

Sri Sarada Society Notes

Dedicated to Holy Mother

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LIFE'S STRUGGLES: REMINDERS OF SOMETHING MORE

Adapted from an article that originally appeared in the Spring 1999 issue of SRI SARADA SOCIETY NOTES

Sri Sarada Devi managed a household, cooked, cleaned, and was surrounded by family members who caused her no end of trouble. Due to the death of her younger brother and the insanity of her sister-in-law, she assumed the life-long care of her niece Radhu. We can identify with such a life because it is familiar. Hearing about the difficulties Mother encountered within her own family inspires faith that she truly understands our struggles. When she speaks of patience and forbearance, we can listen and learn because her life reflects our own. And if we pay close attention to her actions, we discover that patience and forbearance do not mean resigning oneself to less than expected. Rather they represent Mother's positive embrace of the world around her.

Knowing this world was not the whole of Reality, she was able to accept it without making demands. For this same reason, whenever necessary, she possessed the strength to withstand unreasonable demands on her. Mother's day-to-day example gives us a glimpse of Truth by showing us a different way to approach and embrace life, as well as how to let it go.

Radhu was in Mother's constant care well into her adulthood. Yet a change was observed as Mother approached death. While she received other visitors despite the objection of those attending her during her final days, Mother refused even to look at her niece and forbade her to enter the room. Sri Sarada Devi is described as being a mother-heart of compassion. What caused such seemingly uncaring and paradoxical behavior? Mother gives a clue.

She tells us that after Sri Ramakrishna's death, he appeared to her and placed a child in her arms. "This is your yogamaya," he told her. After the Master had left the body, Sri Sarada Devi's naturally high plane of existence lost its moorings within the world. The Master was now free. Likewise, Mother longed to be free from the bonds of physical life. Yet Sri Ramakrishna had left Mother behind for a reason. She had work to do. Something was needed to draw

her mind back to the world. Mother recognized Radhu as the child Sri Ramakrishna had placed in her arms.

Radhu, Mother's niece, her thread of union with this world, was certainly not the pleasant, ideal, loving child we would expect to be associated with Mother. A willful child and unstable adult, Radhu was a constant source of aggravation and trouble. It is recorded that she was even physically abusive to Mother. We expect that our life will one day be perfect and carefree, and we often resent anyone or anything which "spoils" our dream. Surely Sri Sarada Devi deserves the life we seek for ourselves?

Yet Mother did not reject Radhu out of disappointment or bitterness. When her life was drawing to an end, she withdrew from the one thread of attachment which held her mind in the world. She knew her work was finished and that she had remained behind solely to help others understand that life offers us so much more than a pleasant, happy existence. We cling to our worldly attachments because we have forgotten our true nature. Gradually, through disenchanting blows, we come to want more from life. We expand our horizon to seek what is enduring. How much longer would our spiritual journey be if Mother offered us only pleasant experiences, if her life did not mirror our own?

This world is alluring, after all. We may be reminded of a story of Vishnu. After incarnating as a pig and having finished his rescue mission, Vishnu found it quite pleasant to remain on earth in his pig body. The gods tried everything to get Vishnu to assume his true identity, but not until Shiva came to pierce Vishnu's pig body did the Lord emerge laughing. Being a pig was divine play to him!

Like Vishnu, Mother knew her true identity. As she herself put it: "A realized soul laughs upon leaving the body, while we weep, being ignorant of our true nature." Until it was time for her to leave the world, Mother remained bound for our sake through her attachment to Radhu. She did so in a way consistent with Truth, without hint or suggestion that life founded on worldly attachments is meant to be the ideal.

Jayanti Hoyer

IN MOTHER'S WORDS: "These worldly ties are transitory. Today they seem to be the be-all and end-all of life, and tomorrow they vanish. Your real tie is with God."

ARTISTIC SALUTES TO MOTHER

Esther Warkov offers her appreciation of Hymn to Holy Mother: Choral Suite with Flute, Harp, Organ, Tambura, and Finger Cymbals and Invocations: Hymns from the Upanishads, composed by John Schlenck. Published by Vedantic Arts Recordings. Available online from <http://vedantawest.org>, <http://amazon.com>, and <http://cdbaby.net> or by mail to Vedanta West Communications, P. O. Box 237041, New York, NY 10023.

Recognizing that the appreciation of a musical work is a subjective experience, I offer a personal reflection on John Schlenck's *HYMN TO HOLY MOTHER*, a choral suite with small ensemble based on the text *Sri Sarada Stotram* by Swami Abhedananda. While readers may be familiar with Schlenck's many compositions and recordings from his over 40 years as a professional composer and music director at the Vedanta Society of New York, I only recently learned of Schlenck from a Portland, Oregon, radio broadcast of *RAISE THE SELF BY THE SELF: A CANTATA ON THE BHAGAVAD GITA*. I soon came to appreciate Schlenck as a phenomenon. Whereas Western composers have incorporated elements of Indian music and/or taken inspiration from India's sacred texts, Schlenck has created a unique repertoire focusing on texts, melodies, and persons central to the Ramakrishna–Vivekananda tradition. So after hearing the radio broadcast, I determined to survey Schlenck's intriguing musical compositions and to share my enthusiasm with those unfamiliar with his works.

HYMN TO HOLY MOTHER remains, for me, the perfect introduction to Schlenck's sacred compositions. Its inspired quality allows the composition to be heard tirelessly again and again. As a testimony to this, I cite my own response as a listener whose preferences include contemporary Western art music, world music, and experimental jazz—in short, music of a complex nature. After I had heard *HYMN TO HOLY MOTHER* numerous times, it served as a constant companion during a year of transition. I found it capable of providing inspiration, comfort, peace, and fresh musical interest on each hearing.

From a strictly musical point of view, this tireless quality results from a varied musical language that is sophisticated yet accessible. Schlenck creates a unique setting for each verse, utilizing textures and styles associated with earlier Western art and church musics. In *Purity* we hear the choir chant “Pure life” in a style reminiscent of both Gregorian plainsong and medieval polyphony, but with Schlenck's individual imprint. Listening to the finger cymbal accompaniment, I am transported hundreds of years back in time, imagining street songs accompanied by simple percussion. (You won't want to miss the delightful ending of this setting!) Echoes of the Renaissance period can be heard in Ramakrishna (“With your heart absorbed in Ramakrishna,

You are completely colored in his qualities,”), especially when the solo tenor sings to harp accompaniment. Other movements that feature a denser choral texture employ bold, yet accessible, harmonizations.

Personal reflection and an intimate, meditative quality are fostered by the small ensemble scoring (flute, harp, organ, tambura, and finger cymbals). Even in the bolder movements, the suite is never bombastic. The text is beautifully rendered in English by Schlenck with important contributions by Eric Johns (the librettist for Aaron Copeland's only opera, *THE TENDER LAND*). I especially appreciate the clarity of the setting, which enables the listener to easily meditate on the meaning of the text while imbibing the instrumental component. With its clearly discernable text, *HYMN TO HOLY MOTHER* can be appreciated both as uplifting “background” music while we attend to other tasks or as a deeply inspiring composition worthy of our full attention.

This CD is a wonderful acquisition for anyone who appreciates the message of Vedanta. For devotees of Holy Mother, it is a gem that could only inspire greater devotion. For the followers of the jnani path, I offer my own experience: you may find that *HYMN TO HOLY MOTHER* delivers a transmission of unanticipated bhakti as it tenderly draws you to contemplate the divinity of Sri Sarada Devi. *Unsolicited Grace: Accounts of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, a video by Robert Emrich with original music by Ron Bartlett. Vedanta Press, Hollywood, California. Available online from <http://vedanta.com>. Reviewed by Jayanti Hoya*

“Holy Mother played three different roles. Though they cannot be compartmentalized, you cannot separate them into compartments. She acted as mother, acted as teacher, and acted as divinity. Some disciples were impressed by her motherly love, some by her patience and kindness as a teacher, and some by her unsolicited grace as divinity assured in the vision of God.”

These introductory words of Swami Nikhilananda serve as the frame for an extraordinary exploration and revelation of Holy Mother. Emerging from a collage of music, art, photographs, breathtaking natural scenery, and computerized visual effects, one is transported into the presence of Mother herself through the recorded accounts of four swamis who knew her intimately: Swamis Prabhavananda, Nikhilananda, Aseshananda, and Gauriswarananda. Their observations and experiences have been thoughtfully interwoven to give a rare and living portrait of Mother in each of her aspects. While the printed words are tastefully captioned within the visual presentation to aid the listener, nothing can be more moving or sublime than hearing the voices of the swamis themselves. This unique preservation of history will become a treasured addition to the Vedanta tradition.

BENEATH THE SURFACE

Joan Shack introduces Gertrude Emerson in our series on women who have helped in shaping Vedanta in America

Taking a year's leave from her position as associate editor of *ASIA* magazine, Gertrude Emerson journeyed to India to give voice to the voiceless. She had made a previous visit to India, traveling extensively throughout the states and gathering information from a number of sources, including Mahatma Gandhi. But as she put it, "India had eluded me."

Her expressed intent after this visit was to come back, pick out a village to live in, and experience India at first hand. Her leave provided her this opportunity.

Destiny led her to Pachperwa, "the village of five trees," in northeastern India, bordering Nepal. From the outside looking in, India presents itself as amazingly diverse. Experiencing the country and culture from within, delving beneath the surface, Gertrude realized there is an overriding likeness among the people of India—in their view of life, in their ways of thinking, and in the ideals they live by.

The years 1926 and 1927 found Gertrude in Almora with her future husband, Boshi Sen, and Sister Christine; Christine was working on her memoirs, Boshi conducting plant experiments, and Gertrude editing her notes on her life in Pachperwa, which she would publish in England in 1930. Explaining the title, *VOICELESS INDIA*, she wrote, "The life of one village cannot be isolated from the common life of India." The book provides us with a wonderfully picturesque description of all aspects of village life, be it women grinding maize, tobacco sellers, the village dyer, the village confectioner, or the gestures of reverence of villagers passing the temple. In addition, she gives detailed insight into their everyday life, such as fetching water from the well, scrubbing kettles, grinding curry powder, tending the lamps, heating water, and making butter. Readers are able to share her amusement over a variety of incidents, for example, that her house was built with thirteen windows of five different sizes and that mango boards "disgraced" the front while teakwood "adorned" the back. Interestingly, by providing profiles of members of her household, the author gives us a rare opportunity to gauge the depth of her human insight and compassion.

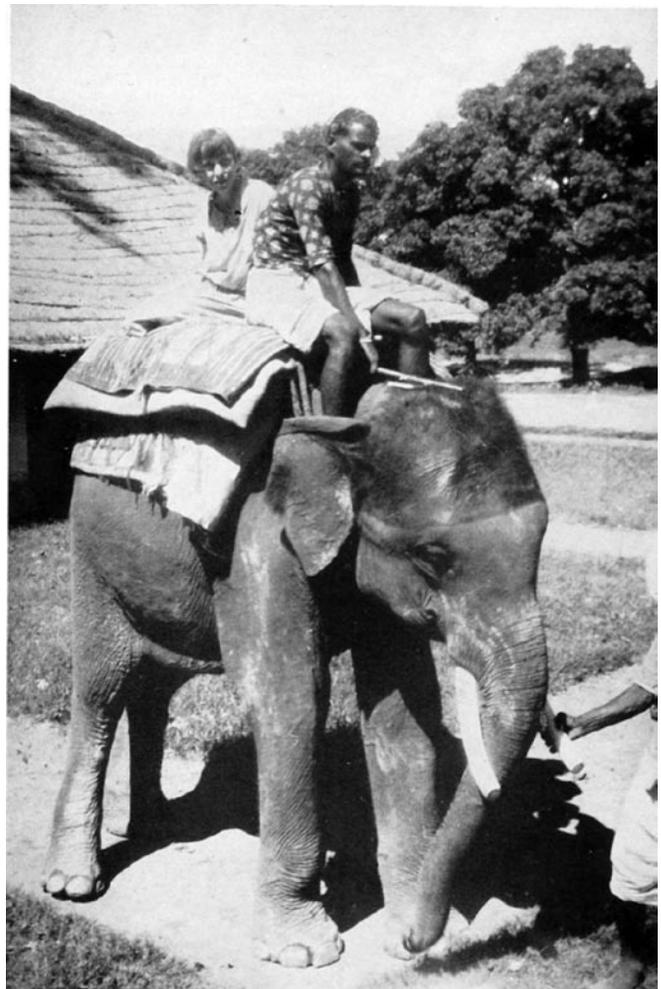
In the introduction to the first edition, Rabindranath Tagore writes: "I feel personally grateful to Miss Emerson for the masterly picture she has drawn of our pathetic village life...she has realized a complete vision of an alien life by making it her own." He applauds the "intellectual sanity displayed in this book."

In October 1932, Boshi Sen and Gertrude Emerson were married. In a letter to Boshi, Josephine MacLeod wrote, "Marital combination of East and West may be the quickest

way to get the leaven at work." It was Josephine, ever ready to aid others financially, who paid all expenses of a rented house in Almora near the Ramakrishna ashram, where Boshi built a "Vivekananda laboratory." In his youth, Boshi was a student of the renowned botanist Jagadish Chandra Bose. He was known to all the direct disciples of those early years. At his house at 8 Bosepara Lane, we find him and his brother caring for their ailing guru, Swami Sadananda, a disciple of Swami Vivekananda. When Sister Christine resigned her position at Sister Nivedita's girls' school in 1924, she also accepted housing at Bosepara Lane from Boshi. In 1928, Boshi, who was devoted to Christine, accompanied her back to the United States to help her recover her health.

Gertrude published *THE PAGEANT OF INDIA'S HISTORY* in 1948. A revised edition entitled *THE STORY OF EARLY INDIAN CIVILIZATION* was released in 1964. In her writings, Gertrude begins by turning back the pages of Indian history to reveal the earliest tools, cave paintings, primitive pottery, and the practice of rice cultivation in prehistoric

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After first arriving in Pachperwa on an elephant Gertrude Emerson became well acquainted with elephants and their ways.

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times. She describes India's priceless heritage: the ancient Indo-Aryans and the four *Vedas*, the eleven early *Upanishads*, the *puranas* of post-Vedic times, and the two Sanskrit epics the *RAMAYANA* and *MAHABHARATA*. Other chapters touch on the reform spirit of Buddhism and Jainism, the first Indian Empire, the Tamil kingdoms, India's Golden Age, and the spread of Indian culture beyond its shores and beyond its mountains. Her sister, Edith Emerson, is credited with the extensive illustrations throughout the book.

Along with three other accomplished New York women, Gertrude created a society to bring women explorers together, women whose work involved extensive travel and investigative research on unique places, people, or things in this world. The Society of Woman Geographers celebrated its 50th Anniversary in 1975. It continues to function as a forum for sharing experiences and knowledge. Chapters have opened in cities throughout the United States and the entire Society meets triennially.

REMEMBERING MOTHER'S DISCIPLE

A project is under way to collect remembrances of Swami Aseshanandaji, the last disciple of Sri Sarada Devi to leave the body. The swami was the head of The Vedanta Society of Portland, Oregon, for many years. So far about 25 responses have been collected, written by both monastics and non-monastics. The organizer hopes to have all remembrances in by June, although there is flexibility if needed. To learn more about this project, contact Esther Warkov in Portland, Oregon, at 971-255-0388 or email esther_warkov@comcast.net. Please pass on this request to others who may have met or known the swami.

MORE ON APPLIED VEDANTA

In response to our article on Applied Vedanta, Activism, and Mother a reader wrote: "I try to find the honey in the ordinary day-to-day life. My world is one of international peacemaking, a process which can be very tedious and often depressing. When some say it is fruitless, I cannot help but wonder." Jayanti Hoye shares the following thoughts.

Consider that Swami Vivekananda, who founded the Ramakrishna Mission and transformed the entire notion of a renunciate's relationship to society, had disdain for the Westerner's idea of "social service." Why? Because we were intent upon bringing about outcomes, outcomes that he said would never come about! In place of "helping the world," Swamiji introduced the service of God in man and, by extension, the service of God in the world.

When others are discouraged, you have Vedanta to inspire you. To work for peace is a noble work; that it is "tedious" is sadhana, spiritual practice. But if and how "peace" manifests is not ours to "obtain." It is for God to reveal. Through selfless service we draw closer to God. And the more we are able to withdraw our desires and expectations from our actions, the clearer the channel we become for God's will to manifest. In the words of Vivekananda,

Doing work is not religion, but work done rightly leads to freedom. In reality all pity is darkness, because whom to pity? Can you pity God? And is there anything else? Thank God for giving you this world as a moral gymnasium to help your development, but never imagine you can help the world. Be grateful to him who curses you, for he gives you a mirror to show what cursing is, also a chance to practise self-restraint; so bless him and be glad. Without exercise, power cannot come out; without the mirror, we cannot see ourselves.

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