

Editorial

East-West Sharing

From the beginning of Swami Vivekananda's teaching in the West, some Western Vedantists have engaged in cross-cultural sharing. A number of Vivekananda's Western disciples, grateful for what Vedanta had brought to their lives, contributed importantly to the Vedantic renaissance in India. Captain and Mrs. Sevier founded the Advaita Ashrama at Mayavati. J.J. Goodwin continued the work of transcribing Swamiji's lectures after Swamiji returned to India, making available to a large Indian public the swami's lectures delivered throughout the length of India, which contributed mightily to the Indian renaissance. Sisters Nivedita and Christine worked tirelessly in the field of women's education; Nivedita also worked for cultural revival. Josephine MacLeod, requested by Swamiji to "love India," rendered great and varied service to the Order and to the country over several decades.

This tradition of service rendered by Western Vedantists in India has continued right up to the present. Several Westerners have rendered important service to the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture in Calcutta. Shelley Brown, inspired by personal contact with the Institute's founder, Swami Nitya-swarup-ananda, in America and in India, has recently authored and published *Centred in Truth: The Story of Swami Nitya-swarup-ananda*, a large, important work on the life and ideals of the swami and the early history of the Institute. Three articles in our present issue relate to Swami Nitya-swarup-ananda—a great advocate of cultural sharing—and to Dr. Brown's book.

Other Vedantists have rendered valuable service in the fields of medicine and rural development. Glyn Jones, a Canadian doctor, served for nearly thirty years at the Vrindaban Sevashrama. Barbara Piner and her associates in ASTI (American Service to India) contribute substantially toward numerous medical, educational and rural development projects in different parts of India. Articles in this issue by Ray and Sonja Berry tell of the challenges and rewards of their work in the village of Koalpara, which was blessed by many visits of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi.

Is all this the proper concern of *American Vedantist*, which is primarily dedicated to developing Vedanta in the West? We think it is. These efforts by Westerners express an American, or Western, spirit of independence, enterprise and organization. They demonstrate what Western Vedantists can achieve and encourage other devotees to undertake other forms of creative service, in the West as well as in India. In addition, persons of whatever nationality who are imbued with a combination of Vedantic spiritual idealism and Western enterprise and know-how can serve as models for the citizen of the future—spiritually grounded yet open, creative, sharing and constantly learning.

—The Editors

Vedanta and World Civilization

John Schlenck

The recent publication of *Centred in Truth: The Story of Swami Nitya-swarup-ananda*, an exhaustive account of the swami's life and work by Dr. Shelley Brown, is a welcome prod to reconsider the ideals for which Swami Nitya-swarup-ananda untiringly worked and lived. It was the swami's unshakable conviction that Vedantic spirituality could be the basis for a future harmonious yet pluralistic world civilization in which each individual culture would retain its own genius while at the same time sharing its riches with all other cultures, so that each human being would consciously be heir to the entire human heritage.

A Radical New Type of Education

“Knowledge of the unity of existence will change man's attitude to himself,” Swami Nitya-swarup-ananda wrote in 1970;¹ “...a profound sense of unity, within himself and within the world around him, will lead man forward to the understanding that...every individual, every nation, is interrelated and interdependent...” But the swami did not stop with philosophy. He laid out a scheme for a radical new type of education:

“What is needed therefore is a reorientation of man's view of himself. He must be given a new psychology . . . through a new type of education which embraces and makes detailed use of mankind's various cultures . . . The new type of education envisaged calls for a carefully planned confrontation of cultures... an educational programme in which scholars and students from all parts of the world will participate . . . Through an active process, in which everyone present is engaged, each individual will enter into ways of thinking, feeling and living different from his own . . . Having experienced each culture from its own standpoint. . . narrow attitudes and feelings will be swept away . . . A vital reorientation of his mind and personality will have taken place . . . He will see that world civilization is, in fact, the sum total of all the achievements of the human race, in whatever age and in whatever field.”²

1. In *Education for World Civilization*, as quoted in *Centred in Truth: The Story of Swami Nitya-swarup-ananda* by Shelley Brown (New York, Kalpa Tree Press, 2001), Vol. II, p. 15.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.

Swami Nitya-swarup-ananda's life work began at the time of the Ramakrishna Birth Centenary. The Sri Ramakrishna Centenary Committee, headed by Swami Akhandananda, a direct disciple of Ramakrishna, at its first meeting in November, 1934 appointed Swami Nitya-swarup-ananda the convenor of the subcommittee to establish an Institute of Culture in Calcutta as one of five "Permanent Memorials" of the Centenary Celebration. Nitya-swarup-ananda served as Akhandananda's personal secretary for a time and transcribed his reminiscences of the Master. It became apparent only with the passing of years what a huge trust Akhandananda had placed on the young monk's shoulders. It is also worth noting Akhandananda's own breadth of vision: he saw that there was an important cultural dimension to the Ramakrishna heritage and encouraged the exploration and development of that dimension. Nitya-swarup-ananda proved, in nearly six subsequent decades of life, his worthiness of the work and the vision entrusted to him. Dr. Brown's two-volume study eloquently chronicles the swami's struggles and achievements in carrying out that trust.

A major part of the story is the swami's herculean effort to build up and give concrete form to the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture which was to embody the idealism of Ramakrishna Vedanta on the cultural plane. The Institute's spacious and meticulously designed permanent home at Gol Park in Calcutta, completed in 1961, stands as a monument to the swami's vision, with its large, well-respected library, its school of languages, its 1,000-seat Vivekananda Hall, international scholars' residence and ongoing multicultural program of activities.

A Vedantic View of Culture

How does this relate to Vedantic spirituality? Just as all religions are accepted as part of an overall harmony, as particular expressions of universal spiritual ideals, so are all cultures to be respected and treasured as part of an overall harmonious world civilization. At the same time, as the spiritual aspirant is to remain steadfastly devoted to his own particular path, so a deep understanding and appreciation of one's own culture precedes and accompanies a deep appreciation of other cultures. Hence the ongoing, in-depth study of Indian culture at the Institute.

Even without knowing Swami Nitya-swarup-ananda's intense devotion to Swami Vivekananda, it is easy for anyone familiar with Vivekananda's life and thought to see that here lay the fount of Nitya-swarup-ananda's inspiration. Even a casual student of Vivekananda's life cannot help but be struck by the eager openness of his encounters with other civilizations, how he sought to learn from Japan, America, England, France while at the same time remaining grounded in Vedantic realization and Indian culture. Swamiji's appreciation of world cultures was not limited to their narrowly defined

spiritual traditions, though he did appreciate and identify with these traditions deeply. He appreciated the full range of beauty and sophistication of his own and other cultures, and at the same time was aware that each had particular strengths and weaknesses. Out of this awareness grew Vivekananda's conviction of the need for sharing among the world's cultures. Each had riches to give, each could minimize its own shortcomings by learning and absorbing from others.

Vivekananda grew up in a place and time that already gave him a headstart in multicultural appreciation. It is sometimes forgotten that his formative years were nurtured by three distinct civilizations. Along with the surrounding Hindu culture which he particularly absorbed from his mother and grandmother and the Western culture he learned at school, partly under British teachers, through his cosmopolitan father, who had studied Persian, Urdu and Arabic and enjoyed cooking in Mogul style, he had some exposure to Islamic culture as well as to modern skepticism. He retained throughout his life a respect and love for Islamic culture and the democratic spirit of Islam.

Vivekananda's Humanism

Much of Vivekananda's open and sometimes surprising appreciation of varied cultures was based on his deep humanism. The value of religion and culture was finally measured by what they did for the human being. For example, one aspect of American culture which he particularly praised was its ability to give people faith in themselves. He saw with his own eyes how downtrodden immigrants, within a few months of arrival in the United States, were transformed by growing self-confidence. Much of his effort, when he returned to India, was to generate in his countrymen a similar faith in themselves, based on a deep awareness of their own great heritage.

Underlying, supporting and enriching Vivekananda's broad humanism was his spiritual training under Sri Ramakrishna, leading to his own Vedantic realization. Ramakrishna's direct experience that all religious paths lead to the goal of God-awareness and God-transformed life is a direct parallel, on the spiritual plane, to the open acceptance of the world's varied cultures and the willingness to experience and learn from them. Ramakrishna consistently worked to remove all traces of narrowness and intolerance from young Narendra and to establish him in direct awareness of divine presence in all things and persons.

Reflecting on Nitya-swarup-ananda's life and work, let us consider the cultural implications, the cultural dimensions of Ramakrishna Vedanta. In the most general sense, what characterizes Ramakrishna Vedanta is its combination of depth and breadth. From this standpoint, human fulfillment lies in realizing and manifesting our essential divinity; the various religions are seen as paths to that realization. The individual spiritual aspirant is to have

intense, one-pointed commitment to his/her own spiritual path (*ishta-nishtha*) while respecting the validity of other spiritual paths and entering into their richness and beauty. Vivekananda developed this through three related ideals: (1) All-round harmonious development of each person, through simultaneous spiritualization of thinking, feeling, and action. (2) Respect for each person's spirituality: there are as many religions as there are people; each person has a particular path to follow, based on the special nature of one's own mind. (3) Service of fellow humans as images or embodiments of God. A life based on these principles will be a life of striving to realize the ideal.

What are the cultural implications of this philosophy? (1) Each culture is to be valued in depth, especially its contribution to the unfolding of human potential. (2) At the same time, one's own culture is to be understood and learned from in depth. (3) Each person is to be respected and must be free to develop in his/her own way. (4) The entire sum of human experience is the heritage of each person. (5) We are to study and learn from that heritage, from the successes and failures of those who have gone before us; we are to make choices, to discriminate, to find out and apply what helps us to grow, to unlock and realize our potential, as individuals and as societies.

The Emotional Factor

Finally, in addition to intellectual understanding, there must be emotional commitment, on both the cultural and spiritual levels. We are to strive to feel our oneness with all human beings, to share their joys and sorrows, their culture, wisdom, yearning, triumph and tragedy, so that we can say with Ruth, "For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God." And, finally, with Holy Mother, "No one is a stranger, my child. This whole world is your own."

Behind the brilliance and cogency of Swami Nitya-swarup-ananda's thought lay intense personal devotion. As a teenager, he suddenly and powerfully found his Chosen Ideal in Sri Ramakrishna simply by seeing his photograph. His life was molded by close contact with direct disciples of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda and initiation by Holy Mother. More than once I was privileged to witness his deep feeling. On one occasion, when meeting with a group of devotees, he was asked to say something about Holy Mother. One could read on his face his intense emotion; he was unable to say a word. That charged silence was more eloquent than any words he could have uttered.

Studying the life and work of Swami Nitya-swarup-ananda can be an occasion for us to consider how, through Vedanta, we can reach out in thought, service and human connection to other cultures and peoples and thus deepen our own sense of shared humanity. □

The Grandeur of Nitya-swarup-ananda's Vision

An Interview with Shelley Brown

[Centred in Truth: The Story of Swami Nitya-swarup-ananda, Dr. Brown's 2-volume work on Swami Nitya-swarup-ananda, was published by Kalpa Tree Press in April of this year. A review of the book is scheduled to appear in our next issue.]

John Schlenck (for *American Vedantist*): How did you come to write *Centred in Truth*?

Shelley Brown: The book grew out of reminiscences that I received shortly after Swami Nitya-swarup-ananda's death in 1992, slated for inclusion in a "Commemorative Volume" being compiled by his friends. The mantle fell on my shoulders in 1994 when it became apparent that the historical significance of his life and work merited a full-length biography. I retired that year from the private practice of hematology/oncology, and a few years later from my position as the Blood Bank Director at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York. The end result is a two-volume work that includes a biography, reminiscences, memorial lectures, and a selection of the swami's own writings.

JS: Your meeting with Swami Nitya-swarup-ananda was initially in a professional capacity. What drew you to him in a deeper way?

Enter the Hospital as a Temple

SB: Yes, Swami Nitya-swarup-ananda came to my office as a patient in 1987 during his second trip to the United States, accompanied by Erik Johns. The Swami's lack of pretension and his spiritual ebullience were irresistible right from the start. My admiration deepened when I began visiting him daily at the Vedanta Society for the treatment of acute bronchitis. Ill though he was, he would sit cross-legged on the cot and exhort me with the gestures of a *pujari* (one who performs ritual worship) to enter the hospital as a temple, each room a place of worship, each patient a Divinity. Thus began an exalted dialogue on the spiritualization of everyday life that tuned every action to the highest Vedantic ideal. I had been a Vedantist for many years, yet his intense approach to ordinary life came as a revelation—the awareness that we become whatever we wish to become through our moment-to-moment thinking, feeling, and doing.

JS: Can you put the swami's essential vision into a few words?

SB: The grandeur of his vision—and of his lifelong odyssey to bring Swami Vivekananda's ideal of human unity into the mainstream of global

thought—is difficult to explain in a few words. *Centred in Truth* is devoted to this theme. Swami Nitya-swarup-ananda always quoted Swamiji on the Oneness of existence as his “Basic Viewpoint,” and he took it as his sacred task to translate this sublime credo into concrete reality for the benefit of humankind.

JS: How did Swami Nitya-swarup-ananda try to implement this vision? What did he actually do?

SB: He began by developing the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture entirely upon Swami Vivekananda’s whole-world teachings, such that the Institute “included the whole of humanity in its vision.” He pioneered global concepts and created a “Scheme of Work” to bring them to life, including a huge cultural curriculum and a roster of top scholars to teach it. Later, his publications on global education had the support of Dr. S. Radhakrishnan in India and were sponsored by UNESCO, yet he felt disappointed at the end that he hadn’t been able to accomplish all he wanted. Dr. Karan Singh commented in his reminiscence that visionaries often have to face such disappointment—the swami, he said, will be remembered as a savant, but he was too far ahead of his time. . . it is just now that the global society is beginning to emerge into a new civilization.

JS: What do you think needs to be done to implement this vision today? What kind of people should be doing it? What exactly can they do?

Appreciation of New Ideas

SB: Swami Nitya-swarup-ananda’s own writings describe his blueprint for human unity and world civilization, so a selection has been included in Volume 2. As to who should be doing it, Swami Nitya-swarup-ananda used to urge all people to DO SOMETHING in the way that was best suited to them, perhaps whatever they were trained to do and could contribute in their own way. He appreciated new ideas and disliked any kind of stereotyped or dogmatic approach to Vedanta.

JS: What can Vedantists who are inspired by the swami’s vision do to further its realization? What is the next step that can be taken?

SB: Swami Nitya-swarup-ananda himself talked about “the next step forward” throughout his development of the Institute of Culture—based on where the Institute stood at the time and where he wanted it to go in order to fulfill its goals. The swami was constantly immersed in the ideal, and he worked very hard to discover the best ways to bring it to fruition. “The next step” came from the depths of his commitment—less a strategy in the usual sense than a forward momentum in the struggle for the ideal. He devoted all his time, energy, and creative imagination to achieve it, even forgoing sleep—whatever was necessary—and we shall have to do the same.

JS: Are you planning to write anything additional to contribute to implementing the swami's vision?

SB: All I can say now is that I am grateful for the opportunity to have written this book, and because of this book I have started Kalpa Tree Press, which will publish the work of others and perhaps more of my own in the future.

JS: How was the book received in India, and what was the response from the Ramakrishna Order?

SB: I had no idea what to expect, but the response in India was like a dream come true. Rupa & Co., a prestigious distributor, picked up *Centred in Truth* at first sight and launched it on March 4 before a large gathering at the Oxford Bookstore in Calcutta; Dr. Govinda Gopal Mukherjee, the eminent Sanskrit scholar and a respected lecturer at the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, officially released the book at the launch and participated the next day in the panel discussion at the Calcutta Press Club—to a fanfare of publicity. As soon as the consignment reached Calcutta, I offered it at the Belur Math and at Sri Sarada Math, where it was accepted most graciously with love and blessings. It was an auspicious beginning, and in the meantime Rupa & Co. has made the book available at bookstores all over India. Now I am working to mainstream the distribution in the United States.

JS: How can we apply the swami's vision to the Vedanta work in the West?

Always Remember that You Are Pure Spirit

SB: When asked by a devotee in America what Swamiji's message was for Vedanta, Swami Nitya-swarup-ananda replied, "As he (Vivekananda) said . . . even after his passing away he would continue to inspire men until every individual becomes one with God. That was his message, this is his message and this will continue to be the message of Swami Vivekananda. Not only to America but to the whole world." This was practical Vedanta on a universal scale—the inspiration for Swami Nitya-swarup-ananda's pure vision. When it came to Vedanta, which he defined as "Truth," he made no distinction between East and West. On a cultural level, he was enthusiastic about the practical aspects of American life and the spirit of self-dependence, which he felt had tremendous value for India. He also admired the many he met in America who were trying to mold their spiritual life in the light of the principles of Vedanta. But when the author once spoke of herself as an American, Swami Nitya-swarup-ananda exploded, "NEVER say that, that you are 'an American.' ALWAYS remember that you are Pure Spirit, Divinity Itself." This consciousness of Oneness, he stressed in all his writings, is the work of Vedanta everywhere. □

Reminiscences of Swami Nitya-swarup-ananda

John Scarborough

[Reprinted from Shelley Brown, Centred in Truth: The Story of Swami Nitya-swarup-ananda, vol. 2, (New York, Kalpa Tree Press, 2001), by permission of the publisher.]

For three weeks in August 1991, I stayed at the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture in an air-conditioned room just a few doors down the hall from Swami Nitya-swarup-ananda's quarters. I was delighted. I saw Swami Nitya-swarup-ananda many times. We would talk for an hour or two, sometimes longer. His words were fresh in my mind when I returned to my room to record them. In this selection from my journal, I hope I have captured some of his extraordinary vigor, humor, wisdom, and joy. I did not see him again; he died the following year.

In August 1991, Swami Nitya-swarup-ananda was ninety-two years old. He had a deep, jolting cough, and he wore a back brace. If these spoke of physical decline, his eyes denied it. They charged into the room. Set in great sockets, held in check above and below by eyelids like venetian blinds, they laughed, they reposed, they probed, they puzzled, they interrogated.

When I first inquired about him, I was led into the foyer near his room, a large sunny area at the end of the hall equipped with couches and chairs. Seated in an armchair, he was talking in Bengali to a woman about thirty-five years old. After a few sentences, he turned to me and asked where I was from, and he motioned for me to sit down. When his visitor left, he sat for several minutes with his eyes closed, then asked me to come to his room after I had shut off the foyer's fan and lights.

What Is Knowledge?

In his room, curtains drawn against the late afternoon's intense sun, he sat still for a few minutes on his bed, one foot placed on the other thigh, head back slightly, eyes closed, rocking gently. He stopped rocking and opened his right eye only.

"Knowledge," he said. He adjusted his position, coughed, and again sat still for a while. "That is the question: What is knowledge? Everything depends on that. Do you think anyone would want to live in darkness?" he asked. "No," he answered. "Everyone wants to know, and to know more. We live on that knowledge. Without knowledge, no one could live for a moment. No one would want to."

The air conditioner's noise made hearing difficult, so I moved to the floor near his bed. He pointed to a chair, then to where I sat. I brought over the chair and sat down, facing him.

"You came on that knowledge. In a huge, multiton aircraft that flew thirty thousand feet above the earth, from Seattle to India in a day. It is incredible. It is knowledge. And people want more. Always more! It is our nature, we want always to learn more. At that level it is endless.

The Highest Knowledge

"And there is higher knowledge, and higher still, and the highest knowledge of all, the knowledge of the knower itself. We want to know because it gives us joy and satisfaction." He paused, closing his eyes. "That knowledge brings infinite peace," he said, his face growing broader as it relaxed into a peaceful expression. "Infinite joy, supreme happiness . . ." He opened his eyes, and looked at me.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"John Scarborough."

"Johns?"

"John, no 's.'"

"John, no 's.' Carborough," he chuckled, playing with my name. "O-u-g-h?"

"Yes."

"John Scarborough. What is your occupation?"

"I am a software-testing engineer for Microsoft."

"Microsoft?"

"Yes, Microsoft. It's computers."

"Oh, computers! Microsoft! I know nothing about all that. That's new."

"Yes," I said, "it is a sort of madness."

"It is all madness," he said. "Everything is madness. It is because we want to know. Have you had your dinner?"

"No."

"Then you . . ." He looked at his watch.

"Yes, I'll go eat now," I said. "May I come again?"

"Yes, any time you like." I took the dust of his feet and went out the door. He called me back: "John. John. Very good. There are many famous Johns in the world." He chuckled and raised his hand in farewell.

The next day he asked about my experiences in Vedanta. I told him about meeting my teacher, Swami Vividishananda; I named a handful of books that had been very important for me; I recalled learning to do puja; and I spoke of

several monks of the Order whom I had met. His smile slowly faded when I mentioned having learned puja. When I stopped talking, he said, “Your first instruction was the exact opposite of what a swami should teach at the very beginning. Devotee, separation—it is hard to remove.”

“No,” I corrected. “No, his first instruction, his first instruction to me was ‘Atman and Brahman are one.’ And his last words, his very last words to me, were just five words: ‘Atman alone is the goal.’ He gave me the same message, first and last.”

Swami Nitya-swarup-ananda looked at me searchingly, his eyes huge and dark. “Yes,” he said. Looking down, rocking slightly, he continued thoughtfully, a line between his eyebrows growing prominent and deep. “Yes, yes, Atman alone . . . the Self alone abides . . . the Self alone. Yes, he is correct. Good, good. You are very fortunate to have had the opportunity to contact such a great swami.”

I asked, “Did Sri Ma [Sri Sarada Devi] ever talk about jnana?”

He grimaced. “What? What is jnana? Why talk about jnana? Why should she talk about jnana? She IS jnana. She is the world. She is the universe. She is who jnana is, who is jnana itself, who is the giver of jnana. She, seeing whom one sees God, sees the Absolute, she will talk about jnana. Eh!”

Seeker of Truth, Yes; Devotee, No

A few minutes passed in silence. He pointed to the picture of Sri Ramakrishna hanging on the wall behind me, and asked me, “What do you see represented there?” I began, “As a devotee—” but I got no further. “What? What is a devotee? Why are you using that word? What is meant by that word? It is a wrong notion! It separates you from truth! A seeker of truth, yes, a devotee, no. An emotional state, perhaps, but it separates us from the truth. Why do you say this, this ‘as a devotee’?” he asked, screwing up his mouth as though he had just taken a drink of soured milk.

“I see Sri Ramakrishna in more than one way,” I replied. “When I meditate, I think of him in one way. When I think of what he said in the light of the teachings of other traditions, I think of him somewhat differently, especially when talking to people who know nothing of him.” “No,” he said. “Tell them what it is. If they can take it, good. If not, let them hear it and later they will understand it. Truth is one. The rest is delusion, maya. Hear it, meditate on it, realize it.” His eyes rested on the picture of Sri Ramakrishna for a few moments, and then he said, “Thakur, Ma, Swamiji—this is the only ideal for the world. To prevent destruction of the world.

“Swamiji’s letter from Almora to a Muslim in Naini Tal, you know it? He says, I want to leave the world a place where the Veda, the Bible, and the Koran are seen as different aspects of One. That is harmony. Yes. Six billion

people are six billion radii converging on and emerging from a common center. As many radii, so many paths.” His attendant arrived. “We will have many such talks,” Swami Nitya-swarup-ananda said. “You and I agree on many things.” He laughed. “Maybe we will disagree. We shall see! You have met many swamis, it is a great advantage.”

The next morning, I knocked hesitantly on his door. When I received no response, I let myself in. He was sitting up in bed. Whether he was meditating or asleep I could not tell. I moved quietly—silently, I hoped—across the room. I was about to sit down when his eyes flashed open, and he roared, “You are the sun! Never forget it!”

His eyes blazed and the force of his voice blasted my entire body. As a child I had experienced a recurring dream in which I watched a man’s head, as large as the sun itself, rise at dawn over a distant mountain range, filling the universe with light, and me with love. After seeking for years the owner of the sun-man’s face, as an adult I came to understand that I had been filled with love and freed from fear by watching the dawn of the Self. Swami Nitya-swarup-ananda’s few words welded my dream and my understanding.

Each Soul Is the Sun

“Each soul is divine! Each soul is the sun!” he continued. “Each soul is the sun covered over by so many clouds. The only difference between soul and soul is owing to clouds. Some have more, some have less—this is the truth. You may teach it to the Muslim, and he will not understand, you may teach it to the Hindu, and he will not understand, you may teach it to the Christian, and he will not understand. It doesn’t matter. It is the truth, whether one realizes it now or later. If no one hears it, who will know?” He recited a verse in Sanskrit, then translated: “Rare is the soul who, turning from body, mind, and senses, discovers the truth dwelling within.”

Again Sanskrit and a translation: “‘Arise, awake, and stop not till the goal is reached!’ This was said one hundred years ago by Swamiji in America. It should have been renewed by every swami in America since then, but look what has happened. We have made a mess of it, creating a crowd of (he winced) devotees, weak and passive. Devotees! They separate themselves from the truth, and we have encouraged them. We have created a cult and lost sight of truth. Truth is One! Unity!”

When I returned after breakfast, he was reading the newspaper. “Formerly there were two superpowers. Now there is only one. If we had done what Swamiji envisioned, think what could have been done now. Vedanta—not India, not dhotis, not cooking—but the oneness and unity that is Vedanta, the essence of the Veda, could now be spread throughout the entire world. But this superpower will not do it. Did you read today? The United States ambassador to Pakistan has said that Kashmir must be Muslim. That is their

way! Divide, divide, divide, on the basis of the one thing—religion—that should unite all people. They want only power, not peace.” He spoke about the responsibilities of a superpower for some time, and then said he was very much enjoying our conversations and looked forward to more. I eagerly accepted his invitation to come for tea.

“Freedom is renunciation!” he exclaimed when we had each eaten a cookie and sipped our tea. “Not an orange cloth, or a shaven head, or giving away all possessions; not saying goodbye to mother and father and family. That is not renunciation. Renunciation means seeing yourself in every human being, seeing yourself in plants, trees, the sky, in all people—friends, family, strangers, the poor and the sick. They are your Self! One’s Self is the universe, and the universe is your Self. One! Each person is a spoke on the wheel of existence, all beings are so many spokes in the same wheel, having a common center and reaching out in so many different rays. Each radius, each spoke is its own path, there are as many paths as there are people. There is not one path, rather there is one truth, with infinite paths to the realization of that truth, oneness.

“But America, the land of the free, is practicing a perverted freedom. It is the freedom of bondage: you are free to be bound by your senses, your instincts, and your desires. You will not question, ‘Where will this lead me?’ No, you will do what you want to do because you want to do it. It will give you nothing, you will have less than what you started with. But still you will do it. Enjoyments are not bad, they are not evil, but if you do not rise above them, they continue on and on and on. Yes, everyone must realize the truth, it is one’s own nature, one’s very being in itself. But when? This searching and searching for greater enjoyment, for any enjoyment, it is endless. . . . There is no enjoyer, no object of enjoyment, no enjoyment: there is only one.”

What Strength Is There in Weakness?

The next day, sitting next to him over early morning tea, I was wondering to myself what simple formulation could summarize all he had said in the last few days. Just then he said, with great intensity, “There is no knower, no object known, no knowledge—no knower-object relationship.” He abruptly raised his right index finger a few inches away from my nose. “One!” he said. He sipped his tea. I repeated internally what he had just said until I could feel it, literally taking it to heart.

“You know that poem with the line about embracing Death?” he asked me. “That is real strength, that is real devotion. I am the Self in all. Have you come, Death? Welcome, you are my own Self! I embrace you. Is such a man conquered by death? No, he has conquered death itself by seeing himself in all. I am the universe, the universe is in me, I am all, I am one. Will I be afraid of death? ‘Welcome, brother Death! Pleased to meet you.’ What will die?

What will be replaced? I am the Self of all! How can I disappear, how die? One! One! We are one, we are one, not two.”

He pointed to Richard Lannoy’s book, *The Speaking Tree*, which I had brought along for him to see, and he remarked that Lannoy quoted Gandhi approvingly: “Our greatest strength is our weakness.” “That was Saint Paul’s cherished notion as well,” I interjected. “This is a wrong notion!” he stormed. “What strength is there in weakness? There is strength in strength, not in weakness. That is your Christianity, that is your devotee. Such a person can be controlled! Where is strength there? What will you say? Will you say that it is impossible?”

He did not wait for my reply. “Swamiji said that his goal is that one day every infant will be born into this world with this knowledge. It is impossible? If even one man or woman has this knowledge, it is possible for many, it is possible for all. But not just one has had this knowledge! There is Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, and Swamiji. There have been and will be many more such. It is one’s birthright, how is it impossible? And then you push it away from you and worship it and say, ‘Oh, I am nothing.’ No! Real faith gives strength!

You Are the Universe

“The whole universe is here, here (thumping his chest with his forefinger). Mind, senses, sense objects, world, people—nothing. All one. It is here. I am the universe. You are divine—the universe is in you, and you are the universe.”

A few days later I stopped in to see him at 9:45 in the morning. “What time is it?” he asked. He was sitting on his bed at a writing table. “I am feeling a little tired,” he said. “Can you come here in half an hour?” “Yes, Maharaj. Actually, I have banking to do. Will 11:15 be all right?” “Yes, yes,” he said; “I want to talk to you some more. I like you very much.” “I like you very much, too, Maharaj,” I said in a tone better suited for stating a preference for coffee as opposed to tea. “Ore baba!” he cried, and burst into laughter. As I was closing the door behind me, he called me back. “You will come then?” “Yes,” I replied. “All right. Please remove this table.”

At 11:30, after my traveler’s checks had been reviewed and approved by five bank employees in three lines on two floors of the bank, I went to Swami Nitya-swarup-ananda’s room. I entered without knocking, sat down, and waited. After a few minutes he looked up.

“There is a wonderful painting by Abanindranath Tagore. Parvati is seated, and he has shown that she has become Shiva. Above her, coming out of her and in her, is Lord Shiva, with flying hair, *damaru* (a drum held in one hand whose attached beaded cords strike its two heads), like that—husband

and wife in unison. He is in her, and she in him. She sees him as her Self. And he sees her as his own Self. The purpose of life is to realize the Self in all beings. Yajnavalkya tells his wife Maitreyi that the husband is dear to the wife, not for the sake of the husband, but for the sake of the Self in him. The wife is dear to the husband, not for the sake of the wife, but for the sake of the Self in her, which is also his own Self. Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Devi—how did they regard each other? Each of them on separate occasions confided that he and she were the same. To know one is to know the other as well. They realized the Self in all beings, and that is how they regarded each other.

“That is the purpose of life. When you work, you are offering that work to the Lord of the universe, who is your Self. Don’t think it is for you that you are doing this.” By gestures he showed work being offered to another, and then, cupping his hands together, he brought them in a sweeping motion to his heart.

The Whole Life Must Be Transformed

“If that thought comes—‘I,’ ‘I’—do not let it take hold. You are a shadow, that little ‘I’ is but a shadow. Work wholeheartedly, with full concentration, but know that it is not done by or for you, constantly remember that. Otherwise when you sit for meditation what will you meditate? Only those thoughts of your work. Half an hour in the morning and evening is not enough! The whole life must be transformed. That is the way. Every moment: One! Not two. The apparent ‘I’ is only a shadow. Ah, I am so glad to talk to you.”

On my last day, I went to Swami Nitya-swarup-ananda’s room to take leave of him.

“I came to your room earlier,” I said, “but you were asleep.” “Yes, yes, I know. I was asleep, but I sensed that you were here. I am very happy to have met you and talked to you. It is too bad you cannot stay longer; we would have many more talks. I find that you appreciate and understand these ideas.”

We talked for a couple of hours about projects that he and I hoped to work on together in the future. “I may go home before this is realized, do you understand?” “Yes,” I said. “Back to the source. How much longer will you live, Maharaj?” “I do not know. I may live up to . . .” He stopped, and gestured toward the picture of Sri Ramakrishna. “I do not control that.”

“Stick around for a while, Maharaj,” I said. “I want to see you again.”

“Yes,” he said. “And I would like to see you. It is an ocean! All souls reach their fulfillment when they are dropped into the ocean, so many streams all pouring into that sea of consciousness. You must write that book,” he said, referring to a book I had been thinking of writing for several years.

“But it will do no good,” he said of the projected book, “if it just enshrines the memory of a particular individual. That is the whole problem all over again. Lift up, expand, bring together. And it is not just an idea—it must be realized, that is the thing. It has been lost! That wonderful vision of Swamiji’s, lost! All souls are divine. Each soul. We are that One. Oneness! Let every nation discover what its greatness is, how it has contributed to the culture of the world, and how it can benefit by learning from every other nation what their greatness is. Each has its own perspective. They must acknowledge their own and that of others.

“You know Mayavati?” I said that I did. “Do you know what Swamiji’s plan was for it? That people from all over the world would go there and, with the backdrop of the Himalayas soaring skyward, listen to one another and discover that Oneness. Always strive for that Oneness. You are that One! See it in every living being.

“Well, let us part on that note.” He raised his hands, parted, above his head, slapped them together, and brought them, joined, to his forehead. “May all blessings be on you and your wife,” he said.

As I was leaving, he called me back and said, “I am very happy to have met you. It was a rare, a rare opportunity that you had contact with so great a soul as Swami Vividishananda. Write me soon, and often, and I will call you. Now you may go.” □

Awake

Lost in this worldly dream
distractions all around.
Struggling to survive
just about to drown.
Awake—
it is not what it seems.
This world is alive,
consciousness everywhere.
Lift the veil and see
all are related to you and me!

—Swami Asitananda

Koalpara Rural Development Project: Update

Ray Berry

[Readers of AV may recall our article in last year's Summer issue (Volume 6, No. 2), "With Vedantic Service to India," which told of the service begun early last year by Ray and Sonja Berry, an American couple, in the village of Koalpara in West Bengal, India, where Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi stayed on numerous occasions. When the couple first visited Koalpara two years ago, the monk in charge of the local ashrama, Swami Durgananda, said to them, "I would like to do something for these local poor people." Ray volunteered, "Sonja and I would like to come and help." Durgananda replied, "Yes, come!" The following account tells of their second season of service last winter.]

(From a letter dated January 7, 2001)

We are sitting here in our yard looking out over the fields. Jagadamba Ashrama, where Holy Mother stayed, is about 150 yards to the south. . . Our hearts are so full it is hard to contain sometimes. The love and enthusiasm of the villagers can be overwhelming. We must be very stern with them at times or it gets out of hand . . . Swami Durgananda is so easy to work with. There is no nonsense and tremendous mutual respect . . . But of course the most important thing here is that this is *Mother's* place. Most everyone who comes here, particularly Westerners, feels this.



Swami Durgananda

Our neighbor, Pinaki, is my overseer. And is he sharp! He knows exactly what we want. Durgananda affectionately calls him "engineer." He understands the subtleties of working with the local people. So my physical work is now much less, and I can just handle the important decisions. Many more projects can be started and more people benefitted, and the money will go much farther. So I hope not to wear myself out like last year.



Ray in Koalpara

We are also getting much more participation from the recipients, and our suppliers, of their own accord, are giving materials at a reduced rate. To see them enter into the spirit of the work brings us much joy.

(From a report written in April, 2001)

Sonja and I arrived back in Koalpara the first week of December, 2000. Our 100-year-old mud house was spick and span and freshly white-washed inside. After settling in for a few days, we slowly went around the village, renewing friendships and inspecting the work which was started last year.

One of the first things I did was to ask Pinaki Naga, a young man of 18, just out of high school and beginning college, to help me with the work. Pinaki and his family live right behind our house. I set a salary for him, but after his first paycheck, which I insisted he accept, he refused to take any more money. I bought him a small used motorcycle which we share, and this is most necessary to cover all the projects. We have also started him on a computer course. His family is landless and very poor; they live in a rented house. We are now looking into a more permanent and stable situation for them.



Learning from Last Year's Experience

The first thing Pinaki and I did was to look at last year's projects. Out of 15 bathrooms that were built, we found that about 10 were being used. Seeing the villagers' resistance to the idea of indoor bathrooms, we decided to focus on other work. As for the three houses that we had started, one was completely finished. One remained as we had left it and is now on its way to being completed. But the third one was a surprise. Here we had completed the foundation, stem wall, and concrete floor at ground level. The walls and roof remained to be done this year. Previously the owner had begged for bricks, sand, and crushed rock from a local wealthy family, and, because he already had these materials on hand, I agreed to build a brick house for his family. When Pinaki and I arrived on the site, we found another brick house, partially completed. I asked Pinaki, "What is this?" He said he didn't know. We walked away. I later found that this man had gone to Swami Durgananda and asked him for more money to repair his existing mud houses. He then used this money to start this third house using some of the materials he had on hand. I immediately decided to stop all help to this family. We subsequently found that this man owns a good amount of farm land, but his whole family behaves like hopeless beggars. If he wants, he can sell a small portion of his holdings and complete his house.

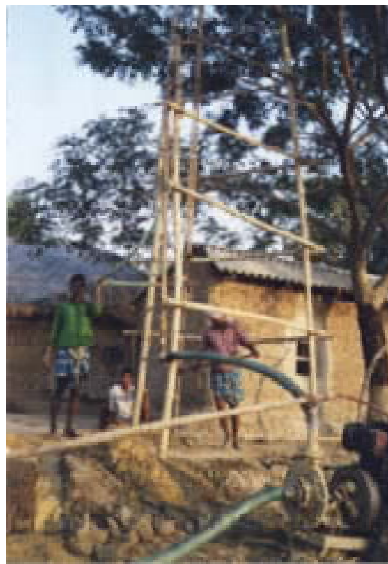
Trusted Assistant

This year we decided that we would build mud houses since cement and brick are so expensive and are not really suitable for the climate. Mud houses are naturally air-conditioned, cooler in the summer and warmer in the winter, and one of their important advantages is that the recipients can participate substantially in the construction, which we insist upon. Pinaki came to me with the names of a few people who needed houses, and our work started slowly. There is now a good-natured competition among the carpenters to see who can build a house the fastest with the smallest crew. This is unheard of here, and so satisfying. In three months over fifty new houses were started, and we had four crews working with their helpers and with the recipients. In some cases we built new houses on land that the people had; in other cases, where there was no land available, the new house was built right over the old one, and then the old one demolished or incorporated into the new structure.

Working with the Most Disadvantaged

This year we especially wanted to work with the most disadvantaged—the poorest of the poor, people with disabilities, widows. It was such a joy to see these people working with enthusiasm on their own homes.

As this year's work began, one old widow came and asked me for a house. I sent her to Pinaki, and he said to her, "After all, how much longer will you live?" She replied, "I need a place for my daughters to stay when they come to visit." Pinaki rejoined, "Do you want us to build a hotel?"



Digging a Well

As Pinaki and I surveyed Koalpara we found several areas that needed wells for drinking water. People in these communities had to carry drinking water from far away or use pond water. Twenty years ago in Olema, the town in northern California where Sonja and I live, a friend of mine had shown me how to dowse for water using two bent wires held loosely in each hand at the level of the solar plexus. I got no response then, nor did I have any need for it or any interest. But here in Koalpara I vaguely remembered that lesson and thought I would give it a try. At the first site, I got no response at the place where the people wanted the well, so I slowly walked the area in an ever widening circle, and in one suitable place I got a nice

response from the wires. I then dowsed, getting a reading of 75 feet depth, with a flow of over 25 gallons per minute. We bored the well on this spot, and hit the first water at exactly 75 feet. This the well driller knows by the depth and quality of the sand he hits. Pointing to the sand, he said in English, ‘Good, better, best!’ From 75 feet he bored through about 15 feet of sand indicating a huge amount of water as the wires had predicted. Dowsing proved remarkably accurate for the seven or eight wells that we bored except in one case, at Jagadamba Ashrama (where Holy Mother actually stayed), because I got a little careless and wanted the well near a certain building. Pinaki later told me that well drillers make a good living boring dry holes. Many people have this “gift” of being able to dowse, and Pinaki is one of them, So he could confirm my findings, and in one location I had him choose the spot.

Crocheting and Sewing

Sonja’s work with the women continued where she left off last year. Six or eight girls who were excellent students last year came to learn how to crochet a doll and doll clothes, as well as shawls, gloves, and bags. Some of these women came forward with their own ideas, too, and this is what Sonja was particularly looking for. From the beginning, the motto was to be “creative, artistic, and imaginative.” Runu, the most productive, has earned almost 10,000 rupees in less than a year. In one year over 200 students have learned, and maybe 20 of them do good enough work to sell it at the ashram. One young man who was paralyzed for



Class in Crocheting

six months has started crocheting with sweet enthusiasm. Sonja says he has potential for good work. We are doing extensive work on his house, and he worked along with the others and has slowly gotten back his ability to do physical work. We also use him as a diplomat for sensitive and delicate matters. Even though he can do heavier work now, I expect he’ll do some crocheting during the rainy season. Sonja thinks that 15 or 20 percent of the girls will be able to do quality work and achieve some measure of

independence by selling what they make. In March we purchased a sewing machine. This has been set up in the new showroom at the ashram, and those interested can learn sewing. One thing holding back the women's work is the lack of suitable outlets where these items can be sold, as very few people come through the ashram at Koalpara. Swami Bhajanananda, a trustee of the Order, came from Belur Math, saw the work, and said it was of excellent quality and reasonably priced, and if it could be sold at the Pallimangal showroom at Belur, the women would not be able to keep up with the demand. That has yet to be approved, and lack of a close relationship with the Pallimangal at Belur



Beginning a New House

and in Jayrambati has been a big disappointment for Sonja, myself, and the hardworking women of Koalpara. All along and particularly in our absence, Swami Durgananda takes on his own projects with people who come to the ashram asking for help. He helps many people with house repairs, new houses, starting small new businesses, clothes, food, etc. When I came across some of his building projects, I found that people abused his trust since he does not supervise what they do. When I explained this to the swami and asked him to let Pinaki oversee his building projects, he readily agreed. I also wanted to reduce his burden. He is so unselfish and giving, and people are constantly asking for things, and that pulls him down. Pinaki can now handle this most gracefully.

Expanding into New Areas

In March we started karate classes for interested boys. Pinaki knew of a young man who had studied Tae Kwon Do and was willing to come to Koalpara to teach the boys. He comes with his young assistant three days a week for two hours; thirty or more boys are attending the classes.

About two weeks later Pinaki found another young man who was willing to teach gymnastics, so we enlisted his help, and over thirty girls are attending these classes. Many also come to the ashram regularly, and it is a joy to watch

them doing their cartwheels, flips, handstands, and splits at the ashram in the evening.

Next year we hope to provide the boys with karate gear and uniforms and the girls with mats, bars, and possibly a trampoline. We are also hoping to start art classes and a swimming program, and, more importantly, we want to introduce computers to a few outstanding high school students. We are hoping to bring some laptops and a printer with us next year.

I am presently working with a group of Dr. Kumar Mehta's graduate students at the University of California, Berkeley, to develop a strong, light-weight adobe block. I hope to be able to manufacture these blocks in Koalpara using local mud and straw, and then use these blocks for our new housing projects. If these blocks are a success, I am hoping that their manufacture and sale can provide a co-operative business for some local men and women.



Karate Class

Of course, any work like this has its difficulties. One problem for Sonja and myself, the local people, and those who visit the ashram, has been the indiscriminate playing of very loud amplified music for hours at a time. Sonja and I would not have been able to stay there had it continued. One night after repeated requests from Maharaj (Swami Durgananda) to "turn it down," I jumped into action. I went and cut the wires on two loudspeakers and roughed up one of the miscreants. A few nights later a group of young men laid a trap for me. Pinaki forewarned me, but I went anyway. They had draped bare electrified wires over the loudspeakers so that if I touched them I would be electrocuted! They had also hidden bamboo sticks to beat me with. Unbeknownst to them I had my own sticks concealed. But they had no courage and turned the music off as I arrived. We are now getting support from others and have refused any help to the thugs and to the community where they live. I hope that internal pressure from their own people will keep them quiet. Maharaj also went early one morning and pulled out the wires of a loudspeaker that had been on all night;

the miscreants were sound asleep. There has been a huge improvement in the past three months.

Enthusiasm in a Poor Community

Daspara is a very poor cobbler community where we have built eight new houses and done some roof repairs. The young men have entered into the work with a fantastic spirit, the best of all the men we have worked with in Koalpara. But their enthusiasm led to an unfortunate accident. They insisted on hiring a local tractor to drive some 15 kilometers to bring a load of cheap bamboo for their new homes. Pinaki and I both objected, but we gave in to their eagerness. While coming back with a towering load, the driver son of the tractor owner lost control while driving recklessly at high speed. The load tipped over, killing one girl on the road and one of the men riding on the load. One other man was paralyzed from the waist down, and five others were



Building a House in Daspara

knocked unconscious and injured. These last five have since recovered and are back at work. We are now pressing for a settlement for the dead and injured, but I am insisting that, instead of money, which will only be squandered, land be given as compensation. At the dead man's cremation one would-be politician tried to sow dissent among this community by saying that the accident was my fault, but these people wouldn't buy into that, and word of this reached the local Communist Party. They called the man in and soundly scolded him. He then ran to Maharaj and repeatedly prostrated before him and begged his forgiveness.

To conclude, let me summarize what little has been accomplished since we started the work in February of last year.

February through April of 2000. Sonja taught crocheting to over 100 girls and women. Three new houses were started. Fifteen bathrooms were completed. Many house and roof repairs were done.

December 2000 through March 2001. Sonja continued her work with the women. A new showroom at the ashram exhibits their work, and a sewing machine has been acquired. Fifty new houses have been built, and many of them are already being lived in. (Since we left Koalpara at the end of March twenty-five more new houses have been started by Pinaki.) Many house and roof repairs. Eight new tube wells. Karate and gymnastic classes. Clothing and some monetary and food distribution to the very poor.

Plans for the fall of 2001. We will continue our building program, hopefully with the adobe blocks that are being researched and developed at U.C. Berkeley. A manufacturing co-operative for these blocks (I have several poor communities in mind). A computer learning center. A local bi-weekly newspaper published by young people. Swimming classes. An art and cultural center where drawing, painting, sculpture, and music can be taught. Sonja plans to teach sewing, clothes making, weaving, and quilting. □

Service in an Indian Village: Challenge and Fulfilment

Sonja Berry

Being a recipient of a grant from the Flow Fund Circle to work in an Indian village—was it a curse or a blessing? Definitely it was scary, and I knew it would change my life drastically and forever. My husband, Ray, knew exactly what he wanted to do, but I had no idea where I would fit in.

Before our arrival in Koalpara last year, we had been promised a place to live. When we got there, we found ourselves in a room where our suitcases barely fit and only one of us at a time could stand. Fortunately there was a bathroom right outside our room. Only a hole in the floor, but it is amazing how fast you get used to almost anything. Within six weeks of our arrival we had our own mud house with a Western bathroom that we had added. No running hot water, but you adjust to cold showers and bucket baths when it is hot outside.

A mud house with a thatched roof—you wonder how a Westerner, or indeed anyone, can live there. When Ray first started talking about doing work in India, I told him there was no way I would ever live in a mud house, especially after living for years in our big, beautiful, comfortable home north of San Francisco. Well, it turns out that living in a mud house is not bad at all as you spend all your time outside anyway and only sleep in the house. Our

particular house in Koalpara—perhaps the nicest house in the village—is over 100 years old. It is cool in summer and warm in winter. We have trees and bushes in our yard which is unusual. Most people have only a mud courtyard which they plaster with cowdung three or four times a week. It always looks very clean and tidy that way, but very barren. They also apply cowdung to their floors. I put bamboo mats down on my floors and just swept them. Our cleaning girl couldn't understand why, and the women in the village probably thought me a little odd and dirty not to use cowdung. After all, it is a disinfectant.

Women and Children Gather Around and Watch

So, finally, here we are in Koalpara, ready to begin work. I still don't have the faintest idea what my role will be. I sit at the ashram with Swami Durgananda or in our yard and crochet. Thank God I had the foresight to bring my crocheting! My daughter-in-law, courtesy of India, will get her fancy bedspread before I die. Women and children gather around me and



watch. One day I ask if they want to learn. It starts slowly with a dozen young women and girls. I find a very small stationery store right in town that also sells wool and crocheting needles. I get a color chart, and the young man who owns the store (in India you see very few

women running any businesses) rides his bicycle to another town to get wool and then delivers it to my house. For him this is a tremendous boost in business.

Now we are all set. I hold classes everyday in our yard for a couple of hours in the afternoon. Now the next problem to be solved: what to make? I decide to teach them how to make a scarf. This way they practice a simple single crochet and straight edges. It is a lot of fun and for me very rewarding. I've never done any teaching and have always said it was the last thing in the world I wanted to do. But these students are so eager to learn and so sweet and full of love. They would spend all day with me if I let them. Of course, part of the attraction is the novelty of spending time with this big, white, Western

woman. It's amazing how easy it is to teach them despite the language barrier. One of the girls, Runu, speaks some English, so we can communicate. Runu also turns out to be my best student and will earn a lot of money with her work.

Coming in Droves

So here we are in 100-degree weather peacefully making mufflers. Some of the women take their time getting the edges straight; a few of them never learn. By now the word has gotten around, and Maharaj encourages the women who come to the ashram to go over to Sonja to learn crocheting. The women start coming in droves. Thirty of them show up in my yard and demand wool. There is no way to get them to understand that I can't teach that many at the same time. One day at least fifty come and refuse to leave. Most of these women have no interest to learn how to crochet; they just want free handouts of wool. Ray has to chase them away threatening with a stick before they understand, and then they just hang over the fence and watch. Finally the first muffler is finished. Now what else to make? A hat becomes the next project. You may wonder what use they have for these warm items in India? My sister in Sweden did! You would be surprised to see how bundled up the Indians are during the cold season, which is not cold for us. But you do get acclimatized and feel as cold as they do.

The hat is easy to make, with no straight edges to battle with. When the hat is finished, again the problem what the next project will be. Yes, I do ask them what they would like to make, but they always want to do what I think they should do. A small blanket of granny squares becomes the third item. These women have a wonderful sense of color, so I encourage them to use that in this project. Besides, it will be a lot of fun. I give them paper and colored pencils and ask them to make a design with 80 squares. It is amazing and a delight to see what they come up with. By now we are coming close to our departure from Koalpara. I order a big shipment of wool to make sure that each of my students will be able to make a blanket. After all, that is what they are striving for.



I have maybe 130 students, but many of them don't come on a regular basis, so I don't remember all of them. If they haven't come every day and I haven't gotten to know them, they look the same to me. They all wear saris if they are married, and they all have black hair and brown eyes. Well, in a small village like this word gets around very fast, especially if it involves "Uncle and Auntie," as they call Ray and me. On this last day of giving out the blanket wool all of a sudden here are all these women demanding wool. I tell Ray I am sure many of them I have never seen before. It turns out they are very clever. They have to show a drawing of their blanket design to get the wool. Everyone has a drawing, and it isn't long before I realize that I keep seeing the same drawing over and over. I'm not as stupid as they think. But since this is the last giveout and we are leaving, there is no point in sending them away and creating a ruckus. So I let them know I am on to their tricks and very disappointed.



2001

Arriving in Koalpara this year is like coming home. Although the nearly four-hour car ride from Calcutta to Koalpara is pure torture and I promise myself never again to make this trip, all the aches and pains disappear at

the sight of Swami Durgananda's loving face. This time our house has been prepared for our arrival and is in perfect working condition. We are comfortable from the start. I know some of the people and this time I know what to do.

I've planned on teaching quilting this year, but my old students want to learn more crocheting. Last year they had mentioned making a doll, so I've brought a sample with me. I've also brought many books on different projects. When you don't speak the language it can be hard to explain something a little more complicated, so I begin by giving Runu private lessons, since she knows some English. Then she helps with the other students who want to make dolls. They make some wonderful dolls, and they look like Indian dolls. Some of the girls enter their dolls in a craft fair in the next village and Runu wins second prize. I've also made a sample shawl that every one of my old students learns how to make; but when they find out I won't

supply the wool, no one actually makes a whole shawl. My idea is that now, when they know how to crochet and can sell their things at the ashram, they are supposed to be on their own. Anyone who has potential and wants to sell I start out with the wool, and after they sell one or two items they are on their own.

In the meantime, while the old students are making dolls, new students come. This year I've decided to have better organization, with smaller classes, and just twice a week, so I can have more time for the old students. Well, that is easier said than done. Try to get across to these women that a new class will start next month. No way. They are angry with me that they can't all hang out in my yard and crochet; and how come the others got wool? At times, when



**Hindu and Muslim
Fellow Students**

they insist on coming anyway, it is very frustrating dealing with them. Some of the students from last year help with the instruction, but the yard isn't big enough for 100 students plus children and mothers and friends! Sometimes it is a real circus.

This year I try to get more of the married women involved so that they will have a source of income. That isn't an easy task. Most of them just come once for the free wool and the ones that do come back claim they have too much housework to do. I do have one student, though, whose husband complains that she doesn't do her housework anymore but just crochets. That really delights me because she does beautiful work. Besides, you always have time for what you really want to do. Some of the women—mostly those who are illiterate—simply can't learn. One woman brings from home a beautiful scarf with

perfectly straight edges, so I give her wool to make another one to sell. She comes back with a half-finished scarf that is also perfect, but she doesn't get anything done during class. I also give her some wool to take home to practice making granny squares, and she brings back twenty perfect ones. Now I say, "Let me see you make a few here in class." As I suspect, it turns out that her daughter has done all the work. She was a student last year but didn't come back this year for more classes.

Making Dolls Spurs Imagination

Out of probably 200 women who have come to class around twenty are now seriously doing work to sell at the ashram. They are making shawls, gloves, bags, dolls, children's dresses, scarves and hats. Some of them are also knitting sweaters and hats with designs and embroidering tablecloths. We buy a sewing machine so they can make linings for their bags. Next year I am planning to teach more of them how to sew and make children's clothing. Weaving and quilting are also on the list. The most fun part this year has been working with the students making dolls. They transform their dolls into nothing resembling my sample. Using their imagination, they are constantly coming up with new ideas.

My most successful student has been Runu. She has been working since we left last year and has made a lot of money. That created some jealousy in the village, but they all have the same chance. It's just a matter of doing it. Some of the students are like my own children. They understand and respect my need for privacy. They come every day just for a visit if they don't have a project going. I feel I have had some good influence on the women and children. I think they have definitely learned to be more giving and able to work on projects together and share ideas. An example of working on a group project is the beautiful granny square blanket they made for Marion Weber (of the Flow Fund Circle). I was a little hesitant to



Most Interesting Student and Classmates

suggest that, knowing their reluctance to share. Lo and behold, they asked to contribute to the project. The blanket turned out well, and Marion was delighted.

My most interesting student this year was a man! He had been paralyzed for six months about a year ago and didn't have full use of his hands. It took him a while to learn, but he kept on coming and finally did as nice a job as any of the women. Now he has the full capacity of his hands, and I like to think that the crocheting was just the thing he needed.

Another success was Rita, whose husband is mentally sick. He spent most of the day outside of their house talking to himself, sometimes in perfect English. She always looked very depressed and had a very sad, painful look on her face. One day Ray asked her to come to me, and that brought her out of her depression. She was the first one to come to class every day, twenty minutes before class. She would sit quietly on my porch and wait for me to come out. I think she knew English because she always knew what I was trying to say, but she denied that she could speak English.

The Hardest Part

For me, the hardest part of living in India is not having another Western woman to share my joys and concerns with. It is not easy being a woman in India. But it does help being an older woman. At least you are shown some



respect by the children and younger women. Forget about the men. Most of them are hopeless; a woman does not exist in their eyes. When they come to our house, it is: “Good morning, Uncle... Goodbye, Uncle.” Aunty is sitting next to Uncle, but she is just a speck on the wall, if even that. Sometimes you have to pinch yourself to make sure you are real. But the love I receive from some of my students makes it worth all the heartaches and invisibility. The villagers also don’t quite know what to make of me because if you have reached 60 years of age you should by all means either be dead or not able to move around the way I do. God forbid you should ride a bicycle! One person thought I couldn’t

possibly be more than 35 because of how fast I rode on my bike.

Rewarding working in a village in rural West Bengal? Yes! Successful working with these women and children? Yes! A curse or a blessing? I think I have to admit to it being a blessing, although sometimes I wasn’t quite sure about that! Has it changed my life? Definitely so. □

How It Is

For us
to take a sip
of Vivekananda
he had to make
a thunderous splash
a tsunami, an
overwhelming deluge
for us to wake,
and even then
we cannot understand
letting the water
roll off, we keep, like children,
playing in the sand.

A Perspective

Divine
in origin
this human love
simply begun:
as natural as flowers,
or blossoms
on a tree.

“Split the wood. . .
Life the stone
and there am I,”
so said Jesus.
If there it be,
why only there?
Why not such love
in you
and me?

—Elva Nelson

Archaeology and the Spiritual Path

Ann Kenny

[Originally written for publication in St. Mark's Messenger, St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Palo Alto, California]

“Archaeology is a perpetual search, never really a finding; it is an eternal journey with no true arrival. Everything is tentative, nothing is final.”

These words, from *Archaeology: A Very Short Introduction*, by Paul Bahn, describe an academic discipline. But when I read them, they echoed feelings about my spiritual search. My search is exciting—the findings I have found and the places I have reached are not final or static.

The search is also risky. Keeping one's faith along the way can be a struggle. I grew up in the Presbyterian church. As a teenager I began questioning, rejecting, and pushing the boundaries of my faith. As a young adult I left not only the church but God. If my faith was not conforming to the belief that determined a faithful life, how could I truly be a Christian? If I did not accept eternal damnation for all those outside the church, how could I be part of the faith? If I could not proclaim the verity of the church's version of Christ and the way to salvation, how could I be a follower of Jesus and the institution that represents the fulfillment of His Way?

Circling Back, with Revelations

I left my “native” faith, but I did not leave the search. I kept looking for new findings and new places—in materialism, atheism, and literature—and eventually returned to religion. Eastern faith traditions, particularly Vedanta, helped me regain and rename my faith. I learned about the cultivation of faith through daily spiritual practices. I learned about the difference between faith defined by institutions and that based upon experience. I came back to God, and I came back to Jesus as both the man and the Christ. And then I came back to the church with Vedanta a part of me. At St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Palo Alto, California, I found a place to be.

In a sense, I have made a circle. But my hope is that my circle imitates a well-written story, that my circling is not only back to the same place but to the same place with revelations. Perhaps perpetual searches are spirals, circling around and up to places of new understandings. I think it is so. I changed and the church changed. The recognition of religious plurality has finally been acknowledged, and, at the least, Christian churches are grappling with

acceptance and practice of this principle. Our own diocese and Bishop Swing have led these efforts through the United Religions initiative.

Nowadays, I'm happy to say that I am accepting ambiguity and reveling in the Mysteries. I can have faith in Christ whether I say Jesus rose in body or in spirit, or whether or not God is reduced to a bundle of firing neurons. I can worship in an institution that imperfectly manifests God's grace in our life.

What is the nature of my faith now? It's the sense of standing on firm ground even when I read words that shake me with new findings. It is the sense of fullness when I hear the poetry of the Bible and the words of justice and compassion that Jesus lived. It is that moment during my meditation when I touch a point deep inside and feel complete.

Sri Ramakrishna said, "The breeze of God's grace is always blowing; set your sails to catch this breeze." I have faith in these words. My search will continue, but unlike the archaeologist, I have faith that there is a final place of arrival for me, an ultimate finding. That is what Jesus taught us, "for behold, the kingdom of God is within you." (Luke 17:21) □

CD Review

Conversations of Sri Ramakrishna

A Complete Translation of *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita*

Sachindra Kumar Majumdar

SRV Retreat Center/Interfaith Peace Temple, Greenville, New York

CD Rom \$25.00 2001

Swami Nikhilananda's translation of *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita* as *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, published in 1942, has served generations of devotees and scholars. Its elegant English style, nearly complete text arranged in convenient chronological order, lengthy biographical introduction and several convenient indices have made it one of the most important works of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda literature in the English language. It may be asked, what is the need for another English translation?

Two principal complaints against the Nikhilananda translation have to do with its over-refined English style and its occasional omissions. Ramakrishna is said to have spoken in an earthy, village patois. Some of this has been glossed over or refined out of the Nikhilananda version, no doubt to avoid offending Western, and perhaps educated, non-Bengali Indian, sensibilities as of 1942. Sensibilities have changed since then; unvarnished accuracy is now preferred. The omissions in the Nikhilananda text have aroused considerable

curiosity in recent years, with at least one scholar suspecting a deliberate “cover-up.” In fact, the omissions are of M.’s personal musings, some of them of a theological nature. Swami Nikhilananda may have thought these would offend the sensibilities of modern skeptics.

SRV Retreat Center/Interfaith Peace Temple now offers an alternative: *Conversations with Sri Ramakrishna: A Complete Translation of Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita* by the late Sachindra Kumar Majumdar, a yoga teacher, scholar and former monk of the Ramakrishna Order. Majumdar completed the translation in 1995, but was unable to find a publisher. Before his death in 1999, he gave publication rights to the Sarada-Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Retreat Center in Greenville, New York. The Center negotiated for several years with a California publisher; when the publisher proved unable to undertake the work, the Center decided to release the book on CD Rom. The CD works on both PC and Macintosh, in Acrobat Reader files that can be printed out.

Majumdar says in his introduction, “The reason for undertaking the present translation is to provide an exact and complete rendering of the original script, omitting nothing, adding nothing. . . Sri Ramakrishna was anxious that his words—which often contained delicate spiritual instructions—were reported exactly with every nuance. . . There are also other reasons. All the devotees and admirers of Ramakrishna would like to have everything available that he said in the way he said it. Besides, they would certainly be interested in M.’s musings and ruminations over what he had heard but which are not available in extant translations, though they form part of the original volumes.”

One change the publisher has made to Majumdar’s translation is with relation to the phrase “kamini-kanchana.” In a special introductory note, the publisher says: “The most accurate, root based definition is the controversial and infamous ‘woman and gold’. . . Mr. Majumdar searched high and low for a workable, more politically correct substitute. He found none. . . Rather than resort to the compromise of a popular phrase that defies exact translation, the Trustees of Mr. Majumdar’s manuscript believe the best solution is to let [the phrase] speak for itself. . . Thus we have reinstated ‘kamini-kanchana’ in the text wherever it originally appeared.”

It is good that we now have a complete and more literal alternative to Nikhilananda (and to other, partial, earlier translations). Whether devotees and admirers of Ramakrishna will find the Majumdar translation more to their liking remains to be seen. We find the chronological order of Nikhilananda’s version both convenient and aesthetically satisfying as one moves through the last four and a half years of Ramakrishna’s life. Majumdar’s style is less elegant, more Indian and more sentimental than Nikhilananda’s. On the other

hand, accuracy and completeness are also important. In Ramakrishna's wide domain there is ample room for different translations, and the fruit of Majumdar's many years of effort is to be treasured.

The CD Rom is available from Vedanta Press in Hollywood and also from the publisher's website: www.universaltemple.org.

—AV Staff

Report

VAR Goes to Russia with the Gita

Vedantic Arts Recordings' composer / producer John Schlenck and conductor Timothy Mount made a second trip to Moscow earlier this spring to record two of Schlenck's cantatas with chorus, orchestra and baritone soloist. Both works have texts from the Bhagavad Gita. The longer of the two works, *Raise the Self by the Self*, uses the Gita's own dialogue form, with a baritone soloist singing the words of Arjuna and the chorus singing the words of Krishna. The text, adapted mainly from the first six chapters by William A. Conrad, Erik Johns and John Schlenck, begins with the dramatic setting on the battlefield (both internal and external), and proceeds through Arjuna's anguished refusal to fight, Krishna's profound response and exhortation, with teachings of jnana yoga, karma yoga and raja yoga interspersed with Arjuna's questions. The second work, *Life of All Lives*, is based on selected verses from chapters seven and nine on the themes of bhakti yoga and God's all-pervading presence. The recording, still to be edited, is to be released later this year or during 2002. Last year's recording, of the cantata *The Bard and the Prophet*, with text from Walt Whitman and Swami Vivekananda, will be released this summer by the Contemporary Record Society.

While in Moscow, John was very happy to meet Swami Jyotirupananda and Russian Vedanta devotees at the swami's apartment. The swami is doing well and now has permanent resident status in Russia, renewable annually. John was given a copy of the Gita in Russian translation, bound and printed by one of the local devotees in the form of a diary, with two verses, in Sanskrit and Russian, for each day of the year. He recalled an incident which had occurred on the completion of last year's recording. The first hornist called out, as John and Tim were leaving the studio, "Bhagavad Gita."

Contributors

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SHELLEY M. BROWN, a writer and retired physician, came to Vedanta in 1953 when, as a teenager, she met Swami Nikhilananda and became affiliated with the Ramakrishna Vivekananda Center in New York.

ANN KENNY, a reading specialist, was closely associated with the Vedanta Society of Sacramento for many years. She is now affiliated with St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Palo Alto.

ELVA NELSON, associated with the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society of Massachusetts since 1949, is author of *Vivekananda and His Swamis* (1992).

JOHN SCARBOROUGH, a retired software-testing engineer, has been associated with the Vedanta Society of Western Washington since 1967. He was a member of the Ramakrishna Order for several years.

JOHN SCHLENCK, resident member and Secretary of the Vedanta Society of New York, is a composer of music. He is also Secretary-Treasurer of Vedanta West Communications.