

Beauty Unveiled

Ancient Recipe for a Most Radiant Self

BY SAHAJA DOUGLASS

“You look so beautiful,” my mother gushed. I could tell she was proud of me. I was four years old and not sure what I had done, but the praise and attention made me feel fantastic—loved and valued—so I spent much of my life chasing that reaction from my mother and from others. Looking beautiful was one of our family’s noble truths, and it had one constant criterion: Be thin. In fact, be very thin. The big impediment to my personal beauty aligning with the family creed was that I had inherited my paternal grandmother’s bone structure, and I was naturally more like a Viking than a waif. I felt like an outlier, and after years of self-destructive eating patterns, I began to cultivate my own definition of beauty based on my internal values: authenticity, compassion, self-awareness, self-care, and self-acceptance. When I felt self-loving, I felt beautiful. When I connected deeply with others, I experienced their beauty and my own.

During the past few months, I have talked with many women about beauty and in particular how the messages they received growing up have influenced their feelings about themselves. Almost universally, women shared their deep yearning to feel attractive and to be perceived as beautiful by others. As children, many women were criticized for not being pretty or were instructed to change themselves to be more beautiful by emulating a mainstream version of beauty. The women I talked with did not see images that represented themselves in magazines and films or on TV. They lacked role models they could identify with, and many felt that they were not beautiful because they did not look like the idealized homogenous images they saw in advertising.

There is a shift happening in America spurred on by the zeitgeist of self-determination. The fashion and entertainment industries are no longer the only influencers; women are rising up on social media and railing against



British model
Philomena Kwao

the one-size-fits-all image of beauty. Women of all shapes, sizes, and ethnic backgrounds are celebrating their beauty and inspiring other women to do the same. Women such as Philomena Kwao, who have hundreds of thousands of fans on Facebook and Instagram, advocate for inclusivity and encourage women to accept themselves and feel proud of their bodies, to embrace their curves and the color of their skin. In response, the media and fashion industries that want to capitalize on these self-made icons feature them in ad campaigns that reach millions of viewers. While most images of women in fashion magazines are still unattainable, there is more variation than ever. There is also a trend in ad campaigns to feature characters viewers can identify with. In theory, this normalization process should make people feel more accepting of themselves.

Even the most successful supermodels, such as Emily Ratajkowski, resist being defined only by their external beauty. Ratajkowski is a self-proclaimed feminist who ardently supports women expressing their sexuality and pushes back against those that try to shame her for celebrating her voluptuous body. She is an active supporter of women’s rights and along with many models uses her visibility to further social justice. Beauty in and of itself is no longer the pinnacle; it is now a vehicle to influence culture and shape conversations about gender and society. Serena Williams, a strong, muscular black woman at the top of women’s tennis, was on the cover of *Vogue* this year. Ten years ago, that would have been unthinkable.

If beauty is now expanding to include women who represent a wider array of characteristics, how is beauty defined? And who sets the standards? Imagine if true beauty is based not on a set of external features but on the expression and reflection of a radiant spirit. Imagine that the veils of illusion are lifted and the characteristics of true beauty include love,

graciousness, authenticity, compassion, determination, and a commitment to serving others. If so, then beauty is attainable for everyone by working on our inner self. The humanitarian Amma has said, “The beauty of our ears is not in our earrings but in listening to the distressed.” Accordingly, true beauty has more to do with a compassionate spirit than the casing it is housed in.

Spiritual aspirants through the ages have worked hard to cultivate internal beauty—unchanging qualities like equanimity, humility, the ability to discern truth from untruth, and a deep understanding of the nature of the Universe. People who are truly beautiful have a radiance that leads those around them to feel beautiful, peaceful, and self-accepting. True beauties do not inspire envy because their focus is not on parading external qualities but instead on perfecting internal universal virtues. They have mastered the fallible, turbulent mind and are living examples that this self-love, which extends out to all of humanity, is available to everyone.

In my own life, I feel most beautiful and fulfilled when I am not focused on how I appear—when I am helping others, meditating, practicing yoga, hugging my sons, or dancing. True beauty is the expression of a selfless attitude and a generous spirit. It is reflected in someone who is deeply connected to her authentic self, whose passions go beyond her self-interests. As stated by the great yoga teacher B. K. S. Iyengar, “The still waters of a lake reflect the beauty around it. When the mind is still, the beauty of the Self is reflected.”

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