

YOGA MAGAZINE

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HAPPY NEW YEAR **2026**

SADHVI SARASWATI

**HOLLYWOOD TO
THE HIMALAYAS**

YOGIC ROOTS

of **TKV
DESIKACHAR**

**YOGA BEHIND
BARS**

**MEDIC TO
mystic**

SAKEEM MAT

**FROM STUDIO
TO SCIENCE**

WITH ROLA



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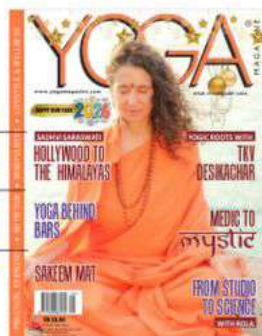
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Author: Sadhvi Bhagawati Saraswati

HOLLYWOOD TO THE HIMALAYAS

Sadhvi Bhagawati Saraswati serves as International Director of Parmarth Niketan Ashram, Rishikesh and Director of International Yoga Festival, taking place from March 9-15, 2026. Her bestselling memoir "Hollywood to the Himalayas" and new release "Come Home to Yourself" are available worldwide. She is also President of Diving Shakti Foundation and Secretary-General, Global Interfaith WASH Alliance and a recipient of US President Biden's Lifetime Award for Volunteer Service. Learn more at www.sadhviji.org

HOW ONE WOMAN'S LEAP OF FAITH BECAME A LIFE OF YOGIC SERVICE AND SPIRITUAL AWAKENING

THE UNLIKELY PILGRIM

Sometimes the Universe leads us to our destiny through the most mundane doorways. For me, that doorway was vegetarian food. Not a vision, not a calling, not even a conscious spiritual seeking, just a Stanford-educated scientist looking for good vegetarian meals who ended up on a plane to India at 25 years old.

For the first 25 years of my life, I identified entirely with my story. From the outside, it looked perfect: Stanford graduate, in the midst of a PhD in neuropsychology, the privilege and opportunity of a Hollywood upbringing. But inwardly, I carried another story, one of suffering, challenges and trauma.

Then, almost by accident, I went to India. Not for spiritual reasons, but for culinary ones! Yet somewhere over the Pacific Ocean, flying toward a country I'd never seen, and knew nothing about, I made a vow that would reshape everything in my life. The vow was simple: to keep my heart open. That quiet promise became the pivot point of my entire life. It opened me to all of the miracles of healing and transformation that have manifested since then.

THE RIVER THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING

Rishikesh was our first stop. Hot, exhausted, and completely unaware I was approaching one of India's most sacred areas, I just wanted to put my feet in the river. I didn't know this was Mother Ganga, the Goddess in river form.

What happened next shattered every framework I'd built for understanding reality. Before my toes even touched the water, I had a spontaneous experience of being in the presence of the Divine. Everything I saw was



pervaded by that Divine Presence. Everything was luminous with divinity.

I then turned my gaze within and realised, *"Oh my God, I am also divine. I am not separate from the divine."* Until that moment, I'd identified as either the privileged girl and A+ student who had everything or the victim who'd survived trauma. Standing in those waters, that entire identity dissolved. I wasn't wrong, broken, or harmed. I was one with the Divine that pervades everything.

"ARE YOU GOING TO TAKE THIS TO THE GRAVE?"

Days later, walking through Parmarth Niketan Ashram, which would become my home, I heard a voice: *"You must stay here."* I almost ignored it, but

remembered my vow to keep my heart open. So, instead of ignoring it, I walked inside and said, *"I want to stay."* When I met Pujya Swami Chidanand Saraswatiji, the head of Parmarth Niketan and one of the world's most beloved and revered spiritual teachers, I told him my story. The abuse, the abandonment, the suffering. He looked at me with infinite compassion and asked a question that sliced through decades of identity: *"Are you going to take this to the grave?"* *"Are you going to take this to the grave?"* *"No,"* of course, I replied.

When I stammered that I was *"in process,"* working on it, he delivered the truth that Western psychology had never offered me: *"You're waiting for someone to draw the line. You're waiting for someone to come in and tell you that you can be free. No one will."*

You can carry this pain to your grave, or you can let it go tonight."

Tonight? After years of therapy, of processing, of managing.... tonight? He instructed me to stand in Mother Ganga after the evening *aarti* ceremony and offer all my pain to her.

The Western-trained psychologist in me thought, "*Rivers don't sweep away trauma and pain.*" But I remembered my vow. I decided that even though I was sure it wouldn't work, I would be sincere about it. This became my first conscious trust fall into the universe—doing something that made no logical sense but doing it with complete sincerity.

I stood in the river. I prayed and cried, prayed and cried. I offered the pain, the anger, the entire story I'd been carrying. And she took it. Not metaphorically or symbolically. She actually took it.

That was nearly thirty years ago, now. The freedom that came from that moment has not only transformed my life but it's also become the foundation of everything I teach.

FROM MANAGING TO FREEDOM – TRUE YOGA

This is what no one had told me in all my years of education and therapy: We don't have to manage our pain for the rest of our lives. We can actually be free.

The Western model I'd been trained in taught me to cope, to process, to understand, to manage. These are valuable tools. But the Eastern wisdom I discovered that night in the Ganga offered something revolutionary: You can actually let it go. Not bypass it, not suppress it, not pretend it

didn't happen, but truly release it to something greater than yourself and be free.

This doesn't mean the trauma didn't happen. It doesn't mean it was okay. It means you don't have to carry it as your identity for the rest of your life. This transformation reveals what yoga truly is, not the Western interpretation of perfecting poses or having flexible hamstrings, but the true, full meaning: union. Yoga is the dissolution of the illusion that we are separate -- from ourselves, from each other, from the divine. When I stood in the Ganga that night, releasing decades of pain, I was practicing the deepest form of yoga, the yoga of surrender, of reunion of *jivatma* (individual soul) to *paramatma* (supreme soul), of remembering that the consciousness witnessing my trauma was never touched by it.

hal yogamag



The eight limbs of yoga that Patanjali offers us aren't steps toward becoming something new; they're the art and science of uncovering of what we've always been. This is why yoga is the perfect antidote to modern suffering. We're not broken beings trying to become whole through achievement or healing. We're whole beings who've forgotten our wholeness, and yoga — whether through movement, breath, meditation or surrender, whether through devotion, wisdom or action — is simply the practice of remembering.

FREEDOM IS PRESENCE, NOT ESCAPE

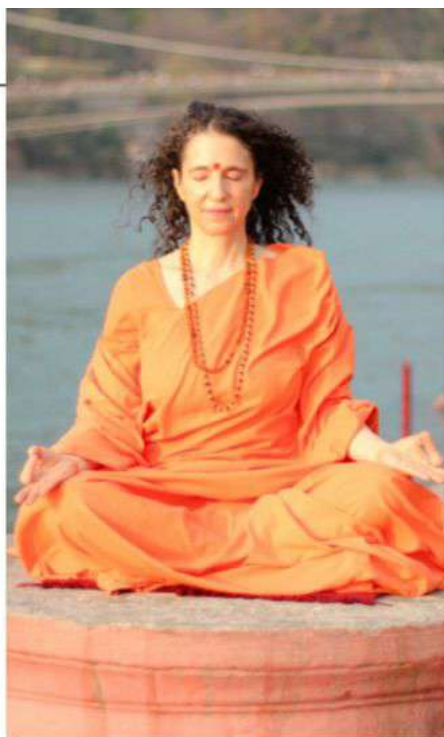
I've learned that freedom isn't the absence of pain. It's the absence of false identity and attachment to the story surrounding the pain. Most of us aren't living in the present; we're living our childhoods on repeat, responding to parents who are no longer speaking, to stories that no longer exist.

Yoga teaches us that freedom is the ability to meet each moment without the chains of old narratives or the false identities we've created around those narratives. It is the practice, as I was given, of letting go of that which is not, so we can embrace and embody that which is. The meditative practice of Neti Neti — not this, not this" — reminds us: You are not your trauma. You are not your thoughts. You are not your emotions. You are not your memories. You are the light of awareness that shines upon it all, that witnesses it all.

This single remembrance dissolves shame, comparison, resentment and anger at their root.

WHY SURRENDER IS COURAGE, NOT WEAKNESS

Surrender is the most misunderstood spiritual principle in the modern world. We imagine it as giving up,



being passive, accepting defeat. But spiritual surrender is none of those things.

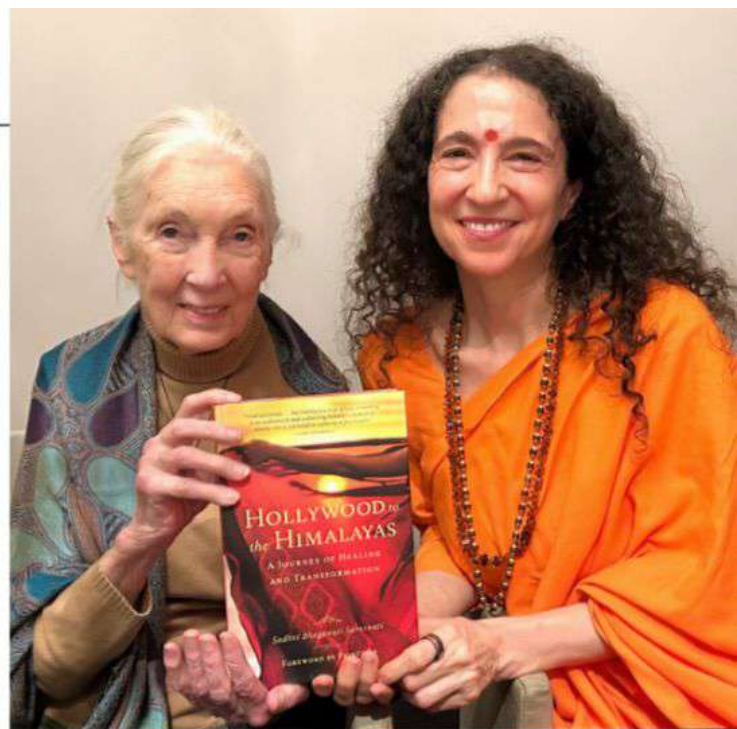
Surrender is one of the strongest, most courageous choices we can make. It is the choice to recognise the truth and organise our lives accordingly! We do not control others. We don't control results. We don't control anyone or anything other than our own thoughts and actions. The rest is in God's hands anyway. Surrender says, *"I hereby relinquish my death-grip on life which prevents me from living. I relinquish my attachment to the illusion of control."* Surrender isn't collapse. It's re-alignment.

Every night when we sleep, we surrender control of our breath, our heartbeat, our blood pressure to something greater. And we wake with these functions working better than when we tried to manage them all day. This is surrender: not weakness, but the ultimate act of faith in the intelligence of the universe.

In the *niyamas* of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, we are given *Ishar Pranidhan* – Surrender! In the *yoga sutras*! Along with the other nine *yamas* and *niyamas* – the very foundation of yoga – surrender is critical. Many of us intuitively understand that we must be non-violent, truthful, pure, that we must not steal or hoard. But surrender? And yet there it is, just as important as *ahimsa* and *satya*, at the very foundation of our yoga practice: surrender to the Divine.

THE TRUST FALL INTO DIVINE GRACE

This practice of surrender, which I call the *"trust fall into the universe,"* has become central to my teaching. Remember those team-building exercises where you fall backward into your colleagues' arms or the arms of other students in your class? Amazingly, we always fall back,



even into the arms of a stranger or the schoolyard bully. We intuitively know they will catch us. Life asks us to do this daily — to trust what we cannot see. We trust seeds to grow. We trust that caterpillars will become butterflies. Yet we resist trusting our own becoming.

When I stood in the river, offering my carefully curated pain story to waters that my rational mind said couldn't possibly help, I was trust-falling. When I stayed in India instead of returning to my PhD program, I was trust-falling. Every time we choose the unknown path that our heart recognises over the known path our mind insists upon, we're trust-falling into grace.

FROM PERSONAL HEALING TO GLOBAL SERVICE

What began as personal awakening became a life of service. For nearly thirty years at Parmarth Niketan, I've watched thousands arrive believing yoga is about perfecting poses or escaping reality. They leave understanding that yoga is union—with yourself, with others, with the divine. It's remembering you were never separate to begin with.

Each March, our International Yoga Festival brings together seekers from nearly 100 countries, not to escape the world, but to learn how to live in it more consciously. Over seven days on the banks of Mother Ganga, participants discover what I discovered: that transformation doesn't require decades of processing. Sometimes it happens in a moment of sincere surrender, in the willingness to let go of the story that has defined us.

The festival offers world-renowned teachers and experts from across the globe, and yet the deepest teaching frequently happens between classes — as we breathe in the air that flows from across the tops of the Himalayas, from across the waters of the Ganga, the same *prana* that has been breathed by sages, yogis and mystics here for thousands of years.

THE INVITATION

Today, people worldwide suffer from depression, anxiety, and loneliness at unprecedented levels. While symptoms vary, the root is the same: We've forgotten who we are. We have been blinded by the myth of separation. The cure is the awareness of union --- yoga.

You don't need to move to India or change your outer life. You only need to take one vow: to keep your heart open.

My journey from Hollywood to the Himalayas became far more than geographical change. It became a journey from fear to faith, from identity to essence, from managing trauma to actual freedom. This is why I wrote my books 'Hollywood to the Himalayas' and 'Come Home to Yourself' — to help others walk the path to their own freedom.

The invitation is open to all: Trust fall into the Universe. Let go of who you think you are and discover who you've always been.

The Universe is always ready to catch you. But you must be willing to let go.