

Ma Santi Devi – A Sublime Life, Simply Lived

By Basile P. Catoméris

I've always found it most rewarding to meet intelligent and bold people who dare to go against the grain, take bold challenges and climb life's highest peaks. To those of us who are open to them, such people become living examples of wisdom. One such remarkable person was Ma Santi Devi.

Ma Santi Devi was Sri Shyam Sundar Goswami's spiritual mother, and later on also mine. It was Masterjee, Ma Santi Devi's husband and guru, who initiated Sri Goswami into the *chakra* discipline of Laya Yoga. Ma Santi Devi was given to "Masterjee" in marriage and discipleship when she was fourteen, although their marriage was not physically consummated until the young disciple was considered fit by her guru at the age of twenty-one.

The union of Masterjee and Ma Santi Devi resulted in a single son, who passed away prematurely as the victim of a political assassination. When Masterjee also passed away, Ma was left grieving in the company of her stepdaughter and three grandchildren, the care of whom would fall essentially on Ma's fragile shoulders. As a true female representative of the Middle Way (*sadhvi grihinia*), Ma alone had to support her three teen-aged grandchildren and one daughter-in-law, who chronically suffered from diabetes and asthma. (Sri Shyam Sundar Goswami actually never lectured on the theme of the Middle Way, probably because he never had a real family life of his own.) The disciplined and pious life required of her, with the twofold challenge of mundane and spiritual duties, was certainly not less ascetic than the path of *sâdhus*.

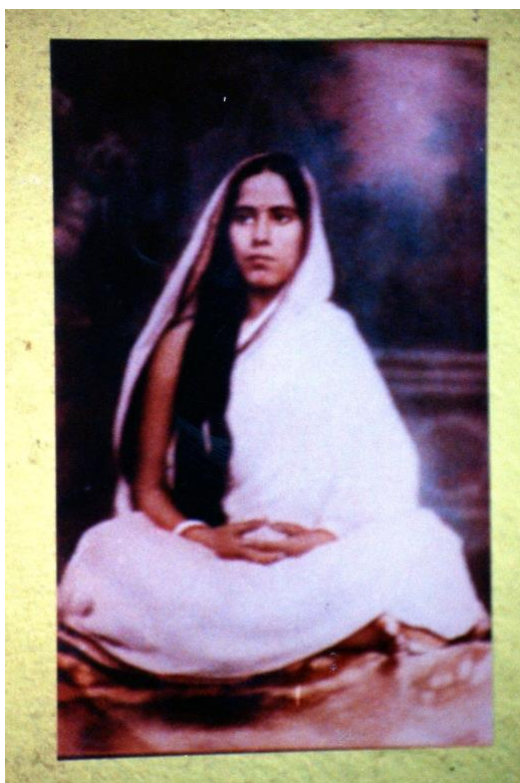
It was under these trying circumstances which I first met Ma Santi Devi. As I arrived at her Indian home in Gurudham, there she was, standing radiantly on the terrace with her family, watching our arrival. Through the mirror of a vanished youthful beauty, under the deep and serious face of a marked destiny, one could still sense the charm and shyness of a child's behavior at her advanced age. To suddenly find myself in this remote Indian village surrounded by children laughing and curious about an exotic visitor, was a kind of experience I never had before.



Ma Santi Devi, with her frail but quite straight body, was then in her early 80s. She was surrounded by her three grandchildren (Devkumar, Sarbani and Shibani), their mom, Arati, as well as numerous, curious children from the neighborhood. Ma was dressed in a white garment, as is customary for Hindu widows.

Our party was warmly welcomed with a discrete smile from her toothless mouth. In one hand, the yogini held a schoolbook and, in the other, something that looked like a necklace. The necklace was in fact a most ancient *mala* threaded with round crystals, of which I would later become the recipient when Ma granted me *diksha* and a fitting spiritual name.

Ma's physical appearance at this advanced age, while worn with grace and dignity, was in stark contrast to the beauty of her youth, as photographically captured and displayed within Gurudham. A picture showed Ma in her early twenties, posing in a seated position with her legs folded, clad in a white garment that left exposed only her face and one bare arm, adorned with a discrete white lace. A river of black hair flowed partly in front of her face, cascading down to the lap where her hands were in a traditional *mudra* used in spiritual practice.



Despite her advanced age and apparent frailty, Ma Santi Devi's vitality was really amazing. Each morning she would faithfully rise early to complete her long spiritual practice, and then take no rest before she had discharged all household duties. This was doubly astounding given India's tough climatic conditions, the polluted air, the occasionally arsenic-poisoned water and the Spartan vegetarian diet upon which she sustained herself through it all. Her humble sustenance consisted mostly of cooked vegetables and *dahl*, *chapatis*, seasonal fruits and the occasional *mishiti* (Indian sweets). Ma Santi Devi's diet and her unusually long lifespan really ought to serve as a wake-up call to Western dieticians and even to most Yoga practitioners in the Western world. As Ma Santi Devi's living example attested, the need to regularly clean and purify both the body and the mind is of paramount importance.

In the daily course of her household duties, that simple and yet extraordinary woman would sit, squatting with a bucket full of water in front of her, slowly progressing with a scouring-cloth without ever raising her body. She would clean the whole floor of the terrace from one end to the other before standing up. Then, walking slowly with the support of a knocking stick on the painted concrete floor, she would go to the kitchen and prepare the first *tchai* of the day. She would then call me upstairs so we could sit together and silently share the comforting hot beverage in the quivering morning.

Ma Santi Devi has had no formal school education and yet she possessed an innate human culture, moral strength, resilience and astounding will power. She could sit in her room quite motionless, meditating uninterruptedly for many hours. Naturally humble, she rejected all kinds of self-advertisement and had no inclination whatsoever for conformism. Scholastic philosophy or sermonizing had no room in her own teaching. Her pragmatic philosophy was eloquently conveyed through her own conduct in life.

Ma Santi Devi was a life philosopher—as any rational and wise philosopher should be! To any seeker who sincerely aspired to transcend the realm of worldliness, she would advocate keeping firmly to whichever practice had already been adopted in the first place...occasionally advising and instructing along the way, or even granting *diksha* when the seeker demonstrated a high enough level of spiritual maturity. Tolerant to people's behavior and even to their deviations from the charted path, she remained first and foremost adamant in pursuing her own arduous spiritual voyage.

It is granted in the spiritual sphere that evolved beings are endowed with a universal mind. They act as catalyzing filters when they cross others' lives and infuse them strength, inspiration, and

purity. Ma Santi Devi was such a special being. She didn't promote herself, or any cult pertaining to her own culture, even the particular teachings of her own Masterjee! She ignored the first commandment and yet practiced it every day.

During her long lifetime, the yogini of Gopalpur exhibited qualities of a high order. She became, in fact, a living example to many people who crossed her life, in particular to those who've chartered the Middle Way with mundane obligations and spiritual ambitions. Throughout her life, she successfully reconciled the challenging duality reflected in the biblical admonition to, "*render unto Caesar the things which be Caesar's, and unto God the things which be God's.*"