

alice in wonder and awe

interview with Swamini
Turiyasangitananda
(Alice Coltrane)
by clea mcdougall

Introduction:

Alice. Says I can call her whatever I like. Her family given name, Alice, or Mrs. Coltrane, or her spiritual name: Turiyasangitananda. Whatever I feel most comfortable with. I'm an old hand at talking with swamis, so I don't mind calling her Turiyasangitananda, but I think of her more as Alice, for some reason. Maybe because I knew of her first as Alice: jazz pianist, harpist, and wife to John Coltrane. I didn't even know until very recently that she is a swami now. All I knew was what I picked up from spending hours listening to her records of swirling harp and organ, and studying the liner notes that were written in such a mystical language that I thought jazz was the music of yogis.

photos by bill jones



Born Alice McLeod in Detroit in 1937, she's had a pretty spectacular life, from being involved in the burgeoning avant jazz scene growing around her husband in the 1960s, to creating her own musical-spiritual language after Coltrane's death in 1967 with recordings such as *A Monastic Trio* and *Journey in Satchidananda*, and later with albums such as *Radha-Krsna Nama Sankirtana*, which is basically Hindu chants arranged in a jazz-gospel style.

Her sound was heavily influenced by her interest in Eastern spirituality and the community of musicians around her in the 1970s, such as saxophonist Pharoah Sanders, who were dedicated to accessing the Divine/cosmic/transcendental through jazz music. A student of Swami Satchidananda for many years, Alice later became a follower of Sai Baba, and in 1983 founded a small community in southern California, the Sai Anantam Ashram.

Swamini Turiyasangitananda. A swami of the mystic variety, having spiritual adventures worthy of Alice in Wonderland herself. Her name, which means the Bliss of God's Divine Music, was given to her by "Divine deliverance." And as she explains in the interview, "I was told the night and time, and to be prepared ... and when the time came, the colours of orange were poured into the cloth of the dress that I was wearing subsequent to the dispensation of mantra."

She's had many such experiences – visitations from her late husband, astral projections, Divine messages, more of which are detailed in her writings (*Monument Eternal* and *Endless Wisdom*) – that push the boundaries of what the more rational among us think of as possible. Yet Alice insists that not only are they possible, but that everyone can reach these higher states of consciousness.

It's a dying sentiment here in the West. The mystic elements that are a deeply rooted part of the yogic tradition tend to be intellectualized, rationalized, put aside in favour of "How can this help me look better, feel better, be a better person day to day?" Not that these aren't valid pursuits, but are we no longer looking for the cosmic in all of this? Wasn't it supposed to be about reaching higher states of consciousness? Whatever happened to this kind of mystical expression, a limitless consciousness where white robes turn orange and visitations from gurus are a part of an everyday cosmic experience?

The first part of Alice's name, *turiya*, technically means "a state of pure consciousness, or the experience of ultimate reality and truth." It is a state of consciousness that underlies *and* transcends our common states of consciousness.

That the experience of ultimate reality and truth actually transcends "consciousness" has always seemed like a paradox to me. And like many who are in this line of work, Alice steps into this paradox beautifully with her mix of practical service and transcendental teachings. She addresses the larger situation of being human: that everything has a certain material reality and yet there is a spiritual longing, something that wants to believe, as Alice believes, that there is much, much more...

Interview:

Clea McDougall *What would you say is your most important teaching?*

Swamini Turiyasangitananda I think the central teaching is meditation. Not teaching on the subject of meditation, but more so, explaining that the path to God must involve meditation to bring you to the closest point. In other words, your study is going to be fine, your acquisition of knowledge is going to be great – but you need direct communication. And the best time is after prayer, after recitation of the names – *japa*. Meditate. Sit in silence and try to hear the voice of the Lord. See the visions that God will send, ask the questions. This brings you into close proximity to God.

And to me, I don't think you can complete any path successfully without meditation. Because if you're a studier, a reader, a *jnani*, one who is involved with acquired knowledge, you are always going to debate that knowledge. And what does mortal man really know about spirituality? I feel it is so limiting if you do not meditate. Prayer is wonderful, it's healing, it's beautiful, but we need that meditation. And that's really the central focus of the teaching.

CM *You are the spiritual leader of your Ashram in southern California. How did you become a teacher?*

ST It started with taking the *sanyas*. That was a total mystical experience. It was God's deliverance of his anointed mercy on me. I was told the night and time, and to be prepared, so I got ready and put on a white dress and all, and I noticed when the time came, the colours of orange were poured into the cloth of the dress that I was wearing. And I just watched it happen. I just watched everything go into that beautiful saffron colour. And my name was given, of course, and the whole outline of the duty, the work and mission were also revealed.

One of the directives given to me was to start the Ashram. I felt I could serve in any way that God wished. If He wants you to do charity work or humanitarian work or however He wishes to utilize you, maybe just talking or giving musical concerts is fine. Many people have a musical ministry. Whatever was ordered, I would have been happy to receive.

At first, I don't think my idea was on *sanyas* as much as it was on having the availability to seek the Lord, to be able to study spiritual scriptures, and just to really immerse myself in living the spiritual life as much as possible. My children, I had raised them, my husband had passed some years ago. I had reached a point where most of my duties as a householder were fulfilled. It gave me the time to want to see, to want to strive, to want to devote quality time, because you know, the work of a woman is so full! I mean it's sometimes twenty-four hours. So once that was reduced, I had additional time that I could apply to the path, and that's what I've been doing.

CM You often talk about having certain experiences, visions, visitations connected with your meditations, what people would describe as a more mystical experience ...

ST They wouldn't if they too engaged that way, and allowed it to become a part of their life. In speaking about it, it seems like it is mystical or transcendental or higher consciousness... yes. But God doesn't restrict anyone from that experience. And we should know that we can, with effort on our part, go to higher levels of understanding and perception instead of limiting ourselves to saying, well, we are just only people and we're going to get our education and have a good life and on and on. However, people are much more, much more than that. And they should not confine themselves to those kinds of limitations.

CM So what is it that happens in meditation that lets you get in touch with a higher or mystical power?

ST You are uplifted into a different state of consciousness. It's not a sleeping consciousness; it's not a trance. You transcend – our level of life, our mentality, where we are as people – and go beyond that mentality to higher levels of consciousness, of understanding and realization. And that's the part that is so missing in people and I feel that's why there are so many mistakes made in life, why there is war... because people do not understand that there is no purpose in being judgemental and being dishonest.

We are all immortal souls and God will prove it to you. You don't have to condemn or judge anybody for anything. We all have the right to know the truth, but if we want to believe in

the negative and in the limitation, that's where we stay. We bring this into the subconscious, and say, "Oh, I could never go that high. Oh, I could never know about those things. Oh no, I'm too afraid, oh no, I can't meditate, my mind is far too busy, filled with all kinds of negative thoughts." Well, if you want to stay bound, you cannot expect to rise above those thoughts. If you give yourself a chance, a chance to be sincere... I believe you will succeed whoever you are.

CM When was the first time you had a glimpse of this mystical dimension?

ST When I was young I had visions every Saturday, for some reason. And I did have out-of-body experiences from the age of nine. Every Saturday I would be sitting down, and the next thing you know I was across the street or downtown or at a family member's house. I think that was God's way of letting me know that there is more to life than what we see around us. And that, for me, it will be more than just astral vision or astral projection. It will be actually moving my spirit into places above this world, around this universe, beyond our universe, Divine sacred places. So that's how the Lord taught me.

CM And when was it that you really started to connect to the more Eastern mystical tradition?

ST I was married to John Coltrane, and he had such a beautiful appreciation of all cultures. It was mainly in a musical and artistic way, but even though he was looking at the contributions musically, he also looked at their spirituality. So he liked to meditate and we used to meditate together. I think it started with him, because I was born into a Christian family; I spent many years in the church. I was a pianist in the church in Detroit, where I am from. And it wasn't so much a turning away from that, as it was a direction that I was given to follow.

CM Would you consider John Coltrane one of your first gurus?

ST I would say in music, yes, because I learned so much, so much about music from the association with him. It was just wonderful! It was valuable what I learned. I will credit him for that. I think when we studied the spiritual books and all, he never told me read this or what do you think



... taking the *sanyas*. That was a total mystical experience. It was God's deliverance of his anointed mercy on me. I was told the night and time, and to be prepared, so I got ready and put on a white dress and all, and I noticed when the time came, the colours of orange were poured into the cloth of the dress that I was wearing. And I just watched it happen. I just watched everything go into that beautiful saffron colour. And my name was given, of course, and the whole outline of the duty and the work was also revealed.

about it. Nothing. We talked more about music, about a particular song or theory. We deliberated on those lines, never on spiritual subjects as much. We would meditate together. And, yes, I would feel that he is my inspiration in music, my guru in music.

CM And the way John Coltrane approached music was very spiritual in itself.

ST Yes. And if you notice, the last several of his recordings, from *A Love Supreme* onward, that the titles of his records and his songs did have a spiritual word in them. *A Love Supreme*, which was one of his most remarkable recordings, we looked at it as maybe something more enlightened. At that time his critics were saying, "He's nihilistic. He's taking standards and recasting them. He's anti-jazz." They went on and on. And when he came out with *A Love Supreme*, how could this man have anger? Why is power and the expression of the power of God, why was it so misrepresented as anger? When *A Love Supreme* came out, there was a change. A change in the mentality. Because over the years, there was so much commentary: "This angry horn player... he's changing all the standards and all the norms, he's ignoring them."

Eventually people really began to understand that this man, and all that power and thunder that they heard, was not in anger. We need thunder and lightning sometimes to let us know it's going to rain. Well, we are in California, we had a five-year drought at one time, so I know that people would be rejoicing to hear the sound of the thunder, and to know that the rains will come.

CM Was there a switch in him around *A Love Supreme*, or did the audience just become more aware of what he was doing?

ST I think there may have been some osmosis, people moving together in their thinking and higher in their consciousness. It was so interesting, when he created *A Love Supreme*. He had meditated that week. I almost didn't see him downstairs. And it was so quiet! There was no sound, no practice! He was up there meditating, and when he came down he said, "I have a whole new music!" He said, "There is a new recording that I will do, I have it all, everything." And it was so beautiful! He was like Moses coming down from the mountain. And when

he recorded it, he knew everything, everything. He said this was the first time that he had all the music in his head at once to record. That was so beautiful.

CM And after he died, is that when you became seriously interested in Vedanta?

ST Yes. But I had a lot more work to do, I couldn't devote time really until the '80s. I mean, I could read about spirituality and go hear lectures, things like this, however, I still had the children to raise. And there was no way I could not do my duty, because God wants us to be dutiful and fulfill our responsibilities and not sit before the Lord in meditation and leave those responsibilities to someone else.

CM And as a musician, too, because you were making quite a lot of music in those years.

ST Yes, and what happened was, that when I got a call from a record company offering me a contract, I did not want to take it because the Lord had pointed me in the direction of spiritual activity, which would involve everything – initiations, service and whatnot. And then it was disclosed to me that I could do both spiritual and musical work. So for five years I executed that contract, and when it was finished, after I made the album *Transfiguration*, I didn't make another album until twenty-six years later. This new album, *Translinear Light*, came out of the pleading and constant appealing from my son Ravi: "Ma, please make a CD." So I eventually agreed.

CM I've heard some of your arrangements of bhajans that were recorded at your Ashram in the years between your more public releases. They sound like a mix of gospel and jazz and East Indian music.

ST Well, I was raised in the church and I played in the church and for the choir, which was basically hymns and anthems. And then we also had the gospel chorus, and I would occasionally play for them. So I had a full range. When I was learning the *bhajans*, I heard more the gospel influence from them! They maybe could have been scholastic or in a more contemporary style, but they weren't. They were really strongly gospel, and I liked that. I wondered about it, and even inquired in my meditation, and I was told, "Do

not change it, you do not have to imitate India, you do not have to try and sing like Subhalakshmi, let everyone sing in the way that comes from their heart.” That’s how the sound developed.

CM Do you still perform music?

ST I occasionally make a guest appearance, and we organized the John Coltrane Foundation, which gives scholarships to young musicians, so I help them out there. Now because of the *Translinear Light* CD, I am going to give back on that as well. I will give a few concerts, although I can’t say I will record again for the public purpose.

I think after a while you just aren’t involved in the personality. God teaches us to be selfless and egoless, so you aren’t involved with personal distinctions. You really are about the work, service, duties, and my concentration is on that greatly. We have to be selfless in our service so we can truly dedicate our life to our work, spend our lives seeking the Lord and living in obedience to the will of the Lord. Devotion and selflessness are such requirements. Because if we are self-interested or involved with our own importance, our own aim, we cannot serve the Lord that way.

I thank the Lord for this time, and mainly I will keep my focus on what He wants me to do and accomplish under His guidance and direction. ॐ

Clea McDougall is always interested in the artist-turned-holy-person. She is a writer and editor who reluctantly lives in Toronto.



a selected discography

Translinear Light, Impulse! 2004

“For Alice Coltrane, it is clear that all music is devotional music. *Translinear Light* is a logical extension of the spiritual and musical path that John and Alice Coltrane began together. It is radiant, cosmic, psycho-active music, which, despite its depth and complexity, has a timeless and universal appeal. This is one for the history books.” Taken from the Impulse! website.

Radha-Krsna Nama Sankirtana,

Warner Brothers, 1977

Bhajans arranged in a jazz and gospel style. What could be better? I have rarely heard so much *bhava* in recorded bhajan singing. Her organ solo on the record is a truly amazing mix of Indian raga, cool jazz and transcendent bliss.

Lord of Lords, Impulse! 1972

An arrangement of Stravinsky’s “Firebird” appears on the album, after Alice had a visitation from Stravinsky himself. Alice recalls: “I was blessed with the good fortune of receiving a visitation from the great master composer, Mr. Igor Stravinsky... Since that time it has been incumbent on me to proceed forthrightly into [his] works. Divine instruction has been given to me throughout the entire arranging of this music.”

Journey in Satchidananda, Impulse! 1971

Alice writes in the liner notes: “Anyone listening to this selection should try to envision himself floating on an ocean of Satchidanandaji’s love, which is literally carrying countless devotees across the vicissitudes and stormy blasts of life to the other shore. Satchidananda means knowledge, existence, bliss.”

A Monastic Trio, Impulse! 1968

Alice’s first solo record after the death of her husband. In the liner notes, LeRoi Jones writes: “It is called a monastic trio, because John’s body has left here... Monastic and spun solitarily in a string cosmos/universe inhabited by memory, of event and emotional circumstance. But they are all loneliness mentioned, sung about.”

Expression (John Coltrane featuring Alice on piano), Impulse! 1967

One of my favourite John Coltrane albums, and his last. Something sad and beautiful about it. When trying to find words to describe the sentiment on the album, Coltrane just said, “Expression. That’s what it is.” —CM