

Editorial

Celebrating Vedantic Teachers

Swami Vivekananda said that in the vast majority of cases a spiritual teacher is needed to quicken the spiritual growth of the aspirant. Books alone are inadequate. Religion becomes living when a sincere student meets a qualified teacher. This issue of *American Vedantist* celebrates some recent outstanding teachers of Vedanta.

Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi is not so often characterized as a great Vedantic teacher as are Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. She taught more by example than by precept, and even her precepts were given informally, as the need arose, in real life situations. But the highest Vedantic realization was the background of her life and teaching. John Schlenck examines the far-reaching implications of Holy Mother's last message. Babaji Bob Kindler's compilation of her teachings in poetic form, *Sri Sarada Vijnanagita*, is reviewed by William Page.

Swami Ashokananda, Swami Pavitrananda and Swami Shantaswarupananda were among the great Vedantic exponents in mid-twentieth century America. Their important duties no doubt included platform lecturing and running Vedanta Societies, but it was the molding of students' lives that they saw as most central to their work. This is highlighted in Theodore Chenoweth's "Reminiscences of Swami Shantaswarupananda" and in Sister Gargi's *In the Company of Swami Ashokananda: A Disciple's Journal*, reviewed here by Marjorie Kewley. Sister Gayatriprana's "Swami Pavitrananda: Head and Heart Combined in One Person" is a study of an extraordinary teacher in the making.

Two more recent exceptional teachers are Swami Pramathananda, first head of the Vedanta Society of Toronto, and Pravrajika Vivekaprana of the Sri Sarada Math. Swami Pramathananda, who passed away in August, impressed many lives by his steady wisdom and simple, loving concern. Pravrajika Vivekaprana, an eloquent present-day exponent of Vedanta, inspires many by her strong, rational presentation and example. *American Vedantist* pays tribute to Swami Pramathananda in an obituary; Vivekaprana's recent book, *A Challenge for Modern Minds*, a compilation of lectures given during American lecture tours, is reviewed by Steven Walker.

American Vedantist salutes all these great teachers. According to Vedanta, spiritual truth has to be reformulated and redemonstrated in each age in order to reach and inspire people. Each of these teachers is a part of that ongoing reformulation for our own age.

—The Editors

Holy Mother's Last Message: A Universal Spirituality for Today

John Schlenck

As Sri Sarada Devi lay on her deathbed, a woman disciple who had known Sri Ramakrishna came to her, weeping, and lamented, "What will happen to us, Mother?" Holy Mother replied, "Why should you be afraid? You have seen the Master. What should frighten you?" Then she continued, very slowly, "Let me tell you one thing, my child. If you want peace, do not look into anybody's faults. Rather look into your own faults. Learn to make the world your own. No one is a stranger, my child; the whole world is your own."

The words are deceptively simple. But as we continue to contemplate their meaning, they seem more and more profound. One's whole spiritual life can be based on these words. Indeed, they express a universal spirituality for our time.

One thing we notice is that the words are totally practical. There is no theology here, not even a mention of God or soul. Anyone in any tradition can relate to them and benefit by them. They tell us what to do to gain peace of mind, peace that "passes understanding." Beyond this, they also show a way to achieve peace in the world, peace in society, human survival, even the health and survival of our planet.

Is this too much of a stretch? Let us see.

"Why should you be afraid?"

Holy Mother first assured the disciple that she had no cause for fear. This she told all her disciples. They had all come to her and been accepted by her and by Sri Ramakrishna. Therefore they had no cause for fear. She was always anxious to dispel any fear in her disciples' minds. Spiritual life was not to be based on, or obstructed by, fear.

"You have seen the Master."

God, Atman, Brahman, may be abstractions to us. But for those who saw Holy Mother, Sri Ramakrishna and his disciples, or Jesus, Buddha, Chaitanya and their disciples, religion was an experienced reality. Some of us have been blessed by meeting disciples of Holy Mother, Swami Brahmananda, Swami Shivananda, by seeing lives that were spiritually transformed. But even if we as individuals haven't met illumined souls, humanity as a whole can be said to have seen them. Admitting that much of what is written about them is pious

exaggeration, there is a spiritual kernel, a spiritual power, beauty and knowledge that can't easily be dismissed. It is historical fact that their lives had profound effects on innumerable human beings. Their teachings, if followed into practice, can transform our lives and our societies. Knowing this gives us faith in the human potential, in our own potential.

“If you want peace. . .”

Do we want peace? In some sense we all want peace. Constant fighting and friction are painful and wear us out. But much of the time we want other things—excitement, pleasure, power, wealth. And even when we want a break from those pursuits, we seek peace outside ourselves, by going to a different place, associating with different people. But do we want real, lasting peace, the peace that passes understanding, the “perfect peace” attainable by a “mind stayed on God”? Holy Mother tells us how to attain that peace:

“. . . do not look into anybody's faults.”

On first hearing, this sounds too simple. Supposing I don't find fault with my neighbor, aren't there many other things that can and do interfere with my peace of mind?

Let us examine more closely. What is required not to find fault with others? We have to put aside our own desires, prejudices and judgments and develop sympathy and understanding for the other. We have to try to see things from the standpoint of the other person, putting oneself “in the other person's shoes.” The other person is after all a fellow human being deserving the same respect and having the same intrinsic value as ourselves. Easy enough to say. But how to practice?

“Rather look into your own faults.”

To see the other person without anger, hatred or desire, we have to work on our own minds, to purify ourselves. Well and good, we may reply. We are already doing spiritual practice, trying to develop love for God. And still we get irritated and find fault with others.

The question is, do we really want to overcome our own shortcomings? Are we really dissatisfied with our own untransformed character, do we dislike feeling angry, being prejudiced and unsympathetic? Or are we addicted to getting angry, being mean and irritable, justifying our own behavior, blaming others for our misfortune? If so, what is the way out?

“Learn to make the world your own.”

Holy Mother did this to the fullest degree. She once said, “Beings all over the universe are my children.” Another time she said, “I do not know

anyone, even an ant, for whom I do not feel compassion.” She cautioned patriotic disciples yearning for Indian independence not to hate the British people, saying, “They, too, are my children.”

How can we learn to feel that all people are our brothers and sisters? News media every day bring us images of people in different parts of the world experiencing joy, sorrow, pleasure, pain. Is it so difficult to feel that they are human beings like ourselves, with the same feelings, the same hopes and fears? Grief at the loss of a loved one is the same all over the world. When we see images of grieving people, rather than thinking of them as members of some group which we may like or dislike, we can try to see them as individual people like ourselves, born into a complex and difficult world, buffeted and shaped by circumstances beyond their control.

But what about the people we interact with on a daily basis? As the saying goes, “Charity begins at home.” How can we overcome disliking certain persons, seeing them as potential or actual enemies?

This requires seeing ourselves and others in a different light. The goal is to “see all beings in the Self and the Self in all beings.” (Gita, VI.29) But for most of us, this scriptural formula, however beautiful, is an abstraction, even a pious cliché. How do we get from here to there?

Humility and Service

Holy Mother’s life is full of helpful suggestions. Two things that stand out are humility and an attitude of service. Whoever came to her she wanted to serve. She once said to a disciple, “Please bless me that I may continue to serve others as long as I live.” Can we imagine the degree of humility behind these words? She is asking her own disciple to bless her! And, having reached the highest spiritual realization herself, with no reason to go on working, she nevertheless wants to continue to serve others as long as she lives. But rather than remaining transfixed in wonder, let us see what we can learn for our own lives.

How can an attitude of mutual suspicion and dislike between oneself and another person be changed? Often these attitudes are built up over a period of time, during which resentment and a feeling of being wronged go on increasing. Even an attempt to be friendly and understanding to someone with whom we have a negative relationship can seem forced and be met with suspicion. Rather than trying to work things out through words, when our motives are suspect, we can try to find an area in which the other person has some need, and then render some service, and go on rendering that service out of concern for that person, without asking for any service in return. Instead of focusing on how we are treated by that person, how unlikable or disagreeable

that person is, our attention gradually shifts to concern for that person's happiness and what we can do to contribute toward it. In this way, dislike can gradually be replaced by concern. And with such concern on our part, there is a very good chance that the other person will become less hostile to us. But we must first *want* to overcome our suspicion, dislike and fault-finding.

Though it may be hard for us to imagine Holy Mother having to struggle with such feelings herself, it is a matter of record that she did pray to overcome the habit of fault-finding. If even she is not too great to utter such a prayer, can we afford to think ourselves beyond the need for it? When we are struggling with our weaknesses, prayer is not only helpful but necessary and often comes spontaneously.

“No one is a stranger, my child”

By developing concern for the other person, we gradually come to feel that that person is not a stranger, that he or she is “our own.” And by struggling to overcome our own feelings of dislike, anger, suspicion and prejudice, we become aware of just how difficult it can be to overcome such feelings. We become sympathetic to others who are suffering from the same handicaps. We find that we are all struggling with similar weaknesses, with similar ignorance of our real nature. Also, by engaging in the struggle and gaining a sense of camaraderie with others, of not being strangers, we can begin to get a handle on what real love and unselfishness mean, of feeling that all persons are our “own.” We attenuate the wall of selfishness that separates us from others and come closer to seeing the Self in all beings.

The Order of the Teaching

The order of the teachings in Mother's last message is significant. First, proceed in our spiritual lives without the paralysis of fear. Then learn not to see the faults of others. This will *necessitate* seeing and acknowledging our own faults and struggling to overcome them. The difficulty of doing this will make us more sympathetic to others; we realize that we are all in the same boat, each struggling with one's own mind. Then we can begin to feel that we are not strangers to any person, that all persons in the world are comrades in the same struggle with the same human weaknesses and foibles. But we also find that these weaknesses can gradually be overcome. The truths of spiritual life seem less abstract, and we are convinced that some day we may truly know that the whole world is our own. When we directly experience that no one is a stranger and that the whole world is our own, we will have reached the nondual truth.

This is on the individual level. But there are profound implications for the larger human society and the world as well.

“The whole world is your own.”

It is almost a cliché nowadays that as the world becomes more and more interconnected physically and economically, there must be a corresponding moral and spiritual interconnection. With modern technology, if we do not overcome greed, violence, hatred and unbridled passion we will destroy ourselves and all life on this uncommonly blessed planet.

How do we go about actually developing such a spiritual interconnection? By feeling and knowing that we are *not* strangers, that we share a common humanity—we all hope, we all suffer, we all struggle, we all experience joy and sorrow, and we are all heirs of great cultural and spiritual riches. But also by feeling and knowing that the world is *our own*, not something strange and alien to be conquered and exploited. We have a responsibility for this beautiful and fragile world we live in. We are one with it, it is one with us.

Even If We’re Not All Perfect. . .

All beautiful sentiments, one may object; but they remain a matter of faith and are not yet realized by us. If we have to wait until all persons have overcome their imperfections, it will be too late. The planet with all its life will be destroyed.

But history shows that great things can be achieved even without all persons being perfect, that, even without direct God-realization, faith (whether in ourselves or in God or both) can move mountainous obstacles. Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. had their foibles but nevertheless achieved moral breakthroughs in their time and place that continue to resonate today. If there are a sufficient number of people of courage and good will, much can be achieved.

Today there are many people of good will working toward an inclusive view of common humanity and for the protection of the planet. There are also many sources of spiritual inspiration for these people. We would like to see Holy Mother’s message and clear vision more widely known and practiced and the potential of its contribution more fully realized.

Even if we are not consciously striving to “see the Self in all beings and all beings in the Self,” Holy Mother’s teaching still holds true. If we only want peace in our household, with our family, friends and neighbors, seeing our own shortcomings instead of those of others is a valuable prescription. And to the extent that we can expand our family and friendship to embrace the earth and all humanity, our lives will be fulfilled, society will be enriched and the planet will be made safer. □

*Reminiscences of Swami Shantaswarupananda**

Theodore H. Chenoweth

[The Vedanta Society in San Francisco, founded by Swami Vivekananda in 1900 and originally named “The Vedanta Society of California,” was headed by Swami Ashokananda from 1931 to 1969. Under his dynamic leadership the Center, renamed the Vedanta Society of Northern California in 1932, expanded to include branch centers in Berkeley and Sacramento, a large retreat in Marin County, and a modern new temple in San Francisco. The monastery in the Old Temple was revived and a women’s convent was established.

[To help with the rapidly expanding work, Swami Ashokananda urgently requested Swami Shantaswarupananda, a younger contemporary and a friend since childhood, to come to America to assist him. Both swamis hailed from the same area of northeastern India and came early to the Ramakrishna Order. Shantaswarupananda knew Holy Mother intimately when he was still in his teens and later took initiation from Swami Shivananda. Shantaswarupananda, a scholar and retiring by nature, resisted the call for some time, then finally yielded, arriving in San Francisco in 1948. After living for a few years at the Olema retreat, he was appointed to manage the sub-center in Berkeley in 1953, where a temple had been constructed in 1939.

[Although Ashokananda, as head of the Society, was the only one who initiated disciples, he entrusted Shantaswarupananda with the day-to-day training of a number of his disciples who lived in the East Bay area.

[After Swami Ashokananda’s passing away in 1969, Swami Shantaswarupananda served as the Society’s leader. During his tenure, the Berkeley and Sacramento Centers were made independent Vedanta Societies. In 1971 the Swami retired to India, where he lived at the Ramakrishna Monastery associated with the Vivekananda Polyclinic in Lucknow until his death in 1996. The writer visited him there almost yearly.]

Those many years ago, from 1954 through 1969 at the Berkeley temple, Swami Shantaswarupananda was able to give several young Vedanta students, the writer among them, his personal attention. He showed us the principles of what he called, “living the spiritual life.”

Those who came to the Berkeley temple, students of Swami Ashokananda or others, benefitted by the presence of Swami Shantaswarupananda. In matters of daily spiritual practice, authentic insight, teachings from the

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scriptures and matters of ritual, the swami's advice was endorsed by Swami Ashokananda. Their statements were not divergent. . .

Swami Ashokananda encouraged the “oldtimers” and us, the newcomers, to support Swami Shantaswarupananda at Berkeley. Ashokananda said that the Swami was unique in his knowledge of Buddhism and Vedanta. He was a Sanskrit scholar and fluent in English (but not in public speaking). He was outwardly quiet (but intensely active), knowledgeable in ritual (but austere), and was adept in the schools of Yoga. In India he had edited *Prabuddha Bharata*, the Order’s premier English language journal, but he accepted Ashokananda’s invitation to work with Americans in supporting Swamiji's work in the West.

When we Vedanta students took up spiritual practice in those days, the Swami said we were “living the spiritual life.” He would express this simply as, “living *the life*.” He would ask, “You must live a life, why not live *The Life*?”

In the Swami’s view, until a person had decided that liberation would be the goal in life—or, what is the same thing, until one yearned to have the vision of one’s Chosen Ideal—one would be led by one’s ego down the “sweet path” instead of living the spiritual life under the higher self.

On the Lookout for a Rare Conjunction

Shankara says that the conjunction of a healthy human life, contact with a qualified teacher, and the desire for liberation occurs so seldom as to be the rarest human experience.

The Swami was always on the lookout for signs of this rare conjunction in every visitor to the Center. If he saw any glimmer of this favorable combination, he felt there was no time to lose. The decisions to accept a spiritual teacher and to live the life, in his view, were the highest priority in human affairs. The decisions were to be settled as soon as possible. To live the spiritual life, internally or externally, is the apex of human life. That is what human life is for. . .

“Living the life” was both cheerful and solemn. Sometimes the lumps would not smooth away and “living the life” became no bed of soft roses; but wasn’t the alternative rather gloomy for us if we could not see the humor and irony of our human predicament?

One time, the swami had prepared a potato and vegetable dish to suit his taste. He asked me to share the dish with him to have a taste of real Indian food. He warned me that the dish was “spicy.” Clara Martin, herself a good cook, joined us.

One tiny, thin, green chili appeared in the serving on my plate. Such a small thing! I brashly said, “Swami, how could this little green thing make all

this food hot?” Before the Swami could answer, I put the little green thing in my mouth and chewed it to bits. The experience became excruciating—at first bearing bravely, then drinking water (no help) and then shedding tears for the burning in the ears and finally drinking cold milk brought by the Swami, which gave some relief. After this minor uproar, the peaceful Swami leaned expectantly across the table toward me and asked, “Well, what is your report?”

Such is our condition, the Atman weeping while it eats chilies.

In one of the early years, some of us went shopping with him to assist him in buying Christmas presents. The store (I. Magnin, Oakland) was filled with beautiful gifts and well dressed people. We roamed the store with the Swami who wanted to see what gifts were available; but he gave no reaction and made no comment on a single thing, even when he made his purchases.

His reserve was not restraint or avoidance. His attitude seemed to be just quiet observation. Standing near the cashier stand and waiting to pay for the selections, the writer pointed around and boldly asked the Swami, “Do you feel that you want to have some of these attractive and beautiful things?”

His answer was an unequivocal, “No.”

“Not even sometimes?”

His answer, “You think swamis are made of stone, do you? Even so, not even sometimes.”

“How can it be, Swami? Doesn’t everyone have desire?”

An Earnest Vow Protects One

He said, “Desire may be there in our mind until the end, but you asked if I wanted these things. When we take a vow to live a spiritual life, the want for these things is robbed of its power.”

“I thought that certain desires never left us.”

“Desires there may be until the end! If our vow (our decision) to live a spiritual life is earnest, then quickly we learn that our vow will protect us, even from our desires and wants. A vow earnestly made will protect you. A vow has a power of its own. Such a vow will also generate the will-power one needs for spiritual life by giving the opportunity for the practice of will-power. Practice is the only way we acquire will-power.”

The writer pressed another question: “Isn’t it disturbing to a spiritual aspirant to come to a place like this, full of attractive things? Shouldn’t we avoid places like this?”

Again, his answer was prompt. “It may seem disturbing, but never have fear (to go anywhere). Just remember that our vow, truly taken, has the power to protect us. The vow replaces the attraction to the objects.

“So, desire may always be there in the mind until the end, who can say? But the attraction that exists in your mind will be replaced by your vow. Then, with your vow, you can go anywhere, if you must.”

A few days later, the writer repeated these words to Swami Ashokananda. He said, “The Swami has a great understanding of yoga. Always ask him to explain.”

Swami Shantaswarupananda said in explanation, “Be always watchful of the activity of your mind. Learn to observe it. Learn to understand it. Observe it closely. That is the way to understand the ego and to know ourselves as we function in this world.

“None of the things around you, that seem attractive to you, contains attraction. The attraction exists as *samskaras* (habits) in your mind. Attraction is not in the object. You may feel attracted to some objects but the attraction, the attachment, is in your mind.

What Is Needed Is Detachment

“Attraction and aversion are opposites and both are equal in difficulty for us to control and eliminate. What is needed is detachment. You may feel you want to enjoy these things again or you may feel aversion to enjoy them again—but either way avoid any physical expression. Detachment is needed, then no physical expression. (Later, even the mental expression of wanting or aversion can be avoided, but that requires diligent practice.) Detachment and the lack of physical expression quickly weaken *samskaras*. They are, after all, only a kind of habit, and if habits are not repeated they lose their power. We have raised up all our habits by repetition, and by detachment we can flatten them by not giving them any physical expression. That is the secret of how we can control and erase [even] the worst habit.”

These comments were checked with Swami Ashokananda who grinned widely and said, “Follow the Swami’s words, if you can.” Meaning: follow the instructions if you are able and comfortable. . .

Swami Shantaswarupananda gave his comments to inform and to strengthen. His words were meant to inspire us to live our lives; when we failed or became mistaken, there were no reproofs. He encouraged us to keep up our regular practices, never to give up. The result would come. He never showed hesitation or expressed doubt. Yet in everything he was gentle and tender to all.

In the writer's association with the Swami for over 14 years at Berkeley—daily for eight years and six years frequently—no preemptive command or harsh word was said to any in earshot. . .

He gave us the necessary stuff. It was we who were expected to shape our daily lives using these basic and essential materials for living a spiritual life.

We were exhorted to think and meditate and then act by applying these principles in our daily life. If we would only act, he said, then, in spite of mistakes, just as the principles were definite so the achievement would be definite.

He often said, “Living the spiritual life is the most scientific of all human sciences. The hypothesis is clearly stated with no mystery. The method of inquiry is clear and available to all. The predicted results are verifiable by any and all who will conduct the experiment. The results will verify the hypothesis and each result will lead, in another round of experiment, to greater and greater knowledge. All that is required is that earnest application be made of the principles involved in living a spiritual life. The results are predictable and verifiable. What more can be asked of a science?”

We were much younger then. Some of us, the writer especially, questioned the Swami for more explanations. The writer, who was entirely ignorant of ritual and who has always been inclined not to accept any fact or statement regardless of the source, repeatedly questioned the Swami's instructions, but his patience, usually, never failed.

I have always asked many questions. Actually, I am a pest, always asking questions. On most occasions I was given the freedom to ask frank questions of both my teachers, Swami Ashokananda who initiated me, and Swami Shantaswarupananda who spoke to me every day.

Poking the Honeycomb

Swami Shantaswarupananda told me of an oral tradition, an anecdote that has since become written, about Swami Brahmananda, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. Swami Brahmananda was so grave in visage that one young monk at the head monastery in Belur was too cowed and timid even to be in his presence. A senior monk, also a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, noticed this. He told the young monk, “You can never get honey from the honeycomb unless you poke it with a stick. Then the honey will flow.” The senior monk said that those who wanted honey from Swami Brahmananda must poke him.

The young monk was aghast and started to withdraw. The senior monk took him by the arm and pulled him into the room of the august Swami and said, “Maharaj! This boy is too frightened to talk to you! I told him he must poke the honeycomb to get honey, but your face is too grave! He wants to run away!”

The grave face widened into a great smile at the audacity and love of his brother monk. Then, he patted the mat beside him for the “boy” to sit. The fact was that, though Swami Brahmananda appeared to be as grave as his

visage, he embodied knowledge, personal concern, and love for all who came to him.

The Swami's point to me was that sometimes I would have to poke to get honey. Taking him at his word, I asked him repeatedly to give me a Sanskrit name as a spiritual aspirant. He disapproved. "The name your mother has given you is sufficient."

One day, in the kitchen of the Center, I importuned him to give me a spiritual name. He was standing at the sink. With feigned exasperation, he turned toward me and instantly replied, "Mho-sha! Mho-sha shall be your name!" He leaned toward me and said, emphatically, "Mho-sha!"

Of course I was pleased, but I asked, "Mho-sha. That's easy to say. What does it mean, Swami?"

He said, "Mho-sha is Bengali for mosquito!"

I was embarrassed.

The Swami had a subtle but deep sense of humor. He explained: "Do not be disappointed. Mho-sha is a good name for a spiritual aspirant! Swami Madhavananda (a highly respected disciple of Holy Mother who became President of the Ramakrishna Order) himself said that if we had one-tenth the determination to achieve liberation as the mosquito has to get through the netting to bite us, we would achieve illumination in a trice!" He was pleased, and with a smile repeated, "Mho-sha."

To have such men as teachers, as true older brothers and friends, is rare good fortune indeed. . .

The Power of Accommodation

The years have proven that the principles and facts given by the Swami are truly the stuff of living a spiritual life. These principles are more durable than the sun and its orbiting planets. The only need is for daily practice.

He said that practice would develop "the power of accommodation" in us. This practice would develop our trust and will power, and these would give us insight about our identity with the divine nature of all existence and preserve our evenness of mind in any situation. From this practice, we would "acquire devotion" that was unshakable.

The power of accommodation was the foundation of an active spiritual life. To practice and acquire this power of accommodation was said flatly by the Swami to be actually the only spiritual discipline necessary, if one could acquire it. Once acquired, realization could not be deferred by the worst karma.

An anecdote will illustrate this.

Sometime, in his travels in India, in a city, the Swami had seen a large drum-like, cylinder machine, called a mill, standing in an open lot. The work of the big mill was to make polished spheres of metal for use elsewhere. Rough shapes, some cube-like and some already part rounded, were loaded into the mill with harsh grit and sand. The machine was turned on and the mixture was tumbled inside the mill for several days and nights continuously.

The mill boomed and banged and its clashing noise could be heard at a distance throughout the neighborhood. When the clashing noise went away and the sound from the mill became a smooth, swishing sound, then only was the mill turned off. Most of the rough shapes that had been put in would be taken out as smooth, polished spheres. The harsh grit would be as soft as face powder. The pieces that were not yet spherical or were insufficiently polished, the operator put back into the mill with more grit and more rough pieces and the process started again.

The working of the mill was a stark analogy for the contact of personalities in our spiritual life. The rough shapes, if not put into the mill, would remain always rough but their destiny was to be polished. The rough shapes only escaped the tumbling when they became perfect polished spheres.

At the Berkeley Center, he said, a certain amount of unavoidable clashing and grinding and shaping and polishing would take place amongst the raw and rough students who were “living the spiritual life.” This shaping and polishing could only occur if we used our will-power to “live the life” and to submit our egos to the tumbling of “joint work.”

The power of accommodation thus acquired would give us dispassion and evenness of mind. With these qualities, no upset in our life could perturb our mind. We would also develop the ability to work effectively in any situation of life and, especially, to work with all who came to the Center.

Thus the work of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda would continue.

Who Will Polish Themselves?

Frankly, this analogy seemed to me to be a hard attitude about human life and an unattractive attitude toward work at the temple, and I said so to the Swami.

He rejoined by saying. “What would you have? The sweet life? It can be had for a time, no doubt, but what amount of progress can be made? Very little!

“Who will polish themselves if life is sweet? One can live in an earthly paradise and have no clashing, perhaps!—or in a cave and encounter no clashing. Can any progress be made in an earthly paradise or in a cave? Only

in the rarest cases. I tell you for certain, if a liar walks in (to the cave), a liar will walk out! This human life is meant to be lived amongst humans.

“None of us comes to this life perfect. Yet, is not each of us the Atman? Realization is the goal of human life, everything we do is to be measured by our effort to reach that goal. If there is clashing and grinding in the name of spiritual life, then? How much progress can be made by following the sweet path?”

His expostulations and questions really had no need of answers.

Swami Shantaswarupananda said that there were three principles which are the “ornaments” that will make every follower of Sri Ramakrishna known to others: (1) the harmony of all religions, (2) the unity of life with the Essence in all existence, and (3) selfless service to the poor and to all forms of life.

He called “the power of accommodation” a fourth ornament that would adorn the “workers” who were the karma-yogi helpers of Sri Ramakrishna. This ornament, he said, would be invisible but would illuminate all who do Ramakrishna’s work in this age. □

Sacrifice and Austerity

The monks discussed here were true pioneers of the work of the Ramakrishna Order in the West, and whatever can be preserved of their words and actions is of value. . .

Swami Vivekananda, his two tours of the West completed, ended his brief life leaving guidelines of sorts for workers in the West, but certainly not a handbook.

Agreeing from the start to make the sacrifice of working in the Occident, these men needed to establish new frameworks of monastic living. Readers will look in vain here for the orthodox *tapasya* of Indian monks: the austerity of fasts, vigils or protracted contemplation. Their austerity was of a different kind. . . their food became whatever was cooked for them; their sleep, a brief respite from community, doorbell and telephone; their *japa* and meditation superimposed over the public work itself. They alone could know the impact of *that* austerity.

—Swami Yogeshananda, *Six Lighted Windows*, 2nd ed., vii-viii.

Swami Pavitrananda: Head and Heart Combined in One Person

Sister Gayatriprana

Swami Pavitrananda was a man of intense inner feeling. As the young boy Bhupen Datta, he specially liked the prayer, “O Divine Mother, teach me how to pray to you, so that by one prayer I shall be saved from praying to you, life after life. Teach me how to pray once in the right way.” Along with this intense search for “That by knowing which all else is known” went an extremely rational, almost iconoclastic attitude. Toward the end of his life he remarked, “If I had to do my work in America over again, I would start a society for honest atheists”—a rather unexpected remark from a religious leader!

Bhupendra was born in a family of devout Vaishnavas in East Bengal in 1896. In his childhood, we find both his rational and devotional sides at play, often in a rather difficult game. He was impervious to the rituals that marked the passage of the day (“my only experience of ritual was removing the images from my sister’s altar while she was meditating!”); and kirtan, or devotional singing as he experienced it in his village, had no appeal whatsoever. He felt that the boisterous and effusive singing was not coming from any deep experience or conviction and was merely an uncouth display of undisciplined emotion (“rowdyism in the name of religion,” as his future mentor, Swami Madhavananda, would call it). The intellectual narrowness of his relatives and neighbors oppressed him and he tended to maintain a Zen-like silence, behind which was going on an intense inner struggle. Unknown to others, he would spend hours by himself in meditation, often in bed at night. His secret was discovered one day when a family servant, searching for a box of matches, found a rosary underneath Bhupen's pillow! This was no doubt a revelation to his family, to whom he must have seemed an enigma at best and at worst an irredeemable iconoclast.

Coming in Contact with Ramakrishna-Vivekananda

The young boy’s mind found solace in the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda literature given to him by an uncle, apparently a soul-mate. Later, while at college, he became close friends with Swami Arupananda, a disciple of Holy Mother, who introduced him to Mother herself and later to Swami Turiyananda. Bhupen’s meeting with Mother was, in a way, rather routine, as he did not speak with her and she remained completely veiled. Nevertheless, his deeply intuitive soul experienced the depth of her gentle, yet irresistibly transforming power.

When Bhupen met Swami Turiyananda, a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna noted for his orthodoxy, meditateness and inner poise, he was going through a great crisis between his inner idealism and the outer reality of college life—the license, mendacity and general laissez-faire that is so opposite to true spirituality. Was this what India had come to, with all of her tremendous spiritual ideals and history? Finding in Swami Turiyananda a receptive and kind soul, Bhupen began to vent his sense of crisis, first by berating the Ramakrishna Order for preaching impossibly high ideals, and then by refusing to visit Swami Brahmananda, or Maharaj, as suggested by the swami. Swami Turiyananda, detached, amused and at the same time deeply appreciative of the sincerity of Bhupen, calmly told him, “Go and see Maharaj. You will find that, with him, all this [arguing] won’t do.”

Bhupen had come to love Swami Turiyananda, perhaps the first person to whom he felt free to open his heart. He had begun to think of him as a guru and felt no inclination to “go from door to door,” as he expressed it. However, when he finally met Maharaj, whom Sri Ramakrishna regarded as his spiritual son, Bhupen at once understood that he was in the presence of a mighty spiritual being. Swami Brahmananda was indeed totally beyond all of Bhupen's conflicts and quickly resolved them in a very simple way. To Bhupen's emphatic denial that God could be believed in or loved, Maharaj simply said, “It is not really so much a matter of belief. It is a matter of following the appropriate methods and obtaining the result.” This highly rational and pragmatic approach spoke to Bhupen’s deeply entwined reason and emotion. At last he had found someone who could give him a “scientific” method to cope with his deeply devotional, and hitherto almost untamable soul.

Joining the Order

The next step was to obtain from Maharaj the method that would bring about the total transformation of Bhupen's spiritual life. This was achieved, after clearing several difficult hurdles, in his initiation and, later, in joining the Ramakrishna Order. After graduating with a Master’s degree in English literature from the University of Calcutta, Bhupen was forced to work for a year or so to pay off family debts, but at last he came to rest in the Order, now under the watchful and loving eye of Swami Shivananda, who had become the Head of the Order after Maharaj's passing in 1922. Swami Shivananda was, like Swami Brahmananda, a huge vessel of understanding and compassion; under his leadership there was space for unconventional personalities like Bhupen. On days of special worship at Belur, for example, Bhupen would be seen to disappear as soon as the preparations for the ritual and food were over. Having conscientiously and devotedly completed his work, he sought the silence of the second floor of Maharaj’s newly built temple, where he

would meditate, facing the Ganges. He could hear the “merry making” of the celebration, but chose to be in

The night, in silence, under many a star,
The river shore, and the husky, whispering waves, whose voice I know,
And the soul turning to Thee, O vast and well-veiled Truth,
And the body gratefully nestling close to Thee.*

After only a year or so as a *brahmachari* (novice) at Belur, Bhupen was dispatched to southern India to work as an assistant to Swami Akhilananda, who had been one of his closest friends in college. Swami Akhilananda was an enterprising type of person, very loving and much loved, who had become involved in a highly experimental project with a new, indigenous university being started in Annamalai, near Chennai. Bhupen had several misgivings about the project, and was also mightily put out when Swami Shivananda cheerily announced to him that, in order to make him more effective in the very conservative South, he was to be given *sannyas* (final monastic vows) forthwith. This premature promotion—only one year after receiving the *brahmacharya* vows—caused considerable raising of eyebrows among the more conventional, but Swami Shivananda's vision prevailed and Bhupen was sent off to Chennai, an intense, thin young swami, rather nervously draped in ochre robes, and answering to the name of Swami Pavitrananda, he whose bliss is in purification. Although the Annamalai project was not a success, Swami Pavitrananda's two years in Chennai were important in that he developed a close relationship with Swami Vishuddhananda, a disciple of Holy Mother who became one of his spiritual mentors, and began lifelong friendships with Swamis Prabhavananda, Ashokananda, and Siddheshwarananda, also stationed in Chennai and destined, like Swami Pavitrananda himself, to serve in the West.

In His Element at Mayavati

Swami Pavitrananda was then sent to Mayavati, the Himalayan headquarters of Advaita Ashrama, the publishing center founded in 1900 by Swami Vivekananda to practice and preach pure, nondual Vedanta, “entirely free from the settings of dualistic weakness.” There was no ritual, including pictures, incense or group devotional singing. For many of the swamis, coming from devotional Hindu backgrounds, adjustment to this life-style was very difficult, and later a rule was made that a stint at Mayavati could not exceed ten years. Swami Pavitrananda, however, was in his element, and remained based at Mayavati for twenty-four years. From a near-death experience he had had in Dhaka shortly before going to Mayavati, we may get a clue as to why he could be so self-sufficient spiritually in the austere milieu of Mayavati. Deathly sick with paratyphoid, his life despaired of, he had a vision of the entire universe. He felt an intense love for the earth and

* Walt Whitman, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed.”

deep regret at having to leave it—the earth, the sky, the clouds, the trees, plants, animals and humans, especially his dear friends. Perhaps on account of his deeply rational streak, he also wondered at the fact that, at this moment of parting, there was no sign whatsoever of Sri Ramakrishna, Maharaj, Swami Turiyananda or any other “holy” icon. It seems that Swami Pavitrananda was able to see in “ordinary” or “secular” things the same divinity as he had seen in the towering spiritual personalities he had been blessed to meet.

At Mayavati he found that merely contemplating the grandeur and beauty of the Himalayan landscape would evoke in him a deeply spiritual mood. He felt no need of formal worship because he saw everywhere a great cosmic worship going on, at Durga Puja Mother herself being worshiped by the profusion of flowers moving joyfully in the breeze. With his deep love and knowledge of English poetry, he recalled the “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey” by William Wordsworth, describing

. . . that serene and blessed mood,
In which the affections gently lead us on,—
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
While with the eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.

From this he understood how sensitive Britons approached the life of the spirit in unadorned nature, without temples or ritual. This was, perhaps, rather foreign to the Indian mind—but Swami Pavitrananda, alone in the Himalayan forests, communed in silence with the inner Self as had Wordsworth and the long lineage of nature mystics going back into Celtic times.

In the Company of Other Outstanding Monks

At Mayavati Swami Pavitrananda became close to Swami Madhavananda, the President of Advaita Ashrama and later President of the Ramakrishna Order. Swami Madhavananda was a formidable man, with a penetrating intellect, tremendous efficiency as a worker and a stickler for protocol. During his tenure at Advaita Ashrama he had streamlined and modernized the work considerably and ruled the ashrama with an iron hand. Despite his forbidding exterior, he was a great lover of truth, and Swami Pavitrananda found his way into his heart by his own unswerving honesty and rational approach to life. Swami Pavitrananda also became close to Swami Abhayananda, the redoubtable and much-loved Bharat Maharaj who later presided over Belur Math for much of his long life, and to Swami Nityaswarupananda, a visionary like himself. As Swami Ashokananda had been relocated from Chennai to Mayavati shortly after Swami Pavitrananda,

the two swamis renewed their friendship. Finally, Swami Nikhilananda was also at Mayavati, another literary prodigy and future “city-mate” of Swami Pavitrnananda, in the second Vedanta center in New York.

Going to Mayavati was for Swami Pavitrnananda like a fish being released from the tiny bowl of religious conformity into the ocean. In addition to the expansiveness of nature, the company of his brilliant brother-monks and the near-total freedom of expression suited him perfectly. A hearty and fun-saturated relationship existed between the brothers, who vied with one another to find ways to tease and amuse each other. Their regular debates, in addition to more traditional religious themes, would thrash out issues such as how India would get its independence from the imperial British and whether they agreed on the methods then being used by Mahatma Gandhi to accomplish that goal. These ideas would spill over into the fiery editorials of Swami Ashokananda in *Prabuddha Bharata* (the English-language monthly magazine published by the Ashrama). His radical objections to what he saw as Mahatma Gandhi’s attempts to turn back the social clock in India instead of moving into the modern world with Swami Vivekananda caused quite a stir in India, where the Mahatma was considered to be practically a god. Swami Pavitrnananda shared many of Swami Ashokananda’s convictions, but was of a quieter temperament than his fiery brother. Therefore, on occasions when Swami Ashokananda was not available to write his editorials, Swami Vireswarananda, then President of Advaita Ashrama, would request Swami Pavitrnananda to ghost-write something that held the line of thought without stirring up so much reaction!

From 1927 to 1930 Swami Pavitrnananda was the manager at the branch center of Advaita Ashrama founded in Calcutta in 1920 by Swami Madhavananda. There he was engaged in the arduous work of dealing with paper merchants, printers, binders, of meeting publication deadlines for *Prabuddha Bharata*, of maintaining quality control over the publications of Advaita Ashrama generally and of maintaining the Ashrama and entertaining guests from all over. Although quiet and meditative, he discharged his duties with great efficiency and precision and acquired a reputation as a reliable and responsible worker.

Discovering India’s Spiritual Culture

In both the Calcutta work and his arduous journeys to and from Mayavati, on trains, pony and by foot, he was exposed to a wide range of people and cultures. At one extreme, in Calcutta he inevitably came into direct contact with Westerners and their rapid, super-efficient way of doing things. At the other extreme, in traveling in the Himalayas he came face to face with the undying spiritual culture of India, which he found in the worship of the unsophisticated hill people, even in the depths of the rugged mountain terrain. Swami Pavitrnananda had a deep love for the peasants and working people,

identifying with their difficulties and rejoicing in their simple faith which, though unsophisticated to all appearances, was nevertheless based on the most ancient truths of Vedanta. He was amazed to find, in the depths of a huge Himalayan cave, a group of hill people chanting, with full understanding, the ancient hymn of the Goddess:

I pervade the whole universe, I am the sustainer of gods.
I am the strength behind the activities of all beings.

As Editor of *Prabuddha Bharata*

In 1931 Swami Pavitrananda became editor of *Prabuddha Bharata*, succeeding Swami Ashokananda who had been dispatched to lead the Vedanta Society of San Francisco. Although his style was more subdued than his predecessor's, Swami Pavitrananda continued to pursue the themes launched by Swami Ashokananda. India's progress toward freedom and the desperate urgency of solving what he saw as the spiritual crisis of the West were the substrates of his lengthy, Socratic-like meditations. He had a penchant for working up the historical background and rational causes for whatever he discussed, thus giving his work a very modern flavor. This distinctive approach was combined with total immersion in the Upanishads which, as with Swami Vivekananda, formed the overarching frame of his references to India's religions and the West's spiritual dilemma.

There were two central points that he made again and again, one for India and the other for the West. India's direct problem was being dominated by a foreign power and thereby losing its own sense of identity. No matter how well-intentioned or even practically helpful the rulers of India might be, it was and always would be impossible for them to understand and empathize with the Indian mind and its aspirations. Indians must find their identity (which he located in a fresh interpretation of the Upanishads in the light of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Vedanta) if they were to attain to political independence and be capable of using it wisely. On the Western side, he saw, as had Swami Vivekananda, that the West's refusal to accept deeper or higher planes of consciousness as valid in human experience had locked it into a limited worldview. That narrow view was now working itself out in hideously destructive wars, made all the worse by the support of modern science which rigidly and aggressively adhered only to the material view of reality. Unless and until the West and the science that supported it could open up to the deeper levels of human consciousness, spirituality would be only in externals, not grounded in the depths of the whole of human possibility. In this connection, he was deeply interested in the work of Carl Jung, a trained scientist who nevertheless boldly explored and discussed the deeper layers of consciousness, thus setting on foot the scientific study of different levels of consciousness.

(to be continued)

In Memoriam

Swami Pramathananda

The Vedanta Society of Toronto lost its beloved leader, Swami Pramathananda, on August 12, 2003. The Swami had headed the Center since its formal affiliation with the Ramakrishna Order in 1989. Before that he had assisted Swami Shraddhananda at the Vedanta Society of Sacramento, beginning in 1982. In addition to ministering at his home center, Swami Pramathananda traveled and lectured widely in Canada and the United States. Beginning in 1992, the Swami served as Chaplain for Hinduism at the University of Toronto, where he gave monthly classes on the Upanishads.

Born Dhiren Sinha in 1920 in India, Swami Pramathananda joined the Order in 1950 and served in various capacities at a number of centers in India. He had a special interest in education and culture and was highly regarded for his work at several Ramakrishna Mission schools. This interest in inculcating moral and spiritual values in young people continued after his coming to the West. Shortly before his death a children's school was started at the Toronto Center. He also stressed the importance of strengthening the family unit.

The Toronto Vedanta Society grew rapidly during Swami Pramathananda's tenure, acquiring in 1995 a spacious new property with temple and living accommodations.

The Swami taught as much by example as by lecturing and counseling. His cheerfulness, warm smile and concern for the happiness of others impressed all who knew him. He taught that the purpose of life is to give joy to others, and he practiced this consistently. But it was during the eight months of his final illness that his character was most strikingly revealed. In spite of increasing pain and weakness, he remained calm, cheerful and concerned for the welfare of others. On the day he was informed of the diagnosis of pancreatic cancer he showed not the least sign of disturbance, but rather praised the doctors and the technology and wanted dinner to be served as usual, asking who made the nice *dal* and *sandesh*. He lost the capacity for speech and facial expression about three weeks before the end, but could still write. At the request of a disciple who asked, "What is going on in your heart now?" he wrote, "All my heart's desires are fulfilled! I am going to meet my beloved. Full of Joy! Blessings! No sorrow! Only blessings! Body is having pain, but I am happy."

Swami Pramathananda's last official duty was to welcome his recently arrived assistant, Swami Kripamayananda, at a reception two weeks before his death. His short but graceful welcoming address was read out to the congregation. □

Sharing Vedanta in Everyday Life

A note to our readers: Vedantists are sometimes asked by friends and co-workers about their value system and philosophy of life. How do we share our experiences and convictions in a way that does not proselytize yet makes available what we have gained from our study and practice? The author of the following essay shows a way of doing this in a business context. We hope other readers will send us their thoughts on the subject.

Managing Our Priorities

Karl R. Bareither

[Originally written as an epilogue to two books: Becoming a Wealth Transfer Specialist and Planning a Family and Business Legacy.]

Wealth comes in many forms and is not limited to greenbacks or the numbers in a bank account. Health is wealth. The love and support of friends and family is wealth. Knowledge is wealth. The service that others offer, the products we use—all are forms of wealth. Defining our wealth on the basis of bank account numbers alone creates an artificial experience of poverty. It is artificial because every day one lives and is supported by the universe. This is cause for thanksgiving.

— John G. Boldt

After much consideration, I have decided to share some thoughts about a personal philosophy that has been an important part of my life. I believe that the quality of my life has been enhanced over the years by what I have learned from so many of my teachers, clients, friends, competitors and associates. My hope is that sharing these insights will help you in your own personal search for inner peace. . .

The subject of this book is the transfer of wealth, but as described in the quote above, wealth can be many things other than money and possessions. We should be thankful for all the forms of wealth we have been blessed with, but frequently, it is only after we have lost something that we come to regret not having been thankful for it. Be thankful for each day you live and are supported by the universe.

The following thoughts are from lessons I've learned over the years that have enhanced the quality of my life. I would like to share some of the wealth from these experiences with you.

Who We Are

Are we human beings that happen to have a spirit or spiritual beings that happen to have a body? In order to have a sense of peace we need to know who we are. Over the years, I have invested much time and energy in keeping up my body, but as I grow older, I find myself more concerned about my spirit. Ask yourself, “Where am I investing my time and energy?” “Am I detaching myself from materialism in order to find more peace of mind or am I latching on to materialism in an effort to be more successful?” Real peace of mind comes from within—not through the accumulation of possessions.

Maintaining Balance in Our Lives

Most of us recognize the importance of maintaining balance in our lives. However, paying lip service to the concept is quite different from actually putting it into practice. We are all pulled in many directions at once by virtue of being a spouse, parent, community volunteer, employee, religious observer, etc.

Attempting to maintain balance can feel like trying to keep several basketballs bouncing at the same time. Each ball requires the same attention. If we concentrate on any one of them, the others begin to lose their energy. It is very difficult, but not impossible, to keep them all bouncing with the same intensity. Life isn't exactly like that, however. It's impossible to pay equal attention to every aspect of your life. Some parts of your life require more attention at times than others. Better to think of the various aspects of your life as parts of a single ball. Concentrate on living the one life you have to the fullest. Don't waste your life trying for perfection in every aspect of it. Bouncing one ball is much easier.

Process versus Results

In our culture, with its focus on results, it would appear that results are key and how they are achieved doesn't usually matter—“I don't care how you do it, just get it done!” Yet the satisfaction of achieving results is often short-lived because we are always immediately dashing off, pursuing our next goal.

Most of my early years were devoted to getting desired results. At times I even prayed that God would assist me in achieving my goals. Results meant everything to me. Then I met a man who I believed to be a great teacher. I told him of my interest in becoming his student. He asked me many questions, including what I expected to learn and how long I planned to be a student. To my great surprise he rejected me as a student. He explained that my expectations were unrealistic in view of my impatience. He suggested

another teacher who he believed could meet my needs within the short time period I had established.

In retrospect, I realized this man truly was a great teacher. He was more interested in helping me meet my expectations than he was in increasing the number of students. I decided this was the kind of person I wanted to become.

Over the years my need to focus on results has waned. Now my attention is more on the journey and less on the destination. This has allowed me to maximize my focus on the process and minimize my obsession with the outcome. The benefit is a greater sense of selfless service and less anxiety about getting selfish results.

Finding Peace of Mind

Much of my life has been devoted to keeping my mind busy. For a long time I had little or no time for reflection because my ego always seemed to have so much to contribute. It was a blessing for me to learn how to still my mind so I could focus on a higher sense of awareness. The key for me was to adopt a regimen of twice daily silent meditation. Previously, my mind could not be at peace because of the constant urge to always be more active rather than less. Now, with my mind at peace, my heart also seems to be more engaged. Stilling the mind and engaging the heart eliminates the need for constant judgment and encourages greater acceptance of oneself and others. As a result, my life is now focused on cooperation rather than competition.

Years ago, while in Portland visiting a teacher, I was eating breakfast and reading a book that he had written. He came into the room, took the book from me and threw it on the floor. As I picked up the book, I asked him why he had thrown it to the floor. He responded that it was always important to focus on one matter at a time. He believed reading while eating demonstrates lack of focus—the result being that neither is done well. Part of stilling the mind is developing the ability to focus with an open mind and heart.

I like the way the well-known Sanskrit chant addresses peace:

Lead us from the unreal to the real.
Lead us from darkness to light.
Lead us from death to immortal life.
Peace, peace, peace.

More versus Better

I was talking recently with a very successful retired executive who told me his work goal had been to become a regional marketing vice president for a large national financial service company. After 30 years he achieved his work goal only to find out that it was not what he really wanted after all. He had

paid a high price in terms of giving little or no attention to other aspects of his life. His experience taught me that you had better be sure of the price you and your family are willing to pay for material success because the benefit may not be worth the sacrifices.

Materialism more often complicates our life than simplifies it. For many years we owned a houseboat on Lake Powell that had been a source of much pleasure. However, as time went by, we found we were spending less and less time on the lake. One day, when I was examining our financial balance sheet, I noted the boat was listed as an asset. The truth of the matter was we were still paying for the upkeep of the boat and many other related expenses, but we were no longer using it. The houseboat was actually more a liability than an asset at that point. We finally decided to sell the boat.

Establishing greater simplicity in our lives is often overlooked in favor of obtaining more things. Accumulating assets usually results in additional complexity.

Many people live by the motto that more is better, but they frequently work harder to buy more things only to find out that they paid too high a price.

Tolerance for Other Beliefs

During a motorhome trip through an Indian reservation, my wife Lillian and I stopped along the road to attend a tent revival meeting. We were warmly greeted and were the only non-Native Americans attending. Shortly after being seated a grandmother came up to us and with a smile and without a word presented Lillian with an infant to hold. The baby lay contentedly in Lillian's arms through the entire service. Later, we asked others why this woman shared this infant with us and were told that this was her way of thanking us for attending. What a gift she gave us!

During the meeting the lay minister informed us that in his previous faith he was able to see God in the streams, trees, valleys, skies and mountains. He seemed somewhat saddened as he explained that now, with his new religion, he needed to wait until his death to see God. I wondered about the person who had convinced this Native American to replace his former belief with another. Why shouldn't he have been left to live with his original religion?

As a youngster growing up, I once asked a neighbor how it was possible that God would save only those who shared our particular beliefs, when the majority of the world's population believes differently. I don't recall his response but many years later the question was finally put to rest for me when I learned of a teaching that maintains all paths lead to God. What a relief it was to know that I did not have to attempt to save all those lost souls who believed differently.

Living in the Present

I recall that much of my life had been spent in regrets about the past or anxiety about the future. The ego seems to have a vested interest only in the past or future. Staying in the present moment is a luxury that many of us are unable to obtain. However, spending your time on guilt or regret about past failings is living in the past. Worry or anxiety is trying to live in the future. The past is gone. The future is promised to no one. Resolve to live in the present—it's all you really have. Life lived to the highest level of selflessness is the ideal.

Waiting for Our Reward

Some time ago, on a flight to Minneapolis, my seat partner asked me, "Are you saved?" I responded, "Saved from what?" The rest of the trip was spent listening to him talk about how wonderful heaven will be—but only for those who believed as he did. Upon arriving at our destination I asked him if heaven was as great as he described, why wasn't anyone really interested in going there—just yet? He responded that that was a great question and he would have to ask his religious teacher and get back to me. To date I have not heard from him.

Many people think that their reward for living a good life will be a kind of eternal Disneyland that they will gain admission to someday—assuming they are worthy. In the meantime they are condemned to mark their time in an unhappy, imperfect world. I believe that a life well lived is its own reward. Why postpone happiness when it is available to you here and now?

Good or Bad?

People tend to want to label experiences as good or bad. For many years I thought I knew the difference between good and bad and made judgments accordingly. However, sometimes I found that an experience I had labeled bad turned out to be good and vice-versa. The following personal story is an example of what I mean.

I used to conduct my business traveling in six western states. Most of my planning work was done in rural communities that were not served by public transportation. As a result, I frequently had to drive for long distances and, in some cases, even that was not a practical solution because of the distances involved. In an effort to cut down my travel time I bought an airplane and hired a pilot. This was good because it cut my travel time dramatically and increased my ability to serve more clients. However, it increased the cost of my travel, which was bad. Later in order to travel at night and during poor

weather conditions, I acquired a twin engine plane. That was good—except it required a substantial capital investment and dramatically increased operating costs, which was bad. After several years had gone by, I attempted to reduce my business operating costs by decreasing the amount of insurance I carried on the aircraft. That was good, but shortly thereafter, I had an aircraft accident and the insurance company paid less than the full cost of the damage—which was bad. The lesson I learned from this experience is that some things are not necessarily what they first appear to be. Is it possible that there is no such thing as good and bad – it just is?

The Butterfly

I'd like to leave you with this story. Think of it when you find life's experiences difficult to deal with.

A man found a cocoon for a butterfly. One day a small opening appeared, he sat and watched the butterfly for several hours as it struggled to force its body through the little hole. Then it seemed to stop making any progress. It appeared as if it had gotten as far as it could and could go no farther. Then the man decided to help the butterfly. He took a pair of scissors and snipped the remaining bit of the cocoon. The butterfly then emerged easily. Something was strange. The butterfly had a swollen body and shriveled wings. The man continued to watch the butterfly because he expected at any moment, the wings would enlarge and expand to be able to support the body, which would contract in time.

Neither happened. In fact, the butterfly spent the rest of its life crawling around with a swollen body and deformed wings. It was never able to fly.

What the man in his kindness and haste did not understand, was that the restricting cocoon and the struggle required for the butterfly to get through the small opening of the cocoon are God's way of forcing fluid from the body of the butterfly into its wings so that it would be ready for flight once it achieved its freedom from the cocoon.

Sometimes struggles are exactly what we need in our life.

If God allowed us to go through all our life without any obstacles, that would cripple us. We would not be as strong as what we could have been. Not only that, we could never fly.

—Origin Unknown

Book Reviews

A Disciple's Journal: In the Company of Swami Ashokananda

by Sister Gargi (Marie Louise Burke)

Kalpa Tree Press, New York, NY

320 pp. paperback \$14.95 2003

When she first came to the San Francisco Vedanta Society in late 1948, Marie Louise Burke met the teacher who would influence and transform every aspect of her life. The teacher was the brilliant Swami Ashokananda, the student a young married woman who experienced in this Swami a deep resonance to her heart's longing for a divine Presence she had sometimes felt as a child. However, when he asked her what she wanted, she replied, "I want to be a real person." So began the great spiritual adventure chronicled in *A Disciple's Journal*, newly published by Kalpa Tree Press.

Originally intended as a private place to set down the instructions of her guru and her own struggles to put them into practice, the journal also contains a treasure trove of inspired talks, intimate conversations, and lively vignettes derived from the interplay between Swami Ashokananda and the women students who gathered almost nightly to partake of his company. Spanning the twenty years of her close relationship with the Swami, this book affords a heretofore unprecedented personal glimpse into the day-to-day training, in example as much as in word, by an extraordinary spiritual teacher who selflessly poured his heart out in service to generations of spiritual seekers in the West.

Heroic Task

True to the spirit of his own guru, Swami Vivekananda, Swami Ashokananda took on the heroic task of building the character of his students, not only instructing them in meditation and other primary spiritual practices in accordance with his deep perception of their various temperaments, but also attending closely to the most subtle and seemingly ordinary aspects of their personal development: "how to think and act and be." *A Disciple's Journal* reveals the ways and means the author and her gurubhais were instructed, encouraged, and goaded to strive for the full realization of their "real person" potentialities.

Sister Gargi (as she later became known after taking first monastic vows from the Ramakrishna Order in India) was, if we are to believe her account, a monumental challenge for her guru. Under the persistent, if not always patient, tutelage of this famed, former editor of the Ramakrishna Order's prestigious magazine *Prabuddha Bharata*, she painstakingly—and at times,

painfully—sought to become a writer of works on Vedanta. Originally a poet and writer of short fiction, which flowed from a deep, intuitive stratum of consciousness, Sister Gargi chronicles the agonizing battles with inertia, woolly-mindedness and crippling self-criticism that plagued her early attempts to carry out writing assignments from her beloved guru. It comes as no surprise to the reader that she eventually developed the ability to write with clarity and fluency, as evidenced by the meticulously researched nonfiction that eventually was published as the award-winning six-volume classic *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries*, as well as other works, including the enchanting and comprehensive biography of *Swami Ashokananda, A Heart Poured Out* (published earlier this year by Kalpa Tree Press).

With her keen ear and memory for nuanced detail, Sister Gargi captures the livingness of the experience of being in the company of Swami Ashokananda as well as the immediacy and freshness of his teachings. His words—fiery, sweet, witty, always instructive to those who cared to listen and reflect—emanated from the depths of his direct, illumined perception of the highest truths of Vedanta, and ignited in his listeners the longing for realization of their own. Speaking of the art of spiritual life, the Swami said, “It is the great art. The whole world becomes joyous, filled with sweetness and festivity. Wherever one goes it is festive, dripping with honey. One sees everything that way—stars, sun, moon, a dung heap.”

Scoldings and Tenderness

The Swami's occasional fierce scoldings, always intentional and without anger, must be understood in the context of the overarching festivity of his presence, for without this continual influx of joy, the disciples would likely have been burned to ash instead of tempered, like fine steel, in the forge of the master blacksmith. Still, the Swami's tender, human heart is evident throughout; for example, in his worry and distress at perhaps having spoken too harshly to a student, or in the pain he felt when one of his spiritual children left the flock.

An entry from *A Disciple's Journal* dated November, 1953 captures the Swami's characteristic way of translating his own experience into words that encourage and inspire others:

Swami: Cheer up! Let the lion of Vedanta roar. Be happy. Make a hole in the world. This troublesome world is just a thin crust; poke a hole through it and the thick, sweet honey of Brahman will pour out.

Me: How can I make a hole?

Swami: Make your mind rest on Brahman. Dwell on Him. Know that in Him is all that the heart craves—all sweetness and love. All joy. Feel His presence. He is here.

The Swami's affection and reverence for his fellow monks is evident in the descriptions of their visits to San Francisco and to the retreat at Lake Tahoe, of which Sister Gargi recounts touching and humorous incidents (several at her own expense). The reader is also given a behind-the-scenes tour of the design and construction of the San Francisco Vedanta Society's new temple, each minute detail of which was overseen with exquisite care by the Swami. In this way too, he trained his disciples to concentrate their full attention on everything connected with divine worship, whether in a consecrated temple or in service to man-as-God.

A Disciple's Journal, along with its companion volume *A Heart Poured Out*, have been fifty-five years in the making. Swami Ashokananda gave Sister Gargi his permission to write about him—indeed, expressly asked her to do so—but only after her other work was finished. Now at the age of ninety-one, Sister Gargi has accomplished one of her finest works as a writer by so generously and vividly welcoming her readers into the magical, transformative company of Swami Ashokananda.

—Marjorie Kewley

Sri Sarada Vijnanagita: Her Teachings

Selected and Arranged in Verse Form by Babaji Bob Kindler.

SRV Associations, Portland, Oregon

133 pages 36 photos paperback \$16.00 2000

One of the more remarkable developments in the Ramakrishna movement over the past 50 years or so has been the increasing importance of Sri Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother. When I first came to Vedanta back in the late 1950s, we heard very little about her. The emphasis was all on Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda.

Over the years her importance has become increasingly recognized. Many altars now display her photo alongside those of Thakur and Swamiji, and sometimes all three photos are the same size. Together they have come to form a new Holy Trinity. There are organizations which focus on her so much that sometimes she seems to overshadow Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. The organization that publishes the book under review, the Sarada-Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Associations, is a case in point: notice the sequence of names.

At one time this trend made me uneasy. I thought the focus of the Ramakrishna movement ought to be primarily on Sri Ramakrishna. But it

doesn't take much thought to realize that this is just another form of exclusivism—and we all know what Sri Ramakrishna had to say about that. Both he and his disciples recognized Holy Mother as an embodiment of divinity. Swami Vivekananda held her in such awe that he sometimes became visibly nervous when approaching her. Holy Mother herself said that Thakur had told her he would live on in her in subtle form. Swami Premananda once remarked, "These fellows who look upon Thakur and Mother as separate will not get anything."

My mistake was that I was one of "these fellows" who regarded Thakur and Mother as separate. The Ramakrishna Order has consistently taken the position that she and Sri Ramakrishna are one, and that he continued his work through her.

There is an impressive body of literature about her, and the English canon continues to grow as more texts are translated from Bengali. Now Babaji Bob Kindler has performed a great service for devotees by rendering many of her teachings into poetic form. He has arranged them by topic into 22 chapters and turned them into free verse. The result is a cornucopia of distilled wisdom that sings. Devotees will feel uplifted when reading it.

The language is simple and informal; readers are made to feel that they are actually approaching the Mother at her house in Jayrambati. The first chapter begins:

My child, you have arrived!
Come! I am overjoyed to see you.

There is a pillow there, bring it and lie down near me.

There are some nice transitions. One chapter ends like this:

May all be blessed in this world and the next.
And always remember that you have a Mother.
Now come, my dear, and I will give you initiation.

This is immediately followed by a chapter on initiation.

Holy Mother's teachings often have a simplicity and a terseness reminiscent of sutras or mahavakyas. Sometimes a single saying summarizes the whole of spiritual life:

Do your duty and keep the mind on God.

Sometimes they reveal a metaphysical truth:

The body is one thing and the soul is another.
The soul pervades the whole body.

Sometimes they reassure us when we encounter obstacles:

Most obstacles to worship are not external; they are internal.
They will gradually fall off one after another,

by taking the Master's name and by meditation.

Sometimes they mention her own role:

Let all be happy, and I shall suffer for them.

Often they have a disarming practicality:

If you keep count while you do japa,
your mind will be drawn to the counting.

So do japa without counting. . . .

Don't let your mind be disturbed over trifles.

It will make you forget the Lord. . . .

It is not wise that a guru and his disciple live together,
for then a disciple observes the...activities of his guru
and very often takes [him] to be a mere human being. . . .

It would be good if the disciple could live
in a place close to the guru's residence
and spend some time daily in visiting [him],
enjoying his company and receiving his instructions.

In brief, this is a useful and inspiring compendium of the Mother's teachings, and a welcome addition to the growing body of literature about her.

—William Page

A Challenge for Modern Minds

by Pravrajika Vivekaprana

Llumina Press, P.O. Box 12203, Coral Springs, FL

for the Sri Sarada Society (<http://www.srisarada.org>)

105 pp. paperback \$10.95 2002

Some readers of this journal have already appreciated Pravrajika Vivekaprana's profoundly practical philosophical temperament thanks to her visits to the United States in the past several years. Now a series of talks given by this senior nun from Sarada Math has just been edited by Edith Tipple, with an introduction by Pamela Hoye—and what a treat it is! Every teacher has a particular approach to spiritual matters, and Tipple rightly calls Vivekaprana's a "no-nonsense" approach. In her talks Vivekaprana demonstrates with great clarity how Vedanta can be a matter of immediate and daily concern for anyone who, feeling lost in the whirl of modern life and its ever-increasing stress and pressures, is ready and willing to think and reflect deeply, and also to put up with difficulty and discomfort. "If I want to climb

Mt. Everest,” she writes, “I must leave behind the idea of physical comfort.” (75) Worse—the resistance to change comes from the mind itself: “No human mind wants to be educated. The whole system resists.” (64) This is because “we are habituated to a system of rewards and punishments that has become so deeply ingrained that we do not understand that the basic purpose of all learning is to evolve.” (64) Therefore “we must come to the point of dissociating activity from enjoyment” (70) and stop the mind from automatically seeking reward and avoiding punishment.

Vivekaprana’s original presentation of Advaita philosophy in ordinary language should make her book unusually valuable for Vedantists in the West. The practical advice is well integrated with her presentation of Vedantic non-dualist philosophy, as she calls upon her readers to realize that they must take charge of their lives and make systematic efforts to change erroneous perceptions and to challenge apparently self-evident truths such as “I have a body” or “happiness comes from the world outside.” The strength for such a seemingly impossible reorientation of the mind comes, she says, from the force of applying awareness in a concentrated fashion. If we think the task to be really impossible, it is only because we have forgotten how fundamentally important awareness is in our experience of what we call “the world”:

If we begin wearing glasses every day, the first day we are aware of them, the second day we start forgetting them, and by the fourth day we do not even realize that we are wearing glasses. We take it for granted that the world we are looking at is coming to us directly, not realizing that we have only to take the glasses off for it to change in that very second. . . . Just so, all experience, whether of ourselves in depth, or of the world around, never comes directly. (49)

Becoming Internalized

Since all experience comes from our inner awareness, we need to be “internalized,” and to do that we must start the process of “turning attention inward”—the title of one of the key essays in the collection.

The basic view of the Vedanta philosophy is that we actually have a simple problem, that of believing that we have become externalized. With a little experiment, with a little analysis, every human being can realize that it is not possible to become externalized. There is no such thing as externalization of attention. It is the other way around. Something seems to come from outside. We take it in, we look at it within ourselves, within awareness, and our awareness gives us the experience. (30)

This “looking within,” writes Vivekaprana, is actually a return to a true perception of our real state, which has never been anything other than

internalized awareness. Her conclusion is that “the problem is not one of going within. The problem is one of realizing that you never went outside.” (31) Such profound Advaita philosophy so simply put! There are many wonderful moments like this in *A Challenge for Modern Minds*.

Friendly Criticism

However, a book review should not avoid friendly criticism, and so one caveat is necessary, in my opinion. (To be fair, I must add that it would apply, not just to this book, but to many discussions of Vedanta the reader is likely to come across.) The reader needs to take with a grain of salt the idea that it was the East that explored the inner world while the West explored the outer world; that throughout history the East has been devoted to Spirit and the West to Matter; that “the West has primarily researched the external [and] the visible” (2) while the East was exploring “the inner dimension.” Even if one leaves aside the long list of the East’s scientific and technological achievements over the centuries, one still needs to question the proposition that, “when Aristotle determined to understand the world we live in, the search for enlightenment [“by Socrates and other philosophers around the time of the Buddha”] shifted to a search of the physical world.” (21)

No doubt, Vivekaprana nuances her portrait of a historically materialistic West by praising the way in which modern Western science is now allegedly discovering Spirit inherent in Matter itself. (Personally, I have never found the idea of what we might call “nuclear mysticism” very convincing.) But what Vivekaprana has left out of the picture completely is the history of the West’s own spiritual culture, which hardly ended with the advent of Aristotle. One need only bring to mind the rich contemplative and mystical history of Christianity, Judaism, and Neoplatonism in order to correct the image of a materialistic West as the historic antithesis of a spiritual East. As an antidote to this excessively polarized vision, I like to remember how Swami Vivekananda wandered throughout India after the death of Ramakrishna with only two books in his possession: the Bhagavad Gita and *The Imitation of Christ*, the one an epitome of traditional Eastern spiritual culture and the other an epitome of traditional Western spiritual culture. With that in mind, one can appreciate how the Vedantic teachings of Vivekananda, whose thoroughly modern intellectual framework is itself the remarkable product of a marriage of East and West, have revived Eastern and Western spiritual traditions alike.

—Steven F. Walker

Report

Conference: “Impact of Swami Vivekananda’s Visit to the West”

The Department of Indic Studies at the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth, sponsored a conference, June 28-29, 2003, which studied the impact of Swami Vivekananda’s visit to the West, both on the West and on India. The conference brought together a diverse and articulate group, including men and women monastics of the Ramakrishna Order (significantly, mostly American), Indian and Western professors, scientists, historians, devotees, and activists trying to promote education and social change.

After welcoming remarks by the host, Prof. Bal Ram Singh, and an opening address by Swami Tyagananda, minister of the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society in Boston, the first part of the conference discussed Eastern influences on the West, including the “New Age” movement, changes in Christianity and interreligious dialog, and was opened by Professor Carl Jackson, historian of the Vedanta movement in America.

The second session, opened by Swami Atmarupananda of the Ridgely Retreat, discussed the applicability of Swami Vivekananda’s message to the modern world. Speakers included Hal French, historian of the Ramakrishna movement, and Jay Lakhani of the Vivekananda Centre, London, a physicist by training.

The third session, opened by Swami Yogeshananda of the Vedanta Center of Atlanta, centered on Indian themes, particularly how Hinduism is defined today. *Hindutva*, exclusivist and nationalistic, was contrasted with Vivekananda’s Vedanta, inclusive and global, stimulating heated debate.

The conference concluded with wide-ranging panel discussion, with key themes the coming together of East and West through the development of a language and format of communication.

—AV Staff

Letters

Long-Term Care Needed

It is encouraging to read that the Vedanta Center of Greater Washington has been considering a retirement community. What a boon to retirees to be adjacent to the Center itself! I am afraid, however, that such an apartment complex for seniors, with no further care available for age-related frailty, will limit it to a

community strictly for Washingtonians. Attracting Vedantists from other parts of the country to leave their homes, family and friends would undoubtedly require the promise of long-term care.

There are four such long-term facilities in Santa Barbara, each including apartments for healthy and active retirees, a Personal Care Unit where minimal help is given, and a Skilled Nursing Unit. They

provide a dining hall, recreation facilities and van service for those who do not drive. Each requires a non-refundable entrance fee in addition to monthly rental fees; nevertheless, waiting lists are from 2 to 6 years. Such communities are clearly the wave of the future when we look at the ageing of our population, and they are growing across the country.

The facilities in Santa Barbara are run by retirement corporations. One is Baptist, but there is no stipulation that one need be a Baptist to live there. A religious organization should be able to set up a retirement facility under a charitable trust, with all such benefits and consequent lowering of cost.

Again, I ask a question of readers far and wide: is there anyone with the

expertise and interest to investigate starting a Vedanta Retirement Community like the ones mentioned above? Since the development next to the Washington Center has not yet begun, or even been approved, might there not be the faintest possibility the developer would build according to our specifications?

Can we Vedantists dare to dream of establishing a carefree and spiritually sympathetic environment for our seniors in their last years of effort? Such a service opportunity is worthy of every consideration. Let us not forget that tomorrow it could be important to us personally as well.

Edith Tipple
Santa Barbara