

CHICAGO CALLS



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THE ROOT OF VEDANTA

Inquisitiveness is the root of Vedanta. The basis of inquisitiveness is the thirst for knowledge.

"Who can be the source of all these varied and wondrous creations?"

The ancient people of India, popularly known as Aryans, had two great gifts:

1. Gift of Intellect and 2. Gift of Intuition

Their sharp intellect, endowed with the power of analysis, penetrated through nature and discovered her secrets. Also, their profound intuition helped them to reach the wonderful metaphysical truth.

The ancient Aryan saw the phenomena of nature—clouds gathering, lightning flashing, rain coming down from the sky and helping the earth to grow vegetation, wind blowing, sun rising and setting without fail—his simple faith made him believe in the existence of a conscious agent. He gave a name, Deva (god), to the consciousness behind each of the phenomena.

The very first spiritual book of humanity, the Rig Veda, is full of hymns in praise of these Devas. Through his emotion and imagination he felt that the Devas needed food and other things. Hence, Yajnas and rituals began. The Vedic gods are impersonal, formless—only descriptions of their powers and mighty deeds have been described.

For some it may look 'childlike', but in that primitive age it was a great attempt to explain the Law of Causality. The Aryans, ancient and modern, accept Adhi-dai-vata, the theory that all manifestation in the universe proceeds from conscious being.

Aryans accepted the existence of the Devas or gods, but their rational mind slowly developed the concept of One Supreme God or Brahman. In the spiritual history of the Aryans, we find the journey from multiplicity (Agni, Vayu, Rudra, Indra, Varuna, Yama) to Monotheism (the belief in one God), called Vishva-karman (The Creator of the universe), Prajapati (Father God—Lord of Beings), Purusha (The Supreme Man), Hiranyagarbha (The Golden-egg), or Prana (Spirit).

Through the passage of time and the development of the rational mind, multiplicity developed into Monotheism. But, that also could not satisfy the inquisitive mind of the Aryans. From Monotheism they ultimately reached Monism (Only one Supreme Being exists).

Many also firmly believed in Pantheism (The universe is the manifestation of God). In the Veda

we find the word Aditi (Infinite). She is the heaven, is the atmosphere, is the mother, is the father, is the son, is all gods, is the whole world.

In their search for the ultimate unitary principle, these spiritual researchers, known as the Rishis, conceived of an Infinite and Absolute Power as the primary cause of all of creation. This Absolute Power, the Rishis realized, could be neither masculine nor feminine. It must be beyond all Names and Forms.

The Rishis described it as Tad Ekam (That One). According to the Rig Veda (RV 3.54.8), One is the basis of all—

"All beings that move and all that move not, whether animals, birds or creatures of various kinds, rest on the one basis."

The concept of the One has been most poetically expressed in the "Hymn To Creation".

nāsad āsīn no sad āsīt tadānīm

nāsīd rajo no vyomā paro yat.

kim āvarīvaḥ kuha kasya śarmann

ambhaḥ kim āsīd gahanam gabhīram.

Then there was neither being nor non-being.

The atmosphere was not, nor sky above it.

What covered all? And where? By what?

Was there the fathomless abyss of water?

The history of the evolution of conceptions from crude to the highest is very clear in the pages of that ancient religious scripture, the Rig Veda.

The earlier hymns of the Rig Veda speak of the mighty gods, like Mitra, Varuna, Indra and others creating the heaven and other objects.

Then we find questions like,

How many suns, dawns and waters are there?

Is night preceded by day or day preceded by night?

What kind of wood was used to make heaven?

Where does the day disappear to?

Who created the earth and stretched the sky?

To answer these questions the Rishis first gave Theistic concepts of creation.

We find hymns on: Vishva-karman (RV, 10.81)

Hiranya-garbha (RV, 10.121);

Pantheistic view: Purusa-sukta (RV10.90)

Higher philosophic view: Nasadiya-Sukta (RV 10.129)

The root of Vedanta is the thirst for knowledge of the One.

This has been noticed by Robert Earnest Hume, "The earnestness of the search for the Truth is one of the delightful and commendable features of the Upanishads.

BE THE WITNESS

SWAMI ATMAJNANANANDA

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This article is based on the lecture delivered at the Spiritual Retreat in May 2018 in Vivekananda Retreat, Ganges, MI

INTRODUCTION

The term *sākṣin* represents one of the most important concepts in the philosophy of Vedanta. We find it used in the Gita, Upanisads, various hymns and prayers, etc. The word, basically meaning “witness,” is also one of the most elusive concepts we have, not falling easily into any one slot. We find it used in a variety of ways, sometimes with a capital “S” to represent the omniscient Lord, sometimes with a small “s” to represent the subject, or higher mind. It may also be identified with the Atman, or real Self. The term, quite paradoxically, literally means “with eyes” *sa ākṣan*, though the real witness has no eyes, but is pure consciousness. In a sense, it is the eye behind the eye, the ear behind the ear, the mind behind the mind. The challenge will be to try to untangle some of the seemingly contradictory uses of the term *sākṣin*, to try to reconcile the different meanings, to show how various traditions give different interpretations, especially devotional schools as opposed to philosophical schools, and then to understand the importance of the concept for our own spiritual practice. We will try to do this by referring to two very important passages from the Upanisads.

CHARIOT ILLUSTRATION FROM THE KATHA UPANISAD

We read in one of the most important sections of the Katha Upanisad about a chariot drawn by horses, travelling down the road, an allegorical illustration meant to explain the relationship between the Self and the body, mind, senses, and sense objects. The chariot is driven by the

charioteer, and the master of the chariot is seated peacefully inside the chariot, neither driving nor directing, but simply watching the passing show. Here the chariot stands for the human body, the horses are the senses, the roads that it travels along are sense objects, the reins are the mind, and the driver is the intellect. Then who is the master enjoying the ride and watching the passing show? The Upanisad states: *ātmendriya-mano-yuktam bhoktety āhur manīṣiṇaḥ*. “The wise say that he is the ‘enjoyer’ associated with the body, senses, and the mind.” And Shankaracharya in his commentary makes the point that the so-called enjoyer is not identical with the Atman in the strict sense of the word, but rather with the *jivātman*. What is his objection? The Atman is ever free and unattached, while the enjoyer requires the mind, the body, and the senses, as well as a false identification with them. And, though he does not mention it specifically, it is understood that the real Self is one. It cannot divide itself up into different smaller selves to ride in different chariots. Or to put it another way: The witness within my chariot, that means my body, witnesses my mind alone, not yours or anyone else’s. And this is the case with all of us. So in that sense, the witness, or *sākṣin*, is not identical with the Atman or pure Self. But on the other hand, the relationship between the rider and the chariot is not an absolute one. He can leave the chariot and still remain the same master. He is not bound by the chariot, the horses or the reins. That is to say, the *jiva*, the Atman confined to and identified with the body, mind, and senses, is not essentially connected to them. They are considered superimpositions, *upādhis*, and have no power to affect the pure and perfect nature of the real Self.

So from this point of view, we can say that the *sākṣin*, the witness, is the pure Self, the real knower, the eternal subject, in apparent connection with the body, mind, and senses of the individual, so that it can silently observe whatever is present to the mind of that person. It appears to be divided and many, just as the reflected sun in containers of water appears to be many, though, like the sun, it remains one and undivided.

WITNESS AS PERSONAL GOD

It seems clear from this analysis that we can explain this phenomenon of the witness strictly in terms of consciousness, the mind, the senses, and the body, and there is not much need to bring in ideas of a personal God or anything like that. However, that is exactly what happens in much of the Vedantic literature. We read in verse 9.18 of the Gita: *gatiḥ bhartā prabhuḥ sākṣī nivāsaḥ śaraṇam suhṛt*. Sri Kirshna tells Arjuna, “I am the goal, the support, the Lord, the abode, the refuge, the friend. And then “I am the *Sākṣin*, the Witness.”

Again, in the second verse of the Gita in chapter 13, we read: *kṣetraijñāṁ cāpi māṁ viddhi sarva-kṣetreṣu bhārata*. Krishna tells Arjuna: “Know me to be the knower, the witness, within all bodies, i.e. individuals.”

Now, how to reconcile these two different visions of the witness? Is it the higher Self, the Atman, in conjunction with the mind, body, and senses, or the Lord himself dwelling within the heart of all beings watching our every thought and emotion? One clue is found in two famous verses found in the Mundaka Upanisad, which Swami Vivekananda refers to several times and which he turns into a beautiful parable.

THE TWO BIRDS ON THE TREE

We read in the Mundaka Upanisad about two birds of beautiful plumage sitting on the same tree, inseparable friends having the same name: the higher Self and the lower self, both dwelling in the

tree of the body. One eats the fruits, bitter and sweet, while the other (the witness) simply watches without eating (3.1.1) Then Swamiji expounds: Each time the lower bird eats a bitter fruit, it looks upward at the other bird majestically sitting on the top of the tree in all its glory and serenity. It then hops higher in order to bask in the glory of the upper bird until it finally merges in the higher bird itself. It then realizes it was always the upper bird, the real Self, seeing only a reflection of itself and thinking it was separate. The first of these two verses is actually a quotation from the Rigveda, while the second verse, which more properly belongs to the Upanisad, actually is a kind of commentary on the first. Here we read:

*samāne vṛkṣe puruṣo nimagnaḥ
anīśayā śocati muhyamānaḥ
juṣṭam yadā paśyati anyam*

īśam asya mahimānam iti vīta-śokaḥ // 3.1.2

“The individual soul on that same tree (in the body) remains drowned in misery; deluded and feeling helpless, it grieves. But when it sees the other, the adorable Lord (*īśa*), and his glory and grandeur, it becomes perfectly free from sorrow.” The interesting thing about the second verse is that what is apparently referred to as the witness in the first verse is here said to be the “adorable Lord.” And even Shankaracharya has no problem with identifying the higher bird with the Supreme Lord, referring to him as the “Lord of the whole universe,” though we might have expected him to interpret it as the “master of the body,” or the higher Self. This is especially so since we remember him referring to the rider in the chariot (the witness) as the *jivātman*, not *isvara*, the Lord.

What we find here is what we may call a paradigm shift, the shift from looking upon the witness as the higher Self (in combination with the mind, senses, body, etc.) to the Supreme Lord. In a sense this shift represents nothing more than the recognition of the truth that the *jiva* is, in reality, the pure Self or Atman falsely identifying with the

superimpositions of the mind, body, senses, intellect, and that the Atman is really nothing but the Supreme Brahman itself. But one further step is needed. What we call Isvara, the Supreme Lord, is also nothing but that transcendental Brahman in connection with Shakti. And it is that pure consciousness of Brahman, together with its power that manifests within the individual as the higher Self.

But there is a second very important and subtle truth found in the second verse with the words *yadā paśyati*, i.e. “when the lower bird sees the higher bird.” And here we see the relevance of Sri Ramakrishna’s teaching about the stick of ego seeming to divide the lake of consciousness into two portions. For when we feel ourselves to be individual souls and feel the presence of the witnessing consciousness, like the lower bird gazing at the higher one, that serene and magnificent presence, as the Upanisad puts it, we feel it to be the presence of the Lord dwelling within our hearts. So for the devotee, who does not particularly like the attitude of so ‘ham, “I am He,” who, in the words of Ramprasad, “would rather taste sugar than become sugar,” the Sākṣin is God himself. The passenger in the chariot of the body turns out to be Jagannath, the Lord of the Universe, dwelling within the body of all. He may be disguised as the individual jiva, but he is also the Witness, the Guide, the Friend, the Antaryāmin, and ultimately the Supreme Lord.

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA'S VIEW

When we read Swamiji we often find him seemingly belittling the idea of the Personal God, claiming that we are searching for God in vain in temples and churches, that the God we are praying to is really nothing but our very own Self, etc. But we should understand the other side of the story and how much Swamiji loved this idea of the Personal God as the Witness dwelling within the body. Just to give a few of the many beautiful

statements he made on this subject:

He whom you are worshipping as unknown and are seeking for, throughout the universe, has been with you all the time. You are living through Him, and He is the Eternal Witness of the universe. He whom all the Vedas worship, nay, more, He who is always present in the eternal ‘I’. He existing, the whole universe exists. He is the light and life of the universe. If the ‘I’ were not in you, you would not see the sun, everything would be a dark mass. He shining, you see the world.

He is the Witness, the eternal Witness of all knowledge. Whatever we know we have to know in and through Him. He is the Essence of our own Self. He is the Essence of this ego, this I and we cannot know anything excepting in and through that I. Therefore you have to know everything in and through the Brahman. To know the chair you have to know it in and through God. Thus God is infinitely nearer to us than the chair, but yet He is infinitely higher. Neither known, nor unknown, but something infinitely higher than either. He is your Self. “Who would live a second, who would breathe a second in this universe, if that Blessed One were not filling it?” Because in and through Him we breathe, in and through Him we exist.

This is the whole history of man. Finer and finer becomes the veil, more and more of the light behind shines forth, for it is its nature to shine. It cannot be known; in vain we try to know it. Were it knowable, it would not be what it is, for it is the eternal subject. Knowledge is a limitation, knowledge is objectifying. He is the eternal subject of everything, the eternal witness in this universe, your own Self.

Can you thus limit Him who is the substance of all knowledge, Him who is the Sākshi, the witness, without whom you cannot have any knowledge, Him who has no qualities, who is the Witness of the whole universe, the Witness in our own souls? How can you know Him? By what means can you bind Him up?

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Whether or not we look upon the sākṣin as the higher Self or the personal God dwelling within the body, we still have to learn how to utilize this concept in our spiritual life and practice. Here, we find the key is to somehow remain in the mood of the witness, to identify with the higher bird, to remain aloof and detached in the midst of our interactions with the world. During the performance of Karma Yoga, this attitude can give us the feeling that we are not the agent of action. We will also find that in addition to cultivating a spirit of detachment, we can work with greater concentration and skill when established in the mood of the witness.

The devotee following the path of Bhakti Yoga may prefer to keep a trace of I-consciousness that allows him or her to identify with the lower bird, but at the same time, worship and try to emulate the higher bird. For such a devotee, the witness remains a constant source of love and joy. When the devotee feels the Lord dwelling within the heart to be like the majestic bird at the top of the tree, majestic and calm, he feels a desire to imbibe

those same qualities himself and also remain in the state of being a witness.

The Jnani likewise will look upon the Impersonal Brahman as the source of the witnessing consciousness within and seek to remain in that same state. So in all spiritual paths, the advice, "Be the Witness," is of the greatest value and utility. This attitude will ultimately yield wonderful spiritual fruits: we find ourselves to be less judgmental, more patient, better able to empathize with others, and ever united with the divine dwelling within the heart as the inner guide. Swami Vivekananda said:

"No breathing, no physical training of Yoga, nothing is of any use until you reach to the idea, "I am the Witness." Say, when the tyrant hand is on your neck, "I am the Witness! I am the Witness!" Say, "I am the Spirit! Nothing external can touch me." When evil thoughts arise, repeat that, give that sledge-hammer blow on their heads, "I am the Spirit! I am the Witness, the Ever-Blessed! I have no reason to do, no reason to suffer, I have finished with everything, I am the Witness."



Man, therefore, according to the Vedanta philosophy, is the greatest being that is in the universe, and this world of work the best place in it, because only herein is the greatest and the best chance for him to become perfect. Angels or gods, whatever you may call them, have all to become men, if they want to become perfect. This is the great centre, the wonderful poise, and the wonderful opportunity — this human life.

-- Swami Vivekananda
(CW 2, Jnana Yoga)

Art Work by Swami Tadatmananda

**SAMANVAYA VADA:
VIVEKANANDA SCHOOL OF PHILOSOPHY**
SWAMI ISHATMANANDA
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The human is a Meaning Seeking Creature.

Victor E. Frankl, in his book Logotherapy, discussed the “Human Search for Meaning.” The great thinkers of India, who are known as Munis in Sanskrit, also dedicated themselves to the search for meaning and concluded that the goal of human life, which is peace and happiness, could never be fulfilled unless men got the answers to two questions:

- 1) Why does this creation exist?
- 2) Who is the Creator?

Because of different approaches to the same problem, different schools of philosophy developed. Three schools are the most prominent. They are:

- 1) Dualism (Dvaita Vada)
- 2) Qualified Monism (Vishista-advaita)
- 3) Monism (Advaita Vada)

In the 19th century Swami Vivekananda propagated a unique philosophy, which was practical and suited for the modern world – Samanvaya Vada (Unity in Diversity).

The idea of Samanvaya, Unity, was always present in the Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, Bhagavata and other scriptures.

In the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (4.4.19), it is said, *neha nānāsti kiṃcana* “There is no diversity whatsoever in it.”

In the Chandogya Upanishad (6.2.1) we find, *ekam eva advitīyam* “In the beginning there was only Being, one only without a second.”

There was no problem in accepting this by the thinkers. The differences arose in explaining the creation.

How could the one without a second become the many? Philosophers differed on this point and there developed different views—Dualism,

Qualified Monism, Monism, and Absolute Monism.

Whenever there is a thesis there will surely be an anti-thesis. The debates continued for many, many years, and it was necessary to find a synthesis.

Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna gave that to the world through his disciple, Swami Vivekananda.

Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda are both Advaitins. Advaita has two distinct characteristics:

- 1) Direct Mystic Experience of Non-dual Reality
- 2) System of Philosophy

Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna realized that ultimate Reality, called Brahman, and going beyond that Jnana (Knowledge), he reached the state of Vijnana—the application of that knowledge in action.

His disciple, Swami Vivekananda, was a pure Dvaitin in the beginning of his philosophical life. Then he tried to understand God without form by following the path of the Brahma-Samaj. Finally, he anchored his faith in Advaita through a sudden experience he had by the grace of his guru.

One day Sri Ramakrishna explained to him the presence of the One in everything—Puja utensils, temple doors, a cat, the holy image of Goddess Kali—all are one consciousness.

Naren expressed his disagreement—even the utensils!! The students of Swami Vivekananda’s life know what happened. The guru touched him and the disciple had the Advaita Experience for three days.

The students of the biography of Swami Vivekananda also know that Swamiji through his very austere spiritual practices realized the Reality and achieved the knowledge of Brahman through his own efforts.

It happened at Kakrighat in Almora in August 1890. After a profound meditation he declared, "I have just passed through one of the greatest moments of my life. Here under this peepul tree the greatest problem of my life has been solved. I have found the oneness of the Macrocosm with the Microcosm. In this Microcosm of the body, everything that is there in the Macrocosm exists. I have seen the whole universe.

The question of spirit and matter is age old. In the Bhagavata we find that King Parikshit was eager to know from the great sage, Shukadeva, "Honorable Sir, how does the Atman, which is spirit and non-material, come to have a body that is material?"

In reply to this question, the sage said, "O King! Except in terms of the inherent power of the Lord, it is not possible to explain how the Self can have a body!"

Taking a hint from Shukadeva, Shankaracharya very strongly established the 'Theory of Maya' to explain phenomena. Swami Vivekananda's philosophy is also based on Brahman-Atman-Maya.

In one of his London lectures, Swamiji, like a true Vedantin, said, "(People ask) how the one Reality became many. The answer to this question is Maya Vada. In reality the One has not become many. It is only a superimposition." His reference was to the Chandogya Upanishad (8.3.2)—"covered by Ignorance."

Philosopher Swami Vivekananda explained:

- 1) Prameya = Object = Brahman
- 2) Pramata = Knower = Jiva
- 3) Pramana = Means of Knowledge = Shruti

A philosopher is also supposed to explain: Tattva = Jiva (Soul), Jagat (Universe) and Ishvara (God)

Vivekananda based his philosophy (Pramana) on Direct Realization and the truth of the Upanishads.

To answer the question, 'What are Jivas?'. He quoted from the Katha Upanishad, "The Self inside all beings, though one, assumes a form in

respect to each shape, and (yet) it is outside." (KU. 2.2.9).

The individual soul is considered to be Consciousness reflected on the Ego.

Brahman is pure, unchanging Consciousness. The higher dimension of Atman is called Brahman. Brahman is the quantitative expansion of the Atman—individual soul.

Swami Vivekananda understood that the highest and most perfect system of philosophy is not a single philosophy but the sum total of all philosophies—each providing a different view of the same reality. This is what is known as Vivekananda's 'Samanvaya-vak'.

The same sun observed from different places and angles will look different, but in reality it is the same sun. Accepting the fact that the Creator (Brahman) and the creation (Jiva) are one, Vivekananda gave stress on the human.

In the Bhagavata (11.9.28) we find "Brahman projected this universe, first the cosmic then the organic at various levels of evolution. He was not satisfied! Why? He thought that in order to rediscover Himself, He needed someone like Him, and then He projected the human form."

Swami Vivekananda, in his philosophy, gave importance to this—the human. "The divinity of man is in a potential state. The goal is to actualize it in life."

As a practice of this philosophy, he introduced the union of different spiritual paths. "Jnana, the dry and intricate philosophy of Vedanta, should be softened with sweet devotion, then the tasty ingredients of work should be added, and the whole should be cooked in the kitchen of yoga. That is what I want to serve, so that even a child can digest it."

To practice this philosophy of Samanvaya-vada, Swami Vivekananda advised people to follow the path of a combination of four yogas—Knowledge, Devotion, Action and Concentration. Every human has four different moods. Utilizing all these one can easily reach the goal, which is union of the individual self with Brahman.



Rebekah Gregory was initially reluctant when federal prosecutors asked her to give a victim impact statement to the jurors who would decide the fate of 2013 Boston Marathon bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnaev. Ultimately the 28-year-old Houston woman, whose left leg was amputated as a result of the blast, seized the opportunity to give Tsarnaev a simple message: **You lost.**

While Tsarnaev and his brother killed three and injured more than 260 with their bombs, their cowardly actions unleashed a tidal wave of love for and among the survivors, she told him. "I looked directly at him. I stared at my biggest enemy. 'You caused mass destruction, but you also brought people together. Nobody's going to remember your name or your brother's name. They're going to remember the survivors.'" Like others who lost loved ones, limbs or hope by the impact of the two pressure-cooker bombs, Gregory is giving back.

Last Christmas she and her now 8-year-old son, Noah, raised buy presents for those who couldn't afford them. She has also sold "Rebekah Strong" T-shirts (made for her 2015 Boston Marathon run) to raise money for earthquake victims in Nepal. Gregory and her son also started what they call "Sharing Smiles."

They visit hospitals and talk to patients. Like fellow marathon amputee Heather Abbott, who started a foundation to raise money to buy prosthetic devices for amputees, Gregory is particularly drawn to those who have lost limbs. She assures them their lives can still be full and rich. "I can still rock a dress," she says with a laugh.

Her main passion is Rebekah's Angels, a foundation that raises money for children suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Noah was sitting at her feet near the finish line when the two bombs exploded on April 15, 2013. Had he been standing, she suspects he would've been killed. She served as a human shield. But while his physical injuries were minor, like her, he is emotionally scarred.

ARISE, AWAKE, AND STOP NOT

Not only did he witness the bloody mayhem, he watched his mother struggle to recover. After spending 40 days in a Boston hospital, Gregory returned to Texas, where she underwent 17 surgeries. Finally, in November 2014, she decided to have her left leg amputated below the knee.

"We both experience [PTSD] but in different ways," Gregory says. She often awakes in the night, screaming and sweating from yet another nightmare. Fireworks paralyze her. Noah's symptoms are subtler: He isn't as adventurous as he once was. He no longer wants to ride his bike. Loud music drives him from movie theaters.

"I tell him, 'Your brain is just tricking you. What you think is scary is not really scary,'" she says. Both are undergoing therapy. Children's inexplicable fears are often ignored or misunderstood, or treatment is too expensive. "So many cases are undiagnosed or untreated," Gregory says. Many children with PTSD grow up to be angry and dysfunctional adults.

Gregory's turnaround has come in various ways. She is frank about her journey, posting near-daily comments to her 46,000 Facebook fans. Her online journal has become a surprising part of her recovery, a forum for sharing experiences and inspiring others.

In April, only five months after her amputation, she ran the last 3.2 miles of the Boston Marathon. It was her first visit to the city since the bombing. While emotionally difficult, it was part of putting the past behind her, she says. The same goes for her decision to stare Tsarnaev in the eyes and tell him his plan to spread hate had failed.

"Did I want my leg to get blown off by a terrorist? No. But so many people donated their time and efforts to get us back—not to normalcy—but to get us back to our lives. The world needs so much hope and light." to the cause of feeding the poor and needy.

(Source: <https://www.success.com/article/4-inspirational-stories-of-people-who-used-their-personal-struggles-to-help-others>)

Introduction to the Cover Page: A Story Of A Unique Journey

Br. Panchatapa

The Western world is celebrating 125 years of the 'bridge' the foundation stone of which was laid by Swami Vivekananda. It was in the year 1893 that Swami Vivekananda, brought the most precious gift of the East -- 'Vedanta' -- to the West. He chose Chicago to unveil the message of Vedanta as Buddha had chosen Saranath and Jesus had chosen Mount Sinai.

What is Vedanta? It should not be categorized as just one of the religions from the East, but as Swami Ranganathananda once defined it: "Science of human being-in-depth". There are numerous work, which have discussed how Vedanta has influenced the spiritual lifestyle of the westerners. The cover image of this volume, too, is an example. The photograph of a window art of the Vivekananda Retreat, Ganges, MI is taken by our devotee Mr. Debejyo Chakraborty. As to the artist who created it, we shall come to it later. What makes this work of art so special? That is what we are going to discuss in this column. This window-art tells us a wonderful story of human journey. Therefore, let us discuss the art, and then the artist.

Most, if not all, of the followers of Vedanta are familiar with this oft quoted verse of the Mundaka Upanishad.

In a tree there are sitting two (*dwā*) birds. They are connected (*sayujā*) as friends (*sakhā*). They are very much like each other. How do they look? – Golden, shining, radiant is the higher bird.

First, the tree. It is the symbol of this physical body; within this body there live, according to a *Shākta*, both the Divine Mother and Her child; according to a *vedāntin*, the higher Self (Absolute) and the lower self (relative); according to a *Christian*, my Father and I.

Second, the lower bird. Inside this gross body, that lower bird lives, which is composed of three

sections: subtle, causal and conscious. The subtle section is made of five sense organs, five motor organs, five life forces and the mind stuff (*mind* to think, *intellect* to discriminate, *memory* to compare experiences and the *ego*). In the causal plane there exist an experience of blankness like that we face during deep sleep. We, the ordinary human beings, identify ourselves with this gross body, which is symbolized by the tree here, and keep ourselves immersed in the experiences earned through the various parts of our subtle bodies. The net result of this deep engrossment is a feeling of tremendous helplessness. In a very poetic way the sage of the Upanishad is informing us about our attachment to this body-mind complex. It is tasting fruits (results, *phala*) – experiencing the results of its actions.

But, the good news is, there is a conscious part too. We have a sense of awareness, within this lower self. It experiences sadness but looks forward to happiness too. However, this awareness is *reflected* awareness; not the final one. It is called *chidāvāsa*. It can be better understood through the example of seeing the face in the mirror. Reflection always implies a presence of something original. For example moonlight means there is sun. Here question may arise: it is the *reflected* consciousness of what? With answers comes the third point.

Third, the higher bird. According to the Upanishads, It is beyond all troubles. It is the existence, consciousness and bliss. This original state cannot be perceived directly just as we cannot see our own faces without a mirror – similarly the higher bird cannot be understood without the lower bird. The higher bird or Absolute consciousness is providing the ground of existence to the lower one. The lower one is objectifying That One, which is not an object, through this manifested universe!

That is how *Dwā Suparnā* or two birds are close *sayujā* friends *sakhayā* or closely related to each other.

Here is a good point to start our spiritual journey. It is *Dwaita Vedanta* or the dualistic approach of Vedanta. *Dwā Suparnā* or two birds are the God and individual being or moksha/nirvana and the aspirant. According to the dualistic school of worship, the lower bird is serving the higher one.

And, the spiritual practices are nothing but the journey of the lower bird to the higher one beginning from service with desire, to work without desire, to merge work in worship, and finally to get dissolved in the higher Self.

What happens when the lower 'bird' gets totally immersed in the higher one? Scriptures say, then there remains no separate state of suffering, even if there is so called 'suffering', it becomes the expression of joy. When Sri Ramakrishna was suffering from the pain of cancer, his disciple Swami Turiyananda could see him 'floating in the ocean of bliss'. That is one's 'home coming' – to return to the source of very existence or in other words to find the 'Kingdom of Heaven' within. There is no wait for time or space for this realization as it is here right now!

All Vedantins meditate on this extraordinary verse and many shared their visualization of this journey of the lower bird to the higher one, from the ignorance to light, and from not-knowing to knowledge in various languages. Here we bring some gems for our dear readers.



In Sri Aurobindo's understanding of these verses influenced his famous creation, "Sāvitrī". Let us begin with Sri Aurobindo's translation of these verses:

Dwā Suparnā Sayujā Sakhāyā
Samānam Vriksam Pariswajate

Tayor anyah pippalam swādu atti,
anashnan anyo abhijākashiti
(Mundaka Upanishad 3.1:1)

1. *Two birds, beautiful of wing, close companions, cling to one common tree: of the two one eats the sweet fruit of the tree, the other eats not but watches his fellow.*

Samāne vrikshe purusho nimagno
'nishayā shocati muhyamanah
Jushtam yadā pashyati anyam isham
asya mahimānam iti vita-shokah
(Mundaka Upanishad 3.1:2)

2. *The soul is the bird that sits immersed on the one common tree; but because he is not lord he is bewildered and has sorrow. But when he sees that other who is the Lord and beloved, he knows that all is His greatness and his sorrow passes away from him.*

Yadā pashyah pashyate rukma-varnam
kartāram isham purusham brahma-yonim
Tadā vidvān punya-pāpe vidhuyā
niranjanah paramam sāmnyam upaiti.
(Mundaka Upanishad 3.1:3)

3. *When, a seer, he sees the Golden-hued, the maker, the Lord, the Spirit who is the source of Brahman, [Or, "whose source is Brahman"; Shankara admits the other meaning as an alternative, but explains it as "the source of the lower Brahman"] then he becomes the knower and shakes from his wings sin and virtue; pure of all stain he reaches the supreme identity. [Or, "pure of all staining tinge he reaches to a supreme equality"]*



Sri Ramakrishna is known as the *Upanishad Purusha*. He said that the spiritual realizations that came through 'this' Sri Ramakrishna's body, have gone beyond the realizations of the sages of the Upanishads.

Sri Ramakrishna's vision is recorded in the book called 'A Portrait of Sri Ramakrishna:', which is the English translation of the Sri Sri Ramakrishna-Punthi by Akshay Kumar Sen, a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna.

One day, the master was seated under a banyan tree. He saw two birds sitting on one branch. One was calm and unperturbed the other was restless and, according to its mood constantly flying around here and there. Now and then, it would gaze at the calm one. Seeing this the calm one opened its mouth and the other one entered. The Master saw it and was startled and started thinking about what that phenomenon signified. The idea of the Atman and the Paramatman dawned on him.

Sri Ramakrishna in his spiritual visions experienced the Divine Womb – Brahmayoni, as it is mentioned in the third verse above. An excerpt from Swami Yogeshananda's book "Visions of Sri Ramakrishna":

The vision of the Brahmayoni, the womb of Brahman, came to the Master when he was engaged in sadhana under the vilva-tree of the temple garden. What he saw was a large shining triangle of living light. This was seen also by Swami Vivekananda, much later, who reported it to his guru. 'Very good,' said the latter, 'you have seen the Brahmayoni; I also saw it, but further, I observed its giving birth to innumerable worlds every moment.' His ears, too, were bringing him nothing but Brahman in those days. Om, the pranava - the 'unstruck sound' – he heard going on continuously everywhere in the universe.



Swami Vivekananda explained his understanding of Upanishadic parable of two birds through his "Inspired Talks" (CW 7): *The reason of the harmony between thought and matter is that they are two sides of one thing, call it "x", which divides itself into the internal and the external.*

The English word "paradise" comes from the Sanskrit para-desa, which was taken over into the

Persian language and means literally "the land beyond", or the other world. The old Aryans always believed in a soul, never that man was the body. Their heavens and hells were all temporary, because no effect can outlast its cause and no cause is eternal; therefore all effects must come to an end.

The whole of the Vedanta Philosophy is in this story: Two birds of golden plumage sat on the same tree. The one above, serene, majestic, immersed in his own glory; the one below restless and eating the fruits of the tree, now sweet, now bitter. Once he ate an exceptionally bitter fruit, then he paused and looked up at the majestic bird above; but he soon forgot about the other bird and went on eating the fruits of the tree as before. Again he ate a bitter fruit, and this time he hopped up a few boughs nearer to the bird at the top. This happened many times until at last the lower bird came to the place of the upper bird and lost himself. He found all at once that there had never been two birds, but that he was all the time that upper bird, serene, majestic, and immersed in his own glory.



The mystic poet Rabindranath Tagore discussed this in his article "Mandir" (Temple). This is a translation from the original in Bengali:

That One, He is here within this human world. In front of our eyes life and death are coming in rotation, sadness and happiness are rising and falling, virtue and sin are painting this apparent existence in light and shadows – all are diverse, agile – amidst these That simple quiet One, alone, is present. all these unstable together are being manifested as the Santiniketan, home of peace of That Unchanging One; these continuous series of changes are verily the eternal representation of That Transcendental. ... The Upanishad has expressed beautifully: two birds are living in a tree being connected with each other. One of them is eating a tasty fruit, the other one is watching without eating.

Where else (other than in the Upanishads) such *sāyujya* (merging in God, the Highest attainment), *sārūpya* (assuming the same form of God) and *sālokya* (To live in the same domain as God is one kind of attainment) of the individual self and Absolute Self are described! This wonderful imagery of the equilibrium between God and individual being is so vivid, as if, someone is compelled to describe it after seeing it before eyes! He did not have to search everywhere. The poet of the woodland had seen the finite and the infinite sitting side-by-side touching each other like two forest-birds with beautiful wings; he did not try to provide some complex example to illustrate this subtle theory. Two small birds are so clearly perceivable, so beautifully visible and in them the perpetual simplicity so earnest that no greater example could illustrate this. Just by being simple this could manifest the Truth extensively. That inevitable valor of the Absolute Truth, that verily came out perfectly through this small, simple metaphor. These two birds are connected with each other through their wings – they are friends, they are certainly living in one tree only – between them one is the enjoyer and the other one is the witness, one is movable and the other one is motionless.



Sri Ramakrishna is known as God incarnation. Sages like Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo or Rabindranath Tagore have gone through immense spiritual practices. Now let us look at how the thinkers of our time look at this parable. Can it help us to dive deeper into the thought of Atman-Brahman relationship?



Swami Abjajananda, a monk of the Ramakrishna Order, who is well known for his book “Monastic disciples of Swami Vivekananda”, shared his perceptions after thinking on these

verses deeper. We translate from a personal letter he wrote in Bengali:

It was full moon night of July-August.. Because of the oft-moving clouds the bright moonshine was appearing pale, hazy, unclear. Clouds were coming and were floating away too. No matter how cloudy are there, can it cover moonshine of the full moon night completely? ... How long can the cloud of maya (illusion) of gross body-subtle body-mind-intellect, debase- irritation-illness-grief, happiness-sadness-hit-and-run can keep the moon-shine like consciousness covered? ... The moonshine of the bliss of Consciousness is ever uncovered! ... As soon as the clouds go away, there remains only moonshine.

My thought-clouds were also floating me away to a plane of imagination. Suddenly I see a huge tree – elegantly standing alone with fruits and flowers. On a branch of the upper part of the tree a lovely bird is sitting, -- it brought joy to see that unmovable, silent bird – as if absorbed in the bliss of its own-self. In the lower part too, on the another branch, one more bird; exactly same beauty, same type. But the bird in the lower branch is a little restless -- cannot sit in one place quietly – just dancing around – from this branch to that branch, from this flower to that flower, tasting this fruit and that fruit. It is considering itself so happy when it is getting the fruit of its choice, -- again becoming grief-stricken when it gets the opposite! ... I was watching those two birds with utmost amazement. Those two birds with golden wings were indeed immaculately beautiful.

I was watching -- the fickle-mindedness of the lower bird. I was also observing how much it is self-slandering after consuming a distasteful flower or fruit! Again and again it was looking at the bird of the upper branch with the deepest regret! As if it is thinking, why it cannot also stay quiet like the upper one?

Certainly it would be able to! But alas! Again forgetting everything, same restlessness – again from this branch to that branch – again to taste different fruits ripe, unripe, bitter, bad, sour, sweet.

I was just witnessing the dance of joy and fret from sufferings; and time to time its ardent upward attention towards the quiet, meditative bird sitting up above! Finally, I saw, as if it has come to very close seat of the upper bird – its body too is smeared with tender light from moonshine. The radiance around the body of that upper bird was like the aura around the full moon. ...

In that radiant moonshine I could see, as if, both the birds got merged. Gradually all got -- disappeared! There remained only pleasant moonshine extended until the horizon. Only light, light only!

I understood, the lower bird was merely very gross appearance of the upper bird merely – utterly, only, its reflection. Or, the real nature of that restless bird was verily that immovable quiet bird. Essentially they are not two – one and inseparable. All these running around, eating of different fruits again and again, alternately becoming happy and sad – all are only its temporary play – only a very fleeting dream! In its own nature it too is that upper bird, which is dignified with silence, sober with tranquility, beyond sorrow and grief – ātmārām, the existence soul. ...

The sky has become stainless, clean by that time. It is dead of night. The full moon is still floating in the sky my mind with its fullest moonshine. ...

I realized. – the identity of those two birds is very much known to me. That upper seating bird is verily the Paramatma – whose another name is Sri Ramakrishna. The sum total of His power is called paramā prakriti, “deva-atmā shaktim swa-gunaih nigurhām -- Sri Sarada.

Some part of that horizon-touching infinite moonshine radiating from Her body only, got condensed to form the other bird – the individual self, who is the enjoyer of joy and grief, that one sitting in the lower branch! In the moonshine, made from the Sarada-powered moonlight, it itself is moonshine. Sitting in the lower branch, through the experiences of illness-suffering-bitterness-affliction different tastes of life, by enduring all of these, gradually looks

upward and starts to feel the presence of its own real Self. At the end it gets dissolved in its own form. The moonshine of the forest becomes one with Sri Ramakrishna-Sarada moonshine, -- in other words, it can realize immediately, aparoksha, that the part of Sarada is none but Sarada alone!



Abbot George Burke (Swami Nirmalananda Giri) of the *Light of the Spirit Monastery*, Atma Jyoti Ashram, in USA interpreted this journey of lower bird to the higher one in a unique way. He has seen it from a monk's (yati) perspective. He wrote -- *The word monk actually means a wanderer. This is because in the ancient times in India the wandering ascetics who moved about teaching dharma were given this title. Obviously they were not married, as their mode of life prevented that, and their life was dedicated to spiritual discipline and teaching. ... They were simply those who sacrificed personal life to serve others. It was a noble way of life, but not a separation. The original Christian ascetics were just the same. They wore ordinary clothes and were considered Christian laity. The only distinctive thing about them was their way of life. The men usually lived on the edge of towns, usually as hermits. The women lived together in houses within the town for mutual protection. In the eyes of everyone they were pious bachelors and spinsters, not at all distinct from other Christians in an official sense.*

That is the historical background, but what is the meaning for us today? No matter where we might live, or how, we must all be “wanderers” in the spirit, aware with both Saint Paul and Saint Peter that we are “strangers and pilgrims on the earth” (Hebrews 11:13; I Peter 2:11).

Jesus told someone: “The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head” (Matthew 8:20). This is actually the truth about every single sentient being on the earth: there is no place where we can come to rest and be at home, for our nature is Spirit and our home is Infinity.

So the yatis spoken of here are those who have become rootless in relation to this world. Or more to the point, those who have recognized that they have no roots in the world, only in God. (“The world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world.” Galatians 6:14). And so in their hearts they are always on pilgrimage back to the Source, aware that wherever they may be it is only a temporary accommodation on the long journey home—to Brahman.



Vaishnavas often consider the upper bird as Sri Krishna and Arjuna the lower one. Sri Krishna says, “among the *pandavas* I am Arjuna”, also, Arjuna approaches Sri Krishna only through His teachings.



Swami Sarvapriyananda, present head of the Vedanta Society of New York, in one of his lectures on this tale of two birds, looked at this metaphor in the light of another well-known verse from *Brihat-Aranyaka Upanishad*. That verse says,

Om purna mada purna midam
Purnāt purnam udachyate
Purnasya purnam adāya
Purnam eva vasishyate.
(Chapter 5, Brahmana15)

Meaning, *that Brahman is infinite, this manifestation is also infinite. This infinite has come from this infinite; if one can recognize that infinite,*

That infinite alone remains.

The higher bird is infinite. The lower bird is the manifested reality or the appearance of the higher bird. In this lower bird if one recognizes the higher bird, the higher bird alone remains.



The story teaches us about the journey from *asat* to *Sat*, from darkness to light, death to deathlessness, from *Prakriti* to *Purusha* from limited to limitless, from duality to non-duality, from reflected consciousness to Absolute consciousness from *Ahmakara* (of “doer-ship”) to dissolution of *Ahamkara* and *Ego*.

And, the teachings of the Upanishads are not limited to any specific time, people or country. Anyone may visualize these two birds. through the medium of one’s choice. For example, Mr. Marc Bertorelli, our artist of this window painting -- we have heard from our long-time devotees that he was a construction worker and helped the Swamis to put together the cabins on the women’s side during the early stages of Vivekananda Monastery, Ganges.

He subsequently developed back injury and hence took up sculpture work.

Swami Bhashyanandaji had told him about the *Mundaka Upanishad* and the two birds and gave him a couple of books to read. He afterwards conceived the idea himself and proceeded to do the sculpting.

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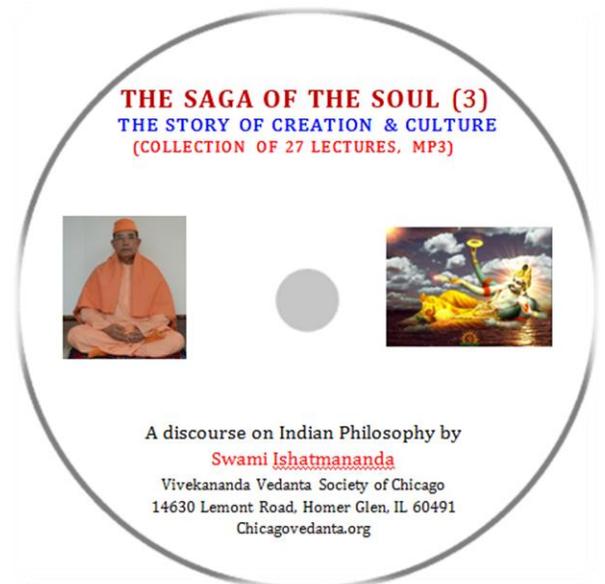
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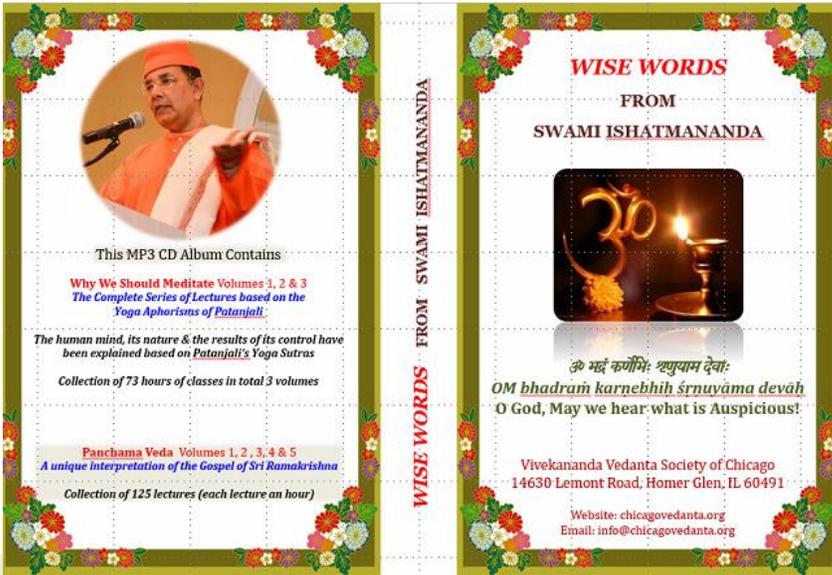


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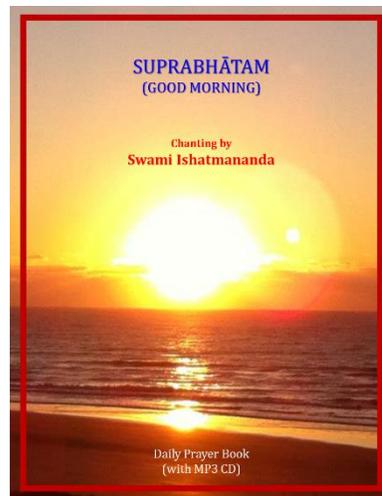
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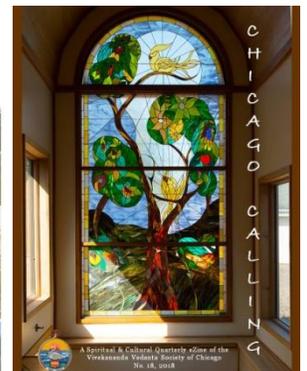
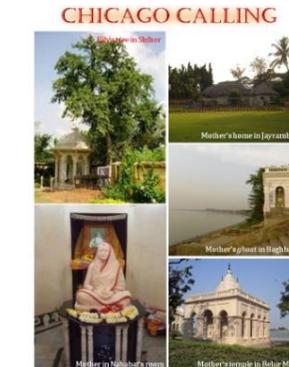
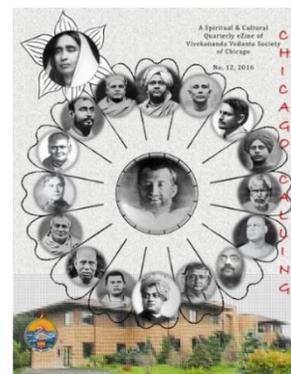
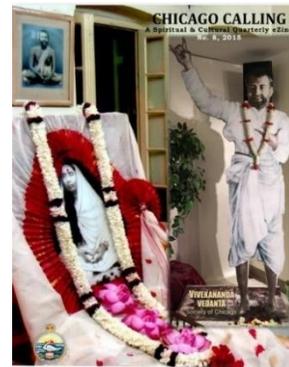
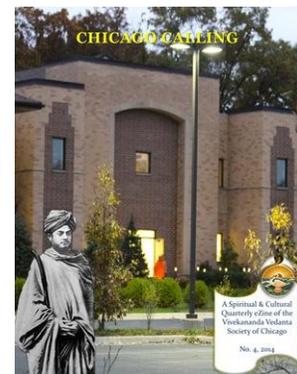
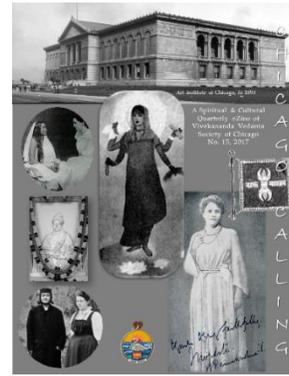
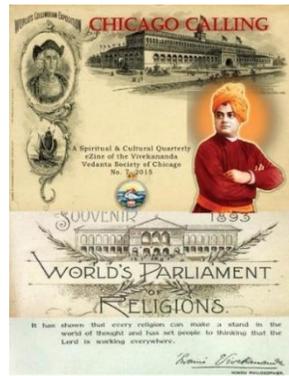
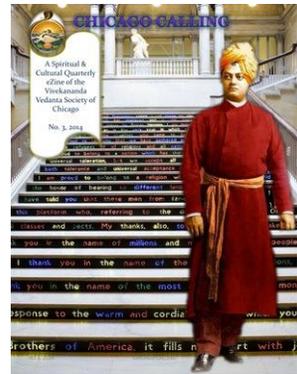
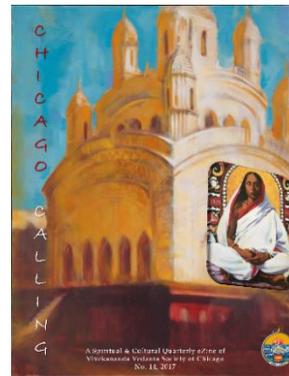
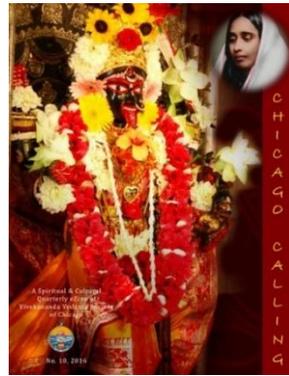
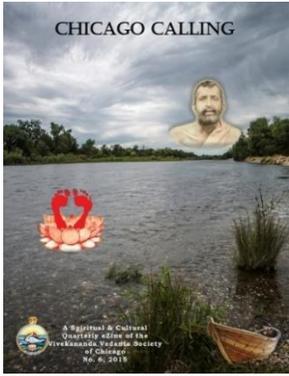
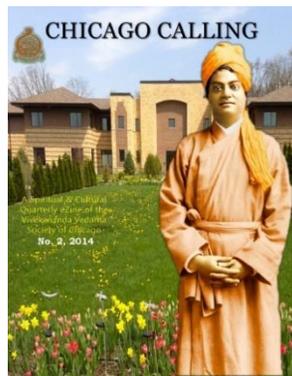
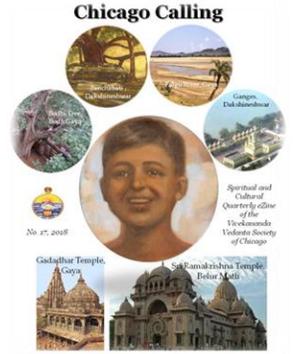
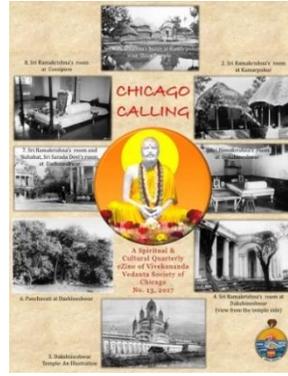
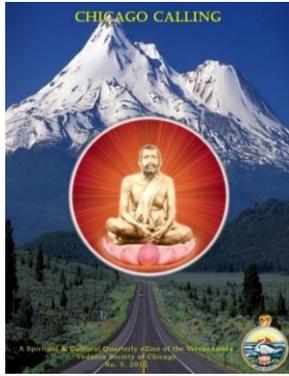
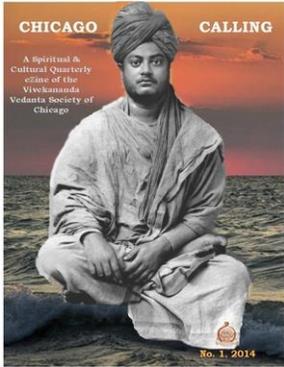
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