

## Editorial

### *Taking Our Temperature*

In the current issue of *American Vedantist*, we present different perspectives on the Vedanta movement in the West, from Swami Vivekananda's pioneering work to new models for the future. These perspectives offer a variety of views about the role of Vedanta in the West: how it was presented in the beginning, how it is being lived out in most of our centers at present, and what are our hopes for it in the future. Is Vedanta a universal philosophy independent of any particular religion? Or is it a sophisticated form of Hinduism? How has Vedanta in the West changed since Swami Vivekananda's original presentation? Do Vedanta Centers in the West have social responsibilities with regard to the surrounding society? Should they undertake social service activities as the Ramakrishna Mission does in India? Have the centers become Hindu temples and cultural centers for a mostly Indian immigrant population? Does it matter? How should they serve what is now an American minority of members? Do native-born Americans, including the children of Indian immigrants, have different needs from the immigrants themselves? Is Indian culture an obstacle to prospective new Western Vedantists?

We encourage you, our readers, to send us your opinions on these questions. From its inception, one of *AV's* main objectives has been to foster a sense of community among Vedantists in the West through the sharing of views and experiences. Such sharing can encourage us to reexamine our own lives, and can also contribute to strengthening our combined efforts. We have inherited a legacy of high spiritual idealism. How are we trying to put it into practice? Are we shaping our lives by its light? Do we continue to plumb its depth and breadth, or have we settled into comfortable, lifeless routines? Are we making any contribution to the lives of others? to the Vedanta movement? How are we serving our families and communities?

Studying the lives of those who have gone before us can help to nourish and inspire us. Brief memorial accounts are given of three who recently passed away: Swami Vandanananda, who lived and served for many years in America; Pravrajika Bhaktiprana, a senior nun of the Vedanta Society of Southern California; and Carolyn Kenny, a long-time devotee on the West Coast. We also continue Swami Vidyatmananda's reminiscences of Swami Ritajananda, who worked in New York and Los Angeles before giving the last 32 years of his life as head of the Centre Vedantique Ramakrichna in Gretz, France.

Readers may be interested to learn about two recently affiliated Vedanta centers in the United States: in Kansas City, Missouri and in St. Petersburg, Florida. Reports are given by the secretaries of the two centers.

—The Editors

## *Dialog—Vedanta for the West*

*[Editors and friends of AV have recently engaged in stimulating discussions concerning the nature of Vedanta in the West and prospects for the future. We share these thoughts with you in the hope that you will want to join the discussion. Please send your thoughts and comments to: The Editors, American Vedantist, P.O. Box 237041, New York, NY 10023.]*

### **Vivekananda’s American Vedanta**

Beatrice Bruteau

The “Vedanta Societies” of the United States were founded by Swami Vivekananda for the express purpose of doing the universal supra-national Vedanta in a thoroughly American way. I think this parallels in some way the intention he had for the Advaita Ashrama in Mayavati. In both cases he wanted to rise above particulars and deal with the fundamental Vedanta. The worship of divine figures from one culture need not be implanted in another culture, nor insisted upon even in their culture of origin. Similarly, it is important to teach in a language familiar to the hearers and in terms to which they are accustomed. Part of the “teaching” is the whole setting, physical and social, in which the teaching/learning takes place. Let it be transcendent of any particular culture at Mayavati and let it be American in America.

This means that although Vivekananda is from India and was formed by Indian culture, he did not propose to insist on America’s adopting Indian cultural forms in order to realize the Formless. I think that we may safely answer the often-asked question, “Are American Vedantists Hindus?” by responding “Not necessarily”—or even, following Vivekananda closely, simply “No.” That would depend on the individual, but would not characterize the nature of the Societies. In founding the societies in the United States, Vivekananda intended that we should rise to the Formless from and by our native culture, as Indians did by theirs.

There is, however, a little more to it than that, from Vivekananda’s point of view. It wasn’t only that any culture is good for starting, and every culture must be transcended, but Vivekananda himself seems to have believed (or at least played with the idea) that Americans have an initial advantage from our position in our culture. He was excited by what he saw here and hoped that the Vedanta could be practiced and realized in this culture more readily than in the Indian culture of his day. He had in mind the freedom, the equality, the self-respect, the opportunities, and the energy of the American scene. It was so infective, so available, that anyone could participate, and an immigrant could be transformed by it in a matter of a few months.

Just as “the king has gone into all the people” in American democracy, so the presence of the divine, the Ultimate, may be more readily experienced in oneself and one’s fellows in a caste-free society where anyone can succeed. So, he reasoned, it should be easier for Americans to rise from this advance standing platform to the realization of the Absolute.

Another point that is important in this discussion is the distinction between religion and spirituality. Religions are generally tied to their cultures of origin. This is because they arise to serve the social needs of particular cultures. But spirituality is different. A genuine spirituality can be practiced in any culture because it seeks the truth about all being.

Now, Vivekananda’s Vedanta began in this country, not as a religion, but as spirituality. He had no intention to convert Americans away from the religions they had grown up with and into a foreign religious belief and practice. He wished rather to lay before them a vision of the universal spirituality to which we can all rise, in and from the context of whatever religion we have inherited or adopted. Indeed, he urged, the truth of Vedanta is available in all the great traditions, and we are encouraged to outgrow believing that “our” religion is the only right one. We are invited to respect and honor all, but to apply ourselves to realizing the highest spirituality, starting from where we are and how we are in our culture, without any need to convert to another religion.

In terms of this understanding of Vivekananda’s presentation of Vedanta, we need also to say that American Vedanta is not intended to be another religion among the many religious institutions that we have in this country. It is not supposed to fulfill the social roles of the properly religious institutions. Religion was not Vivekananda’s idea. We are not expected to adopt Indian dress or language or customs or religion. Spirituality is something else, something that transcends all religions and all cultural customs.

It is essential to Vivekananda’s idea, and important for us to hold fast, that all the religions are to be honored by us, all cultures respected, but no particular religion is favored, and that the local American culture and language constitute the milieu of social and teaching interaction in the Vedanta Societies deriving from Vivekananda’s foundation.

### **Questions for Beatrice Bruteau from William Page**

**Bill Page:** You say, “Vivekananda intended that we should rise to the Formless...” My understanding of Vedanta (which may be wrong) is that it encompasses the three main schools of Dualism, Qualified Nondualism, and Nondualism, together with the entire Hindu pantheon of 330 million personal gods. Maybe that is too broad, but you seem to be narrowing it down to Advaita alone—the Formless school. Vivekananda did regard Advaita as the highest

school of Vedanta, and the one toward which we should all strive, but as a dualistic devotee of the personal God I've always had a little trouble with that. I wonder if he expected EVERYBODY to attain the Formless, or if he was willing to cut some of us a little slack and let us take a rest on one of the lower rungs of the ladder. If he expected all of us to attain the Formless, that sets up a new kind of dogmatism that makes Vedanta much less accepting and all-embracing than we like to think. It also shows an unrealistic overestimation of human nature, since not everybody is capable of appreciating the Formless, and very few are capable of realizing it in this life.

**Beatrice Bruteau:** Vivekananda was never willing to cut anybody a little slack, whether his countrymen or ours. His bag was urging everybody to aim for the highest and repeatedly telling them/us in ringing tones that they/we *were* capable of it. Whether “our” being capable means that “human nature” is capable may be an independent question, and the question should lead to some explorations into who/what “we” really *are*, but Vivekananda (in my understanding of him) didn't delay over that. He was simply into his powerful message that we *can*, and we'd *better believe it*, and he's *not going to lay off* until we *do*.

### **Vivekananda Never Goes Halfway**

Thinking that you can't and very few other people can might even be a little dogmatic itself. We may not be in a position secure enough to pass that kind of judgment. Vivekananda, in my view, isn't a measurer; he always goes full throttle. His words aren't halfway words. They're full power, intended to DO something to you, not to give a restrained opinion on what you might reasonably expect. He's not interested in what you might reasonably expect. He wants the WHOLE Thing and he lets you know it.

If Vivekananda was tough and “dogmatic,” so was Christianity, and therefore wrong when it held out the expectation that everyone is capable of becoming a saint, being holy as God is holy (that's Jewish), being a denizen of heaven, an immortal and glorious being. Jesus was wrong, if he said it, and the compiler/editor of the Gospel according to Matthew was wrong to repeat the saying, “You are to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” “Fect” from *facio*, do, and “per,” thoroughly. In a nearby passage we are told that the Torah (Teaching, Revelation) is to be worked on, followed, until it has been done “completely,” until it is all “accomplished.” Not one tiny scrap left out.

“Everybody knows” it takes some “getting there,” and each one has one's own way of going about it. But nobody knows that anybody else—much less “most people”—is/are incapable of doing so. Do these great souls not know what they are talking about? Are they being unrealistic? Don't understand the limitations of human nature?

Their words are words of vigorous encouragement coming from higher/deeper knowledge, words of confidence in us, in the people, coming from visions of the open horizon, of the limitless capacity of the human person.

**BP:** “. . . rise to the Formless from and by our native culture, as Indians did by theirs.” Exactly which American cultural constructs are going to raise us to the Formless, and how? Even Unitarianism, which is probably the American religious tradition most congenial to Vedanta, takes us only as far as one God who is formless but has beneficent personal attributes.

**BB:** In America, Vivekananda didn’t look to the churches. He looked at people in the street and at the form of the government. He was thrilled by the transformation that he saw in the immigrants and how quickly and extensively it happened. He recognized that the structure and the power were coming from the democracy, the freedom, the opportunity to make one’s life, the acceptance of one another with (almost) equal respect, that sort of thing.

**BP:** You say, “A genuine spirituality can be practiced in any culture because it seeks the truth about all being.” Spirituality is a fairly nebulous term. Can you define it? I once defined it as “refining the emotions and focusing them on whatever one regards as ultimate.” But this definition falls apart if one regards matter as ultimate! Most forms of spirituality I know of occur within specific religious traditions. Can we have spirituality without a specific religion?

**BB:** What was said in the sentence you quoted *is* the definition, to seek the truth about all being, but it’s fair to ask for a fuller treatment. I am willing to withdraw “genuine” and simply say that “spirituality” defined as I do can be done readily out of any culture that does not actively prevent it. Since it involves transcending the culture, it doesn’t depend on the particular nature of the culture, though some may be more helpful than others in getting started (which is what Vivekananda thought American culture could be).

### **Spirituality in Opposition to “Religion”**

My definition of spirituality sets it rather in opposition to “religion” (as I discuss that) so my answer to whether we can have spirituality without religion is “must.” But you’re right in saying that the two usually are found near one another. I think what happens is that people start with religion, find out it doesn’t give what they’re seeking, and go on to spirituality.

“Religion” is traditional and intentionally conservative. It intends to maintain the continuity and dependability of the culture, to answer the usual social questions about who one is and what is one’s role in that society and what the values of the society are and what are the sanctions (rewards and punishments) connected with the required practices. It calls on its history, its view of the Ultimate Government (which it represents and for which it is entitled to act), and its cultural creations (feasts and fasts, myths, laws, social organization—families,

gender roles, education, etc.) The obligation of the person who belongs to a religion is to remain faithful to it, to make one's home in it, to live up to its expectations, obey its laws, attain its ideals, seeing the world and one's own life in its terms, according to its assumptions (explicit or unconscious) and aspirations. Notice that all this is useful, even probably necessary, in any society. There is no intention here to disparage religion by describing it this way. This description is done in order to clarify what I mean by 'spirituality.'

Now, *spirituality* is the abandonment of all this. It is the "leaving of home." You may say, But not everybody can do that. That's not the point. And who is to say? We don't even know whether *we* can do it. How can we presume to know whether someone else can? The point is that this "leaving home" is what 'spirituality' means in this context. That's what I mean when I say spirituality can be practiced in any cultural setting because it doesn't buy into that setting as the last word about reality but seeks the truth about all being—whatever it may turn out to be. Well, can this so-called spirituality arise in a culture and in some kind of relation with the religion of that culture? Why not? Arising can happen anywhere, anyhow. The relation with the given religion has to be *transcendence of*. This may be gradual, I suppose, but relentless. If we start requiring the religion in order to get the spirituality, then we've missed the essential point.

### **America a Better Jumping-Off Place?**

Well, then, according to that argument, shouldn't Vivekananda urge "abandoning" or "transcending" American culture as well as Indian or any other? Fair point. Answer, Yes, of course. As I understand him, he merely thought it might be a better jumping off place because it already had a lot of transcendence of traditional cultures built into it. But I think he must have realized that all sacred threads have to be taken off and discarded in the river.

But we have to live *somehow*. Of course. But we don't have to take it seriously. The *sannyasin* was supposed to keep moving and not take part in any particular cultural behaviors—some didn't even wear a particular cultural garment. That part has to be arranged sensibly and is not all that hard to do if one keeps alert and constantly asks what is being assumed. It's the assumptions you have to watch out for, the unconscious beliefs. Seek them out and question them; that's the practice of this version of "spirituality." Continue questioning until you hit something you can't doubt. Like Descartes: You can't doubt that you are doubting. That leads you into the center of your consciousness, and then you're starting to get somewhere.

Maybe it would be a good and helpful thing, shake us free from our cultural assumptions, to take up with a foreign culture. How about that? Well, there's a lot to be said for that, that's why travel has always been recommended to broaden the mind, make you realize that your way isn't the only way. What's troublesome is *conversion*, simply exchanging one way for another.

Is there such a thing as an American version of what has a right to be called “Vedanta”? Something that is true to the original Vedanta—well, true enough not to be unjust, and maybe some “development” could be allowed—but now in an American setting (which setting, you say, has to be “transcended” in the end, anyway?—Yes, afraid that’s right). So, how “American” is it supposed to be, as distinguished from its culture of origin (without being “unjust” in still calling itself “Vedanta”)?

A possibility: As “American” as Vivekananda set it up, featuring the points in America that he thought advantageous. Then, keep growing from there, be creative, go forward.

**BP:** Your penultimate paragraph gives me the impression that Vedanta’s role is to point people in the direction of higher spirituality through their own religious traditions. Once we’ve done that, our job is over and we can all go home. Not a bad idea, but is that your intent?

### **Is Vedanta a Religion?**

**BB:** No, I don’t quite think that, though if someone got only that, it wouldn’t be bad. As I say, I don’t insist that one start with religion, and I don’t see Vedanta itself as “religion,” though I now realize that many do and we must respect that. If Vedanta is to function as religion, then it will fulfill all the roles usually expected of a religion and will be an alternative to other religions in the world. I’ve never seen it that way. I see it as a universal philosophy/spirituality (according to my transcendence-definition) and kin to others, such as Neo-Platonism, e.g., which one can take seriously along with Vedanta. So I would have to say, from my point of view, that Vedanta is spirituality rather than religion, but that it’s OK if it sends folks back to their received traditions with a deeper appreciation, it’s OK if it functions as one religion among others for those who experience it that way, and it’s OK if it functions as philosophy/spirituality for those who propose to stick with it for that purpose (as distinguished from the religious purpose).

**BP:** You say, “It is essential to Vivekananda’s idea. . . that all the religions are to be honored by us. . . but no particular religion is [to be] favored.” I may be misinterpreting this, but Sri Ramakrishna made it clear that while we were to honor and encourage all religions, we were to practice our own with steadfast devotion. His analogy of the housewife who serves her in-laws and relatives while reserving her special love for her husband was very apt here.

**BB:** What I was saying was that the Vedanta Societies as such are not to urge that this religion is superior to those. The question of what the individual does is a different matter. I understood when I first came into Vedanta that it undertook to help you in whatever tradition or view you found suitable to yourself, but did not intend to impose one on you. Maybe things have changed since then (1950). I

became Roman Catholic for a time in order to do Vedanta in a European dress, which I had been given to understand was completely acceptable. Vedanta, in my mind, is not an alternative to other candidates in the same class, as being Baptist rather than Methodist, say, would be. The call to transcendence takes precedence over all dresses.

## **Ramakrishna-Vedanta and Vivekananda-Vedanta**

John Schlenck

With regard to Vedanta in America, how much has changed since Vivekananda's original presentation? Are the changes for the worse? Or are they a necessary filling in of his original teaching?

Vivekananda's work here went through several stages and operated on different levels. It seems that when he first arrived he had no idea of founding permanent centers or gathering American disciples. His principal aims were to try to gain material help for his impoverished countrymen and to gain recognition and respect for India and Hinduism. He was mostly unsuccessful in the first of these two endeavors, while achieving considerable success in the second. Within the first eighteen months of his arrival here he came to feel that he had a mission here over and above his original aims, a "message for the West as Buddha had for the East." He also became increasingly disenchanted with the meager results of constant lecturing, and wanted to settle down and train serious followers.

Vivekananda worked consciously, in America and also in England, to formulate a message that would inspire Western people to base their lives on fundamental spiritual truths. This message he called Vedanta rather than Hinduism. It was based primarily on the Upanishads (hence Vedanta, "culmination of the Vedas"). It emphasized the inherent divinity of humankind and the means to make that divinity manifest. Those means he codified into four yogas. His lectures on each of these yogas were made into a book bearing the name of that particular spiritual path.

These four paths are very unevenly represented in the Upanishads, with the main emphasis going to Jnana-Yoga, the path of wisdom and discrimination. In some of the later Upanishads there are the beginnings of what would develop into Bhakti-Yoga, the path of devotion. There are only fleeting glimpses of Karma-Yoga—the path of selfless action—and Raja-Yoga—the path of psychophysical control. Karma-Yoga was significantly developed only in the Bhagavad-Gita, which came after the classical Upanishads, while Raja-Yoga, the system codified by Patanjali, seems to have developed mostly outside the Upanishadic tradition, though some of its terminology was incorporated by later Vedantic teachers. Thus Vivekananda drew on more than the Upanishads to formulate his message, and in so doing expanded the use of the word *Vedanta* to cover more than just the



Upanishads. He felt that all of these spiritual paths would be of value to Western aspirants.

Vivekananda's teaching of his followers was not meant to supplant the religions they were nurtured in, but to expand and deepen their understanding of their own religious roots. Among his followers were Christians, Jews and free thinkers. What they brought with them was not to be rejected, for each person must develop according to one's own mental makeup.

### **What Did Vivekananda's Successors Add That Was Different?**

Vivekananda started two Vedanta Societies in America, in New York and in San Francisco. But the exact form these societies would take was left to Vivekananda's successors to develop. What did these successors, beginning with Swami Abhedananda in New York and Swami Trigunatita in San Francisco, add that was different?<sup>1</sup>

In general it can be said that the swamis who followed Vivekananda gave much more prominence to their and Vivekananda's teacher, Sri Ramakrishna, both in teaching content and in modes of worship. Vivekananda only briefly discussed ritual worship (*puja*) in *Bhakti-Yoga*. His successors very soon inaugurated regular formal worship in traditional Indian modes. Again, the doctrine of *avatar* or Divine Incarnation, barely touched upon by Vivekananda, was emphasized by his successors. Similarly, the doctrine of reincarnation, though discussed by Vivekananda, was not a central tenet of his teaching. Thus there was a filling-in of the original message, and some shifts of emphasis.

Objectively, we can say that these changes moved Vedanta in the West more in the direction of traditional Hinduism. The extent to which these changes occurred in any individual center depended much upon the individual swami in charge. Some centers became quite ritualistic; Swami Prabhavananda followed the instruction of his teacher, Swami Brahmananda, to "be ritualistic." Nearly all centers established shrines to Sri Ramakrishna with obligatory daily worship. On the other hand, some topics, such as reincarnation remained more or less peripheral in a number of centers. At most centers the emphasis shifted toward *bhakti-yoga* and away from *jnana-yoga* and *raja-yoga*.

In general, the centers have continued to teach that all religions lead to the goal of spiritual realization, and some practicing Christians and Jews have continued to get inspiration from Vedantic teaching without abandoning their own traditions. However, many Western devotees, not satisfied with their religious upbringing, have been attracted to the personalities of Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother and have accepted them as their chosen ideals.

---

<sup>1</sup> Two other fellow disciples of Ramakrishna—Swamis Saradananda and Turiyananda—worked briefly in America but did not take part in developing centers.

Traditional Hindu forms of worship, especially the autumn worship of Durga, were also introduced, sometimes with traditional images. But alongside the increasing use of traditional Hindu forms and concepts, the universal spirituality of Vedanta continued to be taught, with examples from different traditions presented. Prophets of other religions were honored, with annual celebrations of Christmas, Easter and Buddha's birthday.

Is there a contradiction or hiatus between these two faces of Vedanta in the West, the universal and the particularly Hindu? Why did the detailed filling-in of Vivekananda's original teaching move in a specifically Hindu direction?

### **Why Hindu Spiritual Practices?**

Some would say that it was Hindu from the start, and why pretend otherwise. Vivekananda's universal spirituality was merely a liberal presentation of Hinduism. Others would suggest that there were practical considerations such as a need for specific spiritual practices for the growth of spiritual life. Those Vedanta devotees who were either dissatisfied with the religions they were brought up in or had had no religious upbringing needed some specific forms of contemplative practice. Rather than arbitrarily inventing new forms, was it not more sensible to draw on the rich and varied store of Hindu practices, practices that had been proven effective over the centuries? And some of those practices, such as the repetition of a mantram, were not limited to Hinduism.

A strong case can be made that the adding-on or filling-in with specific Hindu spiritual practices was both necessary and desirable. Wouldn't the alternative be an unfocused collage of different ideas and practices?

My own spiritual development has been immeasurably enriched by the availability of a wide variety of literature in addition to Vivekananda's own transcribed lectures and other writings. I can't even imagine what my life would have been like without *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master*, biographies and reminiscences of Holy Mother and the direct disciples of Ramakrishna. They put a human face on what otherwise might remain abstract teachings. Vivekananda's own *life* also puts a human personality on his teaching.

But what about the introduction of Indian culture along with these spiritual practices? Indian music, dress, food, language, modes of human interaction? This is a different issue, and I will leave that to one of our friends who has sent us a short article expressing concern about these matters. Personally, my own life has been enriched by knowledge and practice of Indian music, though it remains a "second language."

## **Indian Culture and the Future of Vedanta in America**

### **A Devotee Who Wishes to Remain Anonymous**

When I first came to the Vedanta Society centers over 30 years ago, the centers were led by swamis who to us were spiritual giants. These were the monks who were inspired and initiated by the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna and by Holy Mother.

As immigrant Indians came to America (after immigration laws were liberalized in 1966), they naturally gravitated to Vedanta Centers since there were few places to remind them of home and to meet fellow countrymen. At the same time, the old swamis were passing away and a new generation of Indian swamis came from India.

Fast-forward to the present and what do we see? All or most of the Vedanta Centers in America have a large attendance of Indians. What we seem to be facing in the long term is the total Indianization of the Vedanta Centers in America. What does this mean? The Americans will find activities that they cannot relate to, pujas to the many gods and goddesses, some they've never heard of. The native language of the Indian swami will become more common, encouraging Indian devotees to ask questions in their native tongue of the swami. If the Westerner sits at the dinner table, the whole discussion will be in a foreign tongue. Going to a function, the Americans will see that they are a minority, the bulk of the people are from India. The net result? Westerners will feel left out, that they don't belong. Fewer and fewer will attend, till at last, the only Westerners attending will be a few American women who like to dress in saris and put dots on their foreheads.

### **Differing Needs of Immigrants and Native-Born Americans**

Here is another key point: As the Indians get older, will their grown-up children want to attend Vedanta centers? These children will be fully Americanized. Will the centers speak to their needs? If not, is it wise to become so strongly oriented to the culture of the recent immigrants?

There is nothing wrong with having Vedanta centers that focus on and cater to the needs of the Indian immigrants. But what is the reason for Vedanta Centers in the U.S.? Are they here to serve one ethnic group? Can the centers successfully relate to the needs of both the Americans and the immigrants from India? Can the needs of Hindus and Americans be met at the same time in the Vedanta setting? Do the differences between the two cultures mean that each group has its own requirements, its own problems?

The question of the effect of ethnic groups is not a concern only for Vedanta societies. It can easily arise wherever a foreign leader comes to America and gradually the people of the leader's nationality begin to predominate. We can see

the effect with the Arsha Vidya Gurukulam. Their center was a originally a group composed mostly of Americans. They brought Swami Dayananda from India to the center to lead them, and in a space of about ten years, most of the Westerners were gone. The center had grown dramatically, but the bulk of the people who are now there are Indians. It may be argued that the centers are there for whoever shows up, and if it is mostly Indians, then so be it. Perhaps it is naïve to think that the centers that were established in America were started to serve the American people. The centers in Fiji, Singapore, and Mauritius are totally focused on the ethnic Indian populations in those places.

Certainly the Indians have a right to have their own place, to practice spiritual disciplines according to their culture. The problem is that fewer Americans are becoming affiliated with Vedanta centers. If Hindus are the clear majority, the visiting American may feel he or she doesn't belong there.

The two populations have different problems. The Indian swamis are sometimes not aware that Americans have a different background, so they end up speaking as if everyone in the audience has the same issues as Indians.

There is another issue to consider: Americans who come to the Vedanta movement must learn many of the words and ideas from the Hindu religion. They must acculturate themselves to a minimum amount of Indian culture just to be conversant and comfortable in their adopted religion. Most have little problem doing this. Many come to appreciate the rituals and devotion to Sri Ramakrishna and Sarada Devi.

How does the head swami deal with Americans who are not comfortable with too much Indian culture, on the one hand, and, on the other, with Indian devotees who want to feel they are at home when visiting the center? However this is handled, the fact remains that the Indian population is now a majority in most Vedanta Centers, while the influx of the Western devotees is down. Is there a place for Westerners in the Indian swami's effort to accommodate the hopes and expectations of Indian immigrants?

But can the issue even be talked about in an open and honest fashion? The future of the Vedanta movement in America hinges on how we address these questions.

### **Indianization? Let's Have More of It!**

William Page

At the risk of hogging too much space in this journal, I would like to express my views on the topic of the "Indianization" of American Vedanta centers. My perspective is likely to be different from that of the average American, because I'm an expatriate. I've been living overseas, mostly in Asia, almost continuously since 1969. This has affected my outlook considerably.

Let me confess to an unabashedly pro-Indian bias. I belong to a fledgling Vedanta society in Bangkok, Thailand, in which everybody but me is Indian. The other devotees welcome me and treat me with unfailing warmth and hospitality. If they wanted to, they could easily conduct all our scripture readings and discussions in Bengali or Hindi. But they don't. At least partly out of deference to me, the Lone Mlechchha, they do it all in English. And I really appreciate that.

They also feed me. After each of our satsangs, everybody eats: wonderful Indian home-cooked dishes, laid out in sumptuous abundance on a big buffet table, with rice, chapattis, and curries piled up to the moon. Indian food has contributed substantially to my increasingly impressive girth.

I have found Indian devotees to be charming, generous, and hospitable people who are a delight to know. Not long ago I went down to visit the Ramakrishna Ashram in Penang, Malaysia, where the hospitality I received from the Indian devotees was so overwhelming it almost reduced me to tears. There is a proverb taken from the Taittiriya Upanishad (I:11,2), *Atithi devo bhava*—"The guest is to be treated as God"—and from what I've seen, Indian devotees live up to it. I think any American devotees who have made the pilgrimage to India will have experienced the same thing.

### **Enriched by Indian Devotees and Their Culture**

So if Indian devotees are coming to the American Vedanta centers, that's wonderful. Welcome them! The more the merrier! If we can't welcome Sri Ramakrishna's own people, what kind of devotees are we? We'll never be able to outdo the Indians when it comes to hospitality, but at least let's do our best. Give them a warm welcome and make them feel at home. Many of us will never have a chance to go to India and visit the holy places of our movement. Now India is coming to us!

Sustained contact with Indian devotees and their culture will enrich us. It will broaden our hearts, our minds, our knowledge, and our waistlines. By making friends with Indian devotees, we'll be able to learn more about Sri Ramakrishna, his culture, and the people he associated with—all of whom were Indians. We'll learn about whole new schools of philosophy we never knew existed, and whole bodies of scripture, too. Some of us may develop an interest in Indian art, music, dance, literature, or languages. Best of all, we'll meet some really nice people. And the food will be fantastic.

If Indians seem to be "taking over" in some American Vedanta centers, that's fine. Simply because of their shared languages and culture, Indian devotees will be able to give the swamis help, support, and encouragement that American devotees cannot. Vedanta is, after all, an Indian philosophy. There's no question of "Indianizing" it, because it's already Indian.

Maybe what's actually happening is "re-Indianization," because for many years some American Vedanta centers looked and operated very much like Protestant churches. Let's not forget what Swami Vivekananda thundered so many years ago: "I shall flood your Yankee land with ritualistic swamis!" There's lots of talk about Vedanta's universality, but a universality without particulars is sterile. A true universality ought to include all particulars—Indian, American, everything.

Can American Vedanta centers meet the needs of both Indians and Americans? It's not their job to meet ALL the needs of anybody. It's their job to try to meet the spiritual needs of anybody who comes, regardless of nationality. Whether this can be done will depend on what kinds of people come and the skills of the individual swamis. The results are bound to vary. I'm told that one senior swami calls his job a balancing act. That suggests that swamis posted to the United States may now have to receive some training as intercultural acrobats.

What if some American devotees are starting to feel marginalized? That could actually be a good thing. Americans are too accustomed to being treated as cocks-of-the-walk. We can use a little humility in our lives. Feeling marginalized will give our egos a good knock on the head and teach us to adapt. It will also give us an opportunity to practice virtues like patience, self-restraint, and forbearance—qualities for which Americans are not currently famous in the world at large.

There remains the objection that the presence of a majority of Indian devotees will deter American newcomers. But if newcomers are so easily deterred, they probably wouldn't last long anyway. We want people who stick.

I hope readers will give these thoughts some consideration.

### **Vedanta in America: Let's Not Forget About Multiculturalism**

Steven F. Walker

In reading the history of Vedanta centers in America one is struck over and over again by the way American culture and Indian culture met—and sometimes clashed—in a most fruitful way from the very beginning. In fact, the very beginnings established the model for the future. As soon as Vivekananda arrived on these shores, his own thoughts took on an American coloration, and, faced with an American audience that knew little about Vedanta, he tried to express its deepest insights in a language that could bridge the cultural gap immediately. This effort to adapt Vedantic thought to the American mind resulted in a thoroughly new and modern Vedanta, a "reformed" Vedanta of tremendous vitality. Without his American experience, Vivekananda's writings would have been very different, there is no doubt about it. His contact with American minds at the end of the nineteenth century changed and oriented his thought in new and

unexpected ways, and made him into a quintessentially *modern* mystical thinker. Thus, in many ways, we Americans have a right to claim him as “our” Swamiji.

But this “Americanization” of Vedanta, so crucial in establishing the originality as well as the persuasiveness of Vivekananda’s teaching, also involved, for those few who were ready for it, an introduction in depth to the best of traditional Indian culture: Sanskrit chanting, commentary on canonic Vedantic texts, spellbinding stories from Indian mythology—and an irreverent view of Western cultural arrogance from an Indian proud of the roots of his own culture. From that point onwards the presence of Indian swamis continuing Vivekananda’s work in America involved a kind of *acculturation* on both sides for the swamis and for their students: the ones becoming more American, the others becoming more Indian.

I would suggest that in thinking about the future of Vedanta in America we remember that *multiculturalism* has always been its hallmark. The balance between American and Indian components is, no doubt, a delicate balance, and it is especially important today to insist that this balance be sought and maintained in order to safeguard the unique contribution that Vivekananda’s Americanized Vedanta can have for the future of the world. So, whenever the balance swings too far to one side, an effort must be made to reestablish it so that American and Indian elements become once again harmonized. That takes some fine-tuning, some careful thinking, and some subtle judgment, no doubt, but that is what multiculturalism is all about.

### **Envisioned for the Future: A Residential Service Community**

John Schlenck

The staff of American Vedantist has recently been in touch with friends at the Lakeshore Interfaith Institute at Mother's Trust/Mother's Place in Ganges Township, Michigan. They e-mailed to us some of their plans for the future. We are intrigued by the possibilities opened up through their dedication, idealism, and creativity.

There are two things that some American Vedantists feel have been lacking in the Vedanta movement in the West. One is a strong sense of community among ourselves. The other is a sense of relationship to and service of the wider American society of which we are a part. Our image of spiritual life has sometimes been the lone seeker struggling to realize God, afraid of contamination by the surrounding culture.

Vedanta Centers have tended to be “life-style associations” rather than communities. People sharing spiritual ideals come together from different places for meetings and discussions, then return to their own homes. They are bound together by allegiance to a common teaching and sometimes to a particular teacher, but are not closely integrated into a community where each feels personal responsibility for the welfare of the others.

In the West, churches and synagogues traditionally were not merely places for common worship but also community centers, with a sense of shared responsibility. This pattern has become attenuated by modern urban living; but the minister, priest or rabbi is still expected to retain a sense of personal connection with his/her parishioners, visiting them in the hospital when they are sick, presiding at their weddings and funerals, being open for friendly consultation. And religious organizations often run hospitals, schools and nursing homes.

The traditional pattern in India was different. The spiritual teacher gave spiritual direction, but was expected to be above and beyond social concerns. Social responsibilities were shared among the laity, by extended families, by caste or village associations; the spiritual teacher was not expected to take part in these matters.

Spear-headed by Swami Vivekananda, the Ramakrishna Mission and its sister organization, the Ramakrishna Sarada Mission, have altered this pattern with a sense of social responsibility shared by monastic and householder devotees. Widely admired social service activities are undertaken, providing education, health care, and disaster relief. But, for the most part, devotees do not live in integrated communities.

### **Extending the Ashram Model**

There is the ashram model, where monastic and/or lay devotees live together with shared facilities and responsibilities. This, however, usually does not include families with children, and is based more on the vanaprastha or forest-dwelling, tradition. Is there any reason why devotees and their families should not live in integrated residential communities? And is there any reason why Vedanta communities in America should not engage in works of service as do the Ramakrishna and Ramakrishna-Sarada Missions in India?

Swami Bhashyananda envisioned such an arrangement at the Vivekananda Retreat in Ganges Township, Michigan. A core monastic community would be surrounded by non-monastic devotees, sharing with them a common dedication to the ideals of Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, Holy Mother Sarada Devi and Sannyasini Gauri Ma. This integrated community would in turn reach out to and serve the wider circle of the surrounding locality. Such a service community would be intergenerational and multicultural and would include families, children, unmarried single and retired persons, professors and students, as well as men and women monastics.

Encouraged by other senior swamis, Swami Bhashyananda began to implement his vision. Some years after the Vivekananda Monastery and Retreat was established, a house across the street was acquired for the establishment of a women's monastery and 15 acres of land were purchased. Two women renunciates began work on a shrine dedicated to Holy Mother. The swami encouraged families, senior citizens, women, children, and unmarried devotees to



surround the existing monastery and begin to build the community. Those with a monastic vocation were encouraged to leave house, home and possessions and enter into the monastic life, later to take vows of brahmacharya and sannyasa. Social work began with some devotees joining the task force of Ganges Township and Allegan County for abused women and children. Senior devotees donated funds for the purchase of a six-room house to be used for the healthcare of retired Vedantists. Three women were appointed to undertake early childhood education. Two of these women are now monastics at Mother's Trust/Mother's Place. Several members of the community obtained certification licenses in Eden Alternative care, a holistic approach to caring for the elderly.

### **Words of Exhortation**

Swami Bhashyananda's passion for establishing a service ashram in the West found expression in words of exhortation: "How long are you going to do tapasya (solitary spiritual practice)? You must serve the community. Go into the hospital, go into the court for abused women, go to the streets, serve all as an empty cup. When you go to the emergency room, ask 'How may I serve you, what can I do for you?' Serve all unconditionally and see the divine in all. Be an advocate for those without a voice." He sent some of his students to India to see the service work done in the Ramakrishna Mission institutions, and they worked alongside the Indian workers, worshiping Jiva (the embodied soul) as Shiva (God).

After Swami Bhashyananda's passing, these activities and the women's monastery had to separate from the Chicago Center for organizational reasons. But the devotees and monastics of Mother's Trust/Mother's Place, inspired by these ideals, have continued the work begun by Swami Bhashyananda. They have built a temple and established living quarters in an area near the original retreat. Over the years, lay devotees have purchased land nearby and now live there. In the last two years additional land has been acquired, with devotees buying lots, and the total area has expanded to nearly 130 acres.

Meanwhile, the Mother's Trust started the Lakeshore Interfaith Institute, which has an active program of sharing with followers of other spiritual traditions, reaching out to women and children, joining Healthcare Clergy of Western Michigan, undertaking spiritual care services in hospitals, homes and hospices. One of the monks serves on the advisory board of Holland Hospital. They continue in their work of creating a community based on the universal teachings of Ramakrishna, Sarada Devi, Vivekananda, Gauri Ma and the sacred wisdom of all traditions. Plans include family housing, condominiums, a community center, assisted living facilities, a clinic, and a hospice.

These endeavors, while impressive, are only a small model of the larger vision they cherish: putting into practice in America the idealism of Ramakrishna/Sarada Mission service work along with the universal teachings of Sri Ramakrishna. Having seen the work in India, they feel it is dishonor not to try to put these same ideals into practice in the West through service to those in need. Meditation in the shrine goes hand in hand with meditation in action. □

# *Memories of Swami Ritajananda*

## **Swami Vidyatmananda**

*[Excerpted from an unpublished autobiography by the author, an American monk who lived and worked at the French Vedanta center for many years. Continued from the previous issue.]*

In 1961. . . Swami Ritajananda was appointed President of the Centre Védantique Ramakrichna at Gretz, France. . . . New York friends came to visit when they could, as did the more recent friends from Hollywood, or continued to write regularly. And gradually there were established contacts throughout all of Europe and, eventually, even in Brazil.

At first the situation for the new leader was very difficult. . . . What a problem to gain acceptance! His French was rudimentary, and having a modest and self-effacing personality, he was slow to make an impression. Swami Ritajananda was not only not French, and not fluent in French, he was also not at all like [the previous head and founder of the Center] Swami Siddheswarananda.

. . . During the month I spent with him in the summer of 1964 Swami Ritajananda spoke often and openly of the precariousness of the situation. He had taken two or three new friends into the house to help replace those who had left, but the members of the household were insufficient to make a go of the huge place, money was scarce, and new support was slow in appearing.. The Swami wondered openly whether it would be possible to reanimate the work. . . . He even expressed the fear that the Centre might slowly waste away. Thirty years later, of course, such fears showed themselves to have been unfounded.

### **“Only God Is Guru”**

Swami Ritajananda took his elevation to Head-of-Center modestly. He was now empowered to give initiations, and over the years he was to make many disciples. In addition to giving counsel by correspondence he now began to receive people in interviews, so much so that as the years passed he gained a reputation as a sort of wise man or seer from whom one could solicit advice on almost any aspect of human or divine behavior. He became the recipient of widespread adulation. But he never accepted such marks of reverence as meant for himself. He deflected them to Sri Ramakrishna. I never heard him use the word “initiation” in connection with his activities, nor did I ever know of him referring to someone as his disciple. Rather he would say that X had asked for a mantra or that Y had come to be thrown at the feet of the Lord. “Only God is guru. I have done what was expected of me—now let Sri Ramakrishna do *his* job.”

Of course, occasionally close devotees grew indifferent and left. But now there was a confidence and an assurance of success which kept the Swami from taking these defections badly, certainly not as disloyal actions or as rebuffs. The early fear of betrayal seemed thus to have been entirely surmounted. “Why yes, they may find what they are looking for elsewhere. We have done what we could. It is good for them to try elsewhere.”

In matters of administration I rarely saw Swami Ritajananda initiate any action or departure on his own. He much preferred that someone else act as agent. Often he seemed not to know what he wanted, and this lack of decision sometimes baffled his assistants. One supposes that, in these cases, he was waiting to learn the will of God. Or it may be that he was diplomatically waiting for an intended course of action to show itself acceptable to all concerned—for a consensus to emerge. When there appeared a conjunction of all elements, one might consider that the proposed action was indicated and should be undertaken.

This, when I arrived in Gretz in 1966, was a type of personality I had never before worked with. How different this approach was from Lyle Spencer’s aggressive drive and Swami Prabhavananda’s emphatic nature! I was baffled by the Swami’s silence, by the fact that he was often so non-committal. He didn’t tell me what to do, although since I was at that time still of an enterprising nature and rather brash, he quietly cautioned me, as non-French and a newcomer, as to several things not to do. He didn’t seem to depend on me, didn’t have any preconceptions of what my functions were to be, almost made me feel as though he didn’t actually need me; but I was welcome to stay in Gretz if the situation suited me. The ashrama wasn’t his place: it was the Lord’s. I was given no responsibilities, no special status. “Let us see what the Lord wants” was the answer to everything. I had come to Gretz on a year’s trial basis; so I went to Swami Ritajananda on the closing day of that first year and asked him if my performance had been satisfactory and if I should continue. Blandly he took no position on the question at all. “Who am I to answer that? I’m nobody here.” I should do what seemed best to me. Of course I stayed.

### **Change in My Character**

It is not my purpose to talk about myself in this description of Swami Ritajananda. But because I worked closely with him for many years and found my own character changed and my outlook modified by the contact, I can perhaps describe him most effectively by making personal references as to his effect upon me.

As a person habituated to direct lines of commands and to business methods, I was unused to the non-directive mode of operating which Swami Ritajananda followed, finding it extremely disquieting. I was thrown off by this, to me,

inscrutable attitude for years. The place I was eventually to occupy at the ashrama formulated itself naturally as duties others had abandoned fell upon me, or as I saw the need to take up projects no one else cared about. It was a tactful fashion for a newcomer and foreigner to become integrated into the work. But in the early years I had a hard time accepting the fluidity of the situation.

Even to the end of his life Swami never uttered a word of appreciation. He never expressed satisfaction with my work, never said thank you. It took me years not to be hurt by this and to understand it. “Who am I to praise or blame? It’s not I for whom anyone is working. You do what you do for the Lord and for your own development. I won’t make ours a business arrangement.” This evidence of confidence now seems more valuable to me than would utterances of the usual kind of routine thanks.

### **Disarming Through Silence**

Try as I did, I could never manage to involve the Swami in personal or vocational problems. Any complaint was turned aside blandly: “Moods change.” His policy when he was himself scolded or complained against was to remain silent. Just to sit silently until the other had run out of words. No self-defense, just silence. This response had the effect of disarming the assailant and finally forcing him to desist, defeated. The Swami thus was hard to quarrel with. Once, however, when I was really irritated about something he had done, I made up my mind to “have things out” with him. He listened in silence to my angry words and then answered calmly: “You know you are angry. So your reason is disturbed. We’ll wait a little while for the emotion to go, and then we’ll discuss the matter like the good friends we are.”

I see now that only a modest and wise man could act in the ways I have described. The early discomposure I felt turned into admiration. I tried to learn to follow the same mode of behavior myself. “Be patient, be positive, and let things work out.” “Who can tell what is good, what is ultimately bad, what is progress, what is success? It all depends.” “Don’t get excited. There are so many criteria; spiritual unfoldment is too subtle to analyze. Who knows how God works?”

This quality of goodness in Swami Ritajananda was again revealed unexpectedly after the Swami’s death. Among the papers in his desk was discovered a packet of seventeen letters . . . . In the packet was the carbon copy of a letter in which Swami Ritajananda, in a few calm words, spoke of the good qualities he had discovered in his new American aide. I cannot look at the text of that letter or remember the positiveness of Ritajananda’s attitude toward me without being overcome by emotion. . . .

*(to be continued)*

## *In Memoria*

### **Swami Vandanananda (1915—2007)**

Among the swamis who have contributed to Vedanta in America, Swami Vandanananda is remembered with special affection and respect by those who knew him. He served for fourteen years as Assistant Minister of the Vedanta Society of Southern California under Swami Prabhavananda. Though never head of a center, he became an eloquent spokesman for Vedanta as well as a beloved friend to many devotees. When he left the United States to return to India in 1969, some five hundred people attended his going away party.

Born M.A. Narayana Iyengar in Bangalore, the swami grew up in a family of devotees. His grandfather, also named Narayana Iyengar, was a disciple of Holy Mother and later took monastic vows as Swami Srivasananda. The younger Narayana was initiated by Swami Vijnanananda in 1937 and joined the Order the following year at Mayavati. His early monastic years were spent under the loving guidance of Swami Pavitrananda, then head of the Mayavati ashrama. Swami Vandanananda always retained great reverence and love for Swami Pavitrananda, and their relationship continued in the United States, where Swami Pavitrananda served as head of the Vedanta Society of New York.

#### **From Novice to General Secretary**

Swami Vandanananda's first 16 years in the Order were spent entirely in association with the Advaita Ashrama, both at Mayavati and at its publishing branch in Kolkata. He served as Editor of the Ashrama's journal *Prabuddha Bharata* from 1950 to 1954. After his return to India, he was appointed head of the New Delhi center in 1970 and a trustee of the Order in 1973. He was made Assistant General Secretary in 1977 and was elected General Secretary in 1979, retaining this post until 1985. He was known for his courteous and conciliatory nature, and steered the Order through some rough times during the early Communist rule in West Bengal. His years of retirement were spent mainly at the Order's headquarters in Belur, near Kolkata, after a few years in the Himalayan foothills.

The swami was much respected for his erudition and intellectual abilities, as well as for his communication skills. He passed away on February 22 at the Ramakrishna Mission hospital in Kolkata, the Seva Pratishthan, after suffering various ailments for several years.

Cliff Johnson, an American devotee who lived with Swami Vandanananda at the Hollywood Center during the 1960s, gives the following remembrance:

Swami Vandanananda had one of the most inquiring minds I have ever known. This was apart from his obvious spiritual qualities, which certainly recommended him. But his desire to know all manners of things, to ponder endlessly and discuss a variety of subjects played a predominant role in his personality. Occasionally this could create irritation in some of us after breakfast, when we wanted to be up and doing! Now that I reflect on those times, I realize that we should have better disciplined our energy and allowed him to create in us the same kind of curiosity. We could have learned much.

The Swami also possessed a compassionate heart. I recall one incident. During the protests of the 1960s, a young woman tragically set herself afire. Next to her was a picture of Ramakrishna, which was printed in the newspapers. The Swami visited the young woman in the hospital and blessed her. She died the following day. On another occasion, we had a visitor to the monastery who was selling magazine subscriptions and had only stumps in place of hands. The Swami gave him a generous donation and wished him well.

Two years ago I wrote the Swami a letter at Belur Math after a silence of more than thirty years. I gave him a rundown of the many activities I thought would be of interest to him. Although he could no longer physically write, he sent me a lengthy reply in the same courteous and informative manner I had so long associated with him. He will long be remembered for a full life of service, leaving behind a spiritual family of many devotees and friends.

### **Loving Care and Guidance**

John Schlenck, of the Vedanta Society of New York, remembers:

I can never forget Swami Vandanananda's loving care and guidance during my first trip to India in 1971. Due to weather, my flight to New Delhi was much delayed, and I arrived at the New Delhi Center in the middle of the night. Unperturbed at the inconvenient hour, the swami greeted me cordially and, since I had only a few hours before leaving for Madras, we discussed our proposed trip to Mayavati which was to occur several weeks later.

Swami Vandanananda was able to squeeze time out of his very busy New Delhi schedule to go with me on an unforgettable four-day automobile journey to Mayavati, with an overnight stay in Hrishikesh. This was his first trip back to Mayavati after he returned to India. As I was a student of Swami Pavitrananda, there was a special bond between us, and this visit to Mayavati was, for him as well as for me, a

pilgrimage. He shared many precious memories and arranged for me to visit places associated with the ashrama and with Swami Pavitrananda.

One touching incident occurred at Lohaghat, the nearest town, where Sahaji, the first printer of *Prabuddha Bharata*, lived with his widowed sister. Sahaji, then in his nineties—he died later that year—was quite overcome with emotion when he learned that I had come from Swami Pavitrananda, and I was able to tape-record his reminiscences of early days at Mayavati. He remembered all the way back to before the ashrama was established when he met Swami Akhandananda who was traveling as a wandering monk. Swami Vandanananda also arranged for me to tape-record from an old 78-rpm record a song particularly beloved by Swami Pavitrananda, and then taught me the words as we rode back to Delhi.

### **Pravrajika Bhaktiprana (1922—2007)**

Pravrajika Bhaktiprana, (Gwendolyn Jean Thomas) a native Californian, was born in San Jose in 1922. She studied music in New York at the Julliard School of Music, and received teaching credentials at San Jose State College. After graduation, she returned to New York and taught violin. She met Swami Bodhananda at the Vedanta Society of New York and studied Sanskrit and Vedanta philosophy with him.

In 1954 she joined the women's convent at the Vedanta Society of Southern California in Hollywood. She took first vows in 1959 and final vows in 1965, both under Swami Prabhavananda. She continued her interest in music, and in addition to regular convent duties she played the violin at Sunday services and special events. For some period she directed the women's choir and led congregational bhajan singing in the temple. She also continued her study of Sanskrit and the Vedanta scriptures in depth.

Bhaktiprana was a pioneer worker in establishing the Vedanta work in San Diego. She gave classes in Vedanta philosophy and practice there and also in Hollywood and Santa Barbara. She also made a thorough study of Spanish and became a fluent speaker on Vedanta philosophy in that language. She gave a monthly Vedanta class in Spanish at the Hollywood Center and also spoke to devotees in Mexico, Brazil and other Latin American countries. A fellow American devotee, Barbara Piner, visited Sao Paulo some years after Bhaktiprana was there and was impressed by the gratitude of the Brazilian devotees for Bhaktiprana's visit. Bhaktiprana had helped prepare the ground for the Sao Paulo Center to become affiliated with the Ramakrishna Order.

Pravrajika Bhaktiprana passed away on March 30 at a skilled nursing facility near the Hollywood Center. Though she had been ill for some time, her mind remained alert until the end. A few minutes before her passing, she was asked if she would like to have fellow monastics come and chant evening prayers. She said yes, then took some food, then quietly departed. Hymns and prayers were chanted by nuns and monks of the Center.

### **Always Cheerful and Smiling, Never Complaining**

Cliff Johnson gives the following reminiscences:

My first memory of Bhaktiprana goes back to the 1960s, shortly after I joined the monastery. She and another nun, who has since passed on many years back, were planning on a brief retreat at the house in Laguna Beach, CA, where Swami Prabhavananda stayed during a month or so each summer. As I recall he was not there at the time.

It was then someone remarked how different the two nuns were. “You will find Bhaktiprana spending a lot of time in the shrine. Sister S— is much different. She’ll be doing more of the ironing, cooking, and other duties.”

Of course, there was another side to her. She loved conversation and recalling memories of Swami Prabhavananda and the early days of the Society. This was in spite of her many, many months of suffering (for some time she had to wear an “iron cage” to keep her neck from moving). Always cheerful, never complaining, and ever smiling—that was the Bhaktiprana I remember.

And those early years, before her physical problems forced her into retirement, were filled with travels to South America and other Latin countries, where she served as a wonderful messenger of Vedanta. Her fluency in Spanish made this possible.

She sang with devotion and led the women’s choir for many years. Her enthusiasm was the spark that kept the choir alive.

I was fortunate to visit Bhaktiprana at the convalescent hospital a few weeks before she died. She chatted cheerfully, though I knew she must be suffering. I begged her to let me take a photo, to which she agreed. Her attendant even placed a flower in her hair. A week later I discovered my camera was empty of film.

Perhaps that was what God intended. The Spirit can’t be captured by a photograph.



## Carolyn Kenny (1918—2007)

Holy Mother once said to a devotee, “It is a great good fortune to be the mother of a monk.” Two of Carolyn Kenny’s four children were monastics: Swami Vedarupananda, now the resident monk at Vivekananda House in Pasadena, California, and Pravrajika Bhavaprana, a long-time member of the Sarada Convent in Santa Barbara.

Known as Amala, Carolyn came to Vedanta in 1965 in southern California and became a student of Swami Prabhavananda. She was soon a familiar face at the Hollywood Center and its branches in Santa Barbara and Trabuco Canyon. Her friendliness, openness and selflessness drew people to her. In the early 1970s, she participated wholeheartedly in the founding of the San Diego Center and actively supported its growth.

In the early 1990s, Carolyn relocated to Portland, Oregon, where she collaborated with Terrence Hohner in creating an extensive bio-chronology of Swami Vivekananda in the West. This was published in 2000 by Prana Press in Portland. She also wrote articles for the Indian journals of the Ramakrishna Order, *Prabuddha Bharata* and *Vedanta Kesari*, and pamphlets on Durga Puja (worship of the Divine Mother) and Arati (evening ritual worship).

Cliff Johnson remembers her as having

“ . . . a sharp intellect embraced by a devotee’s heart. I first knew of her by way of my close friend Nancy Mayorga, and later through her son, Swami Vedarupananda. She and Nancy, who lived in Santa Barbara, talked frequently on the phone. I recall Nancy telling me how astonished she was that Amala could leave her meditation to answer the phone and “then go right back to meditating again!”

She had retired as a school psychologist many years before I knew her, but I sensed that retirement was not part of her vocabulary. She was always vigorous and dedicated to numerous Vedanta projects. This was true until nearly the final day of her life.

She was a valued friend and represented, to me, the highest ideals of Vedanta.

Carolyn passed away peacefully on March 21 at her home in Portland with her four children by her side chanting the name of Sri Ramakrishna. □

## *Review Essays*

### **The God Delusion**

**By Richard Dawkins.**

**Bantam Press, Transworld Publishers, London**

**Paperback 406 pp. \$27.00 2006**

Richard Dawkins is a professor at Oxford, the author of nine books, a renowned evolutionary biologist, a champion of scientific thinking, one of the three top intellectuals in the world (according to a recent poll), and an atheist.

This cornucopia of qualifications promises us a robust read as he “focuses his fierce intellect” (I’m quoting the back cover) on “the irrationality of belief in God.”

His intellect is indeed fierce, and his assault on the citadel of religion lights up the night sky like fireworks on New Year’s Eve.

Lovers of feisty polemics will appreciate passages like this: “The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.” (31) Oh, and he’s also a “psychotic delinquent.” (38)

Whew. “Fierce intellect” is putting it mildly. To his credit, Dawkins admits that “it is unfair to attack such an easy target. The God Hypothesis should not stand or fall with its most unlovely instantiation, Yahweh.” (31)

### **The God Hypothesis**

Also to his credit, Dawkins defines his terms clearly. He is attacking what he calls the God Hypothesis: the belief that “there exists a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it.” (31)

To this hypothesis he opposes his thesis: that “any creative intelligence, of sufficient complexity to design anything, comes into existence only as an end product of an extended process of gradual evolution. Creative intelligences, being evolved, necessarily arrive late in the universe, and therefore cannot be responsible for designing it. God, in the sense defined, is a delusion.” (31)

This sounds convincing, but it ignores other possibilities. What if a powerful creative intelligence evolved during the course of an earlier universe, then survived the destruction of that universe to condition the formation of our own?

What if such an intelligence evolved in another dimension, then burst into our dimension to create our universe? And consider the spider: it spins a web out of its own body, then enters the web and nests in it. The microbes that evolve to live in the strands of the web would deny the existence of the spider if they were able, because, being only microbes, they can neither perceive nor imagine it.

Such scenarios may sound like something scripted by Steven Spielberg, but they're not beyond the range of possibility.

The weakness of Dawkins' thesis is that it is narrowly Earthcentric. The universe, to put it mildly, is a very big place. Isn't it possible that somewhere, out amidst all that vastness, or maybe even in another dimension, there might be creative intelligences that are far different from those we find on Earth?

This is not a proposition you'd want to bet the farm on. But to make grand and sweeping generalizations about the entire universe from what little we know about the microscopic corner we live in seems to me just a tad premature.

### **A Wide-Ranging Blitzkrieg**

In 406 pages, Dawkins covers a lot of territory. While reserving his most entertaining invective for the God of the Bible, he also takes on monotheism in general, polytheism, deism, pantheism, and even agnosticism.

What's wrong with agnosticism? Well, agnostics say we don't have enough evidence to prove whether God exists or not. Dawkins admits that it's impossible to prove the nonexistence of any given entity. But we can estimate its probability. And given the evidence we currently have at hand, Dawkins thinks it's a pretty sure bet that God—as Dawkins has defined him—does not exist. The fact that the evidence we have at hand is drawn from one small corner of the universe does not deter him.

All of this is very bracing. Dawkins is witty, urbane, admittedly self-indulgent (116), prone to go off onto tangents, fond of snappy phrases (the Ultimate Boeing 747, the Great Beethoven Fallacy, the God of the Gaps, the Mother of All Burkas), and very much full of himself. You'd be, too, if you were one of the world's top three intellectuals.

None of this vitiates the vigor of his arguments. He demolishes the classical arguments for the existence of God (77-85), skewers the claim that religious phenomena are beyond the purview of science (55), dismisses visions as hallucinations born of deeply felt needs (87-92, 347-352), trashes the Bible (chapter seven), and castigates the crimes committed by religion (chapter eight), especially against children (chapter nine). All of this will have fundamentalists reaching for their shotguns.

## Vedantic Arguments

Vedantists will be most interested to see how he addresses two arguments frequently posed in Vedantic journals: (1) the scientific method is limited, religious phenomena are beyond its scope, and religion is better equipped to deal with them than science; (2) great mystics like Sri Ramakrishna have proved that God exists by experiencing him directly.

Dawkins addresses the first argument by asking, “What are those ultimate questions in whose presence religion is an honored guest and science must respectfully slink away?...A universe with a creative superintendent would be a very different kind of universe than one without. Why is that not a scientific matter?” (55) “God’s existence or nonexistence is a scientific fact about the universe, discoverable in principle if not in practice. If he existed and chose to reveal it, God himself could clinch the argument, noisily and unequivocally, in his favor.” (50) “What expertise can theologians bring to deep cosmological questions that science cannot?...If science cannot answer some ultimate question, what makes anybody think religion can?” (56)

That last question brings us to Vedanta’s second argument: the way to answer ultimate questions is through “personal, subjective experience of God.” (154)

## The Tricky Mind

“Personal” and “subjective” are words to which science does not take kindly, and Dawkins regards the whole spectrum of religious experience with a baleful eye. He maintains that our minds play tricks on us, they construct images and voices that we take to be real, and there is no difference between a vision and a hallucination. “The human brain runs first-class simulation software....[It] is especially adept at constructing faces and voices...It is well capable of constructing ‘visions’ and ‘visitations’ of the utmost veridical power.” (88-90)

He cites examples, and concludes, “That is really all that needs to be said about personal ‘experiences’ of gods or other religious phenomena. If you’ve had such an experience, you may well find yourself believing firmly that it was real. But don’t expect the rest of us to take your word for it, especially if we have the slightest familiarity with the brain and its powerful workings.” (92)

Dawkins does not seem to be familiar with the experiences of Sri Ramakrishna, and it is a matter of regret (or maybe of gratitude!) that he does not address them. Given his general orientation, though, I suspect that he would not budge from the position he has staked out above. “Extraordinary fellow!” I can hear him muttering. “But even so...”

In fact, since he is writing from a Western perspective, Dawkins' assault is directed primarily against the Judeo-Christian worldview. He dismisses Hinduism in a single paragraph (33), reduces Buddhism to a footnote (394), and has nothing at all to say about Taoism. Those of us who are even slightly familiar with Eastern religions are likely to be disappointed. How much more interesting it would have been if he had explored some of the more subtle concepts of the Eastern faiths!

In fairness, though, the Eastern religions constitute a vast topic of their own, well beyond the scope of this book, which is big enough already. It would be educational for all concerned if Dawkins were to focus his fierce intellect on them in his next work. In the meantime, this one is recommended to all who enjoy a good theological slugfest.

—William Page

**A Vision for Hinduism: Beyond Hindu Nationalism**  
**by Jeffery D. Long.**  
**I. B. Taurus, London, New York**  
**224pp.      hard back      \$75.00      2007**

This book—written by Professor Jeffery Long, Chair of the Department of Religious Studies at Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania—is a serious attempt to address issues of extreme importance to those of us who have committed ourselves to Vedanta, or what Professor Long calls Hinduism (following, for the sake of ready recognition, popular usage). As the subtitle suggests, the focus of the book is how to address Hindu nationalism, an important fact of contemporary Indian life now impacting the West as increasing numbers of Indian Hindus come to live and work here permanently.

### **Origins of Hindu Nationalism**

Hindu nationalism as an organized political force came into being in the nineteen twenties, when V. D. Savarkar came out with his idea of *Hindutva* (or Hindu-ness), which states that Hindus are to be defined in terms of Indian ethnicity, national allegiance and religious affiliation. In order to be considered a Hindu, all three criteria must be met (174). Such a definition peripheralizes other Indians of different religious persuasion as well as members of the worldwide Indian diaspora. However, the movement started by Savarkar has burgeoned socially and politically, characterizing itself by vitriolic attacks on other Indians of different religious beliefs, coupled with egregious violence against them and non-Indian members of other faiths. For example, it was a member of this

movement who assassinated Mahatma Gandhi for his attempts to include Indian Muslims in India's future. For a very clear and basically fair-minded history of Hindu nationalism, Professor Gerald Larson's *India's Agony over Religion*<sup>1</sup> provides most of the further history one might want to know.

Professor Long gives us this background, but his main concern is with another group of people—Westerners, like himself, who have embraced Hinduism as a permanent worldview and lifestyle, but who are, of course, totally outside the pale of Hinduism as defined by the nationalists and increasingly peripheralized or “Indianized” (which Professor Long calls ‘soft nationalism’) by Indians holding nationalist views, overtly or covertly. He shares with us his own attraction to Hinduism on account of its emphasis on karma, reincarnation, and God, and particularly the unique goal of moksha or liberation, which is so very thrilling for many Westerners who seek a more expanded experiential meaning to their faith. Like them, he also cherishes religious pluralism, or acceptance of all religions as intrinsically valid and important and capable of co-existing and mutually benefiting each other. He considers this to be India's gift to the world, particularly from Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda who developed it in our contemporary context. It is very sad irony that some Hindu leaders are resisting pluralism on the misunderstanding that it teaches that “all religions are the same” (28, 60), in their minds demoting Hinduism and furthering a Christian imperialist agenda which they lay at the feet of no less than Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda!<sup>2</sup>

### **Pluralism: The Dharma Religions**

In Professor Long's mind the subject of religious pluralism is key to resolving the brewing conflict between liberal and fundamentalist Hinduism, and finding a workable rationale for it a matter of some urgency. In setting out to do so, he first—and in line with the definition of Hinduism by the Indian Supreme Court (116)—subsumes under the term *Hindu* followers of all of the indigenous Indian faiths: Hindus proper, Jains, Buddhists and Sikhs, who all believe in and follow the core criteria he has outlined. As far as the West is concerned, this grouping is not as radical as it might seem. Many scholars in the West, both Indian and Western, are now converging on the idea of what they call *the dharma religions*, emphasizing the shared commonalities of the indigenous Indian traditions in an effort to create solidarity, from which a sense of pluralism may be developed within their own purview. One distinguished group developing this

---

<sup>1</sup> Albany, New York: State University of New York, 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Morales, Frank Gaetano: *Radical Universalism* (<http://www.dharmacentral.com/universalism.htm>).

approach is The Dharma Association of North America (DANAM—[www.danam-web.org](http://www.danam-web.org)), of which Professor Long himself is a member.

Going on from there, Professor Long carefully distinguishes between inclusivism, perennialism and pluralism proper, all possible solutions to issues of interreligious understanding. In *inclusivism* a given system subsumes other systems under its own categories—in fact, what many religious people, including Hindus themselves, do. *Perennialism* emphasizes the shared generalities of all of the systems to the neglect of important, non-negotiable particulars, a genre pioneered by Aldous Huxley in his famous *The Perennial Philosophy*. In *pluralism proper* a balance, as well as a reconciliation, is sought between general principles and the actual, key empirical facts of each of the systems.

Addressing pluralism proper, he frankly states that though Hinduism is in practice pluralistic, it has produced very little critical literature on the subject. (66) He therefore proposes to use as the basis for his project Process Theology, the work of the English mathematician and philosopher, Albert North Whitehead and distinguished followers such as David Ray Griffin and John Cobb. This system gives a coherent view, which has by this time been accepted quite widely as a systematic, rational integration of science with religion, particularly the Asian religions, which lend themselves more to impersonal analysis than do the Abrahamic religions.

Having given us the outlines of this system and an idea of how it could be adjusted to meet the needs of Hinduism as he has broadly defined it, Professor Long then attempts to integrate and bolster it with contemporary Hinduism under the heading *Ramakrishna Meets Whitehead: An Outline of Hindu Process Theology*. Within this purview he gives us a historical review of pluralism as it originated with Rammohan Roy and later Ramakrishna and spread into the West via the likes of Gandhi, Aldous Huxley, and the contemporary English philosopher, John Hick; and then attempts to finesse this aspect of Hinduism with Process Theology itself in order to produce a fully developed Hindu Process Theology.

### **Truth Through Multiple Perspectives**

With a view to addressing intra-Hindu points of argument within his Hindu Process Theology, Professor Long goes on to factor in the Jain system of *anekantavada*, the philosophy of perspectivism. Perspectivism, or looking at any question from many different mindsets, is not only part and parcel of the Jain tradition, but also crucial to the Western postmodern view, which insists on applying multiple perspectives in assessing any truth claim, as well as to the delicate process of reconciling the many apparent differences between the various religions – which, of course, he is attempting to reconcile and integrate.

Using this method within the Hindu Process Theology he has established in a general way, he addresses many issues within Hinduism, particularly the tricky ones of God and Self, which are normally considered some of the defining issues in separating Hinduism proper from Jainism and Buddhism in particular. The scope of this review precludes going into any detail; but suffice it to say that Professor Long makes a good, if rather difficult case, for Process Theology's ability to adapt sufficiently to accomplish what he is setting out to do.

After completing this arduous and very commendable work, Professor Long returns to the "scene of the crime" – the question of how liberal Hindus, Hindus of the diaspora, and Western converts and sympathizers with Vedanta can hope to find common ground with the nationalists and coax them to return to their native position of pluralism. He quotes many constructive examples of East-West understanding already established, from Swami Vivekananda's combined role as a pluralist and (non-fundamentalist) nationalist to the popularizing of Hinduism by the Beatles; the trend to redefining caste by character qualities rather than by heredity; and the worldwide success of the Ramakrishna Order, which thus far has eschewed the kind of racism promoted by nationalists. The implication seems to be: let the nationalists look at what is succeeding in practice and make their decisions accordingly.

One can only hope that Professor Long's reasonable appeals will be heard. His highly rational and religiously motivated effort is in stark contrast to the irrational and violent motivation of his target audience. One could visualize the DANAM group being a milieu in which his thesis might thrive, an important piece of work under the auspices of a liberal and literate Indian organization. If successful there, the method could hope to make inroads into Western and perhaps Indian academe, but one wonders how far it could go in the closed and angry minds of Indian nationalists.

For the non-academic reader this is a very expensive book, unfortunately lacking an index. But it is important because it brings a uniquely informed and sensitive point of view to a subject that presents many features similar to other forms of religious fundamentalism. However, unlike Abrahamic fundamentalism, Hinduism has had a long history of religious pluralism and tolerance, thus providing the background on which this unusual book can see the light of day. Western Vedantists, I feel, can only be grateful to Professor Long for tackling so thoroughly a subject that cries out for attention; and one hopes that more Western and Indian scholars will come forward with further thoughtful works on this subject, while we grassroots Vedantists acquire a better understanding of the issues involved.

—Sister Gayatriprana



## *Reports*

*[Two long-established Vedanta centers in America have recently been affiliated with the Ramakrishna Order.]*

### **The Vedanta Center of St. Petersburg, Florida**

The Vedanta Center of St. Petersburg is the thirteenth Center in the United States to become a fully accredited branch of the Ramakrishna Order of India (Belur Math). The Center was officially named a branch by a resolution passed at a meeting of the Board of Trustees of the Ramakrishna Math, Belur on March 17, 2005, and Swami Yuktatmananda was appointed Minister-in-Charge of the Center.

The Center was founded in 1959 by the late Rev. M. McBride Panton and Mrs. Earnly Panton, who were students of the late Swami Nikhilananda of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center of New York. Upon the passing of Reverend Panton and Mrs. Panton, the Center looked to Swami Adiswarananda, Spiritual Leader of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center of New York, to become its Spiritual Advisor. Since 1984 Swami Adiswarananda visited our center several times each year to conduct services, classes and retreats, and to give spiritual guidance. Between the Swami's visits, various members of the Center took turns in conducting the Sunday morning services and weekday evening classes.

The Center is situated on its own one-acre property, a half block from Tampa Bay and surrounded by lovely landscaped grounds and gardens with varieties of fragrant flowers: oleanders, hibiscus, azalea, wisteria, jasmine, and beautiful tropical trees such as magnolia, mango, pine, oak and varieties of palm. The Center is especially proud of its large collection of Bel Trees spread throughout the gardens. Within the property is a Chapel building that can seat 120 people, a Parish House with a meditation hall, classroom, offices, and the residence of the Swami. A separate building contains a small studio apartment and garage.

Swami Yuktatmananda arrived in St. Petersburg on May 4, 2006 to assume charge as Minister and Spiritual Leader of the Center. On May 7, 2006 a reception was held at the Center to welcome and introduce the Swami to the members. Later, on Sunday, June 11, 2006, a special service was held at the Center to formally introduce the Swami to the Center and to the City of St. Petersburg. Swami Adiswarananda came from New York for the occasion, and was joined by the Board of Trustees of the Center and prominent members of the community, including Russ Crumley, President of the Old Southeast Neighborhood Association (of which our Center is a member) and Dr. G.M. Ramappa, President of the Hindu Temple of Florida, Tampa. Ms. Rana Tiwari, an immigration attorney who helped the Center to arrange for Swami Yuktatmananda's immigration to the United States, also attended the program.

The Chapel of the Center was filled to capacity for this special service that began with Vedic chanting by the priest of the Hindu Temple of Florida at Tampa, followed by welcoming remarks by the different participants. Swami Adiswarananda then welcomed Swami Yuktatmananda and spoke about the history of the Center and the tradition of the Ramakrishna Order. Swami Yuktatmananda then spoke and thanked all those present for their warm welcome and commended the members for their many years of devoted service to the Vedanta Center of St. Petersburg. The program included special instrumental musical offerings by the ensemble of John, Susan and Scott Campbell. Many came from distant cities of Florida and other states to attend the program. The *St. Petersburg Times*, a prominent newspaper in Florida, carried in its June 11, 2006 supplement entitled *Neighborhood Times* a full-page interview with Swami Yuktatmananda that has helped more people of St. Petersburg and the Tampa Bay community to know about the Center.

Since then Swami Yuktatmananda has assumed the leadership of the Center with great energy and enthusiasm, conducting the Sunday services and weekday classes that have already started to attract new spiritual aspirants to the Center. On invitation Swami has visited and given talks at a number of cities throughout Florida. Also, during the past year our Center has had the opportunity to welcome many visiting Swamis from different Centers of the United States and abroad. Although Swami Yuktatmananda has been at our Center for barely one year, he has endeared himself to everyone because of his spiritual example, his affection toward all of us, and his untiring leadership of Center.

We are ever grateful to the Trustees of the Ramakrishna Order for granting affiliation to our Center as a branch of the Order. Through the guidance of Swami Adiswarananda, and by the grace of Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother, and Swami Vivekananda, this longtime goal and prayer of our Center has been fulfilled.

—Elizabeth Hawley

### **The Vedanta Society of Kansas City, Missouri**

The year 2007 marks the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of founding for the Vedanta Society of Kansas City, Missouri. To celebrate this auspicious year, the Society's minister, Swami Chetanananda, is conducting seven weekend programs. In addition, four guest swamis will visit the Society: Swami Tyagananda, June 23-24, Swami Atmarupananda, July 14-15, Swami Sridharananda, August 27-29, Swami Sarvadevananda, September 14-15 and October 5-6.

The Society is also devoting one Regular Service each month to honoring a milestone in the American Vedanta movement.

In 1946, Swami Satprakashananda, who had founded the Vedanta Society of St. Louis in 1938, first visited Kansas City at the invitation of Mrs. Gladys Miller and Mrs. Ula Bergfeldt. Again, in September 1947, he visited to give talks. At

that time he granted private interviews to a number of persons. Seeing a high degree of interest in spiritual practice here, he suggested that regular evening classes be begun. These classes began in October and consisted of audiotaped guided meditation and talks by the swami on the Upanishads..

In 1965 the Society was officially organized through the State of Missouri. In 1967 Regular Services on Sunday mornings were instituted.

Swami Satprakashananda visited the Society in Kansas City six more times before his passing in November 1979. His successor, Swami Chetanananda, made his first visit to Kansas City in April 1980.

In February 1985 the Vedanta Society of Kansas City purchased a house at 8701 Ward Parkway. In May 1985 the City of Kansas City granted the Society a Certificate of Compliance to use the house as a church.

In June 2005, the Trustees of the Ramakrishna Order made the Vedanta Society of Kansas City a branch of the Vedanta Society of St. Louis.

Over the last 60 years, 35 distinguished monks of the Ramakrishna Order have visited Kansas City in order to conduct programs at the Vedanta Society, all of which are offered free to the public. Some notable monks who have visited the Society have included Swamis Ranganathananda, Atmasthananda, Smaranananda, Sarvagatananda, Gautamananda, and Sridharananda.

—Linda Prugh

## *Book Review*

### **Swamiji's Devotion to His Mother**

**by Swami Tathagatananda**

**Ramakrishna Mission, Swami Vivekananda's Ancestral House and Cultural Centre, Kolkata**

**27 pp.**

**paperback**

**\$2.00**

**2006**

This short essay offers an extraordinarily interesting glimpse into the last years of Swami Vivekananda, and provides the reader with another reminder of how the swami's giant intellect was balanced by a great big loving heart. While one ordinarily imagines the life of a monk to be based on the renunciation of family ties, the end of Vivekananda's life shows the other side, which is hard to understand from this more usual perspective, unless one remembers how solicitous Ramakrishna was always towards the welfare of his own mother until the moment of her death. In both cases it was not a case of worldly attachment but rather of unselfish love towards someone to whom one owed a great debt in this life. That is why Swami Tathagatananda's booklet provides not only a fascinating account of a little known aspect of Vivekananda's life, but also inspiration for everyone seeking liberation with a model for integrating unselfish

love and the performance of one's social duties with the quest for spiritual freedom.

The other side of the story is rather disturbing, although entertaining, given the very mixed nature of Swamiji's own family—not just a generous father and an admirably intelligent and courageous mother, but also a collection of relatives from Hell. The travails that Vivekananda's mother Bhuvaneshwari Devi had to suffer at the hands of the family into whom she married would have tried a saint—in fact, her forbearance appears quite saintly. There are the makings of a wonderful Bengali sacred soap opera in the tale, and some day an Indian TV producer should get hold of it. Meanwhile, Swami Tathagatananda's booklet constitutes a unique contribution to our sense of the full humanity of a great spiritual teacher.

—Steven F. Walker

## *Contributors*

BEATRICE BRUTEAU is an author of books and articles on philosophical and spiritual themes. She lives in North Carolina and is a member of The Vedanta Center of Atlanta.

SISTER GAYATRIPRANA, a writer on Vivekananda Vedanta with a background in the neurosciences, is a monastic member of the Vedanta Society of Southern California. E-mail: Gayatriprana@msn.com.

ELIZABETH HAWLEY has been a member of the Vedanta Center of St. Petersburg, Florida, for 30 years and has been the Center's secretary since 1994.

WILLIAM PAGE recently retired from teaching English at Thammasat University in Bangkok, Thailand. He has been connected with the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society of Massachusetts since 1960 and is a member of the recently formed Ramakrishna Vedanta Society of Thailand. E-mail: chekbin@yahoo.com.

LINDA PRUGH, a long-time member of the Vedanta Society of Kansas City, Missouri and the Vedanta Society of St Louis, is the author of *Josephine MacLeod and Vivekananda's Mission*, published by Sri Ramakrishna Math (Chennai) in 1999. She lives in metropolitan Kansas City. E-mail: info@vedantakc.org

JOHN SCHLENCK, resident member and Secretary of the Vedanta Society of New York, is a composer of music. He is also Secretary-Treasurer of Vedanta West Communications. E-mail: JSchlenck@aol.com.

STEVEN F. WALKER has been associated with Vedanta centers in Boston and New York for nearly forty years. He teaches comparative literature at Rutgers University. E-mail: sfw@rci.rutgers.edu.

SWAMI VIDYATMANANDA (aka John Yale) joined the Ramakrishna Order in 1950 at the Vedanta Society of Southern California. In 1966 he was posted to the Centre Vedantique Ramakrishna in Gretz, France, where he served until his passing away in 2000. He was the author of *A Yankee and the Swamis* and the editor of the compilation *What Vedanta Means to Me*.