

The History of the Sarada Convent in Santa Barbara Swami Vivekananda's Unique Gift to Western Women—and to the World

As the Ramakrishna Mission celebrates its 125th anniversary, Sarada Convent at the Vedanta Society of Southern California celebrates her 75th anniversary—both events are cause for great rejoicing, and both came about because of Swami Vivekananda's will, foresight and love.

As our convent celebrates 75 years of its existence, we can look back to see how the whole miracle came about. One thing is clear: without the grace of Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda, it could never have happened. More directly, had Swami Vivekananda not come to America, there is little chance there would be American sannyasinis and brahmacharinis today. It was Swamiji himself who ensured that Western women would be given the opportunity to lead lives of renunciation and service.

While today we may take for granted women's sannyasa, it was not so in Swamiji's time, and truly only Swamiji himself could have made it a reality. In his day, giving Western women sacred monastic vows was literally unthinkable; it was an uphill battle that only he could level.

We can feel the shockwaves in the 1896 letter that Swamiji received from his devoted disciple Alasinga Perumal. In replying to Alasinga's alarmed inquiry, Swamiji breezily confirmed, "One of my new sannyasins is indeed a woman." This scarcely credible news reached India via an article in the *New York Herald*.

Any opposition to this Swamiji merely waved off. When he returned to India, he said in an interview with *Prabuddha Bharata*, "Sannyasa is recognized in the Vedas without making any distinction between men and women." Warming to the topic he added, "Do you remember how Yajnavalkya was questioned at the court of King Janaka? His principal examiner was Vacaknavi, the maiden orator... Her gender is not even commented upon. Again, could anything be more complete than the equality of boys and girls in our old forest universities?"

Forest universities weren't a matter of American experience, nor were Hindu sacred monastic vows for that matter, but that didn't stop Swamiji from inaugurating them himself. He deeply believed that spiritual freedom was the goal of human life and neither gender nor nationality should interfere with that great calling. .

To that end, he gave sannyasa vows in 1895 at Thousand Island Park to Marie Louise (Swami Abhayananda). Though not the most promising candidate, she nevertheless inaugurated the first Vedanta work in Australia. The point wasn't whether or not she was

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promising in the ordinary sense of the word: Swamiji knew that once he had set the precedent, women's sannyasa would remain as a permanent part of the Ramakrishna Order's sacred history, and America's as well. And so it has been. Swamiji gave brahmacharya in 1895 to an exceptionally promising candidate, Sister Christine. In 1896 Swamiji gave brahmacharya to Sarah Ellen Waldo, giving her the name Yatimata, in New York City in 1896. In 1899 he gave the gerua cloth of sannyasa to Sarah Bull and the white cloth of brahmacharya to Sister Nivedita.

After Swamiji's death, Swami Trigunatitananda carried on the new tradition by establishing a convent in San Francisco in 1908. Despite a valiant try, it dissolved—due to a number of factors—by 1912. Nevertheless, a convent blessed by a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna was no small matter—its powerful effect and promise remained intact: Swami Ashokananda rekindled the embers when the Northern California Vedanta Convent officially began in 1959.

This long preamble leads us to Southern California, where Sarada Convent—with branches in Hollywood and Santa Barbara—officially began in 1947, under the nurturing guidance of Swami Prabhavananda, who founded the Vedanta Society in 1930. The first nun, soon given the name Sarada, came in 1941 to Hollywood, but there was no convent to join. In its stead there was a group of dedicated spiritual aspirants living at the Vedanta Society, in the home of the saintly Sister Lalita, Carrie Mead Wyckoff, a disciple of Swami Turiyananda and one of the fabled Mead sisters who had hosted Swamiji in Pasadena.

Sarada was the first young woman to come with the ideal of becoming a nun, though more young women would have to join before a true convent could form. With Sarada's arrival in Hollywood, the daily 5-item puja was expanded to a daily 10-item puja, thus fulfilling Swami Brahmananda's instruction to Swami Prabhavananda, "Be ritualistic." The daily 10-item puja has since been conducted by the nuns in Hollywood and Santa Barbara to this day. (There are two daily pujas in Santa Barbara, one in the convent shrine and one in the public temple). On special worship days—the birthdays of Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, Swami Vivekananda and Swami Brahmananda—a 16-item puja and homa fire is performed by the nuns, along with other celebrations such as Shiva Ratri, etc. Durga Puja is celebrated in Santa Barbara and Kali Puja in Hollywood.

Interestingly, beginning in 1938, Swami Prabhavananda performed Kali Puja in Hollywood, at first only using a framed picture of Mother Kali. Then in 1938, he had a vision of Swami Brahmananda who told him to have a *murti*, statue, made for Kali Puja.

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Swami Prabhavananda then asked the artistic Brahmacharini Sarala (Khunki) to make the first murti in 1948, and since then murtis have been made every year in Hollywood for the puja.

In 1943 Barada (or Varada) came to the Hollywood Vedanta Society, after reading the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* in the Los Angeles public library. She wrote Swami Nikhilananda in New York for further instruction, only to be told that there was a swami and a Vedanta Society in her own city, Los Angeles! While Barada was eager to join at once, her parents forbade it until she was twenty-one. She finally joined in 1944 and remained in the convent until her death in 2014. A skilled musician, her exquisite and original musical compositions (including putting much of the *Bhagavad Gita* to music) are performed in Vedanta Societies to this day.

Even more significantly, when Baradaprana went to India with several of the other nuns, she studied puja under the guidance of the renowned Swami Hitananda, the pujari at Belur Math and the author of *Worship of Sri Ramakrishna*. Baradaprana taught puja to several generations of nuns, and she performed pujas, both 10 and 16-item, as well as homa fires well into her seventies, while training the younger generations of nuns to do the same. About convent living, Baradaprana once told a younger nun with a smile, “The first 50 years are the hardest.”

In 1944 Yogaprana joined the growing Hollywood community. Christopher Isherwood remembered her as “very lively and gay.” He added, “It took me a long time to realize how serious and intelligent she was about religion, and how much it meant to her.”¹ She spent her years doing puja, cooking and bookkeeping and was the longtime treasurer of the Vedanta Society. Yogaprana smiled often and conveyed love and warmth, passing away in 1996.

What made a critical difference to the future of women's monasticism in the West was a decision of the Belur Math trustees in 1946 to give Swami Prabhavananda permission to establish a monastery and convent, empowering him to give vows of *brahmacharya*, preliminary monastic vows. At long last, it was established that we would have a real convent that would be under the protecting umbrella of the Ramakrishna Order.

This was an extraordinary event, since, as Baradaprana wrote, for the first time “women were officially accepted by the Ramakrishna Order.” The May 10, 1946 letter, signed by

¹ *Diaries*, Vol. 1: 1939—1960. Ed. Katherine Bucknell, London: Harper Flamingo, 1996, pp. 268-9.

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the General Secretary Swami Madhavananda, said: “Resolved that the draft scheme ... for admitting monastic workers to the Order in U.S.A. be accepted, and that Swami Prabhavananda be permitted to start a monastery and a convent according to the scheme.”² It was the first time that a convent, in any part of the world, was given official sanction from the Ramakrishna Order. Included in this correspondence was the Ramakrishna Math's “Scheme for Western People Desiring to Join the Ramakrishna Order,” which contained the noble objective to be achieved, the goal of human life:

Both these institutions [convent and monastery] will aim at God-realization through the unfoldment of the inner life, following a course of spiritual discipline, self-sacrifice, and performance of household duties on lines set forth in the rules of the Belur Math framed by Swami Vivekananda.³

1947 was another significant year as the monastic ranks swelled. Since the convent's inception 75 years ago, young women came, inspired by the ideals of the Ramakrishna Order—realization of God and service to the world. Many came, remaining in the convent their entire dedicated lives. Others came and left, after a shorter or longer period of time. In their own way, each made their contribution. The convent benefitted from their presence and they benefitted from their years as nuns. Many have told us that their years in the convent were the best years of their lives.

Both Prabhaprana and Satyaprana joined in 1947. Since the first five nuns are our standard bearers, and few people today knew them, a short description is in order: Philosophically minded Satyaprana discovered Vedanta after an early interest in the Rosicrucians. Vedanta philosophy struck a very deep chord and she decided to make Vedanta her life. She was a superb cook, but was more famed for her plain-spoken manner and resolutely Western ways, which masked her profound devotion to Holy Mother. A master stamp collector and an even more avid reader, she had a largely self-taught education, her gruff exterior belied her kind heart and ability to care tenderly for others. She suffered from severe arthritis and other more serious ailments, but she didn't let it define her. She passed away in 1983, her devotion to Mother becoming all the more visible.

If there was one person crucial to the formation of the Santa Barbara convent, it was Prabhaprana. She was its manager from 1947 until her death in 1998. It was telling that at her memorial, a number of people told us privately, “She really loved *me* the most!” When a nun once criticized Prabhaprana, Swami Prabhavananda sharply retorted, “But *she* knows how to love!” Which was true. She not only made everyone *feel* loved, she

² Archives, Vedanta Society of Southern California.

³ Letter of Swami Madhavananda to Swami Prabhavananda, May 10, 1946. Archives, VSSC.

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really *did* love and care for pretty much everyone, and her love and loyalty ran deep and wide. She went far out of her way to be available with a ready ear to monastics, devotees, neighbors, local townspeople, gardeners, laborers, house cleaners, children, animals of all sorts—truly making everyone her own, without show and without stint.

Prabhaprana possessed a keen intelligence and was a born diplomat. She could have an enjoyable conversation with pretty much anybody, connecting to people with ease and warmth. She was a skillful business manager with impeccable manners, and both Swamis Prabhavananda and Swami Swahananda valued her advice, experience and rare common sense. She passed away in 1998, exactly as she had wished: surrounded by her monastic sisters who were chanting, “Jai Sri Ramakrishna.”

In 1947 brahmacharya was given to two of the nuns, Sarada and Amiya, and to a young man who later became the saintly Swami Krishnananda. Swamis Yatiswarananda, Vishwananda, Vividishananda, Devatmananda, Akhilananda, Satprakashananda and Prabhavananda were here for the ground-breaking event. The following month, all of the nuns from the Hollywood center, excepting Amiya, moved from Hollywood to Santa Barbara to establish, finally and officially, Sarada Convent. Predictably, by 1948 more help was needed in Hollywood, so two of the nuns returned there, Yogaprana and Satyaprana. In 1949 several of the nuns, then brahmacharinis, made their first pilgrimage to India, accompanied by Swami Prabhavananda.

In 1959, sanction was given by the Trustees of Belur Math for the nuns to receive sannyas vows, final vows of renunciation. At that time guidelines for running the convents were given. The letter, written by the General Secretary of the Ramakrishna Order, Swami Madhavananda, further finessed and clarified the Western nuns' standing. To clarify: In India in 1959, the first nuns of Sri Sarada Math were given sannyasa by the then-President of the Ramakrishna Order, Swami Shankarananda. At that point, Sri Sarada Math was recognized as a completely independent organization and the full administration was handed over to the nuns from the Ramakrishna Order. Simply put, the Ramakrishna Order and Sri Sarada Math are completely separate organizations, separate in every way except a shared sacred spiritual lineage.

Wisely, however, not only did Swamis Prabhavananda and Ashokananda in San Francisco know that this would never be feasible in the West, the authorities at Belur Math understood it as well. As Swami Madhavananda wrote:

The Trustees readily agreed with you that it would not be possible to separate the convents there, as we are going to do in India. Nor did they consider it practical to

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attach them to this Sarada Math. So those convents must continue to be parts of particular centers, forming a different category from those in India.⁴

Thus our monastic vows are to the Ramakrishna Order of India, and we are directly under the guidance of the swami-in-charge of the Vedanta Society of Southern California, under the larger umbrella of the Ramakrishna Order.

The first pravrajikas—Saradaprana, Baradaprana, Yogaprana, Prabhaprana and Satyaprana—received sannyasa in August, 1959. Nine swamis came to Santa Barbara to participate in this extraordinary event: Satprakashananda, Pavitrananda, Prabhavananda, Vividishananda, Asehananda, Ritajananda, Shraddhananda, Vandanananda and Krishnananda.

Swamiji's wish that women be given the opportunity to pursue in a monastic setting humanity's highest goal, spiritual freedom, was being fulfilled on deeply grateful soil. This was a great landmark in American spiritual history and the Ramakrishna Order's as well.

The five new sannyasinis made a pilgrimage to India a month after sannyasa. The "Panchapranas," as they were humorously known, were greeted everywhere with appreciation and affection. At a time when few Western women were seen in India, seeing five sannyasinis in gerua on pilgrimage in India was an extraordinary sight. They met many dignitaries wherever they went, including Jawaharlal Nehru and his daughter, Indira Gandhi. These American nuns were, after all, the very first Western pravrajikas. Swamiji's initial precedent had borne remarkable fruit, as it has continued to do so since then.

The list of nuns who made a permanent contribution have to include more than just the first nuns to join. We need to mention Anandaprana, for example, who joined in 1952. A German-born Jewish refugee who fled the Nazis with her parents, she came upon the Vedanta Society while working in Los Angeles. It wasn't long before she knew that's where the goal of her life would be found. Her sharp intellect and strong work ethic were quickly put to use when she became Swami Prabhavanada's secretary. She also managed the Hollywood Vedanta bookstore and the Vedanta catalog. If Anandaprana seemed a bit stiff at times, that only hid a genuine warmth and a surprising sense of fun and spot-on humor. Her first 30 years were spent in Hollywood where she served as the convent manager and then she moved to Santa Barbara, where she remained until her death in 2014, after suffering a debilitating stroke.

⁴ Letter of Swami Madhavananda to Swami Prabhavananda, April, 20, 1959. Archives VSSC .

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Bhaktiprana joined the Hollywood convent in 1954. A Juilliard-trained violinist, she directed the Hollywood women's choir. She was also an avid pujarini, rigging up ways to sit to do puja when sitting cross-legged became impossible for her. In her older years, she was one of the convent's first ambassadors to the larger world—learning Spanish to give lectures to Spanish-speaking audiences, and traveling outside the country to give lectures. She was confoundingly innocent and had neither a mean bone nor an angry word. She contributed as much as she could until she became severely handicapped, passing away in 2007.

Shuddhaprana joined Santa Barbara in 1954 and was instrumental in training younger nuns. She also started the convent's bookstore in 1975. For decades the only Vedanta books available in Santa Barbara had to be trotted out weekly from boxes and assembled on a small table outside the temple on Sunday mornings. When the devotees who lived in the gatehouse adjacent to the temple passed away, however, Shuddhaprana transformed it into a small but elegant bookstore with precious little money and a great deal of donated labor and materials. Nearly 50 years later, the store continues to prosper; moreover, it brings people to the temple who otherwise wouldn't have entered through its doors.

Shraddhaprana joined in Hollywood in 1955 in middle age, much older than is permitted today. She had sight & hearing problems, but despite her near blindness, she was an avid reader, and read an enormous amount for the Vedanta Catalog. Deeply sympathetic by nature, she corresponded widely with devotees as well as with inquiring or troubled souls, especially prisoners. In a letter she wrote to a seriously disabled devotee, Shraddhaprana wrote that she'd not told anyone this experience she wanted to share with her:

My recent, unanticipated experience of accepting...the surgery, the hospital stay, and continuing recovery gave me a great gift, which was the experience of complete self-surrender, unconditioned by thoughts or words. I was carried through with such freedom in my deepest heart, and something akin to joy, but much quieter, very, very still.⁵

What a blessed gift, to receive a letter conveying such words of comfort and inspiration! She passed away in 1993 with her rosary in her hand.

The 1960s brought about a wave of interest in the Hindu tradition, creating a slowly growing wave of nuns (and devotees). In 1960 Gauriprana joined the Hollywood

⁵ Personal correspondence to Pamela Hoye.

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convent and Shaktiprana joined in Santa Barbara. Gauriprana was a miracle of cooking, puja, Sunday School and outreach to devotees. Shaktiprana, extraordinarily well named, transformed Santa Barbara's wild chapparal into pathways, trees, plants, flowers, animals—all working harmoniously with the existing natural beauty. Meanwhile Sarada Convent continued to grow: Atmaprana joined Hollywood in 1965, and Vivekaprana joined in 1966.

With Swami Prabhavananda's death in 1976, Swami Swahananda took the helm of the ever-expanding Vedanta Society of Southern California. In contrast to Swami Prabhavananda's approach, Swami Swahananda encouraged, sometimes badgered, the nuns into becoming more active in public work. He strongly encouraged the nuns to take up public lecturing, give classes, and engage themselves in other public Vedanta activities. With some stellar exceptions, the response was mostly heels-dug-in-reluctance. Nevertheless Swami Swahananda persisted, and eventually he won us over. He possessed an indomitable belief in women's strength and abilities, and he wanted them used to maximum effect for the benefit of the Vedanta movement.

Because of his foresight and persistence, nuns began to regularly lecture and give classes in Southern California, then branched out to other Vedanta centers (both affiliated and unaffiliated). Swami Swahananda started a number of Vedanta centers (some yet to be affiliated), so inevitably the nuns eventually began visiting and lecturing there. Most significantly, Swami Swahananda placed nuns in managerial positions as Resident Ministers at the Vivekananda Retreat in New York, at the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society of North Texas and at the Ramakrishna-Sarada Vedanta Center in Phoenix.

While nuns had spoken on occasion to college and high school classes who were visiting the temples during Swami Prabhavananda's years, outside engagement went into overdrive with Swami Swahananda. Nuns not only gave talks on Vedanta to schools, colleges and universities, they began actively engaging in interfaith activities. They also began to participate in programs to feed the homeless and serving victims of domestic abuse. Nuns began serving as hospital chaplains and Hospice representatives. A former editor himself, Swami Swahananda strongly encouraged nuns to write. Thus a number of nuns began writing articles for Vedanta journals and writing books and editing books as well. A small sampling: One nun, for example, edited Volume Nine of *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* as well as Swami Turiyananda's translation of the *Vivekacudamani*. Another nun wrote an introductory book on Vedanta, another wrote a book on Sri Ramanuja, one on the Alvars as well as

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Indian Saints and Mystics. Another nun began engaging with the academy, speaking at scholarly conferences and writing articles and books to rectify widespread misinterpretation of Sri Ramakrishna and the Hindu spiritual tradition.

We need to backtrack a bit to catch up with the growing convent: Saradeshaprana joined in Hollywood in 1968, Krishnaprana joined the Santa Barbara in 1972, and then Brahmaprana in 1973 (becoming Resident Minister in Dallas in 2008). In quick succession, Bhavaprana joined in 1975, Deviprana in 1976 and Vrajaprana in 1977, all in Santa Barbara.

Hollywood's ranks swelled with Akhandaprana joining in 1983 (becoming Resident Minister in Phoenix in 2009), Gitaprana in 1984, (becoming Resident Minister of Ridgely in 2004), Shuddhatmaprana in 1985 (later joining Gitaprana in Ridgely in 2006). Meanwhile, Sevaprana joined the Vedanta Convent in San Francisco in 1976, then came to Sarada Convent in Hollywood in 2008. Vidyaprana joined Hollywood in 1990, as did Dayaprana in 1995 and Sitaprana joined Santa Barbara in 2000. Today's convent also includes Brahmacharinis Jagaddhatri and Durga, and a pre-probationer, Devi. We hope that the numbers of fledgling nuns will grow, and as always, this remains in the hands of the Lord.

When Swami Swahananda passed away in 2012, the helm of the ever-expanding Vedanta Society of Southern California transferred to the capable hands of Swami Sarvadevananda. The convent has continued to flourish under his loving guidance and support, and he has consistently proved to be a source of inspiration and encouragement.

Two sannyasinis who passed away in recent years need further mention, beginning with Vivekaprana. Though she was a trained musician, she was, more than anything else, a natural student who became in course of time a respected teacher. As a monastic sister said of her, "Her only real interest was Vedanta." Over time she became Vedanta Catalog editor, Secretary of the Vedanta Society and its cash manager. In later years she gave classes on the Bhagavad Gita and established the Vedanta Study Circle to study Vedanta philosophy and the Brahma Sutras. As Swami Swahananda once said about her, "Vivekaprana is one of the success stories of Vedanta." Despite debilitating Parkinson's disease and accompanying dementia, she remained cheerful and at peace until she passed in 2018.

Another memorable sannyasini who made a permanent contribution to the Vedanta work in the West was Bhavaprana, who joined Santa Barbara in 1975. She was a

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skilled cellist and had been a published cytologist, specializing in cancer cells. Her innate attention to detail bore fruit in her darkroom where she patiently, carefully developed photos for a large number of the Vedanta Societies. A purist, she never touched up or photoshopped holy photos—“everything is in the photo,” she said. What is already *there* simply needs to be brought out, like a statue hidden within the marble.

Bhavaprana became one of the convent's best writers and wrote a number of articles for Vedanta publications. Though she had a life-long stammer, she overcame that obstacle and was able to give thoughtful, inspiring lectures in the temple. Amazingly, she taught herself HTML so she could learn coding, then developed our enormous vedanta.org website, and was its webmaster for many years. Though shy, she conveyed enormous great warmth and empathy. Despite suffering from Alzheimer's, her personality remained the same— loving and deeply empathetic until her death in 2001.

Time and space prevent me from writing more about the many nuns who have graced, and continue to grace, Sarada Convent for the past 75 years. The Convent has nurtured nuns with a wide variety of aptitudes and skills with a wild variety of personalities, temperaments and attitudes. Yet all of us are united in the ideal of spiritual realization and service, the twin ideals that Swamiji bestowed upon us. With the passage of time, we can see more and more how everything was guided by the Lord's hand. More than ever, we see that Sarada Convent came about because of pure divine grace. We have been blessed beyond measure in this life, and we pray that others will find inspiration in this amazing miracle of Swami Vivekananda.

Pravrajika Vrajaprana
Sarada Convent
Vedanta Society of Southern California