

Sri Sarada Society Notes

Dedicated to Holy Mother

Fall 2005, Volume 11, Issue 2



THE SPIRITUAL VALUE OF WORK

Among the written reminiscences of Sri Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother, one by Sarayubala Devi tells of a visit by an older woman and her daughter-in-law. One imagines that they are frequent visitors, as we learn that one of them shows no hesitation in coming forward to dress Mother's hair. What happens next is both touching and amusing. To everyone's surprise, the woman pulls some strands of hair from Sarada Devi's head and ties them into the skirt of her sari, saying, "I shall preserve them as a souvenir."

While Mother is described as being embarrassed, there is a hint of humor in her reply: "Why would you do that? I have thrown away so much hair before."

A little later, after the worship and distribution of prasad, the women were still with Mother. Golap Ma and Sarayubala were also present. The older woman, who had known the Master, said, "Sri Ramakrishna gave us many instructions. But we have carried out very few of them. Had we followed his advice, we would not have suffered so much in the world. We are attached to the world and are always running after this or that work."

Who cannot relate to this woman's plight? How wise she seems. How common for us to think: "Ah, if only I did not have so much to do, then I would be able to concentrate on my spiritual practices. If I could be free of responsibility, then...."

Mother's reply stops us short. Instead of sympathizing with the woman and agreeing that her attachment to the world is unfortunate, Mother replies, "One must do some work. Through work alone can one remove the bondage of work, not by avoiding work. Total detachment comes later on. One should not be without work even for a moment."

To me, this is a significant teaching by Mother. Like Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita*, when called to reflect upon our circumstances in the light of spiritual teachings we are apt to forget that we are where we are for a purpose. Or, more often, we mistake the purpose to be our own rather than God's.



Unlike Arjuna, we are not likely to be given a vision of God's purpose, although bits and pieces may become apparent through time. However, quite like Arjuna, we are called to trust that we are fulfilling that divine purpose and to realize this is true for whatever situation we are in. Krishna tells Arjuna, "You have the responsibility to work, but you have no claim to the fruit of your labor."

Holy Mother reminds us that learning detachment is a process. As always, her teaching is practical: "Through work alone can one remove the bondage of work, not by avoiding it." That is, it is only while engaged in the responsibilities and activities at hand that we can begin to practice nonattachment. It is only in doing what is before us that we can begin to think we are doing God's will. The moment we reject the responsibilities of our circumstances we are declaring them to be our own, for we can only reject what we think is ours to claim in the first place. In so doing, we separate ourselves from God and divine will. This is both the cause of our attachment and the reason we think our circumstances unsuitable.

We must remember that our part in this divine play is born from our own karma. Hence Mother reminds us, "It is essential that one should work. It is through work alone that one may break asunder the bonds of karma; only then is one free from desires. One shouldn't be without work even for a moment."

Mother's teachings are especially helpful for those of us who have felt the need to be more aware of the role we play in political activity. Like Arjuna on the battlefield, it seems that we are called by circumstance to do our duty as citizens. However, as spiritual aspirants, we have also a tremendous opportunity to practice nonattachment. As Mother tells one disciple, "Work to remove the sufferings of the world," so may we put our best effort into holding up the higher goals and ideals of our nation and humanity while learning to leave the outcome to God.

Jayanti

IN MOTHER'S WORDS: "Always be engaged in some work or the other.

It is conductive to the health of both the body and the mind."

PASSING ON THE LIGHT

Recent issues of *SRI SARADA SOCIETY NOTES* featured a series by Pravrajika Akhandaprana on various ways in which the principles of Vedanta may be made meaningful to Western youth. One very effective way is through music and it was mentioned that she was working on a CD of children's songs.

Recorded with the Sunday School of the Vedanta Society of Southern California, "Peace in 31 Languages" is now available. The CD includes 18 songs for learning and singing along with. Many of the songs were written and adapted by Pravrajika Akhandaprana herself.

The net proceeds from "Peace in 31 Languages" will go to UNICEF to help child victims of war. If you would like to purchase a CD, please send \$20 or whatever you can to Sister Helga Bluemel (Akhandaprana), Sarada Convent, 2027 N. Vine St., Hollywood, CA 90068.

PRAVRAJIIKA VIVEKAPRANA RETURNS

Devotees on both the North and South American continents eagerly await the return of Pravrajika Vivekaprana to the West during October through December of this year. A senior nun of Sri Sarada Math, a self-administered women's monastic order headquartered in Dakshineswar, Kolkata (Calcutta), India, Pravrajika Vivekaprana is head of a retreat center located in Pangot. Situated in the Himalayas, the retreat offers a quiet, peaceful setting for serious spiritual seekers.

Pravrajika Vivekaprana has often visited the Western Hemisphere to conduct retreats and classes, since first coming as a participant in the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions. She is now returning after a four-year absence, during which she established Pangot.

Her visit is made possible by the generous efforts of many devotees and is being co-sponsored in the United States by Sarada Center and Sri Sarada Society. During her ten-week stay, Pravrajika Vivekaprana will be giving classes and retreats in La Paloma and Montevideo, Uruguay; at the Vivekananda Retreat, Ridgely, in upstate New York; and in Santa Barbara, California.

To the right is a brief listing of dates and topics being offered in each location. Please contact those listed for complete information. You can also visit <http://srisarada.org/talks.html> for updates. Sri Sarada Society is exploring innovative ways to make lectures by Pravrajika Vivekaprana and others more available to devotees.

A Challenge for Modern Minds, a collection of lectures by Pravrajika Vivekaprana, is available in paperback from <http://vedanta.org> and <http://amazon.com> and as an ebook from <http://www.llumina.com/store/achallenge1.htm>.

SHIPS

In our park there is a lake
Quite big enough to sail upon,
But it seems to go nowhere—
How'll I know when I get there?
I watch big ships sail to and fro
And I wonder if they know

Where they go.

Grown-ups sail around like that;
They run and rush both to and fro;
I often wonder if they know
Where they go.

From MY SONG GARDEN, a book of poetry for children, by Sister Devamata, Laura Franklin Glenn.



La Paloma, Uruguay

Octobet 6–11 Durga Puja Celebration
Shakti, the Divine Energy, the Divine Power
October 13–16 and October 25–28
Universal Message of the *Bhagavad Gita*

Montevideo, Uruguay

October 17–23 Retreat
Integration of Personality According to Vedanta
Contact Tamar Hesse about programs in Uruguay.
Phone: (00598) 479-6487
Internet: atmarama@adinet.com.uy

Vivekananda Retreat, Ridgely, Stone Ridge, NY

November 5–6
Introduction to Practical Vedanta
November 8–12 and November 14–18
Practical Vedanta, Parts 1 and 2
November 19–20
Sister Nivedita and Swami Vivekananda
November 22–27 (women only)
Holy Mother and Advaita Vedanta
Contact Caroline Giorgi about programs at Ridgely.
Phone: (845) 687-4574
Internet: zzclg@aol.com

St. Mary's Retreat House, Santa Barbara, CA

December 2–4 and December 5–7
Chapter Two of the *Bhagavad Gita*
Contact Amrita Salm soon to reserve a space at St. Mary's.
Phone: (805) 684-2509
Internet: saradacenter@aol.com, <http://saradacenter.org>

GURU-DISCIPLE RELATIONSHIP

This is the third installment in a series on the life of Laura Franklin Glenn, Sister Devamata, who became Swami Paramananda's first disciple and served as his chief assistant.

As Laura Glenn stood on the pier waiting for him to disembark, her heart told her, even before they had met, that this was the one: the teacher she was destined to follow. Her inner "sense" proved to be true. In March 1907, within three months of his arrival, Swami Paramananda initiated Laura, giving her the name Devamata.

Shortly thereafter, he arranged for her to study in India under Swami Ramakrishnananda from 1907 to 1909. She returned wearing the garb of a brahmacharini. She became known to everyone as Sister Devamata.

The special guru–disciple relationship between Swami Paramananda and Devamata was also one of mother and son. He addressed her in his letters as "Mother, dear" and signed them as "your son."

Sent to assist Swami Abhedananda at the New York center, Swami Paramananda was later empowered by President Swami Brahmananda to work independently in Boston. Having no fixed headquarters, Swami Paramananda was delivering lectures in public venues and giving classes in private homes in the Boston area when Devamata returned from India. She became his bedrock of support, always there with practical advice and the needed know-how. And in the spring of 1910, the Vedanta Center found its first permanent home at 16 St. Botolph Street.

About this time, Devamata was appointed by her guru to administer the new Vedanta Center at 1808 Kalorama Road in Washington, DC. Dynamic and strong willed, Devamata often traveled to Washington to conduct classes and give lectures. Eventually, it became a branch of the Boston Center and remained so until it was dissolved in 1917.

In 1911, Swami Paramananda launched a magazine, *Message of the East*, which was published continuously for over fifty years. Devamata was heavily involved in its publication, transcribing many of the swami's lectures. By 1914, nine new booklets were published under Paramananda's name based on the material she had garnered from his lectures and his letters to her.

In the predawn hours of May 19, 1914, members of the Vedanta Center arrived at 1 Queensbury Street. Alighting from their horse cab, they stood for a moment in silent prayer on the broad steps leading to the front door before entering their new home. Dedicated by Paramananda in the name of the Supreme Being of the Universe, the Center quickly became one of the accepted religious organizations in Boston. The community grew and by 1921 the house was full. Sister Devamata assumed the role of novice mistress to those who joined, imposing on them the austerity charac-

terizing her own spiritual life. Her penchant for rules and organizing stood in sharp contrast to the freedom-loving way of the swami.

When the need arose to make extensive renovations to the house, Devamata supervised a six-month project. The change resulted in six new bedrooms, two bathrooms, a laundry room, large and small storage rooms, and a sun parlor. The dining room and cellar were also enlarged and the seating capacity of the chapel was increased.

Early in 1922, at the age of 55, Devamata contracted encephalitis. By May, her death seemed imminent. Paramananda asked the community to hold a three-day and three-night vigil in an effort to save her life. In the middle of the first night, Devamata suddenly felt a heavy burden drop from her. The doctor who came the next morning was stunned by the change in her condition. Over the next few months, she regained her strength, though her left side remained partially paralyzed and her speech slightly garbled.

No longer able to lecture, she turned to writing. Her efforts include a two-volume biography of Swami Paramananda, a biography of Sri Ramakrishna, a monumental compilation of Swami Paramananda's works into *A BOOK OF DAILY THOUGHTS AND PRAYERS*, and the still widely read book *DAYS IN AN INDIAN MONASTERY*, to name a few.

As the house reached capacity again, the swami felt the need for a different line of action, a place set in nature where forms of human expression such as art, music, and crafts would be encouraged. It would be a home for a monastic community where individuals committed to sadhana would find room for self-expression coupled with self-sacrifice. A 140-acre tract of land high in the La Crescenta hills in California was found. In April of 1923, Sister Devamata, Sister Seva, and Mangala set off from the East Coast and traveled west to open Ananda Ashrama. The consecration of the ground for the Temple of the Universal Spirit at Ananda Ashrama took place in 1927. Dedicated to all the religions of the world, it was built under Devamata's supervision during Swami Paramananda's 1928 trip to India.

After she had been snatched from the jaws of death, Devamata's attitude underwent a transformation from the austerity of the earlier days. And as she advanced in years, she faced increasing physical misery. She fractured her leg in a fall and spent months in bed. With the onset of Parkinson's disease, her movements became more restricted. Eventually she was confined to a wheelchair. Dictating a booklet entitled *COMPANION TO PAIN*, she wrote, "Physical ailments are not a misfortune. They are often remedies—remedies for deeper sickness of the mind or heart or character. They cure by chastening. They make us brave, strong, and enduring. Pain allied with spirit heals and exalts." Devamata passed quietly and suddenly in her sleep on December 15, 1942.

Joan Shack

IMAGES FROM THE PAST

In this issue we include three images from the ten glass slides made available to Sri Sarada Society through the efforts of Rosanne Adams Junkins, archivist for the Eliot Baha'i Community and historian for Green Acre, in Eliot, Maine. The slides were produced from photographs taken by Ralph Sylvester Bartlett, a relative of Sarah Farmer, and showcase familiar figures in Vedanta's early history, dating from 1873 to 1906.

We note that Olea Bull, daughter of Sara and Ole Bull, was often found in the company of her mother's friends. In the detail of a photo taken in July 1906, we see Olea (right) with Betty Leggett and Josephine MacLeod. The three are standing on a precipice on Mount Fløien in Bergen, Norway, the birthplace of Olea's father. The sisters, Betty and Josephine, together with Sara had helped Swami Vivekananda establish his Vedanta mission both in the West and in India.

To the right are photos of the Bull villa, both taken during the 1870s. The villa is located on a island in the North Sea called Lysøen, meaning "The Island of Light," and was built in 1873 by Ole Bull. The Norwegian violin virtuoso had significant influence on contemporary music and often entertained fellow artists and musicians at this enchanted summer residence. The wood frame mansion is a blend of Norwegian, Moorish, and Russian motifs and includes a sixty-foot music room with an enormously high ceiling supported by elaborately carved columns. Ole Bull transformed his 175-acre property into a fairy-tale kingdom by adding romantic

paths, ponds, gazebos, exotic trees, and bushes amid the island's lush natural forests.

The world renowned violinist passed away on Lysøen in 1880, when Olea was nine years old. In 1973 the villa and all its contents were given to the Society for the Preservation of Norwegian Ancient Monuments by Sylvea Bull Curtis.



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