

Sri Sarada Society Notes

Dedicated to Holy Mother

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BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS

You have not yet understood the wonderful significance of Mother's life, none of you. But gradually you will know. Without Shakti there is no regeneration for the world....Once more will Gârgis and Maitreyis be born into the world.

—Swami Vivekananda

The time has come when women will have to become great Mother-teachers Rishis, so that humanity can get its real purpose back—to become human first and then divine. How will the women do it? They have to wake up and become divinely inspired so that they can pass it on.

—Pravrajika Vivekaprana, Sri Sarada Math, India

These quotations arose in my mind as I sat in the presence of the four women chosen to participate in the Women Peacemakers Program in 2010. It seemed as if the promise and predictions are coming true. Within each I saw some aspect of the Mother revealed. Their individual power, poise, strength, wisdom, humility, and their effectiveness itself, seemed to arise from within—the spiritual qualities that Vedanta teaches are ours to manifest.

Much can be said about each woman. To give one brief example, Merlie B. Mendoza describes herself as “an ordinary woman called to do extraordinary things.” She has been providing social and humanitarian service amid the Christian–Muslim conflict in the Philippines for two decades. As a devout Catholic, Merlie finds the faith of her Muslim friends to be inspiring, in turn deepening her own dependence upon the divine. In 2008, while serving marginalized Muslim communities in the Sulu archipelago as an independent volunteer, she was abducted by the militant separatist group and held hostage for two months. One day, with a machete at her back and being held at gunpoint, Merlie looked into the face of her young would-be assassin and wondered to herself, “What have we done to you to hurt you so deeply?” Immediately an answer arose within, prompting her to ask the boy’s forgiveness. Not forgiveness for herself, but forgiveness for all the atrocities against Muslim people that have been committed in the name of Christianity.

About the work of peacemaking, which she continues to do, she writes: “One’s vision for peace and humanitarianism must be infused with sustained commitment and endless optimism, yet needs to be crucially balanced with realism. It is not an easy task, akin to walking on a tightrope or groping in the dark, knowing that one is putting oneself at risk but proceeding nevertheless. At times, this commitment to peace is pursued even at the supreme sacrifice of one’s life. The difficult challenges that humanitarians experience and will continue to face in complex areas reveal one’s own weaknesses even as these very same moments could unravel one’s strengths. One’s fears can be overcome with faith, hope, and understanding. These will continue to sustain the humanitarian worker in the most difficult management of conflict.”

Merlie (pictured left) believes that “peacemaking and conflict management go beyond the rational. They touch on the sacred and the divine. It is a combination of an art and a science. It is about goodness.”

The Women Peacemakers Program is a project of the Joan Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice at the University of San Diego in California. Each year the program selects and hosts four outstanding women who contribute to the world of peace and justice in a way that is substantively and qualitatively different from the usual male-oriented approach. The program has achieved international acclaim in its seven years existence as the United Nations and other organizations turn to the recorded accounts by each peacemaker for lessons in how to implement their best practices of peaceful methods to reduce conflict. Learn about the program online at http://www.sandiego.edu/peacestudies/ipj/programs/women_peace_makers/.



Jayanti Hoye

IN MOTHER'S WORDS: "My child, this mind is just like a wild elephant. It races with the wind. Therefore one should discriminate all the time. One should work hard for the realization of God."

IN QUEST OF UNDERSTANDING

In the summer of 2010, Pravrajika Vivekaprana held a series of classes on the Jnana Yoga lectures of Swami Vivekananda during a retreat at the Sri Sarada Math center in Pangot. We find her insights particularly relevant in today's world and share the following notes with Pravrajika Vivekaprana's permission.

1. Experience is what you pay attention to. Attention gives a thing reality. When you pay attention to this world, that is your experience. If you pay attention to your inward life, that is what you experience. Ask yourself: What is my mind attending to?

2. The conscious level is only the tip of the iceberg. The subconscious is powerful, it is important. We may not be aggressive, consciously, but subconsciously we are. We need to take the energy out of the subconscious and use that energy in a conscious way, directed to a goal.

3. The first step in the process of renunciation is to give happiness to others. By making others happy, I am happy. The desire to help another gets you out of selfishness and then comes back to you as happiness.

4. Today, religions are in a state of turmoil. Churning is going on and all sorts of muck is coming up. Be aware of horrors and digest them. Do not look on them as good or bad. Make an ashrama within yourself, withdraw, so you don't go insane. Think: I was born in this age so there is a lesson for me.

5. Thoughts arise in our mind. Do we agree with them? Always question your view of reality. Observe the mind, do not go along with it. We need to be more objective about ourselves. Be alert, and thereby the mind will become more and more aware.

6. There is a limit to our understanding. After all, manifestation means limitation. When we express ourselves we take ourselves very seriously but perfect communication is not possible. We are always feeling misunderstood.

DEFINING INTEGRAL VEDANTA

What is Integral Vedanta? Basically, Vedanta here means Ramakrishna's Vedanta, which accepts at face value the great saying of the *UPANISHADS*: "All this is verily Brahman." There is nothing that is not sacred, because it is Brahman. As Sister Nivedita put it in her introduction to Vivekananda's *COMPLETE WORKS*: "[There is] no distinction, henceforth, between sacred and secular...Life itself is religion."

And what about *Integral*? The closest dictionary meaning is: "A whole, an entire thing, a totality." These are abstract words with which we might describe the nature of our Vedanta, which wholeheartedly embraces all kinds of people: men and women, the other-worldly Vedantins and the this-worldly Tantrics, the Abrahamic and the mystical Asian religions, religion and science, and any other "pairs of opposites" you might be able to think of. But the term was first used by Sri Aurobindo, a man who combined within himself a Western mind trained exclusively in England and the soul of an Indian yogi. In his work *INTEGRAL YOGA* he spelled out how we can combine sacred and secular in our spiritual practice, much as Vivekananda had stressed the importance, not only of the towering *raja* and *jnana yogas*, but equally of the paths of work and love.

How did this Westernized Indian arrive at this breakthrough synthesis? A close friend of Sister Nivedita, he threw himself into subversive work against the British tyranny in India, and in 1906 ended up in jail, under threat of execution. There he had a deep encounter with Swami Vivekananda, dead for four years, who instructed his Anglicized "student" in the highest states of consciousness, those in which Sri Ramakrishna had established Vivekananda himself some twenty years before. Aurobindo was a changed man. He gave up his subversive work and dedicated himself to deep spiritual practice. In time he wrote books that made clear how the intimate connection between the worlds of spirit and matter takes place in the towering reaches of the state beyond *nirvikalpa samadhi*, that which Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda called *vijnana*.

In the 1950s Indian students of Sri Aurobindo arrived in the West and began to spread these ideas in academic institutions. No doubt because they were so integral, so embracing of the whole of life, they caught on quickly and were taken up by Westerners interested in life-affirming spirituality. Ken Wilber, the well-known integral teacher, has incorporated these insights into his work, thus enshrining in the West what we might call the key ingredient of what the Ramakrishna paradigm is about. Wilber's book *INTEGRAL LIFE PRACTICE* gives the theory and ways to practice all of the yogas in a Western mode. This is wonderful, but I wonder: Do we Vedantins have something to contribute to this movement? Can we see to it that our precious tradition has an influence on this indigenous "Western Vedanta?"

Sister Gayatripranas

EDITOR'S NOTE: To explore this topic and its potential email Sister Gayatriprana (Jean MacPhail) at gayatriprana@msn.com.

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.

WITH GOD ON A BUS

Last week I felt a glimpse of Sri Ramakrishna's love for the destitute among us, as well as His fun-loving recognition of the Mother among the carefree and joyful. I felt as if God had come down from heaven to dance with all of us riding the local bus. It was the atmosphere of the transparent personality of Sri Ramakrishna. I wish there had been a kirtan, with all of us singing the praises of our Lord, but instead it was an uninvited reunion of the lonely, hungry, homeless, and disabled.

I was the lonely one, heading to my doctor's appointment at Santurce, a sector of San Juan inbetween the very expensive real estate of Condado and the very rundown cafes not too far away. There I found my kindhearted doctor. When it was time to return home, I went out into the blinding sun, limping after a bus that had left without me. The young man selling pizza at the corner spoke a word of camaraderie. I saw the opportunity as a wonderful time to have a pizza while waiting for the next bus to come.

I sat on the bench under the very gray highway bridge above us. It was dark underneath the bridge and graffiti covered the walls. It was here that I met the hungry one. She was a very good-looking old lady, soft-spoken and wearing fine jewelry. I thought she must have seen better days. We talked for awhile and I learned something of her background, and her dreams. We shared the pizza. The warm pizza in our bellies made us friends in a cinch.

When the bus arrived, we got in. A man congratulated a lady on being such a good mother. I broke my silence as an onlooker and praised her children. My universe was expanding. The bus driver was a kind woman who let in a homeless man for a free ride. They joked with each other. I laughed with my temporary family, in constant awareness that we were all one. A blind young man entered the conversation. He said I should not be afraid to face my limitations because life would make up for them in another way. I know my treasure is my mantra, the silent repetition of the name of God, giving me focus and peace. "Everything has a balance," the disabled one said. "I am the same as anybody else, things just take a little longer." As he left I saw his confident step and I knew he would be all right. He has Swami Vivekananda's strength in his heart.

There are no coincidences. I was no longer the lonely one. With a heart full of gratitude, I walked back home singing to the tune of Jim Croce's song "I've Got a Name."

Once home, I read a message given by Swami Ritajanandaji: "How can you intensify your spiritual life? I told you about Holy Mother. What was Her teaching? She teaches repeat the name of the Lord. It seems to be so simple. No book is necessary. You need not read the *BHAGAVAD GITA* and the *BHAGAVATA PURANA* and all the *UPANISHADS*. It is

not necessary. Repeat the name of the Lord. You may doubt its value and use. I can assure you, it will do everything. As strange as it is, repeating the Lord's name solves all problems—not finding the defects of others, not even of myself. It purifies, the name of the Lord, as we chant here every morning. Chant the glory of the Lord with full faith and all your love for Him. When this love grows more and more you will see the Lord is really with you."

A few days later I went to a concert at the conservatory of music. My friend thanked me for the fun we had. Yes! It was fun, but not as fun as that day on the bus.

Shraddha (Mercedes Vendrell)

THE PEACEFUL ARTS

Vijali Hamilton has dedicated her life to peacemaking. Utilizing her skills as a sculptor, filmmaker, poet, musician, and author she has collaborated with diverse communities around the world, creating monumental stone sculptures and performance ceremonies as part of her quest for peace. It was a pilgrimage that took her seven years, living and working in twelve countries.

In 1991, Vijali encountered Baul musicians in West Bengal and was touched by their universality and acceptance of all religions and cultures and the equality of women and men. She notes: "This attitude is so needed in our age of global travel and communication. I found that they were living the principles of Vedanta in their simple way that reflected the lives of Ramakrishna, Holy Mother, and Vivekananda." Inspired by the Baul song "Shoblo Ke Koi," and her experience working with the community, Vijali wrote the following poem as a prayer for peace.

BENEATH A BANYAN TREE

In a tiny Bengali village
I sit beneath a Banyan tree
and my heart is won...

A child brings garlands
laying them round my neck.
She dances, eyes blazing,
skirts whirling-yellow and blue.

The full moon rises crisp
as Mara brings spiced tea.
Her husband Basu Dev
with closed eyes begins to sing:
"At source we're all the same.
We are fruits of the Tree of Life.

Now, can you tell me, friend,
what difference is there
Hindu or Muslim,
Man or Woman? Blood is red,
each heart beats the rhythm of life."

MOTHER KNOWS BEST

When I was a child the notion that we should be taught “to accept our limitations” was prominent among experts in disability. As a result, I grew up with a fear of getting in over my head. Anything I considered doing always had to be carefully thought out and organized. If I could not determine the outcome, I did not take the risk. The idea of “limit” shaped my approach to life in every aspect—except religion. I would accept no outside authority when it came to my relationship with God. Thus, when I came to Vedanta it seemed a perfect match.

Yet I had learned not to try certain things, and not to expect acceptance from others, solely on the basis of being limited by my disability. In contrast, Vedanta declares both disability and limitation irrelevant to who we are! I had a lifetime of unlearning ahead of me!

I think Mother’s first objective with her newly claimed daughter was to erase my understanding of limitation. My life became “active” almost immediately after coming to Vedanta in ways I could NEVER have imagined. Take the morning a call came asking if I might arrange to prepare one of my vegetable lasagna dishes for a visiting swami’s lunch...that day! The devotee who was to make lunch had fallen ill. Alas, the helper who usually made the lasagna was not with me. I had about three hours to both shop and guide a new assistant in preparing the requested dish, which we always made from scratch! I went to Mother with my plea: “Mother, it is for your two sons. You must help!” We delivered the lasagna, and ourselves, in plenty of time!

I am amused to think how shocked my grade school teachers would be to hear that I was asked to do such a thing. Yet my involvement in doing what might be thought impossible had become so common that I thought little of the request.

Mother has lifted many given tasks from me over time, but not until I had let go of mistaken notions of my limitation. Today I do have to set limits on how much responsibility I accept because of age and lessening ability, but the motivation and selection criteria are very different.

Preparing for my trip to India in 1991 had presented the ultimate challenge. As each step presented itself, I took it. To do otherwise would have been to go against something I knew to be true and greater than myself—something I called Mother. Yet how could I know what to expect? I took the steps and I panicked, simultaneously—until Mother sent relief in the form of a sudden reprimand by a swami. Instead of punishment, I felt as if I had been bathed by the cooling waters of Mother Ganga. Again, my apprehension had come largely from my misidentification with physical limitation, and this idea had been washed away.

Through the years Mother has kept asking the seemingly impossible from me, increasingly outside the Vedanta Center. Ordinary life had earlier seemed impossible and I had let it pass me by. I’d come to Vedanta thinking I was ready to become a monastic. Yet today, at age 61, I am more engaged with the world than at any time in my past. In the process of unfoldment and growth, of finding my strengths and courage, I have become more spontaneous. I have become more genuinely practical as well.

I’d like to think that Mother has thrown me into the world wearing Vedanta-colored glasses. In trying to remain open to the opportunities and challenges she sends and to taking the steps before me, it often helps to remember that I have been named after the Divine Mother herself, Jayanti—”She who is all-conquering.” It helps also to remember that Mother is with me in the adventure.

Jayanti Hoyer

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