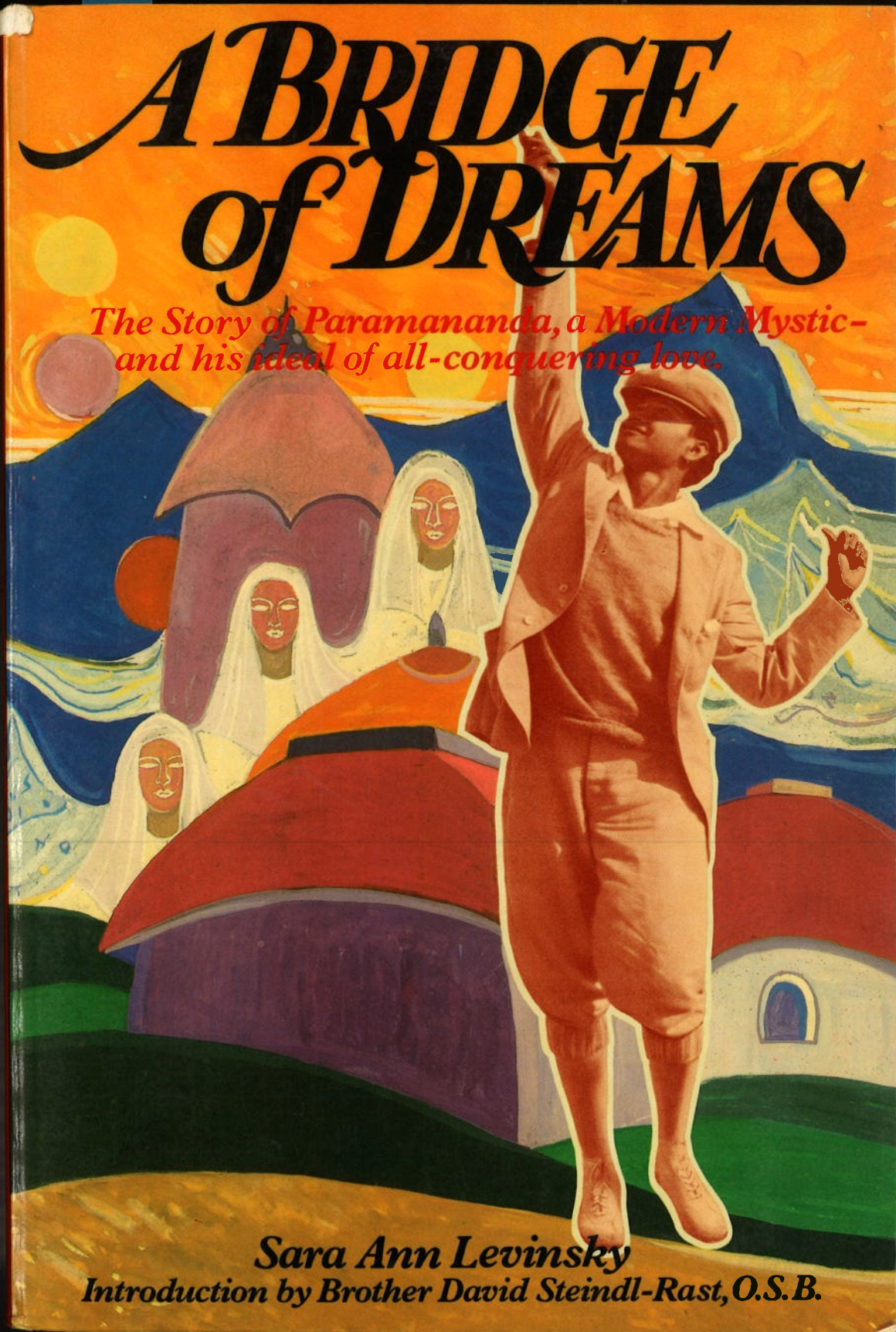


A BRIDGE of DREAMS

*The Story of Paramananda, a Modern Mystic -
and his ideal of all-conquering love.*



Sara Ann Levinsky

Introduction by Brother David Steindl-Rast, O.S.B.

A BRIDGE of DREAMS

Swami Paramananda (1884-1940), one of the first Eastern teachers to come to the United States, was a pioneer in opening up a hostile Christian establishment to Indian religion and philosophy.

Rejecting automatic acceptance of tradition and American myths of size, organization and pragmatism, Paramananda was a guide whose teaching went straight to the heart of spiritual life: *Love one another*. His approach was so idealistic that it was discounted as visionary by his critics, but the innovative community that he founded is still flourishing 75 years later.

A BRIDGE OF DREAMS reveals the story of Paramananda's life and community. Rarely has an historian had such unrestricted access to the diaries, letters and intimate accounts of a spiritual teacher and his disciples. Their finances, frictions, and the love they shared are candidly portrayed in this epic of the spiritual life. Here is no facile philosophy, no esoteric tricks, but the true story of how one ardent soul used the common problems of twentieth century America to prove "*Love conquers all*."

"Actually, I had to bridle my enthusiasm for the book, so as not to make the Introduction sound like a sales promotion. I've read the ms. with deep joy. At many pages I've shed tears. Congratulations! May God guide this book to many readers."

Brother David Steindl-Rast, O.S.B.

"I have been aware of nothing less than a touch of genius in your presentation. The amount of research and analysis, the balance of critical understanding and deep humanity... has deeply impressed me."

Dr. Amiya Chakravarty

Cover Painting: Sushil Mukherjee, 1984

Inner Traditions



Lindisfarne Press

Cover design by Norman Kanter

ISBN 0-89281-063-7

♦ A BRIDGE OF DREAMS ♦

THE STORY OF PARAMANANDA,
A MODERN MYSTIC,
AND HIS IDEAL OF ALL-CONQUERING LOVE



SARA ANN LEVINSKY

INNER TRADITIONS  LINDISFARNE PRESS

Published by The Lindisfarne Press
Box 127, West Stockbridge, MA 01266

Distributed by Inner Traditions International
377 Park Avenue South
New York, New York 10006

Copyright © 1984 by Sara Ann Levinsky

No part of this book may be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information write The Lindisfarne Press.

ISBN 0-89281-063-7
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 83-82698

Printed in the United States of America

CONTENTS

11	List of Illustrations
15	Introduction
20	List of Characters
25	<i>Youth In The Indian Village</i>
44	<i>With Swami Vivekananda</i>
66	<i>The Madras Math</i>
83	<i>New York Tempest</i>
115	<i>Boston Beginnings</i>
139	<i>Washington</i>
151	<i>"To Infuse The Spirit"</i>
171	<i>"The Heathen Invasion"</i>
197	<i>The Tide Turns</i>
217	<i>Queensberry Street</i>
248	<i>Sister Devamata</i>
272	<i>Ananda Ashrama</i>
306	<i>"Love Will Conquer"</i>
344	<i>The Swami's Calamity</i>
379	<i>Concorde and Discord</i>
413	<i>Betrayal</i>
427	<i>Fire and Flood</i>
455	<i>Disappointment In Friends</i>
477	<i>The Great Reassurer</i>
509	<i>Sister Daya</i>
533	<i>The End of Spring</i>
565	<i>Epilogue</i>
567	<i>Bibliography</i>
580	<i>Index</i>

List of Illustrations

FOLLOWING PAGE 96

Sri Ramakrishna.

Ananda Mohan Guha Thakurta, Paramananda's father.

Swami Vivekananda

Paramananda in his native village after becoming a swami.

Paramananda as a sannyasin, c. 1902.

Swami Ramakrishnananda

Group at Belur Math, c. 1901.

Group photograph. India, 1906.

At the Greenacre Conference on Comparative Religion, Maine, c. 1909.

Paramananda and Mr. Stone. Milton, Massachusetts, 1909.

FOLLOWING PAGE 192

Paramananda. Boston, c. 1910.

Sri Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother.

Group photograph. Bangalore, South India, 1908.

#1 Queensberry Street, Boston. Home of the Vedanta Centre, 1914-1925.

Entrance to #1 Queensberry Street, 1914.

Chapel at #1 Queensberry Street.

Swami Paramananda. Los Angeles, c. 1916.

Sister Satya Prana

Sister Seva

Mary Lacy Staib (later Sister Shanta)
Sister Achala
Sister Devamata, c. 1915.
Georgina Jones (later Sister Daya), aged seventeen.
Sister Daya. Boston, 1921.

FOLLOWING PAGE 288

Group photograph. 1919.
Queensberry Street house, 1920.
Paramananda constructing a kite.
Paramananda flying a kite. Revere Beach, 1922.
Kite flying contest, Revere Beach, Massachusetts, 1922.
Paramananda hiking at Ananda Ashrama, 1923.
Panoramic view of Ananda Ashrama grounds,
after construction of Temple.
Facsimile of Paramananda's handwriting, letter to ashrama community,
en route to India, January, 1926.
Group photograph. Ananda Ashrama, December, 1923.
Group photograph. Ananda Ashrama, 1924.
Dedication of Ashrama Cloister, November, 1924.
Ananda Ashrama Cloister, rear view, 1925.
Gayatri Devi. 1927.
Gayatri Devi. Ananda Ashrama, c. 1926.
Gayatri Devi and Sister Daya. Ananda Ashrama, 1926.

FOLLOWING PAGE 384

Paramananda leaving on the Santa Fe, October 14, 1925.
Pasadena railroad station, October 25, 1926.

ister Shanta)
 i
 . 1915.
 ya), aged seventeen.
 t, 1921.
 AGE 288
 . 1919.
 use, 1920.
 cting a kite.
 evere Beach, 1922.
 Massachusetts, 1922.
 da Ashrama, 1923.
 Ashrama grounds,
 Temple.
 , letter to ashrama community,
 ary, 1926.
 ama, December, 1923.
 Ashrama, 1924.
 er, November, 1924.
 rear view, 1925.
 1927.
 hrama, c. 1926.
 and Ashrama, 1926.
 AGE 384
 a Fe, October 14, 1925.
 October 25, 1926.

Hiking at Ananda Ashrama, 1925.
 Group photograph, Ananda Ashrama.
 Planting in orchard, Ananda Ashrama, 1924.
 Paramananda with his brother Bibhu Charan's family. Dacca, 1928.
 Temple of the Universal Spirit, Ananda Ashrama, 1929.
 Interior of Temple.
 Cohasset ashrama, "House on the Rock," August, 1929.
 On the "High Rock," Cohasset ashrama, c. 1929.
 Swami Paramananda. c. 1929.
 Ojai, California, 1927.
 Cloister patio, June, 1926.

FOLLOWING PAGE 480

Gayatri Devi and Paramananda. Ananda Ashrama, December, 1927.
 Sister Devamata. c. 1928.
 Sister Daya. September, 1929.
 Paramananda. New Year's Day, 1927.
 Aboard ship, en route to India, December, 1932.
 Outdoor class at Dacca Ananda Ashrama, 1931.
 Group photograph. Dacca, 1935.
 Chapel of the Vedanta Centre, 420 Beacon Street, Boston, 1939.
 Boulder tossed down by flood, Ananda Ashrama, January, 1934.
 Group photograph. Ananda Ashrama, c. 1937.
 Paramananda with Cincinnati students. July, 1933.
 Last picture taken of Paramananda, with Miss Sherwood
 at her 80th birthday party, June 5, 1940, Ananda Ashrama.
 Swami Paramananda. Cohasset ashrama, 1939.

Introduction

Before he was known as Paramananda, they called him Basanta — Springtime — and how that name fits him! Every word, every action of his seems to radiate the joy, the freshness, the youthfulness of a spring morning. His life's work, too, marks the springtime of Western enthusiasm for the wisdom of India, a blossoming of which we are only now beginning to reap the fruits. Springtime is pregnant with possibilities, and Sara Ann Levinsky catches this air of promise in the pages of Paramananda's biography. No one will be able to read this book without sensing a touch of spring.

Let me make a confession. Confronted by the sheer bulk of the voluminous manuscript, I secretly hoped that by merely skimming through it I could glean material enough to write an introduction. I'm pretty good at skimming through books. But there is no skimming through this one. In no time I was captivated. The freshness of spring is not only in the story of Swami Paramananda's life, but also in the way that story is told here. I like the early spring when things are still plain, almost stark. And I find that quality in the unassuming voice of the narrative sections, refreshingly interspersed with Swami Paramananda's own poems of fervent devotion. As I went on reading, it became more and more difficult to put this book down.

What moved me most deeply was Swami Paramananda's childlike spirit. This may well be his highest achievement. If childlikeness is not an achievement, it is merely retardation. Jesus does not invite us to remain, but to become, like children. Spring is always too short. Childhood is too short for us to become the children we are meant to be. A lifetime is barely long enough for a task like that. But here is a man who accomplished that task. "Every hour that passes grows younger." This is how the poet Rilke captured the spirit of early spring. And St. Paul wrote words which Swami Paramananda could have made his own: "Even though outwardly we wear out, inwardly we grow younger day by day" (2 Cor. 4:16). He was never younger than on his last day when he walked out the door with a dancing step. Who could have suspected that he was not to cross that threshold again?

He blazed a trail. Historically, we may put it that way. And yet, the towering image of a pioneer falls short of conveying Swami Paramananda's true greatness. To his contemporaries he seemed at times like a babe in the woods because he was a child venturing out on a spring morning, his eyes shining with the delight of discovery. But with the wisdom of the child, he found a surer path than many of the noisy trail blazers among his contemporaries. In the prophetic words of Isaiah: "A little child shall lead them" (Is. 11:6).

You have to have worked on a farm to get the full impact of that passage in Isaiah. I, for one, have barely managed to make two calves walk together. It seemed difficult enough without adding a lion. But Swami Paramananda shared Isaiah's vision of the Peaceable Kingdom and that included the wolf, the lamb, the leopard, the cow, the bear, and all the rest of us. Nothing would satisfy him but to "put an end to the intense strife between the different religions." Little children reach for the stars. But the officials of those different religions were not in a mood

to "lie down together." It was a cold springtime.

In 1937, a Parliament of Religions was held in Calcutta. It was the occasion of Swami Paramananda's last visit to his native India. Delegates from all over the world were present. Rabindranath Tagore attended, Charles Lindbergh came from America, and some liberal professors from Europe spoke from a Christian perspective. Yet, not one of the Christian churches of the West sent a delegate. The closest to an official representative of the Christian world was the head of the local Y.M.C.A. If this seems hard to believe, less than half a century later, we owe it to children who reached for the stars. We owe it in greater measure than we may realize to Swami Paramananda, in whose heart-warming presence "prejudice melted away."

He proved to be a Christ figure, more Christian than those Christians who narrow-mindedly opposed him out of sectarian prejudice. He was catholic, if that means "all-embracing," yet harassed by officials of Catholic Boston. Sri Ramakrishna had experienced profound mystical communion with Christ. His disciple, Swami Vivekananda, visited America in 1893-97 and here, inspired by the so-called "active" Christian orders, conceived the ideal of the Ramakrishna Mission, combining God-realization and active service to the human family. Paramananda, the third in this succession of great teachers, had but one goal in life: to become "an open channel for God's love." As one seeker who met him exclaimed: "For the first time I have seen Christ's teaching exemplified in a living character."

Only days before his death, Swami Paramananda startled his intimate disciple with the question, "Have I been a good shepherd?"—"The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep" (Jn. 10:11). Many times, Swami Paramananda had to lay down his life. Confronted by prejudice, slander, suspicion, he chose not to defend himself, but to trust in the power of truth. "It is no easy thing to begin a new work," he wrote, "especially in

a strange country." His biographer aptly calls it "planting flowers in a hail storm." But in his heart of hearts he knew it was springtime, and he went on planting.

The first ones in the world to plant gardens were women. In a male-dominated society Swami Paramananda stood up for the rights of women long before that had become a trend. But more than that, he cultivated womanly virtues in himself. Steeped in devotion to the Great Mother, he did not found his communities as an architect lays foundations for a building. Rather, he planted them, and he knew the labor pains of mothering. This gives his biography an added timeliness today.

Equal rights for women was not a matter for debate; it was an axiom for Swami Paramananda. He stood firm on this point, even when he met with opposition from his own order. In this he proved himself a faithful disciple of his master. Swami Vivekananda had put his own service under the motto, "Women and the poor." He was convinced "there is no chance for the welfare of the world, unless the condition of women is improved." And he compared a society in which men have all the power to a bird trying to fly on one wing. Swami Paramananda may have had all the charm of a child, but in upholding these principles he showed all the fire of a radical.

Springtime is a season for planting, but it is also a season for burning. Last year's dry leaves and husks are consumed in the fires of spring. Again he quoted his beloved teacher Vivekananda: "The world is burning in misery." And, fighting fire with fire, he let his own burning conviction blaze: "We cannot think one thing—peace, and prepare for another—war. It will not, it cannot work!" What would he say to us today?

He does still speak. It has been my privilege to feel the fire of Swami Paramananda's spirit still burning brightly in the Ashramas he started. His chosen disciple, Srimata Gayatri Devi, a great Mother, keeps the fire fervent and the light clear. "Paramananda

y calls it "planting flowers
f hearts he knew it was

gardens were women. In a
nananda stood up for the
become a trend. But more
ues in himself. Steeped in
ot found his communities
uilding. Rather, he planted
mothering. This gives his

matter for debate; it was
e stood firm on this point,
om his own order. In this
f his master. Swami Vive-
r the motto, "Women and
no chance for the welfare
women is improved." And
ave all the power to a bird
nananda may have had all
these principles he showed

, but it is also a season for
asks are consumed in the
ved teacher Vivekananda:
, fighting fire with fire, he
e: "We cannot think one
r—war. It will not, it can-
oday?

privilege to feel the fire of
g brightly in the Ashramas
ata Gayatri Devi, a great
light clear. "Paramananda

strove to create not an organization, but an atmosphere. He wanted to so charge the Vedanta Centre with peace and holiness, that people could directly benefit just by entering the place." And what a privilege it is to breathe that atmosphere, as of a garden in May. This book will extend that privilege to many who cannot travel to one of the Ashramas. It is a timely book, for we need places to refresh our hearts. And we need what healthier generations had on their bookshelves: *Lives of the Saints*. They must be saints for now; catholic saints, who belong to all traditions, like Swami Paramananda. I trust that his biography will keep alive not only the memory of a springtime, but the power of spring in our hearts.

BROTHER DAVID STEINDL-RAST, O.S.B.

Monk of Mt. Saviour Benedictine Monastery