

Sri Sarada Society Notes

Dedicated to Holy Mother

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HOLY MOTHER: PURITY INCARNATE

Adapted from an article submitted by M. Lakshmi Kumari, President of Vivekananda Vedic Vision Foundation, India.

Like the proverbial ray of the full moon which, reaching inside the shell of an oyster in the depths of the blue sea, is said to condense into an exquisite priceless pearl, so did divine grace descend into the noble Mukherjee family at Jayrambati near Calcutta and condense into the immaculate gem "Sarada." This young girl was to bless the world later as the divine consort of Sri Ramakrishna. Blessed indeed became millions who called her Mother and entered through her into the inner sanctum of the Divine Mother.

Sri Ramakrishna found in her the personification of Prakriti and Shakti and, bestowing upon her Divine Motherhood, he created for generations of suffering humanity a haven of peace and solace, an oasis in the arid desert of worldly life. Sri Ramakrishna considered her an incarnation of Saraswati, born to bestow knowledge on others. Swami Vivekananda saw in her the nucleus of *shakti*, out of whose blessing would once again grow Gargis and Maitreyis.

To Sister Nivedita, she was Sri Ramakrishna's final word on the ideal of Indian womanhood, his own chalice of his love for the world, a token left with his children. In Mother's own words: "I am the mother of the virtuous; I am the mother of the wicked; when you are in distress, say to yourself, 'I have a mother!'" To a world crying for love and understanding, here is a message most simple yet most sublime.

Brought up in rural surroundings, young Sarada was quite free of any artificiality. To this simple upbringing was added her early intimate association with Sri Ramakrishna, from whom she imbibed the rarest of spiritual qualities and also lessons in worldly wisdom. Throughout her life she remained immaculately pure, an open window to divinity. She was a model wife, mother, friend, philosopher, and guide in one. Compassion, tolerance, and acceptance of one and all arising out of infinite love and mercy were the hallmarks of her life. Despite her own orthodox upbringing, despite being surrounded by orthodox elderly lady disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, she never hesitated to accept the foreign disciples of Swami Vivekananda into her home. Even criminals found a place in her heart.

The polluting influences of baser human emotions, such as lust, anger, hatred, etc., could never gain entry into her heart. From childhood, it was her constant prayer that she should remain unsullied by evil thoughts. How practically successful she had been is borne out by the spontaneous adoration of Swami Abhedananda.

*Pavitram caritam yasyah, pavitram jivanam tatha
Pavitrata swarupinyai, tasyai Devyai namo namah*

Whose character is immaculate,
Whose life is pure,
Who is the personification of purity,
To that Devi my prostration.

Little wonder then that she became the chosen bride of Sri Ramakrishna and received from him in abundance the training, discipline, and self-knowledge that were not only meant to raise herself to the ultimate in self-realization, but also to impart knowledge and guide hundreds to the same goal. That years after her passing away, her name and her simple life and teachings continue to inspire and guide many, in ever-increasing intensity, bears testimony to the truth and purity that she personified and which she emanated from within. That from the so-called mundane activities of cooking and other household duties, including dedicated service to her husband, mother-in-law, and family members, as well as to a steady stream of devotees and guests, she could crystallize a divine personality, inspiring, supremely lovable—this is greatness. That she made her own life a model of simplicity, renunciation, and service—in this, her greatest message, we witness the glory of a life attuned to the Supreme.

Happy Birthday, Mother!

Join devotees from Europe, Asia, North and South America, and elsewhere who have offered virtual flowers in a salute to Holy Mother as part of a worldwide 150th birthday observance. Our interactive birthday map of the world will remain active through Mother's coming birthday. Visit <http://srisarada.org/birthday.html>.

IN MOTHER'S WORDS: "Suppose one of my children has smeared himself with dirt. It is I, and no one else, who shall have to wash him clean and take him in my arms."

PASSING ON THE LIGHT

Pravrajika Akhandaprana, from the Vedanta Society of Southern California, continues her discussion of how Vedantic ideas may be shared with Western children, thus building a spiritual future.

Both parents and children can share in an exploration of special topics which are of interest to those familiar with Western Abrahamic traditions. For example, Abraham is the common biblical ancestor—great-great...great-grandfather—to the Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike.

There is great need for the West to understand its own divine name—“God”—more clearly and to see the beautiful unity and diversity in that name. All children, no matter what their origins, will have to come to terms with the word “God” in Western education, so learning its real meanings can be of value.

The English word “God” originated from the ancient German *guth*, which meant “divine will, divinity, something sacred, auspicious, good, good earth, farm complex.” God could actually be explained as Ground Of Our Dwelling (physical, mental, and spiritual ground in one), as revered Swami Sarvagatananda of Boston is fond of saying. *Guth* was originally a word like “deity” or “divinity,” which could be used for a male, female, or nonhuman god. Ancient people often had the sense of the whole of existence pulsating with divinity, order, energy, spirit, intelligence, invisible “magic”—the unknown factor. Somehow, in the West especially, we have lost this broad outlook on “God” and we have reduced “God” to a male creator in the sky, with a white beard and an only “son,” who created his beloved human Adam, made a woman from Adam’s rib, and made all creation for their use.

Interestingly, the original most frequently used names of God in the Abrahamic traditions are:

Elohim (Hebrew)

Jewish; plural of *El*, meaning “The Sacred.”

Alaha (Aramaic)

Christian; often explained as “The Unity, The One.”
(*El* and *Al* are interchangeable in Middle Eastern languages.)

Allah (Arabic)

Muslim; “The All.”

(Probably the English word “all” is a cognate.)

Most people are not aware that the word which Jesus actually used for “God” was *Alaha*. In Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the various names for “God” all actually refer to one and the same “God.” When Christianity conquered Northern Europe, various forms of the word *guth* were adopted by the people in those lands to indicate *Alaha*, since they preferred to use their own language. The ancient Germanic language later evolved into English, which was then transported to America.

Most people are also not aware that before *Elohim*, *Alaha*, and *Allah* in the Middle East, there was a Great Goddess *Allat* or *Elat*. While the goddess aspect was suppressed during the historical and cultural shift to male supremacy, it is only fair to remember that our modern word “God” actually refers to the One Mother–Father of us all. No separate words like “goddess” or “god” are even needed! Plus, of course, God is also more than the body and mind and any idea of gender. Our highest concept of God really is the invisible, indescribable ground of Existence, or Ground Of Our Dwelling. But Vedanta says that worshipping some form of God can also be helpful to people who yearn for something more tangible and yearn to remember God and see God in everyday life. Eventually, such religious practices can lead one to the highest Truth.

There are some very interesting ways to introduce these ideas to children and adults alike. At the Vedanta Society in Hollywood, we have been experimenting with seasonal children’s celebrations, which help to give various insights into the nature of God. For each celebration, a special shrine is set up appropriate to the seasonal theme and a simple sort of “participatory puja” is done. Formal rules are kept to a minimum. Muhammad once said that children are ever pure and may wear their sandals into the mosque! The children’s pujas can also be performed before the adults. As Sri Ramakrishna once said, “God is directly present in the person who has the pure heart of a child and who laughs and cries and dances and sings in divine ecstasy.”

EDITOR’S NOTE: Pravrajika Akhandaprana is happy to share information about seasonal celebrations for children and will soon have a CD of children’s songs available. Inquiries can be emailed directly to her at akhandaprana@vedanta.org.

A Challenge for Modern Minds

German Version Published

We are pleased to announce that *A Challenge for Modern Minds*, a series of lectures given by Pravrajika Vivekaprana of Sri Sarada Math in India, has been translated and republished in Germany. The German edition was made possible through the dedicated efforts of the translator, Dietlind Kloppmann, who also published the translation in June 2004. It was printed by the Vedanta-Zentrum Wiesbaden e.V. Individual copies cost 7€. Orders may be sent to Marianne Eckert, Rheinstr. 27, D-55276 Dienheim, Germany.

Available as An E-book

The original English version is available in E-book format for \$4.95. To purchase and download, visit the Llumina Press web site at <http://www.llumina.com/store/achallenge1.htm>.



WHO WE ARE: Sri Sarada Society is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the furtherance of Holy Mother’s inspiration in the West, particularly as it manifests through women.

THE EARLY YEARS

This is the first of four installments on the life of Laura Glenn, Sister Devamata, first disciple and chief assistant of Swami Paramananda. The author, Joan Shack, is grateful for the support and information provided by Mother Sudha of the Cobasset Vedanta Center.

Laura Franklin Glenn first met Swami Vivekananda in New York City, at the age of 29. The date was March 14, 1895. Her reminiscences provide us with her first impression of him. And through them, we experience in small measure what it must have been like.

A sudden hush, a quiet step on the stairs and Swami Vivekananda passed in stately erectness up the aisle to the platform. He began to speak; and memory, time, place, people, all melted away. Nothing was left but a voice ringing through the void. It was as if a gate had swung open and I had passed out on a road leading to limitless attainment. The end of it was not visible; but the promise of what it would be shone through the thought and flashed through the personality of the one who gave it. He stood there—prophet of infinitude.

Their second meeting occurred in December of that year. Swamiji was living and holding classes at 228 West 39th Street. The lodging houses of New York City in the latter half of the nineteenth century had a community kitchen and bathroom. Swamiji rented two parlor rooms on the first floor of the building. Through her later writings Laura, then Sister Devamata, takes us back to that glorious time.

It was a heterogeneous gathering at the classes in those shabby lodgings—old and young, rich and poor, wise and foolish.... We all met day after day and become friends without words or association.... If he suggested tentatively omitting a class because of a holiday or for some other reason, there was a loud protest always.

Throughout 1895, the interest of Laura and her friends was scattered among numerous speakers and various topics: philosophy, metaphysics, and astrology. By the winter of 1895–1896, their interest became focused solely on the message and work of Swamiji. It became for them “the foundation of our daily living, the stimulus that urged us onward.” From December 9 to February 25, Swamiji held, by conservative estimates, 70 classes and delivered 10 public lectures. During the period when she was attending all his classes, Laura experienced a shyness, a reticence, preventing her from coming in personal touch with him for a considerable time. There are many written testimonials that the force of his presence created reactions ranging from shyness to exhaustion. One evening at the close of a lecture, Swamiji stopped her and said, “You come so faithfully, yet you never speak a word.”

During his closing lecture of the season, entitled “My Master, His Life and Teachings,” which he delivered in the

Madison Square Concert Hall on February 23, 1896, Sister Devamata describes Swamiji as being “swept [away] by his subject.” She continues, “The force of it drove him from one end of the platform to the other. It overflowed in a swift running stream of eloquence and feeling. The large audience listened in awed stillness and at the close many left the hall without speaking. As for myself, I was transfixed....”

Sarah Ellen Waldo, an indefatigable worker in the early days of the movement, corrected and edited many of Swamiji’s lectures for publication. In 1901, this literary work was transferred to Laura. The first task she undertook was the editing and publication of Swami’s two volumes on jnana yoga. In 1902, she was put in charge of the Publication Department of the New York Vedanta Society. She worked with Swami Abhedananda, minister-in-charge, in the publication of numerous books. Under his guidance, she underwent intensive spiritual training. She writes that this regimen entailed

...great regularity, careful diet, above all, firm resolution. I charted my day as a sea captain might chart his voyage. I rose early, ate lightly, had fixed hours for spiritual practices and stated hours for publication work...the training included the practice of posture, breathing exercises, an exercise in concentration and a subject of meditation.

During this period, she describes an evening in her private chapel in her apartment, near the Society’s house. “I was just beginning my meditation when Sri Ramakrishna stood before me—a colossal figure made of pure light, with glistening garments. Overawed, I fell on my face before it, crept slowly nearer and laid my forehead on the feet. I knew no more. When I returned to normal consciousness, I found I had been lying in front of the altar for more than an hour.”

The following evening and the following, he appeared again to her at the same time. “I learned that whether clothed in an earthly body or manifest in super-earthly glory, Sri Ramakrishna was a living Presence, moving among men and women, to aid and to bless, to guide and to shield, in the fullness of his love.”

While spending the summer of 1907 in the Catskills of New York State, she re-edited the notes Miss Waldo had taken of Swamiji’s teachings in the summer of 1895 at Thousand Island Park. Swamiji delivered 43 talks there in seven weeks; these talks are considered to be the core of his teachings in the West. Holding out her book of notes to Sister Devamata, Miss Waldo said, “If you are willing to take them and work on them and bring them out, I am glad to pass them over to you. If I tried to do anything with them, I should be thinking all the time how lacking they were.” Eventually they were published as *Inspired Talks*.

Next installment: Days in India

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Book Review

WISDOM FROM THE EAST

JOURNEY OF THE UPANISHADS TO THE WEST by Swami Tathagatananda, Minister-in Charge of the Vedanta Society of New York, 2003. Reviewed by Pat Gibbons.

The Upanishads, a source of the great spiritual teachings known as Vedanta, are thought to be dated anywhere between 4500 and 1200 BC, depending on the particular scholar who makes the calculation. The Rishis, both men and women, to whom this knowledge was revealed in their meditations, were without written language. They passed these revelations on orally, in the form of carefully memorized chants. Down the centuries this wisdom spread over all of India and then through much of the ancient world, along with the early beginnings of science and mathematics, which also had their sources in India.

In this remarkable narrative, Swami Tathagatananda gives a detailed account of how this sharing of wisdom came about. Traders from the ancient world discovered India's material wealth long before Alexander the Great arrived in 327 BC. Along with her goods they brought India's wisdom; thus Hindu philosophy became known throughout the civilized world of that time. In Rome, Greece, and Egypt, as well as other parts of the Near East, traces have been found of both Indian artifacts and, on another level, Vedantic teachings.

In France, the discovery of Sanskrit and the Vedas had a profound effect upon scholars such as Romain Rolland and writers such as Balzac. Rolland became a devotee of Sri Ramakrishna and was the author of a well-known biography of the Master. Swami Tathagatananda notes that in France the influence of Vedanta was, to a great extent, romantic;

its discoverers were enthralled by the poetry of the great Sanskrit writings and even more, for those who were able to master it, by the Sanskrit language itself.

German writers and philosophers such as Kant, Hegel, Max Müller, and Paul Deussen, to name only a few, as Swami points out, are well known to have been profoundly affected by the teachings of India. This was also romantic in part, but it went much deeper and had a profound and permanent influence on their thinking.

Because of its presence in India, England was the first country to bring India's treasures to Europeans in the eighteenth century. Sir William Jones, the founder of the Asiatic Society, was the first great Indologist and several others followed. Romantic poets such as Sir Edwin Arnold, Blake, Wordsworth, and others came under the influence of Vedanta and were severely criticized because of it. This leads us to the American Transcendental Movement, which Swami Tathagatananda calls the Brahmanism of New England and describes in detail. Emerson, Thoreau, and Walt Whitman were among those powerfully influenced by Swami Vivekananda when he came to Boston. His influence would later spread to William James and others.

When I was in school I enjoyed reading poets such as Wordsworth, Blake, and Whitman and assumed that they simply thought high thoughts because of their genius alone. No one explained that the source of these thoughts was Vedanta. Teachers, I think, were often also ignorant of it or did not want to discuss such a "suspect" philosophy. I found Swami Tathagatananda's detailed account fascinating and enlightening. The Transcendentalists were true Vedantins.

It's impossible to cover everything contained in this book in a brief review. I feel I can safely say that Swami Tathagatananda covered every aspect of the movement of Vedanta through the world, showing us where it went, how it traveled, and the people who were responsible for its spread.

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