

## A Western Family's Devotion to Vedanta

By Swami Tathagatananda

The spiritual idealism, eternal wisdom, and hallowed example of the great luminaries Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda ever ignite the divine spark in sincere and noble aspiring souls, wherever they may be. Silent creative minds have had to be inspired and nourished with lofty spiritual ideals in order to live in wisdom and dedicate their lives to the service and cause of Vedanta. The noble Genet family, Jeanne, Rolande and their mother Maman, who lived in the West, is one such example of supreme dedication and devotion to Vedanta.

Jeanne and Rolande Genet were born a year apart, in 1906 and 1907, in a well-to-do French Canadian family in Ottawa. The father's secure government position kept the family prosperous and comfortable. According to the custom of the time, the two sisters boarded in a Catholic convent school. They immediately felt a pronounced admiration and love for convent life. By nature, Jeanne was introspective, reserved and silent; Rolande was jolly, self-reliant, fearless and full of zeal. The nuns cherished them both, deeming them perfect for the contemplative, self-sacrificing convent life.

While Their father passed away when they were still young. Their mother, apprehensive of the nuns' influence on her daughters, moved the family to Montreal, Canada and hired private tutors to educate them. Jeanne was gifted in piano and violin and Rolande in dance. In 1932, at the age of fifty, Maman relocated her family to Manhattan, New York, which offered better career opportunities. In New York, Jeanne pursued a musical vocation while Rolande became an expert dancer.

In spite of Maman's progressive and well-informed intentions, Jeanne and Rolande were destined to lead ideal spiritual lives. Amidst the glamour, their noble lives yearned for Truth. At this time, Rolande was inexorably led to Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda when Romain Rolland's book, *Prophets of New India*, came into her hands. Reading it, Rolande and her sister were profoundly moved. They were inspired to discover for themselves the eternal soul of India, radiant, calm and majestic with a "unifying, pacifying love for all beings." Sri Ramakrishna's and Swami Vivekenanada's genuine truth and intuitive experience of Divinity entered the sisters' souls, beginning their momentous and radical inner transformation. Steadily and securely transformed, they wholly accepted Vedanta's broad principles exemplified in the sacred lives of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda.

In 1933, only a year after moving to New York, Jeanne and Rolande came to the Vedanta Society of New York and heard their first Vedanta lecture, delivered by Swami Bodhananda, a disciple of Swami Vivekananda. Their acquaintance ripened into a soul-enriching friendship. The Swami (who came to New York the year Jeanne's birth) became their true spiritual father, best friend, philosopher and guide. The girls became close devotees and participated in the Society's activities. They joined the Swami's Sanskrit class. Jeanne invariably wrote a few Sanskrit sentences or words in beautifully handwritten script every night before retiring, as time permitted. Both girls participated in Sanskrit dramas staged by Swami Bodhananda.

After some years, when the Swami was passing through difficult times, the family first shifted residence from the East to the West side of Manhattan, and then to the same block as the Society, in order to be closer to the Society. With each move, their luxury was reduced. The profound nobility and motherliness of each member of the Genet family now began to be revealed.

Rolande was the first to respond wholeheartedly. Some time around 1949, she began cooking and bringing food to the Society's brownstone building for the ailing Swami. Then she moved into its unfinished basement, cheerfully assuming responsibility for the personal care of the Swami and the entire household. This was the first glimmer of her selfless dedication. In 1950, she accompanied Swami Bodhananda to the hospital, where he passed away at the age of eighty. She stayed on at the Society, feeling there was never enough she could do to show her eternal gratitude to the source of the spiritual fulfillment she had found in Vedanta.

In 1951 Swami Pavitrananda, a disciple of the first President of the Ramakrishna Order, Swami Brahmananda, was sent from India to serve as the spiritual leader until 1977, when he breathed his last. Around 1953, Maman and Jeanne came to live in the basement alongside Rolande, at his invitation. In order to free Rolande and their mother for full service to the Society, Jeanne donated her piano to charity and assumed a full-time receptionist position in a large corporation. It was the first and only job she ever had. The experience proved invaluable for Jeanne, for she became the Secretary to the Society in 1957, a post she held with devotion and efficiency to her last day. The Genets always supported themselves and rendered free service to the Society.

### **Their Life at the Vedanta Society of New York**

The Society's ground level where they lived was uncomfortable, with common toilets, camp cots for sleeping, exposed overhead pipes, crude floors and primitive kitchen facilities. Thus confronted and frustrated at every turn, it seemed to Rolande that she had thrust her hands into a cluster of bees. Much was demanded of her devotion but her love for Swamiji's work inspired heroic self-sacrifice from within herself and she resolutely ignored all obstacles with serene fortitude, proving her genuine devotion to her mentor and his work. Sincere spiritual life is inspired living, not habitual training—she chose to

*live* a life of service by being accessible to Swamiji and the Society. This was her one love and concern. Emotion fertilizes the roots of action. The zenith of her character was courage. Her faith in Vedanta, which made her break away from all self-comfort, was enduring and consuming enough to merit the grace of the Divine.

All three enjoyed their simple but full life at the Society, and conditions improved after the arrival of Swami Pavritananda. Their resourceful, affectionate mother, widowed in her thirties, never remarried for the sake of her daughters and shared their privation with dignity and grace. Having warmed her hands with zest before the fire of life and wide experience on two continents, she gave up her smoking habit when she learned of Jeanne's discomfort with it, for she slept next to her mother. They harmoniously assumed responsibility for cooking, shopping, and spotless housekeeping, organizing and renewing contracts for the entire building's mechanical maintenance and repair, answering the phones on the ground and first floors, accounting and book-selling, flower arranging and more. They were never shattered or became cynical and sour over these challenges and the dire need for some rest.

Friends and helpers were few and rare. Courtenaye Olden and her husband George attended Swami Pavitrananda's first lecture at the Society in 1951. Divine Grace lightened their burden when Courtenaye's perceptive heart and immediate appreciation of the Genets' service developed into a close friendship. With her car, she took them shopping and the Genets got some fresh air, on alternate weeks, for one of them always remained behind at the Society to serve.

On Good Friday in 1950, at fifty-three, Rolande passed away in full consciousness at the Society. Perhaps she remembered Maeterlinck's words, "If you have been greatly influenced by anyone, prove it in your life, not by tears," which soothed Josephine MacLeod after the passing away of Swami Vivekananda, and was also consoled. She retired early in 1962 to serve the Society and her mother, who passed away at ninety-five during a hospital stay in May 1977. Jeanne spent the night in sincere prayer and arranged for her cremation the next day without ever leaving the Society.

I came to the Society in 1977 and saw her mother only a few times in the corridor but I lived with Jeanne many years intimately. Free from the burden of ego, she had a mystic kinship with all. Her lack of complaint, gently cheerful attitude and lurking sense of humor made it possible to talk with her. Her intense inner vision and warmth enabled her to work ceaselessly. She was tied to the work of the Society and traveled only twice, briefly, though she loved nature. She was only able to begin attending our yearly Fourth of July program, which honors Swami Vivekananda, after Betty Robinson, a devotee, offered to take her place. The same devotee offered her brief summer vacations during the last years of her life at her home in Ocean Grove, New Jersey.

From 1933, Jeanne attended Chapel services regularly, even after twelve hours in the hospital for cataract surgery in 1995. During another hospital stay a few years before, she took the Svetasvataropanishad verses on which the lecture was based that night, with

her and read the entire Upanishad before going to sleep. Her devotion to the class furnishes a luminous commentary on her character.

The worth of the Genet family is forever verified by their lives of myriad, cheerfully assumed responsibilities performed with devotion, self-denial, self-forgetfulness, courage, fortitude and dedication. They remained in the background, content to remain modest, with inner certain faith and devotion and outer fulfillment of their daily chores. Their lives are singularly captivating in this regard.

### **Miss Jeanne Genet as I Understand Her**

Miss Genet passed away on August 28, 1998. She was almost ninety-three, having lived and worked at the Society for almost half a century. We cannot measure the value of her saintly life by its long duration or its labor. We gain but a partial estimation of its value by observing the spiritual attitude behind her life and work. What a magnificent epic of devotion to Sri Ramakrishna and Swamiji we saw in her life! That unswerving devotion illumined her mind and glorified her life. Work was her worship, she was never a captive chained by duty; she never lost her perspective.

Her life was one of complete humility, self-effacement and an ungrudging labor of love. Physically fragile, mentally Herculean, mentally balanced and never impulsive, she appeared to me, like a lovely flower of unswerving devotion to the spirit of the Society. Her gentle nature, suave demeanor and loving service yet concealed a steel frame of discipline and steadfast loyalty. She did not perceive her daily routines as dull and habitual. She suffered no feverish strain, no dissatisfaction, and no grievance. I never once saw her raise her voice, lose her temper or appear stressful or depressed. Her beaming face, pure and loving heart, calm mind and noble character reflected the beauty of her devotion and sincere aspiration. She lived for God.

Sri Ramakrishna is the incarnation of the synthetic genius of philosophy and religion in the modern age. His intoxicated divine life, spiritual ecstasy and famous message, "There are as many paths to the Divine as there are points of view," cast a deep spell on her pure mind. Swami Vivekananda equally dominated the modern age as much by his pure vision and strength of character as by his genius. Vivekananda went beyond the frontiers of his culture to become truly universal. His message, "Whoever gives up this life for His sake, finds the life immortal," gave Miss Genet conviction, courage, fortitude, steadfastness, endurance and patience. With that lamp of faith lit in her pure heart, she lived her life.

She was exposed to the life-giving message of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda when she was just twenty-six and she was fascinated and thrilled. After that, they became the cry of her life, the song of her soul. Ramakrishna-Vivekananda lit a beacon of hope for her. Determined, with stern resolve, she followed the idealism of the twin stars in the firmament of modern life. I believe it was destiny that made it possible for her to be

possessed by them for their work. She performed commendable service to the cause of Vedanta.

Miss Genet's life of singular purpose is conspicuously different from the conventional religious life. She was consciously informed and intelligently committed to Swami Vivekananda's philosophy of work. She lived in unreserved obedience to him. She fully understood and accepted the significance of Swamiji's message of "renunciation and sacrifice" and his conviction that the law of sacrifice is the highest law in the universe, the life-blood of humanity. We can assume that the spirit of Swamiji permeated, charmed and inspired her with its noble principles for living. Her acceptance of his idealism of the divinity of man is commensurate to her life of self-abnegation. Many times, she told me that she looked upon the building of the Society as the body of Swamiji. Her every labor in the Society was her loving offering at the feet of the twin Masters.