

Pravrajika Vrajaprana

(Revered Pravrajika Vrajaprana is a nun at the Sarada Convent of the Vedanta Society of Southern California. As a part of the celebration of the completion of 40 years of Vivekananda Vidyapith, Pravrajika Vrajaprana was invited to visit the Vidyapith and give a talk on "Vedanta in Practice: The Life of Sister Nivedita", on Saturday, March 11, 2017. The following is her address prepared for publication from a video recording.)

Vedanta in Practice: The Life of Sister Nivedita

For those of you, who may not know about Sister Nivedita, let me give you a little biographical background of her. Sister Nivedita was born in 1867. She was born in Ireland as an Irish Protestant in Northern Ireland. Her father and grandfather were protestant ministers and her upbringing was very strict. Her mother, especially, was really tough. She adored her father and he adored her. Her father died when she was ten years old. It was a great blow because he doted on her. She had so many questions about religion and he answered them, delighted by her questioning. Losing her father was a great blow to her. Within a couple of years, she was sent to a boarding school in England. She wanted to be a teacher and was very gifted at teaching. While in London, she fell in love with an engineer. Even before their engagement could be made public, he died suddenly of an illness. At a very young age, she learned that life is unstable and often much briefer than you think it will be. By the time she was 20, she was already questioning all the orthodox Christian beliefs she had been brought up with. She started studying Buddhism seriously. She became an ardent feminist and never gave that up.

She was a very fiery supporter of Irish independence, and at the same time she was a great supporter of the British crown. She loved the British and the British Empire, but she also wanted home rule for Ireland. In fact, she unquestioningly supported British rule around the world. Swamiji told her that that type of patriotism is sinful. The unquestioning nature of her support made it difficult for her to open her eyes to what was going on around her. It was that knee-jerk patriotism that got in the way of reasoning. Swamiji always wanted people to question and use their minds. After some time, when her eyes were opened, she could see

what was going on around her and began to change. When Nivedita was living in London in 1895, she was having a nice time with intellectual giants, such as George Bernard Shaw and Yeats. Once, she was at the Sesame Club thinking high thoughts and Swami Vivekananda came to speak. When she heard him for the first time, she was not greatly impressed because he was “talking at her level.” She also said that she thought she had heard all that before which is probably true because Swami Vivekananda never spoke anything other than the truths we read in the Upanishads. What was new was how he stated them and the life he put into them. Her interest was piqued. She came the following week to hear him speak again. He said something that rocked her to the core, Swamiji said, “Religion is not a matter of belief, but of personal experience.” That got her hooked like a fish on a line. Then, Swami Vivekananda went off to Europe.

When he came back, she was ready for him. She started peppering him with questions and he loved it. She had the ability to ask questions that were really significant. One of the best questions she asked him was in a letter where she asked Swamiji, ‘What is your ideal?’ He wrote her back, “My ideal can be put into a few words. My ideal is to preach unto mankind the divinity and how to make it manifest in every movement in life. One idea I see as clear as daylight is that the spiritual ignorance, nothing else, is the cause of all misery. Who will give the world light? The world is in need of those whose life is one burning love, totally selfless. That love will make every word you tell like a thunderbolt... You have the making in you of a world-mover. Let us call and call till the sleeping Gods awake, till the God within answers the call.” Imagine getting a letter like that from Swamiji!

He wanted her to go to India and educate the women because he knew nothing would happen in India and that India would never rise if women were not educated. So, he wrote her this letter and her response was “Sign me up!” She did not hesitate for even a second. That is another thing we have to learn from Nivedita. When we hear the call for truth, we must answer the call. We will know when we hear the call of truth. The next thing we learn from Nivedita is about her incredible “shraddha” (faith). The word “Shraddha” has been so lamely translated as “faith,” but it is such a powerful word because it means this incredible strength and faith in the words of the guru, in the words of the scriptures, and faith in oneself above all.

You can only have “Shraddha” if you have the sense of the Atman, the sense of divinity within us shining within. If we have that faith, then we can move mountains. She had that and that is why when her guru gave her that work, she knew that she could do it and that she would do it. That is “Shraddha”. Swamiji gave her the work and Nivedita took it with great pride that “my Guru gave me this work.” Swamiji warned her before she took upon herself this work because he knew that everything will go against her. He explained, “The British will neither be happy nor will support you because they are going to be embarrassed by you. People whom you are going to serve will hate you for the color of your skin. They will get their Ganges water out as soon as you leave the room. The climate will murder you because the disease and the poverty will make you sick and right now you are unprepared for it. So, don’t go in there.” Swamiji was overly honest about what she was going to face and the endless sacrifices she would have to make. He almost dissuaded her. On the other hand, Swamiji also told her, “On my part, I promise you that I will stand by you unto death, whether you work for India or not, whether you give up Vedanta or remain in it.” Can you imagine holding that letter in your hand? Can you imagine what power that letter conveyed?

So, in 1898 she arrived in India with all the excitement to help and uplift the poor women of India. But, he was in no hurry to send her out into the field. Instead, he force-fed her knowledge. Before doing anything, he gave her the first brahmacharya vows (her first monastic vows) and gave her the name Nivedita, “the dedicated”. Never was a truer name given. He knew she would go out with a completely wrong attitude if she was not given the knowledge. She would be offending people and ruining the work she had to do because of her attitude. Every morning and evening, he instilled his knowledge unto her. He made her like a sponge and poured all of his knowledge into her and other Western women there, like Sara Bull, Josephine McLeod, and others. He knew that she had to understand Indian values, ideals, culture, and history from the ground up. He was strongly rooted in the thought that Nivedita had to know what Indian history, the Ramayana, and the Mahabharata teach us. She had to become “India in her soul” before she could do anything because you can’t educate if you don’t understand the background and the culture of the people. She had to be “an Indian serving Indians.” She had to lose every part of her British/Irish identity and completely erase herself. To have that

kind of selflessness and humility in the service of guru in India is astonishing. Let us remember what Swami Ashokananda said when he was asking for an assistant. "It is a terrible thing to ask a man to give up his culture. For many of our swamis, they had to come here and think like Americans. What a sacrifice." How else can you approach another culture unless you understand it from that angle? She had to do that from a reverse angle, from the ground up.

Swamiji had a good reason for that. He said, "Western people have a peculiarity of trying to force upon others what they think is good for them." Swamiji was trying to show her what she needed to be. Swamiji invested a huge amount of time and love into Nivedita. She was quite difficult to work with and Swamiji needed all that time and love. He had to scold her incessantly. He was really tough on her. He had to be because she was bull-headed, proud, and resistant to teaching. She was such a strong person that he had to plow into her. Josephine McLeod was so worried that Nivedita might have a nervous breakdown. She took Swamiji aside and said, "Please don't break her." Swamiji told her to not spoil Nivedita. He said that he had devoted more time to Nivedita than to anyone else because he knew she was doing Ramakrishna's work. This was the time Swamiji was forming the Ramakrishna Mission. He was training his brother disciples. He was training his own disciples. He wanted Nivedita to do Ramakrishna's work. That is why he had to put so much love and time into Nivedita. She was going to help uplift women in India. We are reaping the benefits of Swamiji's hard work. He needed her to re-energize India. He said he needed to have a real lioness to do that work. At that time, India did not have anyone who could do it. It had to be Nivedita. When her training was finally over, Swamiji had broken her down to be the sponge that she needed to be so she could really serve.

Then the hard times had just begun because she was living in Bagbazar where the British had put their little toe into. Even by Indian standards, living was rough. There was no escape from the Calcutta summer. It was really bad. In the monsoon season, she had to have an umbrella just to get to the second floor. There was no escape from any of the elements in their own house. It was overcrowded and hot. She was happy there, but it was tough for her because no one wanted to send their girls there. She wanted to start a girls' school and nobody wanted to send their girls there because they thought she would ruin their prospects of marriage.

Parent thought that “If I send my girl to that school, then no one will want to marry her.” Holy mother said this about Nivedita, “Look, Nivedita, the Western girl that came to our country and worked happily, forbearing insults and harassments and also enduring so much discomfort. She tried to educate our children. When she visited some homes to register their children for school, she was humiliated. Some did not allow her to go inside their homes. Some allowed her to go inside and later purified the place by sprinkling Ganges water. She saw everything, but did not mind. She left each place with a smiling face.” Can any of us here do that? Can any of us endure all of that humiliation, all the discomfort and still leave with a genuinely smiling face, feeling that, ‘I am doing the work that Swamiji gave me to do? She always thought ‘How blessed I am!’” That is strength. That is courage. That is humility. No arrogance. No pride there. But, gradually the school gained acceptance. Nivedita beseeched people to send their girls to her school. She offered to pick up and drop off the girls.

When plague broke out in Calcutta, people fled away from the city, but Nivedita started nursing the sick. She went out and started cleaning the streets with her own hands. Finally, the neighborhood boys saw her dedication to service and were embarrassed. Then, she started getting accepted by society. Her work grew and she started working longer hours, never sparing herself. That is why her name was Nivedita, the dedicated. That is another lesson we have to learn from her dedication. She gave herself 100% without any hesitation and without any question. Because she had the ability to do that, she metaphorically "moved the world on its axis." She literally changed the course of history because of "one woman's dedication." Any one of us with wholehearted dedication can change the world.

It is okay if we do not have big work like Nivedita. We are born in this world and meant to do some work. Like Rama's squirrels, each of them had work to do, picking up pebbles to add to the bridge to Sri Lanka. We have our unique place in the world and unique karma we ought to do. If we can do it with that wholehearted dedication we can make our lives a blessing, not only to us, but to the world. Just look at this place, Vidyapith, from a one-bedroom apartment to this place and from one couple to this many people. This is a great example of wholehearted dedication changing the world and changing so many lives for the wholehearted dedication. We

have that ability to make positive changes in the lives of people if we have that dedication and sincerity. This is a wonderful lesson we can learn.

Nivedita was also a powerful and electrifying speaker. One reason she was a powerful speaker was that she had developed the ability to not speak to the ear, but to the mind. Most of us speak so other people can hear, but she learned from Swami Vivekananda that the mind is the pivot and the body depends on the mind. She learned to speak from mind to mind. When she was speaking to the audience, she saw the mind. She started directly addressing the mind and forgot about the medium, the ear. Like her guru, she became a great devotee of Mother Kali. This was extraordinary for an Irish Protestant woman who was living in England, who was a daughter and granddaughter of ministers who were very strict Christians. Even now in America, people raise their eyebrows when I say that I am worshiping a Hindu God or Goddess. They say that we have a pill to cure this weakness of mind. Imagine in the 1890s what Nivedita's relatives and friends thought about her. They must have thought that she was out of her mind. Nivedita gave a speech on Mother Kali in Albert Hall in Calcutta which became a huge sensation. Hindus became very supportive of her and were very happy. It shocked the British because an educated British woman came to India to preach the glories of Kali. They could not believe it. For her, Kali was the answer to everything.

Kali for her was the paradox of the Ultimate. Kali for her was both a personal loving Mother and the impersonal truth of the world as we experience it. She said, "No betrayal of truth is so terrible as choosing what is so beautiful, and easy, and soft to be believed and worshipped. Let us face, also, just as willingly, the terrible, the ugly, and the hard." Let me ask you all: "Is there anyone here who has not experienced something terrible, ugly, and hard in life?" That is the reality of life. Otherwise, how do you explain loving God allowing bad things to happen to good people? It happens every day. We see every day that for every birth there is death, for every pleasure there is pain, for every success there is going to be a failure, and for every little praise there is a blame waiting around the corner. How do you explain that? We have to go beyond the pairs of opposites. We have to go beyond good and evil and beyond birth and death. We have to transcend both. Nivedita got there and Kali made all the sense to her. This is what we learn from Nivedita. *Jai Kali.*

Another reason we should thank her is for providing us the extraordinary memories of Swami Vivekananda which we find nowhere else. She had such an amazing relationship with Swamiji that she could fight with him and still receives love from him. Swamiji used to tell her, "I used to hate Kali and her ways. It was a six-year fight with Sri Ramakrishna because I would not accept Kali." Nivedita asked, "Now, you have accepted her, have you not Swamiji?" He had become a great devotee of Mother Kali. Swamiji answered, "I had to. Ramakrishna Paramahansa dedicated me to her. She guides me in every little thing I do and just does as she likes with me. Yet, I fought so long. I love the man, Sri Ramakrishna. I thought he was the purest man I had ever seen. He loved me more than my own father and mother." Nowhere else than in these letters will we know how much Swamiji knew that Ramakrishna loved him with that intensity.

Nivedita asked Swamiji, "Is it Ramakrishna's greatness that made you hold onto him?" Swamiji said, "No, his greatness had not dawned on me yet. At that time, I had thought of him as a brain-sick baby, always having visions. I hated it. I had to accept Kali, too." When Nivedita asked him what made him accept Kali, Swamiji answered that the reason will die with him because he will not reveal it to anyone. Swamiji said, "I had great misfortunes at that time. My father had died and she saw the opportunity to make a slave of me. Ramakrishna Paramahansa made me come over to her." He said that during his travel in the Western countries he felt that Ramakrishna was holding his hand the entire time. He felt the presence of the Divine Mother the entire time he was here. Nowhere else will we see such revealing words of Swamiji than in his letters to Nivedita. We have to thank her for allowing us to see behind the veil the things we would have never known otherwise. These were in the letters she wrote to Josephine MacLeod as they happened.

We know Swamiji dies in 1902 and everybody was drowned in grief, Nivedita too, of course. Her life took another direction. She was deeply dedicated to the Ramakrishna Mission, but she got involved even more in Indian politics. She became greatly involved in the freedom movement, and the resurgence of Indian culture, Indian art, and Indian science. Because of her increased involvement in politics, she had to put a notice in a newspaper that she was officially breaking away from the Ramakrishna Mission. She had to break away from the Ramakrishna

Mission because the Britishers would have arrested all the monks of the Order if she had officially stayed a part of the Mission and was also involved in the freedom fight. Nonetheless, monks of the Order accompanied her everywhere and followed her. Swami Sadananda was her personal bodyguard.

Whenever she was in Calcutta, she would visit Holy Mother every day. That was the high point of her day. She became very involved with Indian art too. She met the great artists of that time, like the Tagore family and Nandalal Bose. All of them were trying to be European. They were imitating Greek art. She was appalled at them ignoring their own Indian art and trying to mimic Greek art. She paid their way to visit Ajanta caves so they would understand and appreciate the quality of Indian art from their ancestors. When they came back, they were totally changed and stopped mimicking Western art. She always used the word "we." "We, Indians, have our own art, we have our own History, and we have our own culture." Do you see the flowering of Indian art after that? She was a great supporter of Jagadish Chandra Bose. She helped him write five books and he later became "Sir Jagadeesh Chandra Bose" because of her work. She believed in him at a time when nobody did. She pushed him hard because Indian science was so rich at that time that no one could mimic it. She gave faith to Indians in their own ability to do things they had done thousands of years before. She gave them back faith in themselves.

Nivedita was working hard and her place had become crammed with students, with girls, with revolutionaries, with artists, with the cultural leaders of the day, with monks, with everybody. She had very little time for herself. She slept increasingly less. Because of the famine, she gave her food to others who needed it more than herself. Her health started to become increasingly fragile and, by 1911, it started to fail. Jagadish Chandra Bose and his wife took her to Darjeeling for a change in climate. She became really sick there and doctors diagnosed her sickness as blood dysentery, which was 100% fatal at that time. She was in complete peace with the diagnosis. That was quite extraordinary. This is one of the last lessons from her. She was a great *karma yogi*.

When you look at the end of her life, it appears as if everything around her had fallen away. Everything she worked for in her life seemed to have failed. The one thing Swamiji

entrusted her with, the Girls School, she had to close. The two helpers, Sister Christine and Sister Sudhira, both left her because it had become so increasingly chaotic. They both left and started teaching at the Brahmo Samaj School. She begged Sister Sudhira to come back, but she said no. Every single revolutionary she was close to had been either hanged, or imprisoned, or sentenced to exile, or left the country. Every one of them was gone. In 1911, it appeared that India was going backwards politically. Note that from 1911 it took another 36 years for India to get her independence. All the things she had given her blood for, like most of the people she was so close to that she loved had died except for Josephine MacLeod. Swamiji had died. Sara Bull had died. When she went to nurse Sara Bull in her sickness, Sara Bull's daughter accused her of being there to take her money. She had to take Sara Bull somewhere else to nurse her until she died. Nivedita was sick herself. She went back to India. Her beloved Swami Swarupananda, who had given her meditation instructions and had taught her Bengali and Sanskrit, had died as well. Finally, two days before she died, her beloved Swami Sadananda died. It looks like everything and everyone she loved and lived for had died. And yet, she was at deep peace.

As big as her public life was, her private and spiritual life was even bigger. It was her spiritual life that battery-powered her public life. Her Guru, Swami Vivekananda had given that spiritual life to her. Her meditation instructions and mantra and the spiritual life helped her detach herself from her failing body and remain in peace. Just before she died, she wrote, "I am thinking more and more that death means withdrawal into meditation, the sinking of a stone into the well of its own being. I wonder if it would be possible to resolve one whole life into love and blessing so that, in eternity, at least one thought of Self and knowing oneself as the presence of peace and benediction exists for all the need of suffering in the world." Right at the point of death, she was suffering tremendously. And all she wanted was to rid of any ego left so she can be an eternal blessing for anybody else. Can I be a source of peace and blessing for anyone? What a saintly life at the end! To have given up everything that had made her powerful and strong! She gave it up like a straw! That is a real karma yogi. She died in great peace.

Holy Mother said, "All creatures weep for such a soul." Part of being a karma yogi is to take the long view, to be able to step back, and she had that ability. She wrote so prophetically to Josephine MacLeod, "When we understand Swamiji, when we are dead, there will come a long period of obscurity and silence for the work he did. It will seem to have been forgotten, but two hundred years later it will have transformed the West." That is exactly what has happened. I have been around since the 1950s and I can see what is happening in just a short period of time. It is a very different country in the West. The West is very different than it was. It was the work of Swamiji and the work of Nivedita and the work of all these selfless people who have given their lives silently and beautifully. For us who can see the transformation, we can only feel the gratitude for everything that has been done for us. We can only feel gratitude from what we can learn from Swami Vivekananda and Sister Nivedita.

Namaste! Thank you!