

## SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP

*Approaching retirement from a long career as university professor, Janet Walker shares reflections on the enduring value of friendship founded on a shared spiritual commitment—illustrating an aspect of “satsanga” or holy company.*

Most of us form our closest friendships as adults with people with whom we work on a daily basis, sharing work and organizational goals and tasks. But I have heard that, unless there is some other basis for the friendship, after retirement such friendships last about two years and then unravel, as common goals and tasks no longer unite the retiree and those still working. Spiritual friendship is different: it is founded on shared spiritual goals.

The Western medieval Christian tradition knew spiritual friendship between monastics of both genders. In nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Bengal, Sri Sarada Devi experienced friendship with Gauri Ma, Golap Ma, and Yogin Ma, referred to as her companions in the literature, as an important part of her daily life. An unusual friendship for Sarada Devi was formed with one of the Western women disciples of Swami Vivekananda, Margaret Noble (later Sister Nivedita), a relationship captured forever in a beautiful photograph taken at Nivedita's residence in Kolkata in November 1898. The close bond between Sarada Devi, who was 14 years her senior, and Nivedita, which some have considered more that of mother to daughter than a friendship between equals, lasted until Nivedita's death in 1911. The cross-cultural friendship between the Indian Sarada Devi and the Irishwoman Margaret Noble provided a model for spiritual friendships among Vedantists in the West. At American centers I have witnessed numerous such spiritual friendships forged across cultures—for example, that between an American and an Indian woman at the Boston Center, which continued for years as they cooked and served food together. The two friends are now separated due to circumstances beyond their control, but the feeling between them is still there, and it continues to nourish spiritual growth.

In the American Vedantic context, and among women devotees, spiritual friendship is practiced in other ways. One is the friendship and companionship between what Sister Gargi called Third Order monastics—lay people who live a quasi-monastic life outside of a monastery or convent. Groups of women in various parts of America spend their days in individual and communal spiritual activities, linked by their aspiration to lead a spiritual life devoted to Sri Sarada Devi. Another is the friendship between women who have the same spiritual teacher. I can call two disciples of my guru who have become nuns and are living in a convent in California my spiritual sisters, and though I virtually never see them, that sisterhood is real to me, just as my deceased guru is real to me. I also had a spiritual sister who lived a Third Order monastic life until she died of cancer a number of years ago. What links me to these women is a spiritual bond that transcends geographical distance, and even death.

In her introduction to a translation of the treatise *SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP* by the 12th century English monk Aelred of Rievaulx, Marsha L. Dutton writes that for Aelred, “Human friendship is fragile and frequently interrupted both by life's demands and by death but begins and ends in God.” A spiritual friendship is thus grounded in the Ground of our Being. If one loves and honors the Other as the Self, it is a divine bond. If this spirit prevails in the friendship, that friendship will last. If something should disturb the friendship, a disagreement or a hurt, one only has to recall the basis of it to recover the spiritual bond that is, ultimately, a bond with God.



*Editor's Note: We regret an error appearing in the last issue of SRI SARADA SOCIETY NOTES. In Stanford Smith's article, BEHIND THE MASKS, the quote from Swami Vijnanananda encompasses the first two sentences only. The author's commentary resumes with “So Sri Ramakrishna...”*

**IN MOTHER'S WORDS** (In reference to Westerners) “My child, they too are my children.  
I must accommodate everyone. Can I ever be exclusive?”

## SWAMIJI'S HEROIC EXAMPLE

It is often said that Swami Vivekananda “gave his life’s blood” in order to share the principles of Vedanta with the world. But what exactly does this mean? Most of us have some vague notion. We know, for example, that he left the body at age 39, after only nine years of teaching. We may recall this or that account of some challenge he endured, without fully grasping either the extent or the significance of his struggles.

Thus, with the publication of *GLIMPSES OF SWAMI VIVEKANANDA’S HEROIC STRUGGLE* Swami Tathagatananda, minister of the Vedanta Society of New York, has done a tremendous service to not only the memory of Swamiji himself, but to all who might learn from his example. An expanded version of the booklet, which was originally published in India, will be released in commemoration of Swami Vivekananda’s 150th birth anniversary during the Vedanta Society of New York’s celebration May 17–19. This small volume vividly lays before readers the extent and variety of hardships met by Swamiji, including physical distress and human betrayal.

While one may come away with a renewed admiration for Swamiji, careful reading of his response to each struggle affords valuable lessons. As with the Holy Mother and her dealings with those around her, Swami Vivekananda also emerges as a role model. Considering his responses to the suffering he faced leads us to conclude that he faced each directly and consciously, applying his intellectual understanding and spiritual principles for perspective.

First of all, he admitted that his own “baggage” played a role in the difficulties that came his way. Unhesitatingly, he would trace his suffering to his emotional nature and the effects of attachment. We can be reminded by Swamiji to be aware that our desires and *samskaras* (tendencies) motivate our actions, either consciously or unconsciously. What we project out into this world, be it hatred or love, misery or gratitude, comes back to us. We thus contribute to our future experiences. Bravely examining our own contribution to an unpleasant experience can mitigate its effect on us now or in the future.

Next, Swamiji’s conviction that suffering was his own great teacher also pertains to us. It allows us to learn. He wrote:

*I fervently wish no misery ever came near anyone; yet it is that alone that gives us an insight into the depths of our lives, is it not? In our moments of anguish, gates barred forever seem to open and let in many a flood of light. We learn as we grow.*

Swamiji’s affirmation of the Vedanta principle that what happens in the universe (macrocosm) is happening by and large in the life of an individual (microcosm) gives us another perspective for accepting both success and suffering. As the oceans have their ebb and flow, so too, our individual lives reflect the same pattern. Vivekananda saw this pattern in his own life, stating:

*I am always in the midst of ebbs and flows. I knew it always and*

*preached always that every bit of pleasure will bring its quota of pain, if not with compound interest. I have a good deal of love given to me by the world; I deserve a good deal of hatred therefore. I am glad it is so—as it proves my theory of “every wave having its corresponding dip” on my own person.*

Through his acceptance of adversity as part and parcel of life, he challenges us to do the same. As he tells Miss Mary Hale: “Be brave and face everything—come good, come evil, both welcome.”

As if his own understanding of suffering’s role evolved, toward the end of his life, Swamiji rested more and more upon the divine Self (the *Atman*), transcending suffering, all rational thoughts, all intellectualism.

*It [the world] is a land of dreams; it does not matter whether one enjoys or weeps... I am attaining peace that passeth understanding, which is neither joy nor sorrow, but something above them both....*

Swami Tathagatananda writes: “Drawn by the sufferings of humanity, heroic spiritual personalities come in every age to reawaken the healthy spiritual values of life. They accept the prison of the human body in their earthly exile. They bear the sufferings of others and their own without comfort. They are supreme exemplars of spiritual purity, compassion, universal love, fearlessness and self-sacrifice.”

Swami Vivekananda’s heart became one with all. Facing his own liberation, he heroically embraced further suffering in order to serve others: “May I be born again and again and suffer thousands of miseries so that I may worship the only God that exists, the only God I believe in, the sum total of all souls.”

*Joan Shack and Jayanti (Pamela Hoye)*

## .ETERNAL EMBRACE

*Shraddha (Merchi Vendrell) shares this poem inspired by thoughts of her guru.*

*My ritual is my love for You.  
I think of You when the moon shines.  
When the sun warms me I feel Your love.  
When I smile, it doesn’t show in my face,  
Yet You see my identification with joy and feel happy with me.*

*For You, I am as the day awoke and saw me.  
You love me when I speak wisely;  
also when I roam through all sorts of foolish thoughts.  
Everywhere I go You love me.  
No matter what I do, I walk towards You,  
and Your Embrace is Eternal.*

*I wear Your coat of knowledge.  
It is a companion I take with me, to shield me  
as I cut through the worlds.  
My mantra is my sword.  
Beware, O mind! I do not look back.*

**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.

## "I BLESS THESE THOUSAND ISLANDS"

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

In SWAMI VIVEKANANDA IN THE WEST, NEW DISCOVERIES, Marie Louise Burke, sets the scene:  
*Two strangers, wet, bedraggled, and terrified by their own boldness, knocked one dark and rainy night at the front door of Miss Dutcher's cottage located in Thousand Island Park on Wellesley Island.*

Thus it was that Christine Greenstidel and her friend Mary Funke completed the circle of twelve whom Swami Vivekananda accepted as his disciples for seven weeks of study in the summer of 1895. Secluded, commanding a grand view, and built on huge boulders, the cottage was symbolically and practically speaking the ideal setting. From the heights of spiritual consciousness, a realm he knew well, Vivekananda taught with an authority and with the passion of one who wanted nothing more (or less) than for others to know that realm too!

From Christine's accounts we read that he declared that God was real, a truth verified by the "greatest spiritual geniuses known to humanity, the Buddha, the Christ, Zoroaster, Lao Tze." He expounded on the heights that each reached. And if there was a reverberating high note, Christine emphatically declared that, without a second, it was his call to freedom—"Freedom from the bondage in which maya has caught us, in which maya has enmeshed all mankind." She wrote, "He drew aside the curtain for us into the region beyond life and death and planted in our hearts the desire for that glorious freedom."

Swamiji also had a second objective—to train them to carry on his work in America. In a letter to Miss Philips, he expounded on this goal: "Vedanta would never succeed in America until Americans themselves become teachers..." adding that he "would be prouder of the success of one of his pupils (at Thousand Island Park) than of a hundred of his brethren in India."

In his talk entitled *Is Vedanta the Future Religion?* he states that "anything we do ourselves, that is the only thing we do. Anything that is done for us by another never can be ours." Though taken out of context, at its face value this quote is a reiteration of his exhortation to "stand on your own feet" under all circumstances. Swamiji believed in and stood for the power within the individual.

In the evenings the upstairs veranda of the cottage became the classroom, the training ground. Each individual was called upon to make a speech based on their own thinking. There was no escaping this ordeal. At other times, someone was suddenly put on the spot to answer a question posed by another. Christine mused, "Did he know that if we could conquer our self-consciousness in his presence, could speak before him who was considered one of the great orators of the world, no audience anywhere would dismay us?" She remembers him as an "ever loving, gentle father during these evening hours." He might prod their thinking but never dictated.

Of the twelve at Thousand Island Park, Swamiji initiated two into the monastic life. Swami Kripananda (Leon Landsberg) was the first to be sent out to teach. Swami Abhayananda (Mme. Marie Louise) held classes at the newly established Vedanta Society in New York City. To her Swamiji wrote: "Each one is quite independent to teach, quite free to preach whatever he or she likes. If you have the spirit within, you will never fail to attract others...Individuality is my motto." Five women, including Christine, were given vows of brahmacharya.

Returning from India in 1914, Sister Christine lectured in Detroit on a variety of aspects of India—its history, culture, and philosophy. From the accounts of friends who attended her lectures, we gain insights into the art of her presentation and its contents. Mrs. Elizabeth King commented on her "faultless diction," "exquisitely modulated voice," and "priestess"-like stature. Achshah Barlow Brewster vividly recalled the following scene—Sister Christine seated on a platform with several other speakers including a Divine Science healer, a New Thought healer, and a Spiritualist.

*Each one in turn arose and announced that she was "Miss X and lived at 5 East Street" or that she was "Mrs. Y of 10 North Street."*

When Christine rose,

*Her voice pealed forth, "I am not the body, nor the mind, nor the organs of the mind for I am Existence Absolute, Knowledge Absolute, Bliss Absolute. I am That.....I am That."*

Clearly her identification was no longer with name and form; instead, "I am That...I am That." In his remembrance of Sister Christine, her friend Boshi Sen wrote that her lectures on this theme were given "with such wealth of illustrations

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*Closing paragraph from a letter written on November 8, 1910. Images and content of Christine's letters to Swami Paramananda, quoted in this article, were made available to SRI SARADA SOCIETY NOTES from the archives of the Cobasset Vedanta Center.*

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## BY THE TRANSFORMING HAND OF MOTHER

*Eddie Acebo, a resident of the Ramakrishna Monastery in Trabuco, California, tells of the simple and unexpected evolution of Holy Mother Mission, a service organization that came into being and continues primarily through the dedication of local devotees.*

How Holy Mother Mission came about is a mystery to me.

Because I am of Mexican decent, I began to translate books about Vedanta and the Ramakrishna tradition into Spanish in 1997. Before I knew it I had various books finished, including *HOLY MOTHER* by Swami Nikhilananda, and wondered how I was going to publish them. I knew nothing about this business.

A few years later, I can't remember the date, Swami Medhananda came to live with us in Trabuco after working in India (in Mysore) for eleven years. He began to study the possibilities of assembling the equipment for a print shop and we soon were printing and binding our books. At that time I was expanding the vegetable garden and we soon had a surplus of fruits and veggies. So we set up a table under a tree and started selling fruits and veggies and jams and jellies as well. Meanwhile,

Swami had begun getting printing orders for books and soon had a surplus of cash. We transformed the garage into a book shop and then began wondering how we could put our money to work for the good.

We had devotees who were willing to help, so we started making sandwiches every afternoon and bagged them with fruit and cookies, etc. We took them the next day to the street corners where the day laborers stood waiting to be hired for day jobs.

We also wanted to help the families of these men but didn't know how, because to do this we would need larger amounts of provisions, which meant we needed a lot more money. We began to look into local food banks and found one called Second Harvest. Here we could get many pounds of food a week for pennies on the dollar. To join we had to have a nonprofit status, and so Holy Mother Mission was born. We help at most 30 families, most of whom are Spanish speaking. The work is done mostly by householder devotees.

Needless to say, Mother Herself is behind this whole project. Swami Medhananda left the Order and we sold all the printing equipment. However, the Holy Mother Mission is still hale and hearty.

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and variety of aspects that you found yourself rooted and immovably fixed in that knowledge."

The outbreak of World War I prevented her from returning to India for ten years, a very welcome and beneficial occurrence for the group of dedicated students who gathered around her in Detroit. From her letter to Swami Paramananda, minister of the Boston Vedanta Center, dated November 8th 1910, there apparently was a "crusade for forming a Vedanta Centre in Detroit." The plan didn't materialize. Christine visited the Boston Center oftentimes on her arrival from and departure to India, expressing her appreciation for "the atmosphere [that is] so spiritual [that] I feel at home." In fact, she identified with Swami Paramananda's work by referencing "our work and people" in a letter to him. She also spent time at the Vedanta Society of New York and gave lectures there.

In an essay explaining why discipleship is necessary, Sister Christine noted: "One torch can light others, until hundreds, thousands are aflame...." Being among those blessed to receive Vivekananda's commission at Thousand Island Park, as a torch set on fire by him Christine ultimately fulfilled Swamiji's vision by becoming a torch for others!

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