

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA AND HOLY MOTHER

By Jayanti Hoyer

Sri Ramakrishna passed the torch of his divine light and inspiration to Sri Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda in very certain ways. Numerous references point to the Master's expectations following his *mahasamadhi*. It may be interesting to explore how his two chief disciples regarded each other.

Swamiji was reluctant to take a step without Holy Mother's approval. He sought her blessing before traveling to America and her approval upon his return. Having set off as a humble monk in search of aid for his home country, he returned as a world figure. He had felt the divine power of Shakti guiding him, but still wanted Mother's assurance. "The Master is always with you. You have many more things to accomplish for the welfare of the world," she assured him. "The Master is not different from the one whom he called 'Mother.' It was the Master who accomplished all this work through you. You are his chosen child and disciple. How dearly he loved you! He foretold that you would teach men."

Like Sri Ramakrishna, he accepted her guidance without question when she saw fit to alter his intention. Thus, when his overflowing compassion prompted him to use money raised toward the establishment of Belur Math to help those suffering from famine, Mother was able to dissuade him with assurances that an organization that seeks to preserve and share Sri Ramakrishna's teachings would serve countless more in the future. When he had first envisioned the Math, Holy Mother had told him: "Do not worry. What you are doing now and what you will do in the future will be permanent. You are born just to accomplish this work. Thousands of people will hail you as a world teacher, a bestower of divine knowledge. I can assure you that the Master will fulfill your desire in no time. You will soon see that the work you want to undertake will be accomplished."

Each of Ramakrishna's disciples held the Holy Mother in awe. Yet Swamiji's understanding seems to have surpassed this. As he wrote to his monastic brothers:

"You have not yet understood the wonderful significance of Mother's life—none of you. But gradually you will know. Without Shakti (Power) there is no regeneration for the world. Mother was born to revive that wonderful Shakti in India and making her the nucleus, once more will Gargis and Maitreyis be born into the world."

To Swami Vivekananda, Holy Mother was none other than the Shakti power that he felt driving his actions—the Divine Mother herself. "Her grace upon me is one hundred thousand times greater than that of the Master."

Holy Mother, in turn, made frequent references to Swami Vivekananda's uniqueness. "He is in a class apart," she would observe, "...like an unsheathed sword." In recalling the following, she praises Swamiji's renunciation and devotion:

Naren brought his own mother to the Math at the time of the Durga Puja. She roamed from one garden to another and picked chilies, eggplants, etc. She felt a little proud, thinking that it was all due to her son, Naren. Naren came to her and said, "What are you doing there? Why do you not go and meet the Holy Mother? You are simply picking up these vegetables. Maybe you are thinking that your son has done all this work. No, mother. You are mistaken. It is He who has done all this. Naren is nothing." Naren meant that the Math was founded through the grace of Sri Ramakrishna. What great devotion!

When Swami Vivekananda sent word from America urging his monastic brothers to renounce everything in the service of God in man, it was Mother who quelled their doubts: "Naren is an instrument of the Master. It is the Master who writes through Naren about the future duties of his children and devotees for the good of the world. What he has written is all correct. You will see it bearing fruit in the course of time." Again, she observed of Swamiji: "Though fully imbued with the spirit of renunciation and an all-embracing love, and immersed in the eternal joy of communion with the Infinite, he has been suffering for the good of others. . . . He gave his life blood to the service of others. . . . He was specially brought by the Master. . . for preaching his lofty ideals, for the elevating of the masses and for the good of humanity."

Sri Ramakrishna said that Naren had accompanied him to earth as an incarnation of the sage Narada. Sri Sarada Devi, he said, "...is Sarada, Saraswati. She has come to impart knowledge. She has descended by covering up her beauty this time. . . . She is full of wisdom. Is she of the common run? She is my Shakti." As each grew in spiritual realization, Holy Mother and Swamiji mirrored Sri Ramakrishna's declarations with their own unequivocal awareness of the identity of the other.

IN MOTHER'S WORDS (In reference to Swami Vivekananda) "Naren is of divine origin and full of purity from his infancy, and about whom the Master mentioned that he was a rishi, a great sage."

REMEMBERING ELVA LINNEA NELSON

By Steven F. Walker

Elva Linnea Nelson died this year at the age of 91, after having been a beloved member of the Boston Vedanta Society for almost sixty-five years. She was a student of Swami Akhilananda, whose teacher was Swami Brahmananda. Her book *A MONK FOR ALL SEASONS: AKHILANANDA, HIS LIFE OF LOVE AND SERVICE* (2007) is a wonderful token of her devotion to her guru. Akhilananda was a brilliant participant in the intellectual life of Boston, that most intellectual of all American cities, and an effective advocate of interfaith understanding. Elva's painstaking use of archival materials resulted in a richness of detail that brings his career during the period of the Cold War and the Nuclear Age to life in fascinating detail. In her book she pointed out that:

Although it may seem that Swami was pessimistic in pointing out the inadequacies in our culture, his outlook was that this is a great time to be alive. No one came away from his lectures feeling discouraged. Or depressed. Rather encouraged and uplifted.

Elva herself was a quiet but friendly person, who always radiated love, serenity, and cheerfulness. She worked for many years as librarian at the Winchester Library, and she did good work organizing and caring for the Boston center's library. She was also a poet and found in poetry a rich medium for expressing her deeper feelings. Until later in life, when she had to curtail some of her activities, she was a welcome presence at the Boston center, where her sunny temperament inspired many people, including me. It was she who encouraged me to ask for initiation from Swami Sarvagatananda—something I would not have thought of by myself, since at that time I did not know what initiation was or what it entailed. Needless to say, I am eternally grateful to her!

After Swami Akhilananda died in 1962, the transition period was fraught with difficulties. When a misguided and obstreperously determined student of Akhilananda decided to make things as difficult as possible for the junior swami to assume his duties, it was Elva who, along with a small group of fellow devotees, helped to resolve this crisis. From then on she was a steadfast friend and supporter of Swami Sarvagatananda, and an iconic presence at the Boston center for all who came thereafter, as she stood at the front door greeting people and handing them the printed copy of the prayer used during the services. It was hard to think of the center without thinking of Elva!

Elva, like many of the devotees, had a great fondness for the center's Marshfield summer retreat, with its Green Road, forest paths, and rustic cabins in the forest. It is there that I like best to remember her, now that she has left us for the Ocean of Bliss: her serene and cheerful image framed by the green peacefulness of a wooded hilltop not far from the crashing waves of the Atlantic.

This Is How It Is

For us
to take a sip
of Vivekananda
he had to make
a thunderous splash
a tsunami
overwhelming,
a deluge
for us to awake
and even then
we can't understand
letting the water
roll off, we keep
playing in the sand.

Elva Linnea Nelson



We have included two of Elva's poems in this issue. Additionally, in her final published work, she applied her gifts as a poet with spiritual insight in rendering selected sayings of the Master into verse. REMEMBERING RAMAKRISHNA: HIS WORDS was released by Vedanta Press, Hollywood, in 2009.

That One, That Energy

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

Elva Linnea Nelson

WHO WE ARE Sri Sarada Society is a nonprofit association of spiritual aspirants interested in the application of the universal ideals of Vedanta with Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi, as our inspiration.

TIME IN INDIA: A MUTUAL EXCHANGE

This is the third installment in a series of articles on the life of Sister Christine by Joan Shack

The seed was sown that notable summer of 1895 at Thousand Island Park. Thinking aloud, as he was prone to do, Swami Vivekananda discussed with Christine his hopes, concerns, and ways to implement the women's work in India. Through education, with religion at its core, he believed the problems of women in India could be solved. Through education of this type, women imbued with higher aspirations, more cultured, and possessing a broader outlook on life would rise up. The uplifting of society rested with the women and they alone would solve their own problems: this was his firm belief.

With the passing of her mother, Christine's family responsibilities came to a close. She reached Calcutta early in 1902, only to face Vivekananda's passing a few months later. In March 1903, she joined Sister Nivedita in running the girls' school in Calcutta, thus beginning the work entrusted to her by Vivekananda. The school started by Sister Nivedita with Holy Mother Sarada Devi's blessing a few years earlier was operating intermittently, as Nivedita's attention became focused on writing and lecturing. Thus Christine's arrival brought the necessary stabilizing influence. Her background as a teacher in the Detroit public school system, combined with her self-sacrificing and resolute, but gentle nature, made her well suited to the task of giving expression to Swamiji's vision.

Christine inaugurated the women's education project under the guidance of Swami Saradananda when the need to serve young married women and widows was recognized. Her hope was to specialize "the women's work in the direction of industries for women." The first class was held in one room of the House of the Sisters (17 Bosepara Lane) in November 1903. Classes were held in the afternoon during the women's free time from household duties. Christine sought to translate into action the philosophy of education conceived by Vivekananda. To him, education in its truest sense is a manifestation of the perfection within, of one's divinity. In her reminiscences of him, Christine wrote: "The old methods of education in the West concern themselves only with the mind, its training, its discipline...Man is not mind only...Why not build up a new education based upon the true nature of man?" More specifically, she noted: "While all Western knowledge, including science, must be given a place, Indian ideals and Indian traditions must always be held sacred. Education will come by the assimilation of the greatest ideas of the East and the West."

Within the norms of the Hindu society at that time it was unthinkable for Hindu ladies to leave their homes or to study with foreigners. The efforts by Nivedita and Christine to assimilate into the cultural milieu, together with their sincere dedication to serve, made potential objections immaterial. Attendance at the women's school increased rapidly. The house next door at 16 Bosepara Lane was rented to accommodate the growing numbers.

Nivedita wrote: "The whole work for Indian women was taken up and organized by Sister Christine, and to her and her faithfulness and initiative alone it owes all its success." Christine was the steady, behind-the-scenes worker, silently serving. Her loving concern for others and ability to speak fluent Bengali endeared her to the students and other teachers. Over the years, more and more responsibility for the daily running of the school fell to Christine. Nivedita's numerous speaking engagements, writing projects, and involvement in the Indian Independence Movement consumed her time. When the latter returned to the West in 1907, Christine took complete charge of the education project, assisted by Sister Sudhira.

Christine's loyalty and devotion to her guru had led her to India to undertake the cause of women's education. Her total commitment to his vision enabled her to surmount all cultural and physical difficulties she encountered. Vivekananda had realized that Great Freedom beyond. "For us who witnessed his struggle, no words were necessary," she wrote of Vivekananda. "Without any teaching whatever, our eyes were opened... 'So that is what it means,' we thought, 'I am beyond the body with its disabilities, beyond the mind with its limitations.'" In an article published in the *VEDANTA KESARI* entitled "What India Has Meant to Me," she refers to India's external beauty, the romance of its ancient civilization, and notable sites of historic importance. Nothing could compare, however, to India's most precious treasure, which she considered "beyond price." Unequivocally, she stated:

...the teaching of the Atman, the revelation of the glory and divinity of man, the knowledge of his heritage through which he knows himself to be immortal, to be one whom death and sorrow cannot touch without beginning and without end, before whose magnitude the suns and moons and stars and all their systems appear like drops in the ocean, before whose glory universes crumble into nothingness and space and time vanish.



Sister Christine and Sister Nivedita in India

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SPIRITUAL PARALLELS: WHY WE ARE TO SERVE

By Jayanti Hoye

In establishing the Ramakrishna Order in the ideal of service, we know that “service” to Swami Vivekananda meant more than simply “doing good works” or “making good karma.” Coming from a Christian background, I am always inspired to find parallel teachings in the words of Jesus. Consider this example: “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me... Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.” From a Vedantic standpoint, such a statement indicates that Jesus is also advocating what Vivekananda termed “the service of God in man,” although I had never heard such an interpretation.

That Jesus also meant more than simply “doing good” perhaps needs more support. I find this support in paradox. Both emphasize serving the poor and needy. The references are many. Yet both also say that helping make the world better is not the goal. It is, in fact, an impossibility! Swamiji writes rather bluntly: “Never be deluded by the tall talk, of which you hear so much in America, about ‘human progress’ and such stuff. There is no progress without corresponding digression.”

Jesus mirrors Swamiji and points to a higher purpose in his defense of the woman who anoints him with an oil that might have been sold to raise money for the poor. “Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her?” he asks his disciples. “She has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you want, you can do good for them. But you will not always have me.” Repeatedly Jesus has emphasized helping the poor, but here he says there will always be poor people to help. His followers have missed the point. His teaching isn’t just about helping the poor. It is about service to the divine, made manifest in him. He tells them that this woman will be remembered for her devotion.

Another example is found in the story of his visit to the home of Martha and Mary, two sisters who are well known to the Master. Martha has appealed to Jesus, expecting him to reprimand Mary for shirking her household duties as hostess in order to sit at Jesus’ feet. One imagines Martha is taken aback when, instead, he tells her none of the things she has been taught to worry about are important. It is Mary who has taken up the one thing necessary. Our usual idea of duty Swamiji observes, “is the bane of human life. This duty, this idea of duty is the midday summer sun which scorches the innermost soul of mankind... The only true duty is to be unattached and to work as free beings, to give up all work unto God.”

Both Christianity and Vedanta speak of attaining something other than this life as we ordinarily experience it. Historically this has led some aspirants from each tradition to reject the world entirely. Vivekananda eliminated the seeming paradox by using service not as a worldly imperative, but as a genuine spiritual discipline. Again, Swamiji says: “We always forget that this world is a means to an end, and not an end itself.” In the *SERMON ON THE MOUNT*, Jesus explains that those who are not on a spiritual path will continue to toil after the rewards of the world. To those seeking spiritual realization he advises: “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.” Both are telling us that our purpose in serving others rests in purifying our intent by fixing our thought on the divine, for “Happy are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”

Sri Sarada Society Notes

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