

# american vedantist

Volume 15 No. 4 ■ Winter 2010



*...Thou whom the cosmos wears,  
a diamond at its heart ...*

## **STATEMENT OF PURPOSE**

**American Vedantist** (AV) is dedicated to developing Vedanta in the West, especially in the United States, and to making The Perennial Philosophy available to people who are not able to reach a Vedanta center. We are also dedicated to developing a closer community among Vedantists.

We are committed to:

- Stimulating inner growth through shared devotion to the ideals and practice of Vedanta
- Encouraging critical discussion among Vedantists about how inner and outer growth can be achieved
- Exploring new ways in which Vedanta can be expressed in a Western cultural context
- Networking through all available means of communication with Vedantists in the United States and other countries, and
- Facilitating the establishment of grass roots Vedanta groups and social service projects.

We invite our readers to join with AV in these endeavors. Please send us articles, poems, songs, letters to the editor, ideas for action programs and other suggestions for achieving our goals.

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truth is one; sages call it variously  
e pluribus unum: out of many, one

## CONTENTS

Three Stages of the Spiritual Journey <i>Brother Richard Simonelli</i> .....	5
In Praise of Prayer <i>William Page</i> .....	9
Reader's Forum <i>Response to Question in Fall 2009 issue</i> .....	13
Swami Prabhavananda on Holy Mother – Part 2 <i>Compiled by Gopal Stavig</i> .....	15
Sri Sarada Devi's Impact on Western Devotees of Ramakrishna Vedanta <i>Amrita Salm, Ph.D.</i> .....	22
It Only Takes One To Remember (poem) <i>Judith, Hermit of Sarada</i> .....	25
Passing the Torchlight – A Memoir of Swami Pramathananda <i>Swami Parameshananda</i> .....	26
Sri Sarada Devi, The Holy Mother <i>Vedanta Society of Berkeley, with Swami Aparananda</i> .....	31

## MEDIA REVIEW

A Monk for All Seasons: Akhilananda, His Life of Love and Service Elva Linnea Nelson <i>Review by Steven F. Walker</i> .....	40
Buddha (poem) <i>Swami Bhaktimayananda</i> .....	43
Reader's Forum <i>Question for Spring 2010 issue</i> .....	43
Contributors' Notes .....	44

Cover notes: John Dobson, astronomer-philosopher, speaks of Divine Mother as "the Exterior Decorator." Two breathtaking examples of Her work – Front cover is NGC 346 in the Small Magellanic Cloud • Hubble Space Telescope (NASA, ESA & A. Nota); quote is from "Breaker of this world's chain," by Swami Vivekananda. On the back is the Sombrero Galaxy (credits under photo).

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## Dear American Vedantist (email & letters from readers):

At first glance I wasn't going to re-subscribe. But after reading the Fall 2009 beginning pages with memory-writings and pictures of Holy Mother, plus those of the early Vivekananda years, I quickly changed my mind. For me, previously, it was a wasted \$5 (and money is tight now) to read a magazine full of addresses I'll never use. Although I now read that a few people truly liked knowing all those addresses, etc. Maybe you should have sent the addresses only, but under separate cover...NOT in an ISSUE.

Enclosed is my check for \$10, for 2 more issues.

*Yvonne Upton*, San Francisco CA

+++++

I read with horrified fascination the screed by Ray Berry, Sr., in your excellent publication (*Volume 15 No. 3*). It would seem he has fashioned a makeshift lecture platform, hoisted high above the bleating masses, to berate the editorial staff of AV on their lack of insight into "self knowledge, realization...enlightenment." In addition to his pronouncements on AV's "self-serving bulls--t" (sic)--presumably, the Vedanta Society should stay small, provincial and subject to Berry's approval--he insults the revered Swami Swahananda ("an embarrassment"), a completely gratuitous swipe at an honorable man. I hope that any casual readers of the publication will not mistake Berry's venomous rant for a representation of true Vedanta. Please keep up the good work, and never mind the rotten eggs!

*Alex S. Johnson*, Torrance CA



*American Vedantist* is printed at the Ramakrishna Monastery, Trabuco Canyon, CA. The monks there started a new service organization called **Holy Mother Mission** (HMM). Their website, [www.holymothermission.org](http://www.holymothermission.org), explains

the goal and purposes of HMM. It also displays newly printed and released books on a variety of spiritual topics. Income generated by their press, website and other activities is used to feed the needy.



Revered Swami Ranganathananda, former President of the Ramakrishna Order, presides over a worship of Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi (photo courtesy Ramakrishna Math & Mission)

### **Holy Mother: Saradananda, Vivekananda & Brahmananda**

A devotee once asked Swami Saradananda, “You respect Mother so much; is it because she is the wife of your Guru?” The Swami replied, “No, not like that. There is no difference between Thakur and Mother...”

Swami Sunderananda reported, “Swamiji (Swami Vivekananda) went to see Mother after his return from America. Mother, singing Swamiji’s praise, said, ‘What you have done, nobody else would be able to do like that!’ Swamiji replied, ‘What? Have I done all this or have you done? By your mere wish you can create lakhs (hundreds of thousands) of Vivekanandas, do I not know that?’ Mother simply laughed.”

A devotee wrote, “... It suddenly struck me that Maharaj (Swami Brahmananda) never came... to see Mother and prostrate before her. I told Mother, ‘... (Many of Thakur’s great monastic disciples) came to salute you. Why didn’t Maharaj ever come?’ Mother replied, ‘Rakhal (Maharaj) is Lord Narayana himself. Whenever I like to see him, he appears before me.’”

*Swami Tanmayananda, The Compassionate Mother, Sri Sri Sarada Devi, 2002, p. 359 ff.*



Lao Tzu, traveling to the West and the Taijitu, symbol of the Tao  
Artist unknown, image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

More thoughts on the ego:

## Three Stages of the Spiritual Journey

**Brother Richard Simonelli**

*Interfaith Contemplative  
Order of Sarada (OSA)*

The Latin word “ego” gets a lot of play. *Ego* just means “I,” or “me,” or this self that finds itself alive and living a life. Ego can also signify *I Am*, in the sense that this “I” is a sacred being, an emanation of the divine principle of existence. But the greatest popular use of the word “ego” is to signify a separate, disconnected, unrelated self that does not know its kinship with the other egos with whom it shares the condition we call life. The common use of ego, egotism, or egoism denotes a person who is too self-centered or too narcissistic for his or her own good, or for the good of the commonality which all of us—both human beings and the environmental, non-human world—share.

Some practitioners of Eastern religions or spiritualities translate words from Eastern languages denoting the ignorant, unenlightened separate self as “ego” when those concepts come into English. In the Eastern sense, “ego” is the ignorance that does not realize its true identity with the whole. Students of Eastern spiritualities, and others, often utilize the term “ego” as an enemy. But how can “I” be an enemy when, by some

mystery, I find myself living a life in a body, having thoughts, feelings and energy, and knowing that this entity I think of as myself will die? How awesome! I am not my enemy, only my ignorance is. It is only ego not knowing its true identity *as the sacred mystery* that is the problematic part of life, not ego as expressed by this entity I call “myself.”

### **The mountain is the mountain, the river is the river**

There are three parts to the spiritual journey. In **part one** we take everything at face value. The mountain is the mountain and the river is the river. The personality and physical body is *me*. I think I am my thoughts, feelings, and activity.

Most people live and die in this ignorant state of affairs. It is their calling and vocation, and there is no value judgment in this observation. It is fact. But, if by some great gift and miracle we begin to undertake the spiritual journey, we move on to **part two**. We will aspire to do the hard inner work needed to realize who and what we really are.

As we enter and do the work of part two, mountains are no longer mountains and rivers are no longer rivers. I am not my personality, physical body, thoughts, feelings, or energy any

longer. The previous certainty has vanished as we do the work. This is the path.

In part two we begin to sense the insubstantiality or illusory quality of the entire separative ego structure, which just means the personality-self in all its attributes. This is the main thrust of a brave and worthy spiritual journey—but at this point the bread is only half-baked.

When we reach **part three**, mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers once again, but in the sense that this “me,” this “you,” this bird, this tree, this thought, this feeling, this joy or this sorrow are all exactly the expression of Reality in its deepest sense. This part of the journey is called fruition. It is in this completion phase that the ego “I” becomes the utterly sacred, “I Am.” This is realizing wholeness. But this realization is not the *ego-you* of part one. This is not the individual egotism, or worse, the group, or “we” egotism, which can be used as yet another form of ego-separation.

### **Inquiry into the nature of ego**

We must inquire into the nature of ego mightily in part two of the authentic spiritual journey. At times, struggle is appropriate. Ego might appear to be an adversary. But as time goes on, it is more and more inappropriate to un-

derstand ego as an enemy. Ego is not the enemy. The realization of egolessness, when it occurs, is the gift of Grace. Egolessness means we are no longer identified with the unavoidable separation that is a natural part of human nature. There is no way we can make the sense of egolessness happen through the force of will because the false separation is always kept alive in a foolish project like this. The greatest Grace in part two of the journey is to know when to step entirely out of the ego struggle and *to trust yourself just as you are*. It is a subtle obstacle of the spiritual journey to carry the struggle or primary referencing to “ego” further than it needs to go. After a point we can trust the fundamental goodness that we already are, free of our own meddling with the ego process.

When we *realize* the state of egolessness, the *separation identity* is no longer present because the personality-self has been realized as Self. This happens in the fruition part of the journey (part three). When this truly happens, then we realize that those mountains and rivers are Self, taking the form of mountains and rivers. But this is only true when we come to *know* it, and when we *are* it through direct experience, free of all concepts or beliefs. However, there is a qualification or an exception to this absolutism if a

person has had instances of direct experience.

A person who is spiritually ready may choose to *behave* as though he or she has reached part 3 of the journey while continuing to consciously grow into it. This amounts to a practice or method that is certainly not for everyone. It demands stringent humility and self-honesty from the practitioner because one of the greatest delusions is to grasp this three-part teaching only with the intellect and proclaim that fruition has been reached.

This kind of intellectual knowledge can lead to arrogance, superciliousness, and a lack of compassion. Mere intellectual or conceptual knowledge of this truth without direct experience still places us back into part one or two of the journey where there is still much more inner work to do. This method must be undertaken properly or we can hurt ourselves and others.

### **Zen/Tao parable of the mountains and rivers**

The parable of the mountains and rivers mentioned here is a teaching from the Zen Buddhist/Taoist tradition. Paraphrasing, it goes like this: *When I did not understand Reality, mountains were mountains and rivers were rivers. When I thought I understood Reality, mountains were no longer mountains*

*and rivers were no longer rivers. When I finally did understand Reality, mountains were mountains and rivers were rivers once again.* We need to remember that there is no such thing as “ego-death” because ego is with us until the end of our time as separate beings—but it is the sacred ego of a realized being. There is a comparable understanding within Ramakrishna Vedanta.

### **Ramakrishna’s life-journey**

Speaking of Sri Ramakrishna’s life-journey, Swami Nikhilananda recounts a story in his book, *Holy Mother: Being the Life of Sri Sarada Devi, Wife of Sri Ramakrishna and Helpmate in His Mission*. He says: *“Years later, the Master described to his devotees the three stages of a man’s mental evolution. During the first stage he takes the world of names and forms to be real and denies the existence of the Godhead behind it. It is a state of ignorance (ajnana). During the second stage he negates the world as maya and sees only Brahman, or pure spirit. This is a state of knowledge (jnana). During the final stage he again sees the world of names and forms, but now as the manifestation of Brahman. This is the state of mature knowledge (vijnana). The illumined soul, endowed with this mature knowledge, once more accepts the cosmic movement, seeing it as the sport (lila) of Brahman. He remains like a child, guileless and natural.”*<sup>(1)</sup>

Abiding in mature knowledge, issues like “ego” and “maya” (illusion) are understood (and lived) differently than in the ignorance of the first stage, or in the unripe quality of the second stage. When vijñana is realized, a person wouldn’t again indulge in the ignorance of ego and maya that is emphasized in the teachings relating to the first or second stage. That would be willful delusion indeed.

**All aspects of the phenomenal world seen as sacred or divine**

But as one abides in the fruition of the spiritual journey, all aspects of the phenomenal world are known to be sacred or divine. This *sacred world* is inclusive of all phenomena. At this juncture, the declaration of ego and maya as a fundamental spiritual problem is not the point any longer. Ego is part of our human nature and maya is the impermanence of all phenomena. They are expressions of Brahman, too.

This third stage could be called *Mahamaya*, signifying that maya is no longer a problem or a second-class citizen as it is portrayed in the early stages of the spiritual journey. The nature of Reality is Great Maya or sacred maya. What we see is a sacred adornment, or “Mother’s Play.” This suggests the etymological, or root meaning of the word

*Vedanta*—the goal, completion, or outcome of knowledge—i.e., mature knowledge.

These three stages are not a linear progression from part one, to two, to three. Having glimpsed and experienced part three from any part of the path, and at any time through the grace of the Self, we probably go back and re-enter the first and second parts regularly before we are fully established in part three.

The process is like an active, dynamic, ongoing dance – our spiritual journey. It is certainly true that we can’t be fully established at the third stage until we really are. But at this very exceptional time in which we live, failure to reveal a mature understanding of ego and maya beyond part two is to remain in ignorance of what Ramakrishna taught, as expressed in Swami Nikhilananda’s quote. Even maya and ego are indeed pleasing to the divine Mother because she authors the entire process from part one through part three.

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The author is grateful to Sister Judith Thackray, OSA, for her assistance with this article.

1- *Holy Mother: Being the Life of Sri Sarada Devi, Wife of Sri Ramakrishna and Helpmate in His Mission*, Swami Nikhilananda, New York, Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1962, p. 29.



Photo: Wells/flickr.com

“Prayer is not asking for things – not even the best of things – it is going where they are.” – *Gerald Heard*

## In Praise of Prayer

*William Page*

Prayer is the primary spiritual practice in the Western religious tradition embodied in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Westerners who come to Vedanta usually feel more comfortable with prayer than they do with meditation, because they're more familiar with it. But prayer, japa, and meditation can be practiced together. One tends to segue into another.

### **Talking the talk**

Prayer is particularly suited to people who like to talk. It's especially beneficial to those who are

lonely and need someone to talk to. Why be lonely? God is with us. He's right here, right now. He's in the air that surrounds us. So talk to him. That's what he's there for. But what should we talk to him about?

Some people ask for specific blessings or favors. "O Lord, please help me to pass all my courses, let me find a good job, let me earn enough money to buy a car." This is called petitionary prayer, and it has a shortcoming. It turns God into a cosmic Santa Claus.

If God were human, he would surely get irritated with people who are always begging him for things. Fortunately for us, he's not human. But good manners require us to exercise restraint in our importunities. Pestering God for favors all the time is extremely uncool.

Petitionary prayer, despite its shortcomings, is at least a beginning. It can easily expand into less self-centered kinds of prayer. One of these is thankful prayer. Anybody can ask God for things. How many people bother to thank him?

### **Thankful prayer and laudatory prayer**

Thankful prayer is a good way to start the day. It puts us in a good mood and reminds us of how much God has blessed us. Counting our blessings, in fact, is a wholesome practice much neglected in the modern world. Thanking God for everything he's given us may still be self-centered, but it's a considerable improvement over "gimme, gimme, gimme."

There's also laudatory prayer, where we praise God and recount his glories. I've always felt uneasy about this, because it can get smarmy. "O Lord, how great you are! You are omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent. You bestride the universe and give

light to the sun and stars. The heavens are your throne and the Earth is your footstool. O Lord, you are so cool!"

Does God want us to butter him up? Is he pleased when we flatter and fawn upon him like groveling serfs? Are we trying to turn him into a fathead? I can picture him listening to the prayer above and growling, "Yes, yes, yes, I know all that. Get to the point. What do you want now?"

### **Conversational prayer: simply talking to God**

One of the best kinds of prayer is conversational prayer, which means simply talking to God. This brings us back to the question we asked at the beginning: What should we talk to him about?

Anything and everything: whatever is going on, both in our minds and in the world. We can discuss knotty theological questions with him if we like, or any doubts that we may have. We can ask for his advice and guidance. Adults can talk to him about their families and their jobs; children can talk about their friends and their schoolwork. We can talk about our hobbies, sports, and even politics. I know a devotee who, as an adolescent, used to discuss current events with God. It turned out to be excellent preparation

for his Social Studies classes.

A wonderful embodiment of conversational prayer was Brother Lawrence, a 17<sup>th</sup>-century Carmelite monk whose writings have been compiled into a little book called *The Practice of the Presence of God*. He cultivated God's presence by constantly conversing with him. He was a simple and humble man who worked as a cook in the monastery kitchen, and described himself as "a clumsy lummoX who broke everything." (*The Practice of the Presence of God*, by Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, translated by John J. Delaney, Image Books, Doubleday, New York, 1996, p. xxi.)

### **The lummoX and the casserole**

Whether at work or at rest, Brother Lawrence talked to God about everything, all the time, and experienced a constant sense of his presence. I picture him as a big, burly guy, lumbering around the kitchen in his apron, juggling the pots and pans and talking to God. I've often wondered how these conversations, which may have been somewhat one-sided, might have gone. Perhaps they went something like this:

"O Lord, please help me to make this casserole a tasty one. I want it to please the monks. Should I add more salt? What do you think, Lord? ... All right,

it's salty enough. A bit of pepper, then. ... Good, it tastes good. Into the oven, then. ... Out of the oven and onto the table. And, Lord, please help me not to drop it, clumsy lummoX that I am."

Some people will scoff at this kind of prayer as nothing more than childish chatter. But Jesus reminds us that we have to become like children to enter the Kingdom of God, and our minds are always chattering. Why not funnel such chatter into a constant conversation with God?

### **Does God listen to simple-minded fools prattling about casseroles?**

"Well," people will say, "God will get bored. Do you think he has nothing to do but listen to some simple-minded fool prattling about casseroles? God has more important things to do with his time. He's got the entire universe to run."

And that's where they're wrong. God does have the universe to run, but he's concerned with the microcosm as well as the macrocosm. He's intimately involved in both. He has a keen interest in the lives of his devotees, and doesn't mind being bored. In fact, he likes being bored. Whenever a devotee reaches out and talks to him, God is delighted.

How do I know this? Because it makes sense. He wouldn't be

much of a God if he weren't concerned about the things that concern his devotees. He won't care if the devotee's prattle is boring. What he values is not so much the prattle, but the reaching out. After all, how many people reach out to him? How many bother to talk to him at all?

### **Sri Ramakrishna shows the way**

Sri Ramakrishna was the king of devotees, and he really knew how to pray. There was nothing formal or rehearsed about his prayers. They were artless and spontaneous. I've often wished that they could be compiled into a book, so that anybody who wanted to learn how to pray could read it and find out.

We know that we can approach God as a beloved master, as a close friend, as our father or mother, or even as our own child. Sri Ramakrishna assures us that God is our nearest and dearest. And that's how Sri Ramakrishna approached him. He was never shy or diffident; he never held anything back.

His prayers were spontaneous outpourings of emotion, passionate and intense. He prayed the way a child cries out for its mother. Before his first vision of Kali, his only prayer was for her to reveal herself. After his first vision, his only prayer was for her

to reveal herself again and again, and to stay with him forever. In all his subsequent prayers, he conversed with her the same way a child converses with its mother: now cajoling, now weeping, now satisfied, now laughing, now grateful, now philosophical, now petulant and complaining. You can't beat Sri Ramakrishna when it comes to praying.

Above all, Sri Ramakrishna prayed for bhakti, pure love for God. "Mother, here is Thy knowledge and here is Thy ignorance. Take them both, and give me only pure love. Here is Thy holiness and here is Thy unholiness. Take them both, Mother, and give me pure love. Here is Thy good and here is Thy evil. Take them both, Mother, and give me pure love. Here is Thy righteousness and here is Thy unrighteousness. Take them both, Mother, and give me pure love." (*The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, New York, Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1947, p. 312.)

By his example, Sri Ramakrishna taught us how to transform petitionary prayer into a constant reaching for God. If we're going to ask for anything, Sri Ramakrishna says, we should ask for bhakti. For it is through bhakti that God is most easily attained; and by asking him for bhakti, we ask him for the greatest gift of all: himself.

## READER'S FORUM RESPONSE to Question in the Fall Edition

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### Our question was based on a quotation from Sri Ramakrishna about Mother:

"You may feel a thousand times that it is all (Her) magic; but you are still under the control of the Divine Mother. You cannot escape Her. You are not free. You must do what she makes you do. A man attains Brahmajnana only when it is given to him by the Adyasakti, the Divine Mother. Then alone does he see the whole thing as magic; otherwise not.

"As long as the slightest trace of ego remains, one lives under the jurisdiction of the Adyasakti. One is under Her sway. One cannot go beyond Her."

— *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, p. 460, in conversation with M.

**Question: Sri Ramakrishna's uncompromising statement seems to completely set aside any notion of free will. What is your reaction?**

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### Responses:

Ramakrishna said: "You are not free... A man attains Brahmajnana only when it is given to him by the Adyasakti... As long as the slightest trace of ego remains, one lives under the jurisdiction of the Adyasakti." Swami Prabhavananda used to quote Maharaj (Swami Brahmananda) as saying that all you see is nothing but the reactions of gunas to each other. This is what the ego is all about. One is constantly led by the neck by tendencies – reacting happily, sadly, angrily, and so on. *That* is our lack of freedom, *that* is the control of the Adyasakti. Swami Ramakrishnananda reminds us,

"All Maya is localized in ego. [*Story of a Dedicated Life*, p. 183]," But we *do* have the freedom to slowly and slowly change our reactions, our tendencies, and reduce the ego to naught. *This* is what free will is all about, the voice of the Inner Controller, the Atman.

— Contributed by Edith Tipple,  
Santa Barbara CA

Sri Ramakrishna sometimes sang, "O Mother, all is done after Thine own sweet will... Thou workest Thine own work; men only call it theirs."

— Contributed by Judy Blanco,  
Mecca CA



**“The Mother of the Universe” by Jan Zaremba**

Original is a large oil painting done by Zaremba in 1992, when he lived near the Hollywood Center of the Vedanta Society of Southern California ([janzaremba.com](http://janzaremba.com))

# Swami Prabhavananda on the Life of Holy Mother - Part 2

Transcribed by Swami Krishnananda (1904-97)

Compiled by Gopal Stavig

*This is the second part of a two-part article. The first section, published in our Fall 2009 edition (Vol. 15, #3), is a lightly edited transcription of a Sunday lecture by Swami Prabhavananda entitled "Holy Mother." It was given September 16, 1973, in the Hollywood Vedanta Society Temple. Material for part two was drawn from 13 other lectures on Holy Mother given by Swami Prabhavananda between 1948 and 1975. The entire article with a few changes formerly appeared in the Bulletin of the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture (Dec. 2007), pp. 532-42.*

Swami Prabhavananda (1893-1976) founded the Vedanta Society of Southern California in 1929. He was born in the village of Surmanagar and brought up in Vishnupur, about twenty miles west of Holy Mother's hometown of Jayrambati. The swami met eleven of the sixteen monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, many of whom he lived with and knew intimately, and from the disciples he heard numerous stories about Holy Mother. In addition, he met Swami Sadananda, Mahendra Nath Gupta, Girish Ghosh, and Sister Nivedita.

## **A Compilation from 13 Lectures on the Life of Holy Mother (1948-1975)**

Coming into the presence of Holy Mother, even for a second, for a moment, was enough. You touch her feet and that is enough. This has been experienced by hundreds and thousands of people. And what happened? Their lives were completely transformed. If one is prepared, if one is ready, then the reaction to that transmission comes immediately. Otherwise, it has a delayed reaction. This is a truth, a fact, that whoever came and had her blessing; their lives were completely transformed. I have seen the sinner become a saint. Not by lectures, not by gathering information about spirituality or religion, but in silence.<sup>1</sup>

Swami Vivekananda used to speak about Holy Mother this way: "Mother lives in that transcendental consciousness continuously and yet keeps her normal consciousness." Swamiji said about Holy Mother, "She is the living Durga."<sup>2</sup> I will tell you how Swami Vivekananda came to this

country. First, he had the vision of Ramakrishna who wanted him to come here. But Vivekananda thought, well, I must corroborate this vision and who can corroborate it? So he went to Holy Mother without saying anything about the vision. He simply asked her permission—would she permit him to go to America to preach?

Holy Mother's first thought, "No, he is such a young boy to be in a foreign country." So she was thinking of not allowing him to come and was going to write him, when Sri Ramakrishna came and held her arm and said, "No, ask him to go." So she blessed Vivekananda and encouraged him to come to this country.<sup>2</sup>

**Holy Mother held no official position—she was the Mother of the whole organization.**

After the passing of Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda organized the Ramakrishna Math and Mission. Though Holy Mother held no official position, she was the Mother of the whole organization. Whenever there would arise any doubt or difficulty or any problem, she was the final answer to everything.

Swami Vivekananda said that with all their spiritual struggles and with the attainment of samadhi, the highest truth, whenever there would be any subtle prob-

lems in spiritual life that they could not answer, Holy Mother in her simple way would dissolve all doubts and bring the solution. As Swamiji used to say, "It is a miracle how that simple country woman knows everything." Her teachings, as I said, were mostly in silence because there was that power in her.<sup>3</sup>

I heard this from her attendant Rashbehari [Swami Arupananda]: Many years after the passing of Sri Ramakrishna, most of the disciples were in Benares for a celebration. Holy Mother also was in Benares, and she gave some money to a disciple to buy gerua cloths for all the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. Then she said, "Get a silk cloth for Rakhali." Rashbehari asked, "But why? They are all your sons, are they not? Why something special for Rakhali?" And she replied, "Yes, they are all my sons, but Rakhali is my son."<sup>4</sup>

In Benares, when Maharaj saluted Holy Mother as he came down the stairs, Golap Ma asked him, "Mother wants to know why you have to worship her?" Then he danced like a little boy and said, "Because she holds the key to the knowledge of Brahman."<sup>5</sup>

They all went to visit Saranath near Benares. Saranath is the place where they went underground, dug and found the

relics of Buddha, and then they built a Buddhist temple there. So Maharaj went by motorcar and Holy Mother went in a horse carriage to Saranath. Maharaj somehow realized that when Mother returns by horse carriage, there will be a spook on the side of the road. The horse will shy and the carriage will fall down. Maharaj told Holy Mother, "You take the motorcar and I'll go in the horse carriage." As they were coming by carriage, the horse shied and it fell down. Of course, there was not much injury to anyone. Holy Mother remarked, "You see, Rakhhal was ready to sacrifice his life for my sake."<sup>6</sup>

One time, I think it was on the birthday of Ramakrishna, Holy Mother came to the Belur Math to attend the celebration. As she arrived, my Master, Swami Brahmananda went into ecstasy, into deep samadhi. Just think, just feeling her presence he went into deep samadhi. All the other brother disciples were a little concerned about him, because he stayed in that samadhi for a long time, and nobody could bring him out of that deep contemplation. Then Holy Mother received a report about it and said, "Do not be concerned about him, he

will come out all right." Then after a while she came herself, touched his hand and said, "My son, I have brought some sacramental food for you. Wake up and eat." And immediately Maharaj came back to normal consciousness and prostrated himself before her.<sup>7</sup>



Swami  
Prabhavananda  
(1893-1976)

Maharaj once told me that no one can really understand Mother unless she reveals herself to that person. She is still living, and she reveals herself even to those who are not worthy. She showed her unbounded grace and appeared before a disciple of Maharaj in this country. The whole world disappeared, and there was only Mother and what power she bore.<sup>8</sup>

Swami Premananda said to us, "The poison that we cannot swallow, we send to Holy Mother. That is, the people who come to us and we cannot help, we send them to Holy Mother." One time a man went to her with a letter from my Master, Swami Brahmananda. Maharaj had requested Holy Mother to bless this man. As Holy Mother saw that person she said, "Oh, Rakhhal also sends a man like that!" You see, he was so impure! But of course, Holy Mother accepted him, blessed him, and transformed his life.<sup>9</sup>

Swami Trigunatita is regarded as a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna and was the founder of our Vedanta center in San Francisco. There is a story told about him that he was sent to Holy Mother by Sri Ramakrishna, who advised him to be initiated by Holy Mother. Why did he send him to Holy Mother? Sri Ramakrishna repeated a couplet from the Vaishnava scriptures, which expressed the idea that Radha, the divine Shakti of Krishna, has greater power than Krishna.<sup>10</sup>

### **Additional Incidents**

One time in Sister Nivedita's house, she invited Holy Mother to listen to Easter music. Though Holy Mother did not understand the words, she caught the spirit of the resurrection of Christ and went into samadhi listening to the music. At another time Sister Nivedita was explaining to her the Western ceremony of marriage, and she was repeating the vows that they take. As Holy Mother listened to those words, she said, "These are righteous words." You see how appreciative she was of everything!<sup>11</sup>

She was conscious all the time that she was the Mother of the Universe. At the same time you could see that she was just like your own mother, a simple little woman. You know Josephine MacLeod, Tantine said, "I never saw anything in her

except that she was a very simple good woman."<sup>12</sup>

Sri Ramakrishna did not have too many disciples, but Holy Mother made at least a thousand disciples. Here is the peculiarity, a most unique thing: no Avatar, no Divine Incarnation was worshiped while he was living the way Holy Mother was worshiped. She was worshiped as the Divine Mother, as Mother Goddess, God the Mother. But you see, she still remained a simple countrywoman.<sup>13</sup>

One disciple once asked her, "Are you our real Mother?" She said, "Yes." And this is a real relationship. Holy Mother is nearer and we have a closer relationship with her, than with our own mother who gave us birth, from whom we got this life. She is our Eternal Mother, more than our own mother. This is the way she made us feel.<sup>14</sup>

One time somebody asked her, "Mother why do you let such people come to you?" Her reply was, "If the child gets into the mud, what does the mother do? She just wipes and bathes the child and takes the child on her lap."<sup>15</sup>

I know another story; there was a so-called untouchable who came to Holy Mother for initiation. But she said, "You know this is a village, people will think

badly of it. Come to Calcutta, then I shall initiate you." Then this untouchable said with great force, "Yes, when you were in danger, then you accepted the dacoit and his wife as your parents, but now..." Then Holy Mother told the untouchable, "All right, you stay here. This is Shiva-puri. Anybody who stays here for three days and three nights will be purified. And then I shall initiate you." He agreed and received initiation. She looked equally upon all.<sup>16</sup>

### **Thousands of people would come and touch her feet**

The public would come and touch her feet, hundreds and thousands of people standing in rows. Afterwards she would place her feet in cold water because, she said, "Some people come and touch my feet, and it feels like hot charcoal fire." You know what they call vicarious atonement. That's what it was; she used to take the sins of others. And then some disciple said, "But Mother, we will not allow others to do that." Holy Mother smiled and said, "Do you think our Lord came just to eat sweets?"<sup>17</sup>

There is one incident about which I knew personally. In our hometown of Vishnupur, there was a man who was really shunned by society because of his bad character. He was a great drunkard and did all kinds of

other things. When Holy Mother came to the railway station, this man knew about her. And so did another man, a very good soul, who was regarded as a holy man in our hometown. Both of these men came to the railway station to receive Holy Mother. This holy man had an ashrama retreat on the bank of a lake. Years later when the [Southern California] nuns and Krishna [Swami Krishnananda] went with me to India, we stayed in that place by the lake. He made arrangements for Holy Mother to stay at his ashrama, and the other man who was regarded socially as very bad, also made arrangements in his home for Holy Mother to stay.

Now, both of these men went to Holy Mother and prayed that she may come to their home. She said, "No, I'll go with you," meaning with the immoral man. This man felt that he was so bad he would not even touch the feet of Holy Mother. He would stand at a distance and say, "No, I am not worthy to touch Mother's feet, I have done so many sinful acts." And of course, we know how the life of this man was completely transformed. He became holy, one of the great devotees. Any time Holy Mother came and passed by this hometown of ours, she stayed in that house. And now that house has become a sacred spot, a place of pilgrimage.<sup>18</sup>

**A woman who had lived a very wicked life heard about Holy Mother and came to see her**

One time a woman who had lived a very wicked life became very repentant. She heard about Holy Mother and came to see her. But she did not dare enter the room where Holy Mother was seated. She stood outside and prostrated herself. Mother said, "Come in, child." The woman said, "No, Mother, I am a wicked woman, I am so impure, I've lived such a bad life. I would not dare to come into your presence. From a distance I will bow down."

What did Mother do? Mother got up, took her by the hand and brought her in and said, "You have become repentant." Then instantly she initiated her and of course this woman's life was transformed. There are many such incidents.<sup>19</sup>

One time a fellow came and just struck his forehead on the big toe of Holy Mother in such a way that it pained her. And you know that fellow said, "I did that purposely so that Mother would remember that pain and remember me."<sup>20</sup>

At the time there was a boycott of English goods. One of her brahmachari attendants was asked by Holy Mother to go and buy some English cloth for someone in her family. The young

brahmachari said, "But Mother, don't you know that we have boycotted English goods? I cannot go and buy these." Then Mother said, "Yes, what you are doing is all right, you should boycott. But you see, the English people are also as much my children as you are. I cannot boycott." She made no distinction giving that same universal love to all.<sup>21</sup>

**Mother said of President Wilson: "They speak with their lips, they do not speak from their heart."**

This reminds me of another rather political incident. You see, one of the boys reported to Holy Mother how President Woodrow Wilson was trying to form the League of Nations. He was trying to prevent war in the future. She didn't know President Wilson, but as soon as everything was told to her Mother quietly remarked, "They speak with their lips, they do not speak from their heart."<sup>22</sup>

She said, "I must be very old. I saw my father die, and I saw my Mother die. I saw so many die, so I must be very old." But she did not mention that her husband had died.<sup>23</sup>

Just lately I found a letter of Holy Mother that came into my hands. Of course, she did not write it herself, but she used to dictate them. I mention this because there is a wonderful truth there. A disciple of hers who was

a swami was living at Mayavati, one of our monasteries in the Himalayas. This monastery is dedicated to the practice of the nondualistic aspect of Vedanta.

**There could be no worship, not even offering flowers**

There could be no shrine room, no altar, no worship, not even offering flowers to the picture. That is the strict rule that is followed in this monastery. This swami wrote to her, "Mother, if I stay here I have to practice nondualism and I am not a nondualist. I want to love God. What should I do?"

Then Holy Mother wrote this letter to him, and I got a copy of that letter recently. Holy Mother wrote, "No, my son, you are not a dualist. Our master, our guru," referring to Sri Ramakrishna, "he was a nondualist. All of his disciples are nondualists, you are also a nondualist." There is no quarrel or fight or difference, between loving God, worshiping God, and nondualism.<sup>24</sup>

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**Endnotes for Part 2**

Dates refer to when the referenced lecture was given. Email stavig@earthlink.net for details on how to get a copy.

<sup>1</sup> Jan. 11, 1959, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Jan. 11, 1959, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Dec. 19, 1948, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Dec. 4, 1960, p. 1 and Sept. 21, 1975, p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> Sept. 22, 1974, p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> Sept. 22, 1974, pp. 11-12.

<sup>7</sup> Dec. 4, 1960, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Oct. 7, 1973, pp. 13-14.

<sup>9</sup> Dec. 31, 1961, p. 5 and Dec. 12, 1965, p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> Dec. 16, 1951, p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> Dec. 31, 1950, p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> Dec. 9, 1962, p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Dec. 12, 1965, p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> Dec. 12, 1965, p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> Dec. 31, 1950, p. 3 and Dec. 11, 1960, p. 5.

<sup>16</sup> Sept. 22, 1974, pp. 5-6.

<sup>17</sup> Dec. 9, 1962, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> Jan. 8, 1956, p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> Dec. 16, 1951, p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> Dec. 16, 1962, p. 2.

<sup>21</sup> Dec. 31, 1950, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> Dec. 31, 1950, p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> Sept. 21, 1975, p. 11.

<sup>24</sup> Dec. 19, 1948, p. 8.

**Readers:** Please send us your articles, essays and poems. We also want reviews of books and other media that you find interesting — or publications, films, etc., on which you think your fellow readers shouldn't waste their time and money. While we can't promise to print every submission, we look forward to your participation.

— **The Editors**

This article is based on "Sri Sarada Devi in the West" published in **Eternal Mother** (Kolkata: Sri Sarada Math, 2004). Adaptation and reprint by permission.

## Sri Sarada Devi's Impact on Western Devotees of Ramakrishna Vedanta

Amrita M. Salm, Ph.D.

Sri Sarada Devi, familiarly known as Holy Mother to devotees of the Ramakrishna Movement, came into greater prominence in the West after her birth centenary in 1953-54. This was a fascinating development for the western cultural mindset, so infused with the male principle of God through centuries of Judaic-Christian influence.

What is Holy Mother's appeal? How do Westerners relate to this shy, humble, veiled woman who lived most of her life in a small village in India over a hundred years ago? Are we seeing the fulfillment of a long, unsatisfied need for the Motherhood of God? As renowned scholar Christine Downing wrote, "To be fed only male images of the divine is to be badly malnourished. We are starved for images that recognize the sacredness of the feminine and the complexity, richness and nurturing power of female energy." (*The Goddess: Mythological Images of the Feminine*, 1999, p. 4) She further states, "We need images and myths through which we can see

who we are and what we might become." (*Ibid*, p. 2)

To determine some parameters of Sri Sarada Devi's appeal to modern men and women living in the West, a survey was conducted in February – March of 2003. Three hundred thirty-six (336) devotees associated with the Ramakrishna-Vedanta Movement who live in the United States, South America, and Europe completed the survey. Of those, 32% were born in the United States and the same percentage in India; 21% were not born in the US or India; the other 6% did not answer that question. Almost 34% were between 45-59 years old; another 31% were between 60-74 years old. The majority of the survey participants (51.2%) had been associated with the Movement for twenty or more years.

Some may consider it ludicrous to place spiritual personalities under a microscope and try to analyze them — it's fair to say that the relationship between a devotee and his/her spiritual ideal cannot adequately be described

in finite terms. Nevertheless, the survey was conducted as research based on empirical data from a relatively large and diverse sample. Its findings present a concise and scientific point of view. The results are intriguing because this is the first time devotees in western countries were asked about their relationship with Holy Mother. They responded affirmatively, sharing remarkable insights on their beliefs about her.

### **The society in which we live**

Social psychologists tell us that many people in the West suffer from feelings of alienation, depression, a sense of meaninglessness, lack of close family connections, and the pressures of living in a highly competitive society with little or no job security. Approximately 45% of American children are raised by only one of their parents and endure a continual lack of security and mothering (Deborah Belle, *The After-school Lives of Children: Alone and with Others while Parents Work*, 1999).

These children grow up with few financial and educational advantages, inconsistent adult behavior, excessive freedom of choice and independence, and minimum discipline and supervision in their early childhood. Often, employees rather than parents or relatives provide most of their care.



A pencil sketch of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi by Saptarshi Ghosh  
Image courtesy of S. Ghosh and  
Wikipedia Commons

Typically, a philosophical or spiritual perspective, or awareness of the unity or oneness of existence that would offer a deeper, more cohesive meaning in life and a sense of community and connection to something larger than one's self, is absent from western consciousness. Carl Jung wrote that a majority of his middle-

aged patients suffered from a lack of meaning in their lives (*Man and His Symbols*, 1964).

For the fortunate few, God provides an enduring support in what Swami Vivekananda called "this prison, our Iron Age." When asked about herself, Holy Mother responded, "My child, you know that Sri Ramakrishna used to see

the Divine Mother in everyone. He left me behind this time to demonstrate the Motherhood of God." It seems evident from our survey's results that Holy Mother meets this need. She possesses the qualities that Western men and women need to become better, more conscious human beings, attain peace within themselves and in the world, and ultimately to understand their real nature.

### **Survey results**

A large majority of survey participants (90%) meditate on and/or pray to Holy Mother daily, often or sometimes; 73% think she guides them; 89% believe she is relevant today; and 68% feel Holy Mother represents compassion incarnate. Interestingly, participants reported that cultural factors seem to be of little significance in understanding Holy Mother. In a follow-up interview one participant said that, "Holy Mother, the Universal Mother, is timeless, beyond her culture and circumstances... Holy Mother is approachable (because) she led a life that women can relate to. The care she gave her niece and the abuse she took from her is an experience we can relate to, whether we've had it or seen it in the lives around us."

Just over half of respondents (51%) were initially drawn to

Holy Mother's life and dedication. These results were the same for all categories of marital status (9% of respondents were monastic; 31% were unmarried; and 54% were married. A little over 6% did not respond to the question on marital status).

Gender did not seem to be a significant factor in how most of the survey's questions were answered. One hundred seventy-five (175, or 52%) of those who participated were women; 134 or 40% were men; and 8% of respondents did not answer the question on gender.

### **Conclusions**

The spiritual revolution that began with Sri Ramakrishna appears to be manifest to its fullest degree in the life and teachings of Holy Mother and the influence she has on western devotees. Swami Vishuddhananda, the eighth president of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission said, "Do you know now the Ramakrishna Age is over and the Sarada Age has begun? Now Sri Ramakrishna is lying down on the ground like Shiva and Sarada Devi, like Kali, is standing and dancing upon him." Pravrajika Shraddhaprana, third president of Sri Sarada Math said, "Surprisingly enough, a great deal of the spiritual awareness in the West

is coming more through Sarada Devi than through Sri Ramakrishna or Swami Vivekananda... She looked after the welfare not only of Sri Ramakrishna but also all his disciples and all those connected with the Ramakrishna Movement."

**Study results relevant today—  
Mother's life is a prescription**

Although this study was done seven years ago, the results are still relevant today. The results of this research prove that Sri Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother, continues to maintain, sustain, support, and strengthen all who turn to her. The implications of the survey results are clear: Holy Mother is relevant to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Our findings showed that the longer one is associated with the Ramakrishna Movement the closer one feels to her, and the more one is likely to pray to and meditate on her and feel her guidance.

Modern psychologists emphasize the importance of a spiritual perspective, and devotees indicate Holy Mother's life is a prescription—without negative side-effects—that we in the West need today. We need to relate to Holy Mother and by knowing Her know more of ourselves. When more of us become aware of her life and teachings a tremendous spiritual awakening can occur.

**It Only Takes One  
To Remember**

*(written in mountain exile)*

It only takes one  
to remember  
the scattered, black-oiled  
seeds, that  
disappeared temporarily  
as darkness fell  
on the earth;

it only takes one  
to return, in a new  
morning, freshened  
by the mountain  
breezes,  
brilliant in an  
Eastern sky;

it only takes one  
bright, blue plummaged  
bird, squawking with  
life, brimming with  
hope (recalling those  
scattered seeds),

to gulp and consume  
them, red throat moving  
steadily up and down—  
its mercy quickly  
swallowing the night,  
that rolls the wheel,  
and returns the light.

—Judith, *Hermit of Sarada*

# Passing the Torchlight

## A Memoir of Swami Pramathananda

Former president of the Vedanta Society of Toronto, Canada

### Swami Parameshananda

Any celebration has another side — its polar opposite or calamity. The passing of Revered Swami Pramathanandaji on August 12, 2003 was indeed both. It was a sad day to grieve the loss of a spiritual leader and brother monk; at the same time serenity and joy emanated from the body he had left behind.

The swami was a profound influence on many people. His wise counsel and sure advice are still of great help to his students, friends, and fellow monastics. Before coming from India to America in 1982, he held important posts as head of a hospital and educational institutions. He also was selected by two venerable Presidents of the Ramakrishna Order as private secretary, which he said was “the great inspiration” of his life!



Swami Pramathananda/Photo courtesy Irene Borins Ash, from her book *Treasured Legacies—Older & Still Great*, Second Story Press, 2003

In America, Swami Pramathananda first served as Assistant Minister at the Vedanta Society of Sacramento, California. He was there for seven years before coming to Toronto, Canada in 1989 as the founding Swami at a newly purchased residential center.

### A frustrating illness

When he became sick in late 2002 it was a great ordeal. Up until then he seemed inexhaustible, running the Toronto Society and serving as president of many budding Vedanta Societies throughout Canada. His doctors often commented on his exceptionally youthful vital signs. When the swami started complaining of night sweats and nausea, his physicians asked him

to be admitted to the hospital for further testing.

He became frustrated when several months went by without any diagnosis. Since I was the only monastic brother readily available, Swami Pramathanandaji began to give me more responsibility; I was even offered the opportunity to lecture on the Bhagavad Gita. As news of Swami's illness spread, he would say, "I will be fine! Nothing to worry about, keep up your prayers, do your duties, finish them quickly, and go to the shrine regularly."

Phone calls, always plentiful, now increased. Through all this he would quietly remind devotees that a measure of patience is required, some sacrifice helps, and only almighty grace will keep one in perfect balance. The idea, he said, is to first attune yourself, then seek to discover the abundance of joy and inspiration that are antidotes for problems encountered along the path.

"The Bhagavad Gita says we will have to become more and more the silent, discriminating observer. Undesirable thoughts and desires are bound to come," he said; "immediately withdraw your mind from there." He taught that a meditative mind purified by constant absorption eventually draws to itself, by its own will

power, the nectar (amrit) of divine communion.

"This state of mind is its highest and best. One becomes sweet like a child—quiet, indrawn, polite and serene." He said these qualities get ingrained by living for others: by serving monastic brothers and devotees in need, doing the center's weekly accounts, or cooking a savory meal for members of the household.

Finally, in February 2003, after several months of suffering in and out of hospital, pancreatic cancer was found to be the cause of his illness. He was relieved to get this news. "Make tea, make tea," he told the two regular attendants at the hospital, who were sunk with grief. "At long last I know the cause of my suffering, now prepare nice tea! I have to write and inform Belur Math this news. Do you not know Sri Ramakrishna had the same illness? That too gives consolation."

During this time, when women devotees were discouraged from visiting the hospital, one prominent lady brought and served a variety of snacks and cakes to all the staff on the floor, and gave them token gifts. Other women would be persistent and sometimes succeed in having a few moments darshan in the swami's room.

## **Glimpses of life at the Toronto Center**

Under Swami's guidance, Toronto devotees studied various scriptures—the Upanishads, Sankaracarya and our own Ramakrishna, Holy Mother, and Swami Vivekananda literature. Once on a normal winter day before the Friday evening discourse the Swami asked me if we should cancel, "because nobody will come." I thought, 'how does he know that?' The class was held as usual in its regular place, and sure enough I was the only one physically present. I enjoyed that class more than all the others when the hall was full. The great joy of it! I felt like a soldier in Swami Vivekananda's army, grateful for the opportunity — so rare in the world — to have my life's character and future sannyasa heated to molten and solidified.

Swami Pramathanandaji had a way with young people. He would inspire dialog, calling the students together after a class for further discussion and giving us a piece or two of candy to enhance concentration. Bringing like-minded souls into a bond of spiritual friendship helps create and maintain a harmonious totality. A group of friends nurtured in this way indeed promotes a positive outlook and strengthens the heart and soul of a center.

The original location of the

Vedanta Center of Toronto (from 1989 to 1995) was in a residential neighborhood. It was therefore illegal to host public programs; often, however, there were gatherings in excess of building code. This was a constant source of worry to the swami — if something such as a fire ever happened he would be held responsible for breaking legal restrictions. The Center had to rent a hall for Sunday lectures and special celebrations.

Clearly, a new home for the society was needed, so for a couple of years a group of members kept up a regular search. Finally they found a suitable place in a quiet corner of the city, a few minutes walk from the Humber River. The location was wonderful — picnic grounds, soccer fields, a pavilion, and foot and bicycle paths on both sides of the river offered great recreation. Professional realtors sympathetic to the Ramakrishna Mission's ideals helped the Center secure the place at a quarter of its market value. Revered Swami Prabuddhanandaji called from San Francisco to comment, "I see Sri Ramakrishna has brought a building ready-made for your purpose."

Anywhere from 200 to 400 members and friends would come to at least 12 celebrations a year, somewhat fewer to Sunday lectures and weekly discourses. With

this large congregation there was a great responsibility to organize and maintain many departments for the Center. Business meetings were, as they are everywhere and always, a challenge. The swami worked skillfully with various personalities — he could be sharp when necessary — and successfully handled difficult situations as they arose.

### **The end came quickly**

The swami's inevitable end came rather quickly; however, he did have a couple of months of remission. He took this opportunity to organize the Vedanta Vidya Mandir (Sunday school) and was present during its first few meetings. He was active up to the end — passing notes, correcting emails, and inquiring about both young and old students.

Swami Kripamayanandaji was sent from the Ramakrishna Order's headquarters at Belur Math to take charge. He no doubt received a shock when he first saw the ailing Swami in such an emaciated, weakened condition. Kripamayananda's jovial personality was not dimmed, however, and his melodious chanting of Sanskrit gave solace to us all during his first few weeks of residence.

Swami Pramathanandaji passed away just two weeks after the new swami's arrival.

Kripamayananda immediately received overwhelming support and encouragement from all the membership and from his monastic brothers. During the last public meeting that Revered Swami Pramathananda could attend, he wrote a note saying, "I see our new Swami Kripamayananda has won your hearts!"

Later, becoming weaker by the hour, Swami Pramathanandaji would take the minimum medication effective for maintaining tolerable pain and maximum consciousness. When emergency medical technicians arrived and found him gasping for breath they told him his time was short. The swami wrote and passed a note to them: "Not afraid." He then wrote: "Give snacks, sweets, and tea to all the medical team." When he left for the hospital, he wrote, "I will be back in the evening." Sure enough, at about 11:30 pm the emergency medical team returned him to the Center.

A couple of days later he passed away peacefully in his own familiar room. Personal attendants took care of the minutest details of bathing him, changing his cloth, and carrying the cot to the meditation hall. By coincidence a musician came just at that time and appropriate songs graced the somber occasion.

The swami's funeral was well

organized. Devotees and admirers had been informed, and more than 500 visitors came to pay their last respects. Several faith groups remembered him with flowers and other gifts for the center. For several hours Swami Pramathanandaji's body lay in state while the audience offered songs and chants; then, on the same day, cremation was done in a small mortuary chapel near the center. Eighty cars were organized into a procession. Flowers bedecked the casket. Songs and hymns enhanced the sublimity of the occasion. When his casket was finally lowered into the oven the singing of farewells stopped and became simply chanting of OM to cover tearful emotions.

Back at the center lunch was served. Spirits were refreshed, gladdened to have sent off a truly deserving soul. However, that was not all: The flowers had to be collected and distributed to nursing homes around the city; the kitchen had to be mopped up; accounts needed to be updated; and the center put back in proper order.

Suddenly, at 4:15 that afternoon, Toronto's infamous "black-out" occurred; nearly 80% of the greater Toronto area was without power. Guests still on their way home noticed all the traffic lights had gone out. Ten million people were affected — many of them

were without electricity for several days. Scores of local citizens aided the elderly to cross streets, stood at corners directing traffic, and helped prevent looting!

One might think this outpouring of service to one another was some sort of miracle, or perhaps simply a reflection of a perfected soul who had reached home. In any event, our dear departed Swami Pramathananda certainly left us in a memorable fashion.

### **Offerings**

A flower for each one who comes to your open door, Lord.

A flower for each one who stands by your open door and says, "Come to me, come to me, come to me," offering to break this world's chain that binds us down to ignorance, suffering and death.

A flower for each one who comes forward to walk the path that you have struck through this jungle world.

—Shankara (Gary Kemper)

# Sri Sarada Devi, The Holy Mother

By the Vedanta Society of Berkeley, with guidance  
from Swami Aparananda

Whenever a remarkable person commands the universal respect, reverence and adoration of the religious world, one knows with certainty that it is due to the wonderful manifestation of divine power present in that soul from birth. Such a person, who lives only for the sake of others, is the embodiment of the highest spiritual values and exemplary virtues, manifesting uncompromising love, affection, sympathy and compassion for all. The continual manifestation at an exalted level of those values and virtues that are so essential to the upkeep of social and personal life is not easy. A special power and inspiration is required to maintain and retain those higher spiritual qualities. There must be a basic source from which such inspiration springs out and a proximity to that source in the person who, in presence and action, manifests its power.

When people recognize that source and feel it in their life, they gain appreciation for that ideal and are drawn to it. This power goes on influencing a person's heart and soul, and it never ends. It takes time of course, but when a person comes in contact with such a high spiritual soul, a kind of innate belief begins to work in that person's life in such a way that spiritual help results from turning towards that power.

Sri Sarada Devi is such a high spiritual soul. If we believe that there is a relation between human life and divine life – between secular life and spiritual life – and if we accept that a meaningful life is one in which one seeks higher ideals and goals for humanity, then we would like to know about someone whose own life can offer guidance. Sri

Sarada Devi's life provides the inspiration that helps transcend human perceptions and limitations.

An understanding of the meaning of her life will necessarily result in a sense of security – a basic feeling that life has acquired a special goal. There is a special meaning associated with the acquisition of a higher spiritual goal, one which brings a feeling of satisfaction and completeness. Bringing forward this feeling, this overpowering inspiration, into one's own life, is the fundamental service that a spiritual person can give. It is indeed the demonstration of the great power of spirituality.

Sri Sarada Devi was the spiritual consort of Sri Ramakrishna, who was the teacher of Swami Vivekananda and the founder of the monastic order that bears his name. Sri Ramakrishna is considered by many to be the modern prophet of India. Sri Sarada Devi played a key role in continuing the work of this extraordinary religious teacher. As time passes, more and more people from all over the world, from a variety of cultural backgrounds and from diverse religious traditions, are taking an interest in understanding her, in knowing her, in discovering her supreme moral and spiritual excellence, and in coming in contact with her divine nature.

Sri Sarada Devi was born on December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1853, in the remote village of Jayrambati in the district of Bankura in West Bengal, India. She was brought up under the care of her parents, Ram Chandra Mukhopadhyaya and Shyamasundari Devi, in the religious atmosphere of the village. Her parents were pious

orthodox Brahmins devoted to their traditional religions and social customs. They named her Saradamani Devi, or Sarada in short form.

In the course of time, Sarada had a sister and five brothers. She grew up as a gentle and guileless girl, adorned with moral excellence, and an affectionate attitude towards others. Because of Sarada's loving nature, she often worked as peacemaker with her playmates. Though young, she never withdrew from shared family duties such as helping her mother in the kitchen, picking cotton in the fields, feeding the cattle, and looking after her younger sister and brothers. She obtained elementary education from the village school, which later helped her read religious literature such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. From a very young age, her main interest in life was to become acquainted with the spiritual culture of India through local religious activities.

In the early stages of her life, Sarada developed a strong compassionate feeling for others. This feeling soon found an opportunity to spring into action. During her early years there was a terrible drought in the region, which brought about widespread scarcity of food grains. Sarada's parents opened their kitchen to the famine stricken families. It was observed that Sarada was helping in feeding the people in spite of the limitations imposed by her young age.

Days, months, and years passed, when at last the unseen hand of the Providence brought Sarada to Sri Ramakrishna.

Sri Ramakrishna was born on February 18, 1836, in the village of Kamarpukur, in the district of Hooghly, West Bengal, a place three miles from Jayrambati. Sri Ramakrishna was known to have experienced states of God-intoxication from his youth. At the age of seventeen

he went to Calcutta, with his eldest brother Ramkumar. Destiny brought Sri Ramakrishna to the garden-temple of Dakshineswar, a place five miles North of Calcutta where he became a priest serving the Goddess Kali in her aspect as the blissful Mother of the universe. During that time, through prayer and meditation, Sri Ramakrishna became completely absorbed in the thought of God-consciousness, as he became indifferent to food, sleep, and other physical requirements.

According to Indian custom, Sri Ramakrishna's family arranged his wedding to Sarada, although at that time she was only five or seven years old, and Sri Ramakrishna was twenty-three. Sri Ramakrishna, who would always depend on the Divine agency for everything, understood that the event was predestined to take place, so he agreed to it. Soon after the wedding ceremony he returned to the Kali Temple at Dakshineswar, where he continued to live a God-intoxicated life. Eight years passed in this way.

Sri Ramakrishna then visited Kamarpukur to fulfill his responsibilities towards his young wife, Sarada. He proceeded to teach her on all matters, spiritual and secular. He emphasized the basic need of spiritual disciplines, such as the practice of non-attachment, self-mastery, meditation and prayer. He told her how to take care of her duties as a householder, how to serve guests, show respect for elders, discharge worldly duties in an unselfish spirit, even kindle a lamp, travel in a boat and ride in a railway train. He also taught her that one should adjust properly and intelligently to time, place and circumstance and behave with respect for all people, a lesson that she always followed to the letter. Later in her life, Sri Sarada Devi told of how this initial guidance laid the

foundation for her future life. Whenever she recalled those days with Sri Ramakrishna, she would be filled with joy. In her own words, "At that time, I always felt as if a jar, brimful of bliss, was set in my heart. It is not possible to describe the fullness of that joy."

Sri Ramakrishna was quite aware of Sarada's divine nature and her mission in the world. He would remind her again and again of her future work: that she should prepare for the great mission of her life. After this time of initial training, Sri Ramakrishna returned to the Kali Temple. Four years passed. Sri Sarada Devi went to the Dakshineswar temple to meet Sri Ramakrishna. That was the most important event of her life. She acted as a true disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, and lived a nun's life. During that time, Sri Ramakrishna taught her abstruse spiritual truths and multiple spiritual disciplines. He trained her to realize those truths in her own life.

Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Devi lived an unprecedented life in the religious history of the world. At that time Sri Sarada Devi was almost eighteen years of age. The true nature of their relationship and kinship was beyond the grasp of ordinary minds. By observing her behavior, Sri Ramakrishna was convinced that her relationship and attitude toward him were firmly based on a divine spiritual plane. He did not arrive at that conclusion in one day, but as a result of his constant and close association with her. As they shared their lives, day and night, there was only the divine spirit working in them. No thought other than that of the divine presence arose in their minds. Such a continued divine relationship between two souls of opposite gender is unique in religious records, and a source of inspiration for generations to come.

A remarkable dialogue occurred

during those early days. Upon her arrival, Sri Ramakrishna asked, "Do you want to drag me down to the mundane life, as I see you are here?" "Not at all" was the immediate reply from Sri Sarada Devi. And without a moment's hesitation, "On the contrary, I am here to help you realize your spiritual ideal. Why should I drag you down to the worldly life?"

Sri Ramakrishna recognized in Sri Sarada Devi the Divine Energy (*Shakti*) usually known as Divine Mother in Hinduism. This Divine Energy was manifested in and through Sri Sarada Devi for the welfare of the world. In Hinduism there is a Divine Mother that represents this Great Spiritual Power, a conscious and living power that acts in diverse ways, even taking human form. Sri Ramakrishna believed that Sri Sarada Devi represented this very power.

Hinduism advocates the worship of God in a variety of ways, the motherhood of God being its most distinct feature. The fact is that the Ultimate Truth (*Brahman*) is beyond the grasp of human mind or human intelligence, being nameless, formless, attributeless and unattached. From the highest standpoint of the Ultimate Truth, there is no creation, preservation or dissolution. The phenomenal world or relative existence is the outcome of Brahman's Shakti or Divine Power, the inscrutable creative power. This Power (*Shakti*) and the Ultimate Truth (*Brahman*) are as inseparable as fire and its power to burn, a gem and its luster, or a word and its meaning. All animate and inanimate objects are sprung out from one source – the Universal Energy (*Shakti*). In Hinduism this Power is known as Divine Mother, a living self-luminous power. This Divine Mother has many divine forms and aspects. God-incarnations (*Avatars*) are the special manifestations of this power.

This Shakti is manifest in the universe. The operation of the world of phenomena is founded upon a set of natural laws and universal moral principles. Those laws and principles are the first manifestation of divine power. It is in that sense that all created beings are the children of Divine Mother. Yet as children we suffer because of many reasons by which disharmony befalls the world. The world has been anxiously waiting to find relief from pain, suffering, miseries, torture, tyranny, delusion, insecurity, worries, anxieties, and so forth. In the ancient Hindu texts known as the Puranas, such suffering and expectation is described as the constant fight between two forces – evil forces and good forces. The former is represented by demons that incarnate all forms of human weakness, the latter by gods that incarnate the higher virtues. Individuals, societies, nations and even the universal life are subject and affected by the influence of those forces. In the Hindu texts, it is only through the guidance of the Great Spiritual Power (*Maha-Shakti*), that peace is re-established, bringing joy, assurance and happiness in life to all people.

To bring joy, happiness, prosperity and spiritual knowledge to every life, Divine Mother must thus act. At the cosmic level this action results in the staying power of natural laws and moral principles. In the personal realm it results in the ability of a person to acquire harmony within and without, which results in inner knowledge. By practicing various forms of spiritual discipline, divine knowledge and divine powers can be aroused in life. The methods of rousing divine energy within are known as yogas.

Sri Ramakrishna knew that Sri Sarada Devi was the manifestation of the Divine Mother, and he felt that the time was ripe to fully awaken the divinity in

her. He arranged for a special worship of the Divine Mother, which was accomplished by performing the worship of Sri Sarada Devi as the Divine Mother's living manifestation sitting before him and accepting his worship and offerings. The simple girl, born and brought up in a faraway village, was transformed into a veritable goddess and became at the same time conscious of that fact. According to Sri Ramakrishna, the worship of God as the Divine Mother represents the final stage in spiritual life.

One day, Sri Sarada Devi asked Sri Ramakrishna, "How do you look upon me?" The reply came from him, "The same Divine Mother who is in the temple, the same mother who gave birth to this body and is now living in the *nahabat* (the music room next to his room), that same mother is serving me. Truly I always see you as a form of the blissful Divine Mother."

At the Dakshineshwar temple-garden Sri Sarada Devi's life became a busy life. She dedicated the totality of her life to attending to the needs of Sri Ramakrishna and his devotees, male and female, young and old. Besides this, her routine included daily worship, meditation, prayer, and repeating the name of God or a sacred phrase (*mantra*) while passing the beads of a rosary (*mala*) a hundred thousand times. She did not forget her own mother and relatives in her home village. She often visited them, covering the sixty-mile distance on foot.

During one of her trips to Dakshineshwar from Jayrambati, she had an encounter with a highwayman and his wife. On that occasion, she showed a wonderful presence of mind. Sri Sarada Devi's utter simplicity, straightforwardness, and gentle words completely won the heart of the robber and his wife, who at once adopted her as their daughter.

Later, this couple visited Sri Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar several times with suitable gifts, and Sri Ramakrishna treated them kindly as if they were his own in-laws.

As an earthly mother feels the urge of motherhood and the need to nurse, to look after, and to protect her children, likewise the Divine Mother feels that urge at the cosmic level. This divine aspect of motherhood – an experience of universalism – is satisfied through the children of the spirit. All created beings are the children of the Divine Mother. Through Sri Sarada Devi's unceasing activities while she was at Dakshineswar with Sri Ramakrishna, her hidden motherhood gradually began to express itself in her outer activities. Thus she became the spiritual mother to innumerable children.

It was noticed that Sri Sarada Devi asserted her motherly privilege all the time, and would not allow anyone, even Sri Ramakrishna, to interfere with the exercise of her motherly prerogatives. When anyone would address her as "Mother" she immediately forgot all his or her faults and shortcomings. Thus Amzad, a Muslim man, found an equal reception with her, as did Swami Saradananda, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna and General Secretary of the Ramakrishna Order.

Sri Ramakrishna gave up his mortal body (*maha-samadhi*) on the 16<sup>th</sup> of August, 1886. Sri Sarada Devi had to take the responsibility of the devotees and disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, and later on of the religious organization named the Ramakrishna Order – a powerful movement set in motion by Sri Ramakrishna himself. Through Sri Ramakrishna's young disciples, (the foremost among them being Swami Vivekananda), she had to give others courage and peace in moments of despair. From this time on,

it was appropriate to refer to Sri Sarada Devi as Holy Mother, the name by which she is now cherished by her disciples and by Sri Ramakrishna's devotees.

Holy Mother visited many pilgrim centers in India after the passing away of Sri Ramakrishna. In one of the temples she fervently prayed that she might never see other people's blemishes. Later in her life she was approached with a request to reprimand a person for his faults. "I simply cannot do it" she remonstrated firmly. "I cannot see other's faults. I am simply not that way. There are enough people always ready to criticize others. The world will not come to an end if I refrain."

Sri Ramakrishna instructed Sri Sarada Devi to care for people by fulfilling their spiritual needs through the awakening of divine consciousness. Such a mission can only be fulfilled by a few souls who have reached the level of the universal spiritual power, a permanent state of divine consciousness. Souls of that caliber infuse into society the power to awaken spiritual consciousness: a power that can remain latent for future generations who benefit from its release. This creates a continuous effect that works for the welfare of the world. This power never ends. Sri Sarada Devi put in motion one such spiritual avalanche.

The Holy Mother did this by maintaining a loving and sympathetic attitude towards all people. Beginning in 1887 and continuing until she gave up her mortal body on Tuesday, July 21<sup>st</sup> 1920, she carried out her spiritual ministry, bringing joy, assurance, happiness and relief to the suffering people and setting an ideal example for future generations to follow. People will discover the meaning of life through her legacy.

Sri Ramakrishna respected Sri Sarada Devi for her intelligence and

wisdom. The great disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, such as Swami Vivekananda and others, would always consult her and seek her blessings before taking up any new projects.

One key event took place in 1901. Swami Vivekananda introduced the worship of Divine Mother in the form of Mother Durga (a Hindu Goddess) at the newly established Belur Monastery. Holy Mother sanctioned the function with her attendance. Such forms of adoration help spiritual seekers bring forward the spiritual ideal into daily life and develop faith and love for the divine.

Born and brought up in an orthodox Brahmin family, Holy Mother was very bashful and would hesitate to talk with others outside the circle of a few women devotees and the immediate family members. She would also be unwilling to stay in other people's homes. But an elderly devotee of Sri Ramakrishna at Kamarpukur, much respected for her wisdom, advised Holy Mother that Sri Ramakrishna's devotees were like her own children and that she should not hesitate to accept their invitation. Thus, she opened herself up to the world. Gradually, she became convinced beyond the shadow of a doubt that the purpose of Sri Ramakrishna's advent was to show humanity the spiritual meaningfulness of life and the way to reach the goal of spiritual liberation. She also understood that she had a significant part to play in that divine dispensation.

Before going to Chicago, Swami Vivekananda had doubts about his mission in the Western World. He sought the blessings of Holy Mother by writing her a message from South India. Holy mother was very glad to receive the letter from the beloved disciple of Sri Ramakrishna and sent him word that it was

Sri Ramakrishna's divine mission that he would advance in the West. Swami Vivekananda was greatly relieved once he received the response.

For a while, after Sri Ramakrishna's passing away, Holy Mother stayed in the village of Kamarpukur, the birthplace of Sri Ramakrishna. Later on she lived in her own village home of Jayrambati, going to Calcutta from time to time. She carried out unceasing activity wherever she went, whether in Calcutta or Jayrambati. She performed all the duties of life such as talking to relatives, looking after devotees, helping the needy and the sick, and instructing spiritual seekers. While performing her duties she manifested tremendous power of self-control, keeping the expression of her great spiritual power within the bounds of her great modesty.

No one can claim total freedom from the problems of life. They affect all people living in the world. The issue is not whether life's problems will be present in our lives, but how to keep calmness and an attitude of service in every day life in the face of adverse factors. One of the greatest powers at work in human life is patience. A great part of today's life is lost to impatience – impatience with ourselves and impatience with others. Patience and practice of self-control have a tremendous impact on our reactions, which are the root of so many evils. Holy mother exemplified the enormous power of patience in daily life. She lived with several mentally disturbed relatives who were demanding and selfish. Yet she maintained calmness and a spirit of service. As a result, she had mastery over the situation. She practiced self-control—no reaction, no anger, no hatred, no jealousy, and no greed. Her life is the ideal for everybody and for society at large.

Holy Mother was an extraordinary

teacher – a teacher who not only kindled the spiritual power of the disciples, but who also continued to help them until they attained liberation. She won their hearts through her affectionate and loving nature. No one could escape her love and affection.

She was the embodiment of a Spiritual Center. She was like a sacred temple providing peace and calm for worshipping the Divine. Her constant interaction with people made her like an institution for imparting knowledge – secular and spiritual. Wherever she went, she was like an ashram rendering services to the needy, the sick, and the destitute.

The world, with its fascinating objects, draws the minds of average people towards it. Such fascination makes the mind confused and deluded. The world becomes an uncomfortable place. The question that puzzles everyone is, what is the way to live in the world and attain the spiritual goal? Those who, while engaging in sincere religious practice, have accepted a householder's life may find their desires fulfilled to a certain extent and maintain their spiritual ideals at the same time. Given that the fascination for the world reaches deep into their psyche, the world will continue exercising a strong influence on them. Those who have given up world-fascination to follow the path of renunciation may have more of an opportunity to remain indifferent to the world. However, for many a renouncer, danger still remains since the force of thwarted desires can amplify hankering for enjoyable objects. Sri Sarada Devi would respond to this problem by quoting her Master. "Sri Ramakrishna saw the ducklings floating, diving, and swimming in the water of the lake near his home, and not a drop of water would stick to them. They would just shake it all off. Life in the world should be carried out in a similar way.

Though living in the midst of worldly possessions, one should completely shake off all attachment to these objects from one's mind. The Master's instruction was to live in the world completely unattached." Sri Sarada Devi lived day and night amidst the various activities of a householder, but she would remain completely unattached in her heart. Her mind would always dwell on different levels of Divine Consciousness.

The world we perceive is not all there is. Life in the world, including all household duties and responsibilities, is based on an underlying spiritual foundation. Sri Sarada Devi would state that all duties are the Lord's, and we should accept life as the Lord presents it to us. Pleasant and unpleasant situations and feelings of joy and misery will come and go as a result of one's present and past actions (*karma*). Pay little attention to the swings of fortune, as such attention causes disturbance in the mind; rather work to achieve steadfast devotion to the Lord. Practice perseverance and detachment. What is most needed in spiritual life is genuine faith in God and devotion to the Lord. This faith and devotion should be unshakeable by adverse circumstances. Renunciation and austerity should be cultivated. Just as the duckling shakes off the water from its body, one should shake off all worldly bondages from the mind.

The glories and grandeur of the world and the wealth and riches one enjoys are just transitory. We may have them now, and they may vanish the next moment. Sri Sarada Devi would often mention this fact to the disciples, so that by realizing the fleeting nature of worldly possessions, they would be saved from entrapment. Sri Sarada Devi would provide specific examples of prominent families who, after enjoying abundance and prestige, lost their wealth and with

it the recognition of society. Thus, by permanently remembering that worldly things vanish like a dream, detachment develops in one's mind.

When people become too involved in the fulfillment of their selfish ends, they often lose the feeling of sympathy towards others. Sri Sarada Devi was very careful to see that her disciples would feel for others and make others happy, rather than pursue the selfish fulfillment of their own desires. To provide happiness to others, one must give up one's own selfish pursuits. Sri Sarada Devi often told her disciples that the ability to bring peace and fulfillment to those around us is the true measure of the positive influence a person can bring to this world.

Sri Sarada Devi would discourage her disciples from establishing close social contacts, in order to keep them away from worldly influences. She would discourage such contacts even with her own and Sri Ramakrishna's relatives. She tried her best to remove all worldly influences from the minds of her disciples so they could enjoy the blessings of the Divine Spirit within their heart. Those who were fortunate to have the opportunity to spend time close to Sri Sarada Devi and render personal service to her realized in their hearts that she always focused on their ability to develop their moral strength, restrain their emotions and impulses, have genuine faith in God, and maintain steadfastness in devotion and devotional practices under all circumstances. She emphasized that these qualities are essential for spiritual progress.

Her own life was an extraordinary model to help people understand the deeper meaning of life, while undertaking the tasks associated with increasing responsibilities. Her every action was purposeful and a way of worshipping the

Lord. To her, the entire world belongs to Him, and it is His work we are performing. The Lord owns us, and we are His. Service to the Lord in various ways is then the purpose of living. Sri Sarada Devi's mind was always engaged in divine thoughts in the form of an unbroken flow of constant remembrance of the Lord. Her life's actions were well regulated by her dependence and unbreakable faith in the Lord under all circumstances.

During her life in Jayrambati, there was no special place such as a chapel to worship God in the form of her chosen ideal, Sri Ramakrishna. She would always take a picture of Sri Ramakrishna with her and it became the place of worship wherever she was. At her ancestral home, a niche inside the mud wall marked the place where the picture would rest.

Sri Sarada Devi's daily routine provides devotees of all walks of life with a simple example of the highest form of religious life. Early morning, while getting up from bed, her first duty was to see the Master's picture. Worship followed, and then she would sit for japa (repetition of the mantra or sacred words) and meditation. During the course of the day she would perform household duties such as cutting vegetables, arranging for food preparation, and preparing betel rolls. She would follow custom in taking a daily shower, offering food (*bhoga*) to the Master, her chosen ideal, and distributing offered food (*prasad*) to the members of her family. After taking some rest, she would meet devotees and visitors. When the evening came, she would burn incense and light a lamp before the Master's picture and spend some time thinking of the Lord. Food was also offered to the Master at night. After finishing dinner, she would retire to bed. There was

neither negligence nor aversion on her part to any work the house held. All was a service to the Lord.

In this routine program of hers, guests, relatives, neighbors, holy people, devotees, and others would get to share of her love's affection, service, and hospitality. Quite a number of devotees and newcomers would visit her regularly. One of the important functions of Sarada Devi was to make inquiry of the welfare of devotees, visitors and neighbors. It was the most valuable, prominent, and significant service that she rendered to people irrespective of caste, social status, or degree of literacy. High and low caste, educated and uneducated, rich and poor made no difference to her. Only a few souls are able to solve spiritual problems of life for others, kindling the lamp of knowledge on a permanent basis. Her discussions on spiritual subjects always had lasting effects on people's life. Through her influence, people felt, recognized, and discovered a complete and meaningful existence.

Questions addressed to her came from scholars and ascetics of the highest spiritual achievement, from ordinary devotees, and from people entangled in all kinds of worldly situations. They ranged from complicated spiritual matters related to the nature of the Ultimate Reality or specific spiritual practices, to household affairs, and to health and welfare issues. Erudite and ignorant, men and women, young and old, people of all walks of life would bring their questions to her hoping for guidance. Sri Sarada Devi would give proper attention to all and would listen to everybody with loving care. Her insightful answers would touch the hearts of the questioners, and her simple solutions to life's problems would remove all doubts

from the hearts of others. She would answer every one in such a simple and straightforward manner that each person would be perfectly satisfied and convinced of the answer. They would depart with the feeling that a ray of light had illumined their hearts.

The poor, the lonely, the sick, and the destitute could easily approach Sri Sarada Devi without any restrictions and discuss freely with her any and all matters. Just as a loving mother would take care of her child, she would address their sufferings and guide them along the right path with loving attention. She brought a glow of joy and hope to their sorrowful circumstances. The sweet words coming from her lips, the loving glance of her eyes, and the sympathy that flowed from the core of her heart had an extraordinary effect.

During the last part of her life, when she was physically ill and weak and had to spend a great part of her time in bed, she would still keep awake late into the night, praying and repeating God's name for the welfare of others.

Her final words to a bewildered, afflicted and heart-torn world came to us five days before her death. To a weeping woman devotee she said, "Let me tell you something. If you want peace of mind, do not look into other's faults. Rather, look into your own. No one is a stranger, my child. The whole world is your own." And here are her words of reassurance: "I am the mother of the wicked, I am the mother of the virtuous. Whenever you are in distress, just say to yourself, 'I have a mother.'"

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The information presented here was compiled from several sources by Swami Aparananda of the Ramakrishna Order of India.

## MEDIA REVIEW



### Scholar Reading a Book

Painting by Jan Zaremba  
[www.janzaremba.com/sumi-e](http://www.janzaremba.com/sumi-e)

### A Monk for All Seasons: Akhilananda, His Life of Love and Service

**Elva Linnea Nelson**

Lumina Press, 2007

**Steven F. Walker**

This rich and clearly presented compendium of information about the long career of Swami Akhilananda (1894-1962), as a teacher of Vedanta and a guide for many individual spiritual seekers, strikes a balance between institutional history and inspirational

anecdote that is commendable.

Detailed institutional history itself is necessary if we are to remember with gratitude the many small and large efforts it took to create for Vedanta a place in modern American life. However, historical detail may get to be a bit hard going for readers seeking a living portrait of one of the major Ramakrishna monks who devoted the greater part of his mature years to the care and shepherding of souls thirsty for spiritual development. In her

preface, the author, who is a student of Swami Akhilananda, and has been for many years one of the stalwarts of the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society of Massachusetts, confesses that “throughout the research and the writing, it’s been like chasing someone who is elusive.” But if “Swami Akhilananda has not been fully captured,” she adds, it is because “he is not a butterfly to be pinned to a board.” (ix) Fortunately, she does capture (if that is still the proper word) some of the effect of his vigorous intellectual and spiritual presence, and the reader will come to see, if only through a glass darkly, the impressive figure of one of Brahmananda’s closest disciples making his way from 1926 onwards through the shadow world of mid-twentieth century America that was gradually opening itself up to light from the East.

The kind of archival work that is necessary to carry off such a combination of institutional history and spiritual portraiture has to have been arduous and painstaking, and the author has succeeded beautifully in presenting both sides of her subject. She has relied on the recollections of those who knew Akhilananda personally and on the swami’s numerous publications and lectures; she has used published and unpublished texts, includ-

ing newspaper accounts, lecture notes, personal communications to the author, typed manuscripts, and letters—in short, she has done the research more than properly. What emerges from Nelson’s portrait of “a monk for all seasons” is both the spiritual uniqueness of Akhilananda’s personality, formed and strengthened by his early close association with many of the direct disciples and in particular with Swami Brahmananda, Ramakrishna’s “spiritual son,” and the broad intellectual scope of his activity in the West, especially in what she reminds us Vivekananda had called “the Brain of America,” the Boston area, whose intellectual concentration was matched perhaps nowhere else in the world.

In such a daunting arena Swami Akhilananda showed himself fully prepared to stand on his own. His lively participation in the intellectual life of the Boston area powerhouse remains one of his great legacies. He demonstrated a particular affinity with the study of psychology and religion, and his books *Hindu Psychology, Its Meaning for the West* (1946), *Hindu View of Christ* (1949), *Mental Health and Hindu Psychology* (1951) and *Modern Problems and Religion* (1964) testify to his profound involvement with the cultural and intellectual life of his

time and place. Swami Akhilananda made many friends among the Boston intelligentsia: the Harvard psychologist Gordon Allport, Edward Brightman of the Boston University School of Theology, the genial thinker Pitirim Sorokin, the world famous astronomer Harlow Shapley, and many other notable figures. Rarely has any recently arrived foreigner, and a Hindu monk at that, been able to integrate himself so thoroughly into such distinguished company.

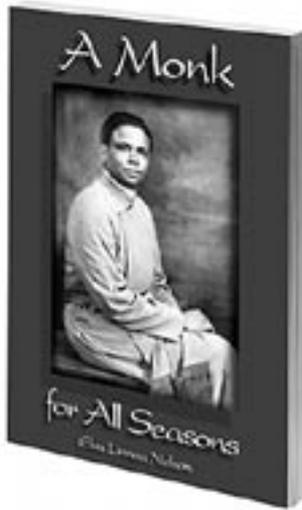
Elva Linnea Nelson has also shared some of the more private aspects of the swami's life, in which she was in his later years a participant, although she modestly says very little about her personal relationship with him. In particular, she draws attention to the dedicated friendship and support of Helen Rubel, who, among other things, gave the swami the large sum of money that enabled Vivekananda's dream of a temple by the Ganges for Ramakrishna to be realized. (For more details about her life and activities, the reader should consult Nelson's

wonderful earlier book *Bhakti: the Dedicated Life of Helen Rubel*, 1995). The author also mentions, although

only in passing, the figure of Mrs. Anna Worcester, who, she grants, "could be somewhat formidable at times." (105) Mrs. Worcester's possessive relationship with the swami, from what I have heard, reminds me of that of Hriday with Sri Ramakrishna, in that, in spite of dedicated service, she could appear to some as quite a

problematic figure. Perhaps the author will address this fascinating topic in a later book. In all events, one appreciates the fact that personal service to a great soul is a most difficult thing to carry off completely successfully.

*A Monk for All Seasons* is a beautiful volume, with numerous well reproduced photographs; the photo of Swami Akhilananda on the cover is simply marvelous! In this aspect, as in the others, the reader will benefit greatly from the loving concern with her subject and with the detail of his earthly career that the author has brought to her portrait of a great Ramakrishna monk.



## **Buddha**

From his own great  
quiet knowledge,  
he speaks the Joy beyond  
the thoughts of man  
(the missing Peace  
we blindly worship),  
and certain ways to  
bring that Peace again.

The pain is ours,  
not God's undoing,  
the love is ours  
that has no end or start.  
He knows, who has  
become, who is;  
not one who holds  
to arguments apart.

As the sunshine  
lives it giving,  
as a river knows  
a union with its soul,  
as a mountain  
broods its meaning,  
so the wise one moves  
towards the goal.

As ripples slip across  
a lake and clouds withhold  
the brilliance of the sky,  
as fire alerts an apprehension,  
so this life remains  
a pending "why?"

Death is fleeting and  
deceptive – what is born  
is circumstance – yet no  
freedom waits the free one  
save his own divine expanse.

— *Swami Bhaktimayananda*

## **READER'S FORUM** **Question for this Issue**

**DEAR READER:**

Please send us your answer to  
the question below. We want  
to devote at least 8 pages of  
the Spring 2010 edition to the  
answers we receive from you.  
We need to hear from you no  
later than May 31.

Our Spring and Summer issues  
will be devoted primarily to dis-  
cussing Swami Vivekananda's  
(Swamiji's) work in America.

**Question:**

**What do you believe  
Swamiji envisioned as  
the future of Vedanta in  
this country?**

Quote from Vivekananda or  
anyone else as you wish, but  
we're especially interested in  
what you believe, based on what  
you have read, or heard from  
others with whom you have  
discussed American Vedanta.

Email us at  
**vedwestcom@gmail.com.**

Your answer can be included in  
the body of your email message,  
or attached as an MS Word or  
RTF file. Please do not send a  
PDF file or any other kind of  
word processing document.

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### **VISIT HOLYMOTHERMISSION.ORG**

Holy Mother Mission is a service organization of the Ramakrishna Monastery in Trabuco Canyon, CA, a branch of the Vedanta Society of Southern California. Our main objective is to serve the needy, in any way we can. The purpose of Holy Mother Mission is to generate income needed for our service projects. We offer:

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