

Sri Sarada Society Notes

Dedicated to Holy Mother

Spring 2009 Volume 15

ISIS: THE UNIVERSAL MOTHER

The author, Devadatta Kali (David Nelson), began his long association with Vedanta in 1966 and was initiated by Swami Prabhavananda three years later. After a 21-year career in classical music as a repertoire specialist, consultant, and executive co-producer for a number of recordings, he is now active as a writer on Hindu religion and spirituality. He is a frequent lecturer at the Vedanta Society of Southern California and is the author of two books, IN PRAISE OF THE GODDESS and THE VEILING BRILLIANCE.

For 3000 years Isis was the most powerful and beloved of Egypt's goddesses. From an early time other goddesses were understood as aspects of her supreme power, and this universalizing tendency would serve her later expansion throughout the Greco-Roman world after Egypt fell to Greek rule in 332 BCE (Before the Common Era). The religion of Isis spread west to the Iberian Peninsula, east to Asia Minor, and north through Gaul as far as London.

Eventually men and especially women from the humble to the noble classes came to regard Isis as a universal goddess. She was the mistress of the stars who ruled over heaven and earth, established laws, and presided over order and justice. Yet for all her cosmic grandeur Isis never lost her approachability and maternal tenderness. With the beating of her outstretched, jewel-colored wings, she was said to instill the breath of life in her human offspring. As the mother who suckled

her infant son Horus, she was the great nourisher and sustainer, many believe the prototype of the Madonna and Child. Because she was the source of life, all life—human, animal, and plant—was held to be sacred. That was a basic tenet of her religion. Isis protected the family and bestowed the blessings of fertility, abundant harvests, wealth, good fortune, and happiness on all. Through her association with ships and sailing, she granted safe passage through life, which was considered as fraught with danger as a

maritime voyage. She was revered as the great healer, and her power extended even to the granting of immortality. A hymn from one of her Egyptian temples underscores her universality: "Through you heaven and all the earth have their being, the breezes have their breath, and the sun its welcome radiance....All mortals who inhabit earth's broad expanse...utter your glorious name, each in the tongue of his own land....Being One, you are all goddesses named by all peoples. My lady and immortal savior, goddess of countless names, almighty Isis, I shall not cease to extol your power!...Be propitious and free me from all affliction, you whose name has might."

Five centuries after that hymn a Latin allegorical novel from around 160 BCE affords an eyewitness account of the religion of Isis in Greco-Roman times. The *METAMORPHOSES* of Apuleius allows us to experience the personal thoughts and feelings of a flesh-and-blood devotee of the Great Mother.

Apuleius clearly identifies with his protagonist, a Greek named Lucius, who dabbles in magic and is transformed into a golden ass—a mute beast still endowed with human emotions and intelligence. The spell can be reversed only with roses, but throughout a painful series of misadventures the magic flowers prove elusive. At last Isis reveals herself in a vision, wherein she calls herself "the embodiment of all gods

and goddesses." She promises to restore Lucius to his true form on the day of her great festival. Once restored, Lucius dedicates his life to the redeeming Queen of Heaven. We are privileged to glimpse his devotion through a prayer he utters at the time of his formal initiation into her monastic order, which appears on page 2 of this issue.

For further reading: Apuleius, THE GOLDEN ASS, tr. by P. J. Walsh (Oxford University Press); R. E. Witt, ISIS IN THE ANCIENT WORLD (Johns Hopkins University Press).



Left, bronze statue of Isis nursing Horus dating from the Ptolemaic dynasty of Egypt. Right, Madonna and Child painting viewed by Sri Ramakrishna.

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."

GOOD-BYE TO OUR SISTER



“Don’t worry about it,” Pat Gibbons said, referring to her passing. “I’ve done this before, many times!” For those of us who knew her it is easy to hear an unconcerned matter-of-factness in her statement even as she may have sought to reassure others.

Pat passed away early on the morning of January 20, 2009. She had been visited by her spiritual sisters the evening before. Rose Di Cerbo, Joan Peak, and Joan Shack spent several hours at her bedside as they reminisced about going on retreats and her various pilgrimages to India, Assisi, and various holy places. Pat was very much present. Despite her usual dismissal of “politics,” she was pleased with the election of Barack Obama.

Pat was a founding member of Sri Sarada Society, and Vedanta inspired and guided her life. A disciple of Swami Chidananda of the Divine Life Society, she would freely share books from her extensive spiritual library of books, tapes, and videos from various Vedanta traditions. Her generosity revealed itself in many ways, but especially through her many years of professional and volunteer service.

Pat was more aware of this world and beyond than she let on. Modest and unassuming, she would often cover her

own best motives with a veneer of eccentricity. Longtime friend Rose Di Cerbo recalls an insightful example.

One Saturday afternoon I came over with coin wrappers and offered to take on the task of cleaning out the coins she had tossed about the back seat of her car, with seeming disdain. “No no no—just leave it,” she buffed.

“But why Pat?” I asked. “I do not mind doing it. You can donate the coins to charity if you do not want them.”

“No, leave it, because it entertains my clients.” She explained that as the head of Child Protective Services for the county, she must often remove a child from a failed placement to another new foster care home and it keeps them quiet. “I let them take whatever they want and since I hate pennies most of them are eager to relieve me.”

Afterward, when I thought about it, I marveled at such complex and compassionate ingenuity. First there was the self-help necessary in picking up the money and second the benefit of helping someone by relieving them of the hated small change. In addition, the little child would go off to a new home with pockets stuffed with small change. What an inspired way to fill that little one with hope in the generosity and abundance of the universe. Pat was so very subtle this way.

Sister Pat, as I liked to call her, was one of the kindest persons I have known. As we feel a loss with her passing, I imagine she is smiling at us...perhaps even chuckling a bit. She knew what really mattered. I was blessed to stay with her during many of my visits East. Boy, did we have fun!

Jayanti Hoye

THE PRAYER OF LUCIUS

“O holy and ever present savior of humanity, ever generous in caring for mortals, upon those who are wretched in misfortune you bestow a mother’s sweet affection. Not a day, a span of sleep, or the smallest moment passes unblessed by your kind deeds. Neither on land nor at sea do you refrain from protective acts, nor do you withhold your saving hand from calming the storms of life.... You cause the world to turn; you give the sun its light....But my talent is too poor to sing your praises, and my means too small to offer sacrifices. Of speech I have no wealth, nor a thousand mouths nor as many tongues, nor an abundance of words to stream forth and celebrate your glory. Only one thing can I do, as can any poor but pious soul: I can enshrine your holy visage, your divinity, in the recess of my heart and forever keep it and gaze upon it with the eyes of the mind.”

METAMORPHOSES, 11.25
translated by David Nelson.

At right: The Goddess Isis, wall painting, c. 1360 BCE.



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.

THE HOLY MOTHER WORKING HER MAGIC IN SOUTH AFRICA

The author, Mrs. Prakashnee Gengan, is a member of the Sri Sarada Devi Ashram in South Africa

From a source nestled in a leafy African suburb, the message of Thakur, Ma, and Swamiji finds fruition on the shores of the Indian Ocean in Durban, South Africa. The Sri Sarada Devi Ashram was initially built in 1984, as the Asherville Branch of the Ramakrishna Centre of South Africa. The Ramakrishna Centre was founded by Swami Nischalananda in 1942. The center has several ashrams dedicated to Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda. The Centre and all its subcenters had, until recently, been affiliated with the worldwide Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission in Belur, India.

In accordance with Swami Vivekananda's vision of a separate monastic order for women devotees, the Sri Sarada Devi Ashram was established in 1985 with Pravrajika Atmaprana Mataji as its first nun. Since 2001, the Sri Sarada Devi Ashram has functioned as a totally independent center. It is situated in a residential area, encompassed by suburban sprawl. However, once within its loving precincts, the Holy Mother's overwhelming spirit is palpable. It stands as an oasis to visitors, acquaintances, devotees, and to those it serves.

A unique feature of this ashram is its focus on the integral message of Vedanta: "service to man is worship of God." In South Africa, like many parts of the globe, one does not have to go in search of the needy, as they are veritably on one's doorstep. Cutting across the barriers of race, color, and creed and inspired by the teachings of the Holy Trinity, humanitarian service is rendered invoking the loving touch of the Holy Mother.

The Sri Sarada Devi Ashram conducts a variety of spiritual and humanitarian outreach programs, including nutrition programs for indigent students and families. There is a Vedanta bookshop for the propagation of Vedanta as taught by Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, and Swami Vivekananda. Many community projects based on social needs are carried out. These include counseling services, speech and hearing therapy, eye camps, and the distribution of groceries, clothing, and blankets.

The serene and beautiful shrine, which seats 600 devotees, is the heart of all activity. Morning and evening vesper services are held daily. Amidst the unceasing humanitarian endeavors, the proverbial ministerial work is conducted, with weekly satsangs being held on Sundays. During these services, religious education classes are conducted for children and youth to

ensure that moral values are instilled at a tender age. The youth participate in sketches, chanting from scriptures such as the *RAMAYANA* and *BHAGAVAD GITA*, and cultural dances.

In observing the tireless work undertaken by the ashram's residents and volunteers, one marvels at the sway the Holy Mother has and is reminded of a favorite quote of hers:

"The mind keeps well when engaged in work, and yet meditation and prayers are also especially needed. You must at least sit down once in the morning and again in the evening. That acts as a rudder to a boat."

As in Holy Mother's life, religion and philosophy find practical expression. The religious element centers around the lives and teachings of the Holy Trinity and expresses itself through the worship and regular satsangs, while the philosophical element derived from the teachings of Vedanta is practically implemented through the humanitarian activities. Thus the ashram fosters the aspirant's devotion to the ideal while also ensuring that devotion does not remain at a mere lip service level.

Sister Nivedita wrote these vivid words about Holy Mother: "In her one sees realized that wisdom and sweetness to which the simplest of women may attain. And yet, to myself the stateliness of her courtesy and her great open mind are almost as wonderful as her sainthood. I have never known her hesitate in giving utterance to large and generous judgment, however new and complex might be the question put before her. Her life is one long stillness of prayer."

The Sri Sarada Devi Ashram in South Africa is a thriving embodiment of the Holy Mother's simple and far-reaching embrace and remains testimony to Mother's reassurance when she said, "I am the mother of the virtuous, I am the mother of the wicked. Whenever you are in distress say to yourself, 'I have a Mother.'"



At Sri Sarada Devi Ashrama Mother's children honor Her with multi-faceted cultural celebrations.

SPIRITUAL REMINDERS

Pat Gibbons regularly sent greetings to her guru, Swami Chidanandaji of the Divine Life Society, at Christmas or Easter or on his birthday. The swami would respond with blessings for her highest welfare and general spiritual teachings. Often these blessings were accompanied with packets of prasad and began with the salutations "Radiant Immortal Self" or "Dear and Blessed Pat" or "Radiant Immortal Atman." We are privileged to share excerpts from these letters below.

July 18, 1981

Blessed Atman, carry on your spiritual practices steadily. Spiritualize all your activities. Feel the Presence of God wherever you go, for He is everywhere. He is within you and you abide in Him. Every speck of space is filled by Him. The Universe that you see outside is nothing but His own manifestation. Any good that you do in the world will ultimately reach Him. Every good action that you perform is verily Divine worship. For, you live, move and have your being in the DIVINE. I am most happy to remember you and think of you upon this sanctified day of Worship.

February 28, 1982

Life is precious. Life is given to you to attain God-Experience. The purpose of life is the attainment of Supreme Bliss. By attaining this Supreme State, the individual goes beyond all sorrow and sufferings and transcends all limitations. Therefore, ever strive to lead the Divine life and engage in Sadhana and prayer.

December 12, 1984

God is all-merciful. Pray to Him, "O God, lead me from the unreal to the Real; from darkness to Light; from death to Immortality."

July 15, 1983

Om Namo Narayanaya. Yes, you are right. The age is only for the body. Not to you. You carry on your Karma yoga in the right spirit as taught by Sri Krishna, the Lord of the Srimad Bhagavad Gita. You will be established in the higher consciousness!

October 20, 1986

Direct your vision inward and realize the glory of the Atman. The key that unlocks the door to this spiritual kingdom within you is the Divine name.

March 7, 1989

Ever root yourself in the Lord. He is the moving Power in all your daily activities. Perform your activities in the spirit of worshipfulness. Feel His presence wherever you go. He is in you and you are in Him.

February 17, 1988

Gradually try to increase your daily period of meditation. Constant repetition of Divine Name and regular meditation form the important part of your daily spiritual Sadhana. These are the two wings upon which you can steadily fly to the Kingdom of Heaven. You are in my prayers.

January 4, 1989

Glory unto the Lord! Upon the glorious beginning of the New Year 1989 I send you my good wishes and pray for your well-being and continued success in your daily Yoga Sadhana. May the Grace of Divine Mother ever be upon you....God knows how to take care of those who have taken refuge in Him. Whenever help comes to you spontaneously from any direction, accept it as sent by God. In fact, everything that comes to us is God-given. Seek the bliss of Atman within.

EDITORIAL STAFF: Joan Shack, Janet Walker, Jayanti Hoye, Ellen Paull • **CIRCULATION:** Hari & Lakshmi

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Sri Sarada Society
P.O. Box 38116, Albany, New York 12203