

Sri Sarada Society Notes

Dedicated to Holy Mother

Spring 2004, Volume 10, Issue 1

MOTHER OF US ALL

The following incident from Holy Mother's life has been recorded in SRI SARADA DEVI AND SRI SARADA MATH, published by Sri Sarada Math in honor of Holy Mother's 150th Birth Anniversary. We have a limited number of copies of this 76-page booklet to give away. Send requests to Sri Sarada Society, P.O. Box 38116, Albany, New York 12203. Requests will be filled in the order received.

A woman who had taken a wrong path was rejected by her family. Holy Mother gave her refuge and, attracted by Mother's love and sympathy, the girl began to come to her often. However, women from respectable families did not look upon the girl with favor. Golap-Ma argued with Mother, "Mother, don't allow this girl to come here. You are not able to tell her; I will." Mother calmly said, "How can this be? She will come to me. She is my daughter."

A much respected woman devotee said, "If she comes, we will not come."

When Mother heard this from Golap-Ma, she said in a firm voice, "If she doesn't want to come, she won't come. If anyone doesn't want to come, let them not come. But she will come to me. Everyone has someone; she has no one but me. She will be with me. I will not prevent her from coming because someone will not come if she does."

Everyone was astonished to hear these words from Mother. Holy Mother is the Mother of everyone: the fallen, the tramped-upon, and the oppressed.

Happy Birthday Mother!

You are invited to join devotees around the world in a salute to Holy Mother for her 150th birthday. You may offer a virtual flower, showing your location on a map of the world, and leave a message. Visit <http://srisarada.org/> or <http://srisarada.org/birthday.html> to offer a flower to Mother.



"Today the world is in great need of Holy Mother's message of universal love and compassion irrespective of caste, creed, color or status."

Revered Pravrajika Shradddhapranaji
President, Sri Sarada Math
Dakshineswar, India
December 13, 2003



Holy Mother's shrine decorated for her 150th Birthday Celebration at Sri Sarada Math, Dakshineswar, India.

IN MOTHER'S WORDS: "I cannot contain myself when one draws near me and calls me Mother."

"Destiny dare not throw my children into hell."

LASTING GIFTS TO VEDANTA

Though the years we have included articles about women who have contributed to the expression of Vedanta in the West. The intent of these articles is never to raise the individual above others, but rather to celebrate the living spirit of Vedanta that they shared with others and to inspire in ourselves and our readers the awareness that we all contribute to the living spirit of Vedanta, each in our own way.

Among those who have inspired us is Sister Gargi, Marie Louise Burke, who passed away this past January at the age of 91. Sister Gargi touched many lives, not simply as a renowned writer, but because she was a dedicated follower of Vedantic principles.

Book Review

A DISCIPLE'S JOURNAL: IN THE COMPANY OF SWAMI ASHOKANANDA by Sister Gargi (Marie Louise Burke). New York: Kalpa Tree Press, 2003, 263 pages.

“What can I tell you? I only did what Swami Ashokananda asked me to do,” Sister Gargi once told me many years ago when I vainly sought to interview her for an article. To those who knew her, such humility was characteristic of this slightly built, intense woman who not only wrote a brilliant biography of her guru, *A HEART Poured OUT*, but over a span of several decades produced a meticulously researched published record of Swami Vivekananda's life in the West that stretched over six volumes.

Also, typically, she notes in her preface to *A DISCIPLE'S JOURNAL* that she never expected this record to be read by anyone other than “her doting older self.” Fortunately for us, it is now in published form. Through its intimate revelations, she tells us a great deal about what it is like to be a true disciple. Sister Gargi is painfully honest in revealing the weaknesses, fears, and doubts that assailed her during her years of association with Swami Ashokananda. He was a tough taskmaster— austere, often uncompromising, and occasionally hot-tempered. But Sister Gargi seemed to sense that with each jostling of her ego, she was growing inwardly. Her deep affection for and complete dedication to her teacher would never leave her. Apparently, the Swami earned this affection through his deep concern for her as well as for his other disciples. She notes: “Swami Ashokananda's concern for his disciples extended to every aspect of their lives, for there was nothing that did not bear upon their spiritual lives. He kept his finger on our every thought and deed....”

In spite of Sister Gargi's enormous literary output during her long life, her journal reveals a woman who often struggled with writer's block and frequent bouts of doubt and uncertainty. The Swami was usually there to both admonish and encourage her. When she jokingly said that she wished there was something one could rub on the brain to make it work, he replied that “If you have the desire to say something, the right words will clothe it. Create the desire within yourself.”

He encouraged her to take notes when she was impressed with an idea. It would seem she took this advice to heart, for we have this intimate journal to prove it.

We can be grateful for the outstanding editing and publishing effort of Dr. Shelley Brown. I am that certain if Swami Ashokananda were alive to read this remarkable book, he would applaud it. And, of course, Sister Gargi would no doubt respond, “Well, I only did what I thought you would ask me to do.” (Thank you, Swami Ashokananda!)

Cliff Johnson

A Vision Made Manifest

I met the then Marie Louise Burke in 1978 when I joined the San Francisco convent. Being an avid student of Swami Vivekananda and having devoured her book about his first visit to the West, I was naturally very eager to meet her. I did so, more or less by accident, when we ran into each other on the way down to the laundry area. Over the years she shared many original materials with me and read and critiqued many of my own manuscripts. In the late 1980s I did the illustrations for two of her books, unusual forays (for her) into short story writing. I got tremendous satisfaction from her joy at the way I had brought especially *HARI THE LION* to life. She was like a little girl, oohing and aahing over the paintings. Later, she adapted *HARI THE LION* as a hilarious play for our Sunday School children, and I had the additional joy of coaching the young actors into suitably “advaitic” lions with roars that at least did not make everyone giggle, and entertained Gargi, who had a wonderful sense of humor and fun, no end.

Gargi told me many things, but what made the biggest impression on my mind was her remark that her six volumes on Swami Vivekananda's visits to the West contained not one thought of her own. The series, she told me, was nothing but an embodiment of the vision of Swami Ashokananda, who had been convinced that Swami Vivekananda's teaching at the end of his life expressed almost qualitatively new insights into Vedanta for the modern world.

The key idea was “All this is verily Brahman,” actually a great saying from the *Chandogya Upanishad*, but brought to life by Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda in terms of the innate divinity of every single being, particularly human beings. Swami Ashokananda liked to emphasize that in Swami Vivekananda's thought not only is every form of God personalized, but also manifests the full and complete God. Swami Ashokananda felt that this new and uncompromising *Advaita* had not been sufficiently emphasized, and it was his dream that Gargi's books should set the stage and provide ironclad evidence for their development, as well as support for their ultimate acceptance globally.

Sister Gayatriprana

A STEADY SPIRIT

Irma Zillessen is remembered in our series on women who have helped in shaping Vedanta in America. It is auspicious to note that she passed away on December 22, 2003. This is the historical date of Holy Mother's birth 150 years ago.

Irma Zillessen died peacefully in her sleep, at 102 years and five months of age. Born in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, she eventually moved to New York. There she taught high school English and journalism at Long Beach High School in Long Beach, until her retirement in 1962.

Betty Robinson of Ocean Grove, New Jersey, remembers first seeing Irma at a Sunday service at the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center in New York City in the 1960s. For many years, Irma drove a group of devotees to Thousand Island Park in upstate New York for the summer seminars on the Upanishads conducted by Swami Nikhilanandaji.

In 1972, because of her husband's health, the couple moved to Sun City, Arizona. Her husband passed away in 1976. In Sun City, Irma continued her connection with Vedanta by offering organized readings and discussions in her home. She continued this service for 28 years. She was also a steady supporter of the Ridgely purchase effort un-

dertaken by the Sri Sarada Society in 1994.

A friend notes that she was a "great soul" who "touched all who knew her." Relatives remember her as "the true giver" in the family. Devotees remember her "balance, straightforwardness, and unwavering loyalty to the truths of Vedanta."

At age 95, in her own steady hand and with clear a mind, she wrote in a note to Betty Robinson dated April 29, 1996:

I go to California and Chicago ashram sometimes, also Seattle and Sacramento. I spent a week in Sacramento last August. Swami Swahanandaji of Los Angeles comes over here to Phoenix twice a year. But I do miss having a Center in my own back yard.

I'm 95 years young, live in my home alone and drive my own car. Mother has been good to me. Why, I don't know!

Hope you are in good health.

Love in Mother. Irma Zillessen

Irma's last two and a half years were spent in a full nursing care facility where she was loved by all who cared for her. She would correct their grammar and bring a smile to their faces. In whatever situation and wherever she found herself, Irma gave to those around her.

Joan Shack

PRAVRAJIKA SATCHITPRANA RETURNS THIS SUMMER

Devotees look forward to a return visit by Pravrajika Satchitprana of Sri Sarada Math, Dakshineswar, near Kolkata, India. The two-month West Coast visit is being co-sponsored by Sarada Center in Southern California and devotees in the Seattle area. At the time this article was written, there were openings for both men and women wishing to participate in retreats and other activities. Contact information for each location is given below.

Pravrajika Satchitprana will arrive on the West Coast on June 12 and depart from Seattle on August 18.

Sarada Center in Carpinteria, California

Two retreats are planned at a Santa Barbara religious retreat complex, with sleeping accommodations and meals provided. The *Isa Upanishad* will be studied during a weekend retreat, June 18 to 20. The second retreat, Monday through Wednesday, June 21 to 23, will focus on the *Vivekachudamani*.

Pravrajika Satchitprana will also be joining in two ashrama-routine sessions at Saradalaya in Carpinteria. These sessions will be held from June 26 to July 4 and from July 8 to 13. The "ashrama routine" means three periods of meditation and three classes daily, including question and answer periods, and a shared lunch. The teachings of Holy Mother, Sri Ramakrishna, Swamiji, and the *Bhagavad Gita*

will be topics of study. Participants are free to attend as many or as few days of these ashrama-routine sessions as they wish.

For further information or to register for either of the retreats or the ashrama-routine sessions please contact Sarada Center at saradacenter@aol.com or visit the center's website at <http://www.saradacenter.org>.

Seattle, Washington, and Vancouver, BC

Arriving in Seattle on July 16, Pravrajika Satchitprana will conduct two four-day ashrama retreats, from July 19 to 22 and August 9 to 12. The *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Kena Upanishad* are among the class topics, with other lectures and evening talks planned throughout her visit. A much anticipated five-day women's retreat will be held from August 2 to 6. Retreats will include meditation, class, and discussion. Pravrajika Satchitprana will also speak in an interfaith program being held at the Vedanta Society of Western Washington on Sunday, August 1.

A retreat has been planned by the Vivekananda Society of British Columbia in Vancouver, July 28 to 31.

For information on planned events in Seattle and Vancouver or to arrange for lodging in the area, please contact Barbara Smith at staffbarbsmith@earthlink.net or call (425) 486-7089.

PILGRIM NOTES

The following notes are from a nine-day stay at Pangot ashram in the foothills of the Himalayas, at an altitude of 6500 feet. Opening its doors in October 2003, the ashram was established to provide a place for in-depth study and practice of Vedanta for Western women. Pravrajika Vivekaprana of Sri Sarada Math directed its construction. These entries are based on a devotee's visit from December 26 to January 4, 2004.

☞ Flowers considered midsummer in New York State—marigolds, sweet williams, snapdragons, California poppies—are blooming here now. New flower beds are being prepared and planted with cuttings as they are in the spring, April–May, in New York. It snowed the second day I was here. It is hard to tell what season of the year it is!

☞ At this elevation, though it is December, the sun is so hot during the day that one needs sunglasses and sun lotion. The stars are so abundant in the clear night sky! The snow-peaked mountains and terraced foothills provide a breathtaking view in all directions. A loftier setting in which to study the lofty ideas of Vedanta could not be found. A quieter setting in which to deeply contemplate or meditate could not be found. To take advantage of the setting a longer, extended stay is advised. Thakur once said, “Look at the Himalayas. Aren't you inspired by feelings of God?”

☞ The guest house is very accommodating to Western devotees. Each bedroom has an adjoining bathroom and is furnished with two single beds, night stands, chairs and a table, and an electric heater. There are two guest houses in Pangot for overflow numbers. At one such, I saw a monkey climb out an open window with a tomato in his mouth and one in each paw. Electric service is prone to be off for periods of time. Solar lights are strategically placed in the ashram and solar-powered lanterns in each bedroom were donated to the guest house.

☞ Classes were held with Pravrajika Vivekaprana seated in the open, beneath the blue sky, with the mountains serving as a backdrop. We read the last lecture of four that Swami Vivekananda delivered in London, entitled “Practical Vedanta.” A question and answer format dominated.

☞ From the train station at Kathgodam, the drive up to Pangot is a steady climb up winding roads on the sides of mountains. Motion sickness may be a concern. For half the trip, the road is a single lane and can be impassable in the winter due to snow or ice. It takes approximately two hours by car. Beautiful vistas present themselves along the way.

For information about a stay at the Pangot ashram, send email to Indu@ebindia.com.



Retreat House in Pangot

EDITORIAL STAFF: Joan Shack, Janet Walker, and Jayanti • **PRODUCTION/LAYOUT:** Jayanti • **CIRCULATION:** JOAN PEAK

NONPROF. ORG.
U S POSTAGE
PAID
PERMIT NO. 971
ALBANY, NY

Sri Sarada Society
P.O. Box 38116, Albany, New York 12203