

american vedantist

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A Directory of the Ramakrishna-Sarada
Vivekananda Movement in the Americas

american vedantist

truth is one; sages call it variously
e pluribus unum: out of many, one

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ENCOURAGING COMMUNITY AMONG VEDANTISTS

Since its founding in 1996, Vedanta West Communications has tried to foster communication among Vedantists in the West. Organizations inspired by the ideals of Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda are sometimes at considerable distance from one another, each with its own membership and identity. A sense of shared commitment and dedication can help to strengthen and deepen the spiritual life of all of us. This special edition of *American Vedantist* is intended to help bring these organizations and their members in closer touch with each other.

Satsang, or holy association, is a pillar of spiritual life in all traditions. To be with fellow devotees, sharing thoughts, aspirations, and service, giving encouragement and mutual support in times of difficulty, is something we all need, as a plant needs nourishing soil in which to grow. The mutual love and respect of the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, both monastic and lay, can be seen as a template for spiritual community, and also as a foundation on which we can continue to build.

We hope the Directory of the Ramakrishna-Sarada-Vivekananda Movement in the Americas featured in this issue of *American Vedantist* will serve as a resource for Vedantists who have occasion to visit other locations where there are Vedanta devotees, or who wish to contact one another by telephone and e-mail. The *Directory* also offers a brief historical record of the continuing expansion of Vedanta in the West.

This strengthening of love and support among Ramakrishna-Sarada-Vivekananda Vedantists is not intended to exclude members of other spiritual communities in and outside the tradition of Vedanta. There are wonderful, sincere, spiritually oriented people in all traditions. Indeed, if we are true followers of the founders of our movement, we must strive to practice Holy Mother's last injunction that "no one is a stranger... the whole world is your own." But at the same time let us grow in an environment that supports and strengthens us in our own path.

If you know of any groups in the Ramakrishna-Vedanta tradition that we have failed to mention, please let us know and we will expand our list.

—The Editors

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA'S SUMMATION OF HIS MESSAGE TO THE WEST, AND HIS VISION FOR PREACHING VEDANTA HERE:

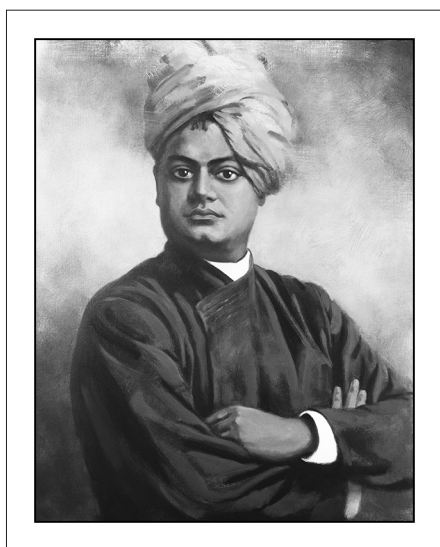
When it was pointed out to Swami Vivekananda in America that Hinduism is not a proselytizing religion, he replied:

“I have a message to the West as Buddha had a message to the East.”

Q: Do you intend to introduce the practices and rituals of the Hindu religion into America?

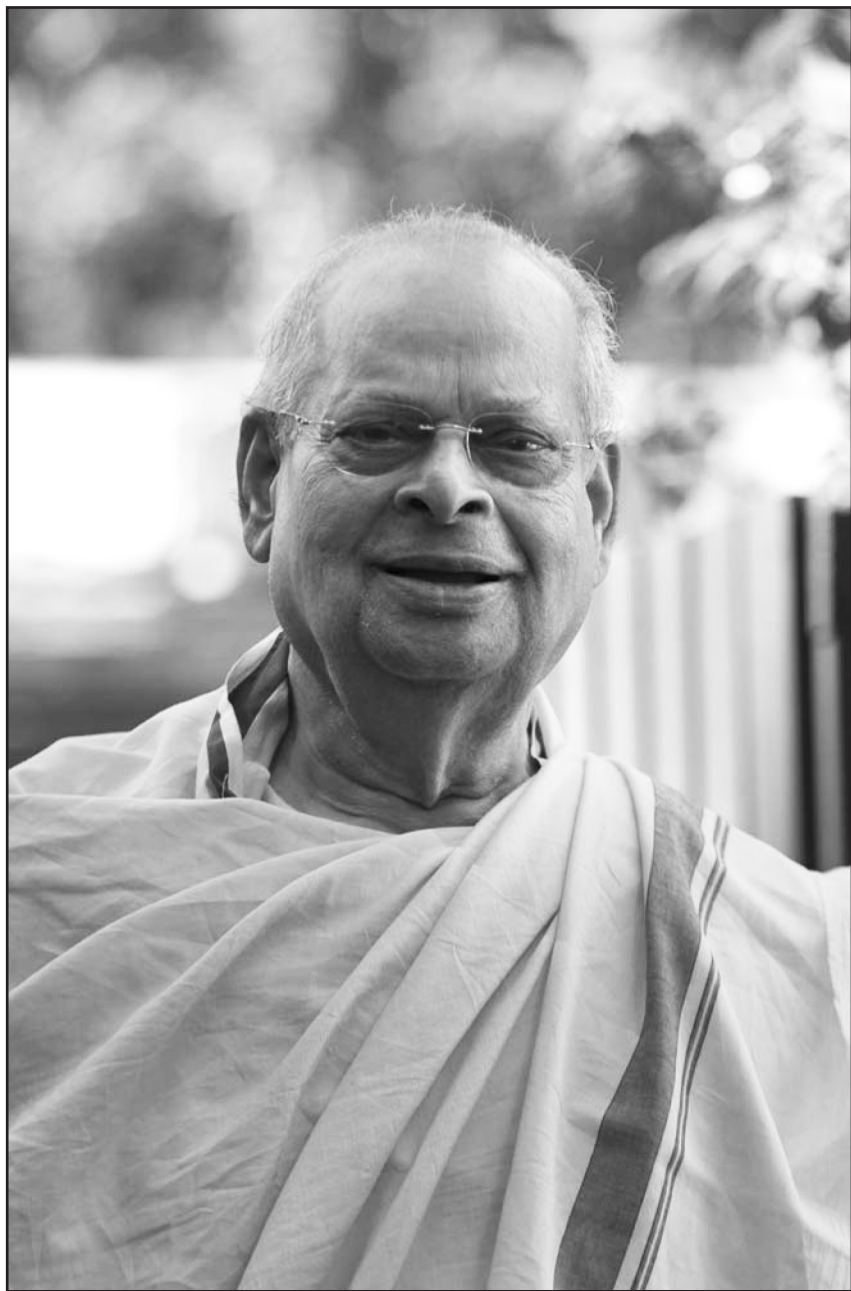
A: I am preaching simply philosophy.

— *Complete Works*, Vol. V, page 314



“Swami Vivekananda had learned the need of the West for the philosophy of Vedanta and he had seen how the philosophy could be applied to every problem of modern man. He was now ready to nurture the seed he had planted into a sturdy tree whose roots would strike deep and whose branches would give shelter to the world.”

— Marie Louis Burke (Sister Gargi), *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1984), Volume 2, p. 330.



Swami Swahananda on his 87th birthday

DEVELOPING VEDANTA IN THE AMERICAS:

An interview with Swami Swahananda

American Vedantist (AV): Swami, at age 88, most men would be retired and relaxing – yet in September you have a trip scheduled to new centers that you are starting, and others that you already started. Why?

Swami Swahananda (SW): My doctor said, “Swami, we don’t know how stroke comes.” —I had a stroke about 14 years ago— “If you lie down you may get it; if you roam about you may get it.” So I thought, better philosophically decide whether you want to lie down or move around.

Our whole life we are inspired by Swamiji, that we must manifest our rajas; our active tendency is to be manifested. But, our combination is (with a) contemplative life, That’s always in the background. And then, when you become old, capacity lessens, of course.

But in one sense, there is more influence, because people accept your ideas more easily, and your circle of devotees, admirers, increases. And also I had the idea—a sort of a passion, you could say—that Swamiji’s ideas must be spread out. Spread out, but instead of leaving it to chance, or to God, in that way. God has given us some capacity; we must try in our own circle—we cannot change the whole world—to do something, instead of simply “lazing” or relaxing.

I don’t consider that relaxing is very beneficial to myself—that idea. And constant inspiration of Swamiji is we must try to do something. I used to move around lecturing, too, but now more purposively I go to certain groups who have a desire to organize—the idea of an organization, the idea of an ashrama. You go and give a lecture, a few people may be impressed. But you don’t see the result. Whereas if a place is organized, an ashrama or a center is organized, then it will be continued.

And there will be some people who will be close; at least 25 people will be more actively attached to the place, and then often feel that they are doing something. There is some meaningfulness in their life, also. So that is how I wanted them to come out and manifest Swamiji’s idea—that we should do something for society.

Modern education makes people conscious of their society. Some are more socially oriented, some are not; but that difference of temperament is there. In our Ramakrishna Mission the ideal is considered a combination, and everybody will have to contribute something to the society, even those who are contemplative types.

As an organization we can say we get involved with activities, but there is always encouragement of deeper spiritual life. That is

what really attracts people—deeper attraction—more than the immediate attraction if you “do something.” So that is the major inspiration behind my life. And through God’s grace my health is not too bad. I don’t have constant pain. If there were constant pain, probably I would not be able to keep up the enthusiasm. But it is better to wear out than to rust out, that is a saying.

Our Swami Madhavananda was fond of telling—he was our General Secretary—“Change of work is a rest.” When you change your occupation or your interest, it is rest. Swami Shankarananda, who gave us sannyas, when he was President, he called our whole batch and said, “I know that you all will be specializing in meditation, study and service; but I would like you to develop a hobby, so that when you (have) moments of down-ness and monotony, you can have something of interest.”

I think my interest was more, at one time, studies; scholarship was the interest. But as I grew older, (it became) this type of ashramas, or expansion—encouraging others. Not that I myself want to do too many things, because my management style is to inspire others to do it. Why should I do it? That was my idea. That way the other people also manifest their energies, they open up. Secondly, I can do more centers; otherwise, I am bound down to one place.

Find out other people and give them scope; that is the idea. That

is why I organized some private centers. My major argument was, you yourselves run it, you yourself lecture, you must express yourselves.

Say you want somebody to be religious, and learn some religious songs. Why should they learn unless there is a forum to sing? And to sing there must be an audience. So that is the reason that if you want to keep up these values, you need not merely books but their self-expression through singing, writing—expressions—dramas, magazines. These are the ways that they will help the society but also express themselves.

That’s why (I) encourage them, telling, “I need not monopolize all the services, you are to do.” I think that management type is, in a sense, better. So of course, we try to advise people who can (do) some specific institution building.

AV: These new centers—from something you said before—you had been visiting in Pittsburgh, for example, for some 30 years before you started a center there. Is that true of all the centers you have started—that you have been going a long time?

SW: Yes. The first center I started was in San Jose (California). I was in Berkeley and there was no money, no money for a building. Still I gathered people and different ideas were there. So I told the interested people, we can’t go for general public. Just gather a few people and give them scope. I was trying to organize people to come

and stay there; for that we required at least a house. (Note: the San Jose house continues as a branch of the Vedanta Society of Berkeley—see Directory for details.)

So, San Jose we did, Stockton we did (note: now closed), San Diego we did (after Swami Swahananda had come to head the Vedanta Society of Southern California in December 1976)—these three, then Washington, D.C. and Ridgely (Vivekananda Retreat, Ridgely). These are the five centers “inside” the organization (under the direct guidance of the Ramakrishna Mission).

Then three centers till now have come up: Phoenix (Arizona), Dallas (Texas) and Pittsburgh (Pennsylvania). Phoenix and Dallas, initial money—entire money, I have given. Then gradually I introduce our monastics to go—as soon as a monastic goes it gathers momentum.

Initially some enthusiasm is there (among the devotees). But day after day after day the people who have everyday duties, it is difficult for them to give too much time. (And) for them to give money is more difficult. So that is the reason I decided to invest, and gradually the center should return the money. But even if they cannot return the money—I’m only asking—I put up some of my own money. But mainly (we depend on) devotees, five or six devotees that can give big money. Once I organize, some people are willing to give extra money.

(It) was my idea, as I suggested to Belur Math: Today or tomorrow you must give the foreigners—Americans and others—some scope. Earlier generation you could claim, they were very highly religious people. Now, (there are) some monks—seniors, 60 years old, they should go and start something—not just one man, every time at least two or three should take part in the work.

Those who are ready, first start them as “sub-heads”—at a new center, but under the supervision of the top swami, and under a top center, which will loan money. (The Swami laughed as he said this.) The condition being that when you pay off the loan, you will be head of the center. (More laughter) And then there will be energy to try for it. Independence—give it. Any group, you give freedom, and responsibility also.

AV: There are already some other informal groups operating throughout the United States, South America, and Canada. If any of them reading this article are inspired to want to associate more closely, should they contact you?

SW: I have been contacted by two or three groups who want to start a center. From some literature, or some swami has told them I am interested, so they contact me. Three places asked me how to organize – can I help to do something? If there were more monastics it would be easier. Even though some devotees are available, and capable, but we are

not able to get facilities for them. Our organization would need to be bigger.

That is one problem – we don't have facilities.

AV: One final question, Maharaj. In 2109, what do you think Vedanta will have become in the Americas?

SW: I explored this point very much, particularly in this country (the U.S.). Many people have felt that we will become huge like the Catholic Church. I don't believe this is possible in modern days – I discussed it with Gambhirananda and many others. What do we visualize?

My conviction is—and after having much discussed it I find no reason to change it—our organization will have to be in many groups—separate organizations, like Catholicism in that sense—varieties of sacred groups. Monolithic organization is no more possible.

My feeling is many organizations will have to come up in different parts of the world—nationalistic ideas will get mixed (in it); other things will get mixed up. I don't think there will be one organization for the entire world. Even one religion may not be there.

Swami Abhedananda gave a lecture: “Religion of the 20th Century”—the Age of Reason has come, the intellectual—people will be more liberal, open and rational. Swamiji also believed (this)... By

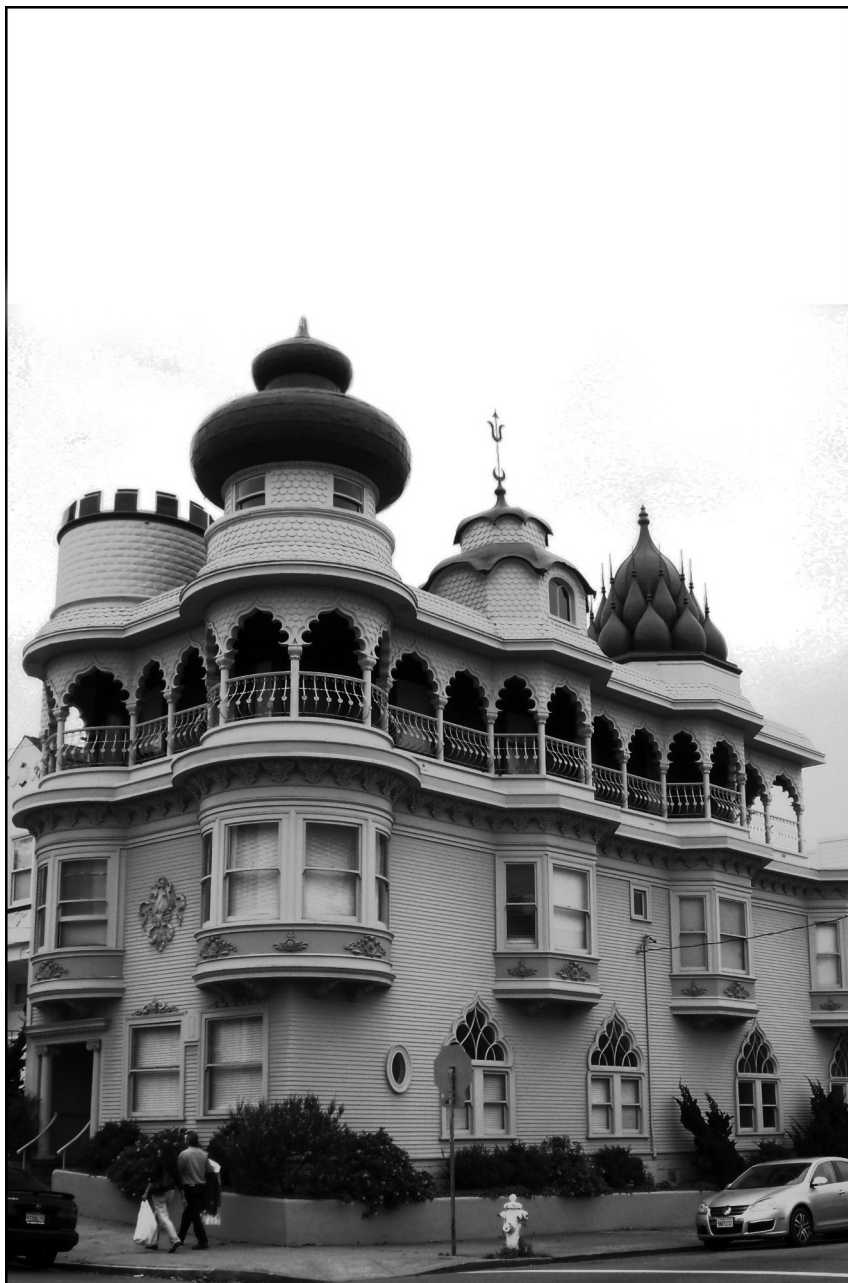
the 21st Century, people will accept it, theoretically at least. That was his (Abhedananda's) prediction. So, ideas will be accepted, but not always in the name of Vedanta, at least not in the next 50, 60 years.

Abhedananda said, in future we may be a “nameless” religion. Because the moment you say Vedanta – Oh, this is a Hindu idea, or Indian idea. So, organizationally, I don't think there will be one organization—there will be many, many different varieties.

Swami Swahananda, a senior monk of the Ramakrishna Order, is the minister and spiritual leader of the Vedanta Society of Southern California. He is a disciple of Swami Vijnanananda, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. Swami Swahananda joined the Ramakrishna Order in 1947 and received sannyasa (final vows) in 1956.

After joining the Order, he served in the Madras Math and, later, as editor of the Order's scholarly publication, the “Vedanta Kesari”. He came to the United States in 1968 as the Assistant Minister of the San Francisco Vedanta Society and was later appointed head of the Vedanta Society of Berkeley, California. Immediately prior to coming to this country, the swami was head of the New Delhi Center, the premier center of the Ramakrishna Order in the capital of India.

In December of 1976 he was transferred to Hollywood, the headquarters of the Vedanta Society of Southern California.



Old Temple in San Francisco The oldest Vedanta building in America

A DIRECTORY OF THE RAMAKRISHNA-SARADA-VIVEKANANDA MOVEMENT IN THE AMERICAS

VEDANTA SOCIETIES OF THE RAMAKRISHNA ORDER

1894: The Vedanta Society of New York

This first Vedanta Society in the Western World was founded by Swami Vivekananda (Swamiji) in 1894, pre-dating the establishment of the Ramakrishna Mission in Calcutta in 1897. Following Vivekananda's success at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, an eager group of students wanted further study and practice under the Swami's guidance. Swamiji arranged for three of his brother disciples, Swami Saradananda, Swami Abhedananda and Swami Turiyananda, to continue his work in New York and nearby states. Saradananda was called back to India by Swamiji in 1898 to serve as the administrative head of the newly formed Ramakrishna Math and Mission. Turiyananda went to Northern California to continue Swamiji's work there in 1900. Swami Abhedananda continued as head of the New York center until 1910. He was succeeded in 1912 by Swami Bodhananda, a disciple of Swami Vivekananda; in 1951 by Swami Pavitranaanda, a disciple of Swami Brahmananda; and in 1977 by the Center's present

head, Swami Tathagatananda. The Center has been at its present location since 1921.

Schedule: Sunday services at 11 AM; Tuesday and Friday classes at 8 PM

Contact information:
Vedanta Society of New York
34 West 71st Street
New York, NY 10023
Phone: 212-877-9197
Fax: 212-877-9198
E-mail: vedantasoc@aol.com
Website: www.vedantany.org

1900: The Vedanta Society of Northern California

During his second stay in the United States, Swami Vivekananda lectured and taught for three months in San Francisco, Oakland, and Alameda. Students from both sides of San Francisco Bay wanted to form an organization that would continue their study after Swamiji left. On April 14, after one of Swamiji's evening lectures, the Vedanta Society was formed for the dual purpose "of assisting Swami Vivekananda in his work in India and studying Vedanta Philosophy." By the time Swamiji left San Francisco he had decided to send Swami Turiyananda as his successor.

Shanti Ashrama

A devotee in Los Angeles, where Vivekananda had worked prior to coming to San Francisco, observing some of the earnest young disciples of Swami Abhedananda, realized the need for a Vedanta retreat and gave Vivekananda a piece of property in Northern California for that purpose. Within a week after Swami Turiyananda arrived in San Francisco on July 26, 1900, he set out for the land. Shanti Ashrama, as he named it, became his headquarters for the next two years. Fifteen months of his stay in California he spent there teaching, meditating, and chanting.

The Old Temple

Swami Trigunatitananda, another brother disciple of Vivekananda, succeeded Swami Turiyananda in 1903. In 1905, under his direction, the Society began construction of a temple on Webster Street. This was the first Hindu temple in the Americas. Completed before the 1906 earthquake, it survived the quake. The Old Temple, still in existence, houses an auditorium, a shrine, and living quarters for monks and male devotees.

Olema Retreat

In 1946 the Society acquired a 2200-acre property in the village of Olema, about an hour's drive north of San Francisco. There it maintains a monastery, and a retreat where spiritual seekers of all faiths may meditate and study

away from the disturbances of urban life.

The New Temple

The New Temple, located at the corner of Fillmore and Vallejo Streets in San Francisco, is now the Society's headquarters. Dedicated in 1959 under the leadership of Swami Ashokananda, who headed the Center from 1931 to 1969, the New Temple houses a variety of activities. The Center has been headed by Swami Prabuddhananda since 1970. The Society maintains a monastery and a convent near the New Temple.

Schedule: Sunday lectures at 11 AM; Wednesday lectures at 8 PM

Contact information:
Vedanta Society of Northern California
2323 Vallejo St.
San Francisco, CA 94123
Phone: 415-922-2323
Email: temple@sfvedanta.org

1909: The Vedanta Centre of Boston

The Vedanta Centre of Boston was founded in 1909 by Vivekananda's youngest disciple, Swami Paramananda. After his passing away in 1940, leadership of the Centre passed to his niece, Srimati Gayatri Devi, who continued Vedanta work in America until her passing away in 1995. For later history of Vedanta in Boston, see Ramakrishna Vedanta Society of Massachusetts, below.

Paramananda lectured and taught extensively throughout the United States. He founded Ananda Ashrama in Southern California in 1923 as an extension of the Vedanta Centre in Boston, and in 1929 founded an ashrama in Cohasset on the South Shore of Massachusetts. For further information on these centers, see Organizations not under the guidance of the Ramakrishna Order which starts on page 24.

1925: Vedanta Society of Portland

Swami Prabhavananda, a disciple of Swami Brahmananda, came to the United States in 1923 in order to assist Swami Prakashananda in San Francisco. At the invitation of Vedanta students in Portland, Prabhavananda came from San Francisco and gave public lectures. With the active encouragement of Swami Prakashananda, the Vedanta Society of Portland was established in November 1925 under the care of Swami Prabhavananda. It was officially incorporated in October 1928.

Swami Prabhavananda moved to Hollywood in 1929, to start the Vedanta Society there. That same year, Swami Vividishananda was sent from India to take charge of the Portland Centre. In 1932, he was succeeded by Swami Devatmananda, who had worked briefly at the New York Vedanta Society. In spite of the Depression, the Society managed to purchase

a substantial house at 1206 N.W. 25th Avenue — its first permanent home.

Scappoose Retreat

On the 100th birthday anniversary of Sri Ramakrishna in February 1936, the Society purchased 120 acres of wooded land 20 miles from Portland, for a retreat. A temple at the Retreat was built and dedicated during the Holy Mother centenary year, 1953-1954. This is the first Hindu Temple of its kind in the Northwest.

Swami Devatmananda was succeeded in 1954 by Swami Aseshananda, a disciple of Holy Mother. Swami Shantarupananda came from India in July 1991 to assist Swami Aseshananda, and has served as minister-in-charge of the Vedanta Society of Portland since Swami Aseshananda's demise in 1996.

Schedule: Sunday lectures 11 AM; Tuesday classes 7 PM; Thursday classes 7:30 PM

Contact information
Vedanta Society of Portland
1157 SE 55th Avenue
Portland, Oregon 97215
Phone (503) 235-3919
Email: swami@vedantasociety.org
www.vedantasociety.org

1928: Vedanta Society of Providence

The Vedanta Society of Providence is located in the heart of the city,

near Brown University. It was founded by Swami Akhilananda, a disciple of Swami Brahmananda, in September 1928 and has been located on Angell Street since 1930. Akhilananda gave regular classes at Brown University and other educational institutions. He also started a center in Boston in 1941. Swami Sarvagatananda was sent to assist him in 1954. After Swami Akhilananda passed away in 1962, he became the minister in-charge and continued until his retirement in 2001. Swami Yogatmananda has headed the Center since July 2001.

Schedule: Sunday services at 5 PM; Tuesday and Friday classes at 7:30 PM

Contact information

Vedanta Society of Providence
227 Angell Street
Providence RI 02906
Phone (401) 421-3906
Email: info@vedantaprov.org
www.vedantaprov.org

1930: The Vedanta Society of Southern California

The Vedanta Society of Southern California (Society) was founded in 1930 in Los Angeles. The Society has branch centers in Santa Barbara, San Diego, South Pasadena, and Trabuco Canyon (in Orange County).

The history of the Society can be traced back to Swami Vivekananda's visit to Los Angeles in late 1899, when he stayed with the Mead sisters in their South

Pasadena home. Thirty years later, one of the sisters, Mrs. Carrie Mead Wyckoff, became acquainted with Swami Prabhavananda, who was then head of the Vedanta Society of Portland. Mrs. Wyckoff owned a house in the Hollywood hills, which she offered to the swami as a gift. In 1929, Prabhavananda moved to Hollywood from Portland to establish the Vedanta Society of Southern California. In 1934, the Society was officially established as a non-profit organization "to promote harmony between Eastern and Western thought, and recognition of the truth in all the great religions of the world." Monastic programs for men and women were started in the 1940s.

Swami Prabhavananda led the Society until his death on July 4, 1976. Later that year, Swami Swahananda moved from the Vedanta Society of Berkeley to become the spiritual leader of the Vedanta Society of Southern California.

Information and a large selection of books on Vedanta and other religions are available in the Hollywood, Santa Barbara, and Trabuco bookshops. Some books are also available at the San Diego Monastery.

Contact information:

General questions should be directed to info@vedanta.org. Website: www.vedanta.org. To order books on spirituality and religion as taught by the world's

faith traditions, and associated items for worship and meditation, visit www.vedanta.com.

Center Addresses:

HOLLYWOOD

1946 Vedanta Place
Hollywood, CA 90068-3996
Phone: (323) 465-7114
Email: hollywood@vedanta.org
Schedule: Sunday lectures 11 AM;
weeknight classes Tues. through
Sat. 7:30 PM; classes in Spanish,
Thursdays 2:30 PM

SANTA BARBARA

927 Ladera Lane
Santa Barbara, CA 93108
Phone: (805) 969-2903
Email: santabarbara@vedanta.org
Schedule: Sunday lectures 11 AM

TRABUCO CANYON

19961 Live Oak Canyon Road
P.O. Box 408
Trabuco Canyon, CA 92678
Phone: (949) 858-0342
Email: rkmtrabuco@vedanta.org
Schedule: Sunday lectures 11 AM;
Wednesday scripture classes 8:30
PM

SAN DIEGO

1440 Upas Street
San Diego, CA 92103-5129
Phone: (619) 291-9377
Email: sandiego@vedanta.org
Schedule: Sunday lectures 11 AM

SOUTH PASADENA

309 Monterey Road
South Pasadena, CA 91030

Phone: (323) 254-1546
Email: pasadena@vedanta.org

1930: Vedanta Society of Chicago (from 1955, the Vivekananda Vedanta Society)

Swami Gnaneswarananda, a disciple of Swami Brahmananda, inaugurated the Vedanta Society of Chicago in January 1930. In addition to giving interviews and holding public and private classes. Gnaneswarananda also taught his students Indian music. In 1933, he organized a convention of American-based swamis at the time of the second Chicago World's fair and the 40th anniversary of the of Swami Vivekananda's first visit to America. After his passing away in 1937, Swami Vishwananda was sent from Bombay in 1938 to take over Gnaneswarananda's work, reaching Chicago in May 1938. After his demise in 1965, Swami Bhashyananda was appointed head of the Center. From the beginning his work was distinguished by vigorous expansion. A new temple, located near the University of Chicago, was dedicated in September 1966. In 1968, the Society purchased 80 acres of land for a Monastery and Retreat in the township of Ganges, Michigan. Construction of a temple was begun in 1971. The Retreat now contains a temple, library, museum, bookstore, auditorium, dining hall, and guest facilities for retreatants. An annual Children's Camp was established at the Retreat. Swami

Bhashyananda also encouraged the formation of Vedanta Centers in different parts of the United States and Canada and sent several American monastics to lead these centers.

Swami Chidananda came from India in May 1991 to assist Swami Bhashyananda. After Bhashyananda became seriously ill in 1993, Chidananda was appointed Minister-in-Charge of the Center. Under his leadership, the Society purchased land in Homer Glen, Illinois for the establishment of the Sri Ramakrishna Universal Temple. The Center relocated to the new property in 2008.

Schedule: Sunday lectures 11 AM;
Tuesday and Friday classes 7:30 PM

Contact information:

Vivekananda Vedanta Society of Chicago

www.vedantasociety-chicago.org
Sri Ramakrishna Universal Temple
14630 S. Lemont Road
Homer Glen, IL 60491
Tel: (708) 301 - 9062

Email: infirmation@vedantasociety-chicago.org

Vivekananda Monastery & Retreat, Ganges
6723, 122nd Avenue,
Fennville, MI 49408
Tel: (269) 543 - 4545
Email: gangesmonastery@vedantasociety-chicago.org

1933: Buenos Aires (Argentina) The Ramakrishna Ashrama

At the request of local students of Vedanta, the Ramakrishna Math sent Swami Vijayananda, a disciple of Swami Brahmananda, to found a center of the Ramakrishna Math in Argentina in December 1932. The Ramakrishna Ashrama was started in Buenos Aires in 1933 and shifted to suburban Bella Vista in 1941. Swami Vijayananda and local students translated a number of Ramakrishna Vedanta books into Spanish. Swami Paratparananda succeeded Swami Vijayananda in 1973 and was succeeded by Swami Pareshananda, the present head of the Ashrama, in 1988. Under Swami Pareshananda, the Ashrama has opened a branch in Buenos Aires city at Estados Unidos 2451, Barrio de San Cristobal.

Schedule:

Bella Vista: Sunday 4 to 7 PM
Satsang
San Cristobal: Fridays 7 PM
scripture class; Saturdays 6 PM
Satsang

Contact information:

Ramakrishna Ashrama
Gaspar Campos 1149
Bella Vista 1661
Buenos Aires
Phone: 541-666-0098
E-mail: pareshananda@ramakrishna.org.ar
Website: <http://ramakrishna.org.ar>

1933: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center of New York

History and general information

Swami Nikhilananda, a disciple of Holy Mother, founded the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center of New York in 1933. The Center maintains a temple in New York City and a summer cottage at Thousand Island Park, New York, where Swami Vivekananda lived and taught in the summer of 1895. In 1968, Swami Adiswarananda was sent to assist Swami Nikhilananda, and on the latter's passing away in 1973, became head of the Center. In December 2007, following the death of Swami Adiswarananda, Swami Yuktatmananda was selected by the Ramakrishna Order to be the Center's Minister and Spiritual Leader. Previously, Yuktatmananda had served for more than a year and a half as minister of the Order's newly accepted branch, the Vedanta Center of St. Petersburg, Florida.

The Vivekananda Cottage is located about 360 miles from New York City, near the Canadian border on Wellesley Island on the St. Lawrence River. It is generally available during the months of July and August as a place of pilgrimage for devotees who wish to visit.

Schedule: Sunday services 11 AM;
Tuesday and Friday classes 8 PM

Contact Information

american vedantist

Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center
of New York

17 East 94th Street

New York, NY 10128

Phone (212) 534-9445 (from
Monday through Saturday,
between 10:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m.
Eastern Time)

Fax (212) 828-1618

Email: rvcnewyork@worldnet.att.net

www.ramakrishna.org

Vivekananda Cottage

P.O. Box 1084

Thousand Island Park, NY 13692

Telephone: (315) 482-3031

[www.ramakrishna.org/activities/
TIP/visitors_info.htm](http://www.ramakrishna.org/activities/TIP/visitors_info.htm)

1938: Vedanta Society of St. Louis

Swami Satprakashananda, a disciple of Swami Brahmananda, founded The Vedanta Society of St. Louis in 1938. He had the good fortune of seeing Swami Vivekananda in 1901, and later he met Sarada Devi and nine direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. The swami was a great scholar and wrote several books on Vedanta. After leading the Vedanta Society of St. Louis for 41 years, Satprakashananda passed away in 1979.

Swami Chetanananda, who had served as assistant minister of the Vedanta Society of Southern California from 1971 to 1978, came to St. Louis in March 1978. He became head of the Center

after the passing away of Swami Satprakashananda.

Schedule: Sunday services 10:30 AM; Tuesday and Thursday classes 8 PM

Contact information
Vedanta Society of St. Louis
205 S. Skinker Blvd.,
St. Louis MO 63105
Phone 314-721-5118

Website: www.vedantastl.org
Send email direct from the website

1938: Vedanta Society of Western Washington

Swami Vividishananda, a disciple of Swami Brahmananda, after working in several American cities, founded the Ramakrishna Vedanta Center of Seattle in 1938. In 1979 the center changed its name to The Vedanta Society of Western Washington. The building at 2716 Broadway Ave East, which the Society now occupies, was purchased in 1942.

Swami Bhaskarananda, the present head, was sent by the Order to assist Swami Vividishananda in 1974. Under Swami Bhaskarananda's leadership the Society has enjoyed considerable growth, including the purchase and development of a beautiful 21-acre retreat property called Tapovan, 45 miles from Seattle, and the purchase of Vivekananda House — which serves as the monastic residence — situated across the street from the present Temple in Seattle.

Schedule: Sunday lectures at 11 AM; Tuesday classes at 7:30 PM

Contact information
The Vedanta Society of Western Washington
2716 Broadway East
Seattle, WA 98102-3909
Phone: 206.323.1228
Fax: 206.329.1791
Email: society@vedanta-seattle.org

Tapovan Retreat
23217 27th Ave. NE
Arlington, WA 98223
Phone: 360.435.6373

1939: Vedanta Society of Berkeley

The Vedanta Society of Berkeley was founded by Swami Ashokananda in 1939 as a branch center of the Vedanta Society of Northern California. Swami Shantaswarupananda was its resident minister for many years. It became an independent center in 1970 under the direction of Swami Swahananda. During Swahananda's time in Berkeley the center established a branch in San Jose. Swahananda was succeeded in 1976 by Swami Swananda and in 1985 by the Society's present head, Swami Aparananda.

Schedule: Sunday lectures at 11 AM; Thursday scripture classes at 8:00

Contact information:
Vedanta Society of Berkeley
2455 Bowditch St.
Berkeley, CA 94704-2429

Phone (510) 848-8862
Email vedantaberkeley@earthlink.net
www.vedantaberkeley.org

San Jose Branch
1376 Mariposa Ave
San Jose, CA 95126-2629
Phone (408) 294-5976

1941: Ramakrishna Vedanta Society of Massachusetts

The RVSM was founded in 1941 by Swami Akhilananda, a disciple of Swami Brahmananda. Under Akhilananda's leadership, the Society acquired a retreat property in Marshfield, MA. After his passing away in 1962, Swami Sarvagatananda, a disciple of Swami Akhandananda, led the Vedanta Society for forty years until his retirement in 2002. Swami Tyagananda is currently the head of the Vedanta work in Boston.

Schedule: Sunday Satsangs 11 AM;
Thursday Study Group 7:30 PM;
Wed. & Sat. Arati and Meditation 6 PM

Contact information
Ramakrishna Vedanta Society of Massachusetts
58 Deerfield Street
Boston, MA 02215
Email: boston@vedantasociety.net
Website: www.vedantasociety.net

1949, affiliated 1952: Vedanta Society of Sacramento

At the request of local devotees,

the Center was founded by Swami Ashokananda in 1949 as a branch of the Vedanta Society of Northern California. It acquired its present property of seven acres on Mission Avenue the following year and was named The Church of Universal Philosophy and Religion. A small chapel was completed and formally dedicated in February 1953. The present temple with monastic living quarters was completed and dedicated in 1964. In 1970 the church became an independent center of the Ramakrishna Order and its name was changed to The Vedanta Society of Sacramento. Swami Shraddhananda was appointed head of the Center. Since his passing in 1996, Swami Prapannananda has been in charge.

Schedule: Sunday lectures 11 AM;
Wednesday scripture class at 7:30 PM;
Saturday evening discourse at 7:30 PM

Contact information:
Vedanta Society of Sacramento
1337 Mission Ave
Carmichael, CA 95608
Phone (916) 489-5137
Fax (916) 489-3248
Email: society@vedantasacto.org
www.vedantasacto.org

1959, affiliated 2006: Vedanta Center of St. Petersburg, Florida

The Vedanta Center of Saint Petersburg, Florida is the newest branch of the Ramakrishna Order outside India. It became an official

Center of the Order in 2006. The Center is located in the beautiful Old Southeast neighborhood of the city on the west coast of Tampa Bay.

The Center was started by Rev. Malcolm McBride Panton, a student of Swami Nikhilananda, as the Church of Spiritual Philosophy and Vedanta Center. Swami Nikhilnanda and later his successor at the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center of New York, Swami Adiswarananda, used to visit the St. Petersburg Center almost every winter. After Rev. Panton passed away, leadership of the center passed to Swami Adiswarananda, several of whose followers continued to maintain regular services at the Center. Repeated requests to the Ramakrishna Order for affiliation were finally honored in 2006. Swami Yuktatmananda came from India to head the Center. After Swami Adiswarananda passed away in 2007, Swami Yuktatmananda was appointed head of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center of New York and was succeeded in St. Petersburg by Swami Ishtananda.

Schedule: Sunday services 11 AM;
Wednesday study group 7:30 PM

Contact information
Vedanta Center of Saint Petersburg
216 19th Avenue SE
St. Petersburg, Florida 33705
Telephone: (727) 896-9840
E-mail: ishtananda@hotmail.com
Website: www.vedantaflorida.com

1968, affiliated 1989: Vedanta Society of Toronto

At the request of local devotees, and under the guidance of Swami Bhashyananda, the Toronto Center was inaugurated in 1968 by Swami Ranganathananda. Swami Pramathananda was appointed its head in 1989 as the Center became formally affiliated with the Ramakrishna Order. Since the passing away of Swami Pramathananda in 2003, Swami Kripamayananda has been in charge.

Schedule: Sunday lectures 11 AM;
scripture classes most Fridays

Contact information:
Vedanta Society of Toronto
120 Emmett Avenue
Toronto, Ontario M6M 2E6
Phone: (416) 240-7262
Web: <http://www.total.net/~vedanta>

1974, affiliated 1999: Ramakrishna Vedanta Ashrama, Sao Paulo (Brazil)

Visits from Argentina by Swami Vijayananda and his successor, Swami Paratparananda, led to the establishment of the Center in 1974. The Ashrama was formally affiliated with the Ramakrishna Order in 1999 with the appointment of Swami Nirmalatmananda as its head. Swami Sunirmalananda was sent to assist him in 2004. The Center maintains a retreat in Embu Guaco. In 2006, the centers in Rio de Janeiro, Curitiba and

Belo Horizonte were made sub-centers of the Sao Paolo Center.

Schedule: Sunday lectures 5:30 PM; Wednesday scripture classes 7:30 PM; Saturday talks 5:30 PM

Contact information:
Ramakrishna Vedanta Ashrama
Largo Senador Raul Cardoso
204 Vila Clementino
CEP: 04021-070 Sao Paulo
Phone/fax: (11) 5572-0428
E-mail: vedantasp@uol.com.br
Website: www.vedanta.org.br

SUB-CENTERS AFFILIATED WITH THE RAMAKRISHNA ORDER

1947, affiliated 2006: The Vedanta Society of Kansas City

Swami Satprakashananda founded the Vedanta Society of Kansas City in 1947. The Kansas City Society is a sub-center of the Vedanta Society of St. Louis. It became officially affiliated with the Ramakrishna Order in 2006. Swami Chetanananda, head of the St. Louis Society, is its spiritual leader.

Schedule: Weekly services most Sundays at 10:30 AM.

Contact information:
Vedanta Society of Kansas City
8701 Ward Parkway
Kansas City, MO 64114
Phone: 816-444-8045
info@vedantakc.org
www.vedantakc.org

1990, affiliated 2006: Centro Ramakrishna Vedanta - Rio de Janeiro (Brazil)

Beginning in 1957, Swami Vijayananda, head of the Center in Argentina, and his successors began visiting Rio every year, and from then on devotees in Rio wanted to have a center. Their group registered as a Vedanta Society in 1990. The Center obtained a large building which was inaugurated in 2002 by Swami Smaranananda, then General Secretary of the Ramakrishna Order. In 2006, the Center became a sub-Center of the Ramakrishna Vedanta Ashrama, Sao Paolo. Swami Nirmalatmananda, head of the Sao Paolo Center, is its spiritual leader.

Schedule: Sunday meetings 5 PM; Thursday classes 8 PM

Contact information:
Centro Ramakrishna Vedanta Rio de Janeiro
Rua Paula Matos 162,
Santa Teresa, Rio de Janeiro
Tel: 21-22243295, 25511208,
38723183
e-mail: site@vedantarj.org.br

1990, affiliated 2006: Centro Ramakrishna Vedanta de Curitiba (Brazil)

The Curitiba Center was founded by local devotees in 1990. In 2006, it became a sub-Center of the Ramakrishna Vedanta Ashrama, Sao Paolo. Swami Nirmalatmananda, head of the Sao Paolo Center, is its spiritual leader.

Schedule: Saturday lectures 5 PM;
Tuesday classes 7:45 PM

Contact information
Centro Ramakrishna Vedanta de
Curitiba
Rua Prof Hostílio Araújo, 120
Curitiba - PR, 82110-130, Brazil
Phone: (41) 3027-2102
E-mail: centro@vedantacuritiba.org.br
Website: www.vedantacuritiba.org.br

1997: The Vedanta Center of Greater Washington, DC

VCGWDC is a sub-center of the Vedanta Society of Southern California. After nearly a century of visits to the Washington area by swamis of the Ramakrishna Order, and at the request of local devotees, The Vedanta Society of Greater Washington, DC was inaugurated in 1997 with Swami Swahananda of the Southern California Center as its spiritual leader. Swami Atmajnanananda is minister in residence.

Schedule: Sunday lectures 11 AM;
Wednesday and Friday classes at 8 PM

Contact information
Vedanta Center of Greater
Washington, DC
3001 Bel Pre Road
Silver Spring, MD 20906
Phone: 301-603-1772;
fax: 301-460-5459
E-mail: Vedanta.dc@gmail.com
Website: www.vedanta-dc.org

1997: Vivekananda Retreat, Ridgely

Swami Vivekananda visited Ridgely Manor, the country estate of Frank Leggett (the first president of the Vedanta Society of New York) on three occasions in the 1890s. Three brother disciples of Swamiji also visited during that period. Over the following century, many other swamis and devotees visited the estate as a place of pilgrimage. In 1997 the property became a sub-center of the Vedanta Society of Southern California under the guidance of Swami Swahananda. Pravrajika Gitaprana is the minister in residence.

Schedule: Classes Saturdays and
Sundays 10:30 AM, Tuesdays,
Wednesdays & Thursdays 7:30 PM

Contact information:
Vivekananda Retreat, Ridgely
P.O. Box 321
Stone Ridge, New York 12484
Phone: 845 / 687-4574; fax 845 /
687-4578
E-mail: info@ridgely.org
Website: www.ridgely.org

2001, affiliated 2006: Centro Ramakrishna Vedanta, Belo Horizonte (Brazil)

Local devotees started the Center and acquired a house in 2001. The Center was affiliated with the Ramakrishna Order in 2006 as a sub-center of the Ramakrishna Vedanta Ashrama, Sao Paulo. Swami

Nirmalatmananda, head of the Sao Paolo Center, is its spiritual leader.

Schedule: Sunday lectures with scriptural study 5 PM

Contact information:

Centro Ramakrishna Vedanta

Rua Faria Lobato, 389

Bairro Santa Amélia - Pampulha

CEP 31555-050, Belo Horizonte - MG

Phone: (31) 3427-5995

E-mail: vedanta@vedantabh.org.br

Website: www.vedantabh.org.br

UNAFFILIATED CENTERS UNDER THE GUIDANCE OF RAMAKRISHNA ORDER SWAMIS

1973: Vedanta Society of Calgary (Canada)

Local devotees under the guidance of Swami Bhashyananda started the Center in 1973.

Schedule: Meetings 2nd and 4th Sundays of each month 2 to 4 PM at INCA: 826, Edmonton Trail, NE

Contact information:

Vedanta Society of Calgary

P.O. Box 6171

Station 'D'

Calgary, Alberta T2P 2C8

Telephone: (403) 208-9139

(Dr. Ramananda Chatterjee)

E-mail: info@vedantacalgary.com

Website: www.vedantacalgary.com

1978 Vancouver: Vivekananda Vedanta Society of British Columbia (Canada)

Under the spiritual guidance of Swami Bhaskarananda of the Vedanta Society of Western Washington.

Schedule: Meetings first Sunday of each month 11 AM; first and third Wednesdays of each month 7:30 PM

Contact information:

The Vivekananda Vedanta Society of British Columbia

Unit #4, 638 East 5th Avenue

Vancouver, British Columbia V5T 1J2

Phone: (604) 876-1557

E-mail: k_bhatsunshine.net

Website: www.vedanta-seattle.org/

1980s: Vedanta Center of Atlanta

In the 1980s Swami Yogeshananda came to Atlanta to introduce Vedanta to the South. A non-profit organization was established a few years later under the name of The Eternal Quest to promote the study and practice of Vedanta. Meetings and classes were held in various rented locations. Afterwards, with the help of friends, a house was purchased in Tucker, GA to establish a permanent center, now known as the Vedanta Center of Atlanta. A new chapel was completed in October 2006 and dedicated on January 13, 2007. In January 2009, the Vedanta Society

of Southern California sent Swami Brahma vidyananda to Atlanta to carry on the work started by Swami Yogeshananda.

Schedule: Sunday discourses 11 AM; Thursday classes: 8 PM

Contact information:

Vedanta Center of Atlanta

2331 Brockett Road,
Tucker, GA 30084

Phone/fax: (770) 938-6673

www.vedanta-atlanta.org

(Email can be sent from this site.)

1997: Sociedad Vedanta de Puerto Rico

Founded by local devotees in 1997, the Society hosts visiting swamis and pravrajikas and conducts occasional retreats.

Schedule: Weekly Saturday worship and meditation 6 AM and 6 PM.

Contact information:

Sociedad Vedanta de Puerto Rico

P O Box 194989

San Juan, PR 00919-4989

Phone: (787) 764-9692, 406-5000

E-Mail: info@vedantapr.org,

vedantapr@yahoo.com

2002: Vedanta Society of Greater Houston

Vedanta Society of Greater Houston was founded in 2002 and is under the spiritual guidance of Swami Chidananda, Minister of the Vivekananda Vedanta Society of Chicago and Swami Brahma-rupananda, Assistant Minister at

the Vedanta Center of Washington DC. Monthly retreats are led by swamis visiting from all over America and abroad.

Schedule: Sunday meetings 10:30 AM; Wednesday classes 7 PM

Contact information:

Vedanta Society of Greater
Houston

5906 Cypress St.,
Houston, TX 77074

Phone (713) 270-1127

Email: info@houstonvedanta.org

www.houstonvedanta.org

2004: Vedanta Society of Northern Colorado

The Center, incorporated as The Institute of Living Universal Values, was started by Pravrajika Akhandaprana of the Vedanta Society of Southern California and local devotees.

Schedule: Sunday family service 11:15 AM; Thursday study class 7:30

Contact information:

Phone; (Sivea Key) 970-219-8916

E-mail: InstituteOfLUV@comcast.net or akhandaprana@yahoo.com

Website: www.livinguniversalvalues.org

2006: Ramakrishna Ashram, Phoenix

The Center is under the spiritual guidance of Swami Swahananda, head of the Vedanta Society of Southern California. The resident

minister is Pravrajika Akhandaprana.

Schedule: Sunday meetings at 11 AM

Contact information:

Ramakrishna Ashram

1138 E Henry Drive

Tempe, AZ 85256

Phone: (480) 968-2194

E-mail: info@vedanta-phoenix.org

Web: <http://vedanta-phoenix.org>

2006: Ramakrishna Vedanta Society of North Texas

Ramakrishna Order swamis began visiting the Dallas/Fort Worth area in the 1960s. At the encouragement of Swami Swahananda of the Vedanta Society of Southern California, the Center was registered in 2006. A house was purchased in Irving and a monastery and chapel were inaugurated in 2007. Pravrajika Brahmaprana serves as Resident Minister.

Schedule: Sunday talks 11 AM; Thursday and Saturday classes 7 PM

Contact information:

Ramakrishna Vedanta Society of North Texas

119 W. Scotland Drive

Irving, Texas 75062

Phone: 972-252-4673 (HOPE)

Email: dfwvedanta@gmail.com

Website: <http://vedantadfw.org>

2008: Ramakrishna Vedanta Society of North Carolina (Raleigh)

Started by local devotees with the
american vedantist

encouragement of Swami Swahananda.

Schedule: Occasional lectures by visiting swamis

Contact information:

Phone (Gulati): 919-493-2507

E-mail: ushagulati@earthlink.com,

umeshgulati@aol.com

Website: <http://vedantanc.org>

2009: Ramakrishna Vedanta Ashrama, Pittsburgh

Inaugurated September 2009 by Swami Swahananda.

Contact information:

Ramakrishna Vedanta Ashrama, Pittsburgh

417 Beatty Road

Monroeville, PA 15142

Phone: (Susmita Ghosh) 412-372-8950, 412-215-0864

E-mail: ramakrishna.vedanta.pitt@gmail.com

ORGANIZATIONS NOT UNDER THE GUIDANCE OF THE RAMAKRISHNA ORDER

1923: Ananda Ashrama, La Crescenta, CA

Swami Paramananda founded Ananda Ashrama in 1923 as a peaceful retreat for spiritual study and prayer. Set in wooded hills northeast of Los Angeles, the Center maintains a chapel and living quarters for

resident monastics and lay devotees. Reverend Mother Gayatri Devi headed the ashram from 1940 until her passing away in 1995. She was succeeded by Reverend Mother Sudha Puri, the current leader.

Schedule: Sunday services at 11 AM; Thursday classes on Bhagavad-Gita at 7 PM

Contact information:

Ananda Ashrama

P.O. Box 8555

La Crescenta, CA 91224-0555

Phone (818) 248-1931

Fax (818) 248-0958

Website: www.vedantacentre.org

1929: The Vedanta Centre, Cohasset, MA

The Centre was founded by Swami Paramananda as an extension of the Vedanta Centre of Boston. After Paramananda passed away in 1940, leadership of his work passed to Reverend Mother Gayatri Devi, and the Cohasset Centre became the headquarters of her work. The current head is Reverend Mother Sudha Puri.

Schedule: Sunday services at 11 AM; Thursday meditation and study classes at 7 PM

Contact information:

Vedanta Centre (Mailing Address)

130 Beechwood Street

Cohasset, MA. 02025

Phone (781) 383-0940

Fax (781) 383-6386

Website: www.vedantacentre.org

1991: Mother's Trust / Ramakrishna Sarada Ashram

Mother's Trust / Ramakrishna Sarada Ashram was founded by women monastic disciples of Swami Bhashyananda in 1991, and is affiliated with the Sri Sri Saradeshwari Ashram in Calcutta, which was founded in 1895 by Gauri Ma, Sri Ramakrishna's only woman monastic disciple. The ashram has an outreach program, The Lakeshore Interfaith Community, a welcoming forum where every spiritual tradition may share its treasures, and also engages in other service programs. A Holy Mother temple was dedicated in 1998. The community has both monastic and lay members. The leader of the ashram is Mataji Gauribrata Puri Devi.

Schedule: Sunday Interfaith Services 11 AM; Friday classes at 7 PM

Contact information:

Mothers Trust Mothers Place

Ramakrishna Sarada Ashram

Lakeshore Interfaith Community

6676 122nd Ave. Ganges, MI. USA

Phone: 616 566-4318

Website: www.motherstrust.org

1992: Sri Sarada Society, Albany, NY

The Sri Sarada Society was formed in 1992 as a devotee organization dedicated to promoting the study

of the life and teachings of Sri Sarada Devi, viewing her example as an inspiration through which the principles of Vedanta may find full and practical application in Western life. The Society sponsors visits to the U.S. by nuns of the Sri Sarada Math, the women's monastic order in India, and encourages informal retreats by small devotee groups, which may be held in one's own home.

Contact information:

Sri Sarada Society

P.O. Box 38116

Albany, New York 12203

Phone (518) 869-6088 / Fax (518) 869-6084

Website: <http://srisarada.org>

1993: SRV Associations

SRV (Sarada-Ramakrishna-Vivekananda) is a spiritual community whose members are dedicated to living a divine life as taught and exemplified by Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, and Swami Vivekananda. It operates centers in Portland, Oregon, San Francisco, and Hawaii. It also offers spiritual retreats and pilgrimages to India, publishes many books and devotional music CDs, a yearly paper magazine called Nectar of Non-dual Truth, and a free, online newsletter. Its spiritual leader is Babaji Bob Kindler.

Contact information:

website: www.srv.org

SRV Hawaii – 1993, 2003

PO Box 1364

Honoka'a, HI 96727

Phone: 808-990-3354

SRV Portland - 1993

SRV Oregon

4204 SE 31st Ave

Portland, OR 97202

Phone: 503-774-2410

SRV San Francisco - 1993

Healing Center of San Francisco

465 Brussels St.,

San Francisco, CA 94134

415-468-4680

1996: Vedanta West Communications Inc.

General information and philosophy

Vedanta West Communications Inc. (VWC) was founded in 1996 to foster the development of Western Vedantic forms of expression. VWC publishes the quarterly journal *American Vedantist*, releases CDs and cassettes under the label Vedantic Arts Recordings, publishes scores of sacred music, and supports other projects to communicate Vedantic idealism through art and service. Vedanta West Communications is convinced that Vedanta's spiritual philosophy has universal meaning not limited to a particular civilization. An important part of Vivekananda's work in the West was the formulation of Vedantic teachings in language that is not culture-specific.

Contact information:
Vedanta West Communications
Inc.
PO Box 237041
New York, NY 10023
Phone (212) 877-4730
Fax (212) 769-4280
Email VedWestCom@gmail.com
www.vedantawest.org

1998: The Interfaith Contemplative Order of Sarada

Based at the Hermitage of the Rock, high above Boulder, Colorado, The Interfaith Contemplative Order of Sarada (OSA) was founded in 1998 as an international outreach for interfaith contemplatives with a background in the Vedanta philosophy. For details, see article on page 36.

Contact Information:
The Interfaith Contemplative
Order of Sarada
POB 1535
Nederland, Colorado 80466
Voice Message: 303-618-2543
Email: contemplative.vedanta@
yahoo.com

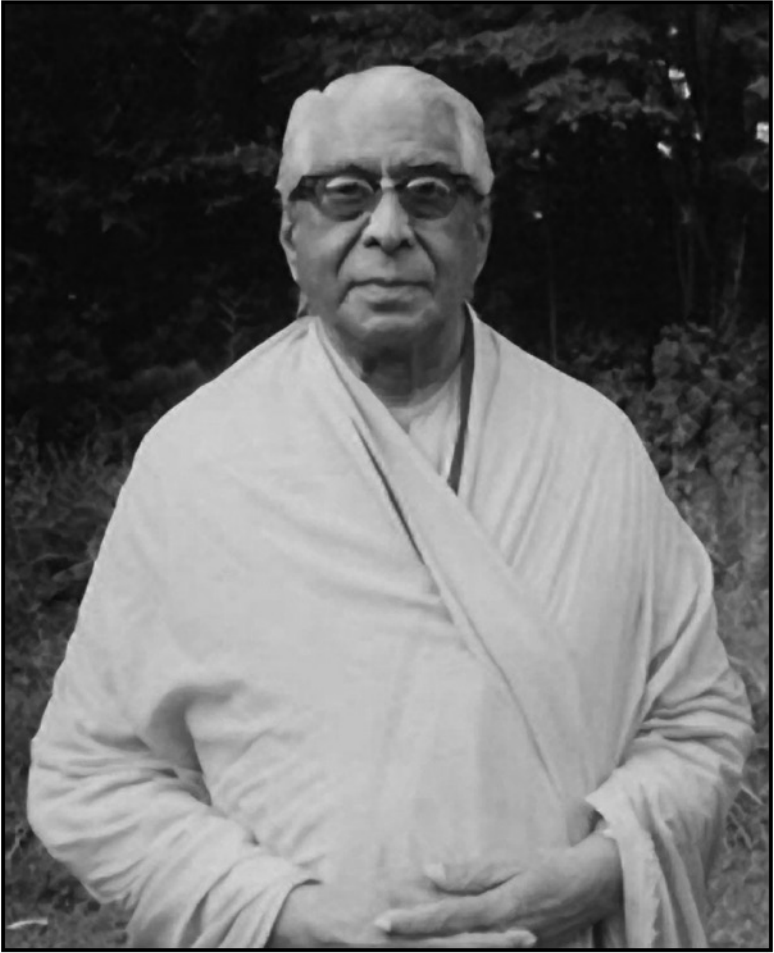
READERS' FORUM

Our Fall issue will be devoted to the Motherhood of God, which is especially celebrated in the autumn and early winter season, beginning with Durga Puja and continuing through the birthday of Sri Sarada Devi.

In the early days of the Ramakrishna Movement, Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi was still living. At that time very little was written about her, and it was difficult to obtain her photograph. The emphasis was almost entirely on Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. This began to change with the observance of the Holy Mother Centenary in 1953-54. People, especially women, came forward to celebrate her life in a way that surprised the leaders of the movement. Sri Sarada Math, the women's monastic organization, was founded at that time. Since then, writings about her and pictures of her have become more and more available, and she has become as popular and revered as Sri Ramakrishna. New lay organizations have sprung up in which she is the primary figure.

Question for this Issue

Why do you think Mother Sri Sarada Devi has become increasingly prominent and popular? What does she mean to you?



Swami Sarvagatananda at the Marshfield retreat

IN MEMORIAM:

SWAMI SARVAGATANANDA (1912–2009)

Swami Tathagatananda

(Eulogy delivered at the memorial service in Boston, May 16, 2009)

With a heavy heart we announce that on May 3, 2009 our most Revered Swami Sarvagatanandaji of hallowed memory passed away peacefully in the early morning hours while he was sleeping. He was 97 years old. He lived in full awareness nearly to the very end of his life. I spoke to him over the phone from New York on April 15 and he was fully conscious at that time.

The Revered Swami was the senior-most monk of our Order working in the West. He joined the Ramakrishna Order in 1935. His Guru, Revered Swami Akhandanandaji, was a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna and President of the Ramakrishna Order. Swami Sarvagatanandaji (Narayan Maharaj, his pre-monastic name) wanted to join the Order. He met Swami Akhandanandaji in Bombay and received spiritual initiation from him in 1936. Swami Akhandanandaji told him to walk barefoot all the way from Bombay to the Ramakrishna Ashrama at Kankhal, near Hardwar.¹ This

1 According to another account, it was Swami Sarvagatananda's own idea to go barefoot.

reminds us of the Upanishadic period when teachers asked their students to do various types of menial work to prepare their minds to receive the highest Truth. The Satyakama Jabala and Guru Gautam episodes come to mind (*Chandogya Up.*, IV: 4-15). With remarkable optimism, he faced the difficulties and hardship of the journey and despite much suffering he fulfilled his Guru's command with a cheerful heart. Narayan Maharaj hailed from South India. He was in his early twenties. His Herculean journey, beset with numerous difficulties, conspicuously reveals the mettle of his character. He walked nearly a thousand miles without much money, trudging through unknown regions, without knowing the local language, with no road map in his hand. With a cool brain, with Lord's Name on his lips, and a dynamic spirit, he achieved the goal. He reached Kankhal on February 7, 1935 and remained there for nine years until February 1943. It may be remembered that he got spiritual initiation from Revered Swami Akhandanandaji in 1936 and sannyas (final monastic vows) from Revered Swami Virajanandaji Maharaj in 1944. Unfortunately, Swami Akhandanandaji passed away in 1937.

Revered Swami Sarvagatanandaji was a unique monk and a great Karma Yogin. With perseverance, patience, and wholehearted loving service he stayed in

the Kankhal Ashrama and never spared himself in serving Swami Kalyanananda. This made him very dear to the Swami. Though he was a junior brahmachari, Narayan Maharaj was eminently trustworthy; his entire mind was focused in rendering various types of service with a compassionate attitude. In this way he endeared himself to one and all. Swami Kalyanananda and the Ashrama depended on his service. Revered Swami Kalyanananda was a disciple of Swami Vivekananda, who had commanded him to serve the poor at Kankhal. Thus Swamiji's dream of serving the poor in the Kankhal area was fulfilled to a large extent. Not only that; the activities of the Kankhal Ashrama and the Swami's dedicated work were highly appreciated by the conservative community of Sadhus as well as by the lay people. Kalyan Maharaj looked upon patients as the embodiment of God, and thereby he fulfilled Swamiji's spiritual training satisfactorily in his own life.

On one occasion in his younger days at Belur Math, Swami Kalyanananda had been asked to bring nearly 40 pounds of ice from Calcutta. The young, hard-working and devoted Kalyanananda brought that heavy chunk of ice, carrying it on his head all the way from Calcutta to Belur Math. It touched Swamiji's heart so profoundly that he forecast that one day Kalyanananda would be known as a Paramahansa ("Illu-

mined Soul"). Swamiji's prophecy was fulfilled.

When Swami Kalyanananda had to leave Kankhal in 1937 due to ill health, he handed over the key to the Ashrama's safe to Swami Sarvagatananda, even though he was the junior-most brahmachari. He asked him to manage the Ashrama in consultation with the secretary of the Ashrama and other senior swamis. Several senior monks were present at that time. When Swami Sarvagatananda refused to accept his new responsibility, Swami Kalyananandaji told him that by taking the key, he would not be the "boss"—he would be the servant of all. He advised him to consult with everyone first and then to manage the Ashram. That itself reveals his trustworthiness and competence. Subsequently, Headquarters instructed all future secretaries of that Ashrama to work in consultation with Narayan Maharaj. I believe that during the entire period of his work in Kankhal, he never took leave for *tapas* or pilgrimage. Swami Kalyanananda worked for thirty-six long years at Kankhal before passing away in 1937. Actually speaking, the year 1937 gave Swami Sarvagatanandaji two hard blows: the demise of his Guru and of Swami Kalyanananda, his mentor.

In 1942, Swami Ranganathananda came from Rangoon to Dhaka walking all the way on foot. When he reached Belur Math he was reduced to a skeleton and

weighed only 35 kg. Headquarters sent him to Kankhal for recuperation and wrote to Swami Sarvagatananda to take good care of the Swami, "as he is a jewel of our Order." Swami Sarvagatananda indeed rendered the most valuable and sincere service in making Swami Ranganathanandaji happy, cheerful, and filled with optimism. Within four months, he was his former self and began to play volleyball. Swami Ranganathananda was now ready to work. Beginning with those days at Kankhal, the bond of unique friendship and loving intimacy grew between them. When Headquarters asked Swami Ranganathananda to take charge of the Karachi Ashrama, he was ready to go, provided Headquarters would allow Swami Sarvagatananda to work under him. At the request of Headquarters, Swami Sarvagatanandaji was sent to work in the Karachi Ashrama during the crucial period of 1943 when India was passing through a critical political situation. Understandably reluctant to leave Kankhal, Swami Sarvagatanandaji nevertheless went with a loving heart to serve Swami Ranganathananda at the Karachi Ashrama.

Revered Swami Sarvagatanandaji also served as the head of the Vizag Center for some time before receiving the order from Headquarters to go to Boston. I believe it was 1954 when he arrived in America to work as the assistant minister to Revered Swami Akh-

ilanandaji of the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society of Boston and Providence. His noble qualities of head and heart were now pressed into service for the development of the two ashramas. After the passing away of Swami Akhilananda in 1962, he became the head of these two centers and began his meaningful, loving and inspired ministry. He had to face innumerable difficulties created by a group of devotees, including threats to his life. They created a pandemonium during the memorial ceremony of Swami Akhilananda. Mr. Pellini and other trusted devotees always protected the Swami. No other Swami that I can recall ever faced such a critical situation in this country. Through the grace of Sri Ramakrishna, in due course of time, peace prevailed in the Ashrama and Swami Sarvagatanandaji was able to lead his normal, peaceful life.

The Marshfield area which is known as the Sarada Retreat Center was much developed at his initiative. Our dear Brother George labored hard and many devotees rendered valuable service over the years to make it a retreat center that today supplies spiritual food to thousands of people.

For nearly forty years, without ever sparing himself, he single-handedly managed the two centers and conducted spiritual retreats every summer. Such a heroic and overwhelming task would completely unnerve an ordinary person. Working diligently with

unique devotion and dynamism, he steadily built up his congregation. He achieved signal success as an inspiring speaker and witty humorist—this is known to us all. He was a genial, sympathetic, and loving counselor with pure ideals who consoled and inspired thousands. He was a familiar and distinguished figure in the intellectual community around Boston. He also conducted weekly services in the chapel of M. I. T. and occasionally spoke in the chapel at Harvard University.

Swami Sarvagatanandaji was more than a man of eminent qualities; he was an earnest man sincerely endeavoring to do a very serious work in the world. He was one-pointed in looking after the interests of all his devotees. He was so dedicated to these aims that he never traveled within this country or beyond it for his own purposes. Greater still was his ethical stature, noble spiritual life and exemplary character. He did much to broaden, sweeten and deepen the intellectual, moral and spiritual consciousness of his congregation. Everyone received new light from him.

He was a man of integrity of character. He tried to implement all that he preached in his own life—there was no dichotomy between his life and teaching. Hundreds and thousands of people were highly benefited by his genial manner, compassionate heart, patience and forbearance. Under his inspired guidance, four girls

embraced the monastic life: one in Hollywood, two in San Francisco and one in India. His zeal to serve the Lord, his enthusiasm, and his loving behavior inspired the cooperation of hundreds of devotees who have benefited immensely through their association with the Swami. One Dutch couple was particularly fond of him; the Dutch lady remained for some time in Boston to be near the Swami. Swami Sarvagatanandaji went to India in 1971. Swami Sarvagatananda knew Swami Ranganathananda intimately from his Kankhal days; then he worked with him in Karachi. Due to their loving friendship, when Swami Ranganathananda was President, he repeatedly and earnestly requested Swami Sarvagatanandaji to visit him in India. So Swami Sarvagatanandaji went again with a group of devotees. In spite of his advanced age and failing health, he accepted the challenge and boldly faced the difficulties of this arduous journey to see Reverend Swami Ranganathananda. On this second visit to India he also went to Holland to see Swami Sarvatmananda, who worked with him as an assistant minister for several years and visited other devotees also, much to the joy of that Dutch couple.

Great souls make a deep and lasting impact in the hearts of devotees. The devotees of Reverend Swami Sarvagatanandaji at both centers give ample testimony of his loving nature. In this regard, the prominent name of George

comes to my mind. George came to the Boston Center and became a full time worker. His numerous services there contributed to its growth, particularly his allegiance to Revered Maharaj, which is remarkable. Out of sheer devotion, George cheerfully assumed a difficult task despite his heavy duties at the Center. Culling from Revered Swami Sarvagatananda's weekly lectures, George compiled and published them in two large volumes. It is a work of great devotion. By glancing through these books, any reader will discover the depth of Swami Sarvagatananda's knowledge of the scriptures. His scholarship in these two volumes has created a deep impact in the minds of readers all over the world. George took care of Revered Swami Sarvagatanandaji during his last years. It was only a year ago that, advanced in age and failing in health, our dear Brother George could no longer cope with the strain of looking after the Swami.

To all of us, Revered Swami Sarvagatananda was known as an earnest spiritual seeker. Here we have what was central and vital in him. His life was one of spotless integrity and honor. He led a simple, unostentatious life. Through his purity of heart and loving nature, he rendered valuable and commendable service to his congregation and to many others. He was very close to our Center, and many of our older devotees knew him very intimately. Blessed are

those who came in contact with him. Twice blessed are those who helped him in various ways—sincerely and wholeheartedly for the growth of the Center. Thrice blessed are those who developed their spiritual life under the guidance of the Revered Swamiji.

The Vivekacudamani, verse 3, says: "There are three things which are rare indeed and are due to the grace of God—namely a human birth, the longing for liberation, and the protecting care of a perfected sage." In one sense, we all do have this great privilege in varying degree, but still, to my mind, Revered Swami Sarvagatananda was very conspicuously fortunate in having the blessings of his Guru, Kalyan Maharaj and the other Swamis.

To my mind, he was a great and venerable monk of our Order—I am making no distinction, but my inner mind compels me to think of him as a great venerable monk of our Order. I am extremely fortunate to have seen and to have known him a little during my thirty years of life in New York City. Although I did not have much personal contact with him, by reading his book, *You Will Be a Paramahansa*, I have formed my opinion about his sterling qualities of head and heart. It has been a great blessing to know a Swami of such caliber in our Order, even a little intimately. I pay my reverential homage at the lotus feet of the Revered Swami. May his soul rest in peace.

RESPONSE TO READER'S FORUM QUESTION IN SPRING EDITION

The Question: What are you willing to do, to help assure that Swami Vivekananda's vision of an American Vedanta is fulfilled?

Vivekananda and American Vedanta

Sister Gayatriprana

I was very pleased to see in the Spring 2009 edition of *American Vedantist* the emphasis on the work of Swami Vivekananda, whom you recognize as the source of Western Vedanta. I am also very grateful for your call for suggestions to "assure that Swami Vivekananda's vision for an American [Western] Vedanta is fulfilled."

My own take on this subject is that first we must thoroughly familiarize ourselves with what Vivekananda's message for the West actually is. My own study of Vivekananda over forty years has convinced me that he not only had a message for India, but also one for the West, which he himself announced in Brooklyn in December of 1894 (CW, Vol. 5: Q and A at the Brooklyn Ethical Society, p. 314). And while both of these messages derived directly from the vision of Sri Ramakrishna, they do have different emphases, almost certainly because the needs of India and the West are different. India, he stated again and again, needed to *manifest* in terms of the contemporary, scientific, democratic and humanistic world the millennial wisdom of its sages, while the West, masters of the science that unlocks the secrets

of the material world, must turn to *realization* of their inner spiritual potential mapped out in Vedanta, not in terms of the culture of India, but in terms of Western science, psychology, transcendental philosophy and spirituality. In expounding this vision, Vivekananda drew liberally on the language and concepts of the German Idealists, American Transcendentalists, and European Positivists, thus speaking all the more directly to the Western audiences who hung on his words.

These two agendas are in no way contradictory or in disagreement. They both join spirituality to the contemporary world, but moving in different directions, as it were. Together they supply a yin-yang, holistic picture of the ways contemporary humanity can express itself and realize its full potential, not only in the inner worlds, but also in the physical world.

In that context, I feel that the need of the moment is for Westerners to acquaint themselves with the Western teachings of Vivekananda. Fortunately these are readily available at the Ramakrishna Monastery Trabuco's Press in the form of ten volumes of Vivekananda's Western Works compiled, edited, and published by Western monastics.

Here you will find Vivekananda's teachings to Westerners compiled in a coherent and rational way, reflecting the progression of his own work in the West. First come the principles of universal religion followed by the concept that spiritual life is a systematic development of consciousness, both ideas in harmony with contemporary Western thought. Then you will discover the four yogas as taught *in the West*

by Vivekananda, followed by his Western treatment of the difficult subjects of maya and evolution of consciousness. Further volumes are in progress, covering the vision of what a fully realized soul is in the context of Western Vedanta with illustrations of this ideal from the life of Vivekananda himself.

This series has built on the insight of Swami Ashokananda, whose work also appears in the Spring *American Vedantist*, that Vivekananda's work became progressively more and more expansive and more and more deep as time progressed. There have been protests that this could not be possible because, as a perfected soul he could in no way "evolve"; but from a Western standpoint, there is no reason to doubt that the depth of his teaching was revealed as he moved deeper and deeper into the needs and yearnings of the Western soul. This was how he manifested Vedanta in the physical world.

This principle is also worked out in each of the individual volumes of the Western Works, largely following the chronological order of the materials on each of the subjects presented. It also lies behind the magisterial six-volume series on *Swami Vivekananda in the West* by Sister Gargi (Marie Louise Burke), who was commissioned by Swami Ashokananda himself to demonstrate the history behind the progression of Vivekananda's teachings. In these volumes we see how profoundly Vivekananda met the needs of some of the West's most enlightened thinkers, Nikola Tesla, Edward Carpenter and William James being some whose names and message still resonate today. And, while

Sister Gargi does not mention it, Vivekananda's works had a profound effect on Leo Tolstoy and through him Gandhi and our own Dr. King, which Uma Majmudar is currently studying and writes about so beautifully in the Spring issue.

It is time for Westerners, like Vivekananda, to acknowledge the greatness of their Western heritage, and to begin to engage with the literature which documents it. One work which has come out recently is *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter between Asian and Western Thought*, by J.J. Clarke. (New York: Routledge, 1997) This volume focuses on the Western tradition up to the present day and demonstrates how Asian thought has introduced whole new ways of working out our problems, without rejecting Western culture. Precisely the agenda that I find in the Western works of Vivekananda.

We have to mold Vedanta according to our own tradition, with the help of the spiritually inspired teachings of Vivekananda, which can encompass both India and the West in an integral way. In several volumes I hope to publish in the near future, I cover many areas of Western culture and concern to which Vivekananda's teachings are related in several dimensions, demonstrating their relevance and the effects they have already had on Western culture. And, God willing, I hope to bring out a video series on how Vivekananda took the spiritual message of Sri Ramakrishna and molded it into the twin teachings for India and the West. That will be my contribution to Western Vedanta. Just pray that I live long enough to get it done.

THE INTERFAITH CONTEMPLATIVE ORDER OF SARADA

A Profile, Summer 2009

Sister Judith, Hermit of Sarada

The Hermitage of the Rock is situated at an altitude of 8,250 feet in the mountains above Boulder, Colorado. It is the home of the Interfaith Contemplative Order of Sarada (OSA), first founded in 1998, as an international outreach for interfaith contemplatives with backgrounds in the Vedanta philosophy. Entering the south-facing door, one is greeted by a bronzed sign directing all to "Remove Thy Shoes", and inviting one to enter in the spirit of the Order's maxim: The Silence is our Teacher; the Presence is our Mother.

Beside the inner door, there is a wreath made of lodgepole pinecones and dried summer wildflowers; there are also garlands of the local wild sage, and strings of feathers donated by the resident western red flickers, magpies, and ravens. Fox, bear, raccoon, and coyote all visit the hermitage compost, for impromptu vegetarian fare. The hermitage is located in the small mountain town of Nederland, which boasts of a renovated Carousel of Happiness in the center of the town, complete with music and an adjacent puppet theater for the children. All around the hermitage are the magnificent mountains of the Indian Peaks Wilderness.

For now, the Order of Sarada is non-residential. Although the hermitage is private, it is the meeting

place for the Nederland Interfaith Contemplatives group sponsored by the Order, as well as the center for all the Order's online interfaith work. The members of the Order are mature contemplatives, with backgrounds in Buddhism, Advaita Vedanta, Protestant Christianity and Catholicism, Cherokee and other Native American spiritualities. Everyone is actively involved in being a part of the interfaith matrix in which the Order of Sarada finds its home in the larger society.

The Order conducts an online Interfaith Talking Circle Ceremony for its members, as well as an online Advaita Vedanta Satsang, to attract of new members. In addition, members regularly contribute contemplative poetry, prose and artwork of an interfaith nature, to various publications. All of the members have been formally affiliated longterm with different faith communities, before taking vows as interfaith contemplatives.

In October 2002, a Sarada-Ramakrishna devotee took the details of the Order's intention and mission to the feet of Mataji Bandana at Sri Sri Saradeshwari Ashram in Calcutta, India. Mother Bandana heard all with great interest, and gave her blessings to the Interfaith Contemplative Order of Sarada during Durga Puja at the Calcutta ashram. The Order had first started in 1998, with the inauguration of the Contemplative Vedanta Sup-

port Network (CVSN), which encouraged interfaith correspondence and dialog within a wide variety of seekers from many paths. By 2002, and with these blessings of Mataji Bandana, the Order began to accept students and associate members into a nonlocal interfaith community based in Nederland, Colorado. Students and associate members get to “try out” what it is like to be a member of an interfaith contemplative order, before making formal commitment as either a Dedicated Contemplative (OSA) or a Solitary Contemplative (OSAh). Community members, or Friends of the Order, join us in an Interfaith Agreement and become eligible to share in the online contemplative community, as well as to receive our newsletter.

Future projects include a Contemplative Vedanta website and annual retreats for the members who live outside of Colorado.

Contact Information:

The Interfaith Contemplative Order of Sarada,
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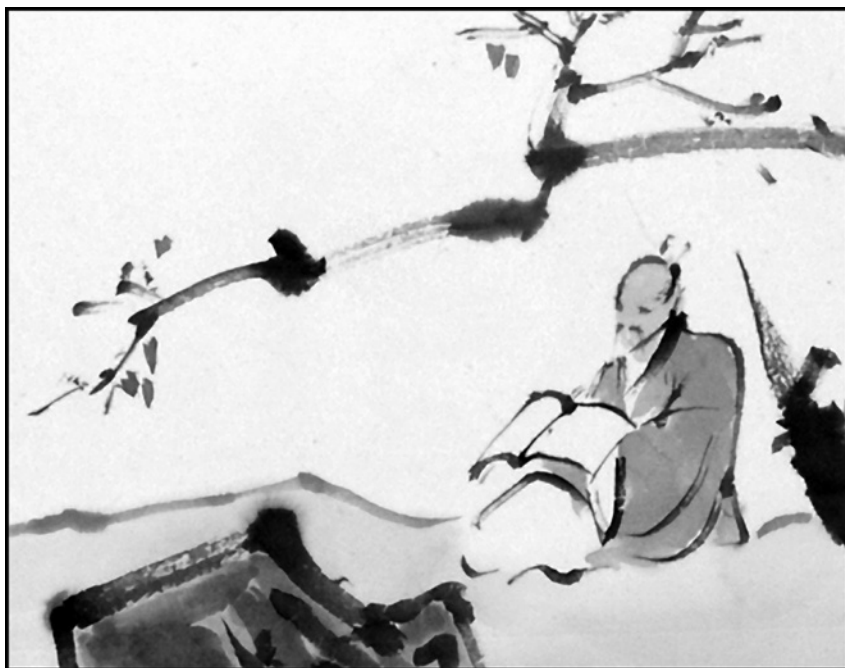
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Hermitage of the Rock, Nederland, Colorado

MEDIA REVIEWS



Scholar Reading a Book

Painting by Jan Zaremba
www.janzaremba.com/sumi-e

Basic Ideas of Hinduism and How It Is Transmitted

Swami Tathagatananda

Vedanta Society of New York
Paperback 255 pp. \$14.00 2009

Swami Atmajnanananda

Don't be fooled by the title of Swami Tathagatanandaji's latest book. It is not a mere primer on Hinduism, and certainly not a dry exposition of concepts, practices, and precepts of Hinduism and Vedanta. Those who are familiar with the swami's earlier books know quite well the creative nature of his mind and the original quality of his writ-

ing. They will also be familiar with both the depth of his understanding and the breadth of his knowledge, as well as his familiarity with the greatest thinkers of both the East and the West, including not only philosophers and religious thinkers, but also historians and poets, psychologists and scientists. And they will not be surprised to find many gems and nuggets hidden throughout the pages of this book.

In many ways, *Basic Ideas of Hinduism* is an extension of an earlier book by the Swami. In his introduction, he refers to the present work as "an edited compilation of the Prologue to my book *Journey of the Upanisads to the West*." The

reader should not assume from this that Swami Tathagatananda is simply rehashing old material. On the contrary, there is a freshness and originality to the book that makes it seem an entirely new work. Each of the various topics discussed reads like a mini-essay, filled with insights and illustrated by quotations from the great thinkers of various cultures, countries and religions. And though an unmistakable sense of pride in the spiritual accomplishments of India and her great saints and sages peeps through in many places, one also feels a deep sense of fairness and admiration for all traditions. The reader will find no hidden agenda to prove the superiority of any one belief system over another simply on the basis of national pride. All views are shown equal respect, with emphasis on the underlying harmony and sympathy between different traditions.

The second section of the book on the transmission of Hinduism is similarly an expanded version of an earlier essay written by Swami Tathagatananda. Here again we see the swami's wonderful grasp of history and his vast knowledge of the great thinkers of the West. Also included at the end of the book are several independent essays on various important Vedantic topics, such as the concept of the Self in Advaita Vedanta and the theory of evolution in Hinduism, as well as an essay on the influence of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda on the West. All of these are reprints from Swami Tathagatananda's contributions to the *Bulletin of the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture* and the *Vedanta Kesari*.

Swami Tathagatanandaji has, without question, written another very important book. I am sure it will prove to be of great interest and value, both to the beginner in Vedanta, looking for a single volume which covers all of the basic ideas of Vedanta from different points of view, as well as to the long-time student searching for new insights.

Beyond Tolerance: Searching for Interfaith Understanding in America

Gustav Niebuhr

Viking, Penguin Group, New York
hard cover 218 + xxxviii pp. \$25.95
2008

John Schlenck

At a time when religion-inspired violence and intolerance are much in the news, Gustav Niebuhr (great nephew of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr) brings heart-warming good news and encouragement, and also a challenge. Niebuhr, associate professor of religion and public communications at Syracuse University, traveled the length and breadth of the United States in recent years documenting grass roots efforts of religious individuals and organizations to reach out to people of other faith communities. What he found was surprising and vastly underreported.

Consider South Brunswick, New Jersey. Immediately after the attacks on the World Trade Center on 9/11, religious leaders of different denominations and police officials coordinated efforts to protect the local mosque. This expression

of communal solidarity grew into ongoing religious dialogue and personal friendships across religious lines. On that same day in Seattle, at a Muslim school in a non-Muslim neighborhood, neighbors placed bouquets of flowers and handwritten notes of encouragement saying, "Not all Americans blame all Muslims." Soon the Church Council of Greater Seattle provided volunteers around the clock to guard the school against vandals. In suburban Detroit, within seven months after 9/11, the spiritual leader of the Islamic Center of America had received and accepted more than 85 invitations from churches, colleges, schools and other groups to speak on Islam. These are striking, but by no means unique, events showing that religious harmony and understanding are achievable through active effort.

This outreach toward understanding and a wider sense of community echoes Swami Vivekananda's words of more than a century ago. Like Vivekananda, Niebuhr argues that tolerance is not enough. But how do you get beyond tolerance to true acceptance? If you start with Ramakrishna's and Vivekananda's realization that all religions are paths to the same spiritual goal, this is not a difficult step. And Niebuhr gives due credit and appreciation to Vivekananda's contribution to interreligious understanding in America.

But for the large number of people who have mutually exclusive views of the universe, is it possible to bridge the gap? Niebuhr believes that it is, through the expansion of a sense of community to include people of different viewpoints. This is of

great practical importance. We can't afford to wait until all people believe that all religions are true. There are urgent reasons to find ways to understand, respect and accept people whose viewpoints are different from our own, even if we think our religion is the best.

One important way to achieve this respect and understanding is to work together on socially beneficial projects. A young American Muslim, Eboo Patel, founded Interfaith Youth Care, an expanding network of students from different faith groups engaged in service projects. Patel told the author, "The main idea was to get young people to identify the source within their own religion for the values—like hospitality and compassion—that overlapped with those of other religions."

Living in a pluralistic society based on freedom of choice is a big advantage, an advantage the United States has had since the beginning. Our Founding Fathers set the tone. Washington addressed the Jewish congregation in Newport, Rhode Island: "It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent national gifts... All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities [privileges] of citizenship." A year before writing the text of the First Amendment, Madison declared: "Freedom arises from a multiplicity of sects, which pervades America, and which is the best and only security for religious liberty in any society." Since that time, America's religious diversity has grown to an extent that even the

Founding Fathers might have found difficult to imagine.

Niebuhr quotes sociologist Mark Juergensmeyer: "It is difficult to belittle and kill a person whom one knows and for whom one has no personal antipathy." One might add, difficult but not impossible. Think Rwanda, or Nazi Europe, or India at the time of partition. Niebuhr sums up his intent: "What interests me in writing this book is the idea that some people choose to build networks that deliberately cross boundaries in an era in which religious differences are so explosive... At its heart, it's a grassroots educational process in which the goal is to gain knowledge about individuals and their beliefs in a way that lessens fear... This book is based on visits and conversations with some of the people who have participated in this countertrend, my effort to learn what they were up to and why."

Vedantists are perhaps uniquely positioned to contribute to this process. But are we making the effort to reach out? It is easy to think we have already arrived at the place of inter-religious acceptance and therefore don't need to make any further effort. Niebuhr's emphasis on building cross-religious community can be a needed corrective to any sense of complacency on our part.

The Evolution of God

Robert Wright

Little, Brown & Company, New York,
Paperback 568 pages \$16.00 2009

William Page

Recent years have given us sev-

eral books on the evolution of the concept of God in Western religion: Karen Armstrong's *A History of God*, Jack Miles's *God: A Biography*, and now Robert Wright's *The Evolution of God*. Armstrong is a former nun, Miles a former priest, and it is evident that they are trying to salvage something from the damage to religious belief inflicted by scientific materialism, the "new atheism," and religion-based terrorism.

Wright is a self-proclaimed materialist who is trying to understand religion as a product of political and economic forces, but he too seems interested in salvaging something from the onslaught. He traces our ideas about the nature of deity from their earliest beginnings as a multiplicity of local, often savage nature-spirits, to the God of contemporary Jewish, Christian, and Islamic monotheism: a single, invisible, universal overlord with a deep concern for morality.

In Wright's view, Yahweh was originally a storm deity, one god among many in the Middle East, who took on the characteristics of some of his competitors and eventually sought to displace them all. The changes in the concept of his nature were conditioned by the political dynamics of the region, in which the confederated tribes of Israel were a minor player and the predominant powers were Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, and later Persia.

Among other theories, Wright speculates that the Israelites were never slaves in Egypt. They were actually Canaanite hill tribes who clashed with their coastal and plains-dwelling cousins. Goodbye

to Moses, the exodus from Egypt, the Ten Commandments, and the forty years of wandering in the wilderness! One wonders how this stupendous epic managed to emerge if the Israelites were living in the hills of Canaan all the while.

Wright theorizes that Jesus was a chauvinist whose doctrine of love was limited to the Jews, as evidenced by his remarks disparaging the Gentiles (e.g., Matthew 5: 48, 6: 7, 6:33). Anecdotes showing his regard for Gentiles, such as the curing of the centurion's servant and the parable of the Good Samaritan, were added later.

It was the apostle Paul who idealized Jesus and broadened his doctrine of love to include all humankind. Paul's motivation was not entirely altruistic. He wanted to convert the pagan world to Christianity. He could hardly have done that if Jesus' doctrine of love had remained limited to the Jews.

Wright sees in Muhammad similarities to Moses and the idealized Jesus. Muhammad is like Moses because he led his people from a place of oppression (Mecca) to a place of freedom (Medina), and because he was a political leader and lawgiver. He is like the idealized Jesus because he taught love and brotherhood.

Wright downplays the frequent imprecations against infidels in the Qur'an. He notes that you can cherry-pick the Qur'an to prove a variety of viewpoints, but maintains that the weight of Quranic verses suggest that it is for God to punish infidels in the next life and for Muslims to practice forbearance in this

one. Somebody should tell this to our contemporary Islamic terrorists.

Wright's central thesis emerges late in the book, and it's based on the belief that God requires us to be moral. Insofar as that belief civilizes us and makes us behave morally, it takes on a creative reality of its own. The impulse to morality that flows from it (Wright calls it moral order, moral direction, even moral truth) is the closest thing we have to God. You could even call it divine.

This seems an odd position for a self-professed materialist to take. But here things get interesting, because Wright starts to speculate about "the source of the moral order." He thinks that it is something extremely subtle, abstract, and beyond our knowing, and suggests that it may be analogous to the "ground of being" postulated by the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich. "Could it be," Wright muses, "that thinking of this source, and relating to this source, as if it were a personal god is actually an appropriate way for human beings to apprehend that source, even if more appropriate ways might be available to beings less limited in their apprehension?" (446.)

This will ring a bell for Vedantists, insofar as we believe that devotion to a personal god is a valid way of approaching the impersonal Absolute. In Wright's thinking, personal gods are illusions. But if thinking of the mysterious "source of the moral order" as if it were a personal god is a valid way of approaching it, then that source can be construed as somewhat analogous to Brahman. After all, in Vedantic thinking,

Brahman is the source of everything. If it were not the source of the impulse to morality, that would come as a surprise; and who knows what depths our Brahman hides?

Theists are bound to be disappointed. If personal gods are illusions, to try to approach a deeper truth through them must seem a quixotic adventure indeed. And even if a “source of the moral order” exists, theists will find it pretty thin gruel. The impulse to morality is an admirable thing, but pales beside the vigor of the interventionist, often-feisty, sometimes-anthropomorphic god depicted in the Abrahamic religions. Theists want a god with personality, a god they can worship, love, and pray to. You can’t pray to an impulse. You might try praying to the source of that impulse, but it would be a lot more satisfying if you could identify that source.

But maybe theists need to grow up. A morality that springs from within is obviously superior to a morality imposed from without. You can’t worship it, but who ever claimed that the sole object of religion is to have something to worship? A higher object would be an inner transformation for the better. Wright seems to be saying that if there is anything, however subtle and beyond our range of knowing, that brings about such transformation, although we may not call it God, it’s the closest thing to God we’ve got.

MEDIA PREVIEW

Days on Earth: A Musical Trilogy
on the Life of Swami Vivekananda

Libretto by Erik Johns Music by
John Schlenck 2 CDs Vedantic Arts
Recordings \$29.95

According to the Bhagavad-Gita, the Divine Power comes again and again for the good of the world.

When the Divine Power came as Sri Ramakrishna, his retinue included a personality of such power and attainment that we celebrate him in his own right — Swami Vivekananda, known affectionately as Swamiji.

Vedantic Arts Recordings (VAR) will soon release a new recording of a major work on Swamiji: *Days on Earth: A Musical Trilogy on the Life of Swami Vivekananda*. Composed by Erik Johns and John Schlenck, this work originally was performed in sections at the annual Vivekananda July 4th Festival of the Vedanta Society of New York. The annual festival has been held every year since 1962, and was hosted at the country home of Erik Johns until his passing away in 2001. Since then the event has been held at Vivekananda Retreat, Ridgely.

Days on Earth is mainly the story of “Swamiji in the making.” Section One is narrated by his mother, Bhuvaneshwari Devi; it begins with her prayer to Lord Shiva for a son and ends when Narendra (Vivekananda’s pre-monastic name) enters college. Section Two is devoted primarily to Narendra’s discipleship under Sri Ramakrishna. It ends after the Master’s passing, when his young disciples take monastic vows at Antpur on Christmas Eve, 1886.

Section Three, Part One, tells of

Swamiji's life as a wandering monk, climaxing with his meditation on the rock at Kanyakumari. Part Two starts with Swamiji at the Parliament of Religions and evokes his Herculean efforts to fulfill his mission over the next nine years. The final section tells of his passing away and concludes with a joyous celebration of the Divine Power that comes again and again for the good of the world.

This two-hour composition is scored for tenor soloist, chorus, two narrators, and instrumental ensemble, and is performed on this recording by world class musicians. VAR expects the recording to be released in November of this year. Please see the enclosed flyer for ordering Days on Earth at a special pre-publication price.

Contributors' Notes

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