

Thus Have I Heard

Swami Chetanananda

When Buddha had concluded his mission and decided to leave the body, his disciples began to lament. His principal disciple, Ananda, asked this question: "After Buddha enters nirvana we want to compile the Sutras. What words should we begin them with to show that they are the Buddha's?"

Buddha replied, "Use these four words: 'Thus have I heard.'"

On the 150th anniversary of Swami Vivekananda's birth, I would like to share with readers what I have heard and collected about Swamiji. When I was a young monk I met Swami Sadashivananda (Bhaktaraj Maharaj) and Brahmachari Jnan Maharaj, who were disciples of Swamiji. In addition I met several swamis who had known Swamiji, including Swamis Sankarananda, Atulananda, and Yogiswarananda.

Swami Satprakashananda told me that when he was 12 years old, he saw Swamiji three times in Dhaka in 1901. Swami Satprakashananda recalled: "Swami Vivekananda came in a magnificent open landau carriage drawn by a pair of horses. The carriage stopped at the gate of Mohini Mohan Das's house. I stood very close to the door of the carriage and was watching Swami Vivekananda. He got down escorted by two prominent attorneys of the city who had accompanied him from the railroad station. I looked at Swamiji closely. He noticed me. I was the only young boy there.

He was heavily garlanded with marigolds.

“The next day after school hours I walked down to that house in expectation of seeing Swami Vivekananda. He came down from the first floor escorted by a group of men and college students. He had put on a long ochre robe that reached down close to his ankles. He had the usual monk’s cap on his head; in his hand he carried a walking stick. He was followed by a large crowd as he walked across the street to the riverside, for the purpose of taking a walk on the paved road along the embankment of the River Budiganga.”

Then Swamiji went on a pilgrimage to Langal-bundh with his mother and others. When Swamiji returned to Dhaka, he stayed in a houseboat. Swami Satprakashananda described his next meeting with Swamiji: “I walked down close to the boat and looked at Swami Vivekananda through the windows from outside. When Swamiji saw me he sat down on a long bench just below the rows of windows on the side close to the bank. He looked at me through one of the windows while resting his arm on the window sill.... During his stay in Dhaka he met parties of visitors at least twice a day and talked with them. He also gave two public lectures, which were well-attended. The impression that Swami Vivekananda left on me has been a source of inspiration all my life. I can still visualize him as I saw him. Later I secured and read whatever literature regarding him I could obtain in English or in Bengali.”¹

On 16 October 1970, when I was in Mayavati, I met Mohanlal Shah at Lohaghat. He told me his reminiscences of Swamiji:

I saw Swamiji four times. First I saw him in 1890 with Swami

Akhandananda. At that time I was living in Almora. Lala Badri Shah's younger brother was my friend and moreover we were related to them. Swamiji stayed with that family. My first impression of Swamiji was that he was like Buddha. He was wonderfully handsome.

Then in 1897 I saw Swamiji in Almora after he had returned from America. We walked two miles in procession to receive him and bring him to Almora. It was a grand reception and many people came. A meeting took place in the market place in front of Badri Shah's house. Swamiji stood on high spot and gave a lecture. I was present but I don't remember what he said.

Again in 1898 Swamiji came and stayed at Thompson House; Nivedita and his other followers stayed in Oakley House in Almora. One day Swami Swarupananda asked me, "Will you go with us to Mayavati?" I replied, "I shall tell you tomorrow." The next day I agreed and left for Mayavati with Mr. and Mrs. Sevier and Swami Swarupananda.

At that time there was a tea garden in Mayavati. I saw how they used to dry the tea leaves in the main house. That house was remodeled to make living quarters. Swami Virajananda set up the Master's shrine upstairs and it was decorated with flowers. Then in 1901 when Swamiji came to Mayavati, the Master's Puja was stopped.

When we heard that Swamiji was coming to Mayavati, Swami Swarupananda told me: 'Swamiji is coming, but what shall we feed him? Go to the village and find out what things are available.' It was winter and terribly cold. I went to a village on a distant hill and

obtained raw plantains, the pith of the plantain tree (*Thor*), and some other vegetables. I cut them and helped the cook to prepare them.

Swamiji came and Virajananda attended him. For the first two nights Swamiji slept on the upper floor, but it was too cold. On the third day he began to sleep near the fireplace on the ground floor.

I was then very busy with my duties. The Mayavati printing press was behind the Ashrama building, and I had to compose all the articles for the Prabuddha Bharata magazine on the press. I did not have much opportunity to talk to Swamiji. He was always surrounded by distinguished people. One day I saw Swamiji pacing and lecturing in the library hall. Mother Sevier and others were listening quietly.

Swamiji wrote two articles in Mayavati — ‘Aryans and Tamilians’ and ‘Stray Remarks on Theosophy’. I composed those articles and took the proofs to him and he began to read them.²

In 1976 I visited Ridgely and met Frances Leggett, the daughter of Francis Leggett. She was very fond of me and gave me many letters written by Swamiji’s friends. She planned to edit a book of Swamiji’s letters, but it did not materialize. However, she wrote a book *Late and Soon*, a history of her family, and Swami Vivekananda was one of the main characters. When Mrs. Leggett died in 1977, I wrote a letter of condolence to her son Frank Margesson, and I mentioned that Swamiji had once put his hand on his mother’s head and blessed her. I also told him that once Swamiji had said to his disciple Swami Swarupananda: “Look here, Swarup, when I place my hand on someone’s head, that person need not worry for anything.

Never have any doubt about this.” Frank and his sister Gay Charteris wrote to tell me how much they appreciated my letter. Gay also mentioned that when her mother died in the hospital, there was a copy of *Meditation and Its Methods According to Swami Vivekananda* under her pillow, which I had presented to her.

Frances Leggett later wrote about this blessing: “This summer [1899] the child [Frances] was blessed. Alberta described it. One morning she and the Swami were sitting in the hall and the child came in with some flowers in her hand and gave them to the Swami. ‘In India,’ he said gravely, ‘we give flowers to our teachers...’ and he pronounced over her some Sanskrit words.”³

In the autumn of 1899 Swamiji was relaxing at Ridgely, and he sometimes played with the children. Hollister Sturges (Betty Leggett’s son by her first marriage) was then a young teenaged boy and was free with Swamiji. He even played golf with Swamiji. Frances wrote: “The young people coming and going at will, imbibing in great gulps the divine truths propounded by the Swami, and more often lured by Holl away for fun and games behind the scenes. ‘I don’t want to be a monk,’ Holl protested. ‘I want to marry and have children.’ ‘All right my boy,’ replied the Swami. ‘Remember only that you choose the harder path.’”⁴

On 19 November 1972, Paul Sturges (a son of Hollister) wrote to me: “When Swamiji was meditating at Ridgely Manor, my father told me he walked by and heard peals of laughter coming from Swamiji’s room. When Swamiji emerged later, my father asked, ‘Whom were you talking to?’ Swamiji replied, ‘I was alone in meditation.’ My father asked again, ‘What

was that laughter all about?' Swamiji replied, 'God is so funny!'

"When I was a boy and asking the inevitable questions about the nature of the universe and questioning the existence of God, I asked my father to tell me what he thought. My father replied: 'I've never thought much about it. I know there is a God because Swamiji told me so.'"

On 10 July 1943 at Fairfield house in Ridgely Paul Sturges recorded Josephine MacLeod's voice on a gramophone disc talking about Swamiji. I used it in the documentary *Vivekananda as We Saw Him*. It is now available on DVD. Here is the transcript:

Remember who you are. Never forget just who you are. They [the great teachers] do not give the same thought to everybody; it depends on your evolution. If you are ready, when you are ready, the teacher comes. It's your readiness that calls him. So when Swamiji came to America, and we went to hear him on the 29th of January 1895, having read the Gita. Betty and I seemed to be ready, because from that hour, life had another purpose, because it gave that strength that's within one -- not what is without.

Then when Mr. Leggett met him, he said "That's the greatest man I ever saw." And someone said to him, "Why do you say that, Mr. Leggett?" He said, "Because he has more common sense." Religion is not a queer thing -- it is the development of the highest side of one's life. Swamiji was such fun. There was such joy in him. He knew he was divine and because he was that, he could pass it on.

If you have money, you can give money; if you have spirituality, you can give that. You can only give what you yourself have earned. So

the children have to carry on. Swamiji used to say: "Give your hearts to the Lord when you are young. Then you'll carry many over." And he said: "Never forget who you are. Incidentally you are an American and a woman, but always you are a child of God. That's your birthright. And so tell yourself that incessantly. Till you get the courage that comes, know that there is this power within you as well as without. Never try to change a person. Take them where they are and give them a push onward. They must develop according to their nature. It's for you never to upset anyone else."⁵

On 27 December 1947 Swami Krishnananda recorded some of the reminiscences of Miss Josephine MacLeod on a gramophone disc in the Hollywood Vedanta Society before she passed away in 1949. Krishnananda showed her some photos of Ramakrishna, Holy Mother, Swamiji, the disciples of the Master, and Belur Math. Seeing some of those pictures Miss MacLeod recalled:

I read the other day his [Swamiji's] first address at the Parliament of Religions, when he was about 30. It was perfectly wonderful. Read again that first address of Swamiji's and just see the power!...

I wouldn't advise anybody to go to India. Sounds terrible. I may go. I've got that house [the guest house and now the President's quarters], you know. I have one big room with a bed Swamiji slept in.... You see, there was a little house at Belur, which is now the monastery. It was built by people who made boats by the Ganges. And

of course anybody could come up from the river -- dacoits or thieves or anybody -- so Swamiji put that great man [Swami Sadananda] -- his first disciple -- a huge, strong man -- as an outpost. We didn't know him, Mrs. Bull and I. And there Swamiji came every day to see us. And one day Nivedita came to see us, her face covered with mosquito bites, not any place unbitten. And then we found there was an extra little room where she could come and live with Mrs. Bull and I. We kept one room together with double beds, and we had a sitting room with a rug on one side and we sat on the floor, and the other biggest room where we had chairs and all, so whatever kind of people we had come visit us, we could seat them. And this one room was for Nivedita, and that's where she got her education. Every day he [Swamiji] came and talked.

And I had a letter from Nivedita written on the 2nd of July in which she said that Swamiji said, "I am preparing for death," (and he did die two days later) "but you must have a meal." And so she had this meal. And she wrote me. She was a great friend of mine, and she wrote me that he had said of me that I was as pure as purity and loving as love itself. Those were the last words he said of me.

But the day of his cremation she went over. He was cremated in a chadar that they [the monks] all wore -- it formed a part of their habit, I think. And she said, "Oh, if a little bit of this chadar could just come this way," and it flew right over to her, and [later] came up to us. I was not there.⁶

On 1 September 1986, at Rameswaram on the coast of Indian Ocean, I heard a wonderful story about Miss Josephine MacLeod from Swami Sarvajnananda, a senior monk of the Ramakrishna Order. I taped his eyewitness account, in which he stated: "Miss MacLeod generally spent six months in America and six months in India. She came to Madras another time [probably in the 1930s], on her way to Calcutta. She took a taxi from the Madras harbour and arrived at the Madras Math about one-thirty in the afternoon. The shrine was closed. The priest swami had already put the Lord to bed. Miss MacLeod said to Swami Sharvananda, the head of the Math, 'I want to go to Swamiji's room.' Swami Sharvananda politely replied: 'Swamiji is resting now. You will have to wait until four o'clock.' 'Nonsense!' said Miss MacLeod. 'Swamiji is resting! If he were alive, he would have come to receive me at the port. And you say that he is resting! Please open the door right now.' Swami Sharvananda asked a monk to open the door of Swamiji's room. I put Swamiji's picture on the pillow, and Miss MacLeod then sat on his bed with her eyes closed. After some time she came out and left for the harbour."⁷ As I listened to this story, I realized the power of love. This American woman's genuine love had swept aside the strict rule of an orthodox Hindu monastery.

In 1893 during the Parliament of Religions, Swamiji was the guest of Mr. and Mrs. John B. Lyons in Chicago. Their granddaughter, Cornelia Conger, visited Belur Math in the 1950s. At Swami Sankarananda's request she wrote her reminiscences about Swamiji, which are published in *Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda*. Later on 24 January 1971 she related

her reminiscences at the Vivekananda Vedanta Society of Chicago, and they were recorded on tape. I listened to that tape many times and included it in our DVD, *Vivekananda as We Saw Him*. At the end of the tape Ms. Conger says: "It's a memory I have never forgotten. He [Swamiji] had the most extraordinary, magnetic personality. I was 84 years old on Thursday, and the picture of him in my mind is just as clear. I've never known anybody like him, and I still think of him as somebody I loved and who I think loved me."⁸

In the summer of 1972 I travelled from Hollywood and visited the Vedanta Society of New York. I found in the society's archives a cassette tape that contained the reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda by Lillian Montgomery, who had attended Swamiji's lectures in New York in June 1900. Swami Pavitrananda and some devotees interviewed her on 22 April 1955, and she related her memories of Swamiji:

Swami Vivekananda was so entirely different from anything that we had known in America. I had heard all my life, it seemed to me, of power and repose, and the first time I saw it was in the presence of Swami Vivekananda. And it all came as such a surprise because I wasn't prepared for it really. Just a short time before that, I was really searching for something, and someone said they had heard of a swami. I didn't even know what a swami was. That was Swami Abhedananda. I heard him several times, and I was very impressed because he was so different from us. He was very calm and poised and all that sort of thing. And I was surprised that he knew so much about our literature and about our sciences and other things. I think I only heard him twice

and someone said, "Another swami is coming." Swami Abhedananda had been speaking in a hall, and they told me that this new swami would speak in a Vedanta house.

So I went to the Vedanta house, and I sat on a front seat so that I wouldn't miss anything. Swamiji entered by a side door. Immediately I knew that there was something extraordinary about him. He was very unassuming, very calm. He entered and took his place on the rostrum. But there was something about that presence -- that you couldn't take your eyes off of him, and he fascinated you. As he sat in his chair, his head was the most perfect that I had ever seen, and it was perfectly poised, and power seemed to emanate from him. I was fascinated. He looked like a living Buddha. He looked entirely different from any living personality I had ever seen.

He rose to speak, and the voice was extraordinary. It was mellow, resonant, but of great purity. As he spoke, veils just seemed to fall from your eyes, because he gave you an entirely different impression of personality. He gave you an entirely different impression as he was speaking of the relationship of the individual to the Divinity. I remember that as I looked at him it seemed to me there was an ocean of consciousness in back of him, and in some way there was no limit to his personality. His awareness was in a vision within. As we see people, we see them as limited because their awareness is entirely connected with the body. With Swami Vivekananda, it seemed to me that there was this ocean of consciousness in back of him and in some way that focussed and flowed through his words.

I heard him say, "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God." I have heard those words all my life, and I have the idea that most people have at some time -- that if you lived a certain life you would come in contact with a divine person or something like that. As Vivekananda was speaking, the purity of that personality was so great, it just seemed to me divinity was reflected in it. It was as if his mind was a limpid lake that was reflecting divine light. And with every word he spoke -- other people speak words and they have no idea of the value -- every word he spoke was a revelation because he brought with it the realization that he was living. Other people that I have heard on the pulpit and that sort of thing -- and I have heard about the best -- they speak from a standpoint of faith, that they have a faith in a divinity. I began to realize that this man was speaking from something that he was living, that every word he uttered came from a state of realization, such a realization as the ordinary person cannot imagine.

At one time, as I listened, I felt that he was so established in this realization that the soul was eternal that he could stand before a cannon without fear, and I seemed to sense that if this form vanished, that that light which was shining through it would stay there forever -- that it would never disappear. It was a strange sensation at the time. But there was a purity and an intense power, such a power as I think we have never seen, and I have never seen and I don't expect I'll ever see it again. It just seemed to pour from an infinite source. And he was perfectly calm, perfectly reposed.

Another thing Swamiji said that fascinated me was, "Face it!" He

told the story of how he was walking along a broad wall and an elderly monk was in back of him, and suddenly a vicious ape appeared, and this ape was about to attack him. Vivekananda was about to turn and run, and the monk said, "Face it!" He turned immediately and faced it, and he felt that power that conquers the beast. The idea that he gave us was that there was that within man that could face any situation that came to him. Those words will always stay with me. I've never forgotten them.

Another thing that impressed me very much was that there was an absence of the sense of ego. I saw eventually what that was, because his whole awareness was turned to that inner vision. Where the ordinary person has the sense of the little ego, Swami Vivekananda's sense of "I" had expanded into something that was vast and deep and very, very pure and very, very powerful, because it just penetrated within and it aroused something within that never was there before. Somewhere he has said that you never see without you, anything that isn't within. I think perhaps his great power was that he perceived the divinity in all forms, and he perceived it to such a degree that he awakened it in his listeners as he was speaking.

His whole personality was absorbed in this vision, which certainly was vast and it seemed to fill the whole space in back of him. He's the only person I've ever seen where there seemed to be no limit to his personality -- and it wasn't like our idea of a halo or anything like that. It was just as if this outer form was so attuned to something, a realization that was all power and purity and beauty. It was a beauty

that just flowed through every word that he spoke, every phrase. As I say, every word that he spoke took on a different -- you had a different conception of the words. As he spoke, veil after veil fell from your eyes, because you sensed the vastness of realization -- which before, I think, we had an idea of sort of an abstraction. But it was like a tremendous joy! It was something like that.

I don't think he could have possibly had an awkward movement, and he couldn't possibly have struck a false tone, because he was so tuned to something that was all harmony, all beauty. There's no one that has appeared at the Metropolitan [Opera] or on any stage that had that wonderful voice, or that had that wonderful magnetism. He just seemed to be a centre of spiritual power, and that emanated from him. He was always calm. But every line of his body followed his thoughts. It was just as if this outer form was floating on a great light.

Swami Pavitrananda: Did anybody ask questions?

Ms. Montgomery: Afterwards, yes, people asked questions, and then about half a dozen people would stay and talk to Swamiji. I always stayed till the last. He fascinated me. I was almost walking on air. You'd heard about saints and all that sort of thing, but he was so entirely different from any conception that I had ever had, because it was a calm power. It was just as if this form were on an ocean of light, as it were. Somehow that light concentrated and just poured through the words that he was speaking.

I find him in his poems much more than in his lectures, because as you read them with your old conceptions, I don't think you could possibly get the tremendous beauty that flowed through Vivekananda. But in his poems, the more and more you sink into them, the more you get the intensity of his feeling, and you know with every word he spoke that it wasn't an abstraction; he was really living all those things.

Swami Pavitrananda: What particular poem of Swami Vivekananda do you like most?"

Ms. Montgomery: I can't say that I have any preference, because he enters into so many aspects of divinity, and as you enter into these things, you feel a variety of feelings.... He comes forth with a phrase that breaks out in the wave of music, so that as you read the poems you must always feel that there is that awareness of a perfect harmony, a perfect beauty, and a realization that's of intense joy!

Devotee: Was his voice high or low? Was it resonant?

Ms. Montgomery: Oh, it was a mellow voice, but it had great resonance and great purity. It came from a plane of consciousness that was so far beyond the physical awareness, but nevertheless it was crystal clear and that's what cleared the mind, because it penetrated.

Devotee: What pitch was his voice? Was it in the high register or low

register?

Ms. Montgomery: I should say in the medium register. But I think it could take a pretty high register, but it was always mellow.

Swami Pavitrananda: Do you remember anything about his eyes?

Ms. Montgomery: His eyes were very beautiful, and they looked within -- that was something entirely different -- entirely new to a Western person. They were very limpid. And in some things you read, they speak of his eyes as bulging. They weren't at all bulging. It's a terrible expression to use, because they were normal eyes, but they were very large and very limpid, and you felt that the vision was within. And they were full of beauty.

Swami Pavitrananda: In those six weeks did he deliver many lectures?

Ms. Montgomery: No, he didn't. He didn't speak in a public hall or anything like that. It was more just like intimate talks. I don't think he spoke more than five times. And of course I was always there.

Swami Pavitrananda: When he would be speaking, would he be speaking standing?

Ms. Montgomery: Yes, he stood.

Swami Pavitrananda: Would he stand or walk?

Ms. Montgomery: He stood. He was rather calm.

Swami Pavitrananda: In India they say that on a big platform he would be pacing up and down.

Ms. Montgomery: No, he didn't. He stood in one place. He was perfectly poised.

Devotee: Did anyone take any notes of his talks?

Ms. Montgomery: Sister Nivedita took notes. Four of his lectures are in *The Master as I Saw Him*.

Swami Pavitrananda: Do you remember what kind of dress he put on?

Ms. Montgomery: The robe that he wore was of a salmon colour.

Swami Pavitrananda: Did he have a turban on?

Ms. Montgomery: No, I never saw him with a turban.

Devotee: How tall he was?

Ms. Montgomery: I think he was quite tall. I don't think he was six feet. He was well proportioned.

Devotee: Did you ever hear Swamiji sing?

Ms. Montgomery: No, but his words were a song -- every word he spoke.

Swami Pavitrananda: Did he chant Sanskrit?

Ms. Montgomery: Yes, of course. That was the first I heard of that voice -- that wonderful OM came, and then he rose.

One thing that is wonderful: We think of all these seers and sages and saints and prophets that have lived a couple of thousand years ago; I think the marvellous thing is that several lived in our age and that one came to this country. To my mind Vivekananda is the greatest personality that ever touched American shores. I think perhaps the wave of spirituality that seems to be rising over here is largely due to Swami Vivekananda.⁹

I have known Katharine Whitmarsh (Prasanna, a disciple of Swami Prabhavananda) since 1971, when I was working in Hollywood and Santa

Barbara. On 6 August 1979 I interviewed her at Santa Barbara and recorded her reminiscences of Swamiji:

I asked my mother about my meeting Swamiji. I wanted her to tell me again what she remembered because of course I was just under two years of age at the time and I couldn't possibly really remember. So she told me that we had been at Ridgely and that Swamiji took a walk every day and he stopped by our house on the way. He enjoyed watching us play -- my brother and myself. He was 3 and I was 1 year and 10 months. We used to run races and he gave a penny to the winner. He seemed to thoroughly enjoy it.

I tried to add some background to this as to why we were there. My father [Theodore Whitmarsh, a nephew of Francis Leggett] was like a son to Uncle Frank Leggett, and he gave the Inn to our family for the summers. Later we had the big cottage, but at that time we were staying at the Inn. We were at the Inn when Swamiji arrived, and he arrived probably on August 29 or 30, 1899. Uncle Frank had asked him to come to Ridgely [upon arriving in New York], but of course he didn't come the day he arrived, so I gather that he arrived at Ridgely on the 30th.

When I was 12 my Uncle Frank died, and Father inherited Camp Percy where Swamiji also went in New Hampshire. We went there summers until the war. Most people who could afford it in the East left the heat of the city at the end of May, Decoration Day holiday [Memorial Day], and stayed three months till September, the Labor Day holiday. It seems that Aunt Betty called it the Great Summer, but

of course it wasn't the Great Summer, it was the Great Autumn, since summer was over in September. When they were all together in Ridgely with Swamiji, and all the people had gathered there, it was September, October, and part of November, and that's never called summer, but autumn. We had already had our summer. I gather that Swamiji staying on was not planned. Perhaps they thought for a short time, but the hectic planning doesn't seem to indicate that he was to be there that long or that it had been prearranged. Usually my father took us to Ridgely at the beginning of the summer and took a later two-week holiday over the 4th of July, and then he returned for my brother Karl's birthday on 27 August and took two weeks then -- one before and one after -- and then took us back to the city. We would probably have returned on the 7th or the 10th, but I'm not sure how many days we were there after Swamiji came. Father had been alone in the hot city since the end of May, and he would want his family back. Also, if we had stayed on, he would have to return and take us back again. Father was a young man of 30 with three children: Francis 6, Karl 3, Katharine, myself, was almost 2.

The walk that Swamiji took every day is rather interesting to me because there is only really one walk at Ridgely, and you take it one way back or the other. But if he left the little cottage and took the road by the casino, he would go on straight through the fields to a big old oak tree, which has since died. It was the highest point on the walk and overlooked the fields on all sides. There was a seat nailed around this great tree, and I often sat there, as I had a special love for it. Years later I

was told Swamiji used to meditate under this tree. So then he walked down the hill to the Inn and enjoyed watching us play for a short time. Then he would go to Ridgely Manor and the cottage [later called Swamiji's cottage].

Mother used to describe the dinner parties, and she always said that Swamiji was the most delightful dinner companion she ever had. Imagine! Anyway, he was great fun. When I went to see Swami Nikhilananda, I don't remember when it was, he told me about my father. He said that when Swamiji went to say good-bye to Uncle Frank -- and he was going to India for the last time -- my father was there. My father said to him that he hoped to see him before long. Swamiji said, "No I'm not coming back." Father said, "Oh, aren't you coming back?" He said "No, I'm going to India to die." Father didn't really take him seriously, as Swamiji often joked. He made some polite remarks about it, but Swamiji insisted that he was going to die. Father said, "Well, if you are going to die, you should leave a will." He said, "I have nothing to will." Father said, "Yes, you've got your books that have been made." Miss Waldo was getting them together. So he said, "If you make up the will, I'll sign it." Then my father got busy -- I don't know the details of how he arranged it -- but that's how they set up the trust fund. Many years later when the trust fund ran out, when everybody had died on the trust fund, Tantine bought it and gave it to Swami Nikhilananda. So all that publishing copyright was done through my father. I'm very of proud of that.¹⁰

Another touching incident took place in Swamiji's cottage at Ridgely. Betty Leggett was the hostess, so she would inspect her guests' sleeping accommodations, as there were many people living there. Swamiji and Swami Turiyananda were sleeping in one room with two beds. Mrs. Leggett came to inspect the accommodations in the cottage and found Swami Turiyananda's mattress and bedding on the floor. "What is the matter, Swami?" she exclaimed. "Is something wrong with the bed?" "No, no," he assured her, "the bed is fine. But, you see, I cannot bring myself to sleep on the same level with Swamiji -- so I have put the mattress on the floor."¹¹ This shows what kind of love and reverence Turiyananda had for Swamiji.

Swami Akhilananda told this interesting story to Dr. Hilary Holt, an American devotee in Hollywood, who related it to me: After one of Swamiji's lectures at Harvard University, Professor William James was walking behind two undergraduates who had just attended the lecture, and he overheard the following conversation:

First student: "I was really disappointed with today's lecture."

Second student: "Why?"

First student: "Well, we were told that this man was so great and that his ideas were so profound."

Second student: "What makes you say his ideas aren't profound?"

First student: "Because I understood every word he said."¹²

We read in Vivekananda's biography that he would see a light before he fell asleep and he believed that everyone went to sleep in the same way. When I was in Hollywood, I heard a similar story about Sister Lalita (Mrs. Carrie Wyckoff, one of the Mead sisters). Sister Lalita would meditate three times a day in the Hollywood shrine with Swami Prabhavananda and other nuns regularly even in her later 80s.

Jyoti (Mrs. Edwin L. Searle) wrote to me on 25 March 1979: "A mental picture I often enjoy is Sister seated in meditation, unmoving and absolutely absorbed for long periods of time. Infinite bliss seemed to emanate from her whenever I sat next to her during meditation."

Pravrajika Yogaprana told me: "After meditation she would prostrate for a long time in the shrine. One day Swami Prabhavananda asked her, 'Sister, why do you prostrate for such a long time?' She replied: 'Sometimes it takes a long time for me before I see the light. Others are fortunate that they see the light quickly.'"¹³ When I heard this story I felt how Swamiji's influence had transformed an American woman, who loved and served him.

I interviewed Sudhira (Miss Helen Hall, a disciple of Swami Prabhavananda) in Hollywood on 10 August 1883. She told me a story concerning Swamiji that Sister Lalita told her: "At the Monterey house the bedrooms were all upstairs. They were coming down for breakfast. She was behind Swamiji, and she got a little unsteady. The steps were steep and shallow. A little unsteady, she put her hand on Swamiji's shoulder to steady herself, and the world went away! She was just in another place, in another consciousness, and she didn't remember getting down. She went

into the dining room and somehow he got her seated and he took over. And he was so charming and so entertaining and so much fun that nobody noticed that Sister Lalita was blanked out -- that she was in another place. That's all she ever said about it. But just touching his shoulder took her there. From that time on, Swamiji was God to Sister."

Sudhira told me another fascinating story concerning Dorothy, the daughter of Shanti (Mrs. Alice Hansbrough, one of the Mead sisters and Swamiji's secretary): "One day I was in San Francisco and Dorothy had, of course, grown by this time. I said: 'Dorothy, you don't ever go to the lectures. Aren't you a Vedantist?' This was when I was first in. And she gave me a look that went right through me and then she said, 'I sat on Swamiji's lap.' What that implied about what she got.... You see, she had no father (her father having disappeared in Alaska) and Swamiji was the pillar of her life. But it was all personal. It wasn't that she read the Vedanta books or anything like that. It was what Swamiji gave her. I'll never forget how she said it. She certainly put me in my place."¹⁴

I collected some letters written by Swami Vivekananda's followers in America, who shared their memories about Swamiji with each other long after his passing away. Viraja Devi (Mrs. Edith Allan, the wife of Thomas Allan of San Francisco) wrote to Ujjvala (Miss Ida Ansell) several letters. Here are some excerpts:

19 November 1947. Edith Allan to Ida Ansell: "I well remember when he [Swamiji] was speaking of leaving San Francisco, etc. I felt very badly and Swamiji said: 'I will send another Swami. He *lives* what I *talk* about.' I

don't suppose you can imagine how I felt when I first met Swami Turiyananda. I thought he was a lovely soul and I revered him. But as Swami Turiyananda himself said, 'I am a row boat and may take two or three to the other side. Swamiji is an Atlantic liner and can take thousands.' There is only *one* Swamiji -- never forget that."

"I came across a paper today written in 1929: Swamiji said: 'I am neither man nor angel. I have no sex nor limit. I am knowledge itself. I am He. I have neither anger nor hatred. I have neither pain nor pleasure. Death nor birth I never had. For I am Knowledge Absolute and Bliss Absolute. I am He. My soul, I am He.'"

7 April 1948. Edith Allan to Ida Ansell: "Once in the morning meditation class on Turk Street, he [Swamiji] asked for questions and I ignorantly began to tell him of an experience I had in the meditation. He came down upon me like a 'ton of bricks' and of course I was hurt. I thought, 'The next question I ever ask you, you'll answer.' That evening after the lecture in Redmen's Hall, Swamiji was waiting as I was till they got the money and tickets settled. I stood at quite a distance from him. Presently he called out, 'Madam you come here.' So I went. He smiled and said: 'The next time you want to ask me a question like that do it when we are alone. If I had answered you, they would all have had that experience, that old lady who shook her head and all of them.' The old lady who shakes her head was Mrs. Wilmore. You may remember her. She went back to the Catholic Church and died a Catholic."

26 June 1950. Edith Allan to Ida Ansell: "Once a woman in San Francisco said to Swamiji, 'I wish I had seen Sri Ramakrishna.' And

Swamiji replied: 'You wish you had seen Sri Ramakrishna and you have seen *me*.' So we really saw the Lord Himself and did not know it. But the longer I live the more I think of Swamiji and the more I feel how blessed we who saw him are."

17 September 1951. Edith Allan to Ida Ansell: "I loved Swamiji for many reasons. He was never so *awfully good*. He was like a consuming fire and at the same time could be naughty and funny.... I am grateful for every moment I spent in his blessed presence and can remember most if not all what he said to me. I never can understand why he was so good to me, and it is true I had many hours alone with him and I always remember it was he who asked me to go to Turk Street to see him. He was so wonderful I never could have asked him to see me, and I had quite a few meals with him, at least three alone with him in the Alameda Home. He cooked and we ate together. Blessed days!"

2 February 1953. Edith Allan to Ida Ansell: "Do you remember Swamiji was invited to go to a party at Mrs. Phoebe Hearst's [in Berkeley] one Sunday afternoon? Another hall had to be rented, the notices in papers changed. Mrs. Hansbrough and Mrs. Aspinall were to go with him. I don't know whether Swamiji ever said he would go, but they hurried about getting ready for the party. Swamiji was serene as usual and Mrs. Aspinall said, 'Swami, you will have to hurry.' 'Why?' said Swamiji. 'It is time we left for Berkeley,' said Mrs. Aspinall. 'I am not going to Berkeley,' said Swamiji, and that was settled. When I knew of it I asked Swamiji why he would not go and he said, 'Mrs. Hansbrough just wanted to lionize me. I would not go to her party.' And he did not go. Whether he ever said he

would go I don't know. Maybe the ladies took it for granted or not, but I do remember the lecture he gave was a repeat of 'Christ the Messenger,' and how wonderful it was. He spoke of Jesus walking along the seashore and saying to some fishermen, 'Follow thou me,' and they forsook all and followed him. 'Fools like you and me could walk along, saying, "Follow thou me", and who do you think would come?"'

An undated letter from San Francisco. Edith Allan to Ida Ansell: "You remember Swamiji saying, 'When a stone is thrown into water a circle comes and then more faint circles form and each circle gets fainter. So it is when an incarnation comes. He is a big stone and forms a wave around him and each circle following gets smaller and smaller and larger and larger in circumference.' How true, yet we are happy to be in any circle. The more I think of Swamiji the more wonderful he becomes!"¹⁵

Swamiji is a wonder to me. 'Wonder' means that which arouses awe, astonishment, surprise, or admiration. When we gaze at the Great Wonders of the world -- the Great Pyramid of Egypt, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the Light House of Alexandria, the Great Wall of China, the Taj Mahal of India, and the Roman Colosseum of Rome -- we are struck with wonder. Similarly I look at my bookshelf and see the many books by and about Swamiji -- *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* in nine volumes; *Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda*; *Life of Swami Vivekananda* by His Eastern and Western Disciples in two volumes; *Life of Vivekananda* by Romain Rolland; *The Master as I Saw Him* and *Notes of Some Wanderings with Swami Vivekananda* by Sister Nivedita; seven books by Mahendra Nath Datta and

one book by Bhupendra Nath Datta; *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries* in six volumes by Marie Louise Burke; *Vivekananda O Samakalin Bharatvarsha* in seven volumes by Sankari Prasad Basu, and hundreds of other books on Swamiji — I am in wonder as I consider Swamiji’s achievements and contributions.

Swami Vivekananda lived in this world for 39 years, 5 months, and 24 days. He started his public work at the age of 30. He worked for about 7 years, and then he said: “I have given enough to thinking humanity for 1500 years.” Is this not a wonder? It is 2013, and we are observing the 150th anniversary of Swami Vivekananda’s birth. Generations to come will stand in wonder as they observe the depth and magnitude of Vivekananda’s life and message.

¹ Transcribed from a tape and *Sri Ramakrishna’s Life and Message in the Present Age*, 100-03

² Swami Chetanananda, *Bahurupe Vivekananda* (Udbodhan Office: Kolkata, 2011) 241-42

³ Frances Leggett, *Late and Soon* (Houghton Mifflin Company: Boston, 1968) 115

⁴ *Ibid.*, 114

⁵ Transcribed from a tape

⁶ Transcribed from a tape

⁷ Transcribed from a tape

⁸ Transcribed from a tape

⁹ Transcribed from a tape

¹⁰ Transcribed from a tape

¹¹ Marie Louise Burke, *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries* (Advaita Ashrama: Kolkata, 1987) 5:112

¹² Swami Chetanananda's Diary

¹³ Transcribed from a tape and Swami Chetanananda's Collection

¹⁴ Transcribed from a tape

¹⁵ Swami Chetanananda's Collection