

## Editorial

### *The Living God in America*

An important part of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda legacy is the service of *jiva* (the individual soul) as Shiva (God). Sri Ramakrishna saw that “compassion,” wrongly interpreted, could imply inequality—handing down something from on high. *Service* puts its practitioner in a better spiritual frame of mind and engenders self-respect in the recipient. Those served are regarded as forms or manifestations of God. Swami Vivekananda gave powerful utterance to this spirit in his poem, “The Living God:”

Ye fools, who neglect the living God,  
And His infinite reflections with which the world is full,  
While ye run after imaginary shadows. . .  
Him worship, the only visible!  
Break all other idols!

. . . and in “To a Friend:”

These are His manifold forms before you;  
Rejecting them, where do you seek for God?”

Can Vedantists in the West tap into this powerful imagery to deepen their spiritual lives and to connect spiritually to the surrounding society? Are the suffering and outcast of our society—the homeless, the abused, the mentally ill, AIDS sufferers, the lonely—less divine in essence than the poor, the uneducated, the sick, the victims of natural disasters in India?

Because the Ramakrishna Order does not, as an organization, undertake social service in the West, there is a tendency for Vedanta devotees in the West to think that service to our own society is somehow not a serious obligation. This is partly because we devotees tend to wait for the swamis in charge of our centers to take each first step. A devotee once asked Swami Ranganathananda, the Order’s present President, why the Vivekananda Rock Memorial at Kanyakumari had not been undertaken by the Ramakrishna Mission. The swami replied, “Swami Vivekananda is nobody’s property.” Vivekananda’s message and inspiration are for the whole world. Indeed, we devotees in the West could take a cue from our lay brothers and sisters in India who have founded over 2,000 independent ashrams, many devoted to service. These devotees seek and obtain inspiration and blessing from the swamis of the Order, but do not depend on them to initiate every endeavor.

We in the Ramakrishna Vedanta tradition are heirs to tremendous spiritual riches. With wealth comes the responsibility of using it for the welfare of others. Can we rise to the challenge?

—The Editors

# *The Power of Service*

**David Nelson (Devadatta Kali)**

Ask any volunteer about service, and you are likely to hear replies like these:

“I like being active, and by volunteering I can enjoy the company of like-minded people.”

“Serving gives me a sense of purpose.”

“This is a way of taking my mind off my own petty concerns.”

“It feels good to do something for someone else.”

“It’s a fact that people who volunteer live longer, healthier lives.”

“I feel I’m the one being benefited, even more than the people I serve.”

These are the observations of volunteers from any religious background, or none at all. They are all talking about the same thing. It’s so simple, yet like many a profound truth, it eludes us because of its very simplicity. Maybe it’s too obvious to be worth our attention, and so, paradoxically, we overlook it. Certainly this elusive something is close enough to be beyond no one’s reach. Yet it has the power to transform our lives. Sri Krishna taught it to Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita: the simple idea of work as worship. Sri Ramakrishna restated it for our present age when he taught his disciples the value of service as spiritual practice.

How does a Vedanta devotee in the West put these principles of service into action, when the Vedanta Societies have neither the resources nor the mandate to perform wide-reaching social services?

Allow me to share some of my personal experiences.

## **Into No-Man’s Land**

It is night, and I am at Kashi Ashram in West Hollywood, a branch of Ma Jaya Sati Bhagavati’s main ashram in Florida. On the verge of sleep, I reflect back on the day’s activities. Early that morning I had traveled a hundred miles from my home in Santa Barbara to take part in Under the Bridges, a grass-roots program to feed the homeless on the streets of Los Angeles. Today was my second time out. Before we started work around 9:00 AM, the Swami in charge asked us to be quiet for a moment, to breathe into the heart and remember why we were there. Soon, with thirty or so of Ma’s disciples at work, the assembly line was running like a precision machine, turning out the bagged lunches we would distribute along with bottled water and items of used clothing. Two hours later, hundreds of lunches had been loaded into

eight vehicles, and we were ready to set out in teams of two or three on our appointed routes.

The route I am on takes us to the blighted no-man's land encircling downtown Los Angeles, where the web of freeways, the railroads, and the Los Angeles River converge. Not too far in the distance loom the skyscrapers of corporate America. I imagine the huge mahogany conference tables, resting on inch-thick carpets, where decisions affecting the lives of the many are made by the privileged few, thirty storeys or more above the city. On the streets below, it is a different story altogether. A lone man or woman in need of a bath pushes along a shopping cart crammed with the necessities of survival. An encampment of lean-tos stretches out along a side street in the industrial area. They are made of old blankets, boards, cardboard and anything else that will afford some degree of shelter. A man sleeps in a cardboard box on the sidewalk, while a few feet away some more fortunate souls live in the relative luxury of a real tent. Even though the day is bright and sunny, many of the homeless are asleep. Without the security of a door to lock, it's safer to sleep in broad daylight than to be at your most vulnerable in the dark of night.

We've spotted a man sitting beneath the freeway, his possessions spread out in a mess on a narrow triangle of concrete that divides the intersecting streets on right and left. With traffic whizzing by on either side, he has occupied this spot for the past seven years. Our driver knows him by name and stops the car to deliver a specially prepared lunch. Unlike most of the homeless, this man is a vegetarian, and our standard meal won't do. Meanwhile, across town in the beach communities another disciple is well stocked with special food for that area's Muslim homeless.

### **Glorious Humanity Even in Degraded Circumstances**

It is impossible to come back from a "run" without at least one story. Maybe it was the young man who looked at you like you were a visitor from outer space when you appeared on the sidewalk out of nowhere with food and drink. Maybe it was the fellow reclining against a cold, hard building, whose smile was like the sun coming out. Or the half-drunk older man who struggled to say "Merry Christmas" but didn't know the English words and ended up hugging you instead while his four companions cheered and treated you like an old friend. Maybe it was the time you had only three meals left, and while you apologized, the four homeless folks graciously assured you not to worry: they would share equally. Maybe it was something humorous, like the man who lost his grip and poured hot chicken soup down your pants leg on that cold December day. Or maybe it was the indefinable emotion that surged through you at the beach the day you stopped a woman from

rummaging through a trash bin in search of something to eat and were able to give her a wholesome, properly prepared meal.

Or maybe it is that same, recurring impression that I discover this night at the ashram on the verge of sleep, reflecting back on the day on the streets. Here are people who have lost almost all the things we define ourselves by: homes, possessions, families, jobs, the very self-images we create through where we live, what we own, what we wear, what we do, whom we know, how much money we have. All they have left is their glorious humanity, and somehow that shines through even their degraded circumstances. A thought arises: the same awareness that shines through their eyes shines through mine and yours. It is the light of consciousness that animates and connects us all. Maybe that is what Swami Brahmananda meant when he said that by serving you begin to see divinity in others and then everywhere. Grateful, I drift off to sleep.

### **Lessons from Another Ashram**

“Love, serve and don’t judge” is the essence of the teaching at Kashi. It is not different from Swami Vivekananda’s instruction to worship God by serving your fellow man, but this universal ideal of service was transmitted here through Neem Karoli Baba, the same itinerant Indian holy man who advised the renowned writer and teacher Ram Dass to “feed everyone.”

Kashi Ashram’s defining moment came in the early 1980s with the arrival of a nameless, incurable disease. Kashi opened its heart and doors to those afflicted with what would come to be known as AIDS. Before there was any sort of effective treatment, Kashi set up a hospice on the ashram grounds and cared for the new class of outcasts. Ever since then, Ma Jaya Sati Bhagavati has worked tirelessly to combat the stigma born of fear and prejudice and to serve those afflicted with HIV. As a Trustee of the Parliament of the World’s Religions, she won an ally in H. H. the Dalai Lama and succeeded in placing AIDS on the organization’s global agenda.

Today, Ma’s disciples continue to take the message of service very much to heart, and their commitment has created a loving, close-knit family whose devotion is in large part centered on *seva*, on reverence for Hanuman, who exemplifies the spirit of service, and on the worship of the Divine Mother Kali. The Los Angeles ashram unites a disparate and wildly improbable group of people. Professionals from the worlds of entertainment, education, commerce and healthcare work and worship side by side with others from less fortunate circumstances—the victims of unspeakable abuse, men and women who have struggled heroically with alcohol and drugs and those who are living with HIV rather than dying from it. All are dedicated to the ideal of service, and they are living proof of its power to turn lives around. If there is any one quality that describes the spirit of *seva* at Kashi, I would say it is joy.

## **Food from the Heart**

A picture of people preparing large quantities of food almost jumped off the page while I was looking through the annual financial report of Pacific Pride Foundation in Santa Barbara. My first thought was, I can do that, and it will be something beyond my regular monetary donation. Within a short time I became a regular volunteer at Project Food Chain, once a week helping to prepare appealing and nutritious meals for people homebound with AIDS.

The stories are less dramatic than those from Under the Bridges, but the principles are similar. Project Food Chain began as a grass-roots effort, thanks to a devotee of Swami Muktananda, although from the beginning the program was strictly secular and broad-based. Today we cook in a large kitchen generously provided by a Protestant church, and the volunteers come from diverse religious or spiritual backgrounds. Several of us have gurus, and some profess no religion at all. It doesn't matter. What unites us is our dedication to service. As at Kashi, the rich work shoulder-to-shoulder with the poor. The majority are retired or semiretired professionals from the educational and healthcare sectors; the youngest are high-school students who are performing the community service required in order to graduate in Santa Barbara. It makes for a lively mix.

When Pacific Pride Foundation announced a budget shortfall last December and decided to discontinue Project Food Chain, the spirit of service rose to the occasion. "We like what we do, and we're not going to stop!" was our consensus. In a few short months Project Food Chain reorganized as a thriving new nonprofit corporation, Food from the Heart. What could have been a devastating blow became a renewed call to commitment. The new mission statement calls for an expanded outreach to clients stricken with any illness who can't afford prepared meals. In fact, the volunteers insisted that food must be provided free of charge to anyone in need and given without any expectation of reward. Without realizing it, Food from the Heart puts the Bhagavad Gita's principles of work into action.

### **Seeking More Personal Contact**

Ask any of us why we do this, and the answer is likely to be, "Because we like to." Food from the Heart offers its volunteers good company, a sense of community and lasting personal friendships. We call ourselves "the family" and share a weekly meal together after our work is done. Most of us would agree that our efforts benefit others but benefit us even more. If there is any regret, it is only that we cooks have little or no personal contact with the clients served.

For me, that is where the Necessities of Life Project comes in. NOLP, once a sister organization under the umbrella of Pacific Pride Foundation, operates

a food pantry for HIV-positive clients and their families. Here clients can “shop” free of charge for their groceries and household items, and as a volunteer I assist them. Additionally, the store has a lounge area where clients, staff and volunteers can interact socially in a friendly and supportive atmosphere.

I serve at NOLP because of Sri Ramakrishna’s and Ma’s teachings, and though I need not mention it to anyone there, this service is part of my sadhana, my spiritual practice. I come into direct contact with people from all walks of life: men and women, gay and straight, young and old, parents with children and people all alone. I can’t tell you much about their personal lives, because we operate under terms of strict confidentiality. Regrettably, HIV infection still carries a heavy burden of social stigma. What I can tell you, because it is published in the foundation’s annual report, is that a large portion of our clients bear the added burdens of mental illness, learning disabilities, homelessness, and substance abuse.

### **Dignity and Courage in Those Served**

“Love, serve and don’t judge” comes vividly alive for me at NOLP. The trained professional staff and my fellow volunteers are without exception men and women of uncommon compassion and dedication. Additionally, I am inspired by the dignity and courage that our clients show in the face of illness and adversity. They are living lessons in confronting life’s existential fears. For many years my career in classical music and recordings kept me shielded from the “real world,” and I never expected that some day I would be serving people battling addictions and life-threatening diseases. How could I have expected to discover a shared humanity with transsexuals and parolees and Spanish-speaking housewives—people so different from myself? What I have discovered is that we are not all that different, and that I have genuine affection for them and gratitude for their acceptance of me.

Sri Krishna was right: work can be a path to personal transformation, and the opportunity is right there at our fingertips. Our human condition requires us to be active; there is no getting away from it. Why not make the most of it, then? Compassion and kindness need not remain abstractions. When we allow them to become active forces in our lives through simple acts of service, they assume a human face. In asking us to serve the poor, the sick, and the lowly, the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna knew exactly what they were doing. Truly, our hearts expand, and we are uplifted. Some people might argue that working for the sake of others is a personal sacrifice. I would agree wholeheartedly, because to sacrifice literally means “to make holy.” That is the true meaning of service. □

# *Awakenings: A Chaplain's Journey in Understanding Spiritual Growth*

**Jon Mack**

I entered a residency program for hospital chaplains to integrate my changing religious beliefs, and to find God again so that I could feel fully human. My seminary career pushed me past conservative evangelical beliefs and left me empty and wandering. I had to change. I was very motivated and energetic and knew standing still was not an option. I followed my instincts and took on a big initiative: physical fitness, experimental learning through service, and studying new philosophies. On my own, I've read many modern philosophers and theologians, and in community I have studied integrative philosophy (Ken Wilber), and I've studied Vedanta. All aspects of these efforts have enriched me greatly, but for this little venture I'll focus on the effects of experiential learning from serving as a chaplain and the contribution provided by Vedanta.

## **Faith Under Fire**

Working at a hospital is doing it “in the trenches.” It is theological training under fire, and your faith is tested every day in every way. No idolatry lasts long in tragedy, and no buried emotions stay buried. You face that old bumper sticker: “Life Sucks, Then You Die.” And, you can only say “Jesus Loves You” so many times before it rings empty. This is when you wonder about another career, or finding a new faith. Here are three examples from my faith-tests as chaplain:

Case 1: A family calls; they fear the death of their dad. The old fellow is anxiously pleasant with me, and expresses his faith, a bit. He speaks of old times, changing subjects often, revealing his desire to avoid the obvious: he will die soon. I stay awhile, pray and make my way out the door. The youngest daughter follows me into the hall. She looks with tearful, pleading eyes and says, “What is Scripture that talks about Heaven? I want to tell my Daddy how he's going there; that he's okay.”

Case 2: A patient fears the morning's surgery, asks me to pray, saying over and over, “I love God, even though he has no reason to love me. I know I have sinned and he has every reason to turn away, as he's done before. He could send me to Hell, right now. I deserve it. Please pray for my forgiveness so I can survive this surgery and be healed.”

Case 3: A patient sobs, tortured by ten years of successive illnesses and multiple surgeries. “Why is this happening? I don't know if I want to go on. When I was young, momma made me marry a man who beat me all the time. I

was 16, and he was in prison. I knew it was wrong, but I did it anyway. Now I'm old, I'm lonely, and I'm empty inside— they've taken almost everything out of me! I don't have a life. I'm tired of this."

My faith training equipped me with two options to respond to each of these folks: (1) "There, there, don't worry. God is a loving God and God is in control," or (2) just be quiet and give lots of hugs and knowing looks. Number 1) is authoritative, but for me it is empty of empowerment for the patient. It says, "Don't do anything because you can't," and it relies on the patient's belief that everything is out of control (God is out there somewhere, not paying attention at the moment). Number (2) can produce tender moments, but it doesn't address the yearning for meaning and growth in the patient or the patient's family. Number (1) combined with a quick exit is an "effective" ministry, because it protects the chaplain from a tough situation, and it's what most Christians expect, anyway. Number (2) is a variation of Number (1), the difference being that there is someone blocking your escape route. You are stuck and have to stand in the misery of pretending you know everything is going to be okay (but you don't believe it for a second). There is the possibility of speaking a sentence of Scripture, but this is only a small variation on the empty theme. These attempts at ministry are helpful to a patient only by God's amazing grace, or simple luck. But, sadly, many times they are not enough, and people are left empty, seeking more. What the chaplain tries to do is noble, but what is heard and felt many times is the same old thing: "Life Sucks and Then You Die."

### **Using the Tools of Vedanta**

Approaching hospital chaplaincy with my intent to change, I challenged my failing beliefs, and looked for something new. Vedanta gave me new tools to refine my beliefs and leave the passive approach behind. Here is how I responded to these cases after the influence of Vedanta:

Case 1: Past beliefs gave me the poetic imagery of new cities, intended to bolster the spirits of those trapped in the terror of a totalitarian regime. Also, many of the assurances of eternal life in the Bible's New Testament are associated with statements about the lordship of Jesus Christ (a different agenda at work). Salvation as described by evangelicals was the proof of possessing the right thinking and the act of professing the right words—this was not acceptable, in my mind. I couldn't tell a distraught daughter, "Here are some words of Scripture which prove your father's salvation." Nor could I say to her, "If he says and believes this, he is saved." What I could say with all my heart was this, "I saw a beautiful spirit in your father, evidence of a life well lived and well loved. Your family is full of love for one another, and that is surely evidence of God's presence. I believe God is eternally present in us and that presence is what is permanent in this life and whatever lies next. Look



at your favorite scriptures, and see what your heart tells you about your father's life, and your love for him. Together, you will find God's words." I now believe my love for them, which is a gift to pass on, is what awakens their connection to God, within. And the daughter seemed to understand that something new was unfolding, something she could share with her father.

### **God in Me Sees God in You**

Case 2: When I first encountered patients who feared God's judgment, I was tempted to judge them myself. "What did you do to yourself to deserve this?" This woman seemed to be thinking the same way. But I've heard about "Namaste." I have a gift from God to love the unlovable, God in me sees God in you. This simple teaching is liberation to love. When patients say they are not worthy, I do not join in their judgment, for there is not a heavenly courtroom with a looming God/judge. God is within them, and within me; I can love them. And there is an awakening: God doesn't judge God's own self, so neither do I, and the patients usually respond. Another benefit is, the more I love myself (God) the more I learn to receive other people's (God's) love as well.

Case 3: The person in this case had so many surgeries that she was literally almost empty, and would never live a normal life again. It was as though she had given her soul away, and then her body followed. She believed she had no control; that was God's job. I listened and concentrated on the beautiful soul within her that kept her going in the midst of unbearable suffering. To me, her physical emptiness served only to highlight the presence of the real God within. I told her I saw God within her, held up my affection for her as proof that she was not empty. I listened carefully to her words and remarked each time I recognized empowering thoughts (there were many). In time, she gave herself the wisdom of nonduality. She began to look more filled, even radiant. If a person believes God is within, an inherent value of self can develop.

"Life sucks, and then you die." Most people could testify to that, I suppose. But I do know that we might observe that "sucks" isn't the ultimate reality of life. The beauty and wonder of God is everywhere, and is also within. No hospital room can shut out God, nor can it shut out the opportunity for spiritual transformation. And I don't think Jesus ever commanded anyone to "love me;" instead, he gave himself the role to love all, and offered all an opportunity to awake to the "truth that will set you free." □

# *Vedanta and Life as a Social Worker*

**Brad Schweers**

If I have learned two things from my years as a social worker, they are: first, that I cannot bring about change in someone else's life, and second, my work can be spiritual practice for me. It is on these two pillars that my work rests, and these pillars have been shaped, in largest part, by Vedanta. Those familiar with Vedanta will recognize these principles as keys in the path of Karma Yoga. Indeed, Karma Yoga has thoroughly molded and informed my life and work.

I was introduced to Vedanta six years ago by my teacher at the Vedanta Society of Atlanta. I moved to Atlanta fresh out of college and lived in a faith-based, simple living community. Swami attended the multi-faith worship circle that our house hosted every Sunday. I had not yet talked to Swami, but I had met him at worship and I clearly and intuitively knew that he could help me on my journey. I studied Christianity, Judaism, and Islam in college, but didn't know anything about Hinduism beyond the all too standard set of Western misconceptions.

## **Old Categories Inadequate for New Experiences**

I told him that I was in the midst of a massive internal upheaval. I grew up in a suburban, Christian household and later became a fundamentalist, but my faith had been wonderfully shattered on a trip to Bosnia a year before. I spent three weeks with a college group living with Muslim families in a Muslim town, teaching and playing with children in a U.N. refugee center. It was my first immersion experience with a culture and religion totally foreign to me. My faith upon arrival was based on clear answers to all questions: Christians were saved, Muslims were not; these are the good people, those are the bad. My black-and-white beliefs bent and then broke with those amazing children in that devastated but magnificent country. My eyes were opened to more injustice, horror, racism, and hatred than I knew how to deal with. My concrete categories for understanding the world were simply inadequate to deal with my new experience.

When I came home, my old faith was irrelevant. I began searching for answers to the human condition in politics, social change, and social justice. I began reading about Marxism, Socialism, and Communism, attended Socialist Worker gatherings, and deeply wanted their answers to be mine. I still share Marx's diagnosis of the shortcomings and injustices of capitalism, but we fundamentally disagree on the source of and solution to the problems. For Marx, the problems and solutions were external. This never satisfied me or resonated with my life. In my analysis, the core problems are internal, as are

the solutions; according to Marx's worldview, the changes needed were only outside and systemic. And so I reached an impasse and moved on. I shared these and other struggles with Swami for several hours that day. My old beliefs were insufficient and my newly adopted faith of working for external social change was equally lacking. That session led to several years of regular meetings and study.

Swami suggested books to read about Vedanta, Christian mysticism, meditation, monasticism, and yoga. The first of these books was Karma Yoga by Swami Vivekananda, which remains the most influential book in terms of shaping my views of my work. Vivekananda, who once referred to himself as a socialist, offered to me the internal components that I found lacking in the religion of "social change."

Reading Karma Yoga transformed the way I viewed the world. My small self, or ego sense, played a much larger role in my life before I came to Vedanta. Since then, I have come to realize that my choices and my power to influence anything are all in the context of Something much larger. It would be tidy to say here that it is God who is in control, but those words do not mean much to me. I can say that there seems to be an Order to this chaotic world, and that my releasing the need to control brings me closer in tune with that Order.

### **I Gave So Much Help; Why Didn't It Work?**

In many ways my work has provided lesson after lesson about practicing releasing control. I spent much of my first years as a social worker trying to change people. To be more honest and precise, I was trying to bring about the changes that I felt people needed. I was working at an uncommon little nonprofit agency in Atlanta called Café 458. When it opened in the late 80s, it was the first restaurant in the country to exclusively serve homeless people, providing support and hospitality for people looking to make changes in their lives. We offered lunch, basic social services, and above all support to homeless men and women. I put all of myself into the people in our program, only to see many go back to the streets and often to drugs. From where I was standing, they seemed to make bad choices or give up. I gave so much to help them! Why didn't it work?

Then an encounter with one man changed my attitude. I'll call him Jim. Jim was 40 years old when he came in and had been an alcoholic for 34 of those years. Jim had dreadful asthma as a child and his grandfather, a moonshiner, used to give him grain alcohol to help his cough. It worked, but Jim slowly became an alcoholic. The first day he walked into our Café he was drunk. But within three weeks he had stopped drinking for the first time in his adult life. He attended Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and got a sponsor, but had setback after setback. Each time, I dreaded he would go back to

drinking and I'd never see him again. But every time he would come back, struggling but sober. That May, he called his mother for the first time ever on Mother's Day. Within six months, he was working full-time. I was there to celebrate his engagement and later his marriage. I did nothing more for Jim than I had done for a hundred other people—same meals, same support, same hospitality. And Jim had tried to stop drinking in the past. Yet, for some reason, it was his time, and his life had unrecognizably shifted. I asked him how he did it, and he said it was “all in God's time,” and I cannot disagree.

Vedanta taught me that God is the change agent. We all do work all the time, and all of this creates impressions on our character, whether good or bad. Everything makes an impact. Sometimes the work seems to bring about noticeable and immediate changes, as with Jim. Often it does not. The truth is that Jim is, in one way, the aggregate of genetic and cultural factors mixed with his reactions to these factors. My input was just a small contribution that coincided with countless other factors to bring about a change in Jim. And behind all these factors is Mystery, what mystical Christianity calls “The Numinous.” Neither Jim nor I really knows why it “worked.” What I tried to provide was support, hope, and a space for change to take place.

### **Work: A Path to “Letting God”**

Vedanta helped me to shift my attitude towards my work and the world. It is easy to say the words “Let go, and let God,” words popular in various circles. To let go completely is to have nothing but the Divine move through one's being. Needless to say, it is not easy to make that attitude real and central in one's life. Here's the key: work can help one to make that shift. Work can be a spiritual practice. This is the second major contribution Vedanta has made to my work.

Whether you are a social worker or a window scrubber, all work can be a form of yoga. This is what Vedanta teaches. The path of Karma Yoga offers every moment of work and service as an occasion for worship and a chance to take the focus off our little selves. Everything is an opportunity—this is the proper attitude towards work. Swami Vivekananda said, “The highest ideal is eternal and entire self-abnegation, where there is no I, but all is Thou.” I cannot say that I have taken every moment of my work as an opportunity for Bhakti Yoga or Jnana Yoga. What I can say is that Vedanta has taught me that this world is a gymnasium that I can use to develop my spiritual muscles.

Every moment one encounters has the potential to be an opportunity for moral exercise and growth, if one chooses to see it that way. All is good, but all is not pleasant, as the Katha Upanishad teaches us. If I could choose two prayers for my life, the first would be “thank you” and the second would be “give me what is good, not necessarily what is pleasant.” This latter prayer helped me get through training to run my first 26.2-mile marathon. During

training, I would curse the hills of Atlanta that caused me so much strain and pain. As I labored up the inclines in the Atlanta summer sun, I was convinced that I'd be better off with no vertical component to my training runs. When the race came, however, I realized those hills had not been devils, but angels—blessings that helped me to build my strength, without which I might not have finished the race.

### **Learning Patience and Avoiding Burnout**

I have worked for the past three years in a day program for adults with mental illnesses. We assist people in identifying goals for their lives and then work on the steps towards those goals. My work has afforded many wonderful, if not always easy or pleasant, opportunities for growth. I have always agreed that patience is a virtue; it has just never been one of mine. Vedanta helped to teach me that my impatience is about me, not any external factors. I have learned this as I have taught the same person how to use a broom and mop, day in and day out, for three years. I have learned to listen to people whose thoughts are so confused that sometimes it takes ten minutes of intense concentration to understand someone tell me she has a doctor's appointment. I have learned that some changes take a decade or more. Like the woman in our program who was able to start her cleaning assignments on time after 13 years of instruction, encouragement, and reminders. Patience has been a byproduct of many hours of work and a gift of pure Grace.

In my field, every organization seems to have at least one co-worker known as the "burned out social worker." She or he is one who has been through many things, but has all but given up on social work. Burn out happens for many reasons—bureaucracy, gross under-funding, budget cuts. The most common reason I have found, though, is that people do not see enough "results." People put so much in but do not see enough come out to make them feel it's worth the effort. Were it not for the attitudes and internal framework Vedanta has given me, I might have burned out by now.

The central message that has helped me with frustration in my work is the one taught to Arjuna by Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita: "To work you have the right, but not the results." This is a tall order. This attitude is not natural to me and is certainly not supported by our culture at large. My work can help me to renounce attachment to the results that I want to see or the ones that I think are best for this or that person. I am not perfect by any means, but I am blessed to have the opportunity to practice every day. I am indeed blessed to serve clients who are some of the most remarkable and gracious people I have ever met.

My work as a social worker has been rewarding, challenging, frustrating, and spiritually enriching. Vedanta has provided the footing that has allowed me to use my work and service as spiritual practice: practice recognizing and

renouncing this illusion of control, and practice seeing the Numinous at work in more and more places. Even while I strive to align myself more and more with the Mystery, I am working for change. Unlike the Marxist answers, that change is in large part inside me, even as I try to bring the messages of Vedanta to my work in this world. Do work, raise your sails. This is what I try to live out in my work. But ultimately, as Ramakrishna told us, it is the breeze of Grace that moves our ship. □

### **True Service**

Service is not the same as helping. Helping is based on inequality, it's not a relationship between equals. When you help, you use your own strength to help someone with less strength. It's a one up, one down relationship, and people feel this inequality. When we help, we may inadvertently take away more than we give, diminishing the person's sense of self-worth and self-esteem. Now, when I help I am very aware of my own strength; but we don't serve with our strength, we serve with ourselves. We draw from all our experiences: our wounds serve, our limitations serve, even our darkness serves. The wholeness in us serves the wholeness in the other, and the wholeness in life. Helping incurs debt: when you help someone, they owe you. But service is mutual. When I help I have a feeling of satisfaction, but when I serve I have a feeling of gratitude. Serving is also different from fixing. We fix broken pipes; we don't fix people. When I set about fixing other people, it's because I see them as broken. Fixing is a form of judgment that separates us from one another; it creates a distance.

So, fundamentally, helping, fixing and serving are ways of seeing life. When you help, you see life as weak; when you fix, you see life as broken; and when you serve, you see life as a whole. When we serve in this way, we understand that the other person's suffering is also my suffering, that their joy is also my joy and then the impulse to serve arises naturally—our natural wisdom and compassion presents itself quite simply.

—Rachel Remen

## *Discussion: Retirement Housing for Vedantists*

### *We Have a Plan*

#### **Swami Atmajnanananda**

It is with great interest that I have been reading the different contributions to *American Vedantist* regarding retirement housing for devotees. I have had an interest in the topic for many years, and feel that it is an extremely important issue for all of us to deal with.

When the property adjacent to our Vedanta Center of Greater Washington, D.C. became available a few years ago, I immediately began to consider the possibility of such a retirement community. Unfortunately, our neighbor decided to sell the property to a developer instead of to us. But, as chance would have it, the developer specializes in affordable senior citizen housing and decided to try to construct a 100-unit apartment building for people 62 and over. Because of the zoning situation, he needs our cooperation and is willing to give us first right to rent as many units as we can use. Eighty of the units would be for those on a limited income, roughly \$40,000 per year or less, and the remaining twenty units would be unrestricted. They are all rental apartments and probably would range from \$800-\$1000 per month for the restricted units, and about \$1200 per month for the two-bedroom unrestricted units. It would not be a care facility and the residents would have to be in good enough condition to look after themselves, with the help of a companion if necessary. But there would probably be a nurse on duty in case of emergencies.

We have no expectation of being able to fill the whole building with Vedanta devotees, but we could easily have a nice community of devotees all living in the same building. They would have the company of each other as well as the company of the devotees who visit the center. And the Vedanta Center is just a short walk from the building, so they could attend all of our programs.

I have been hesitant to say much about this project yet because it is still quite uncertain. There is no guarantee that the developer will be able to get the required zoning, although he feels confident enough to invest a good deal of money in the zoning process. With the length of time needed for zoning, subdividing the property and constructing the building, we are probably looking at two years from now for a completion date. But, again, I must stress that everything is still in the planning stage right now. Still, if any devotees feel that they might be interested in such housing about two years from now, they may e-mail the Vedanta Center of G.W.D.C. ([vedanta-dc@juno.com](mailto:vedanta-dc@juno.com)) for

more information. I will also try to give updates from time to time as more information becomes available.

## *Across the Country*

### **Violet Eaton**

All of us want to see retirement living facilities available for Vedantists. No one has big money. This country is large; distances are great.

So what are the possibilities? We could begin by forming a committee of ten or so people with resources and experience who live dotted across the country and are affiliated with various centers. They might be called the “Big Chiefs,” and would serve to help set up each new Vedanta Retirement House by lending money needed for the undertaking as well as offering guidance to their local areas. They would work out a set of guidelines for running the houses and would create an overall plan, covering financial support and management and the physical conditions needed for the residents.

Pilot projects—maybe one in the East and one in the West—would try out the plans. If the ideas proved good, they could be applied in other parts of the country. If centers or groups of devotees wanted to donate a small house, or felt they could fill a small readymade apartment house with elderly devotees, basic needs would be covered. This would require a lot of research on the part of that local group, for the “Big Chiefs” would act only as advisors. Full responsibility for carrying out the plan would rest with the local group.

The basic aim is to form a plan for retirement living for those devotees who haven’t much money but would like to be with other Vedantists.

I will volunteer to become educated in the pros and cons of retirement homes and will use Laurelmead—a retirement home in Providence where I am moving this summer—as my guide. I am deeply impressed by their wisdom to date. I will keep alert for finding others who would like to serve on the Big Chiefs Committee of ten or eleven. We could all save a lot of trouble by having this impersonal yet caring group acting as overall monitor and evaluating the various possibilities that develop as time goes on. Raising money would be their main job. This would include designing different ways the local groups could raise yearly funds to cover costs for those who are caught by poor health, accident or other misfortune.

All houses would need a nurse, a nurse's aid, a good doctor to call, a couple of volunteers to clean and cook, an available car for running errands, etc.

Obviously, this is but the briefest outline of a possible way to get the project started. I would love to see the idea grow and develop! □



# *Atma, Self, and Individuation*

*(Jungian Psychology and the Advaita Vedanta Philosophy)*

**Cathrine Ann Jones**

*[Concluded from the previous issue. In the first installment, the author described how C.J. Jung, on his only trip to India, was scheduled to travel south and meet the householder sage, Sri Atmananda. The night before his departure, he had a dream which persuaded him to leave India early, thus canceling his trip to south India. Coming from a family of psychics, and a disciple of Freud, Jung was not only disposed to be guided by dreams, but was already of the opinion that Westerners should retain and adapt their own means of enlightenment, such as the mystery cycle of the Holy Grail, and forego the ways of the East. Jung flatly states that the Eastern man's "relations with the world are often incomprehensible to us." He acknowledges that the conflicts of our lower nature, seen from a higher level of personality, look "like a storm in the valley seen from the mountain top," but goes on to say that "since, in a psychic sense, we are both valley and mountain, it might seem a vain illusion to deem oneself beyond what is human." Jung calls the finding of one's self "individuation." For the Advaitist, on the other hand, what is real is Atma, the "deep root of all being," not the body and mind, with which we falsely identify. As Krishna teaches in the Gita, the aim is not to escape the world but to see through the battle of life as one engages in it fully. To do this is to align the lower self of body and mind with the higher self or Atma. True knowledge is to be found within. Krishna's work, like that of any great teacher, is to bring to birth that which already exists within.]*

## **The Self as Integrating Factor**

Can we as Westerners so totally transcend our personalities? Can we align ourselves with a higher consciousness and be free of any tension of opposites? Jung thinks not. One is shaken by life yet at the same time aware of a higher consciousness looking on. Jung describes "a necessary polarity inherent in every self-regulating system".<sup>1</sup> As already stated, Jung believes man to be both valley and mountain. The tension of opposites lies at the core of his findings. However, Jung, in sharp contrast to Freud, tells us that the struggle toward the goal of wholeness or integration is fueled by a religious quest, and individuation is a spiritual journey (Storr, 229). He does not speak of the

1. Jung, C.G. *The Essential Jung*. Ed. Anthony Storr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 227.

Absolute but refers instead to an integrating factor which guides us through our own unique process of individuation.

This integrating factor Jung calls the Self. Seen as archetype, the Self signifies union between the opposites (Storr, 229). Jung speaks of an “archetype of wholeness.” (Storr, 236). From his own dark inner struggles, he turns to the eastern tradition of mandala drawing as a tool to guide his way towards wholeness. In sketching the circular drawings, Jung could observe his psychic transformations (Storr, 230). This area is explored in his *Psychology of Kundalini Yoga*.<sup>2</sup> Echoing Goethe’s *Faust*, Jung says:

Only gradually did I discover what the mandala really is: formation, transformation, eternal mind's eternal re-creation. And that is the self, wholeness of the personality, which if all goes well is harmonious, but which cannot tolerate self-deception (Storr, 230).

For Jung, however, the self was a part of us rather than a force beyond us as in Vedanta. Yet sometimes Jung seems very close to the Eastern view, as in the following words:

If the unconscious can be recognized as a co-determining factor along with consciousness, and if we can live in such a way that conscious and unconscious demands are taken into account. . . then the center of gravity of the total personality shifts its position. It is then no longer in the ego, which is merely the center of consciousness, but in the hypothetical point between conscious and unconscious. This new center might be called the self (Storr, 19).

### **The Point between Conscious and Unconscious**

This shift parallels the Vedantic perspective that all that is needed is to shift the false identification with the body and mind to the Atma, the center, as previously discussed. Yet Jung calls the point between conscious and unconscious hypothetical. It is not yet real, only conjectural. To the Vedantist, however, it is the only reality. In India, the space between two thoughts is a pointer towards the Atma, the one Reality. This is the space where there is no mind, no ego, when the mind is dissolved into some larger Self beyond all personality. “Where are you in this space between two thoughts?” the sage might ask, thus opening the door to pure experience. And in pure experience there is no world. There simply *is*. Jung responds:

But the self comprises infinitely more than a mere ego. . . It is as much one's self, and all other selves, as the ego. Individuation does

2. Jung, C. G., *The Psychology of Kundalini Yoga* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 10.

not shut one out from the world, but gathers the world to one's self (Storr, 419).

Jung grants that self is more than mere ego, but by this he refers to the collective or many selves. The purpose of individuation is not to leave the world behind as is the goal of the Eastern mystic, but rather *to gather the world to one's self*. Here lies the parting of the waves between East and West. Remember the Janus image mentioned earlier? East looks inward while West gazes outward towards the world.

Certainly there are parallels between Jungian thinking and that of Vedanta. In fact, it is likely Jung took the term, Self, from Indian texts. However, according to Barbara Hannah, Jung felt “the East was too far above everyday reality for us (Westerners)” (Jung, xxiii). In his Kundalini Yoga lectures, Jung speaks of the process of individuation:

It is the withdrawal from the emotions; you are no longer identical with them. If you succeed in remembering yourself, in making a difference between yourself and that outburst of passion, then you discover the self; you begin to individuate (Jung, 39).

### **The Ego as an Appendix of the Self**

This, of course, is only the beginning of a long process. Jung is careful to distinguish between, on the one hand, an individualist who becomes the ego, subject to inflation, and, on the other hand, “individuation as becoming that thing which is not the ego” (Jung, 39). He goes on to speak of the ego as “a mere appendix of the self in a sort of loose connection.” He asserts that a connection persists, while Vedanta speaks of ego as illusion. The comparison is sometimes given of the rooster who continues to dance after his head is chopped off. Hence, thinking ourselves a separate entity or ego, we continue to strut and dance, unconscious of our real Self, not even aware that the roots have already been severed. It certainly does feel like this often enough.

In a 1932 lecture, Jung speaks of individuation taking place when you are conscious of it whereas individuality is there from the beginning of one's existence (Jung, 5). In sharp contrast, the enlightenment of the East tends to occur when one is not conscious. It is through the loss or surrender of the conscious self that the light of Self shines. From a Vedantic text:

When I think of myself as an embodied being,  
I am your servant;  
When I think of myself as an individual soul,  
I am a part of You;  
but when I realize I am Atma,

I am one with you.<sup>3</sup>

The goal then is to get beyond the individual self to the greater Self. Meister Eckhart echoes this: “The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me” (Jones, 5). So inner experience rather than inner thought is desired; not theories but nothing less than direct revelation.

The fact is the world exists;

The Truth is it does not.

One lies in the realm of mind,

the other in the pure experience of Self (Jones, 31).

So I wrote during a two-year sadhana period in south India under the guidance of Sri Adwayananda, the son and successor of the great sage Sri Atmananda, whom Jung almost met in 1938. Perhaps it is of some interest that Joseph Campbell, who was so influenced by Jung, did actually meet Sri Atmananda. Campbell spoke to me in New York of his great respect for the Indian sage and later publicly acknowledged this influence on him in the Bill Moyers television interviews (*The Power of Myth* series).

### **A Struggle between Poles of Influence**

For over thirty years, I have had the good fortune to study Advaita Vedanta under Sri Adwayananda. Yet, for over thirty years, I have struggled as a Westerner to transcend the illusive ego. Jungian psychology and Advaita Vedanta have been for decades my unresolved opposite poles of influence. Jung rightly pronounces the importance of waiting until late thirties-early forties to undertake serious inner work. When first living in India with the householder sage and his family, I was but twenty-three. Though it was an amazing time and will no doubt remain the most important years of my life, it was an arduous and confusing time as well. Later I compared myself to one who had built a penthouse before establishing a foundation or lower floor. Granted, there were various impressive mystical experiences due to the powerful atmosphere which surrounds the sage. Yet after years of denying both body and mind, I had eventually to confront both. Jung understood this from his own experience as he writes in his autobiography: “Whenever we give up, leave behind, and forget too much, there is always the danger that the things we have neglected will return with added force” (Jung, 277).

The danger of engaging higher states of consciousness before sufficient ego development is evident in the occurrence of inflation or shadow. Disregard of the body in prolonged meditations can certainly invite serious physical problems that remind us we are also body. Similarly, years of

3. Jones, Cathrine Ann, "Cathrine Ann Jones," chapter in *Dodge Days*, Eds. Edmund and Pamela McIlhenny. (Avery Island, LA, 2000), pp. 109-112.

prolonged separation from the world as in ashram life can give birth to shadowy confusions. However, I do not in any way suggest that such great souls as Sri Adwayananda or Ramana Maharshi, who meditated without speaking for many years, had any such problem. The danger most likely lies in lesser souls such as the writer of this paper. The question remains, can Westerners achieve enlightenment through Eastern traditional methods?

Perhaps one of the difficulties of religious or spiritual writings is that the reader takes them *literally* rather than *symbolically*. There is all too often an unfortunate insistence on literal interpretations of religious and spiritual texts leading to both war and mayhem, from the Crusades of the Middle Ages to Waco, Texas in our own time.

### **The Symbolic Meaning of Experience**

A great contribution of Jung's thinking has been his insistence on *the symbolic meaning of experience both in waking and dream state*. These symbols may draw our attention to aspects of ourselves that we have overlooked, which are hidden in what he calls the "shadow" outside the light of our usual consciousness. Jung urges us to look to our own shadow projections and claim them in order to integrate all the contradictory parts of the psyche. Similarly, this shadow side may also be the undeveloped talents and virtues, the good we do not suspect we may do. Jung's program for individuation urges us then to integrate all the various parts of our personality. This leads to individuation, not to separation from the world.

Are the world and its perceiver but a dream? Or is the dream part of the individual's world? In Jung's lectures on Kundalini Yoga, he states:

It appears to us as though India were fascinated by the background of consciousness, because we ourselves are entirely identified with our foreground, with the conscious. . . (Jung, 61).

This Background seen from the Vedantic perspective *is* the Reality, the Atma, while the perceived or foreground is witnessed as the illusion. Jung goes on to say how the psyche is alive yet so obscure and "so difficult to access that we are first forced to represent it symbolically" (Jung, 62). Sri Atmananda in *Atmananda Tattwa Samhita* states that "words are only pointers to the Absolute."<sup>4</sup> And what are words if they be not symbols? If the Absolute lies beyond the mind, then how can it be grasped by the mind? Yet being human, we cannot help ourselves. We continue to seek to contain what lies beyond our grasp. Jung sees that certain

. . . dreams, visions, and mystical experiences suggest the existence of a consciousness in the unconscious. . . no consciousness can

4. Atmananda, ed. by Adwayananda, *Atma Darshan/Atma Nirvriti*. (Austin: Advaita Publishers, 1983), p. 22.

exist without a subject, that is, an ego to which the contents are related. . . We know of no other kind of consciousness, nor can we imagine a consciousness without an ego (Storr, 219).

Jung admits that “in our (Western) world. . . our consciousness is localized in the head” (Jung, 62). It is after all in the mind, in thought, where the opposites live. “All the opposites meet at the Absolute,” resounds the sage Adwayananda.

Perhaps if we could see our limited selves as no more than metaphors or symbols reaching for the Absolute or Self, the journey would be not only richer but require less angst. The focus then would be not so much on what we think but rather on the inner experience where thought leads. For this to occur, space must be allowed for thoughts to sink more deeply into dissolution, for the identified-with mind/body to disappear. Jung compares the relationship of the soul to the Divine to “the relationship of a drop of water to the sea.” The drop would seem to be lost in the magnitude that is the sea, yet “that sea would not exist but for the multitude of drops” of which the sea itself is composed (Storr, 259). His emphasis remains on the drops or individuals. The Indian sage, however, dismisses both wave (individual soul) and sea (the Divine), leaving in their stead pure experience: “Waves are nothing but water. So is the sea” (Atmananda, 8).

### **Are Jung and Advaita Complementary?**

Could we say that Jung and Advaita Vedanta are complementary? Here doubt arises. I remember an example from the ancient Sanskrit texts my teacher would expound. It went something like this:

Logical thinking is merely the stick used for keeping the funeral pyre burning. The pyre is for the ego. Once the body—or ego—is burnt, there is no need to take the stick (mind) home with you. No. You toss it into the fire as well (Jones, 48).

To conclude in Eastern, cyclic fashion by returning to the beginning, to the first quote, we might ask ourselves which path more deeply calls?

Consciousness going out towards objects is mind.

That which turns towards the Self is pure Sattva (Atmananda, 9). □

# *The Vedanta Society*

Rachel Fell McDermott

*[from the forthcoming Encyclopedia of Religion and American Culture, published by ABC-CLIO]*

The Ramakrishna Vedanta movement is the oldest Hindu organization in the United States; it, and the efforts of its founder, Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), have laid the foundations for all subsequent Hindu groups in the West. Inspired by the teachings of his spiritual master, Sri Ramakrishna (1836-1886), a Bengali devotee of the Hindu Goddess Kali who was also steeped in the nondual philosophy of Advaita Vedanta, Swami Vivekananda came to this country for the first time in 1893 to attend the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago as a representative of the Hindu tradition. His popular success at that historic gathering, in addition to the interest, if not controversy, which his lectures inspired, gradually led him to conceive of a spiritual mission to the West, which he nurtured through private teaching sessions and fledgling group organizations during his two extended stays in the United States, 1893-1896 and 1899-1900. Building from the two Vedanta Societies he founded, in New York and San Francisco, subsequent swamis have expanded the American work; as of 2001, there are fifteen centers throughout the country, each under the leadership of an Indian swami; several retreat centers and monasteries; and a total national membership of approximately three thousand. Between his two American tours, in 1897 Swami Vivekananda founded the administrative and outreach branch of the Indian monastic work, headquartered at Belur Math, outside Calcutta in West Bengal. It is Belur Math which selects swamis for leadership roles in the United States, as well as for its many centers in India and the rest of the world. As such, the Vedanta Societies are branch organizations of an Indian monastic institution — which provides the American work with the advantage of spiritual and institutional groundedness but also with the challenge of trying to forge an authentically Indian message that is also sufficiently adapted to Western people.

## **Breadth of Message and Practical Approach**

The teachings of Vedanta draw upon a combination of Ramakrishna's mystical insights into the love of God, exhortations to renounce the world, belief in the unity of all religions, and the stress on spiritual experience; the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta, according to which each soul is potentially divine; and the social activism of Swami Vivekananda, who established the Ramakrishna Order with the twin ideals of renunciation and service. The

breadth and universalism of this message, in addition to its practical approach and lived embodiment in charismatic swamis, are cited by devotees as reasons for its appeal.

Among the many swamis who have lived and taught in the United States after Swami Vivekananda, five deserve special mention as having made important contributions to the interpretation and grafting of Vedanta onto American soil: Swami Abhedananda (head of the west-side New York center, 1897-1910), who pioneered the idea of Vedanta as a science; Swami Prabhavananda (leader of the Hollywood center, 1929-1976), a prodigious writer and translator who attracted around him several famous Western writers and artists and who spearheaded the most successful journal to date of American Vedanta, *Vedanta and the West* (1938-1970); Swami Ashokananda (in charge of the San Francisco center, 1932-1969), who opened monasteries and branch centers and who attracted many to seek the monastic life; Swami Nikhilananda (head of the east-side New York center, 1933-1973), who contributed enormously to the accessibility of Ramakrishna's message by his readable translation of Ramakrishna's Bengali conversations, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*; and Swami Bhashyananda (leader of the Chicago center, 1965-1991), who opened approximately two dozen satellite centers throughout North America and staffed some of them with his newly trained American swamis. This effort was suspended in 1987, when Belur Math ordered these American swamis "home" to the guidance of core centers, since it was believed that such quick expansion was premature.

### **Earlier Phase: Vigorous Attempts at Acculturation**

Maintaining a balance between Indian ideals and Western contexts has always been a challenge. The early swamis, in particular, taking the example of Swami Vivekananda, made vigorous attempts at acculturation. Reminisces American-born Swami Yogeshananda about Swamis Prabhavananda and Ashokananda in the 1950s: they determined "to put India behind them in a sense; to try to *feel* themselves Western and American, in order better to identify with us. They saw, as we said, through our eyes" (Yogeshananda 1995, 59). For Swami Ashokananda this commitment extended to an active discouragement of Indian music, ritual, and even food in the Vedanta centers. When Belur Math tried to enforce stricter codes regarding the separation of sexes at his Hollywood center, Swami Prabhavananda replied that Indian rules could not apply to American centers.

After a period of growth following World War II, the Vedanta Societies entered a period of decline in the 1970s, with slowing membership and fewer monastic recruits. Since the mid-1980s, however, two factors have combined to indicate increased vitality, even if they do not always work in tandem. The first, as a result of the liberalized immigration laws of 1965, is a new



Indianization of the centers, with Indian, especially Bengali, families seeking Ramakrishna swamis for familiar guidance in adoptive lands. In cities with large Indian populations, overall attendance at Sunday lectures has risen — and with it increased calls for Hindu food, music, and ritual, such as the festivals of Krishna and Ganesha, celebrated along with those for Ramakrishna and Vivekananda at the Chicago center. Indian Vedantists are also generous financial contributors, as the new satellite centers at Toronto and Washington amply testify.

Partly in reaction to this increased Indianization, many Western devotees are calling for a revitalization of Swami Vivekananda's original vision for a truly Western Vedanta. One avenue for the exploration of these issues is a lay magazine called *American Vedantist*, the editors of which take as their explicit mission the translation of Vedanta into Western cultural and philosophical terms. This is not merely an academic project; such devotees also exhort the Vedanta movement as a whole to engage in self-scrutiny and dialogue, and to combine passion for spiritual growth with the practicality and freedom of spirit emblematic of American attitudes. *American Vedantist* is one of several projects of Vedanta West Communications, dedicated to expressing Vedantic idealism in the West through music, words, and art.

### **Calls for Broadened Leadership and Increased Outreach**

In the same vein, other devotees — sometimes Indian as well as Western — urge Belur Math to relax its prohibition against the conferral of leadership positions on American monks and to encourage nuns from the Sarada Math (founded in honor of Ramakrishna's wife, Sarada Devi [1853-1920] in 1954 as a sister monastic institution to the Ramakrishna Order) to visit the United States on teaching missions. More locally, one hears calls for increased lay leadership training, involvement of women, and commitment to social outreach in American, not simply Indian, contexts.

Since the mid-1980s numerous lay groups, inspired by the ideals of Vedanta but not necessarily affiliated with the Order, have sprung up to address precisely these needs: prominent among them are the centers of the Sarada Ramakrishna Vivekananda Association, founded in 1983 to make the teachings and transmission of the lineage accessible to a wider, more liberal American audience; Mother's Trust, Mother's Place, an interfaith community started in 1991 by Swami Bhashyananda, who put a woman devotee in charge; the Sri Sarada Society, which has supported activities of the Sarada Math in the West; American Service to India, which finances overseas projects; and various prison counseling programs in American cities.

The new Indianizing and Westernizing trends visible in the Vedanta Societies of the twenty-first century can be mutually invigorating. Indian parents can be allies with Western devotees in trying to develop a spirituality

that is both Indian and appealing to youth brought up in this country. The first United States-born Indian monk is already in monastic training in India; it is hoped that he, and others like him, will return to help forge an acculturated Vedanta. Another sign of renewed creativity is the use of the Internet in presenting the ideals of Vedanta; for instance, through the website of the Vedanta Society of Southern California one can e-mail a monk or nun with questions; order glossy pictures of Hindu gods, goddesses, or swamis; listen to an audio clip of a lecture delivered by Swami Prabhavananda; contribute to relief work in India; and learn about local interfaith meetings. In addition, just recently the Ramakrishna Order has affiliated two new American centers: one in 1997 in Washington, D.C., the first new center to open in twenty years; and the second in 1998, a year-round retreat center at Ridgely Manor in Stone Ridge, NY, where Swami Vivekananda stayed for ten weeks in 1899. Both of these are under the local leadership of American monks, Swamis Atmajnanananda and Atmarupananda, although they are supervised by the senior Indian swami at the Vedanta Society of Southern California, Swami Swahananda.

### **Distinguishing Characteristics**

What differentiates the Vedanta Societies from other Hindu movements in the United States, such as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, are their firm institutional base in India, which provides vision, external control, and a supply of monks; their relatively Westernized approach to vegetarianism, ritual, and male-female relationships (in recent years there has been a relaxing of the austere message regarding sex-renunciation in marriage); their philosophical rather than ecstatic approach to God-realization; their Western public lecture format combined with instruction by a Hindu guru; and — in spite of new forays into the Internet — a conservative conviction that spiritual growth and influence should proceed quietly and freely.

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## *On the Lighter Side*

### *Bills of Rights*

Legend has it that a group of discontented devotees once sent a letter to the Pantheon of Deities demanding a Bill of Rights for Devotees. The Pantheon replied swiftly with some demands of their own. We reproduce the two letters below.

Dear Pantheon of Deities:

We are a group of discontented devotees who believe it would be appropriate for the Pantheon of Deities to grant us a Bill of Rights for Devotees. Such a bill should include the following points:

1. No ugly deities. We believe that all deities should be beautiful. If you look at the pantheons of ancient civilizations like Sumer and Akkad, there have been some mighty strange-looking gods and goddesses in the history of the world. We also dislike the human bodies and animal heads of the ancient Egyptian deities. Even in contemporary times, we find some fairly ugly customers among the Taoist and Tibetan Buddhist gods.

We demand that the Pantheon clean up its act when it comes to ugly deities. This does not mean that every deity has to look like Brad Pitt or Angelina Jolie. It merely means that they have to look reasonably human. (We exempt Lord Ganesha, of the Hindu pantheon, from this requirement because he's cute.)

2. No dirty deities. We demand that our deities be clean. They should be required to bathe daily and be well-groomed and clean-shaven. Beards and mustaches may be permitted on a case-by-case basis, but they must be neatly trimmed. In a best-case scenario, all male deities would be required to wear ties.

3. No devils or demons. We demand that you get rid of Satan and his band of fallen angels. This is the 21st century, and it's high time we cracked down on the Dark Side of religion. We've outgrown the childish need for the devils and demons of yesteryear. Religions that still harbor them need to do a thorough housecleaning and sweep them away.

4. Omnipotence and goodness. In light of the troublesome issues raised in the Book of Job, we demand that every deity be both omnipotent and good. This means that you have to wipe out death, disease, old age, suffering, pain, and the host of related ills that have always plagued humankind, not to mention animalkind and vegetablekind. We want goodness, peace, and light to reign unchallenged everywhere. Get rid of taxes, too, while you're at it; yes, and karaoke and rap music.

5. Samadhi for sadhakas. Vedantic devotees in particular are complaining that they don't get enough positive reinforcement in their spiritual practices. Some have been meditating for years, and they've never had a vision, never gone into ecstasy, never experienced samadhi. They've had influxes of great joy, felt the presence of the Chosen Ideal, and attained new insights, but the flashy stuff has always been denied them.

Specifically, we demand that every Vedantic devotee be granted bhava samadhi upon completion of a month of regular meditation, savikalpa samadhi after six months, and nirvikalpa samadhi after a year. We demand visions of the Chosen Ideal at regular two-week intervals after the first six months of sadhana. Vedantic devotees ought to be granted jnana after three years of spiritual practice, and vijnana after five years. After that, they should all be ordained as gurus, given a certificate of achievement, and sent forth to teach.

We present these demands in full confidence that you will study them carefully and ultimately see the wisdom of granting them.

Yours with perfunctory prostrations,

The United Association of Stroppy Devotees

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Dear United Association of Stroppy Devotees:

We have received your petition and noted its contents with amusement.

We believe you are suffering from role confusion here. We are the deities. You are the devotees. It is for us to order you around, not for you to order us around.

This is the divinely ordained nature of things. Were it to be violated, the cosmos would be plunged into anarchy and chaos. We're sure you wouldn't want that.

Let us dispose of each of your points in turn:

1. No ugly deities. You are way behind the times. The gods of Sumer, Akkad, and Egypt were long ago superseded by a more progressive deity: to wit and i.e., Allah. Since he is formless, the question of ugliness does not arise.

As for the Taoist and Tibetan Buddhist "deities," usually these are not deities at all. They are mere temple guardians or demons. Their purpose is to scare people into being good. Since the Taoists and the Tibetan Buddhists do not object to them, we see no reason why you should.

Indeed, we consider your demand for beautiful deities a prime example of religious intolerance. Deities often reflect, on a cosmic scale, the nature of the people who worship them. Since there are ugly people, we see no reason why there should not be ugly deities.

Ugly deities need love and worship more than beautiful ones, because fewer people will be attracted to them. Worshiping an ugly deity can even be considered a sign of superior spirituality. Anybody can love a beautiful deity. It takes a real hero (or heroine) to love an ugly one.

Your demand for no ugly deities is therefore denied. In fact, we think we need more of them.

2. No dirty deities. This is really insulting to us. The entire Pantheon is deeply offended. In the old days we would have hurled down fire and brimstone down upon you for such blasphemy; but this is the 21st century, and we've mellowed out a lot.

Besides, this is the Age of the Whiners. So we wish to inform you that we find such statements deeply hurtful. They have delivered a devastating blow to our self-esteem, caused us incalculable mental anguish, and left us feeling emotionally abused, psychologically traumatized, and spiritually raped. You'll be hearing from our lawyers (and our psychotherapists!) soon.

There is no such thing as a dirty deity. All deities are intrinsically clean. Our bodies are composed of pure spirit, often exuding fragrant odors like jasmine, balsam, and sandalwood. Unlike you, we neither accumulate filth from the outside nor exude it from the inside. There is no need for us to bathe, and when we have beards

and mustaches, they are always neatly trimmed. Sometimes they are even oiled and scented.

We don't wear ties because they are a diabolical invention of your governmental and corporate power structure. Ties are a symbol of bondage, a visible sign that one has submitted to the rule of the power sharks. They are designed to intimidate and enslave their wearers. Note, please, their resemblance to a noose; also, to a leash. If you want to be a dog on the leash of the Establishment, go ahead and wear a tie.

We deities are free spirits, and we don't submit to tyranny. That's why you'll never see any god or goddess wearing a tie.

Finally, we don't try to impose a dress code on you, and we resent your attempt to impose one on us.

3. No devils or demons. You'd better take this up with the devils and demons. But we should warn you that they have a function, and that is to remind you of the evil that lurks within yourselves. In fact, the only real demons are within you.

4. Omnipotence and goodness. We admit that some evils are so terrible that they are unacceptable, and we're working on that. After all, this is an incomplete universe. We're not finished with it yet, and there are still some bugs in it we have to work out. For instance, eliminating genocide, massacres, and epidemics is fairly high on our list of priorities.

But you have to do your bit too. It's not fair to blame us for all the evil in the world. We accept the blame for natural disasters. But genocide, massacres, persecution, and acts of injustice are carried out by human beings. It's up to humans to put an end to them.

We also have to say this. If everything were sweetness and light and the world were perfect, you wouldn't have anything to strive for, and you'd be bored silly. Then you'd complain that you didn't have any challenges. Mankind was born to strive upward, as the eagle was born to fly against the wind. Consider the evils that afflict you a challenge, and strive against them. When your strength fails you, call out to us, and we will strengthen you. That's what we're here for.

However, we agree with your point about karaoke and rap music. We'll try to do something about them. Techno and heavy metal, too.

5. Samadhi for sadhakas. Boy, that's what we like about Vedantists. You're a feisty bunch. But when Swami Vivekananda told you to be fearless, he didn't mean obnoxious.

It is very thoughtful of you to map out a timeline for us, letting us know the exact moment in each devotee's progress when we should grant ecstasies, samadhi, visions, and the like. You even have a timeline for vijnana! Very impressive.

We have news for you. Once you have fulfilled our demands for devotees, then you will have a right to set timelines for us. If you want a Bill of Rights for Devotees, we also have one for deities. Specifically, we demand that you:

1. Pray to us at least three times a day. It doesn't need to be long. Whenever you're in a hurry, just checking in to say hello is OK.
2. Meditate at least two hours a day. Sleep time doesn't count.
3. Behave the way you know you ought to behave, and don't behave the way you know you shouldn't.
4. Regard all people as manifestations of God, and treat them accordingly. This doesn't mean you have to be a patsy. Some people don't know they're manifestations of God, so they behave like animals. Sometimes they need a good kick in the teeth to straighten them out and remind them of their true nature.

If you can do these things, and do them well, you won't ask us for visions, ecstasies, and samadhis, because you won't need them. All you'll need will be abiding awareness of the presence of the All-Loving Being; and that will be yours in abundance.

Wishing you all the best in your spiritual striving,

Lovingly yours,

The Pantheon of Deities

—Bahut Pagal

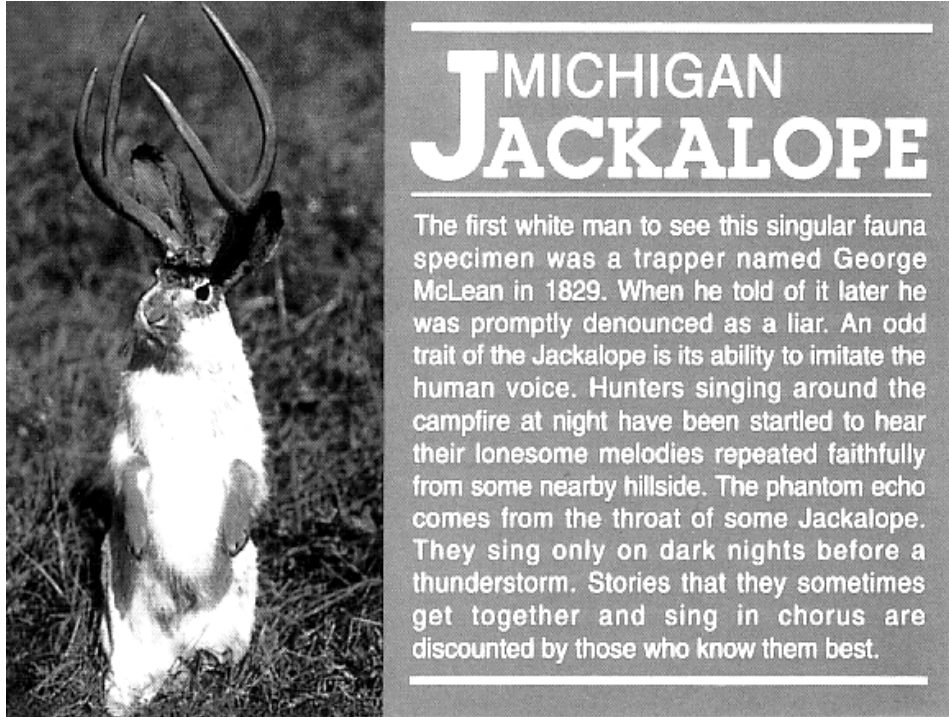
### *Metaphysics in America:*

#### **Sightings in the United States Raise Questions about Vedanta**

Sri Shankaracharya, the eighth-century philosopher-saint and progenitor of our movement, would often use this imagery to express something unreal: "It is like a hare (a jackrabbit) with horns." This was considered to be a definitive example, because of its total impossibility. It was often applied to

the world as we know it, because to Sri Shankaracharya, the world was indeed as unreal as a hare with horns. No one has contested Sri Shankara until now, because his philosophy is considered to be invincible.

However, sightings have been made in the United States of just such a hare or jackrabbit with horns, known to those who have studied it as the *jackalope*. A recent photo was taken in Michigan, though the jackalope has also been seen at Lake Tahoe:



Does this finding stand all that Shankara said on its head? Does this mean that, contrary to 12 centuries of belief, actual transformation of Brahman into material objects, known technically as *parinama*, actually occurs? Perhaps, too, his idea that the world is merely an appearance (a theory known as *vivarta*) is not true, after all. Perhaps at last we can really believe that the world is real! Does it mean that caste, which he upheld, is not true, real, or necessary?

How can this dilemma, of such cosmic significance, be resolved? Is Vedanta today able to tackle questions on such an abstract, metaphysical level? While we wait for the pandits to come up with appropriate answers, we offer a ray of hope to Vedantists, whose world has so rudely been shaken by the equivalent of a Richter 9 earthquake. One of our devotees has taken the initiative in speaking to the condition of Vedantists everywhere:



## Ode to the Jackalope

Let us give a big *hurrah*  
To the holy memory of Shankara.  
He needs all the help that he can muster  
(The jnanis and bhaktas are all in a fluster);  
For, despite his logic and all his brain,  
His theories are all going down the drain.  
The impossible fact he so thoroughly scorns  
Exists in Mich. – the hare with horns!  
Modern research has put in the shade  
All the old acharya said.  
Horrors! Is parinama true?  
Caste demolished? Vivarta, too!!  
Bhaktas! We have one and only hope –  
Take refuge in the jackalope!

—Sister Gayatriprana

## *Book Reviews*

### **God Is Everything: Isavasya Upanishad**

**An exposition by Swami Sarvagatananda**

**Vedanta Society of Toronto, 120 Emmett Ave., Toronto, Ont., Canada  
M6M2E6; phone 416-240-7262, fax 416-245-3764, vedanta@total.net  
130 pages hardcover US \$15, C \$20; softcover US \$12, C \$15 2001**

Swami Sarvagatananda is a senior monk of the Ramakrishna Order and the recently retired head of the Vedanta Societies of Boston and Providence. This book is an exposition of the Isa Upanishad based on a series of lectures which he delivered at a retreat organized by the Vedanta Society of Toronto in June-July 1981. It contains fresh and valuable insights into a very ancient text. The tone throughout is warm and informal.

Swami Sarvagatananda's original approach is evident from his translation of the very first line. Some translators render it "All this is to be covered by the Lord." Swami Sarvagatananda renders it "The ruling force dwells in all of this." He notes that "the Lord" conveys the image of "a deity sitting somewhere above the clouds"; but Isa is the ruling cosmic force, an all-pervading spiritual substance whose nature is pure consciousness.

What implications does such an all-encompassing spirit have for us? The answer is given in the cryptic second line: "By that renunciation, enjoy; do

not covet the wealth of anyone.” That is, once we know that we are always resting in the embrace of the all-loving Being, we can relax, let go of our petty insecurities and grabbiness, and enjoy the bounty that It has provided without clinging to anything. Nothing in this world belongs to us; it all belongs to God. Knowing this, we won’t covet anything, and will share what we have with others.

The swami’s exposition of the remaining seventeen verses is enlivened with apt analogies, illustrations, anecdotes, and reminiscences drawn from his great wealth of experience in the Ramakrishna Order. A good example is his proof of human interdependence. “Suppose I give you an ordinary button. I challenge you to make another button like it, without taking anybody’s help. You have to find out everything yourself without asking anybody—where to get the material, how to cut it, etc. You cannot use anybody’s intelligence or anybody’s instruments. You have to make everything yourself. Can you do it? I will give you one million dollars if you can! There is no ‘self-made man.’ Behind you are millions of people who worked hard to make your life comfortable.”

Among the many gems in this book is a little prayer which can be recited before meditation: “Let us meditate on the abiding presence of the all-loving Being seated on the throne of our heart radiating joy, light, and peace.”

The Isa is famous for its memorable invocation: “That is full, this is full; the full comes out of the full. Taking the fullness out of the fullness, the fullness still remains.” Swami Sarvagatananda’s commentary is a “must-have” for anyone who wants to get the fullness out of one of the greatest of the Upanishads.

—William Page

**The Way Home:  
The Lectures of Swami Vivekananda on Practical Spirituality  
Revised & edited from the Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda  
by Swami Brahmavidyananda  
Temple Universal Publishing, [www.templeuniversal.com](http://www.templeuniversal.com)  
217 pages      paperback      \$14.95      2003  
Distributed by Vedanta Catalog, [www.vedanta.com](http://www.vedanta.com), 800-816-2242**

*The Way Home* is the second book in the series being brought out by Swami Brahmavidyananda of the Vedanta Society of Southern California. In the same revised and edited format as *View from the Center*, it builds on the basis of universal religion developed there from the Western works of Swami Vivekananda.

In brief, the universal religious pathway is to develop the potentiality within all of us to experience deeper and deeper, or higher and higher, levels of consciousness. In *View from the Center*, the selected lectures of Swami Vivekananda demonstrate how such development is the dynamic behind the religious goal of self-transcendence, is the basis of a truly rational religion and universal ethics, and is compatible with all forms of yoga and religion.

Taking up the thread, *The Way Home* gives us an overview of the actual journey of deepening or heightening our level of consciousness. The guiding principle is internal evolution through self-purification and renunciation, struggling through maya and finally emerging into a state where we live consciously from our own spiritual center. In such a state we act entirely from our inner divine core, embracing the universe with love and seeing the world in a radically different way than we do now. We come to understand fully who we are and that we share the same divinity with others and with the cosmos itself. "The world is God himself," if we can but see it.

When we thus arrive "home," our every act, feeling, thought, understanding is nothing less than worship of the spirit by the spirit, unobscured by anything petty or mean.

All of this amounts to a map of the inner process of yoga as delineated by Swami Vivekananda. Complete in itself, *The Way Home* also lays a foundation for the specific yogas of work, devotion, meditation and knowledge, each of which will be expounded in its own volume as the series continues.

—Sister Gayatriprana

## *Letter*

This particularly fine article in the Spring 2003 issue of *AV* impressed me very much: "Job Revisited, A Vedantic Reading," by Charlie K. Mitchell. The article sheds light on a rare occasion of Vedantic teaching hidden in the Old Testament. It is revealed to us through Mitchell's own clear, logical understanding transmitted by his beautiful writing style with a moving, rhythmic and poetic flow.

He convincingly makes us aware of the hidden Vedantic message: God uses suffering, not as a form of punishment, but "as a lever to pry open the doors of divine knowledge" —to an immediate personal understanding.

Al Eschner  
Fullerton, CA

## *Contributors*

SWAMI ATMAJNANANANDA joined the Ramakrishna Order in 1981 at the Vedanta Society of Southern California. He is now resident minister of the Vedanta Center of Greater Washington, D.C. in Silver Spring, Maryland.

VIOLET EATON first came to the Vedanta Society of Southern California in 1968. Her life's journey brought her in close contact with several other Vedanta Centers. She is currently associated with the Vedanta Society of Providence.

SISTER GAYATRI PRANA, a writer on Vivekananda Vedanta with a background in the neurosciences, is a monastic member of the Vedanta Society of Southern California.

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DAVID NELSON (Devadatta Kali) has been a member of the Vedanta Society of Southern California since 1967. He is author of a forthcoming translation of the Chandi, entitled *In Praise of the Goddess: The Devimahatmya and Its Meaning*.

BAHUT PAGAL (see William Page)

WILLIAM PAGE recently retired from teaching English at Thammasat University in Bangkok, Thailand. He has been connected with the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society of Massachusetts since 1960.

RACHEL REMEN, an early pioneer in the mind/body health field, is cofounder and medical director of the Commonwealth Cancer Help Program in Bolinas, California. She teaches family and clinical medicine at the University of California at San Francisco School of Medicine.

BRAD SCHWEERS, a social worker and student of religion, has been associated with the Vedanta Center of Atlanta for six years.