

The Sharing of Spiritual Life

From its inception, American Vedantist has advocated and tried to foster a stronger sense of community among Vedantists in the West. In ancient times, Vedanta was taught and practiced by all sectors of society—by men, women and children, kings, priests and common people, householders as well as monks, parents passing on experienced wisdom to their children. This social context was to some extent abandoned during the medieval period, when it was widely thought that only monks were sufficiently unencumbered to put Vedantic teachings into practice. With Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother and Swami Vivekananda, a social context was once again brought to the fore, emphasizing friendship, love and service among spiritual aspirants as well as service to the surrounding society.

Mutual support and sharing are an important part of this equation. One of our long-time subscribers and contributors recently suggested to us that we publish “a recurring column. . . that deals with the living heartfelt struggles of the spiritual aspirant. We are all fascinated by, and everlastingly grateful to, the diaries of saints, of realized souls. We cherish hearing of their struggles because it puts a name to our own. Saints and realized souls we probably are not yet, but pilgrims on the path to God-realization we all are, and it is helpful to share. . . We are warned not to speak, and certainly not to publish, spiritual experiences. . . But wouldn’t it be wonderful to hear of others’ journeys, of their struggles and of their joys? Some would strike a chord, others would not, but a montage of spiritual life would be rewarding.”

Our friend suggests that such contributions could be made anonymously. The writer would then feel free “to make conscious those hidden struggles, intellectual conundrums, duty-related problems and spiritual joys such as are voiced only in private spiritual journals. For the writer, simply making them conscious would act as a spiritual discipline. Sharing our deepest lives—the writer anonymously, the reader as the interested “other”—would bring a special warmth into the somewhat lonely life of a Vedanta householder.”

We invite from our readers their opinions of this suggestion, and if anyone wants to “start the ball rolling,” AV will be happy to do a trial run of received offerings.

In this issue we observe the conclusion of the sesquicentennial of the birth of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi with articles by Swami Atmajnanananda, Nancy Pope Mayorga and Sister Gayatriprana. We are also initiating a new discussion forum: “Are Western Vedantists Hindus?” We encourage our readers to send us their thoughts on the subject.

—The Editors

Meditation on Holy Mother

Swami Atmajnanananda

*(From a talk given at the Vedanta Society of New York, March 14, 2004.
Continued from the previous issue.)*

Holy Mother and Sri Ramakrishna both had great reverence for the whole phenomenon of photographs. Holy Mother worshiped the photograph of Sri Ramakrishna and felt that there was a very special connection between the photograph and the person. She used to say that the image and the actual, physical person were one and the same. She herself saw Sri Ramakrishna offer flowers and bel leaves to his own photograph; the flowers that Holy Mother had kept for offering he offered to his own photograph after he saw Holy Mother offering them. And Holy Mother believed very strongly that Sri Ramakrishna dwelt within his photograph. How, we can't say. She had some mystical understanding, and she believed it to such an extent that when she offered food to Sri Ramakrishna, she knew when he had accepted that food. People asked her, "Mother, how do you know that he has accepted your offering?" And she said, "A light comes out from his eyes, from the photograph and touches every item of the food. Then I know that he has accepted it, it has become prasad." She had that faith. She used to carry his photograph with her when she went on pilgrimage. When she went to Puri, especially, she kept it under her cloth. When she went inside the temple, she took it out and held it before the image of Jagannath, because Thakur had never gone there during his lifetime. So she wanted to show the image of Jagannath to him. She had a deep conviction that there was some special meaning and significance to the photograph of a holy person, in this case the photograph of Sri Ramakrishna.

How Holy Mother's First Photograph Was Taken

This particular photograph, the first ever taken of Holy Mother, was due to the urging of Sara Bull (Mrs. Ole Bull), an American disciple of Swami Vivekananda. She had come to India with Sister Nivedita, Josephine MacLeod and others, and became very much devoted to Holy Mother. At the time when Sara Bull was about to leave India, she couldn't bear the thought of not seeing Holy Mother again. She didn't know if she would be able to come back to India, and she came up with the idea of having a photograph taken of Holy Mother. This was in November or December of 1898. In this photograph, Holy Mother was approximately 45 years old, not very much different from the age of Sri

Ramakrishna when his photograph was taken. He was probably around forty-eight at the time.

A problem arose because Holy Mother was so shy, she had such modesty. How would she be able to unveil herself before a photographer, to have her picture taken? They tried to get a female photographer but couldn't find one. They ended up with a European photographer, an Englishman named Harrington. He was brought in, but Holy Mother was too shy to unveil herself. They tried to convince her, and finally, because of Sara Bull's great love for Holy Mother, Holy Mother very reluctantly agreed, but still wasn't really sure how she would be able to unveil herself before him. Anyhow she agreed. They wanted to take the photograph on the roof of the house. This was in Baghbazar (a section of Kolkata) where she was staying. As Sara Bull and Sister Nivedita took her up the steps, they noticed that Holy Mother went into an ecstatic mood. By the time they got to the roof she was barely conscious of the external world. They sat her down and arranged everything. When we see the way her hands are folded, the way her hair hangs loose in front of her (possibly because of her modesty they wanted to do that), these things were all arranged by these two Western disciples. After the photograph was taken, Holy Mother's mind gradually came down to the ordinary plane. She looked over at Golap Ma and said, "Is it over?" It was like taking medicine for her. Golap Ma replied, "Yes, everything is over."

Two other photographs were taken on that same occasion. And we can see the difference in the second photograph of Holy Mother, when she wasn't in an ecstatic mood; shyness is written all over her face. It's a beautiful photograph; her head is slightly bent down and she's looking downward. She was far too shy to look towards the photographer. The third photograph is also very beautiful, Holy Mother sitting on the cot with Sister Nivedita; we see their profiles as they face each other.

After this photograph was developed, several copies were made, but it was decided that they were too precious to be distributed to other people. They were given only to very close devotees. It wasn't until 1953, 50 years ago, at the centenary celebration of Holy Mother, that her photograph became more widely distributed.

The Meaning of Mother's Steady Gaze

I mentioned before the steady gaze of her eyes. Now we can understand that her gaze looks steady because she's not looking at anything. Her mind is completely withdrawn from the world. There is an incident in The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna where the Master says to M, "The look of a yogi is like that of a mother bird sitting on her egg, hatching the egg." He asks M., "Can you find me

a picture like that?” And M says yes. I don’t think he ever found the picture during Sri Ramakrishna’s lifetime, but he got one later, and when the Kathamrita (the original Bengali version of the Gospel) was published in five different volumes, in the front of each volume you see the picture of a bird with that look. This is exactly the look of Holy Mother, not aware of anything going on outside, the mind fully withdrawn, fully merged in that inner Reality. It’s interesting to note also that the photograph of Sri Ramakrishna which is widely worshiped also shows him in that state of samadhi. He also wasn’t interested in having his photograph taken, but both he and Holy Mother understood the importance of these photographs, that they would be worshiped one day.

“Adorned with Bangles of God”

Now I want to go back to the line, “Adorned with bangles of gold.” When the marriage between Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother took place, she was a young girl about five years old. There was a tradition that the new bride should have some nice ornaments to wear. Sri Ramakrishna’s family was very poor. They couldn’t afford to buy anything, so they went to the Lahas, the wealthy landlord family of the village, and borrowed some bangles that she could wear during the wedding ceremony. Once the ceremony was over the bangles had to be returned. This was a big problem. The little girl was given these bangles; it was probably the first time in her life she had anything like that, and she was very attached to them. Sri Ramakrishna’s relatives wondered, “How can we ask her to give them back?” But Sri Ramakrishna said, “Let me take care of everything.” He waited until she was sleeping that night, and he went in very quietly and removed the bangles from her wrists without her knowing anything. Of course the next morning when she woke up she immediately realized it and started crying, “Where are my bangles?” Sri Ramakrishna’s mother went to her and tried to console her. “My dear,” she said, “don’t worry. When you grow up my Gadai (Sri Ramakrishna) will give you better ornaments than these.” And as we’ll see, he did take it upon himself to have ornaments made for her.

Breaking Three Cardinal Rules

Now this was a very unusual thing in the life of Sri Ramakrishna. He received some money while he was a priest at Dakshineswar, and this was saved in an account. With this money these golden ornaments were made for Holy Mother. Why do I say that this is something unusual?

Sri Ramakrishna had three cardinal rules in his life, at least three that are relevant in this case. One, he would have nothing to do with money. He couldn’t touch money. There are many instances when his hand curled up when he

inadvertently touched money. Swamiji once wanted to test him and put a coin under his mattress. Sri Ramakrishna sat down and immediately got up. He said, "What is this?" and then Swamiji showed him that there was money there. Number two, he had an aversion to metal. There was a certain period in his life when he couldn't use anything made from metal; he couldn't eat from any metal plate. We read in the Gospel how he asked M if he could have a bowl made for him out of stone, because he couldn't touch metal. But here he is having these bangles made out of gold. Of all metal, gold (kanchan) had the worst possible association in the mind of Sri Ramakrishna. For him gold represented materialism; it represented greed. So there was a very negative association in the mind of Sri Ramakrishna regarding gold. Third, it was absolutely impossible for Sri Ramakrishna to save anything. He couldn't even take something that would be used the very next day. And with Sri Ramakrishna everything played out on a very literal plane. We have examples where he took something inadvertently, without even thinking about it. It could be something as simple as some spices, anything that was not to be used then. One day Sri Ramakrishna went to the Nahabat, where Holy Mother was staying, and asked her for some spices (to chew as a help in digestion). She gave him some for his immediate use, then she also gave him a small packet of spices to keep in his room. He left the Nahabat, but as he was going toward his room he felt himself drawn to the Ganges. And he found himself going there to drown himself in the Ganges, not knowing why. Then he realized he had saved something. He threw it away and was all right. Now we may ask, "Why? This is a very odd thing." For him it represented some kind of lack of faith in the divine. Why save anything if one believes that the Divine Mother provides everything? It was against his ideal of renunciation; a sadhu should simply rely on whatever comes. In having these ornaments made for Holy Mother, he broke these three rules. This is the only time in his life that I know of that he broke these three rules.

Bracelets Made According to Sri Ramakrishna's Vision of Sita

One day he went to his nephew, who was his attendant, and said, "Hridu, how much money do you have saved up in the account?" This is so contrary to his usual way of thinking! Hriday told him, and he said, "Take 300 rupees and go and have these bangles made." He didn't just say bangles. He said a particular type of bangle, what is called a diamond cut. Now why did he want bangles like that? When Sri Ramakrishna had a vision of Sita he noticed that she was wearing that type of bangle. So he told Hriday, "I want these bangles made, the same type of bangle that I saw Sita wearing." And he also said to Hriday, "Her name is Sarada. She is none other than Saraswati (Goddess of Wisdom); that is why she likes to put on ornaments." And it's true, while Sri Ramakrishna couldn't bear

these things, Holy Mother liked these different types of ornaments. And then, after telling Hriday to get these made like the ones he had seen Sita wearing, he said, “This is my relationship with her.” He may have said this partly because Holy Mother was a little bit in exile when she was living in the Nahabat, or because she had some suffering in her life, but in any case it showed that he looked upon her as his divine consort.

After the passing away of Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother began to remove her jewellery. It is a custom in India, specially among the orthodox, that the widow should not wear any jewellery and should wear a plain white cloth and even go to the extent of shaving the head. Sri Ramakrishna’s disciples didn’t know what to do. Holy Mother was at that time 33 years old. Balaram Bose had brought a white cloth for Holy Mother to wear. When Golap Ma saw that, she shuddered and said, “My God, how can we bring this to Holy Mother and tell her that her whole life will be lived as a widow in this way?” But by the time they went to Holy Mother they saw that rather than change her cloth she tore off the bottom portion of her wide-bordered cloth so that there remained a thin red border. She went part way but didn’t accept widowhood in the traditional sense. And for the rest of her life she wore a sari like that, with a thin red border.

Signs of Holy Mother’s Immortal Union with Sri Ramakrishna

She also began to remove all of her jewellery. In those days she wore a gold necklace and a large nose ring. We know about her nose ring. Sri Ramakrishna would sometimes humorously refer to Holy Mother that way. He would say, “Oh, go tell that one,” and he would draw a ring in the nose to indicate Holy Mother. She removed her nose ring and earrings. She also wore bangles that had been made by Mathur Babu for Sri Ramakrishna when he practiced the attitude of the handmaid of the Divine Mother. He wore those at that period. When he removed them he gave them to Holy Mother. She used to wear them. Now she removed these. So she had removed all of her jewellery except the two bangles that Sri Ramakrishna had had made for her. When she was about to remove these two final bangles, he appeared before her. As she described the experience, he appeared before her in human form, took hold of her hand and said to her, “Have I died, that you are removing the signs of a married woman from your wrists?” And we know that later she had another vision where he said, “I’ve only moved from one room to another room.” So she kept the bangles on, at least during that period.

Sri Ramakrishna had told Holy Mother that after his passing away she should go to live in Kamarpukur, his native village. This was something traditional—for a widow to live with her husband’s family—but for her it became very difficult. Sri Ramakrishna’s relatives really didn’t take very good care of her. These small

villages at that time were very orthodox, and the villagers, especially the women, gossiped about her—that she was still wearing jewellery and not wearing a plain white cloth—and made her feel very uncomfortable. They had no inkling of her spiritual stature at that time. The second problem for her in Kamarpukur was that there was no Ganges. She was very fond of bathing in the Ganges. In her own village of Jayrambati she looked upon the small river Amodar as the Ganges. But there was nothing like that in Kamarpukur.

A Bond of Pure Love and Affection

Then she had another vision. Sri Ramakrishna appeared before her and she saw water coming from his feet. She realized that the Ganges itself came from Sri Ramakrishna, that to have him, to worship him was to have the Ganges nearby. She was about to remove her bangles for the second time because of the gossip of the village people, but in this vision Sri Ramakrishna said to her, “Don’t remove the bangles from your wrists. Don’t you know what the Vaishnava scriptures say?” And then he said, “Ask Gauri Ma about this.” Gauri Ma came that afternoon. She was unusual in that day and age. She was well educated, she was a scholar and very bold. She had a manly attitude. She became a wandering nun and begged her food. In many respects she was the exact opposite of Holy Mother. And yet they had a very close, intimate relationship. Holy Mother asked Gauri Ma about the Vaishnava scriptures and Gauri Ma said that according to them her husband as a divine incarnation had a body made of spirit. There was no possibility of death for him, and therefore there could be no widowhood for Holy Mother. And then she said that if Holy Mother (being one with Lakshmi, goddess of wealth) removed her ornaments, the whole world would be devoid of wealth. So from that time on Holy Mother kept her bangles on for the rest of her life. To me, they represent the union, the bond between Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother, not just their spiritual partnership, but a real bond of pure love and affection that existed between them.

This is the hymn that goes with the photograph. It gives us a wonderful opportunity to meditate on Holy Mother in all of these different aspects—as one with the Divine Mother, as one who was completely merged in Brahman, as the spiritual partner of Sri Ramakrishna, and as the Divine Mother in the human realm, playing on the human stage.

[Conclusion]

Holy Mother

Nancy Pope Mayorga

[Part of a forthcoming book: Short Lives of the Saints East and West.]

The only way to live a great life, the sages tell us, is to have a measure of self-knowledge. It is a noticeable fact that as soon as a man begins to search out his self, he begins to take on stature. This searching can be done by all, and is done by a few. But the truly great ones are different. They, by God's grace, know who they are from the beginning. They are born full-grown, as it were. Such a great one was Sarada Mukherji of Jayrambati. The ideal virgin wife, she became the mother of all.

The role of women in the lives of divine Incarnations is always deeply meaningful and touching. There were Chaitanya's mother and young wife, who gave him up to God, and by that act inspired some of the most beautiful Bengali poetry; and the lovely girl who was Buddha's wife and became his first disciple; and Radha who recognized Krishna and loved him as more than man; and Mary, the mother of Jesus, who knew from the beginning that she had no ordinary child. Along with these, playing a most meaningful and moving role of her own, is Sarada Devi, the wife of Sri Ramakrishna.

Quiet Self-Assurance

We know almost everything about her, for she belongs to our own, self-conscious age which is always careful to keep records. Many people wrote in loving detail about her. In the second place, she knew more about herself and the role she had to play. Modest and retiring as she was, this self-knowledge gave her an incontrovertible authority. And considering her humble background, her complete absence of formal education, her lack of familiarity with the world, this quiet self-assurance is one of the most impressive things about her.

She was born at Jayrambati in December, 1853. As a five-year-old girl, she was touched by God, chosen to be Ramakrishna's bride. Then when she was about fourteen and visited her husband's family, and became acquainted with him, she tells of a strange joy that filled her, that was welling up inside her all the time. "I then felt as if a pitcher of bliss was kept in my heart." And when, at eighteen, still in her father's house, she heard rumors that her husband had gone mad, that he had forgotten all about her, she took matters into her own hands and decided to go to Dakshineswar where he was and see for herself. This was no small decision for a young girl, lacking in experience, and living the sheltered life of a Hindu daughter. The trip meant several days of walking, hardships,

perhaps. But although apprehensive about the outcome, Sarada had no doubts about her decision. Her father finally agreed that she was right, and said he would take her. She was right. Ramakrishna welcomed her, and she found him to be not mad, but perhaps one of the truly sane men in the world. Immediately Sarada Devi showed who and what she was.

When Ramakrishna asked, "Have you come to drag me down into maya?" she answered, "No. I have come to help you in your spiritual practice." And help him she did, all the rest of his life, so that he came to depend upon her greatly. Once, toward the end of his life, at the Cossipore garden house, when Sarada was sick and could not climb the stairs to nurse him, he suggested jokingly to his disciples, "Why don't you put her in a basket and bring her up to me?" This was all the more touching because he could not speak, and the joke was made with gestures. She gave more than mere physical help, too. "If she herself had not been so pure," he said, "I might have fallen." Fact or not, the comment is an indication of her greatness and of his recognition of it.

Wives are exhorted to see God in their husbands. But Sarada Devi knew her husband to be God. Had she not met him intimately in the depth of her soul when he performed that extraordinary worship of her, the Shodasi puja? Later, when describing him, she said that his skin was golden and had a glow to it, and that when he came from his room, people would line up and say, "Here he comes! Here he comes!" So she knew the divinity in him. She stood in awe of him. Nevertheless, she had an autonomy of her own. When someone asked her if she obeyed her husband in everything, she answered, "In spiritual matters, absolutely; in practical matters, I use my common sense."

"In this I cannot obey you."

It was to go farther than that. Once when Ramakrishna chided her for receiving a woman of unsavory reputation and said that she should not receive her, Sarada replied, "In this I cannot obey you. She, too, is my daughter." This was a very significant statement. It was an acknowledgement of her eternal role of Mother, who rejects no one.

Of course, Ramakrishna knew. This very knowledge he had imparted to her when they were both in deep samadhi. Sarada's own mother felt that her daughter was living a most unnatural life, and she complained to Ramakrishna about Sarada having no children. He answered, "In the future she will have so many children she will be tired of being called Mother."

But in the meantime the role was growing upon her. She served. Under the most difficult conditions, in cramped and uncomfortable quarters, she served her husband and his disciples, and strangers who came, for seventeen or eighteen hours a day, saving for herself one little period at three in the morning for her bath and her spiritual practice. She cooked at all hours of the day and night, and

very often cooked to order for some particular palate. Always her husband had to have special food because of his delicate digestion, and she often coaxed him and tempted his appetite and disguised the quantities of food because the sight of too much food alarmed him. She must have felt that she was his mother, too.

When Ramakrishna died, she was only thirty-three. She had half her life and her whole ministry ahead of her. For thirty-four more years she would obey God's command to be the mother of all. What she taught by her words was the very purpose of life and religion—well-taught to her by her husband—how to realize God. But what she taught by her life and actions would be impossible to express adequately in words.

She was Mother. Not merely in name. She actually felt that mother's love for everyone, even, by her own admission, for birds and animals. She became known as Sri Sri Ma. The Indian word carries an affectionate and reverent spirit with it which cannot be matched by the English "Holy Mother."

"In my love there is no ebb tide or flood tide."

As the normal mother with five or six children manages to give devoted attention to each, so Holy Mother, with thousands of children, made each one feel that he was her special own. One disciple, wondering at her loving interest in his welfare, asked her, "Shall I always have this affection?" And she answered, "Yes. In my love there is no ebb tide or flood tide." Many times she was asked, "Are you our real mother?" There was never any hesitation in her answer, "I am your real mother." How many times, in how many first-hand accounts we read these same touching words, "When I was leaving, she followed me part way and stood watching me with tears in her eyes." She never allowed anyone to say "Goodbye." She always said, in the Indian way, "Come again."

The mother relationship went even deeper, for she recognized her own. "Haven't we met before? Haven't I seen you before?" Swami Prabhavananda tells of his experience when he was a very young boy and met Holy Mother for the first time as she passed through his town. She put her fingers under his chin and said in most affectionate tones, "Haven't I seen you before?" "No," he answered, surprised, and today he adds, with emotion, "I didn't know. I didn't realize then."

As she grew older, she was worshiped by thousands as the Divine Mother, the living goddess. On the days that people were allowed to touch her feet, the line of those waiting would extend down the stairs, out from the building, and a block away. It is said that slight and reverent contact with her feet would send an electric shock of pleasure through the devotee. People would come back week after week to receive that blessing. No Incarnation was worshiped while living as Holy Mother was. All this she accepted, not for herself, but for the God she felt in her. She herself would rather not have had it—it caused her actual physical

pain—but she knew it was a matter of divine duty, and that knowledge kept her resigned, simple, modest, available to everyone.

In her everyday life she did not have an easy time. Her health was not always good, and her worldly family was a constant exasperation. When she was in her village, she worked as hard as, if not harder than, any ordinary village woman. When she was in Calcutta, she was constantly besieged by devotees wanting her favors. From beginning to end her life was a complete giving of herself. She felt that through her efforts people could be helped to achieve liberation, and she was always performing japam for the good of the world. In spite of all her outer activity, her life was, as Sister Nivedita said, “one long stillness of prayer.” This could be true only because she knew God in the depth of her soul.

She knew her divinity, and as she grew older, she was more outspoken about it. It was not only that she could give extraordinary intuitive and right advice. As Sister Nivedita noted, no matter what the unfamiliar problem was, she always went right to the heart of the matter and “set the questioner in the true attitude to the difficulty.” No, it was more than that. She accepted the fact that God was working through her.

“Then touch me.”

Once a Brahmin woman cook came to her in the evening and said, “Mother, I have touched a dog. I must bathe.” The Mother said, “It is now late in the evening. Don't bathe. It is enough to wash your hands and feet and change your cloth.” The cook said, “Oh! that won't do.” The Mother said, “Then sprinkle some Ganges water on your body.” That also did not satisfy the cook. At last the Mother said to her, “Then touch me.”

A word from her, a touch, could wipe out a lifetime of sinful living. As Swami Premananda said, “The poison we cannot swallow we send to Holy Mother.” In other words, they sent the seemingly hopeless sinners to her, and she transformed them.

Never were more beautiful words spoken at the end of a life than Holy Mother spoke just before she died. And her words have an added poignancy because she lived them and because they sum up that remarkable life: “If you want peace of mind, do not find fault with others. No one is a stranger. The whole world is your own.”

If one is a spiritual aspirant and willing to struggle, he can, no doubt, meet Ramakrishna at the deepest level of the soul and be one with him. But that will be an heroic struggle indeed. How much easier to meet Sarada Devi in the heart and love her as Mother! Over and over again, with a conviction that could not be argued with, she said, “Yes. I am your mother, your own mother.” □

Sarada Devi, A Power that Worked in Silence: The Testimony of a Ramakrishna Order Monk

Sister Gayatriprana

(continued from the previous issue)

By the early 1940s, as President of Advaita Ashrama and in charge of its publications, Swami Pavitrananda was engaged in putting together the first book containing the biographies of the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, in which he intended to include the life of Holy Mother. As he examined and re-examined the materials, however, he understood more and more clearly that Mother was more than merely a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna: “She was a disciple, but when she grew to her full stature, she was the complement of Ramakrishna, and Ramakrishna recognized that in full measure in his lifetime.”¹

A Short Life of the Holy Mother

He therefore omitted Mother from the book and instead brought out, in 1942, a small book written by himself, *A Short Life of the Holy Mother*. This was one of a series of three “short lives” intended as an introduction to Sri Ramakrishna, Mother and Swami Vivekananda. Other swamis wrote the other booklets, but into this one on Mother Swami Pavitrananda poured the most exquisite homage, reflecting her simplicity, love, purity, wisdom and consummate blend of sweetness and firmness. To those who knew Swami Pavitrananda later, these were the very qualities he embodied in himself.

Only twenty-two years after her passing, however, his main impression of her was that the simplicity of her life, her silence and lack of ostentation were “bewildering.” He had found that even those universally respected for their spiritual greatness could not fathom the depth and richness of her life, and concluded that “such a life defies analysis, and it is even more difficult to portray it.”² No doubt this widespread sense of bewilderment and inability to express what she was was due in part to the proximity in time to her earthly life. Not enough time had passed even to begin to understand, but, as Swami Pavitrananda

1. Swami Pavitrananda, “*Sri Sarada Devi, A Great Saint of India*,” a lecture given at the New York Vedanta Society, January 8, 1956, informally reproduced in mimeographed form (hereafter, “*Great Saint*”).

2. Swami Pavitrananda, *A Short Life of the Holy Mother (Mayavati: Advaita Ashrama, 1942)*, Preface.

went on, “We may not comprehend greatness as a whole, but still—does not even a partial glimpse of it bring us infinite good?” Had he himself not received a radical change within without any medium of words or even seeing her face? It can only take time to digest such things. One is forced to go to the deepest levels of one’s being in order to contain, understand and digest the tremendous impact of a being like Sarada Devi.

“What Makes Simple Holy Mother So Powerful?”

Twelve years later, in 1954, the celebration of the centennial of Holy Mother’s birth made major news in India. Her quiet and retired life had been working its silent work, which now brought her before the public, even to those not ordinarily interested in spiritual activities. Swami Pavitrananda had by then passed through very senior responsibilities in the Ramakrishna Order and become head of the New York Vedanta Society. He arrived in 1951 at the age of fifty-five to a totally different world and culture. He wondered if he would survive the first year, far less any lengthy term of service. In the still hours of the very early morning his mind would go back to the presence of the great spiritual souls who had shaped him into what he was—his teacher at school, Swami Shivananda, Swami Turiyananda, Swami Brahmananda, each offering a domain in which he could expand, redefine who he was and reconnect with his spiritual roots. Then there was Mother – the “bewildering and indefinable,” with no specific features, just the presence he had felt on that sticky afternoon at Udbodhan as he took his turn in saluting her.

As editor emeritus, Swami Pavitrananda was called upon to write on special occasions and 1954 was no exception. At the request of the editor of *Vedanta Kesari*, the Chennai-based English language journal of the Order, he wrote a piece in the July number, “What Makes Simple Holy Mother So Powerful?” which seems to throw further light on his image of Sarada Devi. The title in and of itself is a little unusual, because Mother is usually dwelt on in terms of her sweet and motherly qualities rather than as a source of power. However, the power of which Swami Pavitrananda was speaking was not the power we ordinarily think of—making us act contrary to our inclinations, overwhelming, and perhaps even quite frightening. It is clear from his presentation on the depth of her power to transform lives permanently, her overwhelming motherly love that swept away all caste and other social barriers, as well as on the profoundly liberating effect of her infinite affection, that he was striving to indicate his own experience of the almost incomprehensible effect of her removing all the carefully crafted barriers he had erected around himself as a young man.

In a sense, Mother was indeed overwhelming, but in her unbelievably deep and even passionate love. From the testimony of those who lived with her we know that she would become distraught over the fate of someone she barely

knew, identifying with the inner being of the person and yearning to bring it out so that he or she could see it, identify with it and love it totally. Swami Pavitrananda had not had personal tokens of such love, but he had had it awakened in himself through being in her presence and later empathizing with those who had received concrete expressions of that aspect of her being. Finally, with Mother, no matter how powerful she was, there could be no fear for, as the Christian apostle tells us, perfect love casts out fear (1 John, 18). Swami Pavitrananda's mind was notable for its fearlessness as indicated by his well-known outspokenness and vehement adherence to principle against all odds. It was, therefore, natural that he found in Mother, not something to draw back from, but to open up to and permit to do its liberating work.

Whatever the richness and expanse of his inner life, Swami Pavitrananda was ever very precise and rational. After expatiating on Mother's effect on people, he added, "Of course, these are subjective experiences. But when such experiences happened in many cases, it is no longer a matter of subjectivity. It is a solid phenomenon."³ As additional support for his hypothesis, he had observed how Americans, with no knowledge of Hindu culture and with access only to the meager literature on Holy Mother available at that time, nevertheless developed intense devotion to her. He returned again and again to the tremendous power behind her self-effacing life, the key in his mind to Mother (and, incidentally, to those who knew him, of his own life). Referring to the fact that Mother's life was one of unceasing hard work and dealing with the struggles of family and social life, he remarked, "Hers was a perfectly modern mind."⁴ That, he felt, specially qualified her as a role model for contemporary women who can aspire to her perfection, "which inspires and uplifts all—men and women alike."⁵

In the context of Swami Pavitrananda's own life and values, this can only mean that he envisioned women tapping into their own inner silence from which would come, in course of time, the wisdom, power and love that can engage with all the clutter and challenge of contemporary life and slowly, steadily love it into surrender to the Self, the Spirit that is the true reality, even of what we call "the world."

"Sarada Devi, A Great Saint of India"

As an extension of these public revelations, in a lecture at the Vedanta Society in 1956— some thirty-eight years after his meeting with Sarada Devi—he underscored for the last time the importance of Mother's power to transmit

3. Swami Pavitrananda, "What Makes Simple Holy Mother So Powerful?" in *Vedanta Kesari*, July 1954, p. 55.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

spiritual inspiration. To him it was that characteristic which, above all, made Mother “a great saint of India.” At that time he dwelt on the fact that such an ideal and inspiration can be given and received in silence, or in the absence of a shared language.⁶ That is exactly what seems to have happened in his own case and exactly how he himself affected so many who later came in contact with him. For those of us (and I think that is most of us), who are so accustomed to thinking that only verbalization is communicating, it is meeting such beings who speak in silence, or in observing the unstudied actions of their day-to-day existence, that makes us stop and reconsider. Could it be that this world we have created through our endless chatter, our ultra-serious obsession with all that we see on TV, hear in gossip-fests and think (whenever we take our headphones off!) in what we are pleased to call the real world, is not really “where it is at”? That is certainly what happened to Bhupen Roy, whose intellectual uproar was challenged profoundly, leading him on to a deeper and deeper appreciation of what Sarada Devi truly was and a deep, faithful molding of himself around that inner vision.

Perhaps it is not just a fancy that, one day as the swami was rising from his chair, looking into a flood of sunlight coming through the window, a devotee noticed his resemblance in profile to the famous picture of Holy Mother gazing raptly into a shaft of sunlight, which happened to be hanging on the wall behind him. There was indeed a very similar facial structure, there was the same happy and serene expression, the same self-forgetfulness and wisdom; but, above all, the same idea manifesting in two different forms. Like a rainbow appearing suddenly on the edge of a breaking wave, Holy Mother was palpably present at that moment in Swami Pavitrananda, expressing herself in a magnificent spiritual life with the maximum of effectiveness, though without a word of self-recommendation or explanation of any kind.

Shifting to a Totally New Key

Thus it seems acceptable to say that the brief and formal meeting of the college student Bhupen Ray with Holy Mother was to bear tremendous fruit in his later life as Swami Pavitrananda. It also seems appropriate to point to the inwardness and simplicity of the whole event, characteristics of both Mother and the young man whose ideal she was fulfilling, whose anguish she was removing and whose life she was shifting into a totally new key. Without uttering a word, she seems to have cut through not only Bhupen’s immediate turmoil, but also his deeply ingrained skepticism, which he had used as a weapon to defend himself against much that was irrational and untrue in the world he lived in. The great power of Mother to which he later bore witness surely touched directly the

6. “*Great Saint*,” p. 3.

unselfish love within him, crying out for self-expression and support and, in its own way, empowered him to absorb the fullness of his ideal so totally embedded in Mother herself. Indeed, Mother seems (in the immortal words of Sister Nivedita, which Swami Pavitrananda quoted at the beginning of his booklet on Mother's Short Life) to have "stolen unnoticed into his life—like the air, like the sunlight, like the sweetness of gardens and the Ganges" and "wrapped him in the mantle of her peace," soothing him and blessing him with the unseen and unheard touch of her love, "a golden radiance, full of play."⁷

[Conclusion]

Letters of Sister Gargi

[Sister Gargi (Marie Louise Burke) author of the six-volume *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries and other books*, passed away in January of last year at the age of 91. Swami Yogeshananda, who heads the Vedanta Center of Atlanta, has given kind permission to American Vedantist to publish excerpts from letters he received from Sr. Gargi over a period of 32 years.]

Introduction

All of us at the Vedanta Society of Northern California knew Gargi, who was then Marie Louise Burke. It was knowledge from a distance, so to speak, for the monks. But her role in the recording of the movement and her role in Swami Ashokananda's life were obvious. My correspondence with her began in the late sixties, when the Madras Math wished to publish the book, *The Visions of Sri Ramakrishna*, and I requested her to write a foreword. Mrs. Burke graciously agreed and wrote a fine one.

Later, when I was posted to the Ramakrishna-Vedanta Centre in London and began looking for material on Swami Vivekananda that had not yet been found, correspondence with Gargi resumed in earnest. Below are some of the exchanges which took place. Readers may find them attractive and useful for forming a larger impression of her methods and her character.

—Swami Yogeshananda

Aug. 4, 1971

I am now at last sending you the results of my long-drawn-out attempt to gather information and material relating to Swamiji's 1895 and 1896 visits in England...

7. Sankari Prasad Basu, ed., *Letters of Sister Nivedita, Volume 2* (Kolkata: Nababharat Publishers, 1982), *Letter to Sri Sarada Devi from England, December 11, 1910*, p. 1169.

I have no copy of any of it, so I would like it if you could return everything after you have looked through it and copied what you need. . .

When I do write about the London period, I plan to go into detail only in connection with Swamiji's personal life (so to speak) and in general in regard to his public work. But I will need the material for reference.

Aug. 25, 1971

Vedanta Retreat, Lake Tahoe

Every second is golden at the Lake. . .

It is a miracle that you have found Ambrose Sturdy! [E.T. Sturdy's son] And of all places, across the street!. . . Maybe he could tell us something of his father's background, education etc. Also, how did he spend his life after Swamiji's death? Did he marry again? When did he die? . . . Are there any papers at all—such as letters from Mrs. Ole Bull or Miss McLeod? (He knew them both quite well.) Any photographs of Sturdy himself? And of course, did he ever speak of Swamiji? . . .

Dec. 2, 1971

. . . If. . . you want to contribute your findings without publishing them separately, I would be much indebted to you, but I would not expect that at all, particularly as there is no telling at the present moment when I will be able to work on the book. There seem always to be long interruptions. For instance, Swami Budhananda has asked me to help with the next edition of the Life [of Swami Vivekananda by His Eastern and Western Disciples].

Dec. 26, 1971

Many thanks for your letter of December 16. I have read it carefully and have thought a great deal about the whole situation. I have, in fact, been thinking over this problem of ours ever since writing to you on December 2. I feel I made a mistake in proposing that we work independently of one another. It would not be fair to either of us, nor—more important—would it be fair to the work itself. . .

I find I must go ahead with my next book in the way Swami Ashokananda wanted me to. He told me again and again to write about Swamiji's visits to England in as much detail as possible. It was he who asked me to engage Miss Fraser and also to gather facts in every other way possible. As you will of course understand, in view of Swami's instructions, I have never had any real choice in the matter. Another important consideration is the one you made in your letter: all the available information about Swamiji's visits in England should be

presented in one place. You are entirely right. This is of importance not only for the sake of the readers, but also for the sake of the record itself. The story should be presented as a cohesive whole, all of its parts interconnected, with emphasis falling properly, inner significance made clear, highlights highlighted, drama brought out and so on. To split up the information in pieces would do an injustice to the record, and I would feel I had grievously failed a sacred trust. Swami Prabuddhananda pointed out to me that since I have already written two long books about Swamiji's life in the West and have been told to write a third, I should not omit from that third an important part of Swamiji's Western visit. The three books should form a unit complete in itself. I see now that this is perfectly right. I cannot with any justification do less than my best in any part of the work I have been given to do, or brush over any part of it.

When I do take up [the third book] I shall be able to devote almost my entire time to it—steadily, God willing. I don't think one can really write about Swamiji in any other way—at least I cannot. . .

Feb. 12, 1972

. . . In my last book I broke away from the idea of presenting “new discoveries” exclusively. Rather, I included almost everything, old and new. It all fits together (or so I devoutly hope) into a fresh picture, more detailed and more complete than we have had before. In the next book I hope to follow the same general plan, rehashing the old and refurbishing it with the new, and serving up the whole as a well-balanced and, by the grace of God, satisfying dish. That is the idea. . .

I am still working on the Life. I have bitten off a bigger hunk in that regard than I had thought. But that is true of absolutely everything. In Vedanta one gets rather used to having one's mouth so full that one can barely chew, isn't it? . . .

Oct. 13, 1972

. . . Did you know our sad news here? Josephine Stanbury passed away in August. It was very sudden. She had not been at all well for the past few years and was finding the body a great burden—but she did not die from any of the things that were wrong, but just from heart failure—quick. She worked right up to the end, as Swami Ashokananda once told her she would. I don't know how well you knew her. She was a very wonderful person, utterly devoted to the Lord and his work.

Mar. 20, 1973

. . . As for my book: I am beginning to think that if it comes out at all it will be a miracle! I have come to the conclusion that its permanent title is The

Forthcoming Book. But then, progress is being made; to date I have received the galleys for almost half the typescript. Since it is a big book, there is a long way to go; and since the Press is highly temperamental, there is no telling at all how long the next half will take. However, if things go along at a reasonable rate (reasonable for India, that is) the book should appear for Swamiji's 1974 birthday. On the whole, it will be better that you do not hold your breath. . .

Aug. 26, 1973

. . . In one of your letters to me, you said you did not envy my writing one book while reading proof on another. I was going to tell you it was nothing—nothing at all! And just then (as though I had sent a challenge to the gods) the whirlwind began. It has been so intense and constant that I have had to put aside all thought of working on the next book—to say nothing of completing my June letter to you. “One thing at a time!” as Swami Ashokananda used to say. And to be sure, that is all I can manage.

. . . My book has been delayed again. That is my theme song. What about your Visions [The Visions of Sri Ramakrishna]? Is it progressing through the Press? Do you still like the Foreword [which she wrote] or do you want me to rewrite it? If so, please let me know soon. It was a rushed job and maybe not a good one.

Sep. 23, 1973

. . . Sturdy's letters are in Second Visit. How is Major Sturdy? It is possible that according to English copyright laws he holds the inherited rights to his father's letters. You told me at one time that he would not be remotely interested in the matter. I would be happy for that reassurance again. I have had the idea that in English law a letter belongs to its recipient (that is, the copyright to it); but now I am not so sure. I have asked a couple of lawyers—one has told me one thing, another another—which leaves me spinning. Do you know what it is? . . .

Oct. 14, 1973

Please do not mind if I say that we would much rather you did not edit or shorten Swami [Ashokananda]'s lectures. You would do it very well—I am sure. But Swami's instructions to us make this impossible. Please let me also (by the same token) ask you not to make a transcript of the tape. (Swami Prabuddhananda is sending you one). Swami was strenuously against having unedited transcripts of his lectures read by anyone but their editors. He was very firm about it. We guard them here with life itself and have fought many a battle over the point. I hope I do not sound unreasonable. But I know that it doesn't matter, because Swami's wish will be reason enough for you. . .

About Nivedita: I wish I could help. In Second Visit there is quite a lot about her—but it is mostly interpretation; there is nothing definite—no anecdotes or incidents that would be of help to Mrs. Barbara Foxe. I am sorry, as a biographer of Nivedita could do with a light touch here and there!

Feb. 1, 1975

Belur Math

I will stay on in the Foreign Guest House here until June. All I am doing is helping to edit the Western chapters of the Life. It is slow work—particularly when it has to be coordinated with the work of others, and more particularly as I am trying at the same time to edit some of Swami Ashokanandaji's lectures. This last takes time. But the Life, of course, comes first, as that is why I am here. Other work can be done as well (if not better) in San Francisco.

You addressed me in your last letter as "Mrs. Burke." It was a shock to me. You are way behind the times, for which I can blame no one but myself. Rev. President Maharaj [Swami Vireswaranandaji] gave me the name of "Gargi" last November, and now I am called that almost universally—at least, in the Ramakrishna fold. So please let me be Gargi to you, too.

Well—at least I shall perhaps see you in Chicago. I hope to stop off there, as Swami Bhashyanandaji has said there is a great deal of material to be explored. I shall either stop off, or come back to spend some time. I should write to him about it. Truly, if I gave a tenth of the time to writing letters that I give to thinking about writing letters, my correspondence would flourish!

Mar. 8, 1976

About_____. That boy should not go about saying that the New Discovery books have mistakes in them. Sometimes he is wrong. And besides it gives the books a bad reputation. I myself have found mistakes, due to insufficient knowledge at the time of writing. Gently, quietly, we will correct them. One big trouble is that Swamiji's published letters have so many mistakes in them, that the facts get distorted. Everything will eventually come out all right in the end. So far—the inaccuracies are not of much importance. But the material keeps coming—and in the light of it, knowledge keeps changing. Nivedita's letters, for instance. Sankari Prasad Basu is bringing out many heretofore unknown letters—they make a big difference! And Mrs. Gertrude Sen's letter (which she allowed me to copy)—those too make a difference. Slowly, slowly, as I say—all will come right. How can anyone be an "authority" at this stage, when there is still so much to learn! . . .

[to be continued]

Abruption at Wild Basin

A weightless
blue shadow
streaking on like
an arrow;
a line
erasing itself,
breaking off—
moment by moment
disappearing:

Kingfisher haunts
the frozen
ice castle bouldered
creek.

His distinctive cry
takes my breath—
breaking on the
cold air,
like glass
shards underfoot;

mind stops
abrupt,
then goes on
undone—
moment by moment:

the winterblue sky
inside me now.

—Judith, Hermit of Sarada

Forum: Are Western Vedantists Hindus?

What Is a Vedantist?

Steven F. Walker

Are Vedantists Hindus? It is a new and interesting question, but not a new type of question. History repeats itself. Almost two thousand years ago small groups of people scattered around the Mediterranean world ruled by Rome were asking a similar question: are Christians Jews? About twelve hundred years ago in India some of Shankara's opponents were accusing him of being a crypto-Buddhist. And people do not always adhere to one religion only. Many Japanese, for example, identify with being both Buddhists and Shintoists. Sufi Muslims and Hindus have had a close relationship dating back many centuries, and so one can still ask whether Kabir was a Hindu or a Muslim mystic poet. Religions have not been watertight vessels as much as some orthodox theologians might like to maintain. In fact, orthodoxy itself might be seen as the attempt down the ages to limit the natural process of religious syncretism, with the result that greater group solidarity was unfortunately accompanied by increased bigotry and intolerance.

What Is Hinduism?

Of course, there is always the vexing question: what is Hinduism? Hinduism, certainly less a faith than a confederation of faiths, is defined in practice and theory in many different ways, the recourse to the ultimate authority of the Vedas—sacred scriptures often unread or poorly understood, hence posing no great threat to divergent religious doctrines—being seemingly the only defining characteristic that scholars can agree on. In fact, throughout its history Hinduism has shown itself to be quite able to wrap itself like a boa constrictor around practically any belief or cult it came across and to have it for breakfast. Since you are what you eat, this makes a precise definition of Hinduism rather difficult. This is why my friend Ram Murty and I once came up with the following definition: “Hinduism is anything a Hindu says it is.” Well, of course, if Hinduism is anything a Hindu says it is, the next logical question is: “What is a Hindu?” For that we opted for the answer: “Nobody knows”—although it was circular reasoning at best.

All right—forget what a Hindu is or is not: what is a Vedantist? Here the answer seems easier: it must be anyone who finds spiritual sustenance in Vedanta, the mystical philosophy that bases itself on the classical commentaries on the Upanishads, the Gita, and the Brahma Sutras by such luminaries as Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhva. That is clear enough. But even here we have a problem, since a good case can be made for viewing Shankara's Vedanta as the

response of Hinduism to Mahayana Buddhist philosophy, so maybe we should see classical Vedanta as a form of “crypto-Buddhism” (as Shankara’s Hindu opponents had argued)—a kind of Buddhism without the Buddha?

Be that as it may. But what about modern Vedanta—what is that? For many of us who belong to “Vedanta Societies” it is fair to say that it is something championed and explained by Vivekananda a hundred years ago or so. But didn’t Vivekananda add something quite new and different to the Vedantic tradition? And could “Vivekananda Vedanta” have been possible without his teacher Ramakrishna? No doubt, Ramakrishna’s worship of Kali and practice of Tantra do not fit in easily with a purely Vedantic vision, so the issue gets quite complicated. Or does it? Vedanta historically (from Shankara onwards) seems to have managed to get along quite well with traditional image worshipping Hinduism. So perhaps it may be said that modern Vedanta, like classical Vedanta in its own day, has been grafted onto Hinduism once again, a spirituality of the impersonal complementing a spirituality oriented around personal name and form. In that case, aren’t Vedantists really Hindus?

A Parallel from Two Thousand Years Ago

Let us return to the question being asked almost two thousand years ago by widely scattered followers of a crucified Galilean prophet named Jesus, most of whom were Jewish by tradition but a few of whom were not: are Christians Jews? The way they answered the question is of more than academic interest to those of us who are wrestling with a similar one today. It was a major step in the development of early Christianity when the formal link between the traditional Jewish community and the followers of Jesus was sundered. The two immediate issues in the first years after Christ’s crucifixion were circumcision and dietary laws. Peter’s vision (no clean or unclean foods) and Paul’s stand on circumcision (not needed for conversion to Christianity) made it possible for new Gentile converts to Christianity not to have to become practicing Jews as part of the process. I would say that for Western Vedantists who place Ramakrishna at the center of their religious devotion the situation is quite analogous. Ramakrishna was as much a Hindu teacher as Christ was a Jewish prophet; but both of them brought something radically new to the traditional religions into which they were born. While it remains possible for a Hindu devotee of Ramakrishna to remain an observant orthodox Hindu, a non-Hindu coming to Vedanta as a devotee of Ramakrishna feels no obligation to become a Hindu in the process. Outside of a monastic context, no Western Vedantist, to the best of my knowledge, has ever been forced to become a vegetarian or has even been discouraged from eating beef—and as for participating in the various practices of traditional Hinduism (puja, fasting, etc.), it is purely a matter of personal choice. It is as though Ramakrishna Vedanta were a new religion—as new as Christianity was in its time in relation to traditional Judaism. In other words, the umbilical cord

attaching modern Vedanta to traditional Hinduism has been effectively cut, at least in the West; what remains is of course a special reverence for the Hindu tradition, but not an obligatory adherence to it. In general I would say that most modern Western Vedantists have chosen to affirm this separation of Vedanta from traditional Hinduism.

So I would say that, as a Western Vedantist, I do not consider myself to be a Hindu. However, the situation is more complicated than that. Western Vedantists, if they have effectively defined themselves as separate from the traditional Hinduism that was the cultural matrix of Ramakrishna, are still torn to some degree between two different if not opposing paradigms. Some are likely to see the figure and teachings of Ramakrishna as at least as important as Vedanta; others see Vedanta itself as the most dominant factor in their spiritual life.

A Healthy Tension

If no one is stigmatized in Vedanta Societies for favoring one paradigm over the other, the tension between them is still real, and is likely to continue. On the one hand, there is the teaching of the neo-Vedanta suited to the language and habits of thought of the modern scientific age that Vivekananda preached in the West—a Vedanta that emphasizes self-reliance in the search for self-realization. On the other hand, there is the intense feeling for Ramakrishna as an incarnation of the same magnitude as Christ.

I believe it is good to maintain this tension. Speaking personally, I found it very easy to move from the reverence for Christ that enriched my spiritual life in childhood and early youth to the reverence for Ramakrishna that has largely taken its place in my adult years. But thanks to the philosophy of Vedanta I do not believe that devotion to Ramakrishna is the answer for everyone or that other world teachers might not be of equal value to a spiritual seeker. To speak more radically and Vedantically, I believe that everyone contains inside the light that is needed to light one's own path to the Light, and that the Self struggles to enlighten the Self however it wishes to do so through any spiritual path it chooses.

I would suggest by way of conclusion that the term “Western Vedantist” (or, for that matter, “American Vedantist”) is not very meaningful in and of itself. Vedantists, whether in India or elsewhere, share a common metaphysical orientation, but individual Vedantists bring to this common paradigm a cultural and personal history that attaches them to a variety of religious or philosophical roots. Vedanta will probably not become the religion of the modern age (for reasons that Vivekananda gave in his amazing lecture “Is Vedanta the Future Religion?”) but I imagine that it will be increasingly common for people to be Hindu Vedantists, Christian Vedantists, Ramakrishna Vedantists, Islamic Vedantists, Jewish Vedantists, and so on—as well as others who will simply say

“I am a Vedantist of my own particular sort.” And that, I believe, would be all for the best in a world that would celebrate spiritual unity in religious diversity, and would guarantee the right of the individual to choose his or her own spiritual path.

Of Dogtags and Deviancy

William Page

The question has been asked, "Are Western Vedantists Hindus?"

It's a fair question. Some Western Vedantists may identify themselves as Hindus; others may not. I don't know how orthodox Hindus regard us, but I suspect that most of them will not consider us Hindus. They might possibly accept as Hindus those of us who identify strongly with Hinduism, participate in Hindu rituals, and follow orthodox Hindu practices.

In short, the answers to this question will vary, both among Western Vedantists themselves and among orthodox Hindus.

I consider myself a Western Vedantist, but not a Hindu. If anybody asks what religion I belong to, I say I'm a Ramakrishna Vedantist. If they want to know what Ramakrishna Vedanta is, I tell them it's a reform movement within Hinduism.

Sometimes identifying oneself as a Vedantist in the United States can cause problems, because Vedanta is not well known there. Many years ago, when I joined the U.S. Army, I had to fill out a form indicating my religion so that they could print my religion on my dogtags. They thought I was trying to be funny when I wrote "Ramakrishna Vedantist" on the form. I had to show them a pamphlet published by the Hollywood Center to convince them that there really was such a religion. Eventually they gave in and printed "Ramakrishna Vedantist" on my dogtags.

Why don't I consider myself a Hindu? My feeling is that you have to be born a Hindu. I've read that every Hindu is born into a group of people whose ancestors kept their cows in the same shelter, called a gotra. Disputes over the ownership of cows were settled by a person called a gotrapati. I've also heard that if you try to get into the Jagannath Temple at Puri, the priests ask you who your ancestors' gotrapati was, and if you can't answer, you don't get in. This criterion excludes Western Vedantists from the Hindu fold.

To really cement my credentials as a non-Hindu (hold your hats, folks), I don't believe in the infallibility of the Vedas, have no use at all for the caste system, do not regard cows with any particular esteem, and am skeptical about reincarnation and the law of karma.

I also dislike the custom of sacrificing goats to Kali. Once, on a visit to the Kali temple at Kalighat, I saw some goats' heads neatly lined up near the slaughtering-post—and found myself wondering what sort of religion I'd got myself mixed up in.

As the final nail in the coffin of my possible Hinduhood, I eat beef and pork.

Considering all this, I feel confident that the average Hindu will be happy to disown me. Some years ago, when I was visiting an Indian friend in Orissa, he wanted me to meet a very orthodox old lady who was a strict vegetarian. I think my friend told her I was a white Hindu from America. She didn't even want to look at me.

I don't blame her. I imagine she thought of me as some sort of barbarian *mlechchha* whose entire body was made of the flesh of dead cows. Possibly she shuddered at the thought of all those poor cows mooing mournfully inside my stomach. Given such a charming impression, I wouldn't have wanted to meet me either.

In view of such heterodoxy, some readers may be grumbling into their lassi, "How can this guy call himself a Ramakrishna Vedantist? It would be an act of charity even to call him a Deviant Vedantist."

Well, I call myself a Ramakrishna Vedantist because I really love Sri Ramakrishna; and although I have never been able to make much sense out of Shankaracharya, I find the general worldview of the Bhedabheda school of Vishishtadvaita Vedanta very appealing.

Even so, I would not reject the term Deviant Vedantist. It has a feisty ring that I rather like.

Am I a Vedantist or a Hindu? Guidelines from Vivekananda

Sister Gayatriprana

1. How Swami Vivekananda Presented His Message in the West

Introduction

Am I a Vedantist or a Hindu? That's a question many of us have been asking ourselves, especially over the last two to three decades, when the societies run by the Ramakrishna Order in the United States have welcomed increasing numbers of immigrant Indian Hindus. The emphasis of the work has become more and more focused on Sanskrit, Hindu myth, ritual and observance, food, dress and pilgrimage to India. Perhaps more difficult for Westerners has been the increasing emphasis on values that to us are hierarchical, tending to privilege certain groups over others and to favor one culture at the expense of others.

These are weighty issues, which many of us feel are reaching critical mass. There are, in many minds, several big question marks: As a Westerner, with democratic and scientific traditions behind me, how do I relate to Hinduism, and what exactly do I mean by Hinduism? Is Vedanta—as presented in the West by Swami Vivekananda—something different, something that is easier for me to relate to and use for my spiritual growth?

My own response has been to turn to the thinking of Swami Vivekananda, who was, after all, the founder of the Vedanta movement in the West. Where did he stand on the meaning of Hindu or Vedantist in the West? Just to begin the discussion, I will look very briefly at how Swami Vivekananda himself chose to entitle his public addresses in the West, as a very preliminary indication of where he stood on this subject.

How Swami Vivekananda Thought of His Work in the West: A Historical Perspective

In my studies of Swami Vivekananda's work, I have discovered that there were five main periods, defined by where the emphasis of his teaching lay.¹ In the West, the first period began in September, 1893, when he became a public figure overnight on account of his addresses at the first Parliament of the World's Religions. There he submitted a paper, not surprisingly entitled Hinduism, for that was the category of religious belief under which he had been admitted to the Parliament. Around the same time he gave one or two other addresses containing the word Hindu in their titles, but for all practical purposes the first period was the one and only time that he used Hinduism as the "default" word for what he had to say. It is surely significant that, on founding an organized group of Americans in New York City at the end of November, 1894, he chose to call it the Vedanta Society.

We find him launching the second period of his work on December 30, 1894, when he delivered the lecture, "The Religions of India," to the Brooklyn Ethical Association. Two reports of this lecture appear in the Complete Works, one entitled "The Hindu Religion,"² and the other "Indian Religious Thought."³ It seems likely that the first title was superimposed by the Brooklyn Standard Union, in which the report of the lecture was printed, again conforming the swami to the popular comprehension of his much misunderstood religion. Swami Vivekananda seems to have given up the term Hindu at that point in his work, for we find him giving, in addition to his many classes on yoga that took

1. "How Swami Vivekananda Learnt the Message of Sri Ramakrishna" in *Vedanta Kesari*, 1995-1998.

2. Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda (*Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama*), Vol. 1, p. 329.

3. CW, Vol. 4, p. 188.

up most of his time, a number of presentations on the Vedas, or Vedantic philosophy, none of them containing the word Hindu. If we take into consideration the fact that at the Brooklyn lecture he announced, “I have a message for the West as Buddha had for the East.”⁴ I think we can put two and two together and conclude that he had decided to emphasize Vedanta rather than Hinduism to Western audiences.

In March of 1896, his work moved to another, more metaphysical stage, with his address on The Vedanta Philosophy at the Graduate Philosophical Society of Harvard University. From there he went on to London, England, where he delved particularly into the Vedic and Upanishadic tradition as well as the decidedly Vedantic concept of maya, omitting any mention of Hinduism in the titles of his addresses. This period flowed seamlessly into his fourth period, in which he presented his ideas on spiritual evolution/involution in Practical Vedanta, a four part series which is actually a commentary on the Chandogya Upanishad.

Vivekananda’s Work in California

On the return of Swami Vivekananda to the West in 1899, after nearly three years in India, he launched into a whole slew of approaches—tales of traditional Hindu myths, heroes and archetypes, yoga, Vedanta philosophy and evolutionary theory—but the word Hindu did not occur at all in any of the titles of his presentations. He founded loosely organized groups in both Southern and Northern California, which again he called Vedanta Societies. This is in contrast to his brother monk, Swami Trigunatitananda, who in 1906 opened in San Francisco what he called the Hindu Temple.

Perhaps the most clinching piece of evidence that the swami was “thinking Vedanta, not Hinduism”, is the remarkable fact brought to our attention by Sister Gargi in the sixth volume of her series, *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries*. The background to this fact is that he gave a series of lectures in San Francisco on the great teachers of the world, beginning with “Christ’s Message to the World” on Sunday, March 11, 1900. The following week he talked about “Buddha’s Message to the World,” followed the next week by “Muhammad,” and on April 1, by “Krishna.” In this series he ranged over the major spiritual teachers then known to the West, naturally beginning with Christ and Buddha, the most familiar, but also including Muhammad, whose religion with its rich culture had played an important part in Western civilization. He concluded with Krishna, by then known to the West through translations of the Bhagavad Gita circulating for over a hundred years.

4. CW, Vol. 5: “*Questions and Answers at the Brooklyn Ethical Society,*” p. 314.

As Sister Gargi points out, we might well have expected the fifth and last lecture in the Sunday series to have dealt with Sri Ramakrishna,⁵ whom Swami Vivekananda definitely felt to be the summation of all previous prophets and incarnations. It would have been the perfect capstone on the arch of his Western work. We know, however, that Swami Vivekananda was reticent about Sri Ramakrishna, largely because he did not wish to start another cult, with all the potential for divisiveness that cults provide. He had indeed spoken of Sri Ramakrishna in New York and London, especially to more intimate and open-minded groups and it might well be assumed that, in California with earnest New Thought-ers deep into raja-yoga, he would have felt free to give at least a cameo about his spiritual teacher. From this standpoint, the title of his fifth lecture was quite surprising: “Is Vedanta the Future Religion?” Here was no cameo of an avatar—on the contrary, a wide open question, to which he provided some stunning, decidedly “non-Hindu” answers.

Finale in San Francisco

Gargi concludes, as do I, that in this great, almost overpowering finale to his Western work, Swami Vivekananda chose to represent Sri Ramakrishna as a way of looking at and interacting with the world, rather than as a historical figure with tremendous cult potential.⁶ This makes a lot of sense, for as we all know, limiting the avatar in time and space leads to terrible oppression and quite the opposite of what he or she intended. Indeed, in this lecture, Swami Vivekananda thundered that by elevating the avatar and treating people as helplessly dependent on them, “people are still hypnotized into abject degradation.”⁷ “[N]o man [is] to be singled out from the rest of humankind—‘You are worms, and we are the Lord God!’—none of that. If you are the Lord God, I also am the Lord God.”⁸ And, to put Vedanta in the full light of his own understanding, he also made it clear: “Vedanta does not teach the old idea of God at all. . . Vedanta teaches the God that is in everyone, has become everyone and everything.”⁹

Clearly, Swami Vivekananda was here way out of the “Hindu box,” at least as it is known to us today. He chose to call this radical new approach Vedanta, laying it, as it were, at the door of Sri Ramakrishna, whom he elsewhere recognized as the avatar that contained the truth of all other avatars. Clearly, he felt that Vedanta—the brand that Sri Ramakrishna had transmitted—was greater even than the Master himself, and his goal was to get that across to the West, not

5. Marie Louise Burke, *Swami Vivekananda in the West, Vol. 6 (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1986), p. 83.*

6. *Loc. cit.*, pp. 83-84.

7. *CW, Vol. 8: “Is Vedanta the Future Religion?” p. 141.*

8. *Ibid.*, p. 126.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 125.

as Hinduism, but as Vedanta, to which both Sri Ramakrishna and he himself had imparted their own unique interpretations.

[to be continued]

Do We Have to Become Eastern?

Edith Tipple

William James wrote of Margaret Noble (Sister Nivedita): “[Mrs. Ole Bull] was accompanied by an extraordinarily fine young English-woman named Noble, who has Hinduized herself and lives now for the Hindu people...” (quoted by Jacqueline Hazard Bridgeman in "Vivekananda and William James," *Vedanta and the West* #204, July-August 1970.)

What wonderful work she did, and what an inspiration for unselfishness is she. And yet I cannot but be saddened by what I feel is a general conception of Western Vedantists that they have to become Eastern to practice those eternal verities which Ramakrishna refreshed for this present age, and whose insights Swami Vivekananda brought to the West by his uncanny ability to dissolve cultural barriers. He brought to the West Ramakrishna's re-statement of the eternal and the universal, but not a precept owned by the East to be given to the West.

By the public insularity which P. Shneidre speaks to and the passivity and internalization of the average Western Vedantic character which William Page addresses (see *American Vedantist*, Vol. 10, No. 3, “Discussion: Should Vedanta Have a Higher Profile?”), there is the possibility that we could stop dead in its tracks the energy these two great souls set forth. It is impossible to grow from without; growth comes only from within. If we insist in our humility that spirituality is something that comes from without ourselves, from without our culture, we only grow stagnant.

This is not to suggest that our swamis should not continue to be spiritual pole stars and scriptural authorities, but that we take our own full responsibility. It is not good enough to have a religious Center to visit, howsoever helpful and consoling it might be to spend time in the company of people who are like-minded spiritually. It is strengthening to study, to meditate and to communicate with other aspirants, no matter what our development. But it is absolutely essential to bring that shrine of the Temple home and install it there. Only with it at the center of the very homes we live in can our hearts become rooted in the Ideal and all action spring from that core. □

You Are the Source

Text: adapted from Svetasvatara Upanishad

Music: John Schlenck

Moderately fast (♩ = 88)



1. You are the friend and ref - uge of all;
 2. You are the form - less Brah - man su - preme,
 3. You are the fire, you are the sun,
 4. You are the wom - an, you are the man,
 5. You are the dark blue bird in the sky,
 6. You are with - out be - gin - ning in time,
 7. When we for - get our one - ness in you,
 8. Of all re - lig - ions you are the source;



1. You are the At - man hid - den in our hearts.
 2. Yet out of you come man - i - fold forms;
 3. You are the air and you are the moon;
 4. You are the mai - den, you are the youth,
 5. You are the green par - rot with red eyes,
 6. You are be - yond the far - thest space;
 7. Weak - ness as - sails us, suf - fring is our lot;
 8. In you a - lone all knowl - edge shines.



1. By your grace our crav - ings are sub - dued; Grief is trans - cend - ed
 2. Then you with - draw them in - to your - self. Fill our minds and
 3. You are the wa - ters, you are the stars: Brah - man su - preme, Cre -
 4. You are the el - der lean - ing on a staff: Your ho - ly face is
 5. You are the cloud with light - ning in its womb, You are the sea - sons,
 6. From your - self all worlds are born, You are the Spir - it
 7. But let us see you as our Self: Lo, heav - y sor - row
 8. Known by the seers in their pure hearts, You are the glor - y,



1. when we be - hold you. *(instrumental)*
 2. hearts with pure thoughts.
 3. a - tor of all things.
 4. seen through all forms.
 5. you are the deep seas.
 6. dwell - ing with - in all.
 7. turns to great joy.
 8. you the su - preme Light.

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Book Reviews

Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas

By Elaine Pagels

Random House, New York, NY

257 pp. Hardback \$24.95 2003

Many Vedantists feel an affinity with the so-called Gnostic side of Christianity, which emphasized the affinity of the soul and God, and even the identity of the soul with God, and so eventually was declared heretical and suppressed, only to be rediscovered with the unearthing of the Nag Hammadi texts in 1945. Pagels' earlier book *The Gnostic Gospels* (1979) had revealed to a wide audience the charm and the wisdom of these "secret teachings," and now in *Beyond Belief* she focuses on the text that made Baker Roshi of the Zen Center of San Francisco exclaim, "had I known the Gospel of Thomas, I wouldn't have had to become a Buddhist!" (p. 74)

But before concluding that after centuries of persecution, suppression and neglect the "real" Christianity of Christ has been resurrected in our own time with these "Gnostic Gospels," it might be better to focus on the tensions in early Christianity that made it a dynamic and living religion, especially since these same kind of tensions exist in Vedanta today. Consequently the history of early Christianity may have a thing or two to teach us, too.

Tension between the Cult of Christ and the Mystical Teachings

At the very heart of Christianity is the tension between the emphasis on believing in the savior dimension of the figure of Christ, a cult of Christ the Son of God, and the need to follow sincerely and energetically the mystical teachings that he promulgated as a means towards salvation ("if you love me, keep my commandments"). It does seem in retrospect that Christianity has leaned historically to the side of a "cult of Christ" to the detriment of the search for the "inner Christ," the divine light at the heart of all beings. But the tension between these two conflicting paradigms surfaces every now and then in the history of Christianity. One sees it, for example, in the vigorous criticism that the great Flemish mystic Jan van Ruysbroeck made of the rather Vedantic sounding mystical philosophy of Meister Eckhart after its condemnation by Church authorities. Eckhart, who ever since Rudolf Otto's comparison of him with Shankara, has enjoyed the status of a Vedantic saint, was in many ways ahead of his times (hence his appeal to the modern mind), but also an anachronistic figure who unknowingly resurrected some aspects of the Gnostic Christianity the early church had suppressed over a thousand years before. Or take William Blake's

playfully provocative credo: “Jesus Christ is the only saviour. And so am I, and so are you.” Or again, one might see New England transcendentalism as a sudden rushing up of Gnostic enthusiasm for the self-reliant individual seeking divinity within after centuries of rigidly dogmatic Protestantism celebrating Christ as Lord and Savior.

Elaine Pagels explains in this book how she suffered from her Protestant background, which seemed to be mainly interested in belief as opposed to experience, making “being a Christian . . . virtually synonymous with accepting a certain set of beliefs.” (p. 5). The Gospel of Thomas, by contrast, urges the spiritual seeker to look within to find the light, and claims that this light is in all, not just in Christ. It was the Gospel of John, written shortly afterwards, that, according to Pagels, began the process of investing Christ with the sublime majesty that really ought to have been seen as the birthright of the human soul. Thereafter Christianity, it seems, took the wrong fork in the road, and only now can it reintegrate the Gnostic insights it rejected in the early years of its evolution.

A Need for Both

That at least is the general picture I get from reading Pagels’ new book. But it occurs to me that it may be more of a tension between equally valid positions that made for the strength and energy of early Christianity, than an imposition of a rigid system of belief centered on the Savior. Consequently, it seems to me that, if one wishes to reinvigorate modern Christianity, there is no need to throw out “Jesus Christ is the only savior”—one simply needs to add, as the necessary complement, “And so am I and so are you.” In other words, there is no need to choose sides between espousing the cult of Christ and embracing faith in oneself, but rather there is a need to maintain the tension between the two.

This kind of creative tension is something that I feel is at the heart of Vedanta today. On the one hand, Vivekananda, in his desire to preach a religion of strength and courage and so to avoid the pitfalls of cultish religion and its slavish reliance on savior figures, once went so far as to say that the curse of the entire order [the Ramakrishna Math and Mission] would be on whoever made Ramakrishna into the object of a cult. On the other hand, one has to admit that Ramakrishna has indeed become the object of a cult, and, in my opinion, Vedanta seems none the worse for it. Why is that? I think it is because, rather than one paradigm canceling out the other, the two together make for a creative tension resulting in a spirituality that acknowledges both human strength and human helplessness. Christianity may have been guilty in many instances of failing to acknowledge human strength, but the way for its future evolution, I would guess, would be not to play Thomas against John, but rather to accept them both.

Of course, in judging the course of Christian history and in speculating about its future I speak neither as a scholar nor as a practicing Christian, so I would like to give the last word to an old friend of mine, John Orens, editor of the Episcopalian journal *The Anglo-Catholic* and author of a book on the radical 19th century Anglican divine Stewart Headlam. In a recent letter to me, he wrote: “Pagels’ sharp distinction between Thomas and John is surely overdrawn. That said, if we free the positions she discusses from the historical communities with which she identifies them, I think that there is indeed, as you suggest, a perennial quality to this debate. Vedantists and liberal Quakers would be at one end, while Ramakrishna devotees and the advocates of a high Christology would be at the other. The problem, of course, is that the extremes are often more subtle than they first appear. After all, it was Athanasius, the very font of Nicene orthodoxy, who insisted that God became man so that man might become divine. To this day the Orthodox churches teach that our destiny is theosis or divinization. And if, as some of the Fathers [of the Church] teach, Christ is the archetype of humanity, the story of the ascension points to our own entry into the Godhead.”

Mysticism in American Literature: Thoreau’s Quest and Whitman’s Self

**by Paul Hourihan, ed. by Anna Hourihan, foreword by V.K. Chari
Vedantic Shores Press, Redding, CA
144 pp. Paperback \$14.95 2004**

Can an artist be a mystic? And can a mystic be a partially realized soul who stops on the road to realization? In these two fascinating studies published in one volume Paul Hourihan give a resounding YES! to each of these questions. Anyone who has been drawn to Thoreau’s prose and to Whitman’s poetry will be intrigued to learn why. Hourihan deals directly and fearlessly with the question of how these two nineteenth century American proto-Vedantists reached moments of genuine spiritual insight and realization, but then sought to perpetuate them not in their lives but rather as the subject matter for their much revised and reworked literary works *Walden* and *Leaves of Grass*. The artist in them benefitted, but the mystic lost out.

Thoreau’s solitary retreat to Walden Pond constituted, I would say, a kind of *vanaprastha*, the third stage of life as described in the *Laws of Manu* (a translation of which was, along with the *Gita*, one of Thoreau’s favorite books); in fact, if you translate *vanaprastha* literally, it means “spending time in the woods” or, as Thoreau’s subtitle for *Walden* put it (surely not coincidentally) “*Life in the Woods*.” For Hourihan, Thoreau’s spiritual retreat marked the high point of his life, after which he increasingly succumbed to his inner demons, especially to an ingrained contempt for ordinary human beings, a growing “anger at society” (p. 10) and at his teacher Emerson in particular, and “a compulsive

naturalism” that in the later sections of his journals makes for tedious reading, with “hardly any of the insights and beauty we would expect from Henry Thoreau.” (p. 9)

When *Walden* turned out to be no commercially successful publication, Thoreau fell victim to a severe depression; Hourihan adds, in one of the many insightful bits of commentary that are scattered throughout his essay, that one revered swami, when asked what was the principal difficulty of spiritual life, replied after a silence, “Don’t let your mind give in to depression.” (p. 13) Of course, some readers may feel that Hourihan is too quick to analyze the unconscious mind of Henry David Thoreau. But others, including this reader, will feel that he is intuitively right about the complex nature of a man, who has been such an inspiration for American spiritual seekers for many generations, but whose life seems somehow incomplete, as though still tending towards a goal that eluded it.

Still, incomplete and imperfect as he may be, Thoreau reminds us, over and over again, of “the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor” and the need to “keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep.” (quoted p. 54)

The Ideal Is to Combine Them

If Thoreau found inspiration in the relative solitude of Walden Pond, Whitman, by contrast, loved riding in the horse drawn buses of Manhattan, watching the crowd, mingling with all kinds of people and feeling himself to be one with them all. This mystical experience—that “My Self” is present in all human beings without exception—left him with enough material for a lifetime of poetry. But if the artist in him flourished, the mystic ran into a roadblock. Hourihan explains this by arguing that Whitman “made no serious attempt to alter his life to accord with the dimensions of the experience” (p. 86); he did not choose to discipline his life. Once again, Hourihan seems to this reader to have hit the nail on the head, when he writes that Whitman “acts as though the mystical moment was an aspect of his personality he had known from birth” and hence falls victim to his own ingrained tendencies, especially “indolence” and “procrastination” (p. 87). Like Thoreau, he fails to develop further.

But Hourihan still finds inspiration in both, and especially in the *combination* of both. He argues that Walt Whitman reveals a figure that complements that of Thoreau beautifully. If we take them together, and if we emphasize the positive dimensions of their inspiration, we would see, writes Hourihan, that “the ideal life would show a combination of their dominant traits.” From Thoreau we would learn “the great challenge of self-conquest and inner purification;” from Whitman

we would learn “the secret (in Vivekananda’s phrase) of the deification of the world, the necessity of cultivating a sense of the divine in all forms of life.”

He concludes that “Thoreau gives us willpower, Whitman gives us humanity—the ideal is to combine them!” (p. 126) It is a fitting conclusion for a reverent—and yet at times fittingly *irreverent*—appreciation of two classic American artists and mystics.

—Steven F. Walker

Contributors

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