

Sri Sarada Devi in the Light of the Upanishads



PRAVRAJIKA ATMADEVAPRANA

Pravrajika Atmadevaprana is the Secretary, Ramakrishna Sarada Mission, Colombo, Sri Lanka.

There is an interesting incident about how we perceive things. Lord Buddha once pointed to a flower and asked each one of his disciples present to say something about it. One of them pronounced a lecture, another a poem, yet another a parable. Each outdid the other in depth and erudition. Mahakashyap, an eminent disciple, however, only smiled and kept quiet. It is said that only he had *seen* the flower. Others were mere 'label makers.'

Indeed, in our quest for experiencing God, we think too much, reflect too much, talk too much. As Swami Vivekananda said,

*'Our great defect in life is that we are so much drawn to the ideal, the goal is so much more enchanting, so much more alluring, so much bigger in our mental horizon, that we lose sight of the details altogether.'*¹

Engrossed in feverish action, we are apt to overlook the real significance of simple things in life—whether it is a flower or a flower-like simple pure life. One such example is Sri Sarada Devi's life. It is a simple life, nay simplicity itself. But as Sister Nivedita wrote in a letter to Holy Mother once,

*'Surely the wonderful things of God are all quiet—stealing unnoticed into our lives—the air and the sunlight and the sweetness of gardens and of the Ganges, these are the silent things that are like you!'*²

Let us ponder on how this simple life demonstrated the teachings of the Upanishads.

Upanishads in Practice

Though Holy Mother's life looks so simple and commonplace, to understand it is not easy. One needs to make a good deal of spiritual evolution to appreciate the Mother's extraordinary life. One might draw a parallel to what Swamiji said of Sri Ramakrishna:

'The life of Sri Ramakrishna was an extraordinary searchlight under whose illumination one is able to really understand the whole scope of Hindu religion. He was the object-lesson of all the theoretical knowledge given in the Shastras

*(scriptures). He showed by his life what the Rishis and Avatars really wanted to teach. The books were theories, he was the realisation. This man had in fifty-one years lived the five thousand years of national spiritual life and so raised himself to be an object-lesson for future generations.'*³

No wonder Chakravorthy Rajagopalachari aptly named Sri Ramakrishna's teachings as '*Ramakrishna Upanishad*.' But if Sri Ramakrishna was the living embodiment of the ancient principles of the Upanishads, then Holy Mother's life practically presents the recent reliable commentary on them.

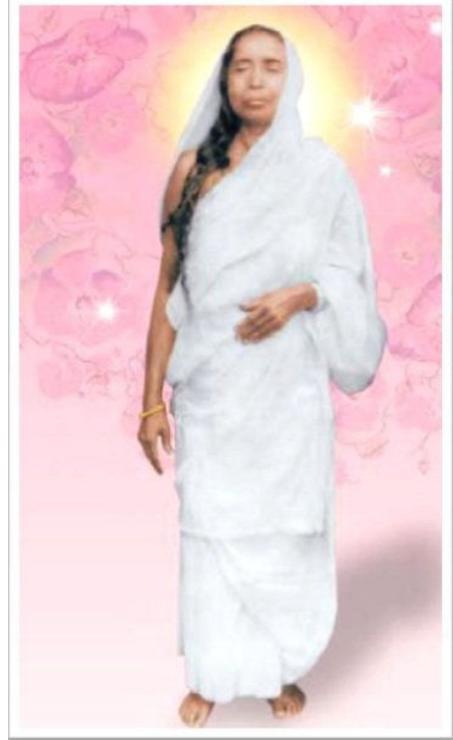
Cosmic Sweep of Divine Vision

One common feature of sages of the Upanishads as well as Mother's life is that they both are shining examples of how to pursue the path of attaining the vision of the One *behind* the many, consummating it with the vision of the One *in* the many, and finally with the One *as* the many. Mother's life is a simple story which explains this profound truth in detail. Her life is an enduring image of fulfillment and joy.

Once a small ocean fish went to an older fish and asked, 'Excuse me, you are older than I, so can you tell me where to find this thing they call the ocean?' 'The ocean,' said the older fish, 'is the thing you are in now.' 'Oh! This? But this is just water. What I am seeking is the ocean,' said the disappointed fish as it swam away to reach elsewhere. The older fish exclaimed, 'Oh little fish! What are you looking for? Just look!' Living in the very ocean and searching for it! That is the irony of human situation—searching for the Infinite while infinite is all around us.

Once a lady went to Holy Mother. She expressed her desire to have some spiritual guidelines from her. But the Mother went on doing her household duties. She did puja, cooking, distributed food and so on. All the while, the lady was following Mother. While taking leave of her, she expressed her disappointment, 'Mother! I thought of getting some instruction from you.' Mother answered, 'Yes my child! I have been instructing you all the while.' That is Holy Mother's message to us—live the life. Her own life demonstrates the glorious fact that right from the humblest household duties to that of guiding the affairs of a spiritual organization, any responsibility could be performed without losing the cosmic sweep of Divine vision. She made no distinction between the sacred and secular nor compartmentalised life in any other way.

A Pitcher of Bliss



Holy Mother used to say that during her days in Dakshineswar, she felt as if a pitcher of bliss was placed in her heart. To us it seems as if Sri Ramakrishna established Her as a pitcher of bliss, in the very heart of our world to guide and provide us succour in this dismal state of affairs. In Sister Devamata's words,



*'Those who had the rare blessing of living with Holy Mother learned that religion was a sweet, natural joyous thing; that purity and holiness were tangible realities.'*⁴

How to live in this world? By possessing God, by renouncing whatever is not real. For, says the Isha Upanishad, 'The whole universe is filled with God.'⁵ Holy Mother showed us how we are to do this. Small, little acts of her life show us how to live in this clumsy, consuming world of hundred little exacting problems, without being affected by them. Her central message is that one can remain unaffected by the worldly cares only by keeping God, and God alone, as the light, solace and goal of life.

The Upanishadic Solution

To perceive the presence of all-pervading God is the highest achievement of all human genius. To strive for this realisation is what the Upanishads guide us to do. Kena Upanishad declares that 'Man achieves great energy through the atman and immortality through its realization,' (*atmana vindate viryam*). Echoing this important truth, Swami Vivekananda said,

*'Call upon the sleeping soul and see how it awakens! Power will come, glory will come, and everything that is excellent will come, when the sleeping soul is aroused to self-conscious activity.'*⁶

Awakening this inner core of our being and aligning our lives to It, is the ultimate solution to present day problems. One may recall here what Arnold Toynbee, the great historian and the Nobel laureate observed some 50 years ago. He said that 'a chapter which had a western beginning will have to have an Indian ending if it is not to end in the self-destruction of the human race.' He further explained,

'In the present age, western technology has not only annihilated the distance, but it has armed the people of the world with weapons of devastating power at a time when they have been brought to point blank range of each other without yet having learnt to know and love each other. At this supremely dangerous moment in human history, the only way of salvation for mankind is an Indian way. The primary reason is that this teaching is right and . . . is right because it flows from

*a true vision of spiritual reality. That true vision is to be found in the truth of the Upanishads.'*⁷

The Upanishadic vision of life is a holistic vision of life. Says the Mundaka Upanishad

*'O adorable Sir, what is by knowing which all this becomes known?'*⁸

This search for the common denominator of life, in truth, is what life is forcing us to seek. Generally we keep struggling to keep our individuality, our separateness, and that is the cause for unhappiness. If we keep ourselves away from total life, it generates a feeling of insufficiency and emptiness. Separation and differentiation only add to our misery. The solution, therefore, lies in breaking the false barriers and seeking unity and oneness. This is where the absolute contentment and fullness can be found. It is this all-inclusive vision of spiritual reality which Toynbee termed as the 'Indian Way.'

Holy Mother practised this vision of inclusiveness and love in her life. Her oftquoted words 'Learn to make the whole world your own. No one is a stranger, my child. The whole world is your own,' sum up not only her central message but the message of the Upanishads as well.

Overcoming Inner Obstacles

Though we, the heirs of such immortal wisdom, hear this, it does not stir us; we find these spiritual truths dry and insipid. Why? The problem lies with our attitude towards life. It is only when the field is fertile that the seeds sprout. A handful of wheat, five thousand years old, was found in the tomb of one of the kings of ancient Egypt. Someone planted the grains and to every one's amazement they came to life. Therein lies the secret.

The wisdom of Upanishad can be likened to those seeds. They contain much life and energy. Though they can remain in the form of seeds for centuries, when they are sown in the fertile soil of a receptive heart, their potential is revealed. If our hearts are dry and dead, how could anything take root there? We must introspect and find out how to make our minds spiritually fertile. Holy Mother's Godcentred life can be a source of great inspiration in this context. Looking at her life strengthens our faith that this ideal is practical.

Practice of Universal Love

True love is universal. This is what Isa Upanishad (verse 7) proclaims, 'One who sees the same self in others, where is sorrow or delusion for him?' The wise man is he who realizes all beings as not distinct from his own self and his own self as the self of all beings. Such a person cannot hate anyone; he can only love. Holy Mother was an embodiment of this truth. Her love was as universal as air, as unpolarized as space, as same-sighted as sunlight.

Be it at her little cottage at Jayrambati or the Udbodhan House in Calcutta, wherever Mother lived, it was a Rishi Ashrama. Whoever came there—no matter if one was a labourer or a cart driver, a hawker or a palanquin bearer, a fisherman or a fish monger—that person was Mother's son or daughter. They all received the same welcome, love and attention from Mother as her own devotees. Hence wherever Mother lived, there came into existence a

unique institution which formed in itself a Math, a veritable temple, as well as a householder's home—all rolled into one.

If we study Mother's life in depth, we come to understand that true spiritual outlook means to seek the welfare of all. Love should be *universal*, directed towards all people. Such a universal attitude comes only through expansion of heart, through sharing in larger life.

Before leaving for America, at Mount Abu, Swami Vivekananda said to Swami Turiyananda, his brother disciple,

*'Hari bhaj, I don't know what I got through all these spiritual practices, but this much I am sure, my heart has expanded. I feel for all.'*⁹

This is real compassion or true spiritual outlook.

An illustration from Mother's life explains this further. Once someone brought two choice mangoes to the Holy Mother. Mother wanted to give them to Sister Devamata, an American nun, who was on a visit to her. But Sister Devamata refused to accept them saying that it would make her happier if the Holy Mother had them. To this Holy Mother responded with a beautiful meaningful question, 'Do you think it will give you greater pleasure to have me keep them or give me greater pleasure to have you take them?'

Devamata, the wise lady understood the inner meaning of this question and answered, 'Yes, it will give you greater pleasure because you have a larger heart to feel it.' She realized the fact that Holy Mother's love and compassion were not based on ordinary human instincts. They were based on larger awareness.

Later Sister Devamata made this comment: 'Unbounded was Mother's concern for every living being. No human measure could contain it.'¹⁰ Swami Virajananda (later 6th President of the Ramakrishna Order), while commenting about the uniqueness of Mother's divine love says,

*'While at home I had loved my mother intensely and she too had abundant affection for me. But could that love stand in comparison to that of Holy Mother's? Nay, she is the mother of my innumerable past incarnations—the mother of eternal time the mother of my very being. Earthly love however pure and noble, still binds but Mother's affection had a liberating effect on the bonds of ignorance.'*¹¹

A Tower of Tolerance

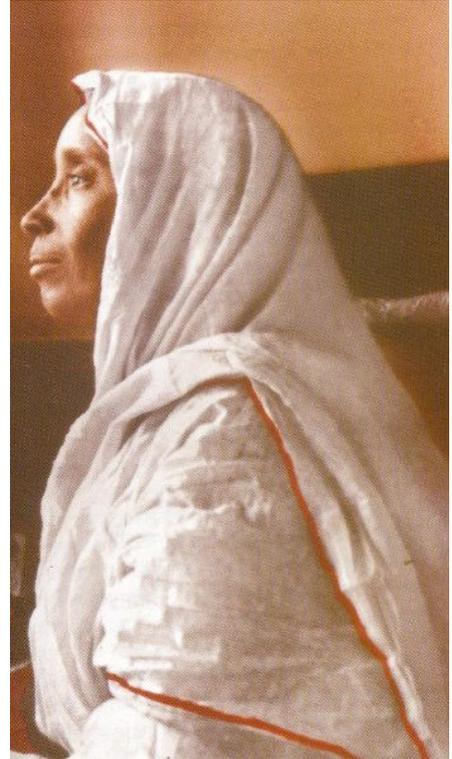
One reads in the Chandogya Upanishad:

*'Where one sees another, one hears another, so long as there are two, there must be fear, and fear is the mother of all misery. Where none sees another, where it is all one, there is none to be miserable, none to be unhappy.'*¹²

Holy Mother, throughout her life, neither excluded nor hated anyone. She included all in the breadth of her love. She accepted all, even criminals, drunkards and thieves, if they but called her 'Mother.' Her boundless tolerance was based on the fact that she thought of the world as ignorant rather than wicked, as unsatisfactory rather than rebellious.

A small incident beautifully expresses this. A young student used to visit Mother quite often to receive her blessings. But in college he had to keep company with all sorts of boys and went astray and gradually came to feel that he was no good. So, one day he went to Mother and said, 'Mother, I will not come here again. I am a misfit here. I am not worthy of this place.' So saying, he tried to run away but Mother ran after him, took him by the shoulders and shaking him said

'Whenever bad thoughts disturb your mind, think of me.'



Then she let go of him. On his way home, the young man kept repeating, 'Think of me, and remember me.' He could not forget Mother's wonderfully compassionate eyes. Eventually he became a monk.¹³

Thus lived this modern *brahmavadini* of the ancient Upanishads. Conscious of her cosmic divine nature and power, she boldly proclaimed, 'If my child gets covered with mud or dirt, is it not my duty to cleanse him and take him on my lap? . . . I am the mother of the virtuous and also the mother of the wicked.' The fact that Mother's affection had a liberating effect on the bonds of ignorance was literally proved in the case of Radhu, her brother's daughter.

Unlimited Power, Yet No Trace of It!

Though a spiritual giant of great exception, Holy Mother lived like a commoner. There is a moving incident depicting her as an unassuming, simple mother. After visiting Mother at Jayarambati, Swami Nikhilananda then a college student, along with Gowri-ma and two other devotees were starting for Calcutta. The Holy Mother asked him again and again to look after Gowri-ma during the journey and with tearful eyes prayed repeatedly to Master for their safety. Gowrima in order to assure her asked her vehemently not to worry about them. Swami Nikhilananda later recalled:

*'The louder Gowri-ma roared not to worry about them, the more humbly the Mother prayed to God for us. I watched the scene and said to myself: "Here is a woman who has not a millionth part of Mother's power and is bubbling over. And there is the Holy Mother, a veritable dynamo of power acting like a ordinary mother and restraining it all.'*¹⁴

Writes Swami Budhananda,

'Such was the tremendous power of her unassuming renunciation that though she went about attending to daily duties like an ordinary woman in white sheet, great sannyasins and Brahmajnanis felt blessed prostrating before her. She looked upon those self-realized souls as a mother would on the little ones. Mighty Vivekananda was at best a robust child before her. Such was the quiet authority of her renunciation; such was her absolute assimilation of the purest content of sannyasa.'

15

The Upanishad Personified

Holy Mother was the embodiment of many ideals mentioned in the Indian spiritual tradition. One may recall here the great brahmavadinis (knowers of Brahman) like Gargi who challenged sage Yajnavalkya in the learned assembly at the court of King Janaka. There have been many great women seers like Vak, who gave the famous *Devi Suktam* of the Rig Veda. The Upanishads also speak of great wives like Maitreyi, who rejected worldly riches and preferred immortal wisdom. The Puranas describe great mothers like Queen Madalasa who imparted spiritual knowledge to her sons from their very birth. There have been great nuns and great women administrators. But think of anyone who has been all these at the *same* time, and yet much more? The name of Holy Mother naturally comes to mind.

Sri Sarada Devi is like the space which contains both atoms and galaxies. That is why even some of the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna could not realize her greatness in the beginning. It was comprehended by Swami Vivekananda alone. He was the first one to point out to his brother disciples saying, 'You have not yet understood the wonderful significance of Mother's life. None of you. But gradually you will know.

'Without Shakti there is no regeneration for the world. Mother has been born to revive. . . once more will Gargis and Maitreyis be born into the world.'

To read Holy Mother's life and teachings is to know the Upanishads in practice. Let us conclude with Sri Ramakrishna's glowing eulogy,

'Look, this Sarada is Saraswati herself. She has come down to the world to give knowledge. . . She is no ordinary woman.'



References

1. *CW*, 2:1
2. *Sri Sarada Devi, the Great Wonder*, Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata, Pp. 484-5
3. *CW*, 5.53
4. *Days in an Indian Monastery*, p.228
5. *Isha Upanishad*, 1
6. *CW*, 3: 193
7. Arnold Toynbee, *Vedanta Kesari*, 2004, p. 451
8. *Mundaka Upanishad*, verse 3
9. cf. *The Life of Swami Vivekananda By His Eastern and Western Disciples*, 1: 388
10. *Days in an Indian Monastery*, p. 215
11. *Sri Sarada Devi, the Great Wonder*, p. 124
12. *Chandogya Upanishad*, VII, xxxiii - xxiv
13. cf. *Teachings of Sri Sarada Devi The Holy Mother*, p. 165-166
14. *Sri Sarada Devi, the Great Wonder*, p. 187
15. *Ibid*, p. 449