

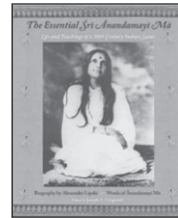
# The Essential Śrī Ānandamayī Mā: Life and Teachings of a 20th Century Indian Saint

*Biography by Alexander Lipski, Words of Śrī Ānandamayī Mā  
(Translated and compiled by Ātmānanda),*

*Edited by Joseph A. Fitzgerald*

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*Reviewed by Samuel Bendeck Sotillos*



“[T]rue realization...[is when] one is fully enlightened as to all faiths and doctrines, and sees all paths as equally good. This is absolute and perfect realization.”

*Śrī Ānandamayī Mā*

Śrī Ānandamayī Mā (1896-1982) was one of the great spiritual luminaries of the 20th century. She was the embodiment of the Divine Mother within traditional Hindu spirituality and while less known, she rightly belongs alongside spiritual giants such as Śrī Rāmakrishna (1836 - 1886), Śrī Ramana Maharshi (1879 - 1950), Swāmī Ramdas (1884 - 1963), and the 68th Jagadguru of Kanchi (1894 - 1994). She has inspired millions of people around the world from all walks of life and of diverse faiths. Some of her admirers include Mahatma Gandhi, Indira Gandhi, Jawarharlal Nehru, former Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau, Queen Frederika of Greece, and the first Indian President Rajendra Prasad.

This volume consists of two books edited as a single volume; the first provides a biography titled *Life and Teaching of Śrī Ānandamayī Mā*

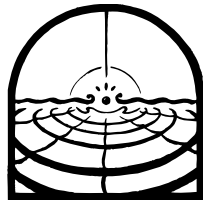
by Alexander Lipski, and the other is an anthology of discourses titled *Words of Sri Anandamayī Ma*, translated and compiled by Ātmānanda. This edition contains one hundred and twenty-five photos and illustrations taken throughout the span of the Divine Mother's life providing a compressive and detailed portrayal of the seminal events and teachings. Additionally, included in this edition are selections from her teachings previously unpublished outside India.

Ānandamayī Mā, or Mātājī as she was known to her devotees, was born on April 30, 1896 in Kheorā, in a small village in the interior of East Bengal (present-day Bangladesh), and was given the name Nirmalā Sundarī (Immaculate Beauty). Her mother Moksadā Sundarī and father Bipin Bihārī Bhattācārya were devout *vaiṣṇavas* or worshipers of Viṣṇu, the preserver and sustainer of the universe, and were strict observers of caste regulations. Her mother counted many scholars or teachers (*pandits*) among her ancestors and the father came from a distinguished *brāhman* family and when he was not working he spent most of his time in spiritual practice.

Though Ānandamayī Mā attended school for less than two years, she possessed a sharp mind. She recalls having what could be regarded as an intuitive intelligence, "Somehow or other, I invariably happened to look up the very questions the teacher would ask, and consequently he always found me well prepared even after long absences. The meaning of unknown words would occur to me spontaneously..." (p. 4) For her, as for many other saints and sages of the world's religions, true knowledge was not dependent on book learning. She stated, "If someone really wants God, and nothing but God, he carries his book in his own heart. He needs no printed book." (p. 5)

When Ānandamayī Mā was almost thirteen years of age, after a careful search, her parents arranged for her marriage with Ramani Mohan Cakravartī (later known as Bholānātha, a name for Śīva), on February 7, 1909. Bholānāth had no idea who he was married to and what an unusual marriage it was to be. It is reported that upon approaching her physically, he received a violent electric shock. The marriage was in fact never physically consummated. Her relationship with her husband was complex; she was spiritually his superior and later became his spiritual teacher (*guru*), yet she also played the traditional role of his obedient wife. She skillfully molded Her husband-disciple to deal with many of

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