule yet still has time for her prolific writing. She is perhaps best known in the United States for the many books published under her birth name and nom de plume, Maya Tiwari. Among those is her groundbreaking work *Ayurveda: A Life of Balance*, which has sold more than a million copies to date and has been published in seven languages.

The journey of Mother Maya’s life has been extraordinary. After rigorous training to become a *Swamini* in



the Hindu ancestry of her birth, she is now honored as a *Synnasini* (“one who bears the title of Her Holiness”) in the monastic tradition of Veda Vyasa in India. Unlike most who wear the robes of a spiritual leader, however, Mother Maya has experienced the pinnacle of worldly success: Maya Tiwari was a luminary of New York’s fashion industry, befriended by the rich and famous. And like many of us, she has experienced the stillness of despair and suffering; she was diagnosed with terminal ovarian cancer at the age of 23. Her odyssey through that illness led to a complete recovery, and also to the deep wisdom evident within her today. Her astonishing transformation lends credibility to her teachings, for she has experienced firsthand every step of the healing model she shares.

A Prodigal Daughter Returns

Given the family name of Maya Tiwari, she was raised in a traditional Hindu home in British Guyana, daughter of a Brahmin father, Pandit Bhagwan Tiwari, whose family was brought to the region from British India as spiritual shepherds to the numerous indentured laborers who worked the sugar cane plantations. These laborers, although not slaves by name, were transported by sea to Guyana and suffered egregious indignities during their passage. To cope with the cultural displacement, the Indian Guyanese clung tightly to their native heritage, preserving the rich traditions of the Hindu culture in their new, imposed homeland. Resolving this legacy of ancestral pain would later catalyze Mother Maya’s personal healing and lay the foundation for her life’s work.

Imbued with fond memories of daily life in Guyana, Mother Maya describes her early years to be “like living in a fourth-world country,” lacking in all modern advancements but deeply connected to family and to nature’s rhythms. She completed four years at Berbice College in Guyana by the unlikely age of 15, and

urged to go to the United States by her doting father, who feared for his children’s welfare in a country on the verge of civil unrest, she headed to Manhattan in 1968, where she intended to earn a law degree at NYU. She began law school but soon after kindled a stimulating friendship with the world-renowned acting instructor Stella Adler and became the youngest student of the Stella Adler Conservatory. After excelling in acting school, she found herself working in costume and fashion design, and at the age of 22, had opened her own exclusive Madison Avenue boutique, Maya. Her client list included fashion icons such as Jackie Onassis; top fashion magazines called her an innovator in fashion who was giving American women a unique look.

American women a unique look. Maya Tiwari was living an American dream: influential friends, glamorous parties, fame, beauty, and wealth—yet in the midst of all this success, her nightly dreams were increasingly disrupted by images of the turbulent racial wars impacting her family in Guyana.

To keep up with the momentum of her New York success, Tiwari had avoided all news of home and estranged herself from

her family, until the dichotomy of the life she was leading and the life she had left behind became too great to reconcile. “My spirit was becoming more and more exhausted, yet I responded by keeping frantically busy, suppressing any awareness that something could be wrong with my life,” she recalls.

One morning on her daily walk through Jackson Square park, a flock of pigeons flew away from her. Drawing from her early ancestral training, she took this as a sign that she was seriously ill. A gynecologist subsequently diagnosed her with an unusual strain of ovarian cancer, which had already taken a firm hold in her uterus. After 12 surgeries spanning years of treatment, which included a near-death experience

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on the operating table, Tiwari was told she had only a few months to live. She was offered a sterile hospital bed and high doses of morphine to ease her into an inevitable death.

In anguish over the idea of dying in a hospital with a drugged spirit, she retreated to a friend's Vermont home in the middle of winter to prepare to die. She wanted to spend the short time she had left in clarity, seeing the truth of who she was. Too distraught to eat, she fasted and prayed in silence—and wept relentlessly over the pain in her own life and the lives of her ancestors. Visions of communing with her father were her only comfort, visions that she later learned her father shared during this time. She poured out her heart to him in these visions, disclosing her anguish and asking his forgiveness. He, in turn, lovingly but firmly pointed out that she had allowed her pain to block her connection to the Divine Mother: “In recognizing our ultimate connection to the Divine,” he counseled, “we also recognize the ancient truths that we must live by, as well as the unique role each of us is destined to fulfill.”

Tiwari realized that she could not run from the grief of a life estranged from what she held dear. “Times of illness force us to stop in our tracks and begin to see the most important things in our lives,” she says. “No matter what challenges or conflicts we are facing, what dreams we are giving up or goals we are not accomplishing, or accomplishing way too much of, it boils down to the simple understanding that ‘I do not want to hurt.’ It is the compelling understanding we must face so that we can begin to reconcile what we have to do and begin to live in a very different realm of reality—a more heightened form of awareness. And if we can capture that understanding, we can reconcile our journey out of life or back to life.”

Like the Greeks' mythic Persephone, who was abducted by the Lord of the Underworld but returned to the living realm, Tiwari was destined not to be consumed by the darkness of her cancer but to transmute the powerful lessons of her descent into a new and changed life. Six months passed during her time in Vermont, and when she ventured out from her cabin in the spring of 1978, weighing 90 pounds and shaking uncontrollably, she sensed she would survive. She emerged from those woods a woman reconnected to her rich spiritual heritage and intent

on leading a life true to her spirit. “My survival through ovarian cancer—along with the largesse of Vedic traditional wisdom—became the nexus for everything that I do and teach today. Also, my opening to that inner awareness of the Divine, which has never been challenged again and which continues to grow in profundity and compassion, led to my work with inner medicine.”

Wise Earth Ayurveda

Mother Maya has been working fervently ever since to restore the long-lost knowledge of the Vedas—knowledge, she explains, that has been out of practice or distorted since the beginning of India's medieval age (tenth century CE). She has taught millions of people her innovative approach to healing, called Wise Earth Ayurveda®, through her books and the Wise Earth School of Ayurveda, the first Ayurveda school in the United States, located near Asheville, North Carolina. Grounded in the belief that each of us

Mother Om Mission

Founded by Mother Maya in 1998, this nongovernmental charitable organization teaches people in some of New York's poorest inner-city neighborhoods and in her native home of Guyana, South America, how to transform violence, poverty, and disease into harmony, nurturance, and health. MOM empowers at-risk communities to reclaim a sense of shared responsibility for their well-being through Ayurveda-based health education and services. Women in crisis have been the primary focus in MOM's development, as health practitioners and instructors address the numerous layers of physical, emotional, and spiritual challenges women in poor communities face daily—from interracial and domestic violence to drug and alcohol abuse, suicide, and life-threatening diseases such as diabetes, cancer, and AIDS. MOM has helped transform the lives of thousands of seriously health-challenged adults, and as many children with learning disabilities, who have been successfully weaned off potentially damaging drugs. MOM has also been successful in determining and targeting dominant disease patterns generic to ancestral communities and has helped to substantially reverse these health and behavioral disorders. For more information about MOM, go to www.motherom.org. —VS

has an extraordinary inner resource for healing, our “inner medicine,” which we can access by transforming our consciousness, Mother Maya and those she trains are helping people to treat and even heal themselves of challenging and devastating conditions such as infertility, cancer, and HIV/AIDS.

“We are *guiding* folks with their own energy,” she emphasizes. “I do not see myself as a healer or those I train as healers. We help guide people to shift their understanding, their awareness. The premise of Inner Medicine® is that no doctor, medicine, or external activity can heal for us, although they can contribute to our healing once we are aware of the choices we make. We need to continually ask ourselves the most fundamental questions: *Will this choice work for me? Is it part of the destiny and path I am to tread in accomplishment of my life’s purpose?*” Additionally she explains, “Through

breath, sound, and food—by basically learning to take the foods that are available to them and respond to them with awareness—people are able to generate within themselves an awareness of vibrant interconnectedness. This process is not casual, and I know there can be a lot of skepticism about it, as there are many models of healing out there. But the vast education of the Vedas and Ayurveda has given us this tome of understanding of the cosmic anatomy behind the physiological and psychological anatomy of the human person.”

Ayurveda, which literally means “knowledge of life and longevity,” is a system of holistic medicine developed more than 7,000 years ago by the *rishis*, India’s great physicians, physicists, and theologians. The *rishis* authored Hinduism’s oldest sacred texts, the Vedas. These scholarly tomes detailed nearly every facet of life, including the sciences—such as medicine (including surgery), astronomy, physics, mathematics, and architecture—and the world’s oldest known spiritual practices, including yoga, now widely known here in the West. Ayurveda is a cosmic blueprint for creating overall health, with principles deeply rooted in honoring the intricate balance between the body, mind, spirit, and rhythms of the universe. Through intense observation, the *rishis* discovered that the universe has a spiritual anatomy, its own rhythm and memory, which greatly influences the inner workings of the human body. They observed that by living with an awareness of the natural rhythms within us and surrounding us, we could establish perfect health.

Wise Earth Ayurveda focuses on the cultivation of the following core principles:

- *Wholeness: Realizing the true self to be one with nature*
- *Simplicity: Practicing humility through surrender to nature’s intelligence*
- *Harmony: Committing to harmony within and without*
- *Memory: Restoring cosmic, cognitive, and ancestral memories*
- *Rhythm: Honoring nature’s nourishment in food, breath, and sound*
- *Sacred Practice: Aligning every activity in accord with nature’s rhythms*
- *Consciousness: Cultivating inner awareness*

Honoring Our Ancestors: Healing the Past and Reclaiming Our Spirit

The Vedic sages recognized that each of us exists as an interdependent being and that we are all linked to the universe through our ancestry. They predicted that the collective grief of the modern world would be caused by the loss of our ancestral memory. When ancestral memories are blocked, a part of our psyche is blocked from innate intuitive guidance. We forget who we are at the deepest levels. When we do not remember our ancestors, we also fail to recognize ancestral traumas that continue to influence our lives, thereby reenacting patterns that originated in the history and memory of our family lines. These blueprints may appear as seemingly impregnable obstacles in the way of our joy, health, and abundance.

A part of Mother Maya’s Inner Medicine® program, Honoring Ancestors is a dynamic, time-honored methodology that cultivates personal awareness to free individuals from ancestral pain, illness, and despair; it transcends the boundaries of all traditions and is easy to incorporate into daily life.

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Mother Maya will be at IONS to share this work in September 2009. (In the Vedic calendar, autumn heralds the “season of the ancestor,” the perfect time to remember and release ancestral memories.) For more information about this event, go to <http://www.noetic.org/events.cfm>. For more information about Mother Maya’s event schedule, see www.wisearth.org. —VS

At the heart of Mother Maya's health model is the recognition that "each of us has an immutable spirit that can transcend every challenge—once we learn to invoke our pure spirit and human awareness." In Wise Earth Ayurveda, cultivating inner awareness is accomplished in part through *sadhanas*—conscious practices that connect us to the Divine, to nature, and to ourselves. A *sadhana* can be a formal meditation or the creation of a wholesome meal for your family. Many *sadhanas* prompt a pause from everyday life, particularly important for those struggling with illness. "Start by taking an hour a day, start by taking one day a week off, start by taking a weekend away from your norm," Mother Maya counsels. "Begin to take pause from everything that you know, everything that has become your daily operation."

"When we are in touch with the divinity within us," she points out, "we become free. We have a sense of freedom in expression, of lightness within, freedom of not being so compelled to live the goal-oriented, stress-driven lives that we all contribute to. Health begins to become more center-poised, and we are then quickly able to separate what serves us from that which does not. The main thing in life is no longer the accomplishment of specific goals at any cost. One of the things that women in particular endure today is a total inundation of stress, even with the holistic work they are doing. Everything seems to get fit into an already overdriven life. There's only one thing that we can control in the human life, and that one thing is not our mind. It's not a thought, it's not our breath, it's not our responses, it's not our actions. It is the cultivation of personal awareness, the moment-to-moment awareness of who we are—in charge of our life, in charge of our purpose, in charge of our path."

Living with Awareness

The need to pause, not only as a preventive measure to stave off disease but as a path toward healing and greater self-knowledge, is a strong premise and hard-won lesson of Mother Maya's work. It's vital that we remain aware of our true and highest purpose by periodically asking ourselves the difficult questions: *What has led to my unhappiness, and which dreams are not being realized? Do these dreams come from the desire to fulfill a worldly goal,*

or are they coming from a longing to accomplish the path and purpose of who I really am?" "There is a significant difference between doing what we feel obligated to do and doing what our inner self is truly calling us to do," Mother Maya explains. "And that clarity comes from awareness."

By pausing through meditation, reflection, and *sadhana*, we will also be better prepared for the natural passages, such as menopause, that prompt us to reevaluate our lives. "Perhaps we've been going too fast in the wrong direction. Perhaps we've been going too fast in the right direction. Perhaps we've been going too slowly in no direction whatsoever. Whatever it may be, illness forces us to take pause at that milestone. And disease is only a milestone; it's not our greater purpose. And good health is also not our greater purpose in life—the greatest purpose in life is to experience complete awareness."

While acknowledging that she has great respect for the medical profession, Mother Maya emphasizes that her work with Inner Medicine is "to help us understand that we have the greatest medicine within our body, within our mind, within our constitution. Once we learn how to harness it, we can remain in the flow of health and healing. Healing is a reality that is happening at every moment of our lives if we are aware of it. It is the ongoing flow of life—we heal at all times. We heal at birth. We heal into life. We heal into death—and ultimately into pure consciousness." She adds, "I don't see healing as extraordinary. I see misery as extraordinary. I see dying unfulfilled as extraordinary. I see the onslaughts and violence to our communities as extraordinary. But I do not see healing or the quantum leaps that the spirit can make as a miracle at all. It's quite the norm for us as humans." 🌱



CATHERINE ELLIOTT ESCOBEDO is a writer, editor, and publishing consultant in Northern California, who can be reached through www.wordsage.net. She is currently editing Mother Maya's forthcoming book, *Abundance: From Feast to Fast*, written under the nom de plume Maya Tiwari and scheduled for release in early 2009.