

Sri Sarada Society Notes

Dedicated to Holy Mother

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ADJUSTING OUR VISION

Adapted from a talk given by Dharmadas at the Olema retreat center in Northern California. Dharmadas is a longtime devotee of Vedanta.

It's difficult to choose just one of Mother's teachings to focus on. Many articles consider her final words:

"If you want peace of mind, do not find fault with others. Rather learn to see your own faults."

I find this teaching extremely difficult to live by. As soon as I'm introduced to someone, my mind starts doing a checklist of faults:

- *What's with those clothes?*
- *Did this guy go to school?*
- *When was the last time he saw a dentist?*
- *He looks untrustworthy.*
- *I'll bet he votes Republican.*

The list goes on and on. But, this idea of don't find fault with others is not exactly the subject I wanted to talk about, yet it is related. In one of the biographies of the Holy Mother, I found this statement:

"With her power of introspection she saw the spiritual side of all and refused to see their faults."

What I'm getting at is that it doesn't say that Mother didn't find fault with others, it says she "refused to see their faults." This strikes me as literally impossible. It's like saying someone developed their eyes to the point where they could force themselves to not see the specific wavelength of the color blue. Out of the whole spectrum of colors, they refuse to see blue. There are other quotes about the Mother along these lines. For example, from that same biography:

"Her last instruction to a disciple was to make the entire world one's own and never to see the fault of another."

I was astonished; not only was Holy Mother able to practice not seeing faults for herself, but she was instructing a disciple to not see faults. I wondered if this was just a matter of translation. Perhaps sometimes it was translated as "don't

find the faults of others," and other times translated as "don't see the faults of others," but both mean the same thing.

I suspected that there was a deeper meaning here—and that the translators knew exactly what they were doing. I believe that there are two levels the Mother talked about: a preliminary effort must be made to stop your mind from seeking faults in others, and then a more sophisticated,

higher practice where you actually don't see the faults. You can get a sense of how that is possible by observing your own mind in reaction to a beloved child acting out a prank. If it was a stranger's child, you might be intolerant, and be annoyed that the child was acting without discipline. But if it's your own child, whom you love without condition, you would be surprised to find someone else could be bothered about it.

I also had another theory about how this could be, which had to do with that old idea that you can only recognize faults in others because you have those same faults in yourself. I

found this direct quote of the Mother that seems to back this up:

"The mind is everything. It is in the mind alone that one feels pure and impure. A person, first of all must make his or her own mind guilty and then alone they can see another's guilt. Does anything ever happen to another if you enumerate their faults? It only injures you. This has been my attitude. Hence I cannot see anybody's faults. If someone does a trifle for me, I try to remember that person even for that. To see the faults of others! One should never do it."

She is telling us to not see the faults of others—literally not to *see* them. She also is giving instruction about how to accomplish that: by purity of mind. Replace the idea of faults with positive thoughts and remembrances of good deeds. She practiced that and realized that. And by her practice, she serves as an example of practical Vedanta for us to follow.



IN MOTHER'S WORDS: "One must not speak an unpleasant truth unnecessarily. By indulging in rude words one's nature becomes rude. One's sensitivity is lost if one has no control over one's speech."

ATHLETIC LIVING

Vedanta psychology recognizes that emotional feelings cannot be turned off like a water tap and does not encourage repression or denial. Instead, it teaches one to be aware of feelings and desires without guilt or shame. It is what we are not aware of, after all, that usually gets us in trouble. And it is unfulfilled desire that makes us angry or jealous or mean or other negative reactions. In the same way, we often cling to the happiness we feel when desires are met because we know this happiness may not last. And, alas, just when we feel “satisfied,” new desires are bound to arise. Thus desire, by definition, renders us selfish and uneasy, whether we are aware of it working within us or not.

However, insofar as we do not want to be driven by desire, we can choose not to be. As long as we are aware, choice is always within our power. We see athletes make conscious choices as a necessary part of their training and we applaud their success. Vedanta teaches one to approach everyday life as a spiritual athlete.

Usually we identify with our emotions. We think of ourselves in terms of what we are feeling and say, “I am jealous,” or “I am happy,” or “I am concerned,” or “I am excited,” or “I am hurt,” and so forth—when we are none of these. Rather, we are the one who is experiencing these various emotional reactions, just as we feel pain when we strain a muscle or break a bone. When we are physically injured we try to do things in a different way in order to avoid the pain. When avoidance is not an option, we tend to adapt by learning to take our focus off the pain we are feeling. Whether we are aware of making these adjustments or not, we have some sense that our own identity is not linked to the physical pain we feel. It is this separation that allows us to understand the cause or source of the pain and adjust our experience.

Vedanta emphasizes this separation by highlighting our identity as the one who is witnessing the experience of both pain and pleasure. But Vedanta does not stop at the physical body. It reminds us that we are also the witness of our thoughts and emotions. This is not an earth-shattering observation. When we speak of a child “learning to control its emotions” we are referring to something the child must become aware of and become master over. Similarly, whenever we think purposefully we become aware of our thoughts and exercise our ability to choose what we wish to think about. So Vedanta is simply taking a very practical experience and bringing the meaning more thoroughly into awareness. That we seem to have less control of our thoughts and emotions than we do of our bodies is mostly due to lack of training.

For approaching everyday life as an athlete, Vedanta emphasizes learning to use our thoughts and emotions as tools,

rather than being dragged about by them. But as with the highly trained athlete in sports, the mastery of something more valuable than desire fulfillment doesn’t happen overnight. With understanding as our guide and awareness our gymnasium we, too, are in training. Part of this training involves learning to separate our identity from our emotional feelings, whether positive or negative.

In practical, personal, terms this means that instead of thinking “I am happy,” I try to recognize that I am *experiencing happiness*. Instead of “being lonely,” I try to remember that I am *feeling loneliness*. Rather than “being angry,” the spiritual athlete tries to stop the impulse to react angrily with the thought “Ah, this is anger I am experiencing.”

This conscious practice of separating our identity from what we are experiencing or feeling helps drive a wedge between “feeling” and “reacting.” The idea is not that we should not respond in situations, but that we may respond more effectively. The more we become used to observing our feelings as separate from ourselves, the better they serve us as indicators of something we may need to be aware of and the more freedom we have “to think before we act.”

Approaching life as a spiritual athlete adds the element of adventure. Rather than being apprehensive and hesitant, we can embrace any situation as an opportunity. In addition to teaching us to be aware of what we are thinking and feeling, Vedanta reminds us that how we think has the power to shape our experience. Again, this is a very basic truth. To draw another example from childhood, when a baby falls during its first attempts to walk it will typically cry out in fear. What is our response? Knowing the child is not hurt we laugh and clap our hands. Seeing us happy, the baby laughs too. Nothing has changed in the situation except that the child has been distracted from its fear. As a result, he or she learns that simply falling down is not a fearful experience. The child’s understanding—and attitude—with respect to falling has changed.

It is the power of attitude that is the spiritual athlete’s most effective asset. Just as the physical athlete has a particular goal or achievement toward which he or she makes a dedicated effort, the spiritual athlete also has an aim. We are all familiar with the sage saying that “if life gives you lemons, make lemonade,” and many of us can recall instances when we have observed individuals seeming to experience the same circumstance in vastly different ways. Vedanta brings this ordinary awareness of the power of attitude into sharp focus.

Armed with the understanding gained from observing thoughts and emotions and learning to act rather than react, the spiritual athlete continues toward his or her chosen aim or ideal, consciously and authentically reshaping life experiences—while, like all athletes, enjoying the effort!

Jayanti Hoye

FROM THE BOOKSHELF

Relief of Tension, Depression and Anxiety Through Spiritual Living by Swami Tathagatananda, 2007, Vedanta Society of New York. Reviewed by Joan Shack.

Well written, easy to read, and thought-provoking, Swami Tathagatananda's discussion of tension, depression, and anxiety speaks to modern times. Each chapter revolves around a single theme: Spiritual thought is the greatest motive force for the individual and for the common welfare. While emphasizing the power of the mind, a concept familiar within Vedanta, the book's title is in keeping with present-day self-help literature, giving it the potential to attract a wider audience beyond the Ramakrishna tradition. Yes, the eternal principles of Vedanta permeate the work, but not in the garb of religion and not necessarily with reference to a philosophy.

The Swami uses the words and lives of numerous saints, authors, poets, philosophers, researchers, psychologists, statesmen, wellness specialists, education professionals, and ordinary individuals to convey his message. The first chapter alone contains quotes from over thirty individuals. Also presented are transforming incidents in the lives of four notable persons, each of whom made a conscious choice to live by higher ideals. Included are Leo Tolstoy, Russia's literary voice; Maharishi Devandranath Tagore of India; William James, American philosopher; and Viktor Frankl, concentration camp survivor and renowned Austrian professor of psychiatry and neurology.

Arising from this broad context, the laws that rule the mind, according to raja yoga, are presented. The curious reader learns that the mind takes the nature of the thoughts it holds; that we see the world subjectively through the prism of the mind; that minds act on each other to afflict or benefit humanity; and last, that the mind, transcending thought and the senses through the power of imagination and concentration, gives knowledge of the Self.

The swami also focuses on the lives of four individuals who have "understood the deeper meaning of suffering." These include Louise Hay, New Age metaphysical lecturer and author, who assumed responsibility for her own physical wellbeing; an unnamed severely crippled veteran whose "enlightened attitude and undefeated spirit" opened the door to brilliant academic accomplishments; Harold Russell, a young handicapped sergeant in World War II, whose sense of inferiority was overcome by a change of attitude; and Nancy, a patient whom medical science could not help and who found relief through "deep relaxation and intense concentration on the area of her pain."

The author observes that the body responds to the thoughts that the mind feeds on—a complex interdependence exists between the two. The inner fire of the human

spirit burnt away the bonds of despair, allowing each of those profited to conquer their adversity.

Chapter Two contrasts civilization with culture. We live in a civilized world, but are largely unaware of our spiritual essence. The author defines a cultured person as one who has transformed their mind and emotion by applying spiritual principles to everything they think or do.

Loneliness, stress, and fear are some of the greatest medical problems of this century. Once again, individual examples are given in which these problems are overcome when the mind is nurtured with spiritual ideals. Our belief system affects the wellbeing and healing of the body, the Swami notes. In this context he explains the use of pranayama, prayer, and meditation.

The author's broad knowledge base is best exemplified in Chapter Three, where he cites passages from a leaflet of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, the preamble of UNESCO's constitution, the twelve steps of AA members, and prestigious medical journals.

Chapter Four further explores the premise that all problems originate in the mind, "whether the unhealthy condition is physical, psychological or emotional." Basic self-deceptions are given practical spiritual antidotes.

This book holds the reader's attention to the very end as the stories just keep coming! Presented compellingly within the context of real life, the teachings become very relevant. I hope this book finds the audience it deserves and, more importantly, can positively impact.

New Releases by Pravrajika Vivekaprana

Various lectures of Pravrajika Vivekaprana, senior sannyasini of Sri Sarada Math and the Ramakrishna Sarada Mission, are being transcribed and edited by Indu Ramchandani, who has accompanied the sannyasini on her lecture tours. In bringing out these booklets, the compiler consciously strives to retain Pravrajika Vivekaprana's unique approach to explaining Vedanta philosophy. This uniqueness is due to her in-depth "study of the teachings of Swami Vivekananda and Hindu philosophy in the context of human psychology" for over 50 years. Three booklets are now available for sale: "The Path of Knowledge," "The Universal Message," and "Death or Immortality." To order, email Caroline Giorgi at zzcgl@aol.com or write Sri Sarada Society, P.O. Box 38116, Albany, NY 12203.

Many questions arise in the minds of people when they talk of renunciation. "Aren't we supposed to make money and enjoy ourselves?" is the most common question. In its depth, renunciation is giving up that which is most difficult to give up, the central selfishness of the personality. From the Vedantic point of view, till we can get out of the centre, we have not renounced. Outer renunciation is comparatively easier.

—Pravrajika Vivekaprana

How To Contact Us: Sri Sarada Society, P.O. Box 38116, Albany, New York 12203, PHONE (518) 869-6088

FAX (518) 869-6084, NEW EMAIL notes@srisarada.org, HOLY MOTHER'S WEB SITE <http://www.srisarada.org/>

SURFING, VEDANTA STYLE

Our article on “Athletic Living” (page 2) was inspired by the following submission by a longtime Vedantin. She writes, “Swami Vivekananda said Vedanta is practical and Mother demonstrated this. But I think we need to hear from devotees about how Vedanta has ‘worked’ in their lives.” We agree and invite you to submit your experiences, signed or unsigned, to notes@srisarada.org or by writing Sri Sarada Society at P.O. Box 38116, Albany, NY 12203.

Vedanta came to the rescue in my mid-thirties, when I felt the socially accepted pressure to get married. That I had no interest in exchanging satisfying friendships for romance left me feeling “out-of-place,” to say the least. Vedanta teachings were welcome, reaffirming that society doesn’t have a corner on the answers. I was not crazy to hear a different beat or follow a different path...or to love in a different way. Thus, 18 years later, I wasn’t expecting to fall in love.

Well, once I stopped reeling in surprise I knew I was facing a clear fork in the road. By one route I would continue on my way, single. By the other, as a couple? Either path appeared full of potential. But which to take? I needed to know for sure so that I could continue my own journey.

I suppose I’ve always been rather straightforward. It just seems that if someone may be playing a significant role in one’s life it’s best to try to find out...so, I asked my new friend. Though apprehensive I knew I would be okay with whatever the answer was. Being independent in nature and finding the possibility of a romantic relationship closed, I readily embraced the alternate path.

Setting out on my own this time was indeed an adventure. Life became a matter of hopping on my “Vedanta surfboard” and riding the waves. Now the principles had come alive, coaching me to be a ready observer. Allowing myself to acknowledge that I felt drawn to this friend, I was definitely

“in training.” I had fallen in love. Being willing to continue on my own did not cancel the feelings of attachment. As I witnessed the rise of various emotions and felt the pull to react, these “waves” became learning experiences. I found myself thinking “Ah, so *this* is what ____ feels like.”

I found the most challenging and productive waves came from those events that were beyond my control. For example, when my friend started dating one person regularly, I was at first surprised by the feelings being stirred up and soon understood how, when driven by desire, such feelings can give birth to some ugly reactions. Yet I was never able to identify feeling jealous. Rather, I realized that part of me was still holding out hope—a hope I didn’t know I had! So seeing him dating sent a message of finality that allowed me to begin “clearing out the cobwebs,” so to speak.

Again, when he became seriously ill, I experienced a new intensity of concern that was eventually transformed into an equally new level of acceptance. Being neither needed nor able to help brought reality to the concept of surrender.

I came through the adventure with more compassion for others. It’s pretty easy to tell when someone is being motivated by selfishness, often from emotional pain. But it’s not as easy to understand the why, until walking in their shoes.

Vedanta is more than a philosophy. It is a way of life that encourages self-discovery and understanding. It is not about living a particular lifestyle, but in the way we embrace the life we live. Sri Ramakrishna said, “As long as I live, so long do I learn.” Finding myself riding unexpected waves, I was reminded of this truth. Our opportunity to learn continues throughout life, in major and in subtle ways. Being truly in love was a major experience I still needed in order to discover and integrate some remaining parts of myself. Not as something to be acted upon, but as something to be felt, acknowledged, embraced...and let go.

EDITORIAL STAFF: Joan Shack, Janet Walker, Jayanti Hoye, Ellen Paull • **CIRCULATION:** Joan Peak, Pat Gibbons

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P.O. Box 38116, Albany, New York 12203
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