

# CHICAGO CALLING



A Spiritual and Cultural Quarterly eZine of  
the Vivekananda Vedanta Society of Chicago

No. 48, 2025

# Table of Contents



	Page
<b>EDITORIAL: RESOLUTION</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>A GLOBAL CELEBRATION OF DIVINE MOTHER</b> <i>SWAMINI ADITYANANDA SWARASWATI</i>	<b>4</b>
<b>FAITH AS THE ONLY PATH TO RACIAL HEALING AND</b> <b>REPAIR</b> <i>FATHER LARRY DOWLING</i>	<b>9</b>
<b>PILGRIMAGE REFLECTIONS, PART 1</b> <b>MUMBAI, DELHI, AND GURUGRAM</b> <i>BRIAN VANDENBOS</i>	<b>16</b>
<b>BHAGAVATA (29): BHAGAVAT DHARMA: THE</b> <b>BLESSINGS OF THE NINE YOGIS</b> <i>SWAMI ISHATMANANDA</i>	<b>18</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION TO THE COVER PAGE</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>ANNUAL REPORTS OF CENTER'S PREMISES</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>ADVERTISEMENTS</b>	<b>27</b>

**Editor: Swami Ishatmananda**  
**Vivekananda Vedanta Society of Chicago**  
**14630 Lemont Road, Homer Glen, 60491**  
**email: [ezine@chicagovedanta.org](mailto:ezine@chicagovedanta.org)**  
**[chicagovedanta.org](http://chicagovedanta.org)**

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## Resolution



This is the customary practice: to take resolutions every New Year. Young students especially are advised by their teachers and guardians to write down in their notebooks or diaries the new resolutions for the coming year. They must also take note of whatever they have done in the old year. Learning from the old year—its faults, its weaknesses—they should march forward, go onward. That is the culture, that is the way human society makes progress.

Back in ancient times there was a beautiful word, the kind *caraiveti*: "March on, march on." They tell the story of one person who was going on foot to a tirtha, but it was a long journey. After covering almost seventy-five percent of the distance, he suddenly decided, "This is too much for me. I won't be able to continue. Let me go back." He knew he had already covered most of the distance, but still he was thinking of giving up.

At that very moment, God Indra came down in the form of an older person and said, "What is the matter? Why do you look sad?" The traveler replied, "I was destined to go over there. I was thinking to go over there. But I have been walking and walking all this time, and I am tired of it. So I am thinking I should go back." Then Indra, the king of the gods in human form, told him, "Charaiveti, Charaiveti, march on and on! You have already covered so much."

This is also our journey. When we try to reach our destination—maybe students dreaming to become medical practitioners, engineers, officers, accountants, politicians, or to be successful in some field of life—the goal should first be fixed. Then we should go on and on without stopping. There will be objections, there will be difficulties. But one has to stop, see, understand, and overcome the difficulties—yet should not stop the journey itself. Maybe we fail in our effort. Even then, we have to go on and on.

Swami Vivekananda has given a wonderful definition about *pūjā*, about worship. Worship, according to Swamiji, is a great fight, a war. At that time you are trying to conquer your own mind, your own senses, which will try to drag you down. That is natural; that is normal. But understanding the defects, understanding the problem, we must overcome them.

Swamiji says again and again: you will fail in your faults, but don't lose heart. What is there? Suppose you cannot do this one thing—there is some other thing in

which you are excellent. Try that. You are not worthless; that is for sure. Keep that in your mind. Have self-confidence and faith in the existence of God, the Supreme, the Divinity. Pray and try. Pray and try. It is bound to come.

In one of the seven steps of Vedantic progress in spiritual life it is said: resolution. The resolution should be this: "*I would like to know myself. Who am I? From where have I come?*" I am only a reflection, born with a body and a mind in it, but this cannot only be material—it must be divine. When I look around I see the excellent personalities like Jesus, Lord Buddha, Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna. There must be something which is truly excellent, beyond this world. I would like to reach over there. I would like to know myself.

The first step one should take in that direction is called *śubha*—holy desire, *śubheccha*, only the holy desire. With that, march on and on. You will find a guru, a teacher, a guide. You will find advice in the scriptures. They will give you encouragement and the right direction. But the effort is yours—you have to go on and on.

If someone thinks that there will be no obstruction anywhere, that everything will be friendly—know that is a great mistake. There will be obstructions. And the higher you go, the more Godward you go, the more difficulties will come. Difficulties will come from within, from your own mind, from your own past *samskāras*, from the past works you have done. All that will come and create hurdles. But, O brave one, take the new resolution: "*I am going to be successful.*" You must overcome, be successful, and one day you will be good to yourself.

Swamiji encouraged us by saying each and every soul has the right to the Buddhahood—Buddha meaning knowledge, the knowledge of oneness. "I am going to realize that One, the Supreme, from which everything has come, and I want to be That." May the New Year 2026 bring success in our lives, and whatever we resolve, may we reach it and complete it.

Swami Brahmananda inspired, "*You must have a clear conception of your life's ideal. Decide now what life you want to lead. Should it be this fleeting life of transient pleasures or the everlasting life of eternal bliss?*" (The Eternal Companion, p. 224).



## A Global Celebration of Divine Mother

Swamini Adityananda Swaraswati

Vice Chair of Unitarian Universalism Ministry for Earth  
Unitarian Church of Hinsdale, IL

*This article is prepared based on the lecture that was delivered on October, 4th, 2025 at Home of Harmony*

*Om Gam Ganapataye Namo Namah.*

*Om Ya Devi Sarva-Bhuteshu Shakti Rupena Samsthita,  
Namas-Tasyai Namas-Tasyai Namas-Tasyai Namo  
Namah.*

In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the world was a formless void, and darkness covered the face of the deep. So says the Bible's Book of Genesis: in the beginning was Divine Mother, in her held the infinite potential of the universe.

She goes by countless names across the world: Mother Kali in India, Nana Beluku in Africa, and dare we even say, the black Madonna of Europe.

Through her love, like in the God of Genesis, in the beginning, there was one from which many ultimately came, and it was beautiful, and it was good. From the one comes the many, so also says the scientists who gaze into the skies and envision the scientific magic of the Big Bang.

So also say the Maharis (great sages), for whom the secrets of the universe reveal themselves when they are deep in meditation. The secrets of the universe reveal themselves with eyes wide shut.

In the beginning, there was darkness; the womb of creation held infinite potential. Time did not exist, atoms did not exist, yet in the void was a tiny, tiny mass.

And from that tiny, tiny mass, from that Oneness, exploded forth magic, atoms, stars, ash, planets, darkness, light, bit by bit, life. Beautiful life. Beautiful life.

In the Chandi, we find:

*Ya Devi Sarva-Bhuteshu Shakti Rupena Samsthita,*

*Namastasyai Namastasyai Namastasyai Namo Namah.*

Divine Mother is the light. She is the darkness and everything in between. Formless and with form. And today in Her Divine season, let us celebrate Her.

Let us celebrate Her as she appears on four continents.

The mantra I just sang refers to Divine Mother as Shakti, the electric light, the energy that animates all of life, the universe, all there is.

Swami Vivekanandaji said: *"Kali is the Divine Mother of the Universe who is embodied in Herself creation and destruction, love and terror, life and death."*

And that reminds me of a story.

It is said that there was a time when the gods believed themselves so powerful that they were beyond compare. They grew vain over the years as they continued to feel so grand, so powerful. And so it was that one day, the Lords Brahma, Vishnu, and Maheshwara (Shiva) were comparing notes; each describing why he was better than the other god. So engrossed were they in this debate that years turned into centuries. Nothing was born. Nothing flourished. All was neglected. Nothing even died. And so, the people and the creatures of our planet cried out for help. They prayed in desperation, for things were becoming very, very desperate as those gods were arguing about who was greater than the next.

So one day while the gods were arguing away, a little girl, maybe about 3 feet tall, with cute little braids, adorable little dimples, a white, perfect smile, maybe five, maybe four years old, appeared.

She came out of the woods, or came out of the garden, what have you? She appeared to the gods, and the gods laughed because she was really cute. "Mr. Gods," she said with a bit of curtsy and a flutter of her eyelashes. "Can you please help me with something, Mr. Gods?" "Sure, little girl," said Lord Brahma in his benevolence, because he is very kind. And so asked Lord Brahma, "What is it that you need?" and she said, "Here, this little blade of grass, I need help just bending it, for a little art project that I'm doing. Can you do that, dear Lord? Can you please help me, dear Lord?" So, of course, Lord Brahma, in all his benevolence, all his strength, took the piece of grass, and he tried to bend it with all his might. But that little grass stayed straight. Lord Vishnu laughed at him. "Ha-ha-ha-ha silly, silly God, give me that." he said. He took the blade of grass away from Lord Brahma. And he tried to bend it. But for all he tried, with all his power, nothing. That grass wouldn't bend. "Ha-ha-ha-ha" said Lord Shiva, "give me that. Don't you know who I am? I told you I'm the strongest of you all." And so, he took that grass and he tried to bend it, and he was ashamed, for even he could not bend that blade of grass.

And the little girl looked at them. She blinked her little eyelashes. She smiled, her cute little smile. And she said, "Silly gods." She took that piece of grass away. "All you need to do is do this. Silly gods." The grass bent. No one else could bend it. "All you need to do is do this", she said in her cute little way. And then it was that the gods realized who she was: do you have any idea of who the little girl may have been? She was none other but the Divine Mother. And the gods had tears in their eyes, and they bowed down to her in all their reverence, and they sang:

*Ya Devi Sarva-Bhuteshu Shakti Rupena Samsthita,  
Namastasyai Namastasyai Namastasyai Namo Namah.*  
Shakti, the energy that enables us all to live. Shakti, as Divine Mother, dances Her eternal dance of life and death. It is Shakti, here in Her form of **Mother Kali**. See, Mother is dancing that dance on

the body of Lord Shiva, her consort. Now, some people think that it looks a bit scary. She is dancing that dance on the body of Lord Shiva, which seems a little frightening. But then I ask you to look at Lord Shiva's face for a moment. Does he look frightened? He's in bliss as she dances that eternal dance.

Ramakrishna Paramahamsa had a very special first darshan of Mother Divine.

Mother Kali appeared to him, and later on, when he talked about what happened.

He said, "*I had a marvelous vision, a marvelous vision of Divine Mother, and I fell unconscious. Within me,*" he said, "*there is a steady flow of undiluted bliss that I had never before experienced, and I felt the immediate presence of Divine Mother.*" Said Ramakrishna Paramansahansa:

With Her grace

With Her shakti

Even humans, mere mortals like you and I, can feel that great bliss

as they close their eyes to the external light  
and meditate with love,  
with deep love.

The love like a mother to her child.

The love of a poet for his beloved.

The love, the longing

for that which we always crave to reach out and touch,

but somehow just always find it right there  
yet out of reach.

Even though She is everywhere.

And so, Swami Vivekananda ji sang these words, which I am going to recite. His beloved Master Ramakrishna Paramahamsa taught him that song. He sang all night long.

Thou art in earth, in water thou

Thou liest in the root of all

Thou are in me

Thou are in every creature

In every creature thou hast thy home.

Though clothed with form,

Yet thou art formless, reality.

Sandhya art thou, Gayatri art thou,

and doust thou sustain the universe?  
Mother, thy help  
Thy help, art thou,  
That help coming from you, of those who have  
no help but thee,  
O' eternal,  
O' beloved  
Of Lord Shiva.

Let's now turn to **Sarah La Kali**, the black Madonna, the Catholic patron saint of the Romani, of the gypsy people, and of the displaced. Sarah La Kali is what She is called, and She is in France, where She is worshiped by millions of people to this day, especially in May, when pilgrims take Her in procession as if they were still in India. The black Madonna of France is brought to the river, like after Durga Puja, she is celebrated with light, like the "Aratis" as we see in India, and here in this holy place. She is Sara La Kali, the black Madonna, and She is very much alive in France.

In Poland, another black Madonna is worshiped. Her story spans the centuries. Today, She is known as a patron saint and protector. She was even crowned Queen of Poland and is known and loved by millions who make a pilgrimage to Her every year to the monastery where She's housed, where She's veiled by cloth all day long except two times a day, when the people can see Her and get a glimpse of Her divine form. They pray for Her blessings. Pray for the miracles because She is known for the miracles that She brings.

Next is a very ancient one. I want to tell you Her story because Divine Mother's story transcends all boundaries, all cultures. It's said that not long after the crucifixion of Jesus about 2,000 years ago, His disciple, St. Luke, created this beautiful image of Mother Divine, the Blessed Virgin. It was then handed down over time. It was a sacred object. It was revered. It was worshiped from hand to hand, heart to heart, until it was installed in a beautiful monastery, in a church in Seville, Spain. But in the year 712, the country of Spain was besieged. It was overwhelmed, overrun by soldiers who forced the priests who cared for Her into hiding. And they

didn't want Her to be damaged because She was so sacred, so they buried Her to protect Her image. They buried Her near a river called the Guadalupe, where they knew they would find Her later on when there was peace. But they never came back. Peace took a very, very long time. Six hundred years had passed: they came and went, until one day a humble shepherd came. He had been searching for his lost cow, and sadly, he found the cow dead near a river.

The shepherd sadly mourned that cow as he sat there, because he was so poor and the cow meant so much to him. He started praying. And all of a sudden, he felt an incredible grace, incredible bliss fill his every soul, every part of him. He'd never felt such bliss before. And a woman appeared to him and said, *"Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid, my son. I am the Mother of God, savior of the human race. Tell the priests what you have seen."*

She then told the shepherd to tell the priests to dig up the place where She was standing, and they would find Her image. And so, as She said, the priest came. Her ancient statue was found near the river; exactly where that cow had died and had come back to life because Divine Mother is all grace. And She brought that animal back to life to make Her son happy. There, on that spot where that statue ("murti") was found, a shrine was built, and then a grand royal monastery was constructed at **Santa Maria de Guadalupe** in Spain.

About 300 years or so later, across the Atlantic Ocean to a place that would one day become Mexico City. At that time, in that place, when there was no Mexico City, an indigenous man named Juan Diego was walking home from his church, past a mountain called the Tepeyac. He was poor. He was illiterate. He didn't dress very well. No one thought very much of him. But Mother did. Mother loves her children, she appreciates humility, and She loved his worship.

So there a woman appeared to him, shining like the sun, filling him with a feeling of divinity and bliss. She blessed him and told him, *"Build a chapel, my son, on this spot, so that I can bless and heal all*

*souls who need me.*" Juan Diego was beyond thrilled. He was in ecstasy. He was in awe, and so like Ramakrishna Paramahansa when He would drunkenly walk with the bliss of God within. Juan Diego walked back to his church, and he tried to talk the priests into building a little chapel where he had seen the Divine Mother, but they just laughed at him.

He was just a peasant without position. But like the man whose cow in Spain was resurrected years before, hundreds of years before him, he saw Her. Skeptical bishop said, "Show me a sign." And so, Juan Diego returned to the mountain where he prayed again to the Divine Mother. Although there is more to this story, I will say that the Holy Mother appeared. She appeared once again because he loved Her, because he prayed to Her with a pure heart. And She shined like the sun, filling him with bliss, a feeling of divinity. She blessed him and She asked him, "What can I do for you, my son, my precious son?" And he said, "Mother, I just need a sign that I saw you so that the priests will believe me and build a holy house for you."

And here is what Divine Mother said, "*Listen, put it into your heart, my child. Let nothing frighten or grieve you. Let not your heart be disturbed. Do not fear sickness or anguish.*" She said, "Am I not here? Who is your mother? Are you not under my protection? Am I not your health? Are you not happily within the folds of my clothing at all times, held safely in my arms? Do you need anything more, my child? Therefore, let nothing else worry or disturb you." There is a beautiful ending to this story.

On returning home, Juan Diego was pretty nervous because he had left his very sick uncle all alone. He had been taking care of him, and everyone knew his dear beloved uncle was dying. But when he got there, his uncle was fine. He was in perfect health. He was dancing. He was so happy. And so Juan Diego said, "Uncle, what happened? You were dying when I last saw you. I didn't think I'd make it back in time to see you." And he said, but he too had been visited by the Holy Mother who appeared to him shining like the

sun, filling him with the feeling of divinity. She blessed him. She healed him. And he asked Her, "Who are you?". She said, "Call me Santa Maria de Guadalupe", the same name that the Holy Mother is called in Spain.

Today, on the mountain where this indigenous peasant was graced with the vision of the Holy Mother, there stands one of the holiest shrines, the Basilica of **Our Lady of Guadalupe**. It's visited by millions of people every year who journey to Mexico and journey from throughout Mexico, for blessing, for healing, for that feeling of love, for Mother Divine. Mother is everywhere. She has no limits, no boundaries, no borders. She'll make sure that we all have the opportunity to love Her and be blessed. Divine Mother is the light. She is the darkness and everything in between—Formless and with form. And we thank Her for Her love on this special day, when we are all together to remember Her in the sacred presence of the Masters: we remember Her.

In Africa, the Divine Mother is worshiped under a different name. And I begin again by saying,

"In the beginning,  
when God created the heavens and the earth,  
the world was a formless void,  
and darkness covered the face of the deep.  
In the beginning was Divine Mother,  
in Her held the infinite potential of the  
universe."

Her name, revered to this day across much of Africa, Brazil, the Caribbean, and elsewhere, is **Nana Belaluku**. Through her love, many people of African heritage say, "Nana Belaluku created the Universe." Nana Belaluku, through her love in Africa, in Brazil, the Caribbean, and elsewhere, is the Divine Mother who bore life to this world, this universe, and all that we know, all that we love. A beautiful manifestation of love itself.

I conclude today with a poem, **Meditation for Mother's Day**, written by Jeffrey Symynkywicz:  
This is the God I could worship:  
a heavenly Mother who preaches  
imitation is not adoration,

who seeks in all Creation  
the indivisible smiles of Her children.  
Our Mother, Holy Wisdom draws one breath  
and even we who are miles away are warmed  
by Her glory of Her inspiration.

Our Mother, Holy Wisdom reaches out  
and even we locked up against ourselves  
are immersed in the blessing of Her embrace.  
This Earth is Her body,  
and we children of the Earth,  
are Her children.

It is really as simple as that.  
Let us honor our Holy Mother  
by loving our bodies made in Her own image,  
by loving one another as She has loved us,  
by loving this Earth, our beautiful, our eternal  
home

beyond this Earth, where the stars sparkle,  
the darkness void of Her loving embrace.  
Om Shanti, Shalom, Salam, Amen.

May divine Mother bless you, and in turn may  
you be a blessing to this world. Hari Om Tatsat.





## Faith as the Only Path to Racial Healing and Repair

Father Larry Dowling

Former Retired Pastor at St. Simon of Cyrene Catholic Parish,  
Chicago

*This article is prepared based on the lecture that was delivered on July 26, 2025, at Home of Harmony*

Good afternoon to everyone. It is an incredible privilege to be here with all of you. Anytime I can come together in a holy place, I feel that energy. The energy comes from the place itself, from the spirit of those who are present, and from the spirit of all those who have worshiped in this space, come together in this space, listened in this space, dialogued in this space—all of those things that are so important to who we are as human beings. We are people of relationships. None of us, as our society sometimes wants to tell us, is a self-made man or a self-made woman. We are created, first of all, out of love, out of a relationship. And in that relationship is this life-giving energy that God gives us, that strengthens us, that fortifies us, and that we need to continue to tap into in all the ways that we live our lives. That energy is at the very heart of who we are and really connects us all.

There is this sense that there is one truth. The truth is in God. And for me, God is love; God is truth; God is beauty—because all those things take us out of ourselves to seek something greater, to see something more profound, to engage in meaningful ways so that we might be life-giving to each other.

Early on in our lives, though, we begin to drift from that. I love this story, and I'm going to share it. It was shared with me a few years ago. There was a couple with a four- or five-year-old son and a three-month-old infant daughter. One day, the son went to them and said, "I want to talk to my sister." And they said, "Okay." Then he said, "I want to talk to her alone." So, they took him into the room, brought him over to the crib, and

walked out, closing the door—but of course not all the way. They listened. And what they heard their son say to his little sister was: "Where do you come from? Who made you? I'm beginning to forget. Where do you come from? Who made you? I'm beginning to forget."

For me, the heart of that story is that we all come from this incredible Spirit of God, who gives every one of us this great gift of life—the life we live, the life we hopefully live true to who God made us to be. God not only created us in love but created every one of us for a purpose. And God ultimately calls us in this life to continue to help each other grow and to build this unity in love. But over the years, we can forget where we come from. So, I always emphasize to parents and grandparents: remind your children and grandchildren every day where they come from. Where do they come from? I try to do this with the people I have the privilege to work with, the people I minister to, the people I minister with, and sometimes the people who minister to me—to engage that spirit and remind each other of where we come from, who made us, because we do forget.

I grew up in Paris. Anybody surprised by that? But I have to qualify it—Paris, Illinois. Paris, Illinois, is a small town in central Illinois, right on the border of Indiana, right across from, if anyone knows it, Terre Haute. That's where I grew up. My great-great-grandfather was one of the founders of Effingham, Illinois. My father's family is from Mattoon, Illinois—all central Illinois. My great-great-great-grandfather was a stowaway from

Germany, so I guess you might call that undocumented or illegal or whatever. And on my father's side, the family also came over during the Irish potato famine.

I also have the pleasure of knowing that on my dad's side, we're related to Abraham Lincoln. It's nice to have that heritage. I think I've read fourteen or fifteen books about Lincoln and his life. He was not a perfect person. Yes, he was involved in emancipation and freeing the slaves, but even then, he was not perfect; he had to evolve from believing that Black people were inferior to white people to knowing in his heart, and in God's eyes, Black people were equal to all people. His reason for the Emancipation Proclamation was, in his mind, the way to save the nation. Again, not a perfect person, though he did a great thing in moving toward a freedom that should have existed from the beginning of our country. But ultimately, it's this path of continuing to know, continuing to discover the truth, continuing to uncover where we come from and what we believe. What are the stories we tell? What are the stories we don't tell? What are the silences that are ashamed to speak the truth, and what are the silences that preserve the racism that continues in our society?

A few years ago, I had a conversation with the head of the Chicago Theological Seminary, the first Black president, Dr. Stephen Ray. I asked him how he would describe racism in relation to what we in the Christian tradition call the Body of Christ, which is really everyone, all of us. And he said: "It is like a cancer in the Body of Christ. It's like a cancer in us. It won't destroy us, but it makes us less than what we could be if we truly dealt with it, if we truly came to understand it, if we truly came to terms with this thing that we carry within us."

For eighteen years, as was mentioned, I was pastor at an African American Catholic church in North Lawndale on the West Side—one of the toughest communities in the city, but full of wonderful people, family people, often living in harsh conditions. The community was devastated first by housing abuses from the contract-buying

system in the '50s and '60s. Black families were not given the same deals when buying homes. They had to sign thirty-year contracts with realtors, make monthly payments, and if they missed even one payment at any point—even near the end—the house could be taken away, and they would lose all equity. Over five or six years, that community lost over five billion dollars in equity—money that would have been passed on to the next generation. The payments were often twenty to thirty percent higher than they would have been in a place like Skokie. It was an incredible abuse, and it was part of the deterioration of that community.

Then came the '60s, and with Dr. King's assassination came further devastation. After the riots, there was the introduction of drugs and guns into the community—an intentional introduction by the powers that be. Drugs were brought in so that people, especially in the Black community, would become addicted. Guns were brought in to ensure violence and crime. And then, eventually, came the so-called War on Drugs. People I have worked with in North Lawndale have testified that during that time, trucks carrying drugs and guns were escorted into the community by police. Intentional. And then, when the War on Drugs officially began in the '70s and '80s—supported by both Democrats and Republicans—the same government that facilitated the introduction of drugs now prosecuted people for using them. If you had a gun that wasn't registered, you were charged. With police departments underfunded, federal money became an incentive to arrest as many people as possible who fit those categories.

North Lawndale is indicative of the results: over sixty percent of the community has been justice-involved, predominantly through drug arrests or convictions. I worked with many men and women who were formerly incarcerated—good people, family people—caught up in a system that was focused on imprisoning them. The impact on families, on children, on the stability of the Black family—devastating. And then, when people

came out, they were denied housing, jobs, and opportunities. Some of that is changing today, thankfully, but the pattern was long established.

So, working within the community and with the community has always been about asking: How do we recognize this? How do I, as a white person, come in not as a savior but simply trying to get to know people? How do I connect with them? How do I understand what they need, and how, together, do we lift each other?

Often, we say, "We need to empower others—especially the poor." Has anybody ever said that? We need to lift them. I don't use that language anymore—at least not by itself. I use the term mutual empowerment. From my faith, I believe that if I have something to offer another person and they accept it, I'm offering them a gift, and they are offering me one by accepting it. It's what I'm supposed to be doing as a Christian, as a fellow human being. So, I sometimes demonstrate this: I reach out my hands, bend over, and say, 'Poor thing, let me lift you.' Or I can bend my knees, get down, grab the other's hands, and, eye to eye, say, "Let's lift each other up."

How does this posture change us? Because if we act out of our faith traditions and offer others something, they give back to us simply by receiving it. We lift each other up. We mutually empower one another.

I think this is a challenge, especially for people who have a lot of money, who might give for a tax deduction or to get their name on a building. But the real question is: Where does your giving come from? Does it come from a commitment of faith that God has gifted us with gifts so that we might share them? That it's not merely a choice but a requirement—because in helping others, we ourselves are helped in living out our faith? This lifting of each other is what I try to preach more and more.

Unfortunately, in the Catholic Church and in other faith traditions, we often look at Black or Hispanic communities as "deficit communities"—communities that need our help, communities that

have nothing to offer us. We need to change that mentality. In my experience of the Black community, I have learned a lot. I've been touched deeply by Black spirituality. So much so that three or four years ago, I decided I wanted to write a book about my experience—about how the Black community changed me as a white person, and to invite others who look like me to come to terms with the racism we all hold within us. Not to call anyone racist, but to recognize something built into us over 400 years. We're not to blame for inheriting it. It is embedded in us.

After eighteen years in the Black community, people would sometimes say, "Father, you don't have a racist bone in your body." And I would say, "Gosh, I wish that were true." But there's always something that hangs on. Four hundred years of a history of being taught white superiority and black inferiority - that does not diminish easily, not without faith and a commitment to change. Thankfully, because I've built relationships within the Black community and other communities—like this wonderful community here—those prejudices break down. When they arise, I can say, "No, that's not true." But I needed to learn that.

Where I grew up was an all-white community—Paris, Illinois. If a Black family moved in, they didn't stay long. My parents taught us to treat others as individuals, according to the content of their character. They were good about preaching that. They didn't always live it. Occasionally they would see Black people or other people of color on TV and make comments. So there was a lack of clarity between what they said and what they did. And for over twenty-five years, because of that segregation, I never really had the opportunity to know a Black person—to know their struggles, their dreams, their hopes, their challenges.

For me, our society is built on that structure of segregation. People in power want us fighting with each other. But our faith tells us something different: that it's about relationship, about getting to know each other, about understanding each other's struggles and pains and also each other's

hopes and dreams. Pope Francis is one of my heroes because he is called the Pope of Mercy. Mercy, in every tradition, may be described differently, but the best way I can express it is: we need to get under each other's skin—in a good way.

When we meet someone, what's the first thing we typically ask? "What do you do?" We don't ask, as a good friend of mine taught me to ask: "Tell me what you want me to know about you." When I've done that, people say, "Really? You want to know about me?" And when they share—and when I share—people go far deeper than the surface conversations we're used to. This openness is essential, especially across racial lines, because our society is set up to keep us apart. In both white people and Black people, there is this built-in distancing—born of history, racism, prejudice. It's there, and we need to recognize it.

There's a book called *The Hidden Wound*. The author is a nature writer, a white man who wrote fifty books about nature, but this was the only book he wrote about race. He grew up on a farm where his family employed Black servants—not slaves, but servants. There was a Black woman who cooked and kept the house, and a Black man who worked the farm with his father. He talked about his relationship with them—loving them and being loved by them—but also about never really getting to know them, never really listening to their challenges or their experiences.

Again, that's the myth we continue to cling to. What Wendell Berry suggested in his book really sits with me. He said that within every white person is the hollow image of a Black person. Within every white person is the hollow image of a Black person. And he said that as white people, we are taught to be nice to Black people, to be polite to them, to treat them with respect. But we never take the time to fill in that space within us—to get to know their stories, to understand their struggles, and for them to understand ours as well.

Our society is built to segregate us. That

segregation happened for me in the town where I grew up. It was an all-white community. No Black person was really allowed to move in. But that can happen anywhere. We know in Chicago, in segregated communities; we know it happens all the time in different places. And we know that the people in power thrive on power by keeping us separated. So, there is this intentional thing that we need to do—something difficult—because we don't have those connections. How do you make those connections?

As I've talked to others, especially my white brothers and sisters, they say, "Yeah, you're right. We need to find ways to do that." But where do we begin? How do we invite? How do we reach out? Who do we reach out to? Because we're not connected to any Black people, and they're not connected to us. So how do we do that? And I think that is the ongoing question for all of us: how do we bridge those places and create spaces where we can come together and share, to get to know each other—not to talk about racism right away, but to build relationships as fellow human beings, as children of God?

Along the way, as we start telling our stories, we hear stories of struggle, of pain, of history. And for us as white people, we also need to be able to say, "Okay, yes—I carry this wound as well. It's a 400-year wound that I carry and need to acknowledge." Because if I don't acknowledge it, I stay in that place where I can say, "Oh yeah, racism is wrong," but am I actively doing anything about it? Am I taking risks for love—as I sometimes say—to reach out and engage others who do not look like me, to try to build relationships? Those are the kinds of spaces that, across every faith tradition, we need to think about. How do we create spaces where people can come together and first build basic relationships, the heart of mercy, the heart of just getting to know each other? Then we can have those hard conversations.

Over the years, I've had the privilege of inviting people I know from different churches and various

racial backgrounds to come together for that purpose. We always spend the first three or four gatherings just getting to know each other. Then we start talking about race. Then there are the various challenges people face in society. A bond gets built. Knowledge is gained. Wisdom is gained. And it builds energy—energy that asks: who else do we invite? What more can we do? How can we make a difference?

So I am in the process of writing my own book, inspired by this book, *The Hidden Wound*, and by the work of James Cone—an African American theologian who wrote several books on Black Christian theology and liberation theology. One of Cone's books, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, is one I continue to hold up. He compared the cross of Jesus to the lynching tree—that tree which was the sign of terror and horror for Black people throughout history after emancipation. Over 4,500 lynchings happened, and over 3,200 of those were public lynchings, where men, women, and children would gather to celebrate and watch. They would have picnics. After someone was lynched, they would burn the body. If I get too graphic here, excuse me. They would take bones as souvenirs. They would take pictures of the body. They would sell postcards—send postcards to friends and family. Children were present. Children were even brought from school to watch. That history runs deep. It is a history of terror and horror for the Black community. And lynching continues today—not necessarily with ropes, but by stepping on the necks of people and watching them die. It continues.

So, again, the challenge for us, as people of faith, is: what do we do? How do we name the wound we carry? How do we recognize it? Sometimes I ask a question, especially in white audiences, when they ask me to talk about racism. There's often the sense of, "Okay, okay, we're enlightened people. Just talk about it, but don't actually ask us to do anything." So, one of the questions I ask is: Would you, as a white person, want to be treated the way Black people are treated today? Would

you like to be treated the same way?

Because we often hear people—some from my own family downstate—say things like, "Oh, they have all the opportunities everyone else has. They're just not trying hard enough." But when I ask, "Would you want to be treated the same way Black people are treated today?" I have never heard anyone say yes. Because we know. Deep down, we know. As much as we want to deny it, we know.

So how do we acknowledge that? How do we learn what we need to learn in order to change? To come to terms with this wound that we carry—a wound we did not create, but one passed down through generations for 400 years, embedding stereotypes into our psyche. And whenever race comes up, we immediately get defensive. Every thought that comes into our mind goes first through what they call the lizard brain—that part that asks, "Is this a threat?" And if so, we fight, flee, or rationalize our way out. That happens in all of us.

So, when the subject of race comes at us, we get that lizard-brain response: "I'm not racist—I have Black friends," or "I'm not racist," and we try to bargain, like we're in a courtroom making a case. Believe me, I've heard it over and over—especially from relatives. My sister, some years back, brought up the conversation, and she immediately said, "I'm not racist—I've got Black friends." So, I said, "Tell me about your Black friends." She said, "Well, we socialize at church, we volunteer together at the spaghetti dinner every few months..." I asked, "What do you know about their lives? Since you brought race up—what do you know about how being Black has affected their lives?" And her first response was, "Why would I need to know that?" And I said, "Friends know each other. They know the deep things about each other." So, we weren't talking about friends. We were talking about Black acquaintances—people she gets along with. If they were truly friends, she would know their history, and they would know hers. It made her think. I don't know what she's

done with that, but she doesn't push back in the same way anymore. Though I still get the occasional, "Well, Black people owned slaves too," or "Africans enslaved their own people," and all that history that we dig up to avoid dealing with things.

For me, the only way to get at this is through faith—through connecting at the level where we are all children of God, created equal, with no one inferior or superior. Yet so much of that sense of superiority is ingrained in many of us. We won't admit it. But we perform all sorts of spiritual gymnastics to rationalize it within ourselves. How do we break that down? How do we acknowledge the wound we carry?

The two parishes mentioned, St. Denis and St. Agatha, now St. Simon of Cyrene parish, had priests who actively abused children before I arrived. I was asked to go in to help with the healing process. I've learned a lot—about abuse, about trauma, things I never studied in seminary. And it has been a grace to be able to work with victim-survivors. We helped establish a healing garden for the archdiocese near Holy Family Church on Roosevelt Road—a living space for prayer, reflection, scripture quotations, and statements of apology from the church.

As I've learned about this and continue to counsel people who reveal their experiences, I see the wounds people carry. I'm working with three individuals who, even after four or five years, are still revisited by those horrible memories. Something triggers them, and it's as though the abuse happens again. How do you break that cycle? How do you help someone say, "I will not let this continue to abuse me"? I call it the abuse of memory—carrying memories that can be triggered, that retraumatize us.

Again, it's not the same thing, but there is a wound we as white people carry—hidden, unacknowledged, yet impeding our growth and our coming together with others who look different from us. That is the challenge of our society.

Some years ago, I came across a piece by Father Ron Rolheiser, one of the spiritual writers I love. He talked about God's loneliness. The loneliness of God—and, in the Christian context, the loneliness of Christ. And I thought, "What does that mean? How can God be lonely?" Surrounded by angels, saints—how could God be lonely? But when I went to the Christian scriptures, to Jesus in his final days, praying to the Father "that all may be one," I realized that longing—that unfulfilled desire for unity—is a kind of loneliness.

I love to write poetry and prose, so I'm going to read this piece that I wrote just because I wanted to capture that somehow, in some way. It's called "In the Loneliness Longing."

*That all may be one. The cry of God's heart, the fire of God's longing as our source and our destiny. To answer the cry, to enter the fire, one must recognize one's own unresolved desire for intimacy: longing for power over, instant gratification, desire to acquire and possess, aching with tension, frustration, and restlessness. We seek resolution in abuse of power, greed, pursuing prestige, demeaning others, immersing ourselves in tasks that give us a false sense of worth and accomplishment, tasks that in the end leave us restless, anxious, wanting more, even more.*

*Yet the Spirit beckons: "Let your false love give way to the love of Christ. Let your deep frustration be consumed by Advent hopeful waiting. Let your restlessness fall away into a joyous gestation of Christ's longing—sublime passion, willing submission, total self-giving, generous outpouring, forgiveness upon forgiveness, relentless hope that all may be one."*

*So, God calls us to enter into, to be transformed by, God's loneliness. God lonely? How can this be? Surrounded by angels, a communion of saints, loved ones passed on before us, caught up in the dance with Creator and Spirit. God lonely—daily overwhelmed by adoration, gratitude, and endless refrains of supplicants calling on His name. Yet lonely indeed is the One who longs from a time with no beginning, from a heart with infinite capacity to embrace, from a well of love that runs infinitely deep, that all may be one.*

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God's loneliness. God lonely? How can this be? Surrounded by angels, a communion of saints, loved ones passed on before us, caught up in the dance with Creator and Spirit. God lonely—daily overwhelmed by adoration, gratitude, and endless refrains of supplicants calling on His name. Yet lonely indeed is the One who longs from a time with no beginning, from a heart with infinite capacity to embrace, from a well of love that runs infinitely deep, that all may be one.

Lord God, let me enter into your loneliness, for consummation with my sometimes recalcitrant, reluctant spirit that pines for my submission to unwavering hope, unquestioning sacrifice, and relentless compassion. Give me the courage and determination to traverse the minefields of self-absorption, self-pity, self-gratification, and self-promotion. Free, then, to offer my God-given gifts to my brothers and sisters with a deep capacity for empathy, seeking to accompany them anywhere, anytime, to lighten their burdens, to help them develop and share their God-given potential. Let me be Christ for them,

and be surprised, awed, fed, and humbled at how they are Christ for me.

Let me seek you—lonely, waiting in the shattered spirit of a battered woman; in the confused mind of an abused child; in the haunted souls of those ravaged by war, famine, and genocide. In the immigrant fearing deportation and separation from family. In the decimated dreams of a parent losing a child, a job, a spouse. In the person of color, the woman, the person of homosexual orientation who feels demeaned, ostracized, unwelcome. In those lonely for lack of ability to love or to accept love. In the loneliness of my own heart. In the person who has lost all hope.

And having found you there, let me join my spirit to yours, that together we may uplift and embrace and mutually empower those we've encountered to join us on the journey. The kingdom less lonely, the world less harsh, the future more promising, our collective longing ever nearer—that all loneliness may be assuaged, that all may be one.

Amen.



“We have read different stories that have been written about him; we know the scholars and their writings, and the higher criticism; and we know all that has been done by study.

We are not here to discuss how much of the New Testament is true, we are not here to discuss how much of that life is historical. It does not matter at all whether the New Testament was written within the five hundred years of his birth; nor does it matter, even, how much of that life is true. But there is something behind it, something we want to imitate. To tell a lie, you have to imitate a truth, and that truth is a fact. You cannot imitate that which you have never perceived. But there must have been a nucleus, a tremendous power that came down; a marvellous manifestation of spiritual power; and of that we are speaking. It stands there. Therefore, we are not afraid of all the criticisms of the scholars. If I, as an Oriental have to worship Jesus of Nazareth, there is only one way, that is, to worship him as God and nothing else.”

-- Swami Vivekananda

(“Christ, the MessengerLos Angeles, California, 1900】

# Pilgrimage Reflections, Part 1

## Mumbai, Delhi, and Gurugram

Brian VandenBos

### Introduction

The scriptures tell us that wherever a holy person sets foot, that place becomes sanctified for ages to come. A pilgrimage, then, is not merely travel; it is a conscious journey into such sanctified spaces, undertaken with the hope that something within us will be quietly transformed. As Swami Vivekananda said, “The ideal of all education and all training should be this: man-making.” A pilgrimage is one such training, an education of the heart.

This 17-day journey through India and England centered on a lecture tour of my guru, Swami Ishatmananda (Swamiji). I am deeply grateful to him, whose invitation made this pilgrimage possible. At the outset my inner mood blended anticipation, curiosity, and an open longing for spiritual uplift. I had never set foot in India before. To visit places where Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, and Swami Vivekananda lived, taught, or inspired others felt like entering a deeper landscape, both outer and inner.

What follows are reflections from the first stage of the journey: Mumbai, Delhi, and Gurugram, woven with glimpses of history, personal impressions, and the teachings that arose along the way.

### Mumbai: A Threshold into India

Our outward pilgrimage began with delays. On November 13 our initial flight was postponed and then cancelled, and for a time even Swamiji's luggage went missing. These disruptions reminded me that pilgrimage often begins with softened expectations rather than smooth beginnings.

### Arrival in Mumbai

We finally reached Mumbai early on November 16. Formerly the presidency capital under British rule, the city has grown into a major cultural and economic center, alive with spiritual diversity and a relentless sense of movement. As I navigated

immigration and stated “spiritual pilgrimage” as my purpose, the weight of the journey settled in.

Mumbai greeted us with vivid contrasts. Auto rickshaws wound through dense traffic, vibrant facades stood beside weathered storefronts, and stray dogs rested in the streets. The city carried an energy both ancient and modern.

### Ramakrishna Math and Mission (Khar)

We spent one night at the historic Ramakrishna Math and Mission in Mumbai. The Math began in 1923 and the Mission in 1932. Its spiritual lineage is extraordinary. Swami Shivananda, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, laid the temple's foundation in 1925, and in 1934 Swami Akhandananda, another direct disciple, installed Holy Mother's sacred relics.

Mumbai has also hosted visits from at least nine other direct disciples besides Swami Vivekananda. Their collective presence seems to permeate the grounds with a serenity one feels more than describes.

That evening Swamiji delivered a discourse titled “Love India.” Despite our long journey and little rest, the devotion of the assembled devotees left a deep impression. The facilities were simple, yet the warmth of the monks and staff overshadowed every discomfort. Their kindness, quiet smiles, and the stillness of Holy Mother's Temple lingered with me.

A devotee's brother later drove us through old Mumbai, including Churchgate and Marine Drive, where the vast Arabian Sea opened peacefully beside the bustling city.

### Delhi: Layers of History and Devotion

On November 17 we flew to Delhi and entered a city with an entirely different character. Delhi is one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities, shaped by the Delhi Sultanate, the Mughal Empire, British colonial rule, and modern India. As we drove past the President's house, India Gate, and diplomatic quarters, the city's breadth and

greenery revealed its distinctive grandeur.

### **Ramakrishna Mission, New Delhi (Paharganj)**

Founded in 1927 and made a branch in 1930, the New Delhi center maintains a tranquil campus amid the surrounding intensity. After a generous lunch and a brief rest, Swamiji delivered a Bengali lecture on "The Impact of Vedanta in the West." When he stepped from the hall, devotees greeted him with great reverence, offering pranams and heartfelt appreciation. Witnessing their affection was a joy.

We then offered pranams to Swami Sarvalokananda, Head of the Delhi Mission, and to Swami Divyananda, Vice-President of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission.

Stepping outside the ashram gates, we entered Delhi's nighttime streets, alive with vendors, lights, and the unmistakable pulse of Indian life. Soon after, we continued on to Gurugram, entering yet another dimension of India's landscape.

### **Gurugram: A Modern Center with Ancient Values**

Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda Institute of Values

Gurugram has transformed rapidly into a major IT and business hub, with towering buildings and modern infrastructure. In 2022 the Ramakrishna Mission established the Vivekananda Institute of Values here, and it became a branch center in 2023. Its purpose is to nurture values-based education grounded in Vedantic principles.

Upon arrival we met Swami Shantatmananda, Head of the center, whose gentleness and hospitality immediately set a comforting tone. After days of travel, a proper rest felt like grace.

### **Morning Quietude**

On November 18 I woke before dawn to the sound of a rooster and walked through the center's grounds. Marigolds, papaya and banana trees, bougainvillea, and darting chipmunks created an atmosphere of beauty and simplicity. That morning walk became a cherished routine.

I was also gifted a set of kurtas and pajama pants, which I wore with a surprising sense of comfort and belonging.

### **Day One of the Retreat**

The retreat began with Swamiji's Bengali talk,

"Come, Become Human," and continued with an English lecture by Swami Tattwamayananda, Minister of the Vedanta Society of Northern California, who introduced the principles of Advaita Vedanta.

### **Day Two of the Retreat**

On the second day Swamiji resumed with "Now, Get Ready to Become God," and Swami Tattwamayananda deepened his exposition of Advaita. Hearing the complementary themes of spiritual evolution and non-dual understanding created a rare harmony.

### **Departure to Bengaluru**

On November 20 we flew to Bengaluru, beginning the next major stage of the pilgrimage.

### **Reflections**

This first portion of the pilgrimage unfolded in ways I did not anticipate. I had gone expecting quiet stillness and inward experiences, yet the lively and ever-changing environments became unexpected teachers in their own way. Gradually I realized that the path was asking something simpler of me: presence. My task was to go where the journey led, care for myself as best I could, and meet each moment with openness.

The contrast between outer motion and inner aspiration reminded me of Sri Ramakrishna's words: The winds of grace are always blowing, but it is you who must raise your sail. The winds did indeed blow, guiding me in ways I could not have foreseen. My responsibility was simply to lift the sail through attention, receptivity, and willingness.

This stage of the pilgrimage also revealed something about my temperament: how deeply I thrive in quiet settings. Yet perhaps this, too, was part of the teaching. Holy Mother often reminded us to serve others while keeping the mind on God. During noisy days and unfamiliar surroundings, the practice became simply to remember, however imperfectly.

As we left Gurugram for Bengaluru, I sensed a subtle steadiness forming within. The next article will explore the journey through Bengaluru, Sathya Sai Grama, Mysore, Kolkata, and West Bengal, where the pilgrimage deepened in unexpected ways.



## BHAGAVATA (29)

### BHAGAVAT DHARMA: THE BLESSINGS OF THE NINE YOGIS

*Swami Ishatmananda*

While going through the sacred pages of the Bhagavatam, we have heard many questions of King Parikshit and the profound answers given by the great Suka Deva. These answers have enriched our spiritual knowledge and illuminated the way for generations of seekers.

Today we shall hear the wonderful teachings of the Nava Yogis—the Nine Holy Men. Their teachings became famous as Bhagavat Dharma.

The great Muni Narada once reached the house of Vasudeva. Having Devarshi Narada as his guest, Vasudeva became very happy. In the course of their conversation, Vasudeva said, “O great Rishi, long ago I practiced spiritual austerities and prayed to the Supreme God to bless me with a son. Now I realize, I was under the spell of Maya—I should have prayed for Liberation instead.” Then Vasudeva said:

ब्रह्मस्तथाऽपि पृच्छामो धर्मान्भागवतांस्त्व।  
यान श्रुत्वा श्रद्धया मर्त्ये मुच्यते सर्वतो भयात्॥ ७ ॥

“I wish to know from you, O holy one, that devotional discipline by hearing which a person can become free from all fear.”

Appreciating Vasudeva for his sincere question, Devarshi Narada narrated the ancient conversation that took place ages ago between the Nine Yogis and King Nimi (Rajarshi Janak's ancestor).

Who were these Nine Yogis?

Narada explained that Swayambhu Manu's son, Priyavrata, had a great grandson named Rishabha, who was very holy, a master in the Vedas, and had one hundred sons. The eldest of them was Bharata—from whom India came to be known as Bharatvarsha. Nine of his sons became kings of nine kingdoms, eighty-one became teachers of rituals (karma-tantra-pravartaka), and the remaining nine became Yogis—famous as the Nava Yogis.

Their names were: Kavi, Hari, Antariksha, Prabuddha, Pippalayana, Avirhotra, Drumila, Chamasa, and Karabhajana.

These nine brothers, the “Nine Yogis,” realized the Atman, and being free from all bondage, used to roam imparting spiritual knowledge to all seekers.

त एकदा निमे: सत्रमुपज्ञमुर्यदच्छया ।  
वितायमानं ऋषिभिर् अजानाभे महात्मनः ॥ २४ ॥

Once, these Nine Yogis came to a Jatra—a great festival of discussion on the Scriptures—being held in Ajanabha (which means Bharatvarsha) by the Rishis, under the auspices of King Nimi, the high-souled ruler of Videha.

Recognizing their greatness, King Nimi received them with deep reverence and honored them as per tradition. Then, with folded hands, he humbly prayed and said:

दुर्लभो मानुषो देहो देहिनां क्षणभज्ञुरः । (11/2/29)

“Human birth is very rare, moreover, life is of short duration.”

Then he added:

धर्मान् भागवतान् ब्रूत यदि नः श्रुतये क्षमम् ।

यैः प्रसन्नः प्रपन्नाय दास्यत्यात्मानमप्यजः ॥ (11/2/31)

“O honored ones, please tell us, if you think us qualified to listen, of that spiritual practice by which the Supreme Lord becomes gracious and bestows the knowledge of the Atman.”

Nimi asked: “How to gain the knowledge of the Atman?”

Kavi, the eldest among the Nine Yogis, replied:

ये वै भगवता प्रोक्ता उपाया ह्यात्मलब्ध्ये ।

अज्ञः पुंसामविदुषां विद्धि भागवतान् हि तान् ॥ ३४ ॥

“Those means which were taught by the Supreme Lord Himself for the realization of the Atman—know them to be the Bhagavat Dharma. They are beneficial for both the learned and the simple-hearted alike.”

Kavi also described the cause of bondage and suffering—identification of the Atman with the body, considering the inert (jada) as conscious (chetana).

How to come out of this delusion? Kavi, the great Yogi, instructed:

कायेन वाचा मनसेन्द्रियैर्वा बुद्ध्यात्मना वानुसृतस्वभावात् ।  
करोति यद् यत् सकलं परस्मै नारायणायेति समर्पयेत्तत् ॥ ३६ ॥

"Whatever one does by body, speech, mind, or senses, or by one's natural tendencies—let all that be dedicated to the Supreme Lord Narayana."

We find the same instruction in the Gita (9/27):

यत् करोषि यदश्वासि यज्जुहोषि ददासि यत् ।  
यत्परस्यासि कौन्तेय तत्कुरुष्व मर्दपणम् ॥ २७ ॥

"Whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you offer or give, whatever austerity you perform—do all that as an offering to Me."

Then Kavi said to King Nimi, "This world, though appearing objective and separate, has no independent existence."

अविद्यमानोऽप्यवभाति हि द्वयो ।  
ध्यातुर्धियः स्वप्नमनोरथौ यथा ॥ ३८ ॥

"It is like the contents of a dream, which exist only in the dreamer's mind." Hence, a wise person should control the mind—the very source of dream, cognition, and desire.

To attain such control, he advised a very simple and effective method:

गीतानि नामानि तदर्थकानि ।  
गायन विलज्जो विचरेदसङ्गः ॥ ३९ ॥

"In order to control the mind, let one move about in the world without attachment, singing the Holy Names of the Lord and pondering on their meaning."

शृणव सुभद्राणि रथाङ्गपाणेर जन्मानि कर्माणि च यानि लोके ।

गीतानि नामानि तदर्थकानि गायन विलज्जो विचरेदसङ्गः ॥

This is similar to what Sri Krishna said,

"Yajñānām Japa Yajño'smi," and what Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Devi often reminded: "Japat Siddhi"—Japa, the repetition of the Lord's Name, brings realization.

Who is afraid of bondage? Only one who still sees Samsara as separate from God. The fear of bondage is of two kinds:

1. Viparyaya — considering the body as the Atman.

2. Apasmriti — forgetfulness of the Soul.

If we can practice seeing this world as the manifestation of the Supreme Being, then where will fear remain?

खं वायुमधिं सलिलं महीं च  
ज्योतीषि सत्त्वानि दिशो द्रुमादीन् ।  
सरित्समुद्रांश्च हरे: शरीरं  
यत्किं च भूतं प्रणमेदनन्यः ॥ ४१ ॥

"The sky, air, fire, water, earth, celestial lights, living beings, quarters (disha — directions), trees (drumādīn — trees and plants), rivers (sarit — streams and rivers), and oceans—whatever exists in creation—should be worshipped as the body of the Lord (Hari Sharīram)."

This practice bestows three results upon the devotee:

1. Devotion to the Lord.

2. Detachment from worldly attractions.

3. Fearlessness and bliss.

Then King Nimi, with great humility, asked yet again:

अथ भक्तं ब्रूहि यद् धर्मो यादशो नृणां संततिर्विदः ।  
पूज्यामानस्तु यस्मात्सर्वशास्त्रं परिशीलयन हे महाबाहो ॥ ४४ ॥

"Kindly tell me, O mighty one, about the Bhagavata—the true devotee of the Lord. How does he live? What distinguishes him among men? How does he conduct himself? What qualities make him dear to the Lord?"



"All will surely realize God. All will be liberated. It may be that some get their meal in the morning, some at noon, and some in the evening; but none will go without food. All, without any exception, will certainly know their real Self."

-- Sri Ramakrishna

## Introduction to the Cover Page: From Intelligence to Consciousness: The First Quarter

*Pravrajika Matriprana*

*Sarada Convent*

*Vedanta Society of Southern California*

The year is approaching its end. Apparently, though, time is endless, there seems to be no visible difference between the sunlight of yesterday and that of today. Yet, the Earth keeps orbiting the Sun along its path, and through the course of this revolution, we divide time. It is said that one cannot dip into the same river twice, nor can one live in the same moment twice. If someone says, "I have dipped twice in the Ganges," they are certainly telling the truth, but even if they dip twice in quick succession, it is impossible for them to bathe in the same water. The moment they first immersed themselves, the water flowed far away. Similarly, time is always in motion. Yet, we try to dip again, to look back. And this is why we celebrate the New Year. This is why we celebrate the end of the year.

A vast number of people in the world primarily follow the Gregorian calendar. While there are various calendars used for religious rituals, their relevance to political, social, and economic matters—i.e., the practical aspects—is very limited. Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to the end of the Gregorian year for the sake of evaluating ourselves.

The year that is going to end is no ordinary one. We have crossed a quarter of the 21st century. The first twenty-five years of the century can be considered a foundation for the following days. Therefore, a comparative discussion is required. If we take the first quarter of the 17th or 18th century, we see that changes were happening gradually—in literature, in painting, in agriculture, in social thinking, and in the way people lived.

From 1700 to 1725, we saw the beginnings of the Enlightenment, significant advancements in science and philosophy, and early industrial

developments, particularly in Europe. This period set the stage for the more profound transformations of the 18th century, such as the Industrial Revolution in the late 1700s and the American and French Revolutions.

The period from 1800 to 1825 was definitely transformative in its own right, but the pace of change was somewhat different compared to later periods. During this era, the world saw the tail end of the Enlightenment and the early stages of the Industrial Revolution. We witnessed significant developments in agriculture, the beginning of industrialization, and important political changes, such as the Napoleonic Wars and the formation of new nations. Machines completely transformed human life, thinking, and social interaction in one powerful jolt.

In terms of abrupt and rapid change, the 20th and 21st centuries generally stand out more, but the early 19th century laid important groundwork for those later advancements. The first quarter of the 20th century laid the groundwork for modern industry, global conflicts, and technological innovations. For example, Henry Ford's automotive journey began with his first vehicle, the Quadricycle, built in 1896 in Detroit. This machine had a 4-horsepower engine and could reach speeds of up to 20 miles per hour. Ford's first test drive took place on June 4, 1896. He recognized that improved roads were essential for the widespread adoption of the automobile. Ford and other automotive pioneers supported various road-building initiatives and lobbied for better infrastructure. The major development of the U.S. road system really took off in the 20th century, especially after the 1920s. By 1913, Henry Ford revolutionized manufacturing with the moving

assembly line, making cars more affordable. Civilization started to run faster. To be more precise, it was paving the way to fly. The Wright brothers' first flight in 1903 revolutionized aviation.

Between 1900 and 1925, the world witnessed several pivotal events, such as the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914, which sparked World War I. In 1901, Queen Victoria's death marked the end of the Victorian era in Great Britain. In 1912, China transitioned from imperial rule to a republic with the establishment of the Republic of China. With the Russian Revolution of 1917, the Bolsheviks came to power, and the Soviet Union was born, replacing czarist rule. Finally, the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 ended World War I. The Russo-Japanese War from 1904 to 1905 saw Japan's rise as a power. In 1920, women gained the right to vote in the United States. In 1918, the Spanish flu claimed the lives of more than 21 million people across the globe in four months.

In the early 20th century, there were incremental improvements in technology—such as the telephone and the movie camera. Although there were certainly rapid advancements, the rate of technological and societal change was more gradual compared to the explosion of innovation seen in the 21st century.

Generally speaking, the period from 2000 to 2025 has seen rapid advancements in digital technology, AI, biotechnology, environmental awareness, and global connectivity, especially the global rollout of 5G networks have reshaped industries. Impactful incidents that have profoundly transformed society and social thought include the September 11 attacks in 2001, the Arab Spring from 2010 to 2012, the rise of populism, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Specifically speaking, changes are similar to those of the first quarter of the last century. Social protests, such as the Black Lives Matter movement and youth climate activism, the death of Queen Elizabeth II in 2022 marking the end of an era in the United Kingdom, and the United States

electing its first female vice president in the centenary year of women earning the right to vote, all reflect this transformation.

Externally, civilization is running faster, flying further. Human beings have invaded other planets in search of life. Ironically, despite a hike in global connectivity, people are becoming lonelier. For instance, in 1925 the world had roughly 90–100 sovereign states, whereas in 2025 there are generally considered to be 195–197 countries. There were no hard-and-fast immigration visa rules worldwide until 1924. However, due to economic and political sanctions, residents of many countries are not allowed to travel to certain other countries, depending on bilateral political relationships. And exactly there begins the inner journey.

Being grounded in history and human nature, it can be predicted that religion, as a social institution, will never be completely free from politics, simply because both require the involvement of large numbers of people, shared identity, and moral authority. However, religion as an inner lived reality, can become politics-free. Thus, the future offers two parallel forms of religion.

It is possible that institutional religion will remain political—temples, churches, and mosques tied to identity, nationalism, and cultural emotion. Inner religion will increasingly detach from politics. Many are leaving identity-based religion without abandoning spiritual inquiry. Increasingly, people intend to dive deeper into meditation, death-awareness, and compassion beyond tribe. This layer may be called quiet, cross-religious, non-institutional, politics-resistant seekers. This did not exist at scale before the 20th century. As politics depends on fear, enemies, and group loyalty, it will be unable to touch a person grounded in inner realization. One who is hard to mobilize through hate, not easily frightened, and not seeking superiority. Swami Vivekananda was against the idea of mixing religion with politics or social reformation.

Of course way before the industrial revolution, human beings existed, religion existed; culture existed. But if we take 1893—the Chicago Parliament of Religions and the appearance of Swami Vivekananda—as a turning point, then we see that before and after this moment there was a radical change in humanity's understanding of life, religion, and interreligious outlook. And this change was deeply psychological and spiritual.

Before 1893: Religion meant "identity" and "authority." Especially in Europe and America, religion was exclusive: "My religion is true; the other is false." Christianity was often equated with civilization itself. Colonialism received moral legitimacy through religion. As a result, terms like "pagan," "heathen," and "infidel" were commonly and casually used. Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism were viewed as primitive, superstitious, pre-civilizational stages. Basically, religion functioned as a conflict-based identity.

In 1893, a silent but fundamental revolution, or something entirely new, appeared. From an international platform, it was announced, "Religion is not belief; it is realization," and "Truth is one; sages call it by different names." These statements did not refute anyone, did not try to convert anyone, and just changed the very framework through which religion was understood. This marked a shift from doctrine to experience, from conversion to comprehension, and from superiority to universality.

A kind of parliamentary religion, or the birth of interfaith consciousness, began here. The change was slow—but deep; namely, meditation, yoga, Zen, and Sufism became acceptable in the West; the idea of being "spiritual but not religious" was born; comparative religion and interfaith dialogue emerged from the capacity to listen to other religions; and religion and science were no longer enemies, as Swami Vivekananda proclaimed: "Science and religion will meet." The Vatican gradually recognized that truth exists in other religions. A shift from Jesus as the "only savior" toward seeing him as a "universal teacher" is one

of the impacts of interfaith dialogue.

Though the change was uneven in Islam, the inner pressure for transformation was created. As a result of Iqbal's philosophy and modern Sufi thought, a clearer distinction between spiritual Islam and political Islam became obvious.

In a nutshell, the inner structure of human beings changed. Prior to the 20th century, people used to ask: Who is right? Who is wrong? After the advent of Swami Vivekananda, the first quarter of the 20th century shaped the Vedanta movement in the West. This movement inspired people to inquire, at least at the conscious level: Who am I? How can truth be experienced? Can I respect another's experience?

It can be seen as if, before 1893, religion was a wall, and after 1893, religion gradually became a window. This shift was and is slow—but irreversible. Of course, this shift is not found everywhere, not in everyone, but the direction of human consciousness is changing. The Vedanta Societies are tirelessly working to make this change possible, "To preach unto mankind their divinity, and how to manifest it in every movement of life."

Vivekananda preached the ancient message of Vedanta in a new format. During his lifetime, he established two Vedanta Societies in North America: in New York (1894) and in San Francisco (1900). After that, in the next quarter of a century, only two Vedanta Societies could be founded: one in Boston (1909) by Swami Paramananda, a disciple of Vivekananda, and the second in Portland (1925) by Swami Prabhavananda, a disciple of Brahmananda.

In the next hundred years, only a dozen societies and retreat centers and/or sub-centers under them were established in North America. The movement has seen transitions in all types of areas and at various levels. However, standing on its spiritual foundation, the practices in Vedanta are trying to help human minds move from external identity to inner experience. It is true that the Vedanta Societies function as institutions, but

they center individual consciousness.

The current time is approaching a clarification point—where the difference between intelligence and consciousness becomes obvious. Though apparently it seems that AI and human consciousness are converging, as AI now speaks, reasons, creates, and mirrors human cognition, many human activities have become algorithmic, fragmented, and externally driven. The human mind itself is increasingly outsourced to machines. This is a surface convergence. In reality, AI is approaching the outer edge of intelligence, and humans are being pushed toward the inner core of consciousness. For the first time in history, intelligence is no longer a uniquely living being's monopoly. Skill, memory, calculation, and even creativity can be automated. The ego has always said, "I think, therefore I am." Now AI "thinks," so the age-old human self-definition collapses. Though not extincted, it is still an existential shock.

The critical distinction between intelligence and consciousness remains as usual. AI can simulate emotion or generate meaning-like structures, but it cannot be aware of awareness or ask "Who am I?" without being programmed to do so. AI operates in the realm of mind and intellect (buddhi), and consciousness (chaitanya) is the witness—never an object. Here Vedantic discrimination comes into play, and the need for meditation rises with the upsurge of mental health crises. Religious forms are weakening, but spirituality is resurfacing.

The Industrial Revolution replaced muscle; AI replaces mind. Only one thing remains irreducible—that is conscious presence. Humans are not yet ready to hold onto it. That is why this period feels like a "bardo," as a Buddhist would say. At this point, the real danger comes when humans forget to be conscious. If humans reduce themselves to algorithmic identity, then they voluntarily collapse into machine-like existence. A Vedantic aspirant knows, at least theoretically, that

consciousness does not evolve like tools or the mind. As Swami Vivekananda reminded us, "The real nature of man is higher than his intellect." In the past, humans have often formed one-sided emotional bonds with gods, saints, or ideological leaders. In the present age, lonely humans are trying to build a similar relationship with AI to gain relief from emotional overload. The present generation has started enjoying mirror-intimacy in AI companionship instead of encounter-intimacy with another human. Though therapeutically AI can be used as support, it should not be used as a substitution; a relationship with AI cannot be absolutized. Relationships with nature or humans are *sādhanā*. They confront ego, attachment, fear, etc., and offer growth over comfort.

A one-sided bond looks similar on the surface—whether with God, a saint, or AI—but spiritually they operate in opposite directions. When a human forms a one-sided bond with God or a saint, the ego gradually loosens. Desire shifts from possession to surrender and eventually leads to upward transcendence. A god or saint points towards that is beyond, while an AI points back to its client. Both may comfort; only one can liberate.

This story began by showing a similarity between a river and time. At the end of the first quarter of the 21st century, or at the starting point of the post-AI era, that example can be revisited in a new light. Just as one cannot dip twice into the same river and yet it is the same river that is always flowing, time repeats itself and yet presents itself in a new form.. Time carries its own possibilities as well as its crises. But what remains unchanged is consciousness—by identifying with it, even amidst apparent change, joy remains constant. That is why the eternal God, Sri Ramakrishna, with His will and unchangeable blessing, said: "May your consciousness be awakened."



## VVSC ACTIVITIES: 2025 REPORT

### HOMER GLEN ASHRAMA

There were daily Puja and evening Arati and special **shrine services** including monthly Ramnam sankirtan.

#### **Lecture Services:**

Sundays: Upanishads (21 talks) and special lectures and worship days.

Wednesdays the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna: Panchama Veda: 40 sessions

**Online talks** on the Bhagavad Gita, Ramayana, Upanishads, Uddhava Gita, Bhagavatam, Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita.

**Bookshop** sold over 1200 titles and published **quarterly eZine**: "Chicago Calling". The premises offered **library and reading room services** as well as personal meditation and retreat opportunities. Over 200 guests across the world stayed overnight in the Ashrama guest rooms.

### VIVEKANANDA RETREAT, GANGES, MI

This year, the premises hosted a series of **Summer Retreats** attended by devotees from across North America, Canada and India. The following Vedanta Society Ministers of conducted retreats:

Swami Sarvasthananda, UK in May, Swami Satyamayananda, Seattle in June, Swami Kripamayananda, Toronto in July, and Swami Ishatmananda, Chicago in August.

Throughout the year, the center also welcomed **Yoga groups and private individual retreatants**.

The center's **Shrine Trail** continues to be source of spiritual sojourn to many local members of the community.

The center is over 50 years old so **significant maintenance** projects will be done in phases.

#### **2026 Projects:**

1. Replace roof over the garage in Ganesh Dham along with parts of the roof over the main building -- bookstore, kitchen: \$150,000
2. Street Lights on Campus: \$5,000
3. Renovating Shanti Cottage: \$20,000
4. Sprinklers in Auditorium: \$30,000
5. Upgrade Mukti Cottage Bathroom: \$5,000

*"Each one of our Yogas is fitted to make man perfect even without the help of the others, because they have all the same goal in view. The Yogas of work, of wisdom, and of devotion are all capable of serving as direct and independent means for the attainment of Moksha. "Fools alone say that work and philosophy are different, not the learned." The learned know that, though apparently different from each other, they at last lead to the same goal of human perfection."*

-- Swami Vivekananda

## HOME OF HARMONY, CHICAGO

In the year 2025 Home of Harmony conducted thirty three Lectures and seminars as a part of the **“Know and Love”** series. Swami Ishatmananada presented talk every month and over fifteen distinguished guest speakers, notably, Rebekah Coffman (Curator, Chicago History Museum), Dr. Syagnik Banerjee (Professor, University of Michigan-Flint), Swami Aparajitananda (Monk, Chinmaya Mission), Dr. Colleen Taylor Sen (Author), Father Larry Dowling (Minister Emeritus, St. Simon of Cyrene Parish), Vicci Rodgers and David Foster (Members, Methodist church), Rev. Tessen Stuart Erickson (Zen Buddhist Temple of Chicago), Dr. Marcia Hermansen (Professor, Loyola University), Swamini Adityananda Saraswati (United Religions Initiative), Rev. Dr. Beth Johnson (Minister, Unitarian Church of Hinsdale).

Another part of the “Know and Love” series is **Meditation through Music**. Various faith groups namely Chicago Tyagaraja Utsav, Wheaton Gurudwara, and Unitarian Church of Hinsdale Choir etc. as well as individuals like Indrani Joshi and Sitar Maestro Partho Bose presented Indian classical vocal and instrumental music.

The presented **forty one** free **Yoga** sessions are offered on Sundays at 11:00 AM from March to December. 160 Cumulative participants benefiting from these sessions.

### **The School of World’s Religions:**

250 students enrolled in four cohort-based online courses in the 2025 school year (March through December):

Hinduism – A Systematic Study of the Sanatana Dharma (75 students)

Buddhism – Past, Present, and Future (122 students)

Introductory Course on Eastern Religions (27 students)

Introductory Course on Abrahamic Religions (26 students)

### **The premises had three special events:**

April 5: An Interfaith Trolley Tour was conducted that was visited by 70 interfaith delegates

August 9: Swami Bodhasarananda, Trustee, and Asst. General Secretary, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission visited and delivered a lecture on Sri Ramakrishna. Nearly 100 attendees enjoyed the talk.

October 18-19 Chicago architectural center conducted Open House. 331 visitors participated.

Throughout the year the premises offered guided tours to the day visitors and 55 overnight guests from around the world stayed in the **Mumukshu Nivas**.

A well-maintained **bookstore** of the premises is now keeping nearly 600 titles of various religious books for purchase. An **interfaith library** offers study rooms with books from more than 10 faith traditions.





## PRESS RELEASE

### **116<sup>th</sup> ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE RAMAKRISHNA MISSION**

The 116<sup>th</sup> Annual General Meeting of the Ramakrishna Mission was held at Belur Math on Sunday, the 14<sup>th</sup> of Dec 2025, at 3.30 p.m., during which, Swami Suvirananda, General Secretary of Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission presented the 'Report of the Governing Body of the Ramakrishna Mission on the working of the association during FY 2024-25'. A synopsis of the report is given hereunder:

#### **1) Awards & Recognitions:**

- a) RKMVERI, the deemed university of the Mission received national recognition, following its selection, along with four other institutions across the country, to start 'Centres of Natural Farming' under the 'National Mission on Natural Farming', a flagship programme launched by the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, Government of India.
- b) National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) awarded A+ grade to the College of Education, Coimbatore and to the Sikshamandira, Belur Math.
- c) The National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF), Ministry of Education, Government of India, announced the India Rankings with notable positions secured by the colleges run by the Mission: The rankings include Vivekananda Centenary College, Rahara, Kolkata, ranked 3rd; Vidyamandira Residential College, Belur Math, ranked 17th; Narendrapur Residential College, Kolkata, ranked 24th; and Arts and Science College, Coimbatore, ranked 82nd.
- d) The Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) recognized and certified the Divyayan Krishi Vigyan Kendra unit of its Ranchi Morabadi branch centre for developing two local scented varieties of rice.
- e) The World Sports Yoga Federation, Kowloon, Hongkong presented the Yoga World Record Certificate and Institution of Excellence Award to the Maruthi College of Physical Education in Coimbatore.
- f) Viveknagar, Agartala school received *Best School Award* from the Government of Tripura.
- g) Kozhikode school received *Best School Award* from Jawaharlal Nehru Cultural Society, Kozhikode (Kerala).
- h) Vidyamandira Residential college, Belur Math achieved the Scientific and Industrial Research Organization (SIRO) recognition from the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research (DSIR), Ministry of Science & Technology, Government of India.

i) The West Bengal Postal Circle released a picture postcard and a pictorial cancellation (postmark) depicting the Universal Temple of Sri Ramakrishna at Belur Math to mark Sri Ramakrishna's birthday, a special postal cover on Swamiji's Ancestral House to mark Swami Vivekananda's birthday and another postal cover to commemorate the 125<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Sargachhi branch centre (Murshidabad Dist., West Bengal).

**2) New Branch Centres:**

- a) Five new branch centres of the Ramakrishna Mission were started at **Haflong** and **Kuralbhanga** (in Assam), **Nellore** (in Andhra Pradesh), and **Sarati** and **Siliguri** (in West Bengal).
- b) Four new branch centres of the Ramakrishna Math were started at **Adipur** (in Gujarat), **Kolhapur** (in Maharashtra), **Pathanamthitta** (in Kerala) and **Rewa** (in Madhya Pradesh).

**3) Activities in India:**

The Ramakrishna Mission and the Ramakrishna Math, through their 244 Indian branch centres and sub-centres, spent **Rs.1670.79 crore** towards various services as per the following details:

Name of the Sector	Number of beneficiaries in lakhs	Amount spent in Rupees (crore)
Educational	2.93	743.17
Medical	84.25	600.54
General Welfare	43.88	42.88
Relief & Rehabilitation	7.46	11.59
Rural & Tribal (Community Welfare)	2.72	6.34
Preaching and other services	71.53	240.95
Publication of literature	-	25.32
<b>Total</b>		<b>1670.79</b>

**4) Activities outside India:**

- a) A new centre was started in Washington, D.C., USA.
- b) The Ramakrishna Mission and the Ramakrishna Math carried out various service activities through their 99 centres and sub centers located in 24 countries outside India.

We take this opportunity to thank our members, well-wishers and devotees for their invaluable support and cooperation in carrying forward the service programmes of the Ramakrishna Mission and Ramakrishna Math.

*Suvirananda*

(Swami Suvirananda)

General Secretary

Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission

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### Vivekananda Vedanta Society of Chicago (VVSC) : Book Store

**Ramakrishna-Vivekananda & Vedanta Literature available  
Order can be placed online: [vedantabooks.com](http://vedantabooks.com)**

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#### Bookshop Hours:

**Homer Glen** (14630 Lemont Road, Homer Glen, IL 60491) : Daily from 9 am to 6 pm.

**Home of Harmony** (3801 N Keeler Ave., Irving Park, Chicago, IL 60641) : Saturday & Sunday 9 am to 6 pm & by appointment.

**Vivekananda Retreat** (6723, 122nd Ave, Ganges, MI 49408) : Daily from 9 am to 6 pm.

**2026**  
Calendar of the  
Vivekananda Vedanta Society of Chicago

Here, with the flow of the Ganga, we meditate on  
Sri Ramakrishna, the embodiment of the  
**Upanishads**

Vivekananda Vedanta Society of Chicago, 14630 Lemont Road, Homer Glen, IL 60491  
Home of Harmony, 3801 N Keeler Ave., Irving Park, Chicago, IL 60641  
Vivekananda Retreat, 6723, 122nd Ave., Ganges, MI 49408

Email: [info@chicagovedanta.org](mailto:info@chicagovedanta.org) Website: [chicagovedanta.org](http://chicagovedanta.org)  
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vedādham-etaṁ puruṣān mahāntam adīptavarnam tamasā paṇḍitāt  
tamāv vidiśvā-śāntayān eti nāgādā-pāñcālā vidyāt-pāñcālā

*Sri Bhakti-vivarta Upanishad, 3.8*

I have realized this Great Being who shines effulgent like the sun beyond all darkness. One passes beyond death only by knowing Him. There is no other way of escape from the circle of birth and death.

*Sri Ramakrishna says*

"Both inside and outside, the individual Satchidananda I see. It both inside and outside. It has merely assumed this sheath (assuming his body) for a support and exists both inside and outside. I clearly perceive this."

Read  
Offline!

**A Quarterly eZine of Vivekananda Vedanta Society of Chicago**  
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