

A LIFE OF SPIRITUAL SEARCH AND UN SERVICE:

Pramoda

Pramoda reveals fascinating details about her experiences as a seeker and her service to the United Nations, beginning just a year after the founding of the organization. She first moved to Jamaica in 1947 – 17 years before Guru came to America. Pramoda, now living in her native France, was interviewed on 29 October 2010 by Nemi. Gratitude to Tanima for providing the words to Guru's songs, and to Boijayanti for assistance with photo research.

Q: Was there anything in your family life, Pramoda, that inspired you to think about the UN?

Pramoda: The war changed my destiny – the shock of the bombing and the suffering that it created. I was at school in France, near Lyon, where I was the number four girl. We followed the routine drill of going to the cellar. I became very thin at some point, because we did not have enough food. I got very, very scared one day when I was not where I should have been. That day there was a bombing near me, and I found the propeller of the bomb. I was so frightened when I saw a crumbled building that I trembled for three days.



Slender Pramoda, not yet 15, shimmies up an equally slender tree during a wartime picnic.

Q: Were you in a religious family? Were you thinking of God?

Pramoda: Well, we were just like anyone else. We were going to church and all that, but I did not get the full significance of it. At my first communion I could sense some things that went beyond me.

Q: How did you first find out about the UN, and what did you think when you heard about it?

Pramoda: I was already engaged in working for peace. My parents had the wonderful idea that I should visit my older sister after the war. I had had a year of secretarial school, so it was quite logical that I could start working with my brother-in-law, a lawyer in Sens, where I am living now. My brother-in-law saw an ad requesting assistance for the Peace Conference in Paris in 1946.

It seems that all my life there was some protection around me! It was there, while I was under contract with the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, that I heard about the United Nations. One man, a translator for whom I went to take notes, was so nice. The wife of this man had lived and worked in America for ten years, and she thought it might be an excellent idea for me to take the UN exam and get recruited. So I went for the exam and was accepted to come to the United Nations.

Everything was checked about me, except my age was overlooked! I was a young woman of 19, quite shy, and I might have looked older than I was, because I was a little serious in those days, not like now! My parents saw no objection in my being recruited for the General Assembly for three months, with the possibility of prolongation most likely.

Q: Had you already learned English?

Pramoda: Yes, I had an excellent English teacher.

Q: When did you actually start at the UN?

Pramoda: My life at the UN started on 21 October 1946.

Q: Where was the UN when you started?

Pramoda: The UN was already at Lake Success, Long Island, at the Sperry Gyroscope Company. Half of the building was utilised by the UN, and the other half was still making turbines for war planes. All of the conference offices and documentation were on the main floor.



Pramoda at her typewriter at the UN's office in Lake Success, NY, in 1948.

Q: Did you ever meet Trygve Lie, the first Secretary-General?

Pramoda: I saw him coming out of a meeting during the General Assembly, towards the end. Since I was going to continue, I was placed in a unit in the Documentation section, where a marvellous former

interpreter, half-English, half-French, had hired me as his secretary. Somehow I just happened to be there when the Secretary-General passed by.

Q: Is it correct that Trygve Lie created the meditation room at the UN?

Pramoda: It was in his day, because I remember the little meditation room in the main corridor by the conference rooms where the meetings were taking place, at Lake Success.



Trygve Lie, the first Secretary-General of the United Nations, in his UN office at Lake Success, just east of Queens. The UN was located there when Pramoda saw Mr. Lie.

Lie, Trygve Lie!
O UN Boat's first pilot high,
Dauntless you fought for your ideal-sky.

Lie, Trygve Lie!
O Oslo, Norway's 'peace mission' son,
The world salutes your spirit's run.

Lie, Trygve Lie!
- Sri Chinmoy

Q: Were you very inspired to be at the UN?

Pramoda: Oh, yes! Of course! I took up a job there because I was so keen to work for peace. The war was so terrible; we had been shattered.

Q: Can you please tell us about the different places where you lived in New York?

Pramoda: I was first sent to the Taft Hotel right on Broadway. People could not stay there more than five



Pramoda at Jones Beach in 1947, just after she turned 20!

days, but because I worked with the United Nations, I had the privilege to stay for three months, until I got established. Then I found a room in Jackson Heights for three months.

Next, in early 1947, there was a house in Jamaica which had been rented for a few French girls with the help of the United Nations. That happened to be just a couple of blocks from where I would buy my house more than 40 years later! It was on 150th Street, near the top of the hill [right around the corner from the house that would become Guru's home in 1968]. Then I went to Parsons Boulevard. I had a wonderful American girlfriend who took quite a liking to me. Her parents gave me a room in their house on Parsons Boulevard, on the block just past where our stores are now.

Q: Did you meet Dag Hammarskjöld?

Pramoda: Oh, yes. We met in the Documents Control office in Manhattan, where I was working. My boss, Mr. Le Bosquet, had been one of the four main interpreters of the League of Nations. I learned about the League of Nations' only after I had been hired by the United Nations!

It was all planned for the various offices. We knew ahead of time the Secretary-General would come around in the afternoon. I admired him very much. He had such dignity. My boss was quite proud to introduce me as his French secretary. Immediately Mr. Hammarskjöld took my hand, looked me straight in the eye and said, "Enchanté, mademoiselle!" And this was how I came to note his penetrating blue eyes. Such a gaze – I never met anyone in my life who looked at me with such blue eyes in this way!



Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld's piercing blue eyes are clearly visible in this 1959 photograph. In a 1953 interview, the Secretary-General spoke of "those great medieval mystics for whom 'self-surrender' had been the way to self-realization." Pramoda was personally introduced to Mr. Hammarskjöld by her boss at the UN.

Dag Hammarskjöld, purity-gold,
Divinity's reality bold!
Your peerless vision cosmic-run
Ceaselessly cried for perfection-sun.
In you the UN glory's height
Of silence-light and delight.

- Sri Chinmoy

Q: Did you feel that he was inspiring?

Pramoda: Yes, there was something – it stayed with me all my life. It was wonderful. I never had such an experience.

Q: Did you ever see U Thant?

Pramoda: Yes, I could see him sometimes in the elevator, and he could notice me at gatherings in my costume, because I was a United Nations Singer^{II}. And since I was tall among the singers, it seems that I was more known because of that.



Pramoda (right) leads the meditation group singers at a 1985 ceremony on U Thant Island in the East River, which separates Manhattan and Queens. The back of the UN Secretariat Building is at left.

I had the occasion to pass very near U Thant in a narrow corridor. It was a very special occasion. I think the President of France was coming, and U Thant was sitting in the narrow corridor where people congregated when their President was coming to the United Nations. We UN Singers had to pass by U Thant and then sing in the back of that room. When I passed by U Thant in that narrow space, I felt a circle of power all around him. It was very evident that he was a special person.



This photograph was taken in the General Assembly Hall in 1959, two years before U Thant (right) became UN Secretary-General upon the death of Dag Hammarskjöld (left).

U Thant, U Thant,
We love your silence-soul,
We loved your compassion-heart.
Your world-harmony-role
Challenged ignorance-dart.
UN pilot supreme,
You treasured perfection-dream.

- Sri Chinmoy

Q: Do you have any other recollections of famous people at the UN?

Pramoda: Oh, yes! I was crossing First Avenue, coming back from lunch, when I happened to see US President Truman. He was attending the ceremony to lay the cornerstone of the UN Headquarters Building.



US President Harry Truman examines the UN Charter in Washington in 1945. Pramoda saw President Truman when he attended the ceremony to lay the cornerstone of UN Headquarters.

UN, UNI
With you began
A fulness-cry
In oneness-sky.
For you I see
A flood-ecstasy.

- Sri Chinmoy

Perhaps it was during the first winter after we moved to the new building that Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt came to one of the large council rooms



Eleanor Roosevelt's work on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights became her greatest legacy. She was Chairperson of the UN Commission on Human Rights. On one occasion when Mrs. Roosevelt told Christmas stories to UN staff, Pramoda was an attentive member of the audience.

Eleanor, Eleanor, Eleanor, Eleanor!
U.S. mother pure,
The world's sister sure.
O heart of compassion-lore,
O soul of protection-shore!
Champion fighter for human rights,
Illumination of poverty-nights.

- Sri Chinmoy

one evening to tell Christmas stories to the UN staff! The theme was "Stories by the Fireside." I saw her face, so extraordinary, with so much character, and she had such expression in her voice. She was a person of such stature – it was amazing.

In the circle, by the fountain, I saw President Kennedy coming out of the Secretariat Building after a visit with Secretary-General U Thant. He was so tall, walking very straight towards his car. I was standing on my toes to see him! He was freckle-faced from the sun and so handsome.

In 1971, with the orchestra of the Festival Casals and the chorus of the Manhattan School of Music, the UN Singers joined in the performance of Pablo Casals' "Hymn to the United Nations" in the UN's General Assembly Hall. We had two rehearsals with Maestro Casals.



President Kennedy bids farewell to Secretary-General U Thant after speaking at the UN General Assembly in 1963. Pramoda saw the President on one such occasion as he walked toward his car. Just above President Kennedy's head in this photograph is the UN library penthouse, where Guru offered meditations many times.

Kennedy's hope was the world.
Its hope was Kennedy.
Kennedy's life was the world.
Its promise was Kennedy.
Together they breathe
Through Eternity.

- Sri Chinmoy

After our first rehearsal in the Dag Hammarskjöld Auditorium, Maestro Casals told us, "When I arrived this morning to work with you, I really thought I was dying. And now I am alive again!" He brought life to the music, and the music brought him to life. It was a revelation. After Maestro Casals played his "Song of the Birds" on the cello at the end of the concert, U Thant came up to the stage and embraced him. The concert was an exalted experience. I was uplifted for three days – it was like being in the centre of the world.



Maestro Pablo Casals is about to play the cello under the seal of the United Nations (his wife Martita hands him the bow). With the UN Singers, Pramoda performed as Maestro Casals conducted his "Hymn to the United Nations" in the General Assembly Hall in 1971.

O Pablo Casals, O Pablo,
Your wonder-cello-flames
Eternally shall love and hallow
Our diving and climbing human frames.

Charmingly short in earth's body-height,
Supremely long in Heaven's soul-length,
O child of tomorrow's dawn, no night
You saw in your beauty's world of strength.

- Sri Chinmoy

Q: Can you tell us how you found out about Guru at the UN, and the meditations?

Pramoda: I had been a seeker already for some years. With another French lady who was older and very knowledgeable, I attended a society where people were interested in meditation and the spiritual things in life. Meditation was very natural. I had also attended meetings of the Theosophical Society. I found



Guru meditates in the UN's Dag Hammarskjöld Library Penthouse, with a wall of ceiling-high windows on either side. The windows at right are the ones visible in the photograph of President Kennedy.

these people were serious, they were cultured and they had interesting events. I saw a notice about the meditations at the UN in the Secretariat News [*the UN staff news magazine*]. And the older lady—who was not to remain too long with Guru, unfortunately—also mentioned it to me. I think my first meeting was the 14th of April 1970 at the Church Center across the street from the United Nations, on one of the higher floors. [This was the very beginning of Guru's meditation-service at the United Nations.]



Guru meditates in front of the banner of the meditation group at the UN. Guru called the UN "The Heart-Home of the World-Body."

Q: What was it like when you saw Guru for the first time?

Pramoda: At this time in my life I was very serious. I was meditating already, I had met other teachers, and I had been receiving blessings of different kinds. In the late '60s, before I met Guru, I really got into meditation, and I was keen in all respects to follow my inner guidance. In those days, the best that I knew was Christ, and all the teachings of the church. I would kneel and ask for enlightenment so that I could proceed with the right things in my life, and not waste time with fakes. I was really intent on going as straight as possible in the right way, although I did not know what that was.

So, this Master happened to be right there at the UN. Right away there were signs that this man was extraordinary. He appeared in different forms in front of me. The presence of a Master is detected by the seekers! There were other seekers receiving the same experiences as I, and we shared them. I liked very much to be able to speak about experiences in different ways.

I wrote a nice letter to the Theosophical Society saying that I could no longer join them in their meditations on Wednesday nights because there was someone available right at the United Nations, and I thought it would be the best thing for me to attend his meditations at this time. I was going step by step.

Q: When did Guru put you in charge of the Peace Meditation singers at the UNⁱⁱⁱ?

Pramoda: It was on the day when we had a picnic and the little child of one of the disciples ran up to Guru and kissed Guru's toe!

Q: That was a famous day! And when did you join the official UN Singers?

Pramoda: That was around 1967, before I knew Guru.



The official UN Singers often perform in their national costumes. Pramoda is at the left in the last row, wearing her traditional French garb.



Pramoda (second from left in the group) performs with the UN Singers outside the Headquarters building.

Q: Do you have any idea how many countries you visited with the UN Singers?

Pramoda: Japan twice, Argentina twice, different islands in the Caribbean, Germany, Spain and other places. We visited many schools, hospitals and churches.

Q: Can you name for us the different sections where you worked at the UN?

Pramoda: First it was the Documents Office, where I worked for the Director. Then in Terminology briefly, and for many years in Public Administration, in Economic Affairs, and then continuing in Technical Cooperation, where they finally made me "assistant librarian." I was assistant librarian to myself, and to no one else! I was always proud of being in the United Nations, and mindful of how we presented ourselves.

Q: And you retired in 1987, so you had 41 years of UN service!

Pramoda: Something like that. And perhaps I could almost have been considered a Mohican^{iv} at the UN, because I was working for peace before I joined.

Q: You lived in New York for such a long time. Did you feel like a New Yorker, or did you always feel French?



The top photo of Pramoda (France Vacher) in her French costume for the UN Singers was part of a year-long Kodak display in Grand Central Station. It is from the early 1980s. The bottom photo is from the late 2000s.

Pramoda: Oh, I would say French. That never changed! But I very much appreciated America in my heart. I loved to live the American style, and it was excellent for me.

Q: You first lived in Jamaica in 1947. When did you buy your house there?

Pramoda: It was in 1989, on Guru's birthday, practically.



Pramoda near the Rose Garden at the recently completed UN Headquarters in Manhattan in 1953.

Q: Your house has also served Guru so much, and continues to do so. Nilima now lives there, and Alo continues to keep many of her files and archives in the upstairs apartment. And I am sure you could see, as I did when I coincidentally lived there long before you bought the house, that Guru's house was visible from your back window!

Pramoda: Yes, that was from the second floor, when the trees were bare.

Q: When you were here, you used to ride your bicycle a lot.

Pramoda: Yes. Nowadays it is not too good for me, but I just acquired a little mini-car!

Q: What are you enjoying most about your life now in France?

Pramoda: It is the peace, the peace in the midst of everything, the sweetness in the air.

Q: You suffered from war when you were young, and now, after all these years, you are enjoying peace.

Pramoda: Yes, as much as possible. I am very blessed.

Q: Pramoda, is there any message that you would like to give to the disciples who are reading this story?

Pramoda: Oh, to follow their destiny, without fail. Not to be afraid – to go ahead, always to go ahead. Go ahead, go ahead!

Q: That is exactly Guru's message. That is wonderful, Pramoda.

Pramoda: And I share this with people that I meet sometimes. I am a humble little servant, and I want to be that servant always.

Guru's way is the safest way I know of, because it is everlasting. It is extremely, extremely powerful to have Guru. I end with one big word: gratitude, gratitude, gratitude. Guru was a big catalyst in my life.



Guru after a meditation in one of the UN conference rooms in 2005. Guru is wearing his UN pass around his neck.

I learned many things which I may not have learned otherwise. With what I lived through, so many things could have happened, and in the end they did not.

I was spared in many ways the consequences of my mistakes. I had divine protection all the way. How could I have made it otherwise?



Guru conducts a Peace Meditation at the Chapel of the Church Centre for the United Nations, Sep 1971.



At Guru's Peace Concert in the UN General Assembly Hall Lobby in 1985, Pramoda leads the meditation group singers. The flags of all the nations are visible in the background, with the blue UN flag rising above them.

To have known Guru is to live with a great treasure in one's heart. We are the recipients of this treasure. We are still living with a fountain, Guru's fountain. It never stops; Guru's fountain is always there, always available, never ending.



Guru's blissful presence at the UN is immortalised in this photograph taken in front of the fountain, with the Secretariat Building in the background. The photograph is the creation of our brother Shraddha, who left this world in 2010.



Pramoda and her dear friend Suvrata, carrying the Preamble to the UN Charter, in the Rose Garden for the Meditation Group's Peace Walk for United Nations Charter Day in 1983.



Pramoda enchants the audience with her lyrical singing at one of our classical concerts.

ⁱ The League of Nations, which was championed by US President Woodrow Wilson after World War I, did not succeed in preventing war, but it was the precursor of the United Nations.

ⁱⁱ The United Nations Singers are staff members who perform music of various cultures at the UN, in the New York area and around the world, usually in their native costumes. The group, part of the United Nations Staff Recreation Council, was formed in 1947, when the UN was located at Lake Success.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Peace Meditation singers are members of the meditation group at the UN. Over the years they have performed Guru's songs about the UN, its member nations and individuals who have made important contributions to the UN and the world community.

^{iv} The staff who joined the United Nations in the very beginning (1945) were known as the "Mohicans" – a reference to the Native American tribe and the historical novel *The Last of the Mohicans*, by James Fenimore Cooper. The last original UN staff member – the last of the UN Mohicans – passed away in 2009.