CHICAGO CALLING

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EDITORIAL

Sri Rama and Humanity

Among the many divine incarnations revered in Indian tradition, two figures stand tall—Sri Ramachandra and Sri Krishna. Both are avatars of the Supreme, but their roles and contributions to human society are distinctly different. While Sri Krishna gave us the profound teachings of the Bhagavad Gita, Sri Ramachandra offered something equally vital—a complete model of ethical and social conduct. Through his life, not sermons, he taught humanity how to live with integrity, compassion, and responsibility.

This distinction is critical to understanding the impact of Sri Ramachandra. Nowhere in the Ramayana do we find him instructing people to meditate or pray to God. He didn't preach dharma in the way Krishna did. Instead, he lived it. At the end of the Satya Yuga, when people were still broadly virtuous yet confused, Sri Ramachandra emerged as a steadying force. While the sages offered wisdom and the learned flaunted their knowledge—sometimes with ego and ambition, like Ravana or Bali—it was Rama who systematized human society with fairness and order.

The context is important. This was a time of transition, when neither Rishis nor scholars could fully guide the unlettered masses. What they needed was a living example of how to act in daily life. Sri Ramachandra became that example—not as a distant god, but as an ideal son, a devoted brother, a responsible ruler, and a dharmic man.

The Ramayana offers vivid glimpses into a thriving, structured civilization. Ayodhya, the capital of Rama's father Dasharatha, was a marvel in its time—spanning 120 miles on each side, bustling with trade, culture, sanitation, and military order. Streets were cleaned daily; markets were organized; and community life thrived with music, medicine, and public service. This wasn't utopia—it was well-planned governance. Sri Ramachandra inherited this world and shaped it into a moral framework.

But Rama's legacy is not merely civic. His personal character was the bedrock upon which this social order stood. At just twelve, he and Lakshmana were taken by the sage Vishwamitra to protect his yajna and to be educated in statecraft, history, economics, and spiritual values. Vishwamitra trained them holistically, preparing them to become protectors of the kingdom, and of dharma.

When Rama bent and broke the mighty bow of Shiva in King Janaka's court, winning the hand of Sita, the world recognized his strength. Yet when challenged by the formidable Parashurama, Rama responded not with pride but with humility—touching the Rishi's feet and asking respectfully whether to use sword or bow. Seeing Rama's divine aura, Parashurama stepped aside. It was not brute strength that moved him—it was Rama's inner nobility.

Such was the consistency of Rama's character. Whether in palace or forest, in joy or grief, he stood unwavering in truth. When Queen Kaikeyi demanded that Rama be exiled and her son Bharata crowned, Rama didn't protest. He upheld his father Dasharatha's promise, despite knowing the consequences. "The sun may stop shining, the moon may lose its light, the oceans may dry up—but the promise I have taken, I will not break," he declared.

This is not myth—it is a model. Rama teaches that vows matter, that one's word should be unshakeable. In an age where oaths are taken casually—in courts, parliaments, and even marriages—Rama reminds us that keeping one's word is the true religion. He lived the principle: "A person's word is like the tusk of an elephant—it comes out, but never returns."

The Ramayana also offers insight into evolving social dynamics. Polygamy existed, but so did swayamvaras where women chose their husbands. Queen Kaikeyi was a charioteer, a warrior who once saved Dasharatha's life. Sage Anusuya, wife of Atri, was a spiritual giant who recognized and honored Sita's devotion and dignity. Women in that era were not just homemakers—they were seekers of truth, researchers of happiness, and pillars of strength.

Rama's exile was not merely a punishment. The forest was home to Rishis and ashrams, to spiritual education and deep contemplation. Rama's 14 years of exile were a journey through India's moral and spiritual geography—where he lived humbly, served sages, and set standards for conduct even in adversity.

When his brother Bharata came to the forest pleading with him to return, Rama declined—to uphold the sanctity of a vow. Yet even then, as elder brother and statesman, he guided Bharata on governance:

- Honor elders, deities, teachers, and honest workers.
- Appoint advisors who are moral and wise.
- Resist corruption—an ancient and ever-present evil.
- Pay your soldiers on time and care for their welfare.
- Build alliances through articulate emissaries—those who serve the nation's interest, even on the golf course of diplomacy!

Rama was a complete administrator, not just a mythic hero. His strength lay not only in his arms but in his clarity of vision and purity of heart. His humility, valor, commitment, and wisdom are enduring values for any society.

In today's world, where vows are broken, systems collapse under selfishness, and values seem negotiable, Sri Ramachandra offers a luminous path. Not by isolating himself in meditation, but by walking with humanity—in courts, in forests, in households, and in battlefields - he shaped civilization itself.

Sister Nivedita once asked whether Sarada Devi was the last light of ancient Indian tradition or the first flame of modern womanhood. It is a powerful question. Likewise, we must ask: Is Sri Ramachandra a figure of the past or a guide for our future?

The answer lies in how seriously we take his life—not as legend, but as law. A law not enforced by fear, [illegible] y love, truth, and unwavering integrity.

जन्माद्यस्य यतोऽन्वयादितरतः चार्थेष्वभिज्ञः स्वराट् तेने ब्रह्म हृदा य आदिकवये मुह्यन्ति यत् सूरयः । तेजोवारिमृदां यथा विनिमयो यत्र त्रिसर्गोऽमृषा धाम्ना स्वेन सदा निरस्तकुहकं सत्यं परं धीमहि।	*janmādyasya yato'nvayāditarataḥ cārtheṣvabhijñaḥ svarāṭ* *tene brahma hṛdā ya ādikavaye muhyanti yat sūrayaḥ,* *tejovārimṛdāṃ yathā vinimayo yatra trisargo'mṛṣā* *dhāmnā svena sadā nirastakuhakaṃ satyaṃ paraṃ dhīmahi.*

"Let us meditate upon the Supreme Spirit who is real; from whom emanate the creation, preservation and destruction of this (universe), his presence in all that exists and his absence from all that is non-existent; who is omniscient and self-refulgent; who extended (i.e. revealed) to the first knower (or wise one) viz. god Brahmā, through his heart, the Veda about which even the learned ones are perplexed; in whom the creation of the three attributes (sattva, rajas and tamas) appears real like the apparent transmutation of the light, water and earth; who by his lustre has always dispelled illusion."

Chicago Sacred: Curating Everyday Religious Heritages

Rebekah Coffman
Curator, Chicago History Museum

This article is prepared based on the lecture that was delivered on March 15, 2025 at the Home of Harmony

"Chicago Sacred" is a broad title that could mean many different things to various people. To begin, I want to start with the following question:

What Does It Mean for Something to Be Sacred?

Since we have developed an entire initiative around the concept of sacredness, there are many ways we could approach this topic. In this discussion, I will explore what sacredness means to me personally as a curator within a museum context. I will also reflect on how this perspective may differ from how sacredness is understood within a community or by a person of faith. At the same time, I will highlight some unexpected similarities that exist between these perspectives in historical and museum settings.

A useful resource that guides museum practice on this topic comes from an international body that addresses how we approach museology and the sacred. This resource states something particularly thought-provoking: sacredness, which may be inherently indefinable, is directly linked to culture and heritage. The two are mutually defining.

When I use the word "sacredness," I often think of something set apart—something separate from everyday life. While we may not all share an identical definition of sacredness, we recognize it when we encounter it. This idea is closely connected to the objects we place in museums to tell our history. These are objects that we have removed from an everyday setting and elevated, signifying that they hold collective recognition and shared meaning.

UNESCO Convention for Intangible Heritage

One of the challenges in museum settings is that history can often feel separate or distinct from our everyday lives. When an object transitions from the street into a museum, people may begin to perceive it as something removed from the present moment.

UNESCO has developed an insightful approach to preserving history without making it static or confined to the past. As public historians, this is particularly important because the history we share and care for must remain connected to living communities today. It is essential to ensure that history and contemporary life are not seen as mutually exclusive.

Conservation of Living Religious Heritage

A related concept is "living religious heritage." While history often implies something that exists in the past, we continue to embody religious heritage through our everyday actions, thoughts, and physical presence. Museums have the responsibility to bridge these aspects—bringing historical and living religious heritage into conversation with one another.

How Do Museums Affect Sacredness?

When we bring objects into a collection, there are different ways to consider sacredness within the objects themselves. One resource I find particularly compelling discusses three models that describe how museums engage with sacredness:

1. Euthanized Sacredness – This model suggests that once an object crosses the threshold into a

museum, it is no longer sacred. It assumes a new identity as a museum artifact rather than a sacred object. Many historical artifacts fall into this category, where museums no longer treat them as embodying sacred qualities. However, this perspective does not always align with how communities may continue to view these objects.

2. Sacredness in the Beholder's Eye – This model allows for community participation in defining sacredness. Museums may not actively designate objects as sacred, yet visitors and community members may still recognize them as such. In this case, the sacredness of an object exists in the perception of those who engage with it.

3.The Zombie Model – This model describes objects that alternate between being activated and becoming dormant. Many museum objects follow this pattern—they remain in storage for long periods and are then displayed for temporary exhibitions where they invite renewed engagement.

There is also an important fourth consideration that is not always discussed: how do we treat objects that are sacred at all times, both in storage and on display? This raises questions about how museums should foster relationships with such objects in ways that acknowledge and respect their ongoing sacred significance.

Religious Heritage in Chicago

Beyond the broad context of sacredness in museums, we must also consider how these ideas manifest within the specific setting of Chicago. The materials that represent our shared heritage continue to shape our understanding of the country we live in. However, museum studies have not always acknowledged American religion as a distinctive area of study, nor have they always granted equal representation to the diverse religious traditions practiced in the United States.

Religion in urban settings is particularly unique. Historically, religious narratives have often treated city-based religion as an "outsider" phenomenon, rather than as an integral part of American religious history. Much of this historical focus has been centered on Christianity and Euro-American heritage, overlooking the diverse ways in which religion is practiced and embodied within urban communities.

Cities, including Chicago, shape and are shaped by religious and spiritual traditions. For instance, many people do not realize the extent to which Chicago's neighborhoods are historically connected to religious institutions. The term "parish" has been used synonymously with "neighborhood," particularly in Catholic communities. Parishes were often organized around national or ethnic identities, as well as linguistic traditions. Over time, these religiously defined spaces have continued to influence neighborhood identities and city-wide patterns of community formation.

This historical organization around religious identity has also contributed to patterns of segregation and inequality. When considering these religious structures, we must also ask: who has been excluded from them? How have these exclusions shaped the city's development over time?

Museums as Spaces of Safeguarding

Museums often participate in processes that separate sacredness from its everyday context. However, they also have the potential to serve as places of safeguarding. In this sense, museums can function as caretakers of religious heritage, ensuring that important cultural and historical materials are preserved for future generations.

While museums are not neutral spaces—they carry their own legacies of inequality—they can nevertheless act as custodians of memory. This is particularly significant in relation to the concept of iconoclasm, or the erasure of history. Museums, despite their complexities, can help ensure that religious heritage is not lost to time.

Four Principles of Religious Literacy

When discussing religion in a museum setting, it is important to approach the subject from a perspective distinct from religious practice. Museums are not places of worship, but they do

engage with religion in ways that encourage both learning and participation. At our institution, we follow Harvard Divinity School's four principles of religious literacy:

1. Religious Expression vs. Scholarly Study – The way individuals personally practice faith differs from how religion is studied academically. Neither approach should be privileged over the other, but it is important to recognize their distinctions.

2. Internal Diversity of Religions – Even within a single religious tradition, there is significant variation. No exhibition or study can fully capture the diversity of beliefs and practices within any one faith.

3. Religion Changes Over Time – Religious beliefs and practices are not static. The way a tradition was expressed in 1893 may be very different from how it is practiced today.

4. Religion is Everywhere – Religion informs many aspects of daily life in ways that may not always be recognized as explicitly religious. Understanding these broader influences can provide new insights into culture and society.

What Makes Chicago a Sacred City?

If we are calling this initiative "Chicago Sacred," we must ask: what makes Chicago a sacred city? One key factor is the city's deep religious legacy. Chicago has been home to significant religious events, including the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 and the Parliament of the World's Religions. The Parliament was one of the first interfaith gatherings of its kind, bringing together religious leaders from diverse traditions. Swami Vivekananda's speeches at the Parliament remain deeply influential in discussions of religious pluralism and universalism in the city.

Understanding these historical legacies helps us appreciate how religious and spiritual traditions continue to shape Chicago today. Swami Vivekananda's message emphasized that, while religious traditions may differ in their expressions, they ultimately share a common goal of unity and understanding. This vision remains central to the work of "Chicago Sacred" as we explore the city's diverse religious heritage.

Archives and Collections as Relationship

For us, in the work of a museum, if we take a legacy like that and understand its deep, embedded connection to Chicago as a place for many diverse religious traditions, we can tell that story through the things we find in our collection. I like to see this work as a way of recognizing that the materials we hold in the museum, whether or not we have explicitly marked them as sacred, hold sacredness through the relationships and connections we build. One of the key aspects of our work is conducting an inventory of our collections based on different religious traditions. This process allows us to uncover connections to materials whose full history or context we may not have previously understood. Through this inventory, we can then connect these materials to different communities or ideas surrounding the city's religious history.

Native Peoples and Indigenous Collections Inventory

Our first inventory focused on Native American and Indigenous collections. In my role as curator of religion and community history, I worked alongside a collections fellow who conducted this inventory. Our first fellow concentrated on Native peoples and Indigenous collections, which enabled us to develop a robust understanding of sacredness within this context. This included processes for repatriation when necessary and other considerations related to Indigenous heritage.

Architecture Inventory

We have since moved into our architecture collections, which I will discuss in more detail later. This inventory serves as another way to connect religious history to physical places by deepening our understanding of the materials in our collection.

Oral Histories

We also conduct oral history projects. You may have heard me mention my colleague Peter Alter,

who is the director of our Studs Terkel Oral History Center. These oral histories capture first-person perspectives on life experiences through a lens of social justice. This approach helps create equity in our collection by ensuring that the everyday lives of people are represented.

Digital Resources

We provide a number of digital resources, including digital exhibitions, online articles, and other educational materials, all accessible through our website. These resources offer ways for the public to engage with our collections and learn about religious heritage.

Community Heritage Workshops

In addition to collecting and preserving materials, we also host Community Heritage Workshops. These workshops allow us to share historical preservation techniques with the public, empowering individuals to care for their own histories. While we certainly accept artifacts and documents into our museum, we believe it is equally important to equip people with the knowledge to preserve and share their own histories. As part of this initiative, we not only house collections for research and exhibitions but also use them to interpret and showcase the city's religious diversity.

Three significant exhibitions have been developed under this initiative, collectively referred to as the "Abrahamic Suite." These exhibitions focused on the Abrahamic traditions: Catholic Chicago, Shalom Chicago, and American Medina. The first exhibition, Catholic Chicago, explored Catholic histories in the city. The second, Shalom Chicago, examined Jewish traditions. The third, American Medina, which was led by Peter Alter, highlighted Muslim histories in Chicago.

Catholic Chicago

These exhibitions underscore the diversity within each religious tradition. Traditions are not monolithic but are internally diverse, evolving through time and adapting to their urban settings. In Catholic Chicago, one of the most interesting aspects was how we presented the idea of a sacred setting in a museum context. The exhibition included a space that, at first glance, resembled a church chapel. However, the exhibit was not a replica of any single church. Instead, it was composed of elements from different churches, forming what could be called a simulacrum—a constructed model that does not exist in reality. Nevertheless, visitors often experienced a spiritual response when entering the space. Some felt compelled to sit on the pews and reflect, while others viewed it strictly as a museum exhibit. This demonstrates how the perception of sacredness is in the eye of the beholder. We, as museum curators, created a space that visually evoked Catholic worship, but it was up to each visitor to interpret it as sacred or historical.

Shalom Chicago

The Shalom Chicago exhibition focused on Jewish histories in the city, emphasizing two major waves of Jewish migration—first by German Jews and later by Eastern European Jews. The exhibition did not only highlight religious practices and significant historical figures but also explored the everyday aspects of Jewish life. One key theme was the role of dietary laws and Sabbath observance in shaping Jewish communities. Visitors were encouraged to consider how Jewish identity influenced their understanding of community—whether through the availability of kosher food or the ability to walk to a synagogue on the Sabbath. This approach highlighted the ways in which religious traditions intersect with daily life beyond formal worship.

American Medina

The American Medina exhibition was deeply rooted in Muslim oral histories from across the city, showcasing the diversity of Muslim experiences in Chicago. It combined elements from both Catholic Chicago and Shalom Chicago, incorporating stories of places of worship and significant figures while grounding the narrative in personal testimonies. The exhibition featured nearly 150 oral histories, making it a powerful repository of firsthand accounts. It also traced the

historical presence of Muslims in Chicago back to the World's Columbian Exposition, which featured nearly 150 oral histories, making it a powerful repository of firsthand accounts. It also traced the historical presence of Muslims in Chicago back to the World's Columbian Exposition, which featured some of the earliest purpose-built mosques in the country. Through these stories, the exhibition mapped how Muslim communities have influenced the geography of the city.

How Do Museums Include Multifaith Representation?

While the Abrahamic Suite exhibitions each focused on a single religious tradition, they also demonstrated the diversity within those traditions. When I started at the museum, we aimed to expand this approach by exploring multifaith representation in our exhibitions. In this context, multifaith representation means including multiple religious traditions within a shared ethnic or national identity. Two exhibitions exemplify this approach: Back Home: Polish Chicago and a forthcoming exhibition, Aquí in Chicago, which will explore Latino histories in the city. Aquí in Chicago is scheduled to open this fall.

Back Home: Polish Chicago

Back Home: Polish Chicago examined Polish histories in the city, focusing on migration waves and the experiences of Polish immigrants. The exhibition explored themes of migration, neighborhood life, and the ways in which Polish communities maintained connections to both Chicago and their homeland.

Saint Mary Magdalene

One example of multifaith sacredness in this exhibition was the display of artifacts from St. Mary Magdalene, a Polish Catholic church that has since closed and been repurposed as a school. Among the objects in the exhibition were two significant liturgical items. The first was a set of small bells used during Catholic services to mark sacred moments, particularly during Communion. The second artifact, known as a clapper, was a wooden instrument used only during Holy Week. Because bells are considered too cheerful for this somber period of Lent, clappers were used instead to produce a dull sound.

These objects took on new life in the exhibition when a visitor who had attended St. Mary Magdalene's Church as a child recognized the clapper and demonstrated how it was used. This interaction illustrated how museum artifacts can bridge the past and present, allowing individuals to reconnect with their sacred traditions. Even though the church itself had closed, the objects preserved in the museum provided a tangible link to its history, reinforcing the idea that sacredness can persist through memory and material culture.

B'nai Sholom

Another example of a community within the Jewish side of Polish history is B'nai Sholom. This congregation is a legacy community that today is part of the KAM Isaiah Israel congregation.

Former KAMII Buildings

With this congregation, we had the opportunity to discuss their evolution and changes over time. By visiting various spaces together, we explored how their community has shifted. While the original buildings still exist, they now serve different purposes, primarily as Christian churches. This transformation provided a meaningful way to bridge the discussion on how traditions evolve and change over time.

Saint Adalbert's

Another example that connects to our next exhibition is St. Adalbert's, a key Chicago church. Originally a Polish Catholic Church, the Archdiocese attempted to close it several decades ago. However, there was a valiant effort by congregation members to keep the doors open, and it remained operational until just a few years ago. Over time, Polish communities transitioned into a Latino majority, reflecting the neighborhood's evolution and the shifting cultural connections within the same sacred spaces. Although the church has now closed, it has been designated as a landmark and will be repurposed. This demonstrates how different identities can find

continuity within a single faith tradition.

Aquí en Chicago

Aquí in Chicago focuses on Latino stories. The origins of this exhibition stem from an interesting experience for us as museum professionals. A group of high school students from Rudy Lozano Leadership Academy visited the museum seeking a tour of Chicago's history. They wanted to understand their place within that history but did not find themselves represented in our main exhibition. Recognizing this gap, they protested and challenged us, stating that it was our responsibility to include Latino stories in the narrative of what makes Chicago what it is today.

Since 2021, my colleague Elena Gonzales has led an effort to not only create an exhibition but also to systematically integrate Latino stories into the museum in a holistic way. This exhibition includes several stories about place, religious traditions, and changes over time. Two Catholic churches, St. Francis and St. Procopius, were originally built for European Catholic immigrants. Over time, these buildings fell into disrepair, and Latino communities revitalized them, sometimes even occupying buildings slated for demolition to preserve their places of worship. These stories highlight acts of resistance and the significance of maintaining sacred spaces as points of connection.

On the right side of the exhibition, Our Lady of Guadalupe is featured. This was the first Mexican church in the city, built by and for Spanish-speaking congregations. The exhibition also explores how Latino communities have established their own religious and cultural presence in Chicago.

Sanctuary: Wellington UCC and KAMII/ Adalberto UMC and Lincoln UMC

This exhibition also includes numerous stories about migration and Chicago's status as a sanctuary city, particularly for undocumented individuals. We discuss how places of worship have served as both spiritual sanctuaries and physical refuges for those seeking protection from deportation.

There have been two major waves of the sanctuary movement. The first wave began in the 1980s and included places such as Wellington UCC Church and KAM Isaiah Israel. The second wave, known as the New Sanctuary Movement, emerged in the early 2000s and included churches such as Adalberto UMC and Lincoln UMC.

Indigeneity and Colonial Resistance

Within the context of Christian practice, particularly in Latino communities, there exists a tension between Catholicism and Indigenous traditions. For some, Catholicism was seen as a force that erased their identity, while for others, it became a means to hybridize and integrate their Indigenous heritage.

This exhibition explores how people navigate these dual identities. One way is through language preservation, where Spanish may be a second or third language for individuals whose first language is an Indigenous tongue with sacred meaning. Another example is food traditions, such as the cultural and spiritual significance of corn (maíz). Continuing to prepare traditional foods like tortillas in Chicago becomes an act of cultural assertion.

Jackson Oral History Project

Bridging into another conversation, we recently completed a digital exhibition in collaboration with Peter Alter, our Chief Historian and Director of the Studs Terkel Oral History Center. Peter has also been working with the Chicago Theological Seminary to document histories related to Operation Breadbasket, Jesse Jackson, and the broader circles of Martin Luther King Jr.

Gresham UMC

This project includes oral history traditions and a virtual exhibition. It has connections to this space, which we will explore further. Reverends Martin Deppe and Janet Wilson are two Methodist leaders featured in these stories.

What is an Interfaith Space in Today's Urban Center?

Having reviewed the work we have done, our next challenge is to go beyond mere multi-faith

representation and move toward truly interfaith spaces. In Chicago, what does it mean to have an interfaith space, and how does it differ from what we have discussed so far?

We are currently experiencing a period of religious change in the United States and worldwide, though it manifests differently in various places. Many discussions about religion in America focus on decline—particularly in mainstream Christian denominations, where fewer people are attending services. However, discussions about religious change should not solely focus on decline but also on transformation.

Research indicates that many people are shifting away from traditional Christian denominations toward identities that may be described as "spiritual but not religious." Some refer to these individuals as "religious nones," meaning they do not adhere to a specific tradition but may engage with multiple faith practices.

Projections by the Pew Research Center suggest that by 2070, the percentage of people practicing non-Christian traditions in the United States will double. Currently, non-Christian traditions represent about 6% of the population, but this figure is expected to reach 12-13%. This raises important questions about how we conceptualize and engage with sacred spaces in a changing religious landscape.

Sacred Shift

I want to briefly discuss the context in which I conduct this work. This research has been ongoing for several years, centered around the concept of "Sacred Shift." This examines spaces that remain physically unchanged yet accumulate layers of historical and communal significance over time.

The key question is: How does this layering of history influence our definitions of sacredness and interfaith heritage? A space may not merely represent change but also serve as a site of interaction between different faith traditions. This perspective offers a promising way to discuss historical transformation.

However, this also introduces tensions. We often distinguish between built spaces and living religious heritage. A church, mosque, or temple may remain physically intact, yet its spiritual use and community may change over time. Similarly, we differentiate between tangible elements (walls, windows, pews) and intangible elements (prayers, music, food traditions).

There is also tension between what is considered secular and what is considered sacred. A concert held in a former church may be viewed as secular, but if the music aligns with certain traditions, it may take on a sacred quality. Who decides this distinction? These tensions become even more pronounced when a religious space transitions between different faith traditions.

Rather than framing these changes as conflicts, we should see them as opportunities for dialogue about interfaith heritage. Traditional historical preservation often prioritizes a building's original function, but this approach overlooks the ways in which spaces gain significance through evolving histories.

Ultimately, the shift from multi-faith to interfaith representation involves fostering genuine engagement rather than merely acknowledging coexistence. It also challenges us to think critically about how we choose to remember and preserve sacred spaces for future generations. As public historians, our role is to facilitate collective remembrance, ensuring that these narratives endure over time.

What does it mean for a museum gallery to transform into an interfaith space?

Reflecting on the concept of an interfaith city, we must consider how to engage with interfaith themes within a museum setting. While spaces like this may encourage regular interfaith discussions, museums do not always facilitate such conversations. The challenge, then, is to transform a museum gallery into a space that fosters these discussions, especially when we examine how these efforts have been approached in the past and how they can be advanced in the future.

Previously, we shifted the focus of the Chicago

Sacred inventory to our architecture collections. These collections have been part of the museum since the 1970s and were established not merely to celebrate architectural design but to highlight the people behind the buildings—the designers, builders, and users. Architecture does not exist in a vacuum; it is shaped by human intent and community engagement.

This perspective is evident in the introduction to our collections by Holabird & Root. The curator at the time, Wim de Wit, described the built environment as more than just structures—it encompasses all elements that contribute to placemaking. Buildings derive significance from the communities that inhabit them. This shift in focus underscores the idea that the users of buildings are just as important, if not more so, than the structures themselves.

In curating our current exhibition, representation is a key consideration—not only in our museum collections but also in how the city has historically designated landmarks. Landmark status has often been granted based on a perspective that predominantly reflects Protestant, and more broadly, Christian traditions. This tendency overlooks the many interwoven histories and points of connection that define religious and community spaces over time.

Gresham UMC

This theme extends to specific locations in Chicago that may not be formally recognized as landmarks yet hold significant historical value. For instance, the Jackson Oral History Project examined histories surrounding Operation Breadbasket. Reverend Deppe, who was a pastor at Gresham United Methodist Church—later renamed New Gresham United Methodist Church—played a pivotal role in this movement. Although the church has recently closed, its legacy continues to live on in oral histories and personal narratives. However, it remains uncertain whether its physical presence will endure.

Adalberto UMC and Lincoln UMC

Other significant sites include churches that played key roles in the sanctuary movement and the protection of undocumented individuals. One such example is Adalberto United Methodist Church, a modest storefront church in the Humboldt Park neighborhood. This church has since closed, and the storefront has been repurposed as an artist space. Without storytelling and continued recognition, such landmarks may fade from public memory.

Architecture Inventory

Our museum collection contains approximately 23 million objects, with the architecture collections numbering in the hundreds of thousands. Cataloging these pieces systematically is a challenging endeavor. However, rather than merely documenting architects and buildings, we strive to record the communities that have utilized these spaces. This involves tracking locations, racial and ethnic connections, and community organizations to build a comprehensive and inclusive historical record.

A compelling example of this effort comes from our collaboration with the American Islamic College. One of our collections features the work of architect Barry Byrne, who designed a building originally constructed as a Catholic school and convent. The museum's metadata previously identified the site solely by its original function. However, since the 1980s, it has served as the home of the American Islamic College—making it an Islamic educational institution for a longer period than it ever functioned as a Catholic school. This demonstrates how historical narratives can be expanded through careful research and inclusive documentation.

This work is not just about updating records; it is an act of repair. When institutions like ours acknowledge the full histories of these spaces, we enable diverse communities to see their stories reflected in our collections. For instance, while our archives contained a photograph of men praying within the American Islamic College, the metadata provided no indication of the building's location or its significance. These oversights reveal the

ongoing need for better documentation.

During a recent tour of Homer Glen, I had the opportunity to engage with Swami Ishatmananda. He shared fascinating insights into Swami Vivekananda's connections to various locations in Chicago. Through inquiry, we discovered that our collections included multiple photographs of these sites—something I might never have known without his input. This underscores the importance of collaboration in uncovering hidden histories.

Architecture and Identity

Swami Vivekananda's perspective on architecture encapsulates the essence of our work: "The difference between architecture and a building is that the former expresses an idea, while the latter is merely a structure built on economic principles. The value of matter depends solely on its capacity to express ideas." This sentiment resonates deeply with our approach—acknowledging that people, ideas, and shared experiences define the meaning of spaces.

Community and Connection

I want to take a moment to discuss this very building and then open the floor to questions. This space serves as an example of interfaith connection and shared history. Originally built as First Methodist of Irving Park, it has undergone several transformations. On the left, you can see an earlier iteration of the building, while the structure on the right more closely resembles its current appearance.

Inside, this space has long been a place for contemplation and prayer. A 1960s commemorative service photograph highlights the continued importance of gathering spaces for spiritual practice. The third story of the building, which now houses a world religions course, has also served as a site for various ministries, including support for incarcerated individuals re-entering society and reconciliation efforts for LGBTQ+ individuals within religious contexts.

Even as physical spaces evolve, their core principles of connection and community remain. Flyers from past events illustrate how outreach efforts—such as food pantries and community meals—have reinforced these values. These moments of collective engagement, like the one celebrated in the 125-year commemorative flyer, remind us of the enduring significance of shared spaces.

Conclusion

Thank you once again for the opportunity to speak in this beautiful and deeply meaningful space. The work being done here exemplifies the power of interfaith dialogue and community engagement, and it is truly an honor to contribute to this conversation.

"There may be many historical discrepancies, there may be interpolations in the life of Krishna. All these things may be true; but, at the same time, there must have been a basis, a foundation for this new and tremendous departure. Taking the life of any other sage or prophet, we find that that prophet is only the evolution of what had gone before him, we find that that prophet is only parching the ideas that had been scattered about his own country even in his own times. Great doubts may exist even as to whether that prophet existed or not. But here, I challenge anyone to show whether these things, these ideals— work for work's sake, love for love's sake, duty for duty's sake, were not original ideas with Krishna, and as such, there must have been someone with whom these ideas originated. They could not have been borrowed from anybody else. They were not floating about in the atmosphere when Krishna was born. But the Lord Krishna was the first preacher of this; his disciple Vyasa took it up and preached it unto mankind."

-- Swami Vivekananda, "The Sages of India"

Gita in Daily Life

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This article is prepared based on the lecture that was delivered on May 3, 2025 at Home of Harmony

Today, the topic of discussion is "Gita in Daily Life." There are countless topics in the Bhagavad Gita. We will focus on one particular theme: decision-making based on the teachings of the Gita.

1. Decision-Making Based on Role

Right decisions in life can be made by understanding the role we have in society. Each of us plays many roles—parent, child, professional, citizen, and so on. Whenever there is a conflict between two roles, the correct decision is to act according to the higher role and give up the lower one.

Take the example of Arjuna in the battlefield. He faced a conflict between two roles: Arjuna the family man and Arjuna the warrior. As a family man, Arjuna thought: "Here is Drona, my teacher. Here is Bhishma, my great-grandfather. I must respect them, worship them, and bow down to them." But as a warrior, his role demanded: "I must fight them for the sake of dharma."

In this case, the higher role was that of a warrior, and so, according to the Gita, he was to choose that.

Consider another example: Suppose someone is the only son of elderly parents and also an army officer. A war breaks out. Should he go to war or stay back to care for his parents? He cannot be in both places. What should he do? The law of dharma says: choose the higher role.

So the first principle of decision-making is: Act according to the higher role when roles conflict.

2. Decision-Making Based on the Beneficiary

The second type of decision-making involves assessing who benefits. If you're faced with two options—one that benefits a small number of people and another that benefits many—then you should choose the one that benefits the greater number.

For example, suppose you are part of a football team. You get an opportunity to score a goal and are in the penalty box. However, the goalkeeper is right in front of you. At the same time, you see that your teammate is in a better position to score. What should you do? Even though you might score individually and receive praise, it is wiser to pass the ball to your teammate. Sacrifice your individual ambition for the welfare of the team.

This principle even applies to the body. If your hand has a wound that refuses to heal and becomes a threat to your life, what do you do? You amputate the hand—for the welfare of the body. So the second principle is: Choose actions that benefit the greater whole over personal or limited gains.

3. Decision-Making Based on Mind vs. Intellect

The mind makes decisions based on likes and dislikes. The intellect makes decisions based on right and wrong. The mind says, "I like it, so let me do it," or "I don't like it, so I won't do it." The intellect says, "It is right, so I should do it," or "It is wrong, so I should avoid it." Whom should we listen to? Always listen to the intellect.

Let us consider four situations:

1. Something is right, and you like it. No problem.

2. Something is wrong, and you dislike it. No problem.

3. Something is right, but you dislike it. There is a problem.

4. Something is wrong, but you like it. Again, there is a problem.

There is a constant tug-of-war between the mind and the intellect. The more we obey the mind, the stronger it becomes. The intellect weakens, and we become slaves to our likes and dislikes. This leads to suffering, because the uncontrolled mind becomes our worst enemy. But when we repeatedly obey the intellect, the intellect becomes stronger. Eventually, the mind and the intellect begin to function in harmony. Such a person is called an integrated person, and this is known as personality integration.

For an integrated personality:

• Whatever is right, the mind also enjoys doing it.

• Whatever is wrong, the mind naturally dislikes.

There is no internal struggle. Such people succeed in all walks of life. To reach this stage, we must constantly choose the intellect over the mind. Though it is a struggle, with every right choice, our personality becomes stronger and more integrated.

4. Decision-Making Based on Swadharma (One's Own Duty)

Bhagavan says in the Gita: "It is better to die performing one's own swadharma than to perform paradharma (someone else's duty), even if that seems more attractive."

So what is swadharma? Swadharma is that which gives us deep fulfillment. It is something that inspires us. Even when we are paid less, we still love doing it. We do it like a hobby, and the challenges it presents don't discourage us—they motivate us to grow. If something in your life meets this description, that is your swadharma.

Many times, parents make the mistake of forcing their children into paradharma. For example, a father who could not become a doctor insists that his son should become one—even if the son has no interest in medicine. This son, though he enrolls in medical school, finds no joy in it.

He feels inferior because others are excelling while he struggles. Even if he finishes medical school, he will likely become a third-rate doctor, miserable during his education and throughout his career.

Therefore, especially when choosing a profession, ask yourself:

• Do I truly love this field?

• Am I doing this just for money?

• Or because my friends are doing it?

Swadharma is that which I love, where I feel naturally motivated, where challenges do not frighten me but excite me. It feels like a hobby, like a calling. That should be our path.

Only you can discover your swadharma. Even animals and birds follow their swadharma:

• A fish stays in water. That is its swadharma.

• A monkey jumps from tree to tree. That is its swadharma.

• If a fish tries to climb a tree, that is paradharma, and it will only suffer.

Similarly, when we follow someone else's path, we feel confused, stressed, and lost. Do not listen to the outer noise. Listen to the inner voice of God. That inner voice will always guide us. Even an earthworm is guided—it stays in the earth. A bird flies in the sky—that is its dharma. In the same way, you are also guided.

The only one who truly knows your swadharma is the Lord, your Creator, who has been with you since beginningless time. So, if we wish to know what our true path is, we must seek guidance from God. He alone is our true Father and Mother. Whenever there is a problem in decision-making related to profession, we must primarily listen to our swadharma—our own inner calling. That was the fourth point: decision-making based on swadharma.

5. Decision-Making Based on the Voice of Conscience

Now we come to the fifth point: decision-making based on the voice of conscience.

How do we know whether something is right or wrong? The answer is: by listening to our conscience. If a particular decision or action is creating guilt or inner disturbance, you can be certain that it is not aligned with dharma. God constantly guides us, and that guidance often

comes through the voice of conscience. Whenever we deviate from the path of righteousness, we experience mental unrest. And when we are walking the path of dharma, the mind is peaceful. This is how the Lord communicates—through peace or disturbance in our minds.

Whenever we displease the Lord, the mind becomes agitated. Whenever we please Him, the mind is calm. That's His coded language. And these disturbances vary: the disturbance caused by anger is different from the disturbance caused by jealousy, hatred, or inferiority complex. These are like different color codes of mental unrest.

So, when the mind is disturbed, we must look within and identify where we are going wrong. The law is: as the thought, so is the state of mind. Negative thoughts lead to disturbance. Right thinking brings peace. The Bhagavad Gita says that the wise do not grieve. Grief and wisdom do not go together; grief and ignorance do.

For example, in the first chapter of the Gita, Arjuna was full of grief. He collapsed on the battlefield, weeping and confused. Yet, at the same time, he argued with Bhagavan about why the war should not be fought. Seeing this contradiction, Bhagavan smiled and said, "Arjuna, on one hand, you speak like a wise man; on the other, you are too weak to stand. These two cannot coexist." Wisdom always comes with strength and peace.

So, whenever the mind is disturbed, it is a sign that we are going wrong somewhere. The disturbance is a message from God: He is not pleased. Bhagavan says, "Whenever there is a decline of dharma, I manifest." In our own minds, whenever our thoughts deviate from dharma, He manifests as inner disturbance.

What should a sincere seeker do? Be aware of this disturbance and correct it immediately. But this kind of awareness is not possible without regular spiritual practice. Meditation and prayer must be part of our daily routine. Over time, they help us develop intuitive awareness and inner sensitivity.

Bhagavan's guidance comes at the level of the mind. If we ignore that inner disturbance, it eventually manifests outwardly as hurtful words or harmful actions. These, in turn, are sent out into the world—and they return to us in the form of suffering, unpleasant environments, or more disturbances.

So, what should we do? Nip it in the bud. A stitch in time saves nine. Make the correction early, before it grows. This again requires daily prayer and meditation. A sincere seeker can detect disturbance early and act accordingly. Thus, the voice of conscience is a great treasure. We must listen to it. This is the fifth mode of decision-making: listening to the voice of conscience.

And here is a great mantra to live by: "If I am disturbed, I am wrong." Usually, we say, "If I am disturbed, someone else must be wrong." But the truth is, if I am disturbed, something is wrong within me. God is trying to tell us, "My dear child, correct yourself. This is not the right way to think."

The more peaceful we are inside, the more harmonious our outer world becomes. Peace within leads to peace with people, situations, and things outside. Many people talk about world peace as if it must come from somewhere outside. But world peace begins with inner peace. When individuals are peaceful, the world becomes peaceful. Disturbed individuals disturb the world.

That's why the two go hand in hand: peace within, harmony outside.

6. Decision-Making Based on the Mood of the Mind

Now, the sixth point: decision-making based on the state or mood of the mind.

The Bhagavad Gita, particularly Chapter 14, describes the three gunas (qualities) of the mind:

1. Tamasic: lazy, dull, sleepy, bored, and uninterested. Never take decisions in this state.

2. Rajasic: restless, agitated, extroverted, passionate, and impulsive. Avoid decisions in this state too.

3. Sattvic: calm, peaceful, alert, and clear. All important decisions should be made in this state.

Whenever you take a decision in a sattvic state of mind, you will not regret it. But decisions made in a tamasic or rajasic state often lead to regret: "I

shouldn't have said that," or "I shouldn't have done that." Therefore, ensure your mind is in a sattvic state before making decisions.

So, this is the sixth mode of decision-making: based on the state of the mind.

Now, suppose none of these six tips are working. You've tried everything, but still don't know what to do. What then?

7. Decision Making by Surrendering to God

Then comes the seventh point: surrender to God.

In Chapter 2, Verse 7 of the Bhagavad Gita, Arjuna completely surrenders to the Lord. He says, "I am confused. I don't know what is right or wrong. Please guide me. I am your disciple." This is the verse of surrender.

When we find ourselves lost or confused, we should chant this verse with humility and devotion. Bow down before God. In that state of surrender, the mind becomes quiet. In the absence of ego, divine guidance arises. Intuitively, we begin to understand what to do.

Turning to God is like turning to light. In the presence of light, everything becomes visible. You won't be confused about right and wrong. But when you turn away from God, you walk into darkness—and confusion naturally follows. So, when you're unable to decide, surrender completely to the Lord. His guidance is always available.

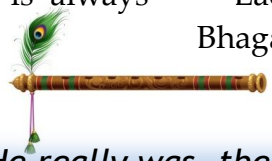
Finally, there's one more source of guidance: the wisdom of elders, scriptures, and saints. Look at how noble beings have made decisions in the past. The Puranas and Itihasas are full of such examples.

For instance, scriptures advise us to obey our parents. But in the Ramayana, Bharata disobeys his mother for the sake of righteousness. Similarly, in the Bhagavata Purana, Prahlada disobeys his father Hiranyakashipu. So, when faced with complex moral situations, we must seek inspiration from how saints and sages handled similar dilemmas.

To recap, here are the seven ways of decision-making discussed based on:

1. Role (choose the higher role when roles conflict)
2. Beneficiary (choose what benefits the majority)
3. Faculties (choose intellect over emotional likes/dislikes)
4. Swadharma (choose what inspires and fulfills you)
5. Voice of conscience (choose what brings peace within)
6. Mood of mind (decide only in a sattvic state)
7. Surrender to God (seek divine guidance when unsure)

Each method is a practical application of the Bhagavad Gita in daily life.



"Sri Krishna ought to be painted as He really was, the Gita personified; and the central idea of the Gita should radiate from His whole form as He was teaching the path of Dharma to Arjuna, who had been overcome by infatuation and cowardice…. Look here, thus does he hold the bridle of the horses — so tight that they are brought to their haunches, with their forelegs fighting the air, and their mouths gaping. This will show a tremendous play of action in the figure of Sri Krishna. His friend, the world - renowned hero, casting aside his bow and arrows, has sunk down like a coward on the chariot, in the midst of the two armies. And Sri Krishna, whip in one hand and tightening the reins with the other, has turned Himself towards Arjuna, with his childlike face beaming with unworldly love and sympathy, and a calm and serene look — and is delivering the message of the Gita to his beloved comrade. Now, tell me what idea this picture of the Preacher of the Gita conveys to you."

-- Swami Vivekananda, "Practical Vedanta"

BHAGAVATA (27): *CAN THE VEDA REVEAL BRAHMAN?*

Swami Ishatmananda

Today we shall discuss a very important question raised by King Parikshit and the answer given by the great soul, Sri Suka.

While studying the Bhagavatam, we came across various questions raised by King Parikshit regarding spiritual matters, as he awaited his death. Sri Suka, an honored monk par excellence, was providing the answers.

However, suddenly, in skanda 10, para 87, the king raised a question about the authority of the Vedas.

We all know that since time immemorial, the Vedas have been accepted not as mere books, but as a mass of knowledge revealed spontaneously in the pure hearts of the rishis. Parikshit was well aware of that tradition. Why, then, did he ask the following question?

Brahman! O You, the knower of Brahman, meaning Sri Suka:

ब्रह्मन् ब्रह्मण्यनिर्देश्ये निर्गुणे गुणवृत्तयः।
कथं चरन्ति श्रुतयः साक्षात् सदसतः परे॥

brahman brahmaṇy-anirdeśye nirguṇe guṇa-vṛttayaḥ
katham caranti śrutaya sākṣāt sad-asataḥ pare.

O knower of Brahman, you are aware that this Supreme Brahman (साक्षात् ब्रह्मन्). It is indescribable or indefinable (अनिर्देश्य) and beyond the gunas (सत्व, रज, तम that is निर्गुणे) of Prakriti, and beyond the relation of cause and effect (सत्–असत्–परे), the Vedas being constituted of words (गुणवृत्तयः श्रुतयः) how can the Vedas reveal Brahman (कथं चरन्ति)? 10/ 87/ 1

King Parikshit's point is astute. How can the Vedas, which are based on words and qualities, reveal Brahman, which is beyond words and qualities?

The Upanishads themselves echo this sentiment, stating Brahman is:

- अवांमनसगोचरम् (Avang-manasa-gocharam): Beyond any expression.
- न तत्र वाग गछति नो मनः (Na-Tatra-Vag-Gachati-No-Manah): Unthinkable by the mind.
- यतो वाच निवर्तन्ते अपराप्य मनसाः सः (*Aparapya-Vacha-Nivartante-Aparapya-Manasa-Saha*): From where words and mind return without success.

Brahman is often described through negatives: अंशरहित (Ansha-rahita) (without parts), क्रियारहित (Kriya-rahita) (without action), विकारशुन्य (Vikara-shunya) (without decay), निरंजन (Niranjan) (without defect), and निर्गुण (Nirguna) (without dualities). Yet, it also possesses positive attributes: अस्ति (Asti) (Existence), भाति (Bhati) (Knowledge), and प्रियम् (Priyam) (Bliss). Given this paradoxical nature, the King's question is incredibly relevant.

Vedas: Maps to the Inexpressible

If Brahman is so inexpressible, then what role do the Vedas play? The answer is, they are not direct descriptions, but rather 'Maps' to guide seekers toward this subtle truth. As ancient texts proclaim:

- तम् तत् उपनीषदम् पुरूषम् प्रिच्छामी: "I wish to know that Supreme Being mentioned in the Upanishads."
- सर्वे वेदा यत् पदम् आप्नोती: "I wish to know that Supreme about whom all the Vedas have indicated." The Vedas are thus known as शब्द ब्रम्ह (Shabda Brahman)—Brahman manifested through words. But what kind of words are these?

When we speak, we create sounds, called pada (पद) in Sanskrit. Each pada, or sound, must carry meaning. For example, "Mother" is a sound with meaning, unlike a mere whistle. Multiple Padas form a vakya (वाक्य), or sentence, also imbued with meaning. This connection between sound, word (Shabda) and meaning (Artha) is fundamental. Sometimes, the apprehended meaning (Lakshana) differs from the direct meaning, as in the phrase "We live on water," which implies dependence rather than literal habitation.

The Deeper Dimensions of Sound

When the Vedas are described as Veda Shabda Brahma (वेद शब्द ब्रम्ह), that "Shabda (शब्द)" refers to something entirely different – a sound that, like Brahman, is:

- Akshaya (अक्षय): Undecaying
- Vinasha-Rahita (विनाश-रहित): Indestructible
- Anadi (अनादि): Without Beginning
- Ananta (अनन्त): Eternal

The great Indian linguist and philosopher, Bhartrihari,, categorized language into five stages, offering a profound insight into how the inexpressible might be approached:

- Vak (वाक्): The fully unmanifested level of language.
- Para (परा): Where only a subtle movement begins to create a word (Shabda (शब्द)).
- Pashyanti (पश्यन्ति): The highest level, described by Rishis. When a Yogi transcends Vaikhari and Madhyama, they reach Pashyanti, becoming one with the Absolute. At this finest level, there is no distinction between the word and its meaning.
- Madhyama (मध्यमा): The thinking level of the mind.
- Vaikhari (वैखरी): The most external level of language, spoken and heard.

Adi Shankaracharya also recognized this view, considering Pashyanti as the meeting point between the waking state and pure consciousness. The Tantra tradition further places these stages within the subtle body: Vaikhari in the throat; Madhyama in the heart; Pashyanti in the navel; and Para in the root (Muladhara (मूलाधार), with Vak residing in the Kundalini (कुण्डलिणी).

Thus, Brahman is expressed through sounds that develop in four stages:

- Para (परा): The primordial vibration before creation.
- Pashyanti (पश्यन्ति): The subtlest form of the word, where there is no difference between sound and meaning (Vachaka-Vachya-Abheda (वाचक-वाच्य-अभेद)).
- Madhyama (मध्यमा): Just before the manifested form of sound, audible only to specially qualified Yogis (from Para to Madhyama, sound is Paramajyoti (परमज्योति) – Supreme Light).
- Vaikhari (वैखरी): The gross form of Vak (वाक्), which is created with the help of the Tongue + Palate + Lips + Teeth + Throat & Udaan (उदान) (Air).

What we read, understand, and express from the Vedas exists at the Vaikhari level. However, Brahman as "Shabda (शब्द)" (sound) is so subtle that no human being can create it. This is why true knowledge is considered Apaurosheya (अपौरुषेय) – not created by any human. It is spontaneously generated from Brahman Itself. Hence, the Vedas are indeed the revealers of Brahman.

The Primordial Sound: OM

The very first vibration, known as Para-Vak, is the subtle OM Nada (ॐ नाद), the primordial sound. This Para-Vak, or OM sound, manifests without the need for any "second object" or external agency. For this profound reason, it is accepted as Brahman itself.

The Taittiriya Upanishad (1/8) unequivocally states, "OM Iti Brahma (ॐ ईति ब्रम्ह)" — OM is Brahman. Numerous other Upanishads, including the Prashna, Katha, and Mandukya, alongside the Bhagavad Gita, similarly equate OM with Brahman. This same profound idea appears in the Manu Samhita (2/83), which declares, "Ekam-Aksharam-Parama-Brahma (एकं-अक्षरं-परम्-ब्रम्ह)," meaning "the one-letter word is the Supreme Brahman." Even in the Vishnu Sahasranama, OM is revered as one of the sacred names of Maha-Vishnu (महा-विष्णु).

While OM (ॐ) appears as a single letter, its deeper analysis reveals three constituent sounds that create this Nada (नाद): A (अ) + U (उ) + M (म) = ॐ. This tripartite structure symbolizes various fundamental concepts:

- Sattva (सत्व) + Raja (रज) + Tama (तम) = Guna-traya (गुणत्रय): The three different qualities of nature.

•Rig (ऋक्) + Yajur (यजू) + Sama (साम) = Mantra-traya (मंत्र त्रय): The three primary Vedas.

•Bhu (भु) + Bhuva (भूवः) + Swa (स्वः) = Loka-traya (लोकत्रय): The three different planes of existence.

•Jagrat (जाग्रत) + Swapna (स्वप्न) + Sushupti (सुषुप्ति) = Avastha-traya (अवस्थात्रय): The three different states of consciousness (waking, dream, and dreamless sleep).

Sri Suka's Revelation: The Purpose of Creation

Instead of a philosophical explanation, Sri Suka's reply to King Parikshit (Bhagavatam 10/87/2) was a profound statement of fact:

बुद्धीन्द्रियमन:प्राणान् जनानामसृजत् प्रभु: ।
मात्रार्थं च भवार्थं च आत्मनेऽकल्पनाय च ॥

buddhīndriya-manaḥ-prāṇān janānām asrjat prabhuḥ, mātrārtham ca bhavārtham ca ātmane 'kalpanāya ca.

"The Lord (प्रभुः) created faculties like intellect, senses, mind, and vital forces (प्राण) in the Jivas (individual souls) so that they may enjoy sense contacts in the world (मात्रार्थ), perform beneficial works, and gradually prepare themselves for liberation from Samsara (the cycle of birth and death). 10/87/2"

This response shifts the focus from the Vedas' ability to describe Brahman to the purpose for which our faculties were created. The divine provision of intellect, senses, mind, and vital forces isn't solely for worldly engagement, but also for the ultimate goal of liberation.

The Bhagavatam further elaborates on Creation in skanda 3, chapter 5, verse 25 and 26:

स वा एतस्य संद्रष्टु: शक्ति: सदसदात्मिका। माया नाम महाभाग ययेदं निर्ममे विभुः ॥ २५ ॥

sā vā etasya saṁdraṣṭuḥ śaktiḥ sad-asad-ātmikā māyā nāma mahā-bhāga yayedaṁ nirmame vibhuḥ.

"O great one, the Supreme God's power 'Maya,' which comprises both being and non-being, is the material cause by which the Almighty created this universe. 3/5/25"

कालवृत्त्या तु मायायां गुणमय्यामधोक्षज:। पुरुषेणात्मभूतेन वीर्यमाधत्त वीर्यवान्॥ २६ ॥

kāla-vṛttyā tu māyāyāṁ guṇa-mayyām adhokṣajaḥ puruṣeṇātma-bhūtena vīryam ādatta vīryavān.

"The supremely powerful Lord, through the power of Kala (time) acting upon Maya, which is full of gunas, impregnated it with His own essence (Purusha). 3/5/26"

Here, Maya is the material cause (उपादानकारण), the conscious Being, Brahman, is the efficient cause (निमित्तकारण), and Kala (Time) is the power (शक्ति) through which creation unfolds. In essence, Brahman encompasses all three—the instrumental, material, and efficient causes. As Sri Ramakrishna eloquently put it, "All these are His Divine Play."

Ultimately, the Vedas do not describe Brahman in the way we describe an object. Instead, they guide us through the layers of existence, through the subtle energies of sound and consciousness, leading us back to the source from which all arises—the unmanifested, eternal Brahman, whose very "word" is the foundation of all creation.

Swami Vivekananda's prayer to Madhava, a name of Krishna that means the Lord of honey or Sweetness.

"Sweet One! Many people offer to You many things, I am poor — but I have the body, mind, and soul. I give them over to You. Deign to accept, Lord of the Universe, and refuse them not."— So have I given over my life and soul once for all. One thing — they are a dry sort of people here — and as to that very few in the whole world are there that are not."

--Complete Works, Vol. 6

Introduction to the Cover Page:
The Motherly Heart of Janmashtami

Pravrajika Matriprana
Sarada Convent
Vedanta Society of Southern California

This is the time of Janmashtami, the holy birthday of Bhagavan Sri Krishna according to the lunar calendar. This festival is celebrated all over the world. Sri Krishna is considered the eighth incarnation (avatāra) of the supreme Godhead, Vishnu. It is usually celebrated in the month of August or September on the eighth day of the waning moon. This event is significant in general in Hinduism, and specifically in Vaishnavism, a branch that focuses on devotion to Vishnu and his avatars.

Beginning from cultural, religious, and spiritual aspects and the like, this festival has innumerable facets. Vyasa, the author of the Mahabharata, the compiler of the four Vedas, and the composer of the Brahmasutras, failed to capture the vastness of Sri Krishna even through 18,000 verses of the Bhagavatam! He asked for forgiveness:

रूपं रूपविवर्जितस्य भवतो ध्यानेन यत्कल्पितं
स्तुत्यानिर्वचनीयताखिलगुरो दुरीकृता यन्मया
व्यापित्वन्च निराकृतं भगवतो यत्तीर्थयात्रादिना
क्ष्यन्तव्यं जगदीश तद्विकलतादोषत्रयं मत्कृतम्

rūpaṁ rūpavivarjitasya bhavato dhyānena yatkalpitaṁ
stutyānirvacanīyatākhilaguro durīkṛtā yanmayā
vyāpitvanca nirākṛtaṁ bhagavato yattīrthayātrādinā
kṣyantavyaṁ jagadīśa tadvikalatādoṣatrayaṁ matkṛtam

"O Lord, for purposes of meditation I have given a name and form to You, though You do not have them; by means of hymns I have sought to describe You, though You are indescribable; I have journeyed to sacred places to be in Your presence, though You are omnipresent. I have committed these three sins in my ignorance, for which I crave Your pardon."

In Vaishnavism, for God-realization one must go through the path of Bhakti Yoga to some extent, and that path is principally developed centering on either one of the Vishnu incarnations—Lord Rama or Sri Krishna. There are mainly five types of relationships through which an aspirant grows spiritually while living a God-centered life. These moods are: *śānta* (peaceful witness), *dāsya* (feeling "I am a servitor of Krishna"), *sakhya* (feeling "I am a friend of Krishna"), *vātsalya* (feeling "Krishna is my baby"), and *madhura* (feeling "I am a lover of Krishna").

Bhāva is basically the aspirant's attitude or mood towards one's chosen ideal. Clearly, *vātsalya* mood is complementary to *mātri bhāva*. When one worships God as their baby and oneself as the mother, it is said to be *vātsalya bhāva*. Similarly, when an aspirant begins by seeing God as one's own mother, it is called *mātri bhāva*. A spiritual aspirant may begin with either of these *bhāvas;* at the vanishing point—that is, at the point of God-realization—only love will remain, whether it be a mother's love for a baby or a baby's love for the mother. That pure love is God.

Mother Yashoda is one of the best examples of *vātsalya bhāva*. She was not always aware that Krishna was God Himself. Though she was ignorant of Krishna's reality, she served God as her own child. Dāmodara, the very name of Sri Krishna, is a testimony of this love. *Dāma* means rope, and *udara* is belly or waist. Mythology says that once baby Krishna was giving her a hard time with his playful naughtiness. She tried to tie him with a rope, and the all-powerful, omniscient Lord allowed her to put that rope around his waist! Hence he assumed the name "Dāmodara." The spiritual significance is—only the love of a devotee can captivate the Lord of the universe.

A more recent example is the case of Aghormani Devi. In the Ramakrishna sphere she is known as "Gopaler Maa," Gopal's mother. Her chosen ideal was Gopal, baby Krishna. She saw her Gopal's body got merged into Sri Ramakrishna's body and she worshiped Sri Ramakrishna as her Gopal alone. After Sri Ramakrishna's death, she once went to attend the chariot festival of Jagannath in Mahesh, a place of pilgrimage on the bank of Ganga. At that time she had the cosmic vision of the Lord. She saw her beloved Gopal not only in the image of Jagannath in the chariot but also in the pilgrims who were pulling the chariot. "I was then not myself," she said. "I danced and laughed and created a commotion there."

Sri Ramakrishna himself practiced holding onto the *vātsalya bhāva*. He taught how a sādhaka (spiritual aspirant) adopts the tender love, care, and protectiveness of a mother. In the introduction of "The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna", Swami Nikhilananda wrote: *About the year 1864 there came to Dakshineswar a wandering Vaishnava monk, Jatadhari, whose Ideal Deity was Rama. He always carried with him a small metal image of the Deity, which he called by the endearing name of Ramlala—Baby Rama. As a result of lifelong spiritual practice he had actually found in the metal image the presence of his Ideal. Ramlala was no longer for him a metal image, but the living God. He devoted himself to nursing Rama, feeding Rama, playing with Rama, taking Rama for a walk, and bathing Rama. And he found that the image responded to his love. Sri Ramakrishna, much impressed with his devotion, requested Jatadhari to spend a few days at Dakshineswar. Soon Ramlala became the favourite companion of Sri Ramakrishna too.*

Sri Ramakrishna told M, the writer of his Gospel: "*I became mad for Rama. I used to walk about carrying an image of Ramlala given to me by a monk. I bathed it, fed it, and laid it down to sleep. I carried it wherever I went. I became mad for Ramlala. … Ramlala was my constant companion. Sometimes I would bathe Him and sometimes feed Him.*

He described to the devotees how the little image would dance gracefully before him, jump on his back, insist on being taken in his arms, run to the fields in the sun, pluck flowers from the bushes, and play pranks like a naughty boy. A very sweet relationship sprang up between him and Ramlala, for whom he felt the love of a mother.

"One day Jatadhari requested Sri Ramakrishna to keep the image and bade him adieu with tearful eyes. He declared that Ramlala had fulfilled his innermost prayer and that he now had no more need of formal worship. A few days later Sri Ramakrishna was blessed through Ramlala with a vision of Ramachandra, whereby he realized that the Rama of the Ramayana, the son of Dasaratha, pervades the whole universe as Spirit and Consciousness; that He is its Creator, Sustainer, and Destroyer; and that, in still another aspect, He is the transcendental Brahman—without form, attribute, or name.

"While worshipping Ramlala as the Divine Child, Sri Ramakrishna's heart became filled with motherly tenderness, and he began to regard himself as a woman. His speech and gestures changed. He began to move freely with the ladies of Mathur's family, who now looked upon him as one of their own sex. During this time he worshipped the Divine Mother as Her companion or handmaid." [Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna].

In Sri Ramakrishna's own words: "I now feel for Purna and the other young boys as I once felt for Ramlala. I used to bathe Ramlala, feed Him, put Him to bed, and take Him wherever I went. I used to weep for Ramlala. Now I have the same feeling for these young boys." Centering on his spiritual son Rakhal—later Swami Brahmananda—Sri Ramakrishna's mātri bhāva bloomed like a thousand-petaled lotus.

Mary is venerated in Christianity as the Mother of God (*Theotokos* in Greek). According to Christian tradition, Mary nurtures the infant Jesus, protects him, and serves the Divine as her child—with no ego, only love. According to Catholic and Orthodox theology, Mother Mary's role is not only biological but spiritually symbolic—representing

devotion, surrender, and the Mother of all believers. She becomes the first devotee, nurturing the Incarnate God.

Because it is the time of Janmashtami, the cover contains an image of baby Krishna. A baby always needs a mother. Therefore, it is worth revisiting two *bhāvas — vātsalya* and *mātri*, on this special occasion. On the day a baby is born, a mother is born too. They grow together. Their journeys are parallel. Gradually they meet at a vanishing point. Irrespective of one's physical appearance, it is the mindset—full of love, care, affection, and that protective, nurturing attitude—which is called "motherly nature." A mother's love for her baby is called *vātsalya*. On the other hand, a baby is totally free from ego and dependent on the mother. To a baby, the mother is everything.

Later in Christian mysticism, similar attitudes are present. St. Francis of Assisi and others sometimes saw Christ as the Beloved Child. Mother Teresa of Calcutta often said she saw Jesus in the distressing disguise of the poor, especially the child. This practice brings sweetness, closeness, and non-duality—as the mother and child become one in heart.

An eternally perfect example of the blend of two *bhāvas* is Maa Sarada Devi. Per the "Gospel of the Holy Mother", once a devotee "asked her: Mother, all other Incarnations survived their spiritual consorts (Shakti), but why this time did the Master pass away leaving you behind?

The Mother said: Do you know, my son, that the Master looked upon all in this world as Mother? He left me behind this time to demonstrate that Motherhood to the world"."

So, the great significance of Holy Mother's life is in the fact that the Sri Ramakrishna ideal of the Motherhood of God reached its consummation in her. From the writings of Swami Tathagatananda: *In her character, one dominant trait overshadowed all the rest: her motherly love and concern. Most striking was her readiness to help everyone regardless of caste, creed, color, and merit—or the lack of it. She was sweetness incarnate and grace abounding. God as Savior is full of love. As a mother loves her children, the great Mother-Heart of God loves all. Holy Mother was an incarnation of Love. Her love is not exclusive. She herself said: "I am the Mother of all. I am the Mother of the good. I am the Mother of the bad, too." In these words lies her greatest reassurance that every one of us is near to her, not far—for this assurance can only come from the Divine Mother Herself.*

The practice of *mātri bhāva* is a unique contribution of Sri Ramakrishna to the traditional bhakti school of thought. To look upon one's chosen ideal as the Divine Mother, and, after attaining the Absolute, to see the immanent as the Mother—and to establish a non-dual identity with the Divine Mother—was completely unheard of before Sri Ramakrishna. He demonstrated it, and Sri Sarada Devi embodied it in day-to-day living.

In this is time of Janmashtami, it may be remembered that a sculptor who prepares an image of Mother Durga for her worship in the autumn begins to apply clay from the day of Janmashtami. A mother begins to take form on the day a baby is born, as it were. Similarly, looking at baby Krishna, *vātsalya bhāva* may spontaneously spring up in a sādhaka's heart, and instantly a mother is born in that mind. The goal is that, through sādhana, this newborn motherly mind will gradually expand to the unending love of the Divine Mother as baby Krishna. She will be celebrated in the remaining four months of the year—as Mother Durga in September, Mother Kali in October, Mother Jagaddhatri in November, and Mother Sarada in December.

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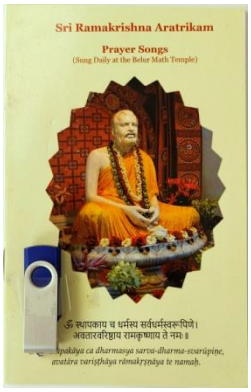

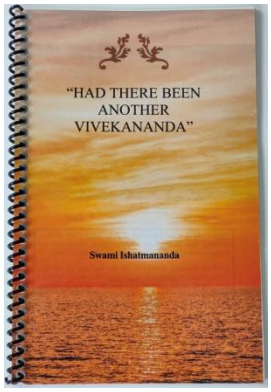

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