

american vedantist

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Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi

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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american vedantist

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

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Dear American Vedantist (email & letters from readers):

I really think it's time you folded the tents.

AV is ranking right up there with *Global Vedanta* & with this issue maybe worse. 18 of 44 pages devoted to addresses of centers in the west? Why not worldwide? Maybe there would be a few more pages filled up. Then the hermit of Colorado, another 2 pages. The interview with Swahananda, an embarrassment. And with all that not a word about spiritual practice, self-knowledge, realization of the ultimate reality, meditation, enlightenment.....the core of VEDANTA

Just more self-serving bulls--t on the future...if it'll grow into another huge organization like the Catholic Church. I couldn't believe it. No wonder no Americans come.....

Please remove my name from the subscription list. It is soooooooooo sad. — *Ray Berry Sr.*

+++++

I want to especially thank you for the directory of the Ramakrishna-Sarada-Vivekananda movement. I myself get confused about such categories as "Sub-Centers" as opposed to "Unaffiliated Centers." I really appreciate receiving a complete list of the centers in the Americas. Please keep up your excellent work with American Vedantist.

— *Sr. Eleanor Francis, CSJB (Br. Chandra)*

+++++

I was going to suggest that after we become "North American Vedantist", we could move on to becoming "Pan-American Vedantist"... but I see that you have already begun to think in this direction. This is wonderful news! This is the way for the magazine to really nourish our Vedanta community.

May Mother bless this movement; surely this is what Swami Vivekananda would have wished to bring about. — *Sister Judith*

+++++

Just received the latest issue of AV... it is a very good issue indeed... Very nice interview with Swami Swahananda, and one of the best things about the directory is that you gave a brief history of each of the centers mentioned. Swami Tathagatananda's tribute to Swami Sarvagatananda brought tears to my eyes... Good show! — *Bill Page*

+++++

Read through your listing of centers in AV with great interest. Fabulous idea! A keeper. — *Karl Whitmarsh*



Vivekananda in Kashmir with Josephine MacLeod, Sara Bull and Sister Nivedita, 1898

Divine Mother — the First Manifestation

... Mother is the first manifestation of power and is considered a higher idea than father. With the name of Mother comes the idea of Shakti, Divine Energy and Omnipotence, just as the baby believes its mother to be all-powerful, able to do anything. The Divine Mother is the Kundalini ("coiled up" power) sleeping in us; without worshipping Her we can never know ourselves... Every manifestation of power in the universe is "Mother." She is life, She is intelligence, She is Love... Established in the idea of Mother, we can do anything. She quickly answers prayer.

She can show Herself to us in any form at any moment. Divine Mother can have form and name or name without form; and as we worship Her in these various aspects we can rise to pure Being, having neither form nor name... A bit of Mother, a drop, was Krishna, another was Buddha, another was Christ... Worship Her if you want love and wisdom.

Swami Vivekananda/CW/Volume 7/Inspired Talks (Recorded by S.E. Waldo on July 2, 1895)

Holy Mother and Her Western Children

John Schlenck

When Swami Vivekananda returned to India in January 1897 after three and a half years in the West, he brought with him several Western followers, and others came the next year. They traveled with him, ate with him, lived with him, experiencing India as no Westerners ever had. But along with the profound effect India had on them, they also had an effect on the Indians they encountered. Cultural barriers began to dissolve.

Before Swamiji's Western followers met Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother, he was understandably nervous about how she would receive them. After all, she had been brought up in a very traditional, caste-bound society where foreigners were considered "mlecchas," barbarians. Eating with them was considered to be defiling.

Vivekananda's Irish disciple Sister Nivedita (Margaret Noble), and his American followers Sara Bull and Josephine MacLeod were the first Westerners Holy Mother had ever met. Nivedita recounts that meeting:

"March 17, 1898, St. Patrick's Day—a day of days! That day we paid our first visit to Sarada Devi, wife of Sri Ramakrishna. . . She has always been terribly orthodox, but all this melted away the instant she saw her first...

*Westerners . . . and she tasted food with them! . . . Fruit. . . was naturally offered to her, and she, to the surprise of everyone, accepted."*¹

At the time, this was revolutionary.

And Holy Mother showed her love for them in other ways. In the words of Swami Gaurishwarananda, a disciple of Holy Mother,

*When Mother asked Nivedita her name, she replied, "My name is Miss Margaret Elizabeth Noble." Mother said, "My dear girl, it is very difficult for me to utter such a big name. I will call you 'Baby.'" Mother spoke in Bengali. When that was translated to Nivedita, she was very glad. "Yes, yes, I am Mother's baby!" And Mother loved her, blessed her, touching her head, gave her prasada, and she was so glad. When she returned to Swami Vivekananda, she was full of joy. "Mother has loved me, Mother has blessed me. . ."*²

That meeting was recalled by Sara Bull as follows: "We were the first foreigners to have received permission to see Sarada Devi, the widow of Sri Ramakrishna. She called us her children, and saying that our visit to her was of the Lord, she felt no strangeness in being with us."³ It is to Sara Bull that we owe the first photographs ever taken of Holy Mother, including the one that is most commonly worshiped. This occurred about eight months after their first meeting. Holy Mother

recalled, "At first I refused to be photographed. But Sara pressed me and said, 'I shall take the picture to America and worship it.' In the end I had to agree."⁴

Laura Glenn, known as Sister Devamata, was a student of Swami Paramananda, who founded the Vedanta Society of Boston. Devamata spent two years in India, from 1909 to 1911, mainly in Madras (now Chennai) under the guidance of Swami Ramakrishnananda. During that time she made a pilgrimage to Bengal to visit the places associated with Sri Ramakrishna and to meet Holy Mother. A few days after Devamata reached Madras, she received the following letter from Holy Mother:

My dear Devamata,

I am very glad to hear of your so much devotion to my Lord. You are my daughter. May infinite devotion rise up in your heart—this is my blessing to you. For this I pray to my Lord. May you live long and along with all my other children may you remain merged in bliss eternal.

I am doing well.

Your affectionate

Mother⁵

When Devamata reached Calcutta, Holy Mother at once accepted her into her daily life, as she had accepted Nivedita previously. By doing so she risked social ostracism. Devamata was given the privilege of caring for Mother's rooms. After Devamata left Calcutta, Mother

kept up a correspondence with her for several years, always addressing her as "My sweet daughter," "my beloved daughter," "my beloved child."

Betty Leggett and Josephine MacLeod were sisters who attended Swami Vivekananda's New York lectures beginning in 1895. Betty visited India toward the end of 1912 and wrote to Josephine in January, 1913 about her meeting with Holy Mother:

*"I went to the little house [the Udbodhan] to see her. . . She was quite free, with head and hands uncovered. . . She was very gentle and halting and full of reverence for Him (Sri Ramakrishna) as she talked, and made many gestures of adoration. . . She took my face in her hands several times and kissed her hands and we parted several times with much emotion. . . When I had gone all over the house, I found her at the head of the stairs, fairly radiant, again taking my face in her hands and blessing me. I had tears and I thought she had: but I couldn't see for my own. . ."*⁶

Josephine saw Holy Mother several times. Her exalted mood after one visit is recounted by Swami Gambhirananda. After her return to Belur Math in the evening, a brahmachari was asked to accompany her to the guest house. She had moved ahead and was "repeating to herself, 'I've seen her, I've seen her.' Suddenly she was aware of the brahmachari's presence, and bringing her face to his ears she whispered with great emotion, 'The

Holy Mother! I've seen her.' She covered a furlong in this mood of elation, hardly noticing where her footsteps fell or if her feet touched the ground at all; and every now and then she kept on uttering the word 'Mother' and making some soliloquy."⁷

Sister Christine, an American disciple of Vivekananda who lived and gave service in India for a number of years, also saw Holy Mother several times. She lived and served with Sister Nivedita at the girls' school started by Nivedita. She came to visit Holy Mother a few days after Nivedita passed away. Mother said, "'Alas! They two lived together. Now it will be so sad for her to live alone!' And to Christine she said, 'Considering how even our hearts feel so intensely for her, yours will do so all the more, my dear. . . .' And the Mother began shedding tears."⁸

It is known that Holy Mother initiated at least three Westerners. In September 1918, a European lady came to ask her blessing on her sick daughter. Holy Mother stretched forth her hand in the Western manner and caught hold of the woman's hand. Mother blessed her wholeheartedly and gave her a lotus that had been offered to Sri Ramakrishna, saying, "Please touch your daughter's head with it." The daughter recovered, and afterward the lady continued to visit Holy Mother and took initiation from her.⁹

Most of Holy Mother's interactions with Westerners were naturally with women, with whom she could interact more freely. But there were exceptions. Swami Atulananda, known as Gurudas Maharaj, was a Dutch-born student of Swami Abhedananda and Turiyananda in America. He afterward lived in India for many years. On his first trip to India, in 1911, he received initiation from Holy Mother. His experience is recorded in the biographical introduction to *With the Swamis in India and America*:

When Gurudas Maharaj was later asked how he had felt at the time of his initiation—since he could neither understand Bengali, nor could Holy Mother speak English—he explained, "When a child sits on its mother's lap, in which language to they converse? Similarly, I felt at that time as though the whole world were dissolved, and I was a small baby sitting on the lap of my mother. I felt inebriated, and I had no doubts."¹⁰

We were told by Swami Pavitrananda, head of the Vedanta Society of New York from 1951 to 1977, that there was a doctor living on Long Island (New York) who had been initiated by Holy Mother. In the early 1960s that doctor sent one lady who had spiritual interest to the New York Vedanta Society.

There were numerous occasions when Mother expressed her realization that "beings all over the universe are my children."

And one may accept intellectually that this was her experience. But to visualize this vividly, it is helpful to contemplate concrete instances when she stepped outside her own cultural context.

Nivedita was particularly impressed by Holy Mother's "power to penetrate a new religious feeling or idea." Mother once visited Nivedita and Christine at their school on Easter. She wanted to learn something about the Christian festival. When they sang some Easter hymns, Nivedita was impressed by "the swiftness of [Mother's] comprehension, and the depth of her sympathy with these resurrection-hymns, unimpeded by any foreignness or unfamiliarity in them." On another occasion Mother asked Nivedita and Christine to describe a European wedding. "With much fun and laughter, personating now the 'Christian brahmin,' and again the bride and bridegroom, we complied. But we were neither of us prepared for the effect of the marriage vow. "For better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health—till death us do part," were words that drew exclamations of delight from all about us. But none appreciated them as did the Mother. Again and again she had them repeated to her. 'Oh the Dharmmi words! The righteous words!' she said."¹¹

On one occasion a brahmachari, inspired by the pre-Gandhi freedom movement, was asked to buy some clothes for Mother's nieces. He wanted to buy coarse

locally made garments and protested when the nieces insisted on better quality English goods. Sensing his dislike of Britishers, Mother said, "They too are my children, don't you agree?"

The unlimited love and acceptance of Sarada Devi is perhaps best expressed in her last message, uttered on her death bed shortly before she expired. That message concludes, "Learn to make the world your own. No one is a stranger, my child; the whole world is you own."¹²

Footnotes

¹ Purnatmananda, Swami, *translated by Maloti Sen Gupta, Reminiscences of Sri Sarada Devi* (Kolkata, Advaita Ashrama, 2007), 106-107.

² Gaurishwarananda, Swami, *Reminiscences of Holy Mother* (New York: Vedanta West Communications, 1995), in *American Vedantist*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 6.

³ Purnatmananda, *Reminiscences*, 149.

⁴ Nikhilananda, Swami, *Holy Mother* (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1962), 114.

⁵ *Reminiscences*, 129.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 147-148.

⁷ Gambhirananda, Swami, *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1977), 392.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 391-392.

⁹ *The Gospel of the Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1984), 67-68.

¹⁰ Atulananda, Swami, *With the Swamis in America and India* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1988), 10.

¹¹ *Reminiscences*, 113.

¹² Nikhilananda, 319.



Om
Hari
Om

IN PRAISE OF JAPA

William Page

Japa is one of the main spiritual practices of the Ramakrishna movement. Combined with prayer and meditation, it forms a triangle—a three-fold method of reaching out for God, establishing him within, and keeping him there.

Prayer is simply the act of talking to God. The words can be spoken aloud, whispered, or uttered mentally. They reach out to God and invite him to come down and take his seat upon the lotus of the heart.

Once he's there, we begin to do japa and meditate. Japa is the continuous, silent repetition of a very short prayer or invocation called a mantra. It can be done

on its own or in conjunction with meditation. Meditation is the act of visualizing God within us. Together, these two practices establish God within us and enable us to feel his presence.

In the intervals between meditation sessions, we usually get preoccupied with our daily work. If God gets restless at being neglected and seems inclined to leave his seat, we can bring him back by doing japa.

So prayer draws the Lord from the heavens to the heart, japa and meditation establish him on his throne within, and japa keeps him there. Of course, his grace is also necessary. Without it, nothing happens.



Do It Now

Prayer and meditation require our full attention, but one of the advantages of japa is that you can do other things at the same time. Holy Mother, who was famous for doing prodigious amounts of japa, undoubtedly did much of it while busy with her household chores—husking paddy, sweeping and scrubbing the floor, washing and cutting vegetables.

It's also a good way to shut down the endless chatter of the mind. We often find our thoughts wandering. Japa pulls them back and gives them focus. It's like a thread that ties the mind to the lotus feet of the Lord; it reminds us always to pay attention to him.

Sri Ramakrishna taught a variety of spiritual practices, but Swami Brahmananda and Holy Mother placed special emphasis on japa. If you study their teachings, you'll find that they constantly emphasized the necessity of doing it, and especially at fixed times in the morning and evening.

The fixed times establish the habit. Once you get used to doing it at certain times, you get restless to do it when those times come. If you don't do it, you feel guilty. In fact, guilt feelings are common among devotees who skip doing

their japa. If you don't want to feel guilty, better not skip it!

A common complaint among beginners is that they don't feel any results. Swami Brahmananda constantly had to reassure his disciples that if they didn't feel any results in the beginning, they would feel them later on. Perseverance is the key. In fact, he told one disciple, "Follow some spiritual discipline for at least three years, and then, if you find you have made no tangible progress, you may come back and slap my face!" (Swami Prabhavananda, *The Eternal Companion*, Vedanta Press, Hollywood, 1947; p. 129.)



Vicarious Japa: A Gift from Holy Mother

Holy Mother said that some of her disciples were incapable of doing much japa, so she did it for them. In her old age, when her attendant noticed that she was doing japa even in bed, she asked, "What can I do, my son? The boys come and entreat me eagerly. They take the *mantra* and go home. But nobody does any *japa* regularly. Some don't do it even once. Yet as I have shouldered the burden, should I not look after them? That's why I do *japa* and pray to the Master, 'O Master, grant them enlightenment, grant them emancipation, and do you take on yourself their care in every way here and hereafter!'"

(Swami Gambhirananda, *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi*, Sri Ramakrishna Math, Chennai, Fourth Edition, 1986; p. 397. See also Swami Nikhilananda, *Sri Sarada Devi, The Holy Mother: Her Teachings and Conversations*, Skylight Paths Publishing, Woodstock, Vermont, 2004; pp. 25-26.)

I can imagine some people grumbling, "Holy Mother made it too easy for her disciples. She spoiled them. How could they develop any character if she did everything for them?"

I can also imagine her giving a sharp reply: "I am the Mother! Shall I not do everything for my children? As for their character, you don't need to worry about it. I will take care of it."

Lazy guys like me envy Holy Mother's disciples. What a soft deal they had! We don't have the luxury of knowing that she's doing japa for us. Some of us have to do three rounds of the rosary just to get started. Sometimes it takes that long just to drag the mind away from worldly thoughts and get it settled down. That's especially true in the evening, after a day of being beaten up by the world.

Coffee, Tea, or Japa?

Early-morning japa, which is recommended most highly, is sup-

posed to take hold quickly, because the mind is fresh and doesn't have to wean itself away from worldly thoughts. But you have to make sure that you're fully awake, or you're likely to fall asleep.

People like me, who need three cups of coffee just to wake up in the morning, are always relieved to read about a disciple of Holy Mother who told her that it was impossible for him to do japa before having his morning tea. Fortunately for us all, Holy Mother gave him permission to drink his tea first. (Gambhirananda, p. 410.)

I have been quick to interpret this as permission to drink my three cups of coffee in the morning before trying to do anything that requires the slightest bit of intelligence. I console myself for this weakness by invoking the example of an eminent Tibetan lama, the late Kalu Rimpoche, who used to drink Tibetan tea while meditating.

Don't Mess with the Mantra

Japa is sometimes difficult for Westerners, because the mantra is in Sanskrit, a language we're unfamiliar with. I know an American devotee who once rebelled against his mantra. "I'm tired of this Sanskrit gibberish," he complained. "I want an English mantra." So, although he had been initiated by

a perfectly well-qualified teacher, he made up an English mantra and started doing japa with it.

At first it seemed new and fresh, and he was heartened by the results. The image of his Chosen Ideal glowed within him; it seemed to be cheering him on. Novelty is always exciting, and he expected to make rapid progress.

But surprise, surprise! Novelty wears off pretty quickly unless there's some substance behind it. Pretty soon, about halfway through his rosary, he began to nod off, and his old mantra started welling up from the depths of his mind. He stopped it, reimposed his English mantra, and succeeded for awhile; but the old Sanskrit mantra was stubborn, and kept resurfacing when he least expected it. No matter how much he resisted, it kept coming back. Eventually the image of the Chosen Ideal seemed to be grinning at him, and then he got the message.

Finally he gave up and returned to his old mantra. "There's more to this mantra stuff than meets the eye," he admitted. "I guess you can't keep a good mantra down."

But It's Boring!

The big complaint that most people make about japa is that it's boring. Who wants to keep chanting the same old line? What a waste of time! What's the point?

The point, of course, is to recondition the mind. That's what spiritual practice is all about: to recondition the mind so that it will become a fit place

for the indwelling of the Lord. But our minds are restless, and scream for more exciting fare. This is especially true in our switched-on era, when cyberspace is crackling with high-tech entertainment. Who wants to pray when you can google? Who wants to chant when you can twitter?

If we're serious about spiritual life, we have to shut down the computer and dig out the old rosary. Swami Brahmananda's remark that his disciples could come back and slap his face if they didn't feel any results within three years is something we ought always to keep in mind. He didn't mean three years of just piddling around. He meant three years of persistent and intensive effort.

Experience shows that if we keep working on our japa, it gradually takes hold. It stops being boring and eventually becomes sweet. The mantra becomes an old friend, something solid in the foundation of our minds, an anchor for our wayward thoughts. It can be a healing balm in times of grief, a refuge in times of trouble. It takes on a life of its own, and rises from our subconscious to greet us whenever we turn to it.

It also becomes something very much like the default setting of the mind. When the mind wanders, the mantra often emerges spontaneously. We find it resounding within us without making any effort. All we have to do is listen.

In fact, this may be one answer to the famous Zen koan, "Who is it that recites the Buddha's name?" When we become established in japa, the Buddha's name recites itself.

O CHRISTMAS TREE, O CHRISTMAS TREE - WHAT IS IT THAT YOU MEAN TO ME?

Sister Gayatriprana

The Pagan Roots of Christmas

Many of us who have been “in Vedanta” for several decades come from traditional Western backgrounds and are engaged on a day to day basis with the effort to reconcile our own culture with the exotic imports that now demand our attention. One of the deepest and earliest impressions many of us have is of the celebration of Christmas with our families, a time when we all come together in a spirit of love and generosity and, in our own ways, renew our personal commitment to the deeper values of life

Although the midwinter festival has in the West been given the name of Christ, I believe its roots lie in a much more basic human response to the universe we live in. Prior to religion as we know it now, human religious response was focused largely on natural events, on which, apart from anything else, depended our survival. The winter solstice is a very major natural event, when the amount of light and warmth reaching the earth from the sun is at a minimum. For nearly two months there is sustained dark and cold, particularly in the latitudes further from the equator, and most familiar to us, in Europe, especially Northern Europe. There



Image courtesy Bonnet Girls and Associates
— Helen Scott

the festival was marked in pagan times by the burning of bonfires and animal sacrifice – a maximum strength puja, you might say.

Northern Europeans were in a special situation, facing not only darkness but terrific cold, lack of food and always the fear that they might not make it through the winter. That is no doubt why their winter rituals were so robust, even so vehement and relentlessly jolly, as an ancient wassail song attests:

*Deck the halls with boughs of holly,
tra la la la la, la la la la!*

*'Tis the season to be jolly, tra la la la
la, la la la la!*

One of the few living things to

be had in abundance at that time were the branches of evergreens, and these were cut and brought into their homes, as a reassurance that life was still going on and would burst forth again. The bright red berries of holly were an especially comforting touch, not only cheery in themselves, but promising warmth and abundant life to come.

The Christmas tree – a more recent version of the ancient boughs – brings together the evergreens and the lights of the festival of the solstice – an enchanting sight, especially if one has seen a traditional German tree, with real candles and gingerbread decorations. The eyes of the children sparkle as they gaze at the beautiful sight, and the older people feel a deep warmth, a sense of oneness with each other and a connectedness with the process of life, symbolized by the silent, forbearing tree, which in most cases is itself a sacrifice, as it is cut from its roots to perform its sacred function. Here we enact the primeval ritual of the invoking of the sun, which brings to the darkness and cold its enlivening, warming, heartening and joyous presence.

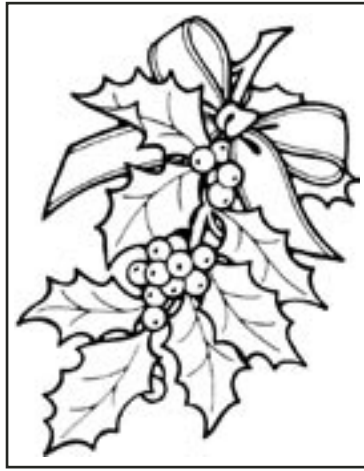
The Creation of Religious Tradition out of Our Pagan Roots

Many might say that all this is very “pagan,” which would mean,

I think, placing the locus of our self-identity and worship in the natural world. Is there something intrinsically wrong with that?

When Swami Vivekananda was in London he gave a series of very intellectually challenging lectures on the abstruse subject of maya.

His audiences asked him if such Vedanta could ever be practical, and he responded with four lectures entitled *Practical Vedanta*, most of which is commentary on the Chandogya Upanishad, one of the earliest and most “pagan” of the Upanishads. Specifically, he tells the story of two young men who experienced Brahman directly in and through the physical world – fire, plants and animals – and goes on to say that practicality in religion is, quite simply, such direct perception, which we have through our personal experiences.¹ The principle he stresses is that we have the capacity to experience the divine, not just in the physical world, but in several different dimensions, all



of which are valid and necessary. What is not desirable is to limit our experience to only one dimension, whether it be the physical or the purely abstract. Humanity seems to begin with the material world, but we also have the capacity to enter and experience several other “worlds”, of increasing subtlety and power.

In the Western tradition, for example, the introduction of Christianity shifted the key of Christmas from unbridled wassailing to an awareness of a more interior Christ principle which is capable of refining the way we interpret our experiences. The ideal of the gentle and loving Christ took the edge off pagan sacrifices and set a standard of human behavior which emphasized the more refined and thoughtful aspects of human nature.

I think it is very significant, however, that the Christian fathers grafted the Christ ideal on to the pre-existing pagan festivals. The explanation that occurs in the light of practical Vedanta is that to deny the human need to rejoice in the natural world is to cut off the very root of religious experience. What was needed – and provided – was to add the more interior dimension, which in its own way gradually entrained the wassail and refined our notion of culture. In the medieval period, however, Christianity got too involved with its principles, which turned into dogmas and instruments of torture in the 500

year *fatwah* we call the Inquisition. In essence the Inquisition was directed against anyone who dared to say they had experienced the divine in the material world, the working definition of a witch. The gentle and loving Christ was turned into a scourge to thrash the life out of pagan culture completely. The ultimate result of such excesses was a radical shift, in the Renaissance, away from Judeo-Christian dogma and back to the pagan religions. Of course, there could be no way of going back to pre-Christian paganism, but what did emerge was the scientific worldview, insisting that the material world be given its due in the range of valid objects for human experience, thus providing us with the basis of what we now call secular.

Santa as the Humanistic Symbol of Christmas

In this brave new world the only thing that mattered was material proof, and religion became a question of how we conduct ourselves in the physical world. Our behavior must be seen to conform to universal principles, not dogmas pulled out of hats located God knew where. A stern discipline, but a needed corrective for the metaphysical excesses of the Middle Ages. The religious form of Christianity corresponding to this way of thinking was Protestantism, which historically lay behind the scientific revolutions, modern notions of democracy and the free-

enterprise social system. In this new context we find the transmutation of Saint Nicholas, a shadowy Christian saint, into *Sinter Klaas*, who arrived in the New World with Protestant Dutch settlers in the seventeenth century. Standing for kindheartedness, generosity and deep concern for human individuals, each of whom is responded to in a very specific and loving way, Sinter Klaas is, one could say, the “humanized” ideal of the deity of the winter solstice. He embodies not only the pagan idea of the sun returning in midwinter but also the cardinal Christian virtues. Here was a role model for all of us, unpretentious, but with no claims to transcendental authority — in the post-Inquisition context, so fraught with terror and disgust.

Saint Nicholas’s subsequent history could well be seen as yet another exercise in a basically good thing going too far. By the early nineteenth century, Saint Nicholas had become the patron of the New York Historical Society, and had begun his metamorphosis into Santa Claus in Clement Clark Moore’s classic poem, *The Night Before Christmas*. 1863 – the year of Swami Vivekananda’s birth – saw the full potential of Santa unfold in the cartoons of Thomas Nast.

Such was the impact of Nast’s work that President Lincoln requested him to do a piece showing Santa with some Union soldiers.

The resultant demoralization of the Confederate troops is not only an example of early psychological warfare, but a testimony to the amazing power of the Santa icon!²

The nineteen twenties and thirties saw Santa move into the American mainstream, which means, for better or for worse, appearing on Normal Rockwell magazine covers, Coca Cola advertisements, and acquiring a full team of reindeer, including Rudolph of the shiny nose, a whimsy created under the auspices of the mail order firm, Montgomery Ward. This notion took the form of a popular song in the nineteen forties, with what consequences we all know.

The rising tide of commodification and commercialization of Santa led to a backlash from more traditional Christians, and in the late nineties an image appeared of Santa being crucified, a rather disagreeable call to return to the suffering, guilt, and dependence on a historical savior, innate to traditional Christianity.³

Where Do We Find the Real Meaning of Christmas Now?

Clearly, we are reaching a crisis with Santa and the humanistic tradition he embodies. Is there a way we can retain the human goodness of Santa without returning to the punishing religions that are attacking him? Here we can indeed turn

to the events of January 1, 1886, when Sri Ramakrishna demonstrated in person how a God-realized soul can radically transform all the preceding forms and tie them into a much, much bigger picture. On that day (only ten days after the winter solstice), he fulfilled for his devotees the deepest longing of their hearts – not only for spiritual things, but also for what we might call “worldly” success. A form of “spiritual Santa”, you might say!

To bring out another dimension of these events, let us imagine that at that time an eight-year-old American boy called Tom was living in Calcutta with his parents. Calcutta was a very long way from New York, and so terribly different! Much hotter, dirtier – and then, those scary gods and goddesses! Why did they have animal heads and so many arms, all of that jewelry and those nasty axes, swords and

tridents? That fat one with the elephant’s head – how horrible! As Christmas drew near, the lack of snow, the lack of Christmas trees and all the fun a child of his age expects as the days grow colder

– and above all, no mention of Santa, far less a sighting – was too much for Tom. He became quite inconsolable and stopped eating.

His parents were unusually enlightened people, and they took an interest in Indian holy men. On January 1 they took their pale and depressed child to Kasipur (Cossipore) in the hopes that seeing Sri Ramakrishna would cheer him up. They arrived at the time that Sri Ramakrishna was in his mood of

gift-giving and gently pushed Tom toward him. Tom was too tongue-tied to speak, and besides, his Bengali was not up to the occasion.

I don’t think it is going too far to suggest that Sri Ramakrishna would have instantly understood what Tom’s heart was crying for, because the Master accepted all forms of chosen ideals. Can we doubt that, understanding the intensity of the boy’s longing, he brought Santa to him,

and perhaps even that Santa took Tom on his lap and gave him the gift that pleased him most?

But the gift that came with all of that was even better. Tom would have understood the kindness, the



generosity, the basic goodness of Santa, not just in a Sunday-School-catechism sort of way, but as the very air we breathe. He would have understood – though perhaps not all at once – that he himself had as much potential to care, to love, to give, as Santa has. And – the special Ramakrishna touch – the next time Tom saw that funny elephant headed god, he would have seen him as Santa – *his* Santa – taking the peculiarly Indian form of Ganesha. He might have gone on to learn just how to live so that Santa would be manifest in everything he did, not just at Christmas, but all the time.

I firmly believe that Sri Ramakrishna's touch can enable us to see the spiritual depths in "even" our home-grown Western icons. If Santa is our ideal – and why not? He is vastly more humane than many of our religious ideas – we can become the embodiment of all he stands for. One thing we can say about Santa, in closing – he usually carries a Christmas tree, so the pagans also get in on this deal with Sri Ramakrishna. Can we ask for a better Christmas party, with everyone there, everyone happy, and everyone plugged in to what they really are, underneath all of those trappings? Let's say Sri Ramakrishna is the Maha-Santa, the really Big Santa, of which all lesser Santas are but manifestations!

Footnotes

¹ CW, Vol.2: *Practical Vedanta II*, p.317

² www.religioustolerance.org/santa1.htm

³ *ibid.*



American Vedantist
is printed at
the Ramakrishna
Monastery, Trabuco
Canyon, California.

The monks have
started a new service
organization called
Holy Mother Mission.

Their website, www.holymothermission.org,
explains in detail the
goal and purpose of
this organization.
It also displays newly
printed and released
books on a variety of
spiritual topics.

The income that this
press, website and
project generates is
used to feed
the needy.

Swami Prabhavananda on the Life of Holy Mother

Transcribed by Swami Krishnananda (1904-97)

Compiled by Gopal Stavig

Swami Prabhavananda (1893-1976) was born in the village of Surmanagar, India, and brought up in Vishnupur, about twenty miles west of Holy Mother's hometown of Jayrambati. He 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. What follows in the first three sections is a lightly edited transcription of a Sunday lecture entitled "Holy Mother." It was delivered on September 16, 1973, by Swami Prabhavananda in the Hollywood Vedanta Society Temple. During the talk Swami Prabhavananda mentioned that some of these stories might not be written down. Throughout this manuscript and particularly in the last two sections, additional information is supplied and indicated in the end-notes.¹ Overall, the material was drawn from 14 lectures delivered between 1948 and 1975 by Swami Prabhavananda on Holy Mother.

Swami Prabhavananda's Personal Experiences

The life of Holy Mother has been written beautifully by many authors, and so I will not recount her life story. First, I will give you



Sarada Devi — Holy Mother
(painting by Swami Tatatananda)

my own experiences that I had with her. I had the blessed fortune to meet her many times in my life. I shall also relate to you what I have heard directly from the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, and you will find how they looked upon her, as well as some stories I have heard from her attendant [Rashbehari, later Swami Arupananda], a brother disciple of mine.

Let me first tell you my own experiences with her. Her birthplace Jayrambati was about twenty miles from my hometown. In order to

go to her home from Calcutta, she would take a train to my hometown Vishnupur. She would get off at the railway station there and have to wait for some time before she could get a bullock cart to go to her village. At that time, practically nobody in our district knew about Holy Mother.

She was staying at an inn and was on the porch the day I first saw her. A friend and I were going out for a walk. I was then only 14 or 15 years old and I noticed Radhu, Holy Mother's niece standing and holding one of the pillars. Then we noticed a holy man who was seated and surrounded by many women, who were also seated there.

As my friend and I continued walking, we criticized this sadhu. "Look at this holy man surrounded by women!" As a result, look what happened to me!² When we returned from our walk, it was a little dark. My friend was to go home in one direction, and I was to go home in another direction. But something drew me back to this holy man. He said, "Will you see Holy Mother?" I got excited because I had read the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* at that time. You see, as a young boy I was an atheist. And it was the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* that attracted me. As I read the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, Naren and Rakhal, these two names attracted me. Of course, Naren [Swami Vivekananda] was not living then, so I had Rakhal [Swami Brahmananda] on my mind.

I said, "Holy Mother. Do you mean Paramahansa's wife?" "Yes." She was right there and so I touched her toes. You see, we did that with our fingers. And she kissed me like our mother's kiss, by placing her fingers on the chin and then putting them to her lips. Then she said, "Son, haven't I seen you before?" I said, "No, Mother, I have not seen you." Of course, mothers recognize their children, but unfortunately children do not recognize the mother who is the Mother of the Universe.³

Holy Mother would come to Calcutta and stay at the Udbodhan Office. Visitors were allowed twice a week to come and touch her feet. One day was reserved for the women and another day reserved for the men. I used to go to see her once a week and she would remain veiled. And so I used to go and touch her toes. She would be seated with her body and face covered. You could see only her feet. Thousands of people would come. There would be rows of people in lines for two or three blocks.

Not that I had any special reverence for Holy Mother, because I always considered her to be a simple countrywoman, like my own mother. However, I used to go because I would get a wonderful sensation like an electric shock every time I touched her toes. Later I learned in that way she transmitted spiritual power. But I didn't know. Just for that sensation, I went

to see her once a week, because afterwards I would feel a soothing influence in my whole body. Holy Mother used to come and live in Calcutta for six months as a general rule, and then go to back to Jayrambati for six months. This was around 1910 or 1911.⁴

One time another friend of mine [who became Swami Amriteswarananda] and I came together to Vishnupur. Unfortunately he died young. If he had lived today, I am sure he would have become the President of our Order. I use to call him Paresh. In our home we stayed, and then we hired a bullock cart and traveled, sleeping in the bullock cart, all night. First, we went to Koalpara [about three miles from Jayrambati], where Holy Mother used to come and stay occasionally. In Koalpara there is an adobe house where there is a picture of Holy Mother and Sri Ramakrishna. We saw a picture of Holy Mother, which she installed and worshiped herself. And so we had the blessed fortune to see that picture and bow down to it. Sri Ramakrishna himself also worshiped his own picture and said, "Some-day this picture [meaning his own photo] will be worshiped in many homes in the world."

I always carried a picture of Holy Mother. In the Udbodhan Office, I had a friend who gave me that picture. Generally, they did not sell them at that time. I carried that picture all my life. Holy Mother told in a vision, "I see many in America

placing my picture on the left of Thakur." I think I was the first one who did that. That is the picture you see there in the [Hollywood Vedanta Society] shrine.⁵

As we went to Mother's house, we were late to arrive. She had told her attendant Rashbehari, a swami [Swami Arupananda] who later recorded the teachings of Holy Mother [1909-13, 1918], "Two of Rakhal's sons are coming. Save some food for them." We did not write to her nor was there any telephone, but she knew we were coming.

When we would go to her village, she didn't have a veil or anything like that. Then like a mother she served us food on leaf plates. One very interesting thing: she looked like one's own mother to whoever saw her. So she appeared to me as my own mother. I saw no difference. It was not only like that with me, but also with many others I have known. When we would see her, she would act and behave just like our own mother. She sat by us and asked us if we liked the food, just as our own mother does. If we liked something, then she would give us more. So in that way she fed us. I have never eaten such food in my life. It was like nectar, I still remember that. After finishing, we were going to throw out the leaf plates. Then Mother said, "What are you doing?"

"We cannot leave these leaf plates here. We ate in those." Then she said, "What would you have

done if your mother had been present?" So we left them there.

Both of us stayed there for three days and three nights. When we left Holy Mother, she stood by the door and kissed us. And as far as she could see, she kept looking at us. This was the custom she had with everybody that used to go to her. These were wonderful times. We did not have any teaching or anything; she did not teach us anything. Just to see her and to touch her feet was enough.

While we were there, she initiated one young man. As we came back, we saw he was very sick and was dying. And at the moment of death, he sat straight up and chanted the mantra that Holy Mother gave to him. So it was a wonderful death from that standpoint.⁶

At Belur Math

When we were students in Calcutta, they gave word to us that Mother will be coming to the Belur Math and they needed volunteers. So many of our college boys went there. We stood in rows at the Belur Math. It was not the present big monastery, so there was very little room there. Holy Mother was carried in a palanquin up to the gate, and then they had a chair prepared for her. There were four disciples of Sri Ramakrishna: Maharaj (Swami Brahmananda), Swami Saradananda,

Swami Premananda, and Swami Shivananda. They carried her on their shoulders. Then Maharaj gave

the order that nobody should bow down before Mother at that time. But we saw Khoka Maharaj, Swami Subodhananda. He just rolled on the ground before her. Maharaj said, "Who is that, who is that?" Of course, Khoka Maharaj in the meantime disappeared. So Mother was carried by these four swamis upstairs to the



Swami
Prabhavananda
(1893-1976)

shrine room. I believe she was worshiped at that time by these disciples. One thing I know, that while she was living, she was worshiped by hundreds and thousands of people as a living Goddess.

While she was living on earth, I saw her only once more, when I became a monk and three of us [Prajnan Maharaj and Satyen (Swami Atmabodhananda)] were going to Mayavati. Maharaj [Swami Brahmananda] said to us, "Go and take the blessings of Holy Mother." So we went. At that time she did not have a veil, and of course she kissed us as usual. Then she offered us each one flower. I do not know what the others did but when the flower dried up, I threw it away.

Other People's Experiences of Holy Mother

A funny incident comes to my mind. There was a Brahmin and

he came to show his respects to Holy Mother. She used to appear in Calcutta and would cover herself completely. She was seated and you could see only her feet. This old man sat down at her feet and began to meditate, and to practice breathing exercises and all kinds of things that a person does in ritualistic worship before an image. Now you see, it was a hot day and Holy Mother was perspiring with her veil, all covered up. Then one attendant of Holy Mother, Golap Ma, came and dragged him out and said to him, "What is this? Do you think this is a clay image that you have to bring life into her?"⁷

There is another very interesting story. I do not know if these stories are published, I have no idea. It occurred in the Udbodhan Office while Holy Mother was there. You see, downstairs was the Udbodhan Office, and upstairs was the place for Holy Mother. There was a bedstead and on the other side of the bedstead there was a shrine. She stayed in the shrine during that time. There was one holy man who came, who did not belong to our Order. He prostrated before Holy Mother and then came and sat at the Udbodhan Office downstairs. Mother sent three fruits to this holy man, but he kept silent. They said, "Go away now. Go away now," but he would not listen to anybody. He sat straight there and would not move.

About an hour later Holy Mother

sent another fruit. As he received that fruit he began to dance in joy saying, "At long last Mother gave me liberation." You see, three fruits – dharma, artha, kama. Dharma is merit, artha is fortune, and kama is what you desire. But moksha, the fourth fruit, is liberation. So when Mother gave him three fruits he held them and would not move until she sent another fruit.

Now I will tell you how Swamiji, Maharaj, and Swami Yogananda, who was her attendant, would touch her feet. Swamiji would dip himself in the Ganges six or seven times. He thought he was not pure enough to touch her feet. And then only he would go and touch her feet. But you see we didn't know. We went under any condition. But Maharaj would go just like a little boy who had done something wrong and was afraid to approach his mother. So he would compose himself first by saying, "Hello Radhu, how are you?" Then he would bow down to her and try to go away. And the Mother would say, "Rakhal, sit down." On other occasions, Swami Brahmananda would approach Holy Mother with spiritual emotion and fervor and his whole body would be shaking. That is, he would be in ecstatic consciousness whenever he would approach to touch the feet of Holy Mother. Swami Yogananda who was her attendant, would not touch her feet. Where she would stand, there he would take the dust after

she left.⁸ Of course, all this happened after Thakur passed away.⁹

Perhaps you know the story how, when Thakur passed away Mother wept, saying, "O Mother, why did you leave me alone?" What a relationship they had! She called him "Mother" and he called her "Mother." And then she was going to take the dress of a widow. In a vision Thakur said to her, "I am not dead, just this room and that room separate us, that is all." She had to live in a village where she wore a white cloth with a red border. You see, widows are not allowed to use a red border. Also, a widow is not supposed to have any vermilion here on her forehead. But I learned she used to put vermilion in another place so it would not be noticeable, because she knew he was not dead.

She made no difference between sinner or saint. While Thakur was living, he asked three followers of his to take initiation from Holy Mother. But later after the passing away of Sri Ramakrishna, she initiated anybody who asked. Holy Mother made this remark, "Thakur selected his disciples, but he is sending me them like ants in rows," and she initiated everyone that came to her.

She looked equally upon all. There was a Muslim robber [Amjad], what we call a "dacoit." He had great respect and reverence for Holy Mother and his whole life changed. He used to bring

fruits for Mother. When a woman of the household was offering him food, she was almost throwing the foodstuff at him. Holy Mother was shocked. She said, "What is this? He is as much my child as Sarat," Swami Saradananda. Then she herself served him food.

In this connection there is a very interesting story that I remember. There was a drunken man, and Swami Saradananda never allowed him to go and see Holy Mother, because he did not know how he would behave. He remained drunk almost all of the time. At twelve o'clock midnight, he would come and roll on the ground near the Udbodhan where Holy Mother lived upstairs and sing a song to this effect:

"Cherish my precious Mother Shyama tenderly within, O mind. May you and I alone behold Her, letting no one else intrude." And then he would add the line, "Let not the rascal Sarat intrude." As he would sing that song, Holy Mother suddenly would open the door and come out and bless him.

Holy Mother disobeyed Sri Ramakrishna at one time. There was a woman of ill character, and she wanted to offer food to Sri Ramakrishna. So she carried the food to him and Holy Mother followed her. Then Sri Ramakrishna could not touch that food. Holy Mother said, "No, you have to take that food. Whoever calls me 'Mother,' he is my son or she is my daughter.

You have to eat that." And he had to. She saw no sinner, no saint. Of course, this woman was completely transformed.¹⁰

Swami Vivekananda used to say about her that Holy Mother lived in samadhi all the time. At the same time she would be active, doing the household duties, talking and appearing in a normal state. It was phenomenal. I have heard Swami Turiyananda say, "Mother never comes down from her throat center. We have difficulty to bring our mind to that center, and Holy Mother finds it difficult to come down from the highest center to this center and forcibly keep her mind there."

Just think of that, a man of God is speaking. In other words, she lived in bhava samadhi or samadhi all of the time and at the same time carried on the work. See the power of Mother.¹¹

There was the nephew of Sri Ramakrishna, Shibuda [Shibu, Shivaram]. I met him, both Ramlal and Shibuda the younger brother.¹² He was very much devoted to Holy Mother. At one time Holy Mother was going from Jayrambati to Kamarpukar, and Shibuda was carrying her clothing and what things she required. Suddenly Shibuda turned toward her and said, "Auntie tell me who you are." "O Shibuda, what are you saying? I am your auntie." "Well, if you are my auntie only, then here is your bag. You carry it yourself." Then

she said, "No, I am Mother Kali." Then he carried it.

Another time Shibuda came and wanted to stay there for three nights in Jayrambati. Mother said, "How is that, what about the worship of the deities?" He said, "I have finished the worship for three days and three nights." "That won't do, you have to offer worship everyday. Go back." "All right auntie, but tell me who you are." Then again she said, "I am Mother Kali." So he chanted some verses bowing down to Mother.

Swami Ramakrishnananda took her to South India. There was a woman who I believe was a disciple of Maharaj. This woman did not know any language but Tamil, and Holy Mother only Bengali. But they would talk together for an hour or so and perfectly understand each other. This happened when Holy Mother came to visit the Ramakrishna Monastery in Bangalore. I heard this from a famous swami who was present on the occasion.

She was taken out for a ride and when she came back, there were about a thousand people gathered there. Mother looked at them and said in Bengali [which meant], "I wish I could speak your language." When this was interpreted to the audience they said, "No, Mother, we do not want to hear you speak, we just want your darshan." Holy Mother meditated on a rock there in Bangalore, and today they have

a little shrine there with the picture of Mother.¹³

How she received the Western disciples of Swamiji is something. When Swamiji went back from this country [America], he took some women disciples—Nivedita, Tantine and Mrs. Ole Bull. They were introduced to Holy Mother who was seated near them on the floor. They were given sweets on a plate, and of course, there was no talk because Mother did not know their language. Swamiji was standing and these disciples were taking their food. Suddenly, Holy Mother stooped down and took one of the sweets. Mother said, “Why should I not eat from the same plate with my own daughters?” That even thrilled Swamiji because he knew that she had accepted his Western disciples.¹⁴

During her mahasamadhi all of Thakur’s disciples were present there. Her disciples were not allowed to come at that time, except her attendant. Three days before she passed away, she was eating puffed rice mixed with mustard oil and green onions and green chilies. That is the favorite food of our women in that district.

She was very sick, and she was eating that. So Golap Ma went and told Swami Saradananda, and he came and bowed down to her. She said, “My son, what can I do for you?” and she was hiding the food like a little girl. Then Swami Saradananda said, “I want that,”

pointing to the food. So Mother gave it to him. After three days she passed away. That made Swami Saradananda feel very bad.

During the period of her mahasamadhi when she was passing away, Maharaj [Swami Brahmananda] did not come. He was at Bhubaneswar. Swami Saradananda was asked, “Why is it that all of you disciples are present and only Maharaj is not present?” Swami Saradananda said, “Maharaj is not like us.” You see, Maharaj had the power to stay wherever he was and yet come [in subtle form] and visit anyone. So he visited her. Mother knew. Swami Saradananda also knew and that’s why he said, “He is not like one of us.”

At exactly the time of her death Maharaj told Swami Nirvananda, “Mother just left her body.” The telegram came exactly at that hour. At that time Holy Mother’s beauty came out. While living, that beauty was not there, because people might look at her with impure eyes and that would harm them. So her real beauty came out when she passed away.¹⁵

Now Swami Saradananda felt very bad that he took away the plate of food from Holy Mother. When Maharaj came to Calcutta, Swami Saradananda told that story and said, “Maharaj, you have to eat this food and let her eat through your mouth.” Then he prepared that same thing, and Maharaj in an ecstatic mood took that food.

[Swami Prabhavananda then recited some of Holy Mother's teachings and read a letter over six hundred words in length, from Swami Premananda to Surendra about the glories of Holy Mother.¹⁶]

I should tell you in this connection because they are taking the collection, Sri Ramakrishna

could not touch money.¹⁷ But Holy Mother, whenever any money would come to her, would touch it to her forehead, because that is Mother Lakshmi and that is how we are fed.

The 2nd part of this article will appear in our next edition (Winter 2010).

Endnotes for Part 1

¹ This article with a few changes formerly appeared in the *Bulletin of the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture* (Dec. 2007), pp. 532-42. Swami Prabhavananda's use of words in public speaking was more informal than his writing style. About 11% of the events described in this article (primarily in the early part) are found using different wording in Swami Prabhavananda, "My Memories of Holy Mother," *Prabuddha Bharata* (March 1969), pp. 90-92; Swami Prabhavananda, "The Holy Mother as a Disciple Saw Her," in *Sarada Devi The Great Wonder* (New Delhi: Ramakrishna Mission, 1984), pp. 158-60.

² In 1929, Swami Prabhavananda founded the Vedanta Society of Southern California, which includes two monasteries and two convents in different locations.

³ (Sept. 16, 1973), cassette; (Dec. 31, 1961), p. 1. Typed copies of all of these lectures were loaned to me through the courtesy of Joanne Euler, curator of the Vedanta Archives, Vedanta Society of Southern California.

⁴ (Sept. 16, 1973), cassette; (Dec. 11, 1960), p. 4.

⁵ (Sept. 16, 1973), cassette; (Oct. 7, 1973), p. 3.

⁶ (Sept. 16, 1973), cassette; (Jan. 8,

1956), p. 2; (Dec. 9, 1962), p. 4; (Oct. 12, 1975), p. 3.

⁷ (Sept. 16, 1973), cassette; (Dec. 9, 1962), p. 2.

⁸ Traditionally, to show reverence, devotees will touch a holy person's feet with their hands, then place their hands on their own head or heart. This is called "taking the dust of the feet."

⁹ (Sept. 16, 1973), cassette; (Dec. 16, 1951), p. 4.

¹⁰ (Sept. 16, 1973), cassette; (Dec. 15, 1957), p. 5.

¹¹ (Sept. 16, 1973), cassette; (Jan. 4, 1959), p. 4; (Dec. 4, 1960), p. 4.

¹² Shibuda or Shibu [Shivaram] was the younger brother of Ramlal (1858-1933) and the son of Ramakrishna's elder brother Rameswar.

¹³ (Sept. 16, 1973), cassette; (Dec. 11, 1960), p. 1; (Oct. 7, 1973), p. 9.

¹⁴ (Sept. 16, 1973), cassette; (Dec. 16, 1951), p. 2; (Jan. 7, 1962), p. 4.

¹⁵ (Sept. 16, 1973), cassette; (Sept. 21, 1975), p. 12; (Oct. 12, 1975), p. 9.

¹⁶ The letter is found in Swami Prabhavananda, *Swami Premananda Teachings and Reminiscences* (Hollywood: Vedanta Press, 1968), pp. 155-57.

¹⁷ A financial offering is usually given after a Sunday lecture.

READER'S FORUM RESPONSE

to *Question in the Special Edition*

Question: Why do you think Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi has become increasingly prominent and popular? What does she mean to you?

Response by Stafford Smith

An increasing popular interest in Holy Mother verifies the historical progression foreseen a century ago by Swamis Vivekananda and Shivananda. Swamiji wrote that "people will not understand her now, but they will gradually... There will be no salvation of the world without the Divine Power.... Mother has been born to revive this wonderful Shakti... Without the grace of Shakti nothing will be accomplished... What do I find in America and Europe? The worship of Shakti, the worship of Power. Yet they worship Her ignorantly, through sense gratification. Imagine then what a lot of good they will achieve when they worship Her with purity, looking on Her as their Mother!"

To this Mahapurush Maharaj added: "Primordial Energy had incarnated Herself as Mother in order to awaken the women of the world. Her advent was followed by an unprecedented awakening of the women of the world. They are now resolved to build up their lives in all-round gracefulness and to advance in all directions. Not

much has been achieved yet, for this is just the beginning.... There is remarkable activation among women in the spheres of spiritual pursuits, politics, science, the arts, literature, etc. And more is to come. This is the play of Divine Power, the mysterious significance of which is beyond the conception of ordinary mortals."

Taking these predictive statements at face value, what do they imply? First, with the advent of Holy Mother there was a subtle shift in the world dynamic away from the masculine pole and toward the feminine. Second, in its initial stages this shift has occurred beneath the surface of conscious awareness and has not depended in any major way upon public recognition of Holy Mother's significance. But, third, with the momentum of time the force of Holy Mother's advent will increasingly manifest within public awareness.

A century later it appears that in the West we are just starting to move into the third stage outlined above: Sri Sarada Devi is now beginning to be known and appreciated beyond the small circle of serious Vedanta devotees. And while this should produce elation among Vedanta enthusiasts, in the short term it may also generate discomfort. This is because worship

of Holy Mother could suddenly break out of the familiar forms and organizational boundaries to which we have all become accustomed. We may be forced to recognize that Holy Mother is no longer the exclusive possession of the Vedanta societies but, indeed, belongs to everyone equally.

A variation on this theme is already being experienced as an emerging interest, especially among women devotees, in studying and worshiping Holy Mother within settings operated and directed by female monastics. Over time this may result in a more equal institutional balance between Vedanta programs run by monks and those run by nuns. This should be welcomed as a natural expression of the feminine awakening so eloquently described above by Mahapurush Maharaj. The totality of Vedanta energy will be increased, not merely shifted from one place to another.

On a broader level the emergence of Holy Mother to greater prominence within the general cultural awareness should eventually impact the direction of feminism itself. During the initial phase, when Holy Mother remained a hidden force, the specific content of feminist thought was free to wander in every direction. Now as Sri Sarada Devi's message of purity, unselfishness and nurturing service becomes more widely known, it should moderate those tendencies

toward an aggressive narcissism that characterized elements of early feminism.

The other side of the coin is that as Sarada Devi becomes a more public entity there will be efforts to reshape her image into forms compatible with contemporary popular values. To some degree this is already beginning to occur. One now occasionally encounters paintings and drawings that depict Holy Mother as a more conventionally glamorous individual, and the incidents of her life are combed meticulously for hidden expressions of a god-like power more in keeping with our normal expectations. The profound and unwavering humility of Sri Sarada Devi is so completely at odds with the ingrained egoistic structure of modern society that it seems beyond the capacity of many minds to even imagine its possibility.

Finally, on the grandest scale one must consider that perhaps Sri Sarada Devi incarnated not just for the redemption of individual souls but for the salvation of the planet itself. As every critical parameter of our biosphere approaches either exhaustion or a state of irreversible degradation, the physical survival of humanity itself increasingly will come under siege. The impending choice is between passively accepting a status quo that leads inexorably to catastrophic environmental collapse or imposing dictatorial levels of institutional control in a

last desperate attempt to engineer avoidance of a global calamity. This unhappy dilemma can be escaped only if there is a fundamental restructuring of internal human values to a higher level of integration, away from a selfish, heedless and often immoral exploitation of people and resources and toward

a compassionate nurturing of life. Perhaps an earthly incarnation of the Divine Mother of the Universe is truly the only force powerful enough to awaken us from our fearful and self-absorbed collective stupor and divert us from a cataclysmic course onto a life-sustaining path.

THE IMMORTAL EYES OF SRI RAMAKRISHNA

Sheila Lalwani Payne

*They keep an eternal watch over
the mournful cries of desolate souls,
a heavened breath of hope lifting
the hearts of those forlorned by
Time's random cruelty. As if rising
from the depths of a bottomless ocean,
the steadied gaze empowers
the weak and the lost
with a strength unknown—to counter
the leeching meanness
of a pitiless world,
to counter the bared fangs
of a predatory, amoral age.*

*Sometimes they sing,
sometimes they dance
spring-borne with impish laughter.
Here a joyous smile,
there a quickened dart
that grasps the inner longings
of a doubting heart
and answers with the gentled love
of a mother nurturing her only child.*

*Yet there is something changeless
in the liquid dark
of those half-lidded eyes.*

*It beckons, it calls,
urging one to let go of
solitary moanings and
maddened images,
to let that fever bordering
on despair turn into
burning prayer for faith—
faith to live in freedom:
freedom from the cares of the world,
freedom from the prison of the past,
the fears of the future, freedom to be.*

*Who has not felt it?
Who has not longed for it?*

*That changeless something
haunts those
who thirst for more, for that which is
but a distant memory
of something once known.*

*Those eyes, those half-lidded eyes,
they beckon,
they call—in whispers soft
as dew-dropped petals—
they call, urging one to let go and
melt into the liquid dark,
into that soundless, spaceless
moment that knows no time.*

*The immortal eyes of
Bhagvan Sri Ramakrishna*

MEDIA REVIEWS



Scholar Reading a Book

Painting by Jan Zaremba
www.janzaremba.com/sumi-e

Girish Chandra Ghosh: A Bohemian Devotee of Sri Ramakrishna

by Swami Chetanananda

**Biographical introduction by
Christopher Isherwood**

Vedanta Society of St. Louis

495 pages (with index)

Hardback \$29.95 2009

Over the years Swami Chetanananda has put devotees of Ramakrishna and all those interested in Vedanta greatly in his debt, through his many translations

from the Bengali of texts to which non-Bengali readers, whether in the West, in India or elsewhere, would not otherwise have had access. Here now is a fascinating and definitive biography of the great Bengali playwright Girish Chandra Ghosh, along with summaries of his plays and many texts concerning him that were hitherto unavailable to readers in English. There are a number of scenes in *The Gospel of Ramakrishna* where Girish Ghosh is one of the interlocutors, and Swami Chetanananda has rightly translated these familiar texts as

his biographical narrative proceeds. But most of what the book contains will be new to most readers, as it is based on texts either untranslated or not readily available. Furthermore, readers interested in Vedanta will join with others interested primarily in theater, because Girish Ghosh was the founder of modern Bengali theater as well as one of the most notable of Ramakrishna's householder disciples—a man of both great spiritual capacities and great creative energies.

There has never been in this respect anyone quite like him, although Christopher Isherwood, whose “biographical introduction” (a lecture he gave at the Santa Barbara temple in 1975) opens the book, understandably felt a great affinity with him.

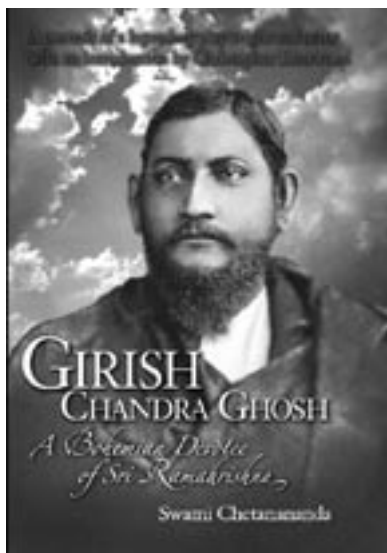
After Ramakrishna's death Girish's dramatic activity continued, his creative genius being in no way deflected by his few years spent in what for many onlookers seemed like a uniquely problematic and in all events unusual relationship with the Master. His creative frenzies, drunken fits and Bohemian ways did not seem to predestine him for

spiritual greatness, but nevertheless that is what happened, thanks to his devotion to Sri Ramakrishna. His radical spiritual transformation must have especially impressed those who knew him in his earlier years. Thanks to Swami Chetanananda's biography, one can finally appreciate fully what an amazing character he was.

The synopses of many of his plays give a wonderful picture of the Shakespearean breadth and depth of his imaginative flights. But it was his plays on religious themes that drew the attention of the paramahansa of Dakshineshwar, who

attended five of them between late 1884 and the spring of 1885. On at least two occasions he entered samadhi while watching the drama unfold on stage. Thus, as Chetanananda writes, “by bringing Ramakrishna to his plays, Girish made him the patron saint of the Bengali stage.” He then adds intriguingly that “through his plays, Girish carried Ramakrishna's message to the red-light districts of Calcutta.” (162) What does *that* mean?

In Calcutta in the late nineteenth century, actresses were



frequently the mistresses of wealthy men and theater enthusiasts, and their mothers were often common prostitutes. The profession of acting was considered to be completely unsuitable for a respectable woman. So Ramakrishna's friendly and compassionate attitude towards the actresses of Girish's company shocked many of his Indo-Victorian contemporaries, and "for many years he and his disciples had to face opposition and criticism from prominent citizens and from society in general." (163) Chetananda cites some wonderful rejoinders from Vivekananda in his maturity, who for all his wonderful spiritual qualities had been in his youth a bit of a prig: "at twenty years of age," Chetananda quotes him in a letter, "I was the most unsympathetic, uncompromising fanatic; I would not walk on the footpath on the theatre side of the streets in Calcutta." (167) The actress Binodini was one of those "fallen women" whose spirituality was awakened by Ramakrishna's kind attention, and her story (along with those of two others like her) is the subject of one of the most fascinating chapters in the book. It is, as Chetananda makes clear, Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalen all over again.

The next chapter is strikingly original, as it deals with Ramakrishna's influence on Girish's later plays. Chetananda quotes Girish as having said, that "I learned how to write drama and how to act from Sri Ramakrishna." (225) This is in

itself a remarkable statement, but the author goes on to explain it:

Girish wrote roughly ninety plays, some before meeting Ramakrishna, but most of them afterwards. It is wonderful to see how he incorporated Ramakrishna's ideas into his plays—the ideal of religious harmony, as well as his spiritual teachings on faith, devotion, renunciation, self-surrender—sometimes even his very words. But more important, Girish showed how a real guru rescues his disciples from temptation and sin and transforms their lives. (226)

His play *Vilwamangal Thakur*, staged just a few months before Ramakrishna's death, is considered to be one of his best; the relatively short time he spent with his master from September 1884 onwards had already marked both his spiritual life and his dramatic imagination. Chetananda gives a long synopsis of the play with quotations that makes clear what a magnificently imaginative author Girish was. (No wonder Girish felt an affinity with the emotionally multifaceted and compassionate genius of Victor Hugo, about whom he said, that he "was endowed equally with a tremendous imagination and a talent for creating characters and stories." 406) And Chetananda adds that after Girish lost his wife, two daughters and a young son only a few years after his master's death:

The intensity with which his gigantic heart had felt grief, joy, despair,

and hope made it possible for him to portray the characters in his dramas vividly. He used to say that the poet and the playwright could imbue their writings with life and feeling only if they themselves had firsthand experience of all facets of life. He once said, "Who can criticize the portrayal of characters in my plays? I have studied the lives of all types of people, from the prostitute to the paramahansa [illuminated soul]." (338)

The rest of the book gives the records of conversations between Ramakrishna and Girish, and an account of the relationship of Girish with Vivekananda (he was the only one who could stand up and argue vehemently with Swamiji), with the other disciples, and with Holy Mother, from whom he once asked for sannyasa (the right to become a monk), but "the Mother did not give her consent and suggested instead that he continue his literary and acting careers." (361)

The book concludes with various interviews and reminiscences. So *Girish Chandra Ghosh: A Bohemian Devotee of Sri Ramakrishna* is not only the definitive biography of one of the most unusual combinations the world has ever seen of vital spirits, spiritual greatness and artistic genius, but also a most convenient compendium of materials the reader can browse through, while reflecting on his wonderfully multifaceted personality. There are also a number of excellent photographs, and a useful index.

—Steven F. Walker

THAT ONE, THAT ENERGY

Elva Linnea Nelson

She,
majestic, radiant
whose glance turns the world
from the microscopic
to the endless
infinite,
that one,
in whom there is
no beginning
and no end—
she, the
immutable energy,
in a timeless moment
caresses us all
with her silent wishes
and lulls us
into joy—
within me everything
becomes a smile.

Readers: Please send us 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**

Days on Earth: A Musical Trilogy on the Life of Swami Vivekananda

**Music by John Schlenck,
libretto by Erik Johns**

Vedantic Arts Recordings
2 compact discs
\$29.95 2009

Esther Warkov

Days on Earth affords a unique opportunity to contemplate the life and mission of Swami Vivekananda in an engaging musical setting. Composer John Schlenck, director of music for the Vedanta Society of New York, tells the story of Vivekananda with narrators, tenor soloist, chorus, and small instrumental ensemble. The libretto, which draws on *The Life of Swami Vivekananda* (by Eastern and Western disciples), was created by Erik Johns (1927-2001). Johns, known for his collaboration with composer Aaron Copland, also hosted the Vedanta Society of New York's Fourth of July Vivekananda Festival for 40 years. *Days on Earth* grew out of the wish to provide a musical program for this annual festival while giving expression to the collaborators' devotion to Vivekananda. The composition also continues Schlenck's ongoing commitment to creating music accessible to Western Vedantists. The CDs' accompanying booklet in-

cludes historical information about Vivekananda, thereby making the recording accessible to listeners outside Vedanta circles, as well.

The universal themes that inform the libretto are paralleled by a synthesis of Western classical and world music styles into a unified musical language. The composition opens with the theme of a mother's longing for a child using a mostly five-note pentatonic scale common to many countries. When this scale is heard above the Indian tambura drone (representing the underlying Divine Self), the boundaries of musical styles begin to dissolve. We then hear an Indian raga scale that is also heard in the Near East. As the two musical styles blend into a larger universal language we recall Vivekananda's message to transcend our individual/national boundaries.

In other words, Schlenck's synthesis of different musical styles into one unified language exemplifies Vivekananda's teaching. Next, the chorus joyously proclaims Naren's (Vivekananda's) birth amidst a great Hindu festival. Exciting instrumental music allows us to visualize how "it seemed as through the celebrations of millions of men and women greeted the birth of Bhuvaneshwari's child."

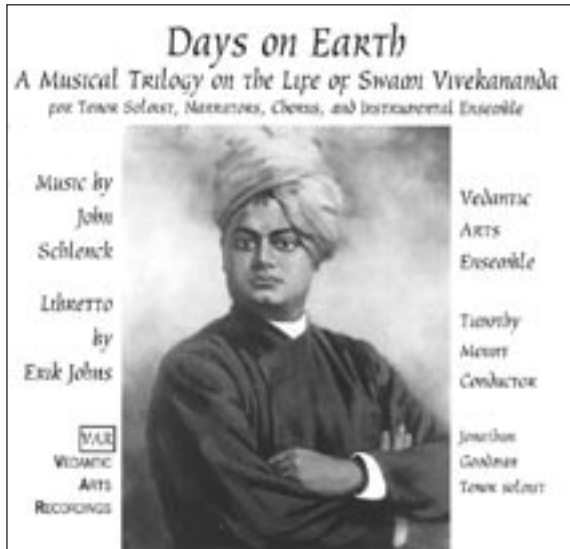
In "Days of Childhood," we learn of Vivekananda's many abilities and the nascent spiritual inclinations that would bring him to Sri Ramakrishna. Because the

story of Vivekananda's childhood is so vividly depicted, this movement is an especially engaging introduction to his life, even for children. The young Vivekananda's naughtiness is delightfully narrated to the accompaniment of Mediterranean/Balkan-like dance music.

In "Days of Youth" we learn that "slowly desire of the spirit became strong until at last it held mastery over him." Then, when Ramakrishna is introduced, the work takes on a completely different character. In Schlenck's own words, "The music representing Ramakrishna is atonal, suggesting that he is beyond all reference."

In an exalted moment we discover that Naren "had reached the culmination of his quest," i.e. realization of the Self. Soon the mood becomes intimate; Ramakrishna transmits his power to Naren and enters "a bliss from which he never returned to earthly consciousness." Ramakrishna's greatness is proclaimed and we hear an excerpt from the vesper hymn composed by Vivekananda, "Khandana Bhava Bandhana."

Then, Schlenck tells us, "Narendra inspires his brother disciples with the story of Christ's renuncia-



tion and self sacrifice. This new motif contains within it the weeping theme, representing the pathos of self-sacrifice. Before a sacred fire, the young disciples take the vow of renunciation."

In "Days of Manhood" we find out how Narendra "was consumed with the desire to be absorbed in the highest bliss, to hide himself away and live in great austerity. But in his deepest meditation he saw another life awaiting him, a life intense with activity and self-immolation." Remembering how Ramakrishna proclaimed, "An empty stomach is no good for religion," Vivekananda determined to attend the Parliament of Religions in America and to regenerate his countrymen while awakening the West. The chorus proclaims: "With the powers of his mind and soul he spread the ideals

of his race. He carried the message of the spirit wherever he was called, speaking words that stirred the minds and fed the soul of men. . . Inspiring vast crowds with impassioned eloquence, or whispering intimate instructions to disciples, he was a brilliant fire."

Days on Earth closes with Vivekananda's admonition to "Arise, awake and stop not till the goal is reached." "The final music celebrates the Divine Power that comes again and again for the good of the world," followed by "the serene melody of the Khandana hymn as the chorus intones 'Hari Om Tat Sat,'" Schlenck explains.

The tambura, symbol of the abiding Divine Self, is heard with an ascending violin melody; together, they draw us to spiritual heights. We are uplifted, inspired, and so much the better for participating in this vivid contemplation

of Swami Vivekananda.

This dramatic depiction of Vivekananda's life on earth deserves to be widely heard and shared: in Vedanta centers, at events celebrating Vivekananda, in study groups, youth classes, individually, and with friends. In the words of a senior monk of the Ramakrishna order, "We want God vision, not television."

For those who are accustomed to television, movies, novels as entertainment, why not turn to Vivekananda and *Days on Earth* for an experience that is fresh, uplifting, compelling, and enduring?

This 2 CD box can be purchased online from amazon.com, or from cdbaby.net. Orders can also be placed by mail to Vedanta West Communications, PO Box 237041, New York, NY 10023. Inquiries can be sent to VedWestCom@gmail.com, or call 212.877.4730.

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HOLY MOTHER MISSION IS A SERVICE ORGANIZATION OF THE RAMAKRISHNA MONASTERY IN TRABUCO CANYON, CALIFORNIA, A BRANCH OF THE VEDANTA SOCIETY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA.

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Let Kali Dance

*– a free translation and interpretation
of Swami Vivekananda's poem
"And Let Shyama Dance There" by*

Peter Shneidre (Hiranyagarbha)

Blossoms uncork their maddening perfume,
and a world of bees buzzes and swarms.
The silvery moon is a gorgeous smile tonight,
one of many sent down to find homes on earth.

A fragrant breeze that comes up from the south
whispers of all the sandalwood it found
along the way – but it's starting to brush
against our memories, too; it unfolds them
easily, like old letters murmuring of rivers
and streams, rippling lakes, and those beetles
that live – as we would like to live –
on honey only, flying over lotuses
waving gently

as a current quickens, a river of music
the mountain caves have always had
an answer for;
warblers, made of song, hide in the leaves
to pour their hearts out in sweet nothings;

the rising hope of day, the sun,
moved its brush so tenderly across the earth
only this morning, releasing a river of color
through nature, like a museum bursting
and a heart, too, overflowed its banks.

But when thunder shouts and clouds collide,
an elemental war will split the earth and sky;
darkness hints at other darkness to come,
and a wind behind the world begins to roar.

In shots of brightness, bolts of lightning flash
like arrows pointing suddenly at death;
monstrous waves argue with thunder, foaming,
shoving their way up mountains,
forcing themselves on earth

who screams, loses her balance, falls back,
sinks to her knees and cries softly;
falling through, huge mountains
become dust

but a pretty little house on a lake of blue
is still standing,
surrounded by a cluster of water lilies;
ripe grapes bleed for us,
whispering their tale of passion.
And as the song of the harp flows through us
its sweet melody, taking its time,
harmonizes our desires.

O, the emotions that come to live in us!
Warm shudders of love, and just as warm
the tears that'll soon come down!

Youth's red lips
under two blue oceans of feeling
– and below, two hands eager to open love's cage
where they think the heart, like a quiet little bird,
is imprisoned.

But marching music begins anew, trumpets blare,
earth shakes beneath an army's heavy weight;
the roar of cannon, dark rattle of guns,
masses of smoke, the appalled ground where the
dead fall;
pounding artillery spewing hell's fire
in a thousand directions; shells bursting to explode
in the softest bodies;
elephants, men, horses exploding together,
hurtling through space;

earth quakes with this hideous dance
of a million heroes on a million horses
charging and capturing flags,
pausing only to blink at the smoke
and a shower of mortar
and bullets raining
to see if a flag is still there;

...it is! Right over there,
reliable old signs of victory and heroism
as warm blood drips down the flagpole;
even the rifles are drunk on it.

Look!

The leader stumbles, but the flag moves on –
any shoulder's just as good; who is left to care?
Underneath is a soft carpet of the dead.

*The flesh wants its pleasure,
the senses to sing,
the mind aches for laughter
but the senses take wing.*

As you try to feel your way to a world beyond sorrow
tell me if *you'd* trade moonlight
for the fatal gaze of noon.

I didn't think so;
even the fool with a heart hot as the sun
wants, at night, to come undone
under a gentle moon;

so by all means, let's enjoy our lives.
Where's the fool who hugs his sorrow?
Put misery in his jolly cup,
poison his cocktail;
he sucks the venom so his hope can live!
Oh, what a wretch.

But everyone shrinks from the terrible.
No one wants a goddess
to resemble death too closely,

dancing in the cremation ground
with a horrid sword reeking of blood;
when they think she isn't looking
they'll carefully lift it from her hand
to make room for a guitar!

But O Shyama, Dark One,
O Kali, destroyer of all,
you alone are true;
sweet little Krishna is but a shadow of your
reflection.

Terrible mother, carve the truth out of us,
poke out the illusions;
come, sever our dream of happiness
and strip off our fondness for the flesh.

Oh sure,
they're willing to drape skulls on you
in their imagination – but then they get cold feet,
shrinking back to call you "All Merciful!"
They hear you laughing at their time of need,
they just don't believe their ears.
Even your nakedness scares them.
For you wear nothing – a fabric of your own design –
and this is too much for them.

And after all this, they can still say
It is only demons, not us, that the Mother kills.
Right. They pretend to want you,
but they knock and run away.
You are death! Lovingly,
tenderly, without bias, with each of your children
you share the plague and disease –
cups filled by your own hand, lovingly,
to the brim, with venom.

Idiots! You are neglecting your own mother,
your own terrible one.

You're tempting misery by hoping
for happiness; you wrap yourselves
in a shawl of worship and devotion,
and all the while your mind
fills up with dreams of coming out ahead.

You hang back far enough for the blood
from a baby goat's head not to splash on you
and your tender heart, which is aching
at the very idea, am I right?

You cowards! Compassionate?

Who are you to be compassionate!

(This is an odd situation, but where is the man
or woman I could whisper this to? No one
is willing to look directly at the truth!)

Free yourself from temptation –
the liquor of love, the drug of sex.

Break your sweet harps! From this moment on,
roar like oceans. Drink tears,
promise your lives away,
let the body fall where it may.

Wake up, you are a hero!

Blink your dreams away,
death is right in front of you anyway;
is fear going to help you now?

Of course, it hurts to become yourself.

Birth hurts, death hurts.

But this struggle *is* God,
whose temple is the cremation ground.

Constant struggle – that is your offering,
what is sacred, what is God's.

Constant defeat doesn't mean anything.

Light your little name and its hopes on fire,
make of your heart a cremation ground,
and let Mother dance there.

Holy Mother Mission: An Initiative to Serve the Needy

Shankara (Gary Kemper)

Monks and devotees of the Ramakrishna Monastery in Trabuco Canyon, California, recently started a service program called Holy Mother Mission (HMM). They believe that now, more urgently than during the monastery's past, those who are poor and often hungry should be served.

In India, the Ramakrishna Mission has been doing social and relief work for over 100 years. Yet, when the first disciples of Ramakrishna came to the West, they understood that this kind of service was not the primary need here.

A century later the situation is changing rapidly. Eastern countries are more prosperous while America is facing greater economic hardship. An HMM spokesman said, "We feel the pain many around us are experiencing and think the time is right for direct service."

HMM plans to expand its service activities. "For now we've started in a simple way," said a devotee who lives at the monastery. "We offer sandwich bags, which include fruits and sweets, and bottled water to the needy, five days a week."

"We strive to be regular rather than doing big things too early," an HMM organizer said. "We have a steady routine going, one that we

hope can be sustained by our own efforts and the help of our devotees and friends. Later, things will naturally evolve if Mother wants it and by Her guidance."

Holy Mother Mission's printing press operations, online store, and Trabuco Monastery store — where they will soon sell their own homegrown organic vegetables — serve the exclusive purpose of



financing their project.

"We are very glad to have consolidated these activities under Holy Mother Mission," a Trabuco monk said. "It is a great joy to all who serve with us that they are working for the benefit of Holy Mother Mission and its goal of serving the needy."

"If you'd like to help us in this effort, you are more than welcome," he said. Contributions can be made on the Mission's website, www.holymothermission.org or you can email them for more information at holymothermission@gmail.com.

Mother of the Universe

René Pineda (Gadadhar)

From the lips of
a tiny babe in arms
Comes his first word,
the sweet sound of mother.
Ma... ma... ma-ma,
to him she is God
Providing him with everything
— love, understanding,
Peace and tranquility.
She is the essence of spirituality.
Mother's child can do no wrong,
For the love of
the Divine Mother is by far
The highest and deepest love.
May her divine love
reflect from our eyes
And into each other's heart.

Three Gems from Swami Sarvagatananda

A Devotee

Swami Sarvagatananda said three things that stick in my memory:

"If ignorance is bliss, whole world must be in blissful condition."

"Do your best and forget the rest."

And a prayer from his book *Krishna Yoga*, p. 88:

"Let us meditate on the abiding presence of the All-Loving Being, seated on the throne of our heart, radiating joy, love, and peace."

READER'S FORUM

Question for this Issue

DEAR READER:

Please send your answer to the question below right away. We want to devote at least 8 pages of our Winter 2010 edition to the responses we receive from you.

Our question is 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 Adysakti. One is under Her sway. One cannot go beyond Her."

— *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, p. 460, in conversation with M. on Friday, June 20, 1884.

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

Contributors' Notes

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*Sri Sarada Devi's house at Jayrambati (West Bengal, India),
where she lived for most of her life/Alan Perry photo (2002)
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