



A Spiritual & Cultural
Quarterly eZine of the
Vivekananda Vedanta Society
of Chicago
No. 22, 2019



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Editorial: The Philosophy of The Bhagavata

The Bhagavata is one of the famous literatures of the Hindus, popularly known as a book of Divine Life.

The Bhagavata philosophy is based on direct experience of the absolute Reality.

The philosophy has two aspects

1. Theoretical – also known as Brahma-vada.
2. Practical – also known as Bhagavata-Dharma.

Brahma-Vada or the Theoretical part of the Bhagavata asserts that Brahman or Atman is the only absolute Reality-that is the essence of Bhagavata philosophy.

According to this philosophy-this universe, including body-mind and ego is an expression of this reality.

But this view, God is everything, should not be mistaken as Pantheism.

The Bhagavata philosophy supports Pan-en-theism-everything has been created from the one absolute reality and the reality transcends the universe.

Like the other philosophies the Bhagavata philosophy also accepts four pramanas-four methods of proof

1. Direct Perception
2. Inference
3. Comparison from the holy lives of the Rishis and
4. Veda.

The Absolute pure consciousness has been described in Vedantic literatures as – Paramatman, Pratyagatman, Brahman, Atman, Purushottama, Akshra, Turiya, Bhuma and many other names.

The Bhagavata calls it as Krishna, Hari, Vasudeva, Narayana etc.

The Bhagavata accepts both the aspects of the reality – Impersonal, Absolute being and also the Personal aspect of the Supreme being.

Without form and with form.

The Personal God, God with form is not an abstract imaginary entity but a concrete being.

The personal god is known as Vishnu.

The Bhagavata uphold the concept of Avatara and also Bhagavat.

'Bhagavat' means one who has realized the 'Bhaga' or the Gracious Lord. Any human by sincere effort can become 'Bhagavat'- the realized Soul.

But 'Bhagavat' can never become 'Avatar'.

Avatara is one who brings down the kingdom of heaven on earth.

Human beings get a conception of God through Avatara.

The Absolute Reality, the pure-consciousness has been realized as Purusha.

Through the analysis of three mental stages - waking, dream and dreamless, we find the pure-consciousness and understand that the phenomenal world is nothing but our mind's projection.

Similarly Purusha projects the world out of itself.

The concept of Purusha, is thus helpful in understanding the identity of man, God and Nature.

This Purusha is none other than God.

The Bhagavata philosophy accepts the conception of Maya – the power of God. Within Maya everything is relative.

God creates Jagat, the Universe, through Maya.

Man creates Samsara, his world, through Mind.

The Bhagavata suggests some spiritual practices to realize the Reality.

1. Love – Special emphasis has been given on the emotional aspect. Love flows from both side-God and Man. When God loves a human, it is known as Grace. When human loves God it is known as Bhakti. Object of Bhakti may be the Personal God or an Avatara.
2. Service – Pure love express itself as Service, Selfless service is considered as one of the highest of all kind of worship of God
3. Worship – Worship is the extreme expression of Reverence, Service and Love. Worship can be offered only to him whom we love and adore
4. The Goal – The highest goal of life is – Mukti. 'Mukti' means, achieving, getting back the natural divinity and the perfection of the soul. 'Mukti' can be achieved only by the Superconscious experience of the Absolute.

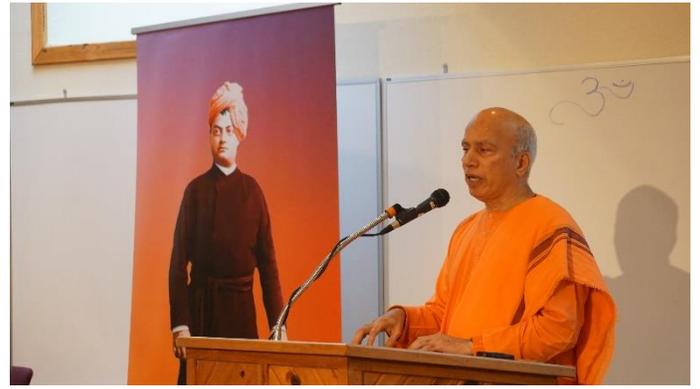
The philosophy of the Bhagavata is very practical – its main propounder is Sri Krishna about whom Swami Vivekananda said – Sri Krishna is the great teacher in the history of the world to discover and proclaim the grand truths of Love for Love's sake and Duty for Duty's sake. Accordingly to Sri Ramakrishna- Bhagavata is sweet as cake fried in the butter of wisdom and soaked in the honey of love.

ADVAITA VEDANTA: BASICS

SWAMI TYAGANANDA

Ramakrishna Vedanta Society, Boston

This article is based on the talk delivered during
September 2018 spiritual retreat in Ganges.



*OM asato maa sad-gamaya |
tamaso maa jyotir-gamaya |
mrtyor-maa amrtam gamaya |
OM shaantih shaantih shaantih ||*

May the divine lead us from the unreal to the real; from darkness to light; from death to immortality. Let the divine consciousness fill our hearts and protect us.

We will get to hear in the course of this retreat, the three major schools of Vedanta, their perspectives, and also the possibility of harmonizing them. It's helpful to see how these different perspectives even came about. A lot of philosophical approaches have developed as a result of human beings experiencing things within themselves and in the world outside, then trying to interpret their experiences; trying to understand what's going on, and trying to find answers to the questions that arose in their heart.

One of the experiences that is common to our human situation is the experience of both joy and sorrow. There are times when we are happy, calm, peaceful, and there are times when we are stressed, anxious, and worried. Given a choice, we would all like to be always peaceful and calm. However, unfortunately, that doesn't seem to happen. It's possible that at some point human beings, at least some human beings, began to ask themselves, "When and how can I hold on to those few times my life, perhaps a few times during the day, when I'm really calm and peaceful, and what do I need to do in order to remove the stress and anxiety, worry and fear, and all of these

negativities?" This kind of self-questioning and trying to understand our experiences led to a general feeling in the human mind that at some unspecified time in the past, it was possible that everything was really good. Everything was peaceful. Everything was wonderful. Somehow, things are not so good now. But, how exactly did this change occur—change from that ideal state to the present, not such an ideal state? Nobody knew.

When we experience something, but we have no idea how it started, then usually we resort to the language of myth. That's how different myths have appeared at different points in history, in different traditions, to explain or describe how that fall from the ideal state occurred. In the language of myth, different stories have come. One of the well-known stories in the Western world comes from the Bible. The story is that, when God created Adam and Eve, He gave them a place to stay in Paradise, the Garden of Eden, where everything was perfect. No tension, no problem. Everything was just ideal. God told them not to eat the fruit of a certain tree. Mark Twain once said, "God didn't know human psychology. If you want people do something, tell them not to do it." Adam and Eve began that tradition. God told them not to eat the fruit of the tree, but they just went out and did exactly that. Then, of course, we read how that act of disobedience to God threw them out of the Garden of Eden, and that fall, the fall from the grace, occurred, and that's where we are now. That's one way of understanding how that perfect state was lost and the present imperfect experience came into being.

Myth is nothing but a story that human beings tell to understand what may have happened and how we can rectify the situation. There is a story in Vedanta as well. And the story is that in the beginning the reality was this one undivided, conscious presence. The word that is often used in the Upanishads for this reality is "Brahman". Brahman is not the name of a person. It doesn't mean some force or energy or anything like that. Brahman simply means the vast, the all-pervading. The problem that people who thought about this one undivided reality had to figure out was, "How did this one infinite reality suddenly become many?" We may talk about the One. We may write poetry about it. We might sing songs about it, but our present experience is anything but the One. We just see diversity at every level. This One, though it sounds like a very exotic idea, is not a part of our experience. So, the question is, how did this one undivided reality come to be many, which is our present experience. At the Parliament of Religions, Swami Vivekananda said, "The Hindu is bold. He says 'I do not know how this mess occurred.'" When we say I do not know, that is an affirmation of our ignorance. When we don't know something, that is ignorance. The Vedanta story begins with ignorance, because how this occurred is not known.

Ignorance has a great capacity. It can do amazing things. One experience that these early thinkers turned to was an experience in their own life. We all have lots of ignorance, but there is one specific instance of ignorance that occurs at least once in a twenty-four hour cycle and that is when we go to sleep. Because sleep, by definition, really means ignorance of the waking world. Think about it this way—every night when you switch off the light and lie on your bed, you may turn and toss for a while. At that point, you know exactly who you are, and you know exactly where you are. If someone asks you, "Where are you?" You say, "I'm in my bed." If they ask you, "Who are you? What's your name?" You can tell your name. Yet suddenly,

at some point, no one knows the exact moment, you fall asleep. If you have a sleeping APP, you might know next morning when you fell asleep. You yourself don't know that moment. You suddenly don't know any longer who you are. You don't know where you are. Sleep has this magical quality that suddenly in an instant, you find yourself in an entirely different world. We just call it the dream. The dream world. Really, nothing has changed. Just that as you lay in your bed, you knew who you were, and then you forgot who you were. In the dream, I not only see the dream world, but I see one person in my dream and I say, "That's me." The entire dream is projected from me. Maybe I'm the only person sleeping in that room. I forget myself and a whole new world is created. This whole world is a projection of my own mind. In that world, I just look at the one person in my dream world and say, "That's me." Therefore, I'm experiencing the dream in two ways

1. I'm experiencing the entire dream from the "real me", who is asleep.

2. Then there is a "fake me" in the dream experiencing the dream world, when I get identified with this one person in my dream.

Now, here is a question. Brahman, of course, is a very impersonal entity, but the word that often gets used in religious language is 'God'. If you want to refer to Brahman in the language of love, you should feel free to call Brahman 'God', recognizing that we are not using the word 'God' in the very popular sense when we are referring to Brahman. So, here is the question. When I fall asleep, I forget my identity and then create the dream world. What would happen if Brahman fell asleep? Now, that's just absolutely a ridiculous question, because Brahman is consciousness and falling asleep means being mostly unconscious. So, asking the question, "What would happen if Brahman fell asleep?" is like asking what would happen if consciousness became unconscious? Ridiculous! It can never happen. But on the other hand, when I am asleep in my bed and

suddenly find myself in Hawaii in my dream, it never happened because all the time I was in my bed. However, apparently, I can be in some different world in my dream. In exactly the same way, just as I cannot be in my bed and in Hawaii at the same time, Brahman cannot fall asleep. Really, it's not difficult to speculate what might happen. It's a very skeptical "If". If Brahman fell asleep, what would happen? It is pretty much what would happen when I fall asleep. When I fall asleep, I forget myself and I project a dream. When Brahman would fall asleep, Brahman would forget that "I am Brahman". In reality, Brahman, as we read about Brahman in the texts, is infinite. Just like in my dream, I'm no longer "me" because in my dream I can be dancing and running about here and there while the real "me" is asleep. Similarly, in Brahman's dream, Brahman is no longer Brahman. Brahman is infinite, but in the dream, Brahman has become finite. Brahman is immortal. In the dream, Brahman has become mortal. This entire cosmos, these galaxies and stars and rivers and mountains and everything that we see is a dream that Brahman is having. In that dream, Brahman looks at one living being and says, "That's me." All of us experience that 'me' in our hearts. The "me" that we experience in our hearts is the 'me' that Brahman is experiencing in Brahman's dream world.

That very situation is a separation from our true identity. When I start dreaming, I get separated from my real identity, and I acquire a dream identity. Similarly, when Brahman sleeps, Brahman forgets Brahman's real identity and acquires, for instance, a human identity. Brahman, which is truly divine, is no longer divine in the dream but human. That is the kind of myth that is told in Vedanta. Why do I call it a myth? Because it didn't really happen. All that has happened is that Brahman may have slept. Even of that we are not sure. All that we know is that right now we feel that we are mortal, we are imperfect, we have all these limitations, and we are trying to figure out

how these limitations came upon us. The story that we read in the Upanishads is that this is one way how our mortality, our limitations can be understood, but in reality, we are infinite and free.

What do I need to do to get out of the dream? Just wake up! We don't need to do anything else. But think about it this way. Now, in the dream, this "me" that I experience is the "me" that Brahman is experiencing. It's Brahman's experience of "me" that is now manifesting in our hearts. But when we look at the world around us, a question naturally comes – "Where did it come from?" Somebody has made it. You see a chair. The chair couldn't have just come by itself. It was manufactured somewhere. Similarly, I look at this world and ask, "Where did it come from?" That's how we then think about a being from whom this world emerges. One who projects or creates this world—Srishti. One who is responsible for maintaining this universe—Sthithi. One into whom this entire world gets absorbed—Pralaya. I conclude that there is one being from whom this entire world came. This thought could arise in any living being. However, as we are all human beings here, I'm just looking at it from a very human standpoint. Since each one of us is a person, we tend to think of answers to these questions in very personal terms. Therefore, what comes to mind is some Super Being who is still very personal. That's how we see that Being—as the one who controls this universe from outside, who is the ruler of the universe. That is called Ishvara. The "Ish" Dhatu (root word) in Sanskrit means to rule. Ishvara or Parameshwara, the Supreme Ruler. It's an effort that I make as one among the multitude of beings in this world trying to see who may have made this world, who preserves it and into whom it gets dissolved. This Ishvara that I conceive is a very personal being, just as I'm a very personal being myself.

Every entity that we see in our dreams is equally real. Because as long as the dream lasts, everyone in the dream lasts.

When the dream is over, everything is over. This personal being that I see, Ishvara, is as real as me. Yet, I know what a big difference there is between Parameshwara, the Supreme Being, who is supreme in every way, and me who is so little. Therefore, there is this experience of separation that I feel from the Supreme Being.

When I look within my own personality, I find that one of the ways of understanding my personality is to see that it's at least threefold. There is a visible part of me, the body, which I can see and everyone can see. Then there is an invisible part of me, the mind, including intellect, the ego, thoughts, emotions, feelings, memories, everything—in other words, everything which is a part of me, which a surgeon will not find when my body is cut open. That's the invisible part of me. There is third part of me within me, called the spirit. According to Vedanta, the body and the mind are both material. The third part, Spirit (Chaitanya), is non-material. Sometimes we make too big a deal about our mind. But from a philosophical standpoint, both body and mind are material, and they're not very different from one another. The only difference is that I can see the one, and I cannot see the other. In every other respect they are identical. We know that the body gets tired. Mind can get tired. You put junk in the body, you fall ill. You put junk in the mind, the mind falls ill. They both have their doctors. As both are material, they act and interact upon one another. That's why even modern medicine believes that most of the illnesses that we have are psychosomatic in nature. We know from our own experience that if the body is not well and if it remains unwell for a long time, very often it affects the state of mind. Likewise, if the mind is not doing well and it remains unwell for a long time, we know that it affects the body as well. Therefore, the reason body and mind are able to act and interact upon one another is because they belong to the same level. But there is something else within us, which doesn't change. If you line up all

the photographs of you right from a very young age up to this point, you will see that you don't look alike in all those photographs. Clearly, there's so much that has changed. When we were born, we weighed a just few pounds. Now we weigh much more. So, physically we have changed. Mentally, our thoughts, emotions, feelings keep on changing with age, with circumstances, with situations. In spite of so many changes in the body and mind, I somehow feel that I'm still the same person. If something has remained unchanged within me, it is the Spirit.

Now, think about how many separations have occurred. Brahman has fallen asleep. This whole world is projected from the Brahman's mind. Within that world, Brahman zeroes in on some person and says, "That's me." So, there is a separation between Ishvara and this individual Jiva. Then, within the Jiva there is body and mind, and oftentimes the body and mind are not in harmony. So, there is a separation between the body and the mind. The spirit has always remained separate. Most of us are not even aware that there is something called Spirit within us. Most of us are just caught up in our own physical and mental worries and tensions. The mind itself, psychologists say, is also divided. There is a conscious part of the mind, and there is an unconscious part of the mind. Most of our mind is unconscious. We ourselves have no idea what's going on within us. We are aware of only a little part of our mind. So, the mind itself has gotten divided.

As if all these separations were not enough, we look at the world outside and we find more separations. Separation between human beings. People might live in a family, but not everyone feels that oneness, so there is a separation between one person and another. For one reason or the other people fight, quarrel. There is separation between our talents, our knowledge, our skills and ourselves.

For instance, when you take up a job somewhere, you get separated from the products of your own work. Oftentimes when you take up a job, a part of your life, whether it's eight hours or ten hours, no longer belongs to you. It belongs to your employer. The employer in return for the time of your life gives you some money. My skills, my talent, which I think are a part of me, are evaluated by my employer. My employer says, "Depending on this skill, this much is what I'm going to pay." So, my skills also go on the market place of the world. What are all these job interviews and resumés? It's another product that we sell. Just as shopkeepers sell us their goods, when you go for a job interview, you are the product. Therefore, we say this is what this product can do. In this marketplace of the world, we're consumers of products and we're also the products ourselves.

Think about what a terrible degeneration has occurred. This one infinite being just fell asleep. This World appeared, and this infinite being became finite, mortal, worried. Tried to figure out from where this world came. That's how Ishvara appeared, and I began feeling my separation from Ishvara. Within me my body and mind got separated. Within my mind, my conscious and unconscious parts are separated. I'm separated from other people in the world. I'm separated from the part of my life when I have to work. We are no longer whole. We have become fragmented. As long as we remain fragmented, we cannot be happy. If somebody chops off parts of me and puts them everywhere, how can I be happy? Only when everything kind of comes together as a whole, could I be happy. Therefore, all of these spiritual practices that we see are primarily meant to bring that wholeness. Apparently, my wholeness has gotten shattered into these hundreds of bits and pieces. The different ways of trying to remove those separations and getting back to being who I really am is what spiritual practice is all about. Depending on what kind of story we tell, depending on how we think the problem came to be in the first place, our solution will be

determined. The biblical story I mentioned told how that ideal state was lost. The story stated that the fall from that ideal state occurred as a result of disobedience to God. Since the problem is disobedience, the solution is obedience. That's how obeying the Lord's commandments becomes the primary practice. Therefore, the solution depends on how the story is framed.

One of the ways in which the story is told is about self-forgetfulness, and that is what sleep is. So, if the story is that Brahman, somehow, apparently, we don't know for sure, but apparently fell asleep, and the result of the sleep is this dream. If it's a pleasant dream, we wouldn't want to get up. But if it's a nightmare, then the sooner we get up, the better it is. The only way to get out of a terrible dream is just to wake up. We might find some solutions in the dream. If a tiger is chasing me, of course I can run for my life. I can get a gun and try to kill it. There are solutions in my dream. Let's say a tiger is chasing me. Well, what are the options before me? Well, first of all, save myself, and then I can try various ways to solve the problem. Another way exists, and that is just to wake up now. Waking up doesn't really solve the problem. If a tiger is chasing me in my dream and I suddenly wake up, the problem is not really solved. I really don't know what happened to the tiger, what happened to me. But the whole problem is dissolved. So, you're not solving the problem. You're really dissolving the entire dream.

The problem is this — in our dream, if we knew it was a dream, we could walk out of it anytime. Just wake up. Most of the time we don't know that it's a dream. That's the problem. So, in my dream, if a friend were to come and tell me, "Hey, it's only a dream." I would roll my eyes and say, "What! What nonsense! It's all real", because that's how our dream appears to be. We know that dream to be a dream only when we wake up and not when we are dreaming. That is the real problem. The Upanishads, the Gita and all of these great Vedanta teachers have been telling us again and again that this is a dream.

You are the infinite being pure and perfect. I would just say, "Yeah, yeah, yeah." I mean, it feels good, but it really doesn't change our life. Religion is not just about making us feel good. True religion is actually bringing about a transformation. The major challenge is that we don't know that dream to be a dream in reality. Shankaracharya in his commentary, says the greatest miracle, the Maya, is this—the Upanishads keep on telling us tirelessly that you are the Atman, you are the infinite, you're pure and perfect, and yet we don't wake up. Sometimes it might make sense intellectually, but in real life it doesn't really change us much. Nobody has ever told us that we are this body, and yet we believe it very strongly. That's real Maya! Nobody has told us that we are human beings, and, yet, we are very convinced that we are. Even after reading hundreds of Vedanta books where you have been told that you are a divine being, that doesn't really change our daily life much. That is Maya! So, what can we do? Clearly, and to put it very briefly, the first thing is to cultivate a very healthy skepticism—not take things at their face value. Don't accept anything just because it appears to be so in some way. Always question. That is what Sri Ramakrishna asked all of his disciples to do. Always question! Swami Vivekananda says in one place that he questioned his master at every step. Those of us, who have read his life, know how skeptical he was. He tested everything. Sri Ramakrishna knew he was being tested and he liked it. He never got offended. He said, "Don't you believe what I'm saying? You're doubting it?" That's what he wanted. It's a healthy form of skepticism. Swamiji says that because he questioned his master at every step, he knew every inch of the way. So just nodding our head to whatever a Swami says, thinking that it must be true, is not I think the right approach. Accept only what makes sense to you.

If it resonates with your head and heart accept it. Otherwise, keep on questioning. If something

does make sense to me, then I must, somehow, make it a part of my life. It won't do to say, "Oh, yes, I accept that everything is one. I accept that I'm truly infinite", and then go about the rest of my life living as if I'm a very finite, mortal, human being. That doesn't make sense. So again, as I said, don't accept anything blindly. But after you have thought about it, after you find it both intellectually and emotionally fulfilling, satisfying, then don't let it remain only at the level of the intellect. Swamiji used to say that it should mingle in every drop of the blood and just become a part of who I am. In other words, it should influence the way I think, it should influence the way I speak, the way I relate with people and with the world. It should influence the way I do my work.

Obviously, we're not going to be perfect at it. It's natural for a perfect person to live like a perfect person. But, for an ignorant person to live like an enlightened person is difficult. But that's the practice. Shankaracharya in his commentary says that the characteristics of the enlightened become the spiritual practice of the unenlightened. One of our Brahmacharins, many years ago, was in San Francisco with Swami Ashokanandaji, the head of the center and an enlightened soul. This Brahmacharin had been in the monastery, I believe, for some five or six years and was performing spiritual practices regularly, but found that after those few years, nothing much had changed. He was getting impatient wondering when he would be enlightened. He went to Swami Ashokananda and asked, "What more do I need to do in order to become enlightened?" Swami Ashokanandaji said, "What are you waiting for? Why don't you start living now as if you're already enlightened?" I think that's the most practical advice any teacher could have given. If you have some idea about enlightenment or God realization, depending on what books you have read or what experience you have had, how do you think you will be when you realize God?

If you have some idea about what kind of experience you will have, then start living it now. Don't wait. When I will realize God, I will do like that. It doesn't work that way. What you're going to do after God realization, start doing now. You're not going to be able to do it perfectly, because you've not realized God. So, an unrealized person trying to live like a realized person will be very imperfect. When we do anything new, we are never perfect. If you start learning violin, for instance, or any musical instrument, your first day is never going to be perfect. But if you keep on practicing day after day, month after month, year after year, gradually, efficiency will increase and quality will increase. Once you become an expert, then you can play that violin or any other instrument very effortlessly. Similarly, as an unenlightened being, if I resolve that from this very moment, I'm going to live like an enlightened being, of course, it's not going to be perfect. I'm going to fail miserably. But, if without being discouraged, I can say day after day that no matter how often I fail, I'm going to think the way an enlightened being thinks; I'm going to relate with other people in the world as an enlightened being would do; I am going to do everything like an enlightened person; If I keep on practicing it day after day, slowly, I'm going to get better at it. If I can live like an enlightened being, even for five minutes, that's still good. If I can do that for five minutes, it gives me hope. If I can do it for five minutes now, maybe after a month or two or six months, I may be able to do it for six minutes, then seven minutes. Eventually if I can do it twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, I'm already enlightened.

Sometimes we tend to think about enlightenment as some kind of a very a dramatic change. It may happen through God's grace. I'm not saying that won't happen. What I'm saying is,

until that happens, we can try to help God, go nearer to that goal a little bit. So why not just begin with saying, let me be enlightened for thirty seconds and then increase it to one minute, two minutes. This way a gradual march towards enlightenment can occur. What it will ultimately end up with is that I suddenly wake up and find that all of this was simply a dream. That all along it was just a dream. Maybe, I may not, because there never was really a dream. So even that awareness that this was a dream may not last long.

I'll just conclude by mentioning what Swami Shivananda Maharaj used to say, "What's the big deal about realizing God? Essentially, you're just going to be what you already are." You're not going to get anything new. Right now, I am what I am. Even now, even at this very moment, we're already Brahman. There is nothing much to do. What we have to do is really a negative work. This kind of a cloud that has come separating me from who I am. I just have to remove the cloud and then discover that there was never really a cloud to begin with. That's the approach Advaitins take. That may not be the right statement. A better statement would be, "If my mind thinks along these lines, then I can say this is the way my non-dualistic mind is thinking." Therefore, don't approach these things as some fixed philosophy—Dvaita, Advaita, Vishishta-advaita. It's a burden to choose one of these three. You don't have to choose anything. All that you have to do is look at your life, think about your situation, think about what you would like to be thinking. Read, listen, and see which approach makes the best sense to you. Depending on whichever way is best suited to your temperament, to your approach, to your personality, that will be your own specific way of waking up. These are some of the thoughts that come to mind, if you try to reflect about the human situation from a non-dualistic perspective.

TRAVELOGUE, 2018: SOUTH EAST ASIA (PART 2)

SWAMI ISHATMANANDA

Vivekananda Vedanta Society of Chicago

In the last issue of the magazine, I covered my 2018 travel to Bangkok, Thailand. On 30th Jan, 2018, after two days of stay in Bangkok, we took leave from the devotees there and came to Suvarnabhumi Airport. Our next destination was Seam Reap, Cambodia.

Seam Reap is the home of the Angkor temples; the most famous of them are Angkor Wat and Bayon. The Angkor temples were built during the Khmer Empire or, officially, the Angkor Empire. The Khmer Empire was a Hindu-Buddhist empire in Southeast Asia. They started as a Hindu empire but later incorporated Buddhist traditions. At its highest point, the empire ruled over most of mainland Southeast Asia comprising current day Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Thailand and the northwest part of Malaysia.

To understand the Angkor temples, we need to know about the Angkor Empire, which was one of the most prominent Indianized empires outside of ancient India. At its peak during the 11th – 13th centuries, the Angkor Empire was the largest urban center in the world. The Empire was immensely powerful and wealthy; it patronized art, culture, architecture, and urban planning. At the same time it tried to harmonize Hinduism and Buddhism, adopting the concept of Harihara (which united Shaiva and Vaishnava sects) and later fusing it with the Buddhist bodhisattva concept to ascribe divinity to the royal family. The empire began during the ninth century when King Jayavarman II declared himself Rajchakravarty, the emperor. The highest points of the empire were reached during the reigns of Suryavarman II (building Angkor Wat) in the 12th century and later Jayavarman VII (building Angkor Thom) and Jayavarman VIII (last defender of Angkor hegemony in Southeast Asia) in the 13th century.

We will talk about the monuments to their achievements later.

One question has puzzled tourists and researchers alike for over a century—Why did the emperors build such huge temple complexes in the middle of jungles and rice paddies? The recent advances in satellite imaging have provided a plausible answer. The advanced LIDAR technology has shown that once there were gigantic cities and urban structures around the temple complexes. It showed almost 750 square miles of densely populated cities, with sophisticated canals and irrigation systems. It might have been the largest empire on earth in its peak. Now, the current jungles around the temples sit on top of the old civilization.

What caused this empire to fall into oblivion for centuries? Multiple social, economic, cultural and ecological reasons are postulated for the demise of the empire. The Angkor Empire was based on its agricultural prosperity. The Khmers built an extensive network of canals and reservoirs (we will visit one of them during our stay) that not only prevented floods, but also provided water for three harvests of rice per year. They were also a practical means of transportation. Because of population pressure, however, the nearby Kulen hills were cleared of forests for residential areas and rice paddies. The exposed areas created water runoffs that resulted in violent floods downstream. The silt buildup in canals and reservoirs due to the floods contributed to even more floods later. That had a disastrous effect on the agrarian economy. Also, there was endless infighting within the empire and the onslaught of outside enemies like the Mongols from China and the Sukhothai from the then new Thai Kingdom of Ayutthaya (we discussed them in last installment of the travelogue).

The weakened empire could not bear the cost of the wars.

But, the great Angkor Empire was built by war and always maintained the labor-intensive drainage canal system. They were fierce warriors and devoted builders. What happened then? One controversial explanation is that it was the effect of Theravada Buddhism. That may explain the apparently confusing beliefs of the ancient Khmers as seen in the temples we would visit.

There were two main traditions (in the broadest and simplest terms) of the Buddhism that moved out of India. The Mahayana tradition went toward northwestern neighbors like Afghanistan, Iran and central Asia. It also crossed the Himalayas to reach China and then spread eastward to current day Mongolia, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, as well as Taiwan, Japan and Korea. The other tradition went southward. It became established in Sri Lanka as Theravada Buddhism, which then spread throughout Southeast Asia. The Angkor Emperors first started as defenders of the Hindu faith. Then, when Mahayana Buddhism came, they tried to incorporate the bodhisattva concept into the culture. In fact, Jayavarman VII, considered the greatest of the Angkor Emperors, was a follower of Mahayana Buddhism and built temples commemorating his parents as bodhisattvas. He and other emperors tried to balance Hinduism and the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism. Later, when the southern Theravada tradition came, it really shook the cultural foundation of the empire. The emperor lost his special significance as the first among

mortals in the eyes of his subjects. Also, the mendicant tradition that killed the ancient prosperous Mourya dynasty of India, struck at the root of the cultural fabric of agrarian hardworking Khmer society.

Now, let us come back to our journey. We reached Seap Ream in the evening and were transferred to our hotel. The next day we were to start early with the visit to Angkor Wat. We had a quick dinner and went to bed. The next day we started with a Western breakfast. We had a guide named, Sarat, who arrived with a big station wagon to carry us on the sight seeing tour. Tourism is a big contributor to the economy of Cambodia, and Angkor Wat is the star attraction, so the government tries to maximize ticket collection by charging steep entrance fees.

After getting the tickets with our photos on top, we were off to Angkor Wat. It is an inexplicable feeling of awe that rises when you come in front of the biggest temple in the world, built some thousand years back. It is not just a temple, but a temple complex. The construction started during the reign of Suryavarman II the in early 12th century. It was built to be the king's state temple. It was dedicated to lord Vishnu. Toward the late 12th century, it was converted to a Buddhist temple and continues to be so till this day. Then it was neglected for centuries until the French rediscovered it in the 19th century and started restoration of the temple complex. Still, what remains (and has been restored) inspires our imagination about what it must have been like, when it was new nine hundred years back.



Angkor Wat Outer Gallery

The day was supposed to be very hot, but by God's grace it remained cloudy. We approached the periphery of the temple complex, which is surrounded by a moat. As we took the causeway over the moat, the tall imposing towers of the temple were visible in the distance. We approached from the west side of the complex and crossed the outer enclosure. That was a memorable moment! We were formally in the temple complex, but the actual temple was quite far off. The size of the inner complex is unbelievably big. It is more than 200 acres in size, and the moat around it is more than three miles long. Our guide, Sarat, showed us the entrances for the kings, the priests and the common public. The intricate decorations of lotus motif and dancing figures on the outer wall indicated what treasure lay inside. Time had ravaged the stone structures, but still the indomitable spirit of human artistic expressions from almost a millennium ago stood in front of us.

The whole structure is made of concentric rectangular planes at ever-higher levels culminating into the main tower. From the outer enclosure to the temple proper, there is a long approach road. There are two libraries on the either side of the approach road. While we were on our way to the main temple, a little entrepreneurial Khmer girl approached us with palm juice, served in cylindrical bamboo containers, just like what is available in eastern or southern India.



Palm Juice in Angkor Wat Complex

We enjoyed the refreshingly cold natural juice and approached the outer gallery of the temple. The corridor of the outer gallery presented us with extraordinary bas-reliefs depicting scenes from Ramayana and Mahabharata. I noticed scenes from Kurukshetra battles depicted over there, as well as battles from the Ramayana. They showed how the departed souls go to the higher regions of heaven or to the nether regions of hell. Our guide tried telling us the stories behind the depictions, but we seemed to know more about them. The extraordinary level of the detail inspired us to discover more nuances in the scenes from our knowledge of the Hindu sacred literatures. The apsaras and devatas depicted there showed the nature of heavenly bliss as visualized by the unknown artists of the bygone era. There were also depictions of the fire and fury of hell. The ever-present theme of the mythical ocean churning was also there with vivid details. We couldn't even cover a tenth of the outer gallery before we got tired. The continuous trek in the difficult structure with its many stairs going up and down was wearing us out, and we needed to take some rest.

We moved on to inner and even higher levels. There we encountered a group of traditionally dressed locals who were there for photo opportunities offered to tourists. Two of the devotees who were accompanying me took some photos. We looked at the central tower in the middle of the complex but did not climb to the shrine due to the steep flight of stairs. Anyway, the Vishnu image that used to be there had been replaced when the temple was converted to Theravada Buddhist traditions and the relief friezes were replaced. We saw many more decorations around the upper levels – more devata and asura depictions. While descending back down, we saw the Vishnu image, which had been in the main shrine. We prayed together in front of that grand image and washed the feet of the Lord reverently before making our way out.

The Angkor Wat temple is an eclectic combination of grand scale, mind boggling architecture and the finest form of bas-relief art. Architectural knowledge and deep understanding of astronomy merged with Hindu tradition to define some of the features of the temple. It is a subject worthy of deep exploration and humble appreciation, which we cannot do in this short space. The intricate bas-relief works, which could be measured in square kilometers if aggregated, would necessitate days of minute inspection—not

just the couple of hours we spent there. I encourage anyone interested in architecture and Hindu culture outside ancient India to visit Angkor Wat.

We had to take some rest after the long walk in the Angkor Wat temple. The temperature was soaring now, as was the humidity. We ate some snacks and had coconut water in a make shift food court in one corner of the temple ground. Then we were off to Bayon Temple.

Inner Gallery Entrance



The Vishnu Image moved from shrine



Checking Wall Decorations



Ocean Churning Scene



Bayon temple is the most notable temple in Angkor Thom, the capital city founded by King Jayavarman VII. Jayavarman VII was the most prominent king of the Khmer Empire. After his father's death he had to win back the empire from intermediate rulers. He converted from Hinduism to Mahayana Buddhism. Bayon temple was built as a Buddhist temple. The whole of Angkor Thom was built around the Bayon Temple.

(serpent) in tug-of-war style, possibly depicting the ocean churning scene from Hindu mythology. Then there are the imposing faces on the tower gates on four sides of the towers, which are most probably the artistic representation of the face of the god-king keeping an eye on all four sides.

The city of Angkor Thom has a moat and a boundary wall around it. We approached through the south gate of Angkor Thom. The causeway is beautifully decorated with devatas on one side and asuras on other side of the road holding the naga

The ancient Khmer people built large stone edifices to the gods, but their secular buildings, including palaces, were always made of wood and other perishable items. So, no trace of them remains today. Once we entered the south gate of Angkor Thom, we were greeted by thick green forests, where there used to be a bustling city.

. We followed the road to the center of the city, which is the famous Bayon Temple.

The temple has not been restored as well as Angkor Wat, but the remaining outer walls are richly decorated even today. They depict mythological scenes and everyday events in ancient Khmer, as well as the king's court.

Prominent in those depictions is iconography of the military exploits of Jayavarman VII, mostly against Cham forces from the neighboring Champa kingdom.

Another prominent feature of Bayon is the face towers with gigantic smiling faces of

Avalokiteswara, the embodiment of compassion in Buddhism (though there are different opinions on whether they are the god-king's face instead of Avalokiteswara's face). There are around 200 such faces visible today. Though it was a Buddhist temple, there are representations of Hindu mythic gods. The inner gallery is filled with scenes from Hindu mythology with the Trimurti and scenes from Ramayana, Mahabharata and Puranas. Also, the construction follows the Vaishnavite tradition of Gopura, the Shaivite tradition of Lingam, as well as a specific Khmer architectural style commonly known as Bayon style (following the temple name). The sun became blazing hot and we were getting tired, so we started our onward journey to other temples. First to come was Phimeanakas, the pyramid shaped Hindu temple of naga legends, where the king, as legend says, used to consult a serpent. It predates Jayavarman VII by 250 years, but he incorporated this into his royal palace in Angkor Thom. The outside of the palace was a gallery, named the Terrace of Elephants. This served as a giant viewing stand for the king to address his army or common people. The terrace is decorated with vivid statues of elephants, Garudas and lions.

The Terrace of Elephants was visible from the road, but our guide insisted on showing us the palace. Arup and I didn't want to venture out from the AC car into the blazing sun, so we stayed back

in the car. Two of the accompanying devotees joined the guide to see the palace. Once they reached the palace grounds, the guide insisted that it was 'the palace', but there was no palace—not even any broken remains of it—only the open ground and forests in the distance. Then it came to us that at one time there had been a palace, so the ground is still called 'the palace' even though there is no palace now. The palace was made of wood and other organic materials, following Khmer custom for secular buildings, and was long gone leaving only the stone base, named the Terrace of the Elephants. We had a good laugh at the whole situation.

Then came the Baphuon temple, built in the eleventh century by Udayadityavarman II, so it predates the surrounding Angkor Thom city built by Jayavarman VII. It was a Hindu Shiva temple, which in the fifteenth century was converted to a Buddhist temple. There is a beautiful elevated walkway from the main gate to the temple. In its original form it had an imposing top tower made of bronze and described in Chinese literature by envoys from the contemporary Chinese empire. The top tower is now gone. Also, the next level was demolished to create a huge reclining Buddha statue at the back of the temple. There is an unfortunate story associated with this temple. During the mid-twentieth century, restoration work began, which necessitated dismantling most of the temple structure to reinforce the base. The plan was to put the temple back together in its original form with the original materials. The stone blocks were removed and carefully numbered to put them back later. But then the long tragic civil war started, and the restoration work was abandoned. The plans for placement of the 300,000 stones was also lost. The second restoration started in 1990's. It has been called the world's largest jigsaw puzzle, involving stones literally weighing tons. The current restored form follows the same structure as it was after the Buddhist transformation.

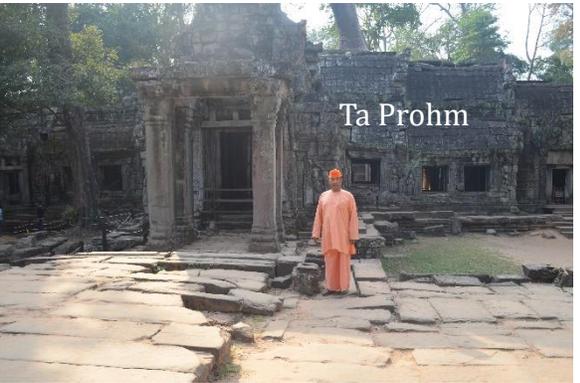
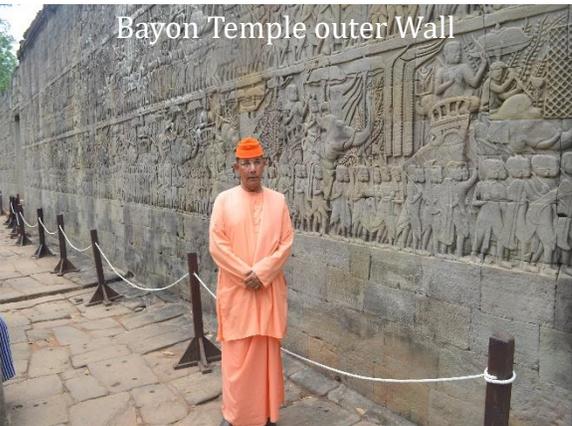
The face tower



We stopped for a lunch break now. Our guide took us to a food court serving Cambodian style food, with coconut water as the accompanying drink. We finished our lunch quickly and our next destination was Ta Prohm. Ta Prohm was built by Jayavarman VII as a Mahayana Buddhist monastery just outside the city of Angkor Thom and became a seat of learning.



Bayon Temple outer Wall



Though it is one of the most visited sites in Angkor, it was left as it is to not disturb the vegetation growing on the temple structure. The famous photos of Angkor temples with large silk-cotton trees on the structure comes from this temple, and it has been depicted in famous Hollywood movies. The main image in this temple was Prajnaparamita, the embodiment of wisdom, which was modeled after the king's mother. Arup took some more interest in taking photos not least because of the Hollywood connection! After arduously trekking around the ruins, we came out and noticed a billboard describing the restoration work being done by the Archeological Survey of India in collaboration with Cambodian authorities.

We visited enough ruined temples for the day and wanted a change of scene. So, we headed for the Tonle Sap Lake, the famous battle site of Khmer versus Chams depicted so vividly on Bayon Temple. We went to the boat.

The boat ran through swamps and marshy lands which had distinctive smells, and we were wondering if this was all there was to it. Later we learned that the vegetation around the lake was a

variety of freshwater mangrove (in contrast to the salt water mangrove found in Sundarbans in the Ganges delta) and was partly responsible for the distinctive smell. We saw the houseboats of fishermen working their nets, and we also saw a floating market on a barge catering to the lakeside communities. Fortunately, the waterway opened up to the vast expanse of the Tonle Sap Lake and we halted the boat at a vantage point to watch the setting sun. The cool evening breeze with the mildly rippling water at the time of dusk set the mood for introspection. I sat down on the front deck with the others settling down behind me. Together we chanted the Surya Pranam mantra and did japa there. We spent quite some time there floating around. The hot humid day changed into a cool breezy evening. After the sunset we started our journey back to the boat quay.

The day had been hectic with so much of walking. We wanted a relaxed dinner to balance it out. Our guide suggested a buffet dinner with a traditional dance performance, and we all agreed. It was a long drive to the restaurant, but we looked forward to a new cultural experience.

After our food was served, the performance began. The food was the standard western, eastern mishmash you may get in American Chinatowns. The performance was a novelty. It was based on a familiar Ramayana story, but enacted in a traditional Khmer way. The music was made with a traditional flute and a xylophone like instrument played with mallets. The gracefully dressed actors enacted scenes, but at a very slow rhythm compared to Indian classical dance styles. Another

curious part of the performance was the use of coconut shells by the performers themselves as a percussion instrument to rhythmically keep pace. There was also the mischievous presence of Hanuman doing naughty things in Lanka to bring some comic relief to the long performance. We enjoyed it.

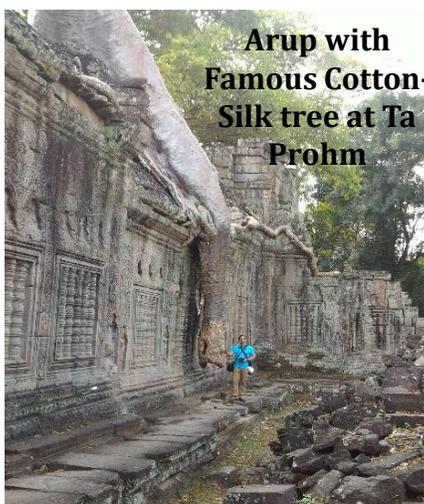
After dinner we headed back to the hotel. The next day would be packed with another round of Angkor temple visits.



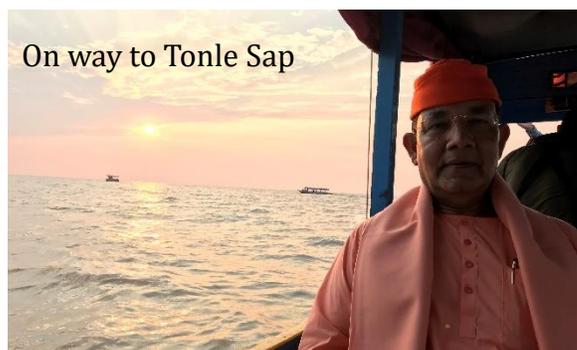
We started the next day with a visit to Preah Khan. It was built by Jayavarman VII to honor his father. Like Ta Prohm, the temple we visited on the previous day, which was built to honor the king's mother, Preah Khan deified the king's father as Bodhisattwa Avalokiteswara. The similarity continues with the current condition of the temple, which also has big trees growing on the



structure. Due to the single story nature of the monument without much vertical development, Mother Nature could not do as much damage as compared to other famous Angkor Temples.



While approaching this temple, we were fascinated by the huge Garuda statues on either side of the gate at the end of the causeway. There are 72 such statues across the compound wall. After the photo opportunity, we moved inside.



We passed by the Dharmashala, the house of the sacred flame. Then we visited the hall of dancers with depictions of celestial dancers on the lintel. Passing



through the long hallway, we came to a very unique two-story structure, which housed the namesake of the temple – Preah Khan, the sacred sword of the king. Archaeologists have found a stone tablet there, which had a Sanskrit poem inscribed on it describing over 500 divine entities located in the Preah Khan temple complex along with divine mantras.

We moved on to the inner sanctuary of the temple that once housed the Avalokiteswara image, but which is now occupied by a simple Buddhist stupa. Legend says that the king's son, Jayavaman VIII, who became king after Jayavarman VII, went back to Hinduism and turned against his father's Mahayana faith and also went against his father's attempted deification of the grandparents. He destroyed most of the Buddha statues in Preah Khan, including the one in the inner sanctuary. There were three more temples surrounding the main temple, which were dedicated to Shiva, Vishnu and departed royals. We quickly returned to the car for our next destination.

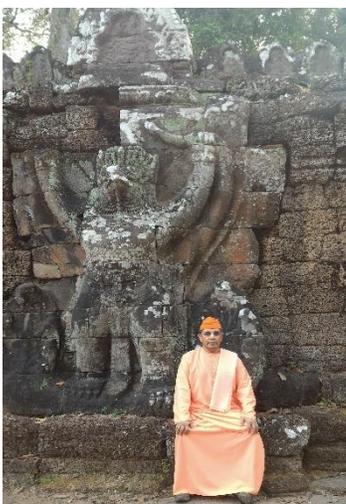
Our next destination was Neak Pean or the Dragon Temple. It is situated in the middle of the Jayatataka baray. This baray is one of the great achievements of the agrarian Khmer empire. It prevented floods and also provided water for agriculture. In the middle of the baray, Jayavarman VII built the artificial island of Neak Pean. Some historians say that Jayavarman VII built it to represent Anavatapta, the mythical Himalayan lake that never becomes hot and cools down the fire of worldly pains for the mortals. The two nagas surrounding the main temple base are Nanda and Upananda, the two serpents associated with mythical Anavatapta Lake.

You have to take a long narrow causeway over the Jayatataka baray to reach Neak Pean. Our enjoyment of the natural beauty of the vast but somewhat shallow water body was on our faces as we walked

down the causeway. On the island itself, there were five pools—a central pool connected by stone conduits to four pools on the four sides. All of these had complicated channels with mythical animal sculptures on the floor of the lakes as well as on the water conduits. Taking a bath was supposed to balance the four elements in the body—earth, water, air and fire. The island was one of the 'hospitals' or medicine centers established by Jayavarman VII.

After spending some time enjoying the place, we walked back using the same causeway. The day had become hot and humid, so we needed some refreshments after the long walk on Neak Pean. Our guide, Sarat, took us to a nearby stall. To our amazement, we found young palm fruit jelly (which we call taal saas in Bengali). It was the perfect antidote to our exhaustion. We enjoyed local coffee as well. Then we headed for our last destination, Pre Rup.

Pre Rup was a Hindu temple pyramid built by an early Khmer king, Rajendravarmān, in the tenth century. The main deity of the temple was Shiva, housed in the sanctuary of the main tower. There are four surrounding towers, which have images of Lakshmi, Uma, Vishnu and Shiva. At one time there was a huge bronze Nandi statue at the foot of the stairs for the upper levels, but now only the stone base of the statue remains. We all went up the temple stairs and took a look around the middle level.



Garuda at Preah Khan



The Cultural Performance



Ruined temple at Preah Khan

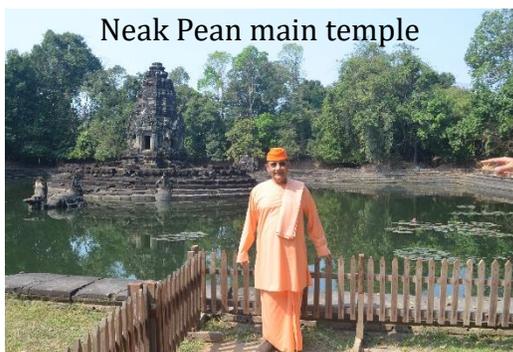
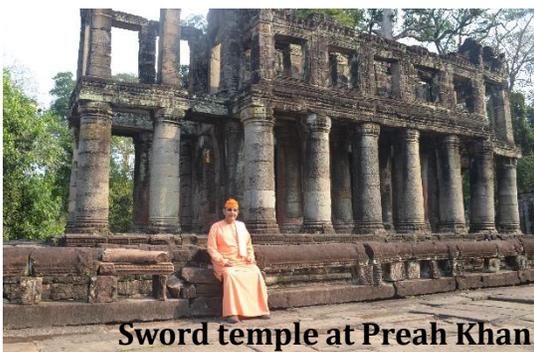
Our visit to Angkor was coming to an end, and as we stood there in a temple built a thousand years ago in a foreign land in honor of Lord Shiva, the strangely calm atmosphere around the temple made the mind soar high. I shared my feelings with the accompanying devotees. We talked about how the Shiva concept is important in Hindu tradition. We talked about Thakur and Girish Ghosh. We talked about how Shivaratri is celebrated in the Mission. Then we moved on to the upper level and entered the main sanctuary, where a new Buddha statue has been installed. But we imagined the presence of Shiva there and sang the Bengali song – “O shib ghuchao amar moner bhrom” – “O Lord Shiva, please remove the delusion of my mind”. Then we offered our pranam and came out.

Time was short! We were scheduled to fly out of Cambodia to Kuala Lumpur late that afternoon. So we asked the guide to take us to a place for a quick bite. The restaurant fortunately had some working air conditioning, and we enjoyed the simple food. I liked the taste of the food, which was quite close to Thai cuisine in the use of coconut, lime leaves and lemon grass, but was much simpler in preparation. My Bengali palate liked the fish curry made with fresh catch. Also notable was the use of banana leaves to decorate

the serving plates.

We noticed one of the ubiquitous Cambodian ‘rickshaws’ called *tuktuk* standing near the restaurant. We had a close look at it and chatted for a while. We also took a last look at the baray nearby. We had learned so much about this land in the last one and half days of our quick visit. The other devotees hurried up, and we went back to the hotel to collect our luggage. We reached the Seam Reap airport just in time for our flight.

Angkor Wat and the other Angkor temples mesmerize the mind with their grandeur. We wonder what kind of expansive thinking the Angkor people had to imagine and execute on that scale. We also imagine how Hinduism had such a great influence because there is no history of South East Asia civilization before the Hindu culture spread there. But, alas, time doesn’t spare anything. The Angkor temples tell the story of human attempts to create monuments for eternity and also the ephemeral nature of those attempts. Buddha realized the impermanence of life and taught it to his followers. All the great kings and their monuments were devoured by time. But the teachings of the Great Ones are still alive and well in human hearts. The Angkor temples inspire us to hold those spiritual gems ever closer to our hearts, for they are the real things in this transitory world.



Introduction to the Cover Page:

125th Year Birth Anniversary of Swami Gnaneswarananda

Br. Panchatapa

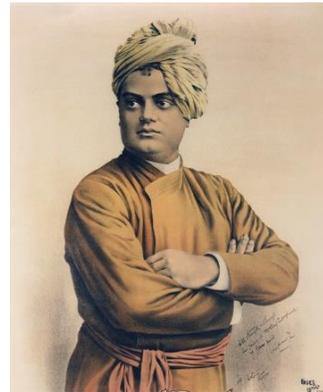
1893 was a remarkable year for Vedanta in the West. In Chicago, the Ramakrishna movement began in America in September from the platform of Parliament of World's Religions. Swami Vivekananda reached Chicago on July 30, 1893 and just about a month before that, on **June 28, 1893** Swami Gnaneswarananda, the founder-head of the Vedanta Society of Chicago was born as Satindra Kumar Chakravarty.

Santindra was born in a village called Skekharnagar located about 12 miles away from Dhaka (now in Bangladesh, then in undivided India). Late June through late August is usually monsoon time in Bengal. Satindra received his nickname 'Badal' that means rain, from his elder sister, who brought him up. He was the youngest one in the family and his father passed away due to sudden heart attack when he was only 2 years old. One of Badal's maternal uncles, Ranjani Nath Roy used to help and guide the family. Ranjani Nath met Sri Ramakrishna in 1883 and possibly through him the whole family came to know about Sri Ramakrishna and his disciples.

From his boyhood, Badal was the leader of the village boys. He was gifted with a melodious voice, and at the same time was a good actor, an artist, a musician and a poet. Song was as natural to him as speech. He was involved in physical exercises, group drilling, gymnastics and athletics. This made him brave and fearless. With immense intelligence, he had a huge heart, that could accommodate all. When he was only eight years old, he jumped in a river to save a drowning man! He developed a strong body and was a staunch nationalist and fervent patriot.

Badal came to Dhaka for his schooling. When he

was about ten years old, he saw a large picture of a man being carried a procession through the streets of Dhaka. He did not know whose photo it was or what was the procession about. He thought it must be some political demonstration. Anyway, the boy liked that man in the picture as he looked so commanding, with arms folded over his chest and with such brilliant and penetrating eyes. The boy thought he must be the leader or the captain of a freedom group and he said to himself: 'When I grow up I'm going to join his party!' Later, after becoming a Swami, after sharing this story of his childhood, with smile he would turned around his disciples and remark, "And you see he is my Captain!" Truly, who could say in a better way than him "freedom, freedom, freedom is the song of soul!"

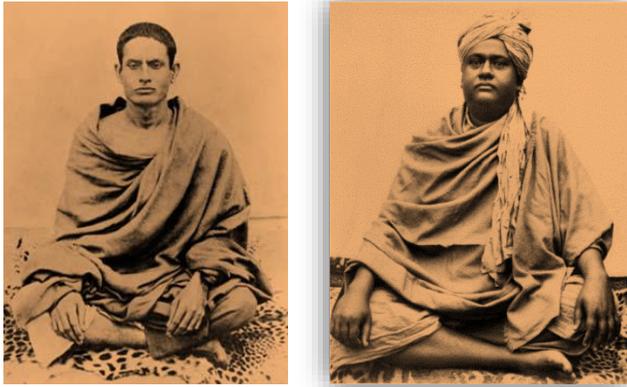


A few years later, on a sultry, summer afternoon, this young man got absorbed in the thought: "How shall I live my life? What shall I live for?". The Swami continues, "I think that was the very hour, a memorable hour,

of my life when I first discovered for myself what I shall live for is to expand my self by serving the universe with all I have. And I have realized that I can live twenty lives, not to speak of this one life, if that outlook is not disturbed."

In 1913 Satindra met Swami Premananda in Dhaka ashrama. With his power of love Premananda made this young anarchist, rebel student his own.

After graduating from Jagannath college, Dhaka in 1914 he got fully involved with the 'Man-making mission' of Swamiji and became a regular devotee of the Ramakrishna Mission Dhaka.



Swami Premananda Swami Brahmananda

In 1916 Satindra first met his guru Swami Brahmananda, the first president of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, at the Dhaka center. At the very first look Maharaj told him, 'Come tomorrow, Satindra, I shall initiate you'. It is recorded that Maharaj was not very open to giving mantra. Satindra was also immediately drawn to him.

Within a few months he decided to take the vow of Brahmacharya and join the order. At the beginning his mother did not agree and stopped taking food. Like mother, like son. Her dear Badal, too, started fasting. She could not bear it and she finally gave him her blessings so he could enter into the new life.

After staying at Belur Math for sometime, Brahmachari Satindra was sent to Banaras, where the Order has two centers: Advaita Ashrama (devoted to meditation) and Home of Service (basically hospital and dispensaries where monks would nurse the sick and attend the needy). Service to man, as God is the spiritual practice at the Home of Service. As in Dhaka center, in Banaras too, the selfless service of Satindra created deep impact in others mind.

In 1919 Satindra returned Belur Math to take the vow of Sannyasa. Through this ceremony now formally he accepted renunciation and selfless service as his only purpose of life; though in practice had started in his boyhood days. Swami

Brahmananda bestowed on him the monastic name Swami Jnaneswarananda – the bliss (Ananda) of the Lord of Jnana (Knowledge). Shiva is usually referred as the Lord of Jnana. As the 'J' has the sound of hard 'G', in Sanskrit, Swami spelt it that way in the West. The monks of the Order used to call him Gnaneswar Maharaj.

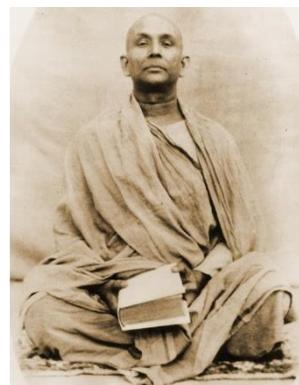
He stayed in Banaras for 5 years and during that time he met his guru several times. Being pleased seeing the service of this young Sannyasi, Maharaj said, 'He is one in a million!'. Another remark he made was, "You will not find another boy like Satindra."

In Banaras he got opportunity to serve Swamis Adbhutananda and Turiyananda, two other direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, whose lives influenced Gnaneswar Maharaj's life greatly.

From Turiyananda he learned to be fearless. Once he was assigned some task by Turiyananda, which he thought won't be able to do. Seeing this mental state of this young Sannyasi, Turiyananda scolded, "What! You come to me and say you cannot do it? What good has your philosophy done you if even now you are under the delusion that you are weak? Go ahead. Try to do it.

You may not succeed at first. But persist, and you will get over that weakness of fear. Then everything you do will manifest great power, strength, and vitality." This uplifted him for the rest of his life.

Adbhutananda (Latu Maharaj) had immense love for him. He told Gnaneswar Maharaj to be the instrument to spread Sri Ramakrishna's message in Bihar (Latu Maharaj's home state).



Swami Turiyananda



Swami Adbhutananda

However, after his Sannyasa at Belur Math for some reason or the other he could not visit and pay his respects to Mother Sarada before his returning to Benaras. He felt very sorry for that. During that time he was studying the Bhagwat Gita and was struggling to understand a particular verse. Another senior monk explained it to him but it could not satisfy him. Just about this time the news of Holy Mother's passing away reached Banaras via telegraph. He got tremendously grief-stricken and thought what a pity, becoming a Sannyasin he had not been favored with Mother's blessings! He fell down flat on his bed weeping profusely. Gradually he fell asleep and in dream he saw Mother came in his room. The room was illumined by her presence. She consoled him and showed her affection to him in many ways. She explained that verse fully and he woke up with full peace of mind. No sorrow remained. That dream created such a deep impression in Swami's mind that he remembered it forever.

In a talk in America many years later Swami said, "Holy Mother was an inexhaustible source of spiritual inspirational and power. It fills my heart with an inexplicable joy to be able to say that I had the rare privilege of meeting this Woman of all women. I have seen something in her which I never expect to see again in anyone she was divinity incarnate. She was the most modest of the modest, the most humble of the humble, and at the same time the wisest of the wise and the most powerful of the powerful. And that is no exaggeration. She had absolute ownership over the most precious treasures of spirituality, but she did not make a display of them. She had that unusual faculty of concealing her strength and greatness. This appealed to me as the mightiest of her powers. But it took me sometime to understand this. When I saw Holy Mother for the first time I thought, 'What is her greatness? Why should I bow down before her just because providence arranged for her marriage to Sri Ramakrishna?' I had a sense of protest about it. But gradually I learned better. I found in her an all-encompassing, divine love, in

which wise or ignorant, pure or impure, high or low, had no distinction whatsoever. They were all accepted within her all-embracing, all-purifying mercy and goodness. I have known of events in the life of this saintly woman which carry a thrilling conviction to my hearth that during my lifetime I have seen at least one true picture of universal acceptance, indiscriminate grace, and limitless power and love."



Swami once told a devotee, "If Holy Mother were living today I would send you to her, even if I had to go out and beg for the money on the streets of Chicago."

In 1922, Swami was sent to Patna as its founder-head by Swami Turiyananda.

Patna is located in Bihar, the home state of Swami Adbhutananda.

He started the center in a humble way but he got devotees like Dr. Rajendra Prasad, who later became the first President of independent India. His enthusiasm and hard work attracted many people and the center grew very well under his stewardship.

However, in 1927, as Belur Math needed him he returned there and within a few months got posted as an assistant minister at the Vedanta Society of New York. Swami Bodhananda, a disciple of Swami Vivekananda was then the head there.

In New York he delivered talks on Philosophy, mythology and the like using contemporary American examples so that his audience would feel his was speaking in 'our language'.

Swami arrived Chicago in December 1929 with the object of opening a Vedanta center. On 19th January 1930 the Vedanta Society of Chicago was established with great enthusiasm at the Masonic Temple building at 32 W Randolph Street. It is an interesting coincidence that Swami Vivekananda was also a member of Freemason society before meeting Sri Ramakrishna.



Masonic Temple
1891

In our introduction to the cover story column of 'Chicago Calling' vol. 20 we have discussed Swami Vivekananda's freemasonry connections in detail. Given that connection, and the year this building was constructed (1891) it is reasonable to guess Swamiji may have come to this house during his first visit to Chicago. Swamiji's chronology says he gave parlor talks at the Masonic Temple, but gives the address as 55 State Street, which is very close to the Randolph St address.

On February 10, 1894 *Scientific American* reported that "the Masonic temple in Chicago city that was built as a part of architectural display during World Columbian Exposition is the 'highest commercial building of the world'. Of the fourteen passenger elevators, seven are for express service only, not stopping below the tenth floor. The others stop at any floor desired. The building is situated on the corner of Randolph and State Streets, in the heart of Chicago. It is constructed of granite, marble, steel and terra cotta as the principal materials of construction, and is fireproof throughout."

One of the best buildings of the city then was the home of the Vedanta Society of Chicago, an appropriate site as the city where the Ramakrishna movement has begun in America.

In his inaugural address Swami referred to Chicago as "the city of my dreams, where America discovered true India through her great son, Swami Vivekananda.... Chicago is the city where the ancient great grandmother of the human race [India] greeted the most modern of her children, the American culture, through the message of Vivekananda." From the Vedanta Society of Chicago inauguration podium its founder Swami predicted, "A new era in the civilization of the human race will dawn by the harmonious synthesis of the spirituality of India and the scientific achievement of modern America."



Masonic Temple
Entrance,
1892

From the beginning the attendance was good, growing from an average at the Sunday morning lectures of 60 during the first six months to an average of 90 in the 1930-31 season. Classes grew from 50 to 70 in the same period. He used to deliver frequent lectures at other places and in 1931 new, larger quarters at 120 E Delaware Place were taken. In the religious census of 1936 the membership of the Society was given as 105, making it one of the largest centers. He shared, "a fanciful idea of my own regarding the relationship between India and America, which will bring new civilization."



Masonic Temple
Stairway and
Galleries,
December,
1892

The great historic blunder of Columbus, that gave America to the modern world, is very suggestive to me. It is just the symbol of cultural marriage between the East and the West. That unity had to take place through the mediumship of America. That is why Columbus discovered America instead of India....

“...Also, India and America occupy just the opposite sides of the globe. They are geographical antipodes. To me this is significant. You know, when the two opposite ends in an electric battery meet, they manifest a tremendous energy. So, when modern America is united with ancient India, by assimilating the best of each other’s cultures, a tremendous civilization will be the result. The Vedanta movement, to my mind, is the pioneer in this great achievement.”

After a brief explanation of the Vedanta philosophy he gave a outline of the Vedanta movement in America. He announced “I will be speaking systematically on the subject of Vedanta Philosophy from next Sunday at 3 pm in the hall next door, Hall no. A4.’

Swami began the work with great enthusiasm, freely giving interviews, holding private and group classes and giving public lectures, as usual, at the Masonic temple. He also spoke on the radio and gave talks on various subjects at churches, schools, clubs, and other cultural organizations. His universal outlook brought him many admirers.

For the monks of those days, teaching Vedanta in the America was a very uphill work. Once he had a music program where he sang *Radhe Radhe Jai Govinda*. A reporter was there, who later when was asked how he liked the program, he replied that it sounded to him “Rowdy, Rowdy going to jail!” The Swamis had to encounter much prejudice, ignorance, and often opposition.

The society maintained a small press, which published various books on Hinduism. In 1933 it published one of the earliest histories of the Ramakrishna Movement in America, *Hinduism Comes to America*, a brief account of the origin, purpose and spiritual significance of the Vedanta

movement in America along with a brief summaries of each Swamis work and photographs.

In the summer of 1933, forty years after the World’s fair and Columbian Exposition of 1893 a large Vivekananda Memorial Celebration was organized by Swami Gnaneswarananda. All the leaders of American Vedanta Centers were invited to this convention. Swamis Ashokananda (San Francisco), Devatmananda (Portland), Akhilananda (Providence), Vividishananda (Washington DC), Paramananda (Boston and La Crescenta, CA), and Nikhilananda (New York) -- all joined Gnaneswarananda as speakers of the program – illustrating the growing scope of the Vedanta work. Many Chicagoans attracted to the Vedanta Movement at that time and remained as devotees and students, and some were accepted as disciples as disciples by Swami Gnaneswarananda.

Not only his own center, Swami used to take interest in the development of any Vedanta work that required support. For example when Swami Vividishananda’s effort to form the Washington D.C center was failing, Swami Gnaneswarananda put in a lot of effort and visited the center to encourage the work.



Besides his public lectures, Swami held two groups of classes a week, one on the yogas and one on the Upanishads or other spiritual texts. He also had many private classes and took small groups for special studies.

He held a Sanskrit class and one Bengali class for those who were interested in learning those languages. Based on his teachings at the yoga classes he brought out a book entitled, *Divine Communion*.

On Friday nights he held a regular music class where he taught devotional music, both vocal and instrumental. After Swami’s classes were over he would relax in a big arm chair surrounded by the students. He was often heard to draw a deep relaxing sigh and say, “Shiva, Shiva, Shiva.”



In 1934 Swami had a trip to India. On the way he visited Europe. His letters sent to the devotees of the Chicago center from each country are of great historic value. His ship came to Colombo, he offered his salutations to Ma Kanyakumari,

he stopped by the Ramakrishna Mission centers in Patna and Banaras and reached Belur Math. He immensely enjoyed his stay at the Math and enjoyed meeting his fellow brother disciples. He met his mother also for a brief time.

Swami praised the qualities of American womanhood. He said that while in India he had asked his old mother whether she would like to have him for a son again, if he were to be reborn. His mother had of course said, yes. Swami said, "But I told her that if I am to be born again I am not going to be born of just one mother. I want two mothers! My dear old mother said, 'but that is not possible! I replied, 'if not possible, God will have to make it possible! I want to be born at a time when a child can have two mothers, one like yourself and one like an American mother. I want to combine you with a mother of United States.... I want that energy, that efficiency, that constructive ability which I find in the woman of America. I want all that – combined with your patience, your endurance, forgiveness, wisdom, and spiritual idealism!"

In 1936 to celebrate the birth centenary of Sri Ramakrishna Swami organized an elaborate program. There were lectures, conversations, a large and well attended banquet, musical performance by the members of Swami's music class and many other functions.

Speakers for the program held at the Tropical Room of the Medinah Club were Swamis Paramananda (*The Message of Sri Ramakrishna*), Akhilananda (*Ramakrishna: The Fountain of Love*),

Nikhilananda (*Ramakrishna and Modern World*), Vividishananda (*Ramakrishna and His Mission*), Rev George Lake (MD Liberal Catholic Church), and Dr. Preston Bradley (Pastor, Peoples' Church).

On this occasion Swami published the first short biography of Sri Ramakrishna in English in the United States. This little book entitled *Ramakrishna: The Man and the Power*.

It is worth mentioning an interesting tale related to this book. There was a handyman, Mr. Brown, in the neighborhood, who used to survive through different types of odd jobs like selling Christmas trees during December etc. Most of the time he smelled of liquor and of course devotees were not very pleased with his presence. Swami used to pay him 75 cents for window cleaning. When the book came in printing, a large drawing of Sri Ramakrishna in the pose taken at Keshab Sen's house was seen as the frontispiece. To address devotees' curiosities, Swami proudly said that Mr. Brown did that.



He further explained that while cleaning window one day, Mr. Brown told him that he always wanted to be an artist. But he had never had the opportunity to study art or much of anything else, for that matter. Swami had immediately 'commissioned'

him to do the drawing for the frontispiece of the book.

We need to remember that Swami's time [1929 - 1937] in Chicago completely overlapped with the *Great Depression era* [1929 - 1939]. Against a car fare of 20 cents, Swami's food was 15 cents. One Sunday, the book sales were \$5, while the hall rent was \$10. At one time there was nothing in the house but some lettuce and a little bread. Once a student, who lost his job and was going through a hard time happened to visit the center that time. Knowing the student's difficulties, the Swami asked him to share his meal with him and they each had a lettuce sandwich and a glass of water.

Despite all these difficulties the Swami could continue his work as this special Swami felt, “through his love Sri Ramakrishna could implant into his disciples the love of God, purity, and spirituality. In fact love is no love if it does not have the miracle of uplifting. We hear people say, ‘fall in love’.’ But why use that expression? We *rise* in love!’...”

From 1933 Swami started to suffer from a heart condition. A 1934 trip to India was strenuous for him as he often wrote, “no sleep last night – awfully hot- tired – heart bad” and so on. But after the summer of 1937, the swami put himself under the care of a doctor. However, he continued to give one class a week and that was every Tuesday evening on the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*.

Sometime around the third or fourth week of October, Swami told one of his disciples that he had dreamt that he was in a small boat with Maharaj, his Guru. Maharaj was rowing(or at the helm of) the boat. The devotee asked if any one was with him, he replied: “No, I was alone with Maharaj.”

Swami gave his last class on the 9th of November, 1937. In that class he said, “Understand this life [Sri Ramakrishna’s]. Read it critically. Use your little yardstick of understanding until you learn that your yardstick is useless. Then throw away this meager measurement.”

That week he had a cardiograph. After the test Swami returned to the center. A devotee asked him about the doctor’s opinion on his cardiogram. Swami replied quietly, “he said, ‘with a heart like that you might live for years, or you might live a day.’”

The next day, Sunday, November 14, 1937, the pilot of Swami’s ‘boat’ came for him and Swamiji’s term of loving service to God-in-man came to a sudden close. He was just 44 years old.

‘The first snow of the winter fell. Flurries of snow-flakes filled the sky and silently fell on earth, like the proverbial flower-petals of Sanskrit lore that are scattered from heaven upon the departure of a great soul from this mortal life’.

At the end of the *Great Depression* in 1939 the building where the Vedanta Society of Chicago was founded by Swami Gnaneswarananda was demolished too. According to The Chicago Tribune on May 7, 1939: “The Capitol building, which as the Masonic temple was for decades Chicago’s most famous building, Is being torn down. The wrecking job is a substantial one. Physically the structure is still sturdy. ... Economically the building is worthless. This is partly because of the surplus of office space. Though not primarily responsible, the speculative building boom of the 1920s hastened the end of the older buildings. They were wearing out, anyway, not so much in their physical features as in their usefulness and convenience.”

The promising venture of Vedanta in Chicago was interrupted by Swami Gnaneswarananda’s premature death. After a brief lapse, Swami Vishwananda was sent from India, who continued work from 1938.

During Swami Vishwananda’s time the center was named Vivekananda Vedanta Society of Chicago and Society “owned” its first building.

Sri Ramakrishna’s work never stops. The flag bearers keep coming and the legacy continues. Let’s look at an excerpt from Swami Yogeshananda’s *Six Lighted Windows*: “When Swami Vishwananda arrived in Chicago to take over the work, he had a dream – a vision, rather. Swami Gnaneswarananda (his predecessor) appeared to him, and patting Vishwananda’s fat stomach, said, “So, Brother, you have come to take over. Good, good!” Then Gnaneswarananda turned into a little boy dressed in *gerrua*, and at a distance appeared Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother, luminous on a kind of alter. A path of light connected the little boy to them. He then ran along this path and merged into the figures on the altar.”

The author is indebted to the book, ‘Swami Gnaneswarananda: A Brief Account of His Life’, Ed: Mallika Clare Gupta.

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