

## **A Writer Who Inspires Me**

By Debjani Chatterjee

My childhood dream of running away to the Himalayas, meditating in caves, and finding a guru who would answer all my questions and lead me to God, remains a dream. But a writer who inspires me greatly did all these – and wrote about his experiences.

He is not someone whom most people will readily identify as a writer. This is because Paramahansa Yogananda is better known as a pre-eminent spiritual teacher of the twentieth century; the first Indian, after Swami Vivekananda, to bring the knowledge of Indian spirituality to the West, an immensely popular Kriya Yoga teacher and founder of the Self-Realization Fellowship in America and the Yogoda school in India. He became known as the charismatic ‘father of Yoga in the West’. His teachings have transformed the lives of many, including myself. But there is no denying that he was also a prolific writer. Even in his lifetime, his writings played an important part in reaching out to, and influencing, many. After his death in 1952, his books have spread around the world and been translated into many languages. Both his life and his books have become a constant and powerful source of inspiration, touching the lives of multitudes.

I first came across his work from reading his best-selling *Autobiography of a Yogi* (1946), a gripping book that I have read and reread many times. With

its inspiring message of spiritual accessibility, delivered in simple unassuming language, and with honesty and humour, it is an autobiography that fulfils Yogananda's prediction: 'This book will change the lives of millions. It will be my messenger when I am gone.'

Among his large oeuvre are such gems as *God Talks to Arjuna*, *The Second Coming of Christ* and *Wine of the Mystic: The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, all three published posthumously. Yogananda inspires me on many counts. Spiritual topics have always interested me, and initially I was attracted by the subject matter of his books. He writes with enthusiasm about meetings with mystics from many faith backgrounds such as Anandamayi Ma, 'the Blissful Mother', and Therese Neumann, the German Catholic stigmatic. Other topics on which he wrote include reincarnation, the ties and consequences of karma, the guru-disciple relationship, living in the world but loosening the shackles of attachment to material possessions, healing affirmations, serving others and fulfilling one's potential. His language and style, too, have taught me much. Though writing about complex concepts and profound experiences, his eloquent presentation of material is eminently accessible to readers from all backgrounds and of varying ability. Many books are collections of talks that he gave, often in response to disciples' questions, and directly address the important issues raised.

Yogananda meditated from childhood, escaped to the Himalayas more than once, against his family's wishes, and had the great good fortune of being found by his guru, Sri Yukteswar Giri. He inspires me because he offers accessible guidance to encourage all spiritual seekers. Reading his books, I understand that the Himalayan cave for meditation is within me, and that the guru makes himself or herself known when the disciple is ready. Meanwhile, the Universe itself has much to teach.

## **Debjani Chatterjee**

Debjani Chatterjee MBE FRSL has been called a poet 'full of wit and charm' (Andrew Motion), 'Britain's best-known Asian poet' (Elisabetta Marino) and a 'national treasure' (Barry Tebb). She grew up in India, Japan, Bangladesh, Hong Kong, Egypt and Morocco, before settling in England. She studied at five universities: Cairo, Kent, Lancaster, Sheffield and Leeds. She has worked in industry, teaching, community relations and creative arts psychotherapy. An acclaimed international poet, children's writer, translator, Olympic torchbearer and storyteller, her awards include an MBE for services to Literature, Sheffield Hallam University's honorary doctorate, and Word Masala's Lifetime Achievement in Poetry Award. A former Chair of the National Association of Writers in Education and the Arts Council's Translation Panel, she is a Royal Literary Fund Fellow and patron of Survivors Poetry. She has had residencies at Sheffield Children's Hospital, Ilkley Literature Festival, Barbican Centre, Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, and various universities. Her 70+ books include: *The Elephant-Headed God & Other Hindu Tales* – a Children's Book of the Year, *Animal Antics*, *Namaskar: New and Selected Poems*, and *Do You Hear the Storm Sing?* Her award-winning anthologies include *The Redbeck Anthology of British South Asian Poetry* and *Barbed Lines*.

A recording of this talk can be found at **[writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)**

© Debjani Chatterjee