

Dedicated to Holy Mother

# Sri Sarada Society *Notes*

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## LEARNING TO SEE DIVINITY IN EVERYTHING

*A reader shares a lesson learned from reflecting upon Sri Sarada Devi's life, revealing the benefit found in studying the lives of saints.*

Looking back over the past year, my view of the world was one of endless strife, hardship, and insanity. One morning I mentally inquired of Holy Mother, "Why are these times that we live in so unbelievably crazy?"

As was my practice in the early hours, I opened a spiritual book to a random page. It happened to be *THE GOSPEL OF HOLY MOTHER* that morning. As I read, I realized that Mother was graciously answering my question.

The reading began by narrating an incident about Mother's niece Radhu, who was addicted to opium. Once, when not receiving another dose as she demanded, she threw a big eggplant, hitting Holy Mother on the back. In the next paragraph I read that Radhu's unbalanced mother upset the entire household by claiming that Radhu's husband had drowned in the village pond. He was later found unharmed. The narration ended with a third incident: Radhu's mother had run forward in a fit of anger to beat Holy Mother with a burning firebrand. Hearing Mother scream, one of her attendants ran to her aid, snatching the implement from the madwoman's hand.

Holy Mother was surrounded with craziness; she knew it only too well. Her response was one of compassion for the offender. When struck with the eggplant, she prayed, "O Lord! Do not take notice. She does not understand." What she saw was an erring child who didn't know any better. Holy Mother's life was a perfect manifestation of the motherhood of God. Everyone was her child: a caring, concerned, motherly response was completely natural to her. Facing the terrible in all these instances, she looked beyond the behavior. Her eyes only saw a child whom she wanted to protect from bad karmic consequences. Whether behaving well or badly, her children experienced the warmth of a mother's heart.

Recently, I listened to a taped lecture that included the classic story of mistaken identity. It happened that a piece of white linen had gotten caught on a tree stump. The stump was as tall as a human being, with two branches protruding from it. During his nightly rounds a policeman spotted the covered tree trunk. "There is a thief!" he thought, as he dashed forward. Now it so happened that a thief had also passed by with the intent to steal and, mistaking the tree for a policeman, he had run off. Both had mistaken the tree trunk for something else. The policeman was on the lookout for a thief; his mind was focused on upholding the law and preventing crime. The thief wanted to avoid capture. What was paramount in their minds was what they saw.

Vedanta teaches that every human is the manifestation of the Divine. We waste time mistakenly identifying others as having qualities that we consider to be either good or bad, or even neutral, whereas hidden behind these many external measures dwells the Divine. In every moment of our lives we are interacting with the Divine, even when surrounded by madness. Thus, there are no ordinary moments or ordinary people. There is no room for monotony or boredom either, just the adventure of perceiving the Divine's presence in human form. The very loftiness of this teaching inspires us to lift our consciousness beyond the realm of our ego-centered sense perceptions, which always involve judgment, and experience, as a reality, our infinitude and the infinitude of others. We have little to no control over the craziness we witness, whether it manifests close up in our nation or in a distant place. Despite the presence of so much craziness in her life, Holy Mother has shown that spiritual concepts can be worked out so as to be reflected in daily actions. Practicing continuous recollection of our true nature by means of studying, reading, and meditation will have its benefit. For without a doubt, what our mind dwells on and thinks deeply about will inevitably influence what we see and consequently how we act.



Holy Mother and her niece Radhu

**IN MOTHER'S WORDS** There is no treasure equal to contentment  
and no virtue equal to fortitude.

## A MONUMENTAL MEETING

*Joan Shack offers the first in a series of articles on Christine Greenstidel, who was a close disciple of Swami Vivekananda. Known as Sister Christine, she was born on August 17, 1866, in Nuremburg, Germany. Her family moved to the United States when Christine was three.*

On the cold Detroit evening of February 24, 1894, Christine Greenstidel acquiesced to her friend's urging to attend a lecture to be given by "Swami Vivekananda: A Monk from India." Within five minutes of his talk the first twenty-seven years of her life faded into oblivion; it began anew from that point forward. Christine recalled: "It was the mind that made the first great appeal. Its ideas were so clear, so powerful, so transcendental that it seemed incredible that they could have emanated from the intellect of a limited human being." Christine knew that she had found her teacher. To him, she remained ever faithful. To her, the Swami remained ever solicitous, ever fatherly.

In 1971, ninety letters of Vivekananda's addressed to Christine were uncovered. This correspondence provides a rare insight into their relationship. Writing in the first person, he offers her advice using himself as an example. He repeatedly expresses concern for her physical well-being, which she was likely to sacrifice by taking her duties so seriously. His personal assurances and encouragement fill each correspondence. In his earliest letters, dated 1896, the theme appears to be: tap your inner strength and flourish despite the demanding circumstances of life. This theme is repeated in a poem he writes for her entitled: "To an Early Violet." And later that year, he sends a few flowers that he had picked while in the Alps that were growing under rugged mountainous conditions, yet beautiful and delicate.

Throughout 1898 Vivekananda's letters convey his hope for traveling to the West once again, details of the new Math at Belur, and hints of her future work in India. They also provide hitherto unknown facts about his health and state of mind, so very freely expressed. Openness is characteristic of all his letters to her, an indication of their close relationship. Mary Louise Burke writes: "If anyone was Swamiji's daughter in a very human sense, I think it was Christine."

In the early part of 1899, he announces his plans to be in England in the summer. He writes: "It will be such a pleasure to see you," closing with the blessing, "Mother knows best. I dedicate you to Her forever. What more can I do? This is the highest, the best, and loveliest."

When Vivekananda's ship the *S.S. Golconda* docked in the London harbor, Christine was there to greet him, and met Nivedita, who had traveled with him. After two weeks in England, they departed for New York aboard the steamer *Numidian*. For Christine the voyage was a blessing—ten inspiring days in his presence. In July 1900 we find him in Detroit staying in Christine's family house for five days, a very crowded, simply furnished, but welcoming home.

Shortly after this visit, Vivekananda sends her a poem, "Thou Blessed Dream," referring to the world as: "a dream, a play. A play [in which], we each have a part." In the face of this dream called life, an attitude of detachment is being driven home to Christine. In Paris, he composes a long letter to her in French. Opening with a benediction, "God bless you at every step," it contains his strong assurance that she will, like him, "have your reward." Himself having "found the pearl for which I dived into

the ocean of life," he assures her that this achievement can also be hers if sought "with eagerness."

Vivekananda's health was failing in 1901, yet his correspondence conveys calm and poise, and is full of ordinary details about his life. In July of that year, he reminds her: "I have dedicated you to Mother. She is your shield, your guide. No harm can reach you...I know it." Learning the true nature of Christine's domestic situation, purposely hidden from him, he reprimands her, referring to her as a silly goose. At the time he was looking after a goose. A nursery rhyme of his own composition is also included with the playful reprimand.

Shortly after the passing of her mother, Christine made plans to sail to India. She arrived April 7, 1902, and was sent to Mayavati to recuperate. Christine received a few more letters from Vivekananda urging her to "get plump," "stuff yourself," "sleep as much as you can," and "lay on food." Grief gripped Christine when news reached Mayavati of his passing on July 4, 1902. Twenty-five years later, she voiced regret for not having asked him certain things "that I need to know now." That very night, in her dream, Vivekananda answered all his daughter's questions.



Sister Christine

**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.



## INTEGRAL VEDANTA LOOKS AHEAD

*Since its first weekend retreat in October 2010, in New Mexico, a small group of long-time Vedantists continue to explore ways of pooling ideas and resources. Inspired by the vision of Swami Vivekananda, Integral Vedanta seeks to further the Ramakrishna Vedanta movement in the West, exploring how best to communicate Vedanta in the 21st Century.*

**VASTNESS OF SWAMIJI** His was an all-inclusive vision—every aspect of life was an illustration of a spiritual ideal waiting to be recognized, divinity manifesting. During one of his walks in New York City, Vivekananda’s gaze rose to the top of a skyscraper. Possibly, it was the 260-foot New York Tribune building, one of the earliest skyscrapers. He immediately, half-audibly, commented on the greatness of the Divine Mother. It was the energy of the Divine Mother that appeared in this form before him. Furthermore, its construction spoke of human power and vision coupled with dauntless spirit. He marveled, realizing these qualities could be harnessed and utilized by man for spiritual growth.

Every field and endeavor of mankind gripped his interest and curiosity, whether economic theories, social thought, or scientific discoveries. He was a student of life; the strong points of every nation were his course of study. It was often the smallest things that caught his attention and spoke to the noblest qualities of that nation.

Sister Nivedita writes that he looked “at the world...through the eyes of the taught,” which provided him with an in-depth understanding of the human mind. The poet Rabindranath Tagore viewed him as the meeting point of East and West. He wrote that Vivekananda possessed “the unique genius of assimilation and acceptance.” Romain Rolland described him as “the personification of the harmony of all human energy.”

This harmonizing trait was evident in his ability to gauge the meaning of his guru’s utterance: “Who are we to show compassion to others? No, not compassion for others, but rather the service of man, recognizing him to be a veritable manifestation of God,” and then to bring alive, to make practical, these words of Sri Ramakrishna. He boldly deviated from the tradition of monasticism in the East, which equated renunciation with complete withdrawal from society. He added to the inward spiritual life of the members of the Order an outward component of humanitarian activities. Both aspects were incorporated in the motto of the movement: For the freedom of oneself and for the welfare of the world. Vivekananda dedicated himself and the Order to the service of others, serving God in man within society. Service was his theme: “The poor, the illiterate, the ignorant, the afflicted—let these be your God. Know that service to these alone is the highest realization.”

Service of God in man became one of Vivekananda’s foremost teachings, especially in the West. Its basis was the Upanishadic truth, *tat twam asi* (thou art that). The individual soul is one with the universal soul. To Vivekananda, practical Vedanta meant permeating our being with the idea that I am that ever glorious

Self, then bringing this thought to bear on our everyday life.




We need look no further than his speech at The World’s Parliament of Religions in 1893, which launched his work in the West, to see the dual themes of universality and harmony play out. In his addresses, Vivekananda spoke on behalf of all religions, while other delegates represented their traditions faithfully. He urged religions to give up the frog-in-the-well mentality. He expressed the hope that the Parliament itself would be the “death-knell” to intolerance and persecution. Mrs. Blodgett, present for his first address, reported that his opening words immediately evoked a tremendous reaction in the assembly: “Seven thousand people rose to their feet.” Why? Instead of appealing to universality based on emotions or rational reasoning, he spoke from his own realization of the oneness of existence.

In summary, Vivekananda’s outlook was one of acceptance (as in the case of embracing all aspects of life), unification (as in the case of the sacred and secular), and harmonization (every religion is true)—basically, it was one of universal integration. Clearly, the seeds of Integral Vedanta were sown by Vivekananda.

**PUBLISHING PROJECT** To serve the larger Vedanta family in the West, the group is undertaking to publicize and promote events and projects of an “integrating” nature, that is, which demonstrate inclusiveness. How? First of all, gathering information from centers or informal groups or individual Vedantists, and then electronically disseminating it to a list of subscribers. Its focus is limited, in that the information published will be of events or activities promoting cooperation, broadening outreach, demonstrating new approaches in addressing issues, or establishing new models for spiritual growth through service, education, and other activities.

Its content will consist of announcements, details, and interviews concerning a specific project or activity. It will not support generic articles on spiritual topics, a discussion forum, book reviews, or after-the-fact reports of conferences or seminars.

The purpose of disseminating information in this form is to:

-  *Increase awareness of the form Vedanta is taking in the West to a larger circle of people as we enter the 21st century.*
-  *Encourage support or inspiration for a project or activity from a large, diverse constituency.*
-  *Support and facilitate networking between groups or individuals.*

The first issue of *INTEGRAL VEDANTA NEWS* has been launched via email. Subsequent issues of the publication will be sent periodically and in a timely fashion to any interested subscribers. If you would like to subscribe, you may submit your email address to [Integralvedantanews@gmail.com](mailto:Integralvedantanews@gmail.com). Information for publication can be emailed to our news manager at [Integralvedantainfo@gmail.com](mailto:Integralvedantainfo@gmail.com). If you have friends who may be interested in Integral Vedanta, please tell them about *INTEGRAL VEDANTA NEWS*.

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## CONVERGING ANNIVERSARIES

**M**y earliest remembrance of Sri Sarada Society is of meeting Joan Shack in Chicago, September 1993. We were at the centenary anniversary of The World's Parliament of Religions. I smile, recalling that whenever we crossed paths I'd see her sporting a video camera on her shoulder for recording events and festivities. Sri Sarada Society had been founded in 1992 by Betty Robinson and Joan Shack, initially as a way to support Sri Sarada Math's participation in the Parliament. Three monastics had come from Sri Sarada Math, Dakshineswar, Kolkata: Pravrajika Amalaprana, Pravrajika Vivekaprana, and Pravrajika Prabuddhaprana. The presence of three sannyasinis from an independent women's monastic order and coming from India created quite a stir. None who heard them speak were disappointed.

The pravrajikas have each travelled abroad multiple times since the Parliament to give classes and retreats in the United States, Canada, Puerto Rico, and Uruguay. A fourth, Pravrajika Satchitprana, has also traveled widely. Devotees from the West also look forward to stays at the new retreat center of the Ramakrishna Sarada Mission at Pangot, India, under the leadership of Pravrajika Vivekaprana.

I met Joan again in Spring 1994, when a road trip brought me to New York City for the Centennial Celebration of the Vedanta Society of New York, the first to be started by Swami Vivekananda. It was during this visit that I heard that Ridgely, the upstate estate intimately associated with Swami Vivekananda, would possibly be for sale. When Ridgely officially came on the market, Sri Sarada Society took on the Save Ridgely Project at the request of

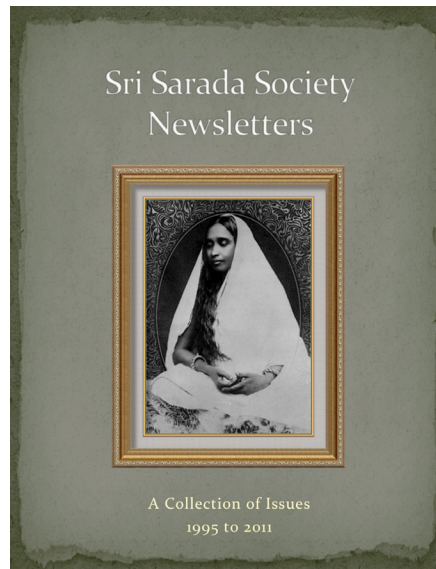
Betty Zimmer. The Society signed a one-year option contract for Ridgely to keep it off the open market, followed by three years of nonstop fund raising and various events to increase awareness of this sacred space in America, until the estate was acquired by the Ramakrishna Order, Belur Math in 1997. My addition as a board member during this effort was highlighted by a visit to Ridgely Manor, where I had tea with Lord Frank and Lady Helena Margesson. Frank is the grandson of Francis Leggett and I loved hearing him tell the history of his family's special friendship with Swamiji.

In 1996 we unveiled a website dedicated to Sri Sarada Devi, "Holy Mother's Cyber-Tantu," weaving Mother's "thread" into the newly forming internet. It was among the first sites devoted to Vedanta. Another engaging project soon came when Edith Tipple asked for our collaboration on her transcription of a series of lectures given by Pravrajika Vivekaprana. *A CHALLENGE FOR MODERN MINDS* was published in late 2002 in both paperback and ebook editions.

The Parliament, the Ridgely estate, the formation of Sri Sarada Math, Mother herself, Vedanta in the hands and hearts of ordinary people—each was significant to Swami Vivekananda's life or vision. It seems no surprise to me that the 20th anniversary of Sri Sarada Society falls within the worldwide celebration of Swamiji's 150th birthday.

*Jayanti*

*SRI SARADA SOCIETY UPDATE* was first published in May 1995. The name was changed to *SRI SARADA SOCIETY NOTES* in 1998. To mark the Society's 20th anniversary we have prepared an ebook collection of all newsletter issues through 2011. It is available for download as a PDF from <http://srisarada.org/newsletter.html>



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