

Introduction

The creation of this book is deeply rooted in my personal background and spiritual journey. Before each chapter, I include a personal reflection—sometimes brief, sometimes more extended—written in italics. These reflections offer glimpses into my own experiences and inner process, providing the ground from which the themes of each chapter have grown. They are not separate from the content, but interwoven with it, offering context, resonance, and a more intimate entry point into what follows. At the end of each chapter, a fitting addition offers further reflection or insight.

As a child of barely five years old, the most important questions on my mind were: ‘Who am I?’ ‘Where did I come from?’ ‘Where am I going?’ ‘How can people find joy when death is inevitable?’ ‘What is death, and is it, or is it not the end of my existence?’ These questions sparked a lifelong search that eventually led me to the Far East.

I set foot in India for the first time in 1973, during the first hippie wave, and felt an instant sense of belonging. India, being the source of ancient wisdom, resonated deeply with my soul. Since 1985, I have lived primarily in India, residing in or near ashrams and sacred places that seem bathed in a luminous, almost palpable spiritual frequency.

Immersed in the presence of saints and sages and nourished

by my daily practice, I have absorbed teachings not just through words, but through presence, through silence and simply through the rhythm of a life on sacred Indian soil. It is no surprise that the content of this book is rooted in the knowledge and inspiration I received from the Far East. I have come to realise that much of this ancient wisdom is universal. It transcends cultural and religious boundaries.

During my years in *Benares**, I had the opportunity to interact with local children from impoverished families. They would often visit me and were eager to learn English. One child became close to me, and I felt compelled to help her fulfil her desire for education.

As I explored the Indian school system, I began to ponder the importance of parenting, education and the role of schools in shaping young minds. I wondered if there were schools that incorporated spiritual values into their curriculum. That was the beginning of a journey—reading, gathering information, and eventually visiting such schools.

Since early childhood, I had always dreamed of becoming a mother. This longing remained alive even after I moved to India in search of spiritual truth. During my early years in India, I often shared my heartfelt wish—to deepen my connection with God and to become a mother—with some of the saints I encountered.

Once, *Amma* (Mata Amritanandamayi) told me that my life was meant solely for God. My master, Swami Chidananda, advised me to work with children and to become a universal mother—to offer love to many children, free from personal attachment, which he said could become an obstacle on the spiritual path.

* Holy place for Hindus at the banks of the Ganges River, also known as Varanasi

Following Swamiji's advice, I decided to retrain as an elementary school teacher and enrolled in a Teacher Training Course in the Netherlands. As I immersed myself in my studies and work with children, my personal desire for motherhood was, by Swamiji's grace, transcended.

During my teacher training I had the opportunity to gain practical experience in schools that truly inspired me. Children are our future and I realised how important it is to provide them with the best possible education, especially in these times of profound global change.

Astrologically, it is believed that we are living through a period of a great transition. According to Western astrology, we are now in the final phase of the Piscean Age, a time characterized by selfishness and materialism. The upcoming Aquarian Age symbolises purification: on the material plane through renewal of the Earth, and on the spiritual level through a blossoming of deepened insight.

Many people can sense this Aquarius energy— the old structures are crumbling. However, this new age can only emerge after significant upheaval— politically, scientifically, culturally, geologically and climatologically. This Western astrological calculation is just a small part of a much larger cycle.

Many ancient cultures—such as the Mayans, Egyptians, Greeks, and Hindus— possessed knowledge of much grander time cycles. Though not always framed astrologically, their understanding reflected remarkably similar insights. It is striking how many traditions and cultures share common beliefs about the transformative period ahead. It is widely believed that this ongoing transformation process, will gradually elevate humanity to a higher level of consciousness.

Today, esoteric knowledge is more accessible than ever,

and modern communication allows ancient truths and new insights to reach a global audience quickly and with ease. As time moves forward, the universe will continue to reveal more of its secrets. This transition will bring great shifts, not only in politics, science, and climate—but also in how we raise and educate our children.

It is crucial for parents and teachers to recognise that we are in a time of transition so that they can equip children with the necessary tools. Since the end of the last century, many ancient and highly developed souls seem to be taking birth—a fact often noticed by many working closely with children. Many of the children born in recent years are masters of wisdom, harbingers of the coming new age. These children have a special task to fulfil on earth. Often these children have a high level of consciousness, and are known to be highly sensitive and tend to benefit more from intuitive styles of learning.

As more people become aware of this shift, the demand for a new kind of education is likely to grow. A more holistic approach to education—one based on universal principles and suited to our multicultural society—will be better aligned with the needs of this new generation. Integral, holistic education—which develops body, mind *and* spirit— is essential for a balanced and harmonious life. It is important that children acquire knowledge not only about the outer world but also about their inner world.

Modern education tends to focus on intellectual development and children are being prepared to compete in a society dominated by careerism and materialism. Especially today, it is essential to nurture the heart-based qualities like compassion, forgiveness and tolerance. Children need spiritual nourishment both at home and at school to truly thrive in this evolving world.

Introduction

If children understand who they truly are—if they have knowledge of their true nature and life purpose—it will provide them with the foundation they need to navigate an increasingly complex society. Today's children are tomorrow's adults; those who will truly help humanity are the ones who recognise that spiritual evolution is our collective destiny.

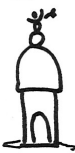
~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ॐ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Dear God,

I believe in you,
but I have never
seen you. How do
you look? Where do
you live? I want
that you become my
friend. I want to discuss
my problems with you.
You tell me when and
where you can meet me.

Best wishes

Neeraj
Class VI



Prelude: A childhood experience

For as long as I can remember, questions about the purpose of life dominated my thoughts. I was obsessed with them, and often my most primal feeling was: If I do not find an answer to these questions, what is the point of living?

Born in the Netherlands, as the eldest of three children in an upper middle-class Christian family, I felt like an outsider from a young age. My grandfather was a devoted follower of Jesus and used to write books about him. I would often sit on the floor while he worked, writing my own poems about Jesus.

One day, when I was about seven or eight years old, I asked my grandfather: ‘What happens to children born in Indonesia who have never heard of Jesus?’

My grandfather replied: ‘If they believe in Jesus, they will go to heaven. And if they don’t believe in Jesus, they will go to hell’. My belief system was profoundly shaken, and this incident marked a turning point in my life. Intuitively, I felt that this could not be true. If there is a God, He must be there for everybody. I felt determined not to give up until I found the answers I was seeking.

I didn’t feel connected to the Christian Church, and since I also felt somewhat estranged from my own family, I carried a deep sense of loneliness throughout my childhood and adolescence. The only thing that truly touched my heart was religious music. I knew I had to find a path that was entirely my own.

It would take many years, however, before I could even begin to understand what the purpose of our life truly was.

Education in the Light of our destiny

1.1 East and West: a different approach...

As I pondered the mysteries of existence, I realised that the questions I asked in my childhood were not mine alone—they are universal and timeless. Across cultures, generations, and continents, people have always sought answers to fundamental questions:

Who are we, where do we come from and why are we here?

Is there a higher power behind this world of names and forms?

Is there a way to attain true and everlasting happiness?

Growing up in a Western materialistic society, I observed that despite scientific advancements and increasing comforts, people are unhappy. Their minds are restless and constantly seeking to satisfy worldly desires. As soon as one desire is fulfilled, another emerges, leaving individuals trapped in a cycle of discontentment. In contrast, ancient Indian *rishis*, *yogis*, and Tibetan *lamas* explored the inner realm, seeking the source of happiness within. Through introspection and meditation,

they discovered that true happiness comes when the mind is still, and that bliss comes when one is established in a state of mind in which there are no thoughts—when resting in one's true nature. While both scientists and sages seek a way to everlasting happiness and the well-being of the whole world, their approaches differ. The distinction lies in the method of enquiry. Scientists focus on the external world, whereas *yogis*, *rishis* and Tibetan *lamas* explore the internal. The difference lies only in the field of enquiry. The fleeting happiness derived from sensory experiences is temporary and limited. However, a *yogi* who has learned to keep his mind still through continuous meditation will be able to constantly enjoy the bliss of his own Self.* The ever-blissful Self is the source of all knowledge and power; indeed, the Self is the source of the entire universe.

I discovered that the true strength of the Eastern approach rests in its timeless values, the guiding essence of the way of life in this part of the world.

Our life's purpose is to rediscover this pristine state of pure being, realising our oneness with God. Whether one is born in the East or West, ultimately evolution will lead him to his destiny, which is the same for all. Every human is an embodied soul that must pass through his own evolution. The path he treads upon will differ from person to person according to his *karma*†. The word *karma* refers to the law of cause and effect—or, as it is said in the Bible: 'As you sow, so you will reap'. According to the law of *karma*, the circumstances in which a person is placed are a result of his past deeds. In his present

* See Ch. 2 for elaborate explanation of the Self

† There are 3 types of *karma*: *Prarabdha karma* refers to that portion of one's karma to be worked out in this lifetime; *Sanchita karma* refers to all collected karmas from previous births; *Agami karma* refers to deeds and actions done in the present which will bear fruits in future.

life he creates his future by his words, thoughts and deeds. He is, so to say, the architect of his own future. So, the most conscious decision to become the parent of a child is to give a chance to a soul desiring to incarnate, to gain experiences necessary for the development of his soul. A great task, and a tremendous responsibility...

Adolescence

The next section, which outlines parenting in the past and future prompted me to reflect on my own upbringing—growing up in a Western culture during the transformative decades of the 1960s and 1970s, and eventually moving to India in the early 1980s, a transition that felt almost like landing on another planet.

As a teenager searching for the meaning of life, I began reading books on existentialism by writers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Simone de Beauvoir. These famous writers held the view that life has no meaning and that death is the end of existence. This certainly did not uplift my spirit; in fact, it made me feel even more depressed.

The time when I grew up was marked by major social, cultural and political changes. There was a lot of activism and many young people became involved in civil rights, the women's movement, and anti-war protests. The music was revolutionary. I grew up with the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the underground, and psychedelic music of the sixties. I was attracted to the ideas of the first hippie movement, which longed for a society without violence—a society with peace, love, and no war. Just like so many of my generation, all I wanted was to go to India. So, it was in fact the first hippie movement that brought me to India. During my first visit to India in 1973, I lived for a couple of months happily and peacefully among them on the beaches of Goa, embracing their carefree and laid-back lifestyle. I hoped and believed that our generation would change society and felt rather disappointed to see that, after some time, most of them abandoned activism and assimilated into mainstream society pursuing conventional careers.

I was free-spirited, but my parents were conservative and restricted my freedom, which led to frequent conflicts. At a very young age, I left my family home, convinced that I would be happy

to live an independent life in Amsterdam. Amsterdam, in the early 1970s, was a true paradise of freedom, known for its open-minded atmosphere, countercultural movement and progressive social politics. It was a haven for hippies, artists, activists and free thinkers. Living in Amsterdam, however, was not quite what I had imagined—the freedom I had longed for did not automatically bring the happiness I had expected.

Longing to do something meaningful, I enrolled in college to study social work. At that time, colleges and universities were breeding grounds for radical ideas, activism, and alternative social politics. Almost every subject was taught from a left-wing political perspective. For example, we were trained in Marxist psychology, showing how social, economic, and class structures shape human behaviour and consciousness. I could not relate to most of it, but nevertheless managed to complete my studies focusing on my own interest.

The greatest challenge I faced, however, was my own mind. Endless, often negative and depressive thoughts plagued me, and the worse part was that I completely identified with them. The greatest blessing of my life came when, by the grace of God, I was able to return to India. There, for the first time I was able to learn about the things that truly matter: understanding who I am, discovering the purpose of life, exploring the nature of mind and its constant thoughts, and learning how to quiet the mind.

My first visit to India in 1973 certainly did not set me on the path and so unfortunately, I did not come in contact with ancient Vedic wisdom at that time. However, I clearly remember feeling a deep sense of coming home. While travelling through South India in the early 1970s, something stirred within me—a subtle awakening, perhaps. There was an energy in this fascinating country that resonated deeply. However, many years had to pass

before my soul was truly ready to return to India and receive the nourishment it had been longing for so long.

Looking back, I can say that I was absolutely a child of my time and cultural background. Once I came in touch with Indian cultural and spiritual heritage, my views and lifestyle changed completely. Also, I fully realise that the way my journey unfolded, was truly a blessing in disguise. Had I been born in India, I would not have had the freedom to roam as a free bird. Being born in the West, combined with my strong independent spirit, turned out to be a great advantage. I feel I have been able to embrace the best of both East and West.

Dear God,
Thank you for
the baby brother
but what I prayed
for was a Puppy
Joyce

1.2 Parenthood, in past and present

As I reflect on my own experiences and observe the lives of others, I am continually struck by how profoundly parenthood shapes both individuals and society. In ancient civilisations, child-rearing was deeply rooted in spiritual values with parents recognising their children as divine manifestations. Little divine sparks, that came to them based on a mystical karmic connection from the past. The birth of a child to certain parents was not random, but connected with the specific circumstances necessary for that child's further development on the way to its final destination.

To many parents, this ancient wisdom is still a living truth. However, for most parents such ideas seem distant, even strange. Spiritual values have faded into the background for much of humanity, and with them, the sense of a deeper meaning of parenthood.

For most parents, the relationship with their children is based on identification with the physical aspect. Their focus is on providing material comforts, and many parents do not even realise that children need something more.

The contrast between past and present is stark. Today's children are growing up in a world overloaded with stimulation and often navigate through life without a sense of purpose or direction. They are constantly plugged in—scrolling, clicking, chasing the next hit of excitement—but behind the bright screens and busy schedules, many of them feel lost. They have no clear goal in mind and have no idea who they are.

I have experienced firsthand how this sense of disconnection creates a deep inner emptiness. It is not uncommon to hear that modern teenagers are difficult—frustrating their parents, challenging for teachers, and misunderstood by society. The

fact that they are felt to be a burden has a lot to do with what they have been given—or rather, have not been given in life.

The first impressions of childhood undoubtedly leave a lasting imprint on a person's future. Early experiences shape the child's inner world, and those early years are the ideal time to lay a solid foundation. Parents play a crucial role during this formative period—they are the architects of a child's reality.

Yet, as I have observed, many of us are unable to offer our children the nurturing environment they truly need. From a very young age, we teach them how to be entertained rather than how to be still. We teach them to consume rather than to connect. We rush through life, juggling multiple responsibilities, working late, and often hand them a tablet—whereas what they really crave are our arms.

It is easy to blame 'kids these days' or society and screens, but the deeper issue is that many children are growing up without the steady presence of love, without the feeling of truly being seen and truly safe—especially during those first few crucial early years. The absence of these essential elements shapes how they grow into adulthood—how they love, how they relate, and how they react. In short, early childhood experiences influence the entire trajectory of a person's life.

In this, the role of mothers is especially vital. For generations, mothers have been regarded as the heart of the home, embodying love, compassion, and selflessness. These nurturing qualities are the core of the Mother Goddess traditions in Hinduism and Tibetan Buddhism. It is no coincidence that the first word most children utter is 'Mama.' In nearly every language, the word 'Mother' carries profound power and beauty. In India, it is common to address women of a certain age as 'Mother' or '*Ma*' particularly in spiritual communities, as a gesture of reverence for these timeless qualities.

In the past, across cultures, motherhood was held in high regard, but over time, this image has faded. In today's world, media and advertisements push an ideal of women as youthful, physically beautiful and above all, sexually appealing. Yet the truth is that nature has entrusted women, first and foremost, with the role of mother. And the maternal instinct—deep, protective, and unwavering—is far stronger than the sexual instinct.

Since the second half of the last century, I have observed how gender roles have undergone a massive shift—especially for women. Today's woman is independent, empowered and largely economically independent. These are positive consequences of the emancipation movement, which began in the 1960s and 1970s. However, there is another side to the coin. The changing social norms and the emphasis on career development have led to a decline in the traditional maternal role. Women are now expected to balance work and family responsibilities, often leaving them drained, and with little energy to offer their children the presence and attention they need.

People often look down on a woman who is 'only' a housewife or homemaker. A woman who chooses to stay at home with her children is often met with subtle judgment. Nowadays, many have forgotten how essential it is for a child to grow up with their mother, at least until the age of five. From both observation and personal experience, I am convinced nothing is more important than being present for one's children—especially during the early years. What a mother transmits in love and wisdom to her children will benefit the world.

However, reality is not simple; not every woman can stay at home. For some, it is a financial necessity to work. For others, it's a personal choice to keep their career. And that is

understandable. But it is a fact that this shift has a deep impact on how children are raised and what they receive during those foundational years.

Once, a Westerner asked Mata Amritanandamayi (Amma): ‘Why is it that the hearts of western people are often so dry?’ The Holy Mother answered: ‘The social norm that prevails paves the way for this dryness of the heart’.* ‘A child gets its first lesson in love from its mother. In the West, however, the roles of mother and father are confused. Mothers become fathers and thus lose the quality of motherly love. Their careers have very often become more important than their love for their children.’ ‘The instability of married life is another factor. The husband-wife and father-mother relationships are so weak and fragile. For a child who lives in an unstable situation it is more difficult to become a loving and affectionate person. Such children do not even learn the most basic lesson of love in their lives’. ‘They grow up, seeing the conflicts, arguments, disputes, hatred, fighting, and finally the separation of their parents. They never experience what love is, which is what they are supposed to learn from experiencing the mutual love between their father and mother. The parents are the two teachers which the children see from birth until they come in contact with the world. If the seed of love is not sown at home, it cannot sprout or blossom’.† ‘Many westerners are a product of their ‘modern’ education. They are fed with all kinds of factual information about the empirical world; the emphasis

* Swami Amritaswarupananda, *Awaken Children*, Volume 5, (Mata Amritananda Mission Trust), p 144

† Swami Amritaswarupananda, *Awaken Children*, Volume 4, (Mata Amritananda Mission Trust), 1991, 146;

Based on Swami Amritaswarupananda, *Awaken Children*, Volume 8 (Mata Amritananda Mission trust), 14-15

is on science and technology. They are intellectual and take an intellectual approach to everything. Their analytical minds are well-developed, but their hearts are shrivelled and dry’.

These words of a female contemporary saint, make clear, how essential love, security and warmth are, in the process of bringing up a child harmoniously.



Amma meditating with kids

In my travels and exposure to Eastern cultures, I have noticed that family is often the primary social unit, providing a sense of belonging, security, and support. It is common for three or even four generations to live under the same roof. The young care for the old; the old look after the young. In Eastern countries relationships between parents and children are very close, especially between the mother and child. Though it is true that the family structure in eastern countries is very different from that in the West, this does not mean that the

situation in the East is perfect and without challenges. There also, people face many problems—only on a different level.

Research shows that children who spend their early years near their mothers and grow up in stable, nurturing family environments tend to feel more secure and are less likely to struggle with psychological issues later in life.

Reflecting on parenthood in past and present—both through personal observation and broader cultural shifts—I am convinced that parenthood is a sacred responsibility. By embracing spiritual values and recognising the significance of motherly love, attention, safety, warmth, and structure, we can create a space where children can truly flourish.

As Kahlil Gibran beautifully wrote: ‘Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life’s longing for itself.’ As parents, we have a profound responsibility to support and nurture our children’s growth, while acknowledging that they are not ours to own, but rather precious beings entrusted to our care.

*And a woman who held a babe against her bosom said,
Speak us of Children.*

And he said:

Your children are not your children.

They are the sons and daughters of Life’s longing for itself.

They come through you but not from you,

And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.

You may give them your love but not your thoughts,

For they have their own thoughts.

You may house their bodies, but not their souls,

For their souls’ dwell in the house of tomorrow,

which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.

Education in the Light of our destiny

*You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you.
For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.
You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are
sent forth.
The Archer sees to mark upon the path of the infinite,
and He bends you with His might that His arrows may go swift
and far.
Let your bending in the Archer's hand be for the gladness;
For even as He loves the arrow that flies,
So, He loves also the bow that is stable.*

From: The Prophet by Kahlil Gibran

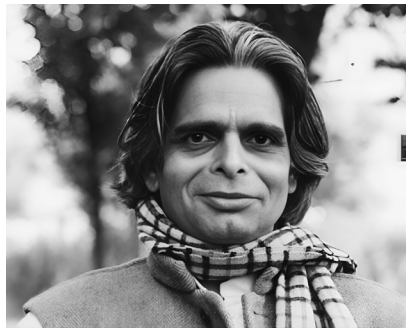


Wake-up call

I have realised how certain circumstances in one's life can act as powerful triggers for spiritual awakening. My first awakening took place in Amsterdam, when I came into contact with the macrobiotic philosophy. Rooted in traditional Chinese concepts like yin-yang balance and the five elements, macrobiotics offers a holistic approach to health and well-being that integrates an organic, wholesome diet, lifestyle and spiritual principles. I immersed myself in this philosophy and lifestyle for some years and particularly its spiritual components resonated profoundly with me, sparking a desire to explore these ideas further.

I did not have to wait long. In 1982, a saint from India visited the Netherlands—Swami Ranganathananda, then President of the Ramakrishna Mission. He gave teachings on the Bhagavad Gita. I still remember how his words touched me so deeply that I knew I had to follow this path.*

A year later, I met my first spiritual teacher, Harish Johari—an Indian scholar, spiritual teacher, artist and author who introduced many Westerners to Indian knowledge, blending scientific insights with spiritual practices.



Harish Johari

*The *Bhagavad Gita* is a sacred Hindu text, part of the *Mahabharata*, containing Krishna's teachings to Arjuna.

As soon as I heard his teachings, I knew this was the knowledge and ancient wisdom I had been seeking my entire life. It intensified my longing to return to India. I felt strongly that I should go well-prepared and so I lived for a long time in the house of Harish Johari's students in the Netherlands, where I was able to learn everything about the Hindu way of life—not only Indian cooking and the significance of certain spices, but also the customs, daily life, and raising children according to Hindu tradition. Finally, after settling my affairs in the Netherlands, I left for India without having the slightest idea that I was going to spend most of my future life on Indian soil.

I realise how innocent I was at the beginning of my journey. I believed that just a year of meditation would lead to realisation. The truth is that it took many years of dedicated practice—and at times, frustration—before I truly began to experience, from within, what it was all about. The practices certainly helped to purify the mind, but they only served as a means to an end. I read countless spiritual books—they absolutely helped me gain insight and understand that we are not this perishable body but the Eternal Self, or Atman. But reading about Self-realisation also made it seem like something extremely difficult to attain. Now I have come to an understanding that recognising one's eternal, unchanging nature is not difficult. In fact, it is so simple that we easily overlook it. Recognising the underlying current, the substratum of everything is not so difficult. What is difficult is remaining in that awareness, as the mind constantly pulls us away. Today, most practices have fallen away on their own. For me, the most direct and transformative path has been Self Enquiry—the method taught by Ramana Maharshi—which is a means to bring back the mind to its source again and again and again...

1.3 Spirituality in upbringing and education

I have often observed that the term ‘*spiritual education*’ leaves people wondering—what does it mean? In my understanding, spirituality is about awakening to the inner reality of our being—our true Self, which goes beyond our thinking, our earthly life, and our body. Spirituality means that there is an inner striving to get in touch with that greater reality, to know that reality, to feel it, to connect with it. The result is a transformation of our whole being, the emergence of a new being, a new state of being. ‘Spiritual education’ refers to a form of learning that not only imparts knowledge and wisdom but also guides children in experiencing the timeless, unchanging reality of their true nature. I have seen how children who are connected to their deeper core often relate more naturally to themselves, their fellow human beings, the animals, nature and Mother Earth. Conventional education tends to focus primarily on the development of the intellect and physical body, neglecting the spiritual aspect. Spiritual education, on the other hand, aims at an integral development of body, mind, and spirit—both rationally as well as emotionally. It does not neglect any aspect of the personality. To me, the word ‘spiritual’ implies a holistic approach, an intimate connection between microcosm and macrocosm.

Spiritual versus religious

A question I often encounter is: ‘Is spiritual education identical to religious education?’ Spiritual education is based on the essence of religion, but religious education is not necessarily spiritual. Religious education often focuses on specific doctrines, institutions and dogma, whereas spiritual education emphasises the universal principles and values that underlie all faiths. Spiritual education encourages children to explore, question,

and experience the mysteries of life, rather than simply adopting a particular creed or belief system. By adopting a holistic approach spiritual education empowers a deeper understanding of themselves and the world around them.

I have noticed that, for many people, the word ‘religion’ carries a negative connotation. However, the word ‘religion’ comes from the Latin *religio* which consists of two words, *re* and *Ligare*. *Re* means ‘return’ and *Ligare* means ‘bring’ or ‘bind’. Religion, then, means that which brings the soul back to God.

When we use the word ‘religion’ it is important to truly understand its deeper meaning and purpose. One definition that has stayed with me comes from Swami Sivananda, as he beautifully described religion in the following way: *

- It is a bond between God and man
- Religions show the way to God-realisation
- Religion means living in awareness of God
- Its essence lies in service, peace, universal love, and unity
- Religion is not a collection of opinions, dogmas, or rituals—it is a way of life. it is not in books but in the heart of man
- Religion is not just about believing in a specific creed or dogma; it is the realisation of our oneness with all that exists
- The foundation for religion is faith
- There is only one true religion—the religion of love

A quotation of Swami Sivananda: ‘Every religion has a spiritual dimension which is universal and it is at this level that religions can truly meet. One religion is as good as another. One road or path to the Supreme is as good as any other road or path. Cows may have different colours, but the colour of milk is one. In the same way, all prophets are messengers of God. They are awakened beings, blessed with a direct and intuitive vision of the

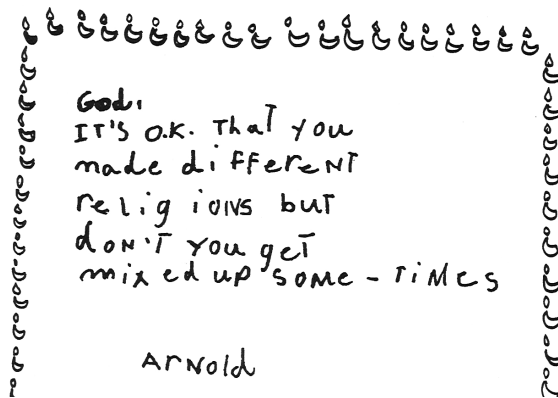
* Based on Swami Sivananda, *Religious Education* (Divine Life Society, 1960)

Divine. Their words are sacred whether found in the *Koran*, the *Bible*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, or any other holy scripture. As the *Rig Veda* says: 'Truth is One, sages call it by different names'.

Whether we speak of Brahman, Allah, Krishna, Ahura Mazda, Jehovah, Shinto, Tao, Buddha, Zoroaster, Jesus, Mahavira, or Confucius—all represent the same Divine reality. Religion is one; the paths are many. Different times, cultures and individual temperaments require different forms of expression, and so the variety of religions exists to meet the unique needs of humanity.

Still, the essence remains the same: each religion shows us the way to realise the Divine within. All true spiritual traditions share common values—peace, brotherhood, truth, non-injury, purity and tolerance. These moral pillars can give human beings strength, comfort, courage, peace and wisdom on the spiritual path'.*

Swami Sivananda's teachings have had a profound impact on me, and I have been able to apply them meaningfully in my work with children. At every school, I begin my lessons by sharing that all religions are simply different paths leading to the same goal. Just as there are many roads to reach Amsterdam, each religion offers a unique path to the Divine.



* Swami Sivananda, *Religious Education Ch 9* (Divine Life Society, 1960)

Scriptural Quotations

Hinduism

'In the effulgent lotus of the Heart dwells Brahman, the Light of Lights'—Munduka Upanishad

'Know the Self and be free.'

Judaism

'The Lord is my Light, whom shall I fear?'—Psalms

'I am THAT I am.' Exodus

Shintoism

'The Light of Divine Consciousness shines forever'—Kurozumi Munetada

'See no evil. Hear no evil. Speak no evil.'

Taoism

'Following the Light, the sage takes care of all'—Lao Tsu

'He who has overcome himself is mighty.'

Buddhism

'The radiance of Buddha shines ceaselessly'—Dhammapada

'For the whole world this is the law: all is impermanent.'

Christianity

'I have come into the world as Light'—Holy Bible

'The Kingdom of Heaven is within you.'

Islam

'Allah is the Light of heavens and the earth'—Holy Koran

'There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is the Prophet of Allah.'

Sikhism

‘God, being Truth, is the one Light of all’—Adi Granth

‘There is but one God and his name is Truth, wonderful is the Guru.’

Confucianism

‘Blame yourself as you would blame others, excuse others as you would excuse yourself’—Confucius

African Religions

‘God is the sun beaming Light everywhere’— Tribal African Native American Religions

‘The Light of Wakan Tanka is upon my people’- Song of Kablaya

Other known religions

‘Truth is One, paths are many.’

Swami Sivananda

‘God is love. The only true religion is the religion of love or the religion of the heart.’

‘Feel for others as you feel for yourself.’

*‘This universal religion will bring world peace and happiness’—
Swami Sivananda*

Return to India and getting acquainted with ancient wisdom teachings

Back in India, my initial months were spent at the Sivananda Ashram Rishikesh which was a true blessing. My entire 'spiritual upbringing' took place in this ashram founded by Swami Sivananda, a true Master, spiritual genius and a saint of the highest order, renowned across the world for his universal outlook on spirituality.

I attended daily Satsangs with Swami Krishnanandaji Maharaj, who was the General Secretary of the ashram. He was a spiritual mastermind whose intellect, wisdom and insight into Vedanta, Yoga and philosophy made him one of the most profound and brilliant thinkers of modern times. These satsangs were instrumental helping me to understand the essence of spiritual life*

My first darshan† with Swami Chidanandaji, former President of Divine Life Society, took place on 2nd October 1986—Gandhi Jayanthi. I witnessed Swamiji washing the feet of those considered 'untouchables', which left a profound impression on me. From that day on, my association with Swamiji started. Trying to describe Swamiji is challenging, as words seem inadequate to capture the essence of this beautiful soul. Swamiji embodied humility, knew how to bring joy to others, and consistently emphasised the importance of connecting with the Eternal, unchanging principle—our true Self.

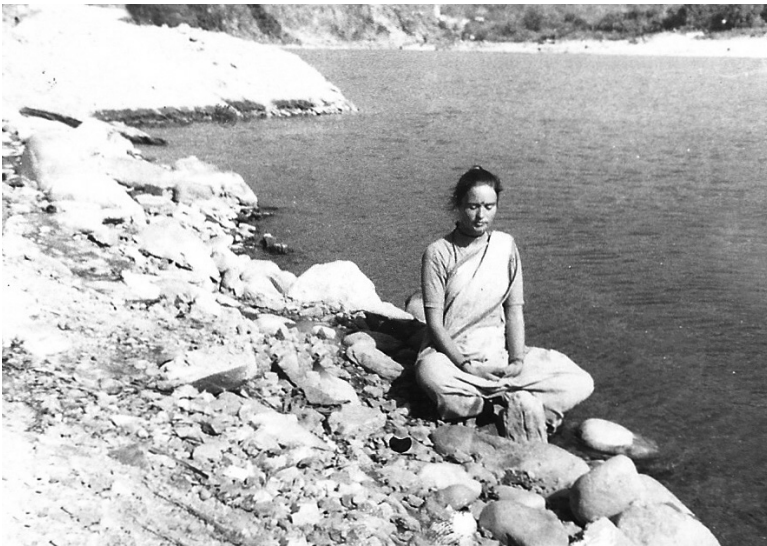
It was in Sivananda Ashram that I was introduced to Advaita Vedanta. Swami Brahmananda, a great saint, used to give daily classes on the Yoga Vasistha, an ancient Advaitic text, conveying, through many stories, that the Self alone is real. The text repeatedly

* Satsang means literally 'association with Truth'; spiritual gathering

† Darshan means literally: 'seeing'; being in the presence of a saint or deity and receiving blessings.

*mentions four pillars for the journey to Self-realisation: keeping the company of wise, holy, enlightened beings (Satsanga); practising Self Enquiry or Atma Vichara—not analytical reasoning, but a direct looking within; cultivating contentment by letting go of desires and being satisfied with what is; and developing self-control. Additionally, it emphasises the importance of scriptural studies and putting sincere self-effort into one's practice. Looking back, even though my path was far from being free of challenges and obstacles, these principles have remained the foundation of my sadhana.**

Staying in Sivananda Ashram gave ample opportunity to become familiar with the writings of Gurudev Swami Sivananda. The practice of Japa, the repetition of God's Name, appealed very much to me and as much as possible I have been repeating the mantra which by now has become my constant companion.



Rishikesh in the 1980s

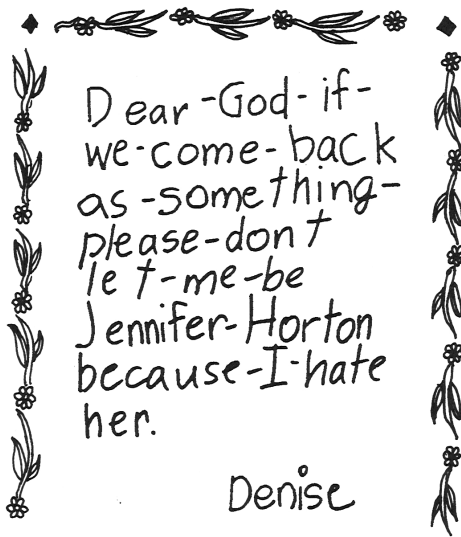
* *Sadhana* means Spiritual practice

In those early years, the Bhagavad Gita inspired me to try to keep my mind focused on God, remaining unaffected by external conditions like heat and cold, pleasure or pain. Combined with my saddhu samskaras, this led me to believe that a life of austerity (tapas) was necessary to realise God. It took me several years to understand that such extremes are not required—all that is truly needed is a still and quiet mind. Yet, calming a restless mind is no easy task as an unruly troubled mind is not easily tamed.*

My experiences during pilgrimages all over Himalaya—living in caves, dharmshalas or ashrams—taught me some important lessons. One of the most important lessons was not to worry about tomorrow but to stay anchored in the HERE and NOW, trusting that God takes care of tomorrow. Gradually, I also came to understand why Buddha emphasised a balanced approach to life: the Middle Path.

As I see it now: all those earlier practices helped me to become spiritually mature enough to grasp the teachings of Ramana Maharshi. It was the grace of Swami Chidananda Maharaj, that ultimately brought me to Ramanasramam in Tiruvannamalai. The teachings of Bhagavan Ramana resonated deeply and I felt that whatever sadhana I had done previously was only a preparation; once you have come to Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi, and are ready for such profound teachings, there is no further to go anywhere else as this is the ultimate. For the benefit of the readers a supplementary section on the teachings of Ramana Maharshi has been added in the Appendix.

* Samskaras are subtle imprints stored in the subconscious, and unconscious layers of the mind



Dear-God-if-
we-come-back
as-something-
please-don't
let-me-be
Jennifer-Horton
because-I-hate
her.

Denise