

# CHICAGO CALLING

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## EDITORIAL

### *Can One See God?*

Swami Vivekananda once asked Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna: "Have you seen God?" To which the great master replied, "Yes, I have seen God. I see Him as I see you here, only more clearly." We have all read accounts of the extraordinary visions and experiences Sri Ramakrishna had of God, yet they often leave us wondering, "Can I see God too?" Many people assume that such experiences are reserved only for divine incarnations or for those we regard as sages or enlightened beings. However, Sri Ramakrishna stated clearly that anyone can see the blessed form of God, whether a monk or a householder.

But what does it truly mean to "see" God? It does not require becoming unconscious of the outer world in samadhi or giving up all worldly activity and becoming a sannyasi. But rather, one should look upon our fellow human beings and recognize that each person is an expression of the Supreme Spirit. God, being infinite spirit and infinite expression, can be seen both in form and formlessness, matter or spirit. Yet the human mind can not conceive of the formless aspect of God since by its very nature the mind is conditioned to think in terms of form. So what can we do?

In the opening chapter of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, we find a conversation between Mahendranath Gupta and the Master on whether God should be understood as having form or being formless. Sri Ramakrishna explains that the One who is the spirit behind all of creation has manifested itself in countless forms so that people of varying temperaments may worship him according to their own nature. This is why we have people like Sri Ramakrishna who are direct representations of Can One See God? pure spirit in human form. However, a sincere seeker should not confine their love and devotion only to divine incarnations such as Jesus, Rama, or the Buddha, but should learn to see even those they regard as enemies as manifestations of God.



Such a practice not only strengthens devotion but gradually purifies the mind and elevates it to a higher plane of consciousness. Imagine a coworker who is consistently rude, insulting, and difficult, yet, instead of reacting with anger, you see in them another form of your chosen ideal. Or perhaps your boss is yelling at you, and still you perceive only Ramakrishna. A family member is causing you lots of trouble, yet all you see is the radiant face of the Holy Mother. One should first cultivate love for the lotus feet of God, as said by Ramakrishna, and then, once you are stable in that love, transfer it to all people. You should feel the same love for a stranger as you do for a close friend or family member. Serve all like you would serve God. This is how one can truly see God everywhere.

But there is another step. You must also see yourself as God, too. The divine lives of people such as Jesus Christ or Ramakrishna are not here just to tell a story or to show the world miraculous feats of power, but to show us what we are supposed to become. As the great Swami Vivekananda said, "All souls are potentially divine." All men and women have the power within themselves to become just like Jesus or Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna if we would only stop thinking of ourselves as separate from God. To see yourself as one with the blessed spirit is one of the highest forms of practice one can have. To have faith in yourself is to have faith in God because you and God are not separate.

So one can see God, not just in divine forms, but in all humans, strangers or family, and also in themselves.



# The Universe – A Cosmic Symphony

Sister Sue Kilduski

The Benedictine Sisters of Chicago

*This article is prepared based on the presentation that was delivered on April 18, 2026, at the Home of Harmony*

We're starting by talking about the Big Bang.

We've all heard the popular question, "if a tree falls in a forest and no one's there to hear it, does it make noise?" We can reword the question to be, "if there was a Big Bang and nobody was in space to hear it, would it make a sound?" One would guess that it would make a huge sound, being a Big Bang.

To answer this, we need to define sound. Sound is organized vibration. Everything in the universe is vibrating. Space vibrations can't be detected.

In the early 20th century, physicists were debating whether the Big Bang theory, which hypothesized a very hot and dense origin of the universe, or the steady state theory, which suggested the universe had always existed and remained in a uniform state, was correct. But the Big Bang was really more probable. It wasn't until 1964 that they were able to get the data they needed to prove that the Big Bang theory was the one.

At that time, two physicists, Arno Penzias and Robert Wilson, were working with Bell Telephone Labs in New Jersey. They used a 20-foot horn antenna, which is a feed horn for microwaves, a microwave antenna. Because of that special horn, it didn't have any resonant elements, so they could operate over a wide range of frequencies. They were able to get up to 1 GHz to 20 GHz. We know that a giga is one billion, so that's a lot of sound.

They ended up detecting a persistent isotropic noise that could not be attributed to Earth, the Sun, or the galaxy. Eliminating all possible sources of this interference, they realized that the signal was coming from all directions in the sky, which is

exactly what isotropic means. It's radiant energy, and it's equal in all directions, creating a spherical wave.

The noise that was left over from the radiation from the Big Bang was called microwave background noise. That was the sound they detected. It took a lot to get that sound. It just didn't happen. In order for humans to experience the sound of this, because this is a very low-frequency spectrum noise, it had to be converted into sound waves with a frequency high enough for us to hear it.

Scientists like John Cramer at the University of Washington used a process called sonification to convert the spatial temperature fluctuations into sound files, scaled up huge amounts. They're talking up to 100 septillion, or 10 to the 26th times. That's a lot of scaling up that they had to do. It took a computer program, basically, that was able to help them. It's called Mathematica. It converted them into sound and created that 100-second recording of what it actually sounds like.

After that, they were able to realize that they could reach the microwaves. These were the closest they ever came to hearing anything from the Big Bang, and that was within 380,000 years after the universe began. Before 1964, they had never been able to hear something that close to the Big Bang. It pretty much made sure that the Big Bang was the thing that really happened.

With wavelengths and frequencies and software to interpret the sound for us, our Eastern religions—Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism, and others—have a powerful tool. The word for tool is mantra in Sanskrit. The word manas is mind, and

*tra* is tool. So it makes it a tool for the mind, or an instrument of thought. They are the basic tools for many meditation practices. This tool should not go unmentioned when discussing the universe and music.

The sound of Aum is made up of three Sanskrit letters that represent the trinity: Ah, Brahma and creation; Au, Vishnu and preservation; and Ma, Shiva and destruction and transformation. Of course, you know that the Hindus consider Aum to be the first sound of vibration that was created when the universe was created. They don't talk about the Big Bang; they say the creation, the time the universe was created.

The sound of Aum connects the individual soul, Atma, with the supreme soul, Paramatma. It is often referenced in modern conversations as cosmic sound that resonates with the universe. That same thing that we heard through electronics and through computer programming, we can hear through the human voice: the same sound and the same connection with the creation of those sounds. You can see how deeply resonant that is, how long and pulled out it is, how long it lasts, and how it brings the breath in line for meditation.

There are other cultures that also have chants that help to link them to creation and their role in keeping the songs of their ancestors in their minds as the continuation of creation.

Chants play a big part in Aboriginal ceremonies, where adult men gather around a fire to chant ancient songs while others around them act out the elements of the song through dance. As all land is sacred to them, these songs must be continually sung to keep the land alive, describing the Aboriginal people's strong relationship to the land of their ancestors.

In African culture, chants taught to children carry stories of an individual's family, community, and regional affiliations, as well as their clan and their revered ancestors. They're known as praise songs, and they're sung in an a cappella choral style. It's more of a Western style. It was this form of poetry that helped others to know others better,

to know where they came from, and to know their creation story.

Native American music plays a vital role in history and education. These rituals and chants are said to have originated from deities and spirits. Stories are performed through monophonic, single-lined chanting, telling epic legends about the culture and historical figures that have become an iconic part of the tradition.

Passed off from one family member to another, these chants or songs hold special meanings. They're believed to possess spiritual power for healing, for success in hunting, as a memorial, and for social gatherings.

This mention of various cultural groups, their chants, and the effects on their tribal bonding and link to creation was taken from the website [soundoflife.com](http://soundoflife.com).

Now the question is: what is music? Are all the sounds in the universe music?

Fundamentally, music is simply ordered patterns of vibration or frequency. We know that everything in the universe is vibrating. But to understand our human relationship to a vibrating universe, we need to know our place in the universe. We need to know how we understand the universe.

We travel back to prehistoric times, to the time of the evolution of the conscious human, discussing the relationship of our consciousness to the universe. This is going to be a little story, a little telling of the very creation of our own human cells.

First, it's good for us because we need to reflect on what a miracle it was that we actually came to exist on this planet, or in this universe.

There's a book called *Rare Earth: Why Complex Life Is Uncommon in the Universe*, by Peter Ward. He's a geologist and evolutionary biologist, and also by Donald Brownlee, a cosmologist and astrobiologist. They presented the argument that complex life is rare in the universe. They write that the essential criteria for complex life are terrestrial planets with plate tectonics and oxygen, a large moon, a magnetic field, a gas giant like Jupiter for protection, and an orbit in the habitable zone of the

right kind of star.

What kind of planet is going to have all of those things just at the right time?

The very first life that appeared on Earth was in the form of bacteria, and that actually came to Earth through chance. There was a lightning storm. There were many, many, many millions of years of lightning storms, but one lightning storm actually created a bacteria, a single-celled bacteria.

They were anaerobic and likely derived energy from chemical compounds rather than sunlight. Again, they had to land in a place where there was no oxygen, and they didn't need oxygen. That one cell did not need oxygen, so it settled in the right place at the right time.

Then, 2.4 billion years ago, one bacterium was engulfed by another in the process called endosymbiosis, leading to the development of complex eukaryotic cells. The engulfed bacterium eventually became the mitochondrion, or the energy acting as a powerhouse within the host cell. It was able to live without oxygen and without any energy or power behind it because it came from the mitochondrion.

If we jump ahead to 300,000 years ago, from the beginning of a cell to 300,000 years ago, that single, then two-celled bacteria turned into *Homo sapiens*, and the universe gave forth consciousness.

What is the role of consciousness in the universe?

Richard Elliott Friedman, in his book *The Hidden Face of God*, writes of the relationship between human consciousness and reality out there. This conversation has long been on the table. He suggests that the answer to the well-known question that we had at the beginning of this talk, which I altered—"when a tree falls in the forest where there's no one to hear it, does it make a sound?"—is yes.

As we just learned, humans have the conscious ability to make the sound audible to the human ear. As to the magnitude of complex conscious life present here on Earth, he quotes Paul Davies: "We who are children of the universe, which is

animated stardust, we can nevertheless reflect on the nature of that same universe. How we have become linked into this cosmic direct dimension is a mystery, yet that linkage cannot be denied."

In another place, the universe has organized its own self-awareness, and it was referred to as the galaxy's way of evolving a brain. Basically, humans were turned into the way the universe could know itself.

Friedman goes on to consider consciousness and the feeling of divine presence inside human beings, which has deep roots in civilization. He says, "Even musicians sometimes have the experience in which, in the midst of the performance, they feel that they are not producing the music themselves, but are rather the instrument, the means, as some force causes that music to pass through them."

I've had this experience. Davies describes a similar intuition experienced by mathematicians when they're really involved in their work and they have a great insight; it has to come from something other than them.

There seems to be music and math working together in our consciousness' understanding of the universe. As we learn, music is defined by mathematics, as is the universe.

Our first quote from here is, "Before there was language, there was music. Music is essential to who we are as human beings. In fact, it is fundamental to the cosmos in its totality. Music is the picture of the beloved."

Evolutionary musicology studies what grounds the cognitive mechanisms of music appreciation and music creation in evolutionary theory.

There are three main thoughts in evolutionary musicology. The bipedalism hypothesis studies how bipedal walking may have influenced the development of what's called entrainment, or the synchronization of behavior of different organisms by a regular beat. A common thing; the drum. It's one of the first things they used before they could even talk.

Then there is the music-language hypothesis,

which exhibits three properties found in both music and language. One would be lexical tone, like a pitch, to convey semantic meaning and musical ideas. Another is combinatorial phrase formation, the ability to form phrases that exhibit melodic, rhythmic, and semantic variation, and combine them to create global melodic formulas capable of conveying emotive meaning.

Then there's the AVID model of music evolution, short for audio-visual intimidating display. AVID was supported by Joseph Jordania, who wrote a 500-page book called *Who Asked the First Question?* The book was on the history of choral music and suggests that music was part of a predator control system used by early hominids.

Rhythmic loud singing and drumming, together with threatening rhythmic body movements and body paints, was a core element of AVID. It was also a key factor in putting hominid groups into a specific altered state of consciousness, which Jordania calls battle trance, so they would not feel fear or pain and would be religiously dedicated to group interests.

He suggests that the use of dancing to the sounds of loud rhythmic rock music used in contemporary combat missions is directly related to this. Apart from defense, Jordania suggested the system was the core strategy to obtain food via confrontational or aggression scavenging.

Also, the theory holds that humming could have played a role in early hominid evolution as contact calls. Many social animals produce seemingly haphazard and indistinctive sounds when they are foraging or feeding. These sounds have two functions. One, to let group members know that they are among kin and there's no danger. And two, in the case of the appearance of any signs of danger, the animal or human that notices the danger first stops moving, stops producing sounds, remains silent, and looks in the direction of the danger. Then the members of the group notice this, and all in the group start silently scanning the environment for possible danger.

It was Charles Darwin who was the first to notice

this in wild horses and cattle. Jordania suggests that for humans, as for many social animals, silence can be a sign of danger. That's why gentle humming and musical sounds relax us. This idea is used in contemporary music therapy, and it's also the idea behind lullabies that we sing to our babies.

The wide dispersal of singing behavior among different animal species, like birds and whales and many others, suggests that singing appeared independently in different species. Currently, there are about 5,400 species of animals that are known to sing. Some of those demonstrate the ability to learn their songs, to improvise, and even compose new melodies.

In some animal species, singing is a group activity. We humans have been studying whales for centuries, and now we've been able to go underwater with cameras and recorders to record their sound for long, long periods of time. By doing this, we discovered that they do have their own language. There are some phrases they repeat over and over, and then there are some answers that come only to that one voice talking. There are questions that they use, and they talk about each other.

They can analyze this conversation. Again, it was days and days and days of recorded conversation. They were able to figure out that it really was a language they were using.

All of this music, of course, came from Wikipedia, evolutionary musicology.

Now, we've sufficiently covered the evolution of life and music. The next subject is the history of humans who, throughout time, searched for the relationships of music to the activity of the universe outside of Earth. I'll call it the music of the spheres umbrella, and that will become clear as we go on.

I'm going to read from here because he speaks directly to the music of the spheres concept: "By this title, I do not wish to encourage any superstition or any ideas that might attract people into the fields of curiosity. But through this subject,

I wish to direct the attention of those who search for truth toward the law of music that is working throughout the whole universe and that, in other words, may be called the law of life, the sense of proportion, the law of harmony, the law that brings about balance, the law that is hidden behind all aspects of life that holds this uniform universe intact and works out its destiny throughout the whole universe, fulfilling its purpose."

Let's start with Pythagoras.

There was a man named Censorinus, and he wrote a book, *De Die Natali*, which means "the natal day." He was writing to somebody about the day they were born. But in the process of writing this, and this was in 238 CE, he gave a summary of what Pythagoras's inquiring mind had provided for humankind.

I want to read it to you directly from the source because this is going to give you an idea of what they were actually thinking in 238 AD. You'll notice that some of these things aren't quite the way things are.

"Pythagoras has demonstrated that all the universe moves upon the principles of music. That the seven planets, which float between the sky and the Earth, and which rule the generation of mortals, have a movement called by the Greeks harmonic and intervals corresponding to musical ones. That they give, each according to its place in space, diverse sounds that are so perfect that the sweetest melodies result. Only they are inaudible to our ears, which are too coarse for their sublime sounds.

"Eratosthenes found by geometrical calculations that the greatest circumference of the Earth is 252,000 stadia. Pythagoras indicated how many stadia there were between the Earth and each of the planets. The particular stadia in question is that which is called italic, which is of 625 feet from the Earth to the Moon. Pythagoras thought that there were about 126,000 stadia, which responds to the interval of a musical tone. That from the Moon to Mercury, there was half this distance."

And it continues on to discuss the distances between all the planets and the Sun.

"To other stars are applied many rules which belong to the musical art. Pythagoras has also shown that all the universe is harmonious."

Dorylaeus was a Greek general. This is interesting for a general to write such a thing, but he's written that the universe is the musical instrument of God. Others have called the universe the ballroom, on account of the movement of the seven revolving planets.

"But all of these things deserve a minute explanation and this is not the place for it."

This is all quoted from Censorinus. I'm going to follow his advice and end the discussion on Pythagoras, because he'll come out again and again, because his work was basic to many others.

We're going to begin to talk about Gregorian chant and the solfège system. I think I have the end of this. It's very hard to see, but I will explain it note by note so you'll understand.

There was a musicologist, Professor Apel, and he wrote in a book titled *Gregorian Chants*. The origins of what is now called solfeggio arose from a medieval hymn to St. John the Baptist. That's the hymn up there. It had a peculiarity: the first six lines of the music commenced respectively on the first six notes of the scale. The first syllable of each line was sung to a note one degree higher than the first syllable of the line that preceded it.

To make that more clear, the syllables in these words are do, re, mi, fa, sol, la. That's all they had. They only had six notes back in that time.

I'll read the music itself to you so you can see what's supposed to be up there. This is a hymn to St. John the Baptist, and it says in English, "So that your servants may, with loosened voices, resound the wonders of your deeds. Clean the guilt from our stained lips, oh St. John."

This is what it is in Latin, and you'll notice the do, re, mi: "Ut queant laxis re sonare fibris Mira gestorum famuli tuorum solve polluti polluti et la e e re arum." And it ends with "Sancte Iohannes."

Now, you notice that the word Ut was used

rather than Do. It was actually a Benedictine monk who took this whole system, which had been started in the 6th century by Gregory the Great, who wrote the Gregorian chant. This was a Benedictine monk who lived from 922 to 1033. He took this hymn and adopted it so that it could be used to teach sight singing, and so that the people would know and be able to read the chants and sing the chants.

Those six syllables became the notes of the scale that go up. There was another French musician later who added si, because they didn't have that note back in the days of this early composition. They had to do some changes among them because si begins with an S, and they already had sol. They wanted each syllable to have a different consonant and vowel.

The ut was changed because they wanted the words to be consonants first and vowels second. When you sing, you hit the consonant and then you open your mouth and let the vowel come out. You can get a bigger sound from that, having the vowel come second. They changed that to do.

The other thing about solfège as it's used today is that it has hand signals that go along with it, telling you this is do, this is re, this is mi, fa, sol, la, ti, and do again. When you're learning music, you can take these signals and combine them with the tone of each of these syllables, and it becomes part of you. It's muscle memory. It becomes part of you because the hand is being a part of you singing the notes.

It's the same for rhythm. You clap the rhythm out. Again, you're clapping your hands to sing the note. Eventually, after practice and practice, those notes become a part of you. They're not just in your mind. They're not just some sound you think that it is. It's actually a part of you, in your heart, because you put it there through the actions of your hands, out with the syllables, and how beautiful it can sound.

I want to note that it's often thought, especially by alternative health circles, that Western chant music was based on Eastern Hindu music. But

instead of the solfeggio scale, Hindu music employs the sargam system with the names of sa, re, ga, ma, pa, dha, ni. All of these have different frequencies than the solfège frequencies. The solfège frequencies were 396, 417, 528 hertz, and they just kept going up and up the scale.

The Hindu scale is not the same. Both traditions do recognize the power of sound, frequency, and vibration to affect the mind, body, and emotions. But the basic foundations of the two traditions are totally different.

Indian music is based on raga, a melodic framework, and tala, rhythm, usually tuned to a movable tonic. Sa can begin on any frequency, at any note, and the same pattern will go from it. While some contemporary spiritual studies connect the two traditions to commonalities with the seven chakras, they are historically and technically separate.

The solfeggio information was taken from *Frequency Fascinations*, written by Silvia Villa. I just wanted to let you know where these things are coming from. This woman, Silvia Villa, probably writing her thesis statement for her doctorate, did it on all the various solfège methods that are used and what they represent.

Now we're going to consider another mathematical series, which you probably have all heard of. It's the Fibonacci series. It was named after Leonardo of Pisa, who lived from 1170 to 1240 or 1250.

He was known as Fibonacci, and that means he was the son of Nachi. He published the series in the book *Liber Abaci* in 1202. But he was not the first person to discover them. Acharya Hemachandra, who lived from 1088 to 1173, was the one who investigated the rhythms that could be created from the syllables used in Sanskrit poetry.

The series begins with zero and adds one to it. You start with zero, one, and then you add one plus one; it becomes two. Add two plus one; it becomes three. Three plus two becomes five. It just goes on and on and on. Five goes to eight, and it

gets larger and larger and larger, till it finally ends up in infinity.

You are left with the number which the Greeks used the letter phi for, and it's called the golden ratio. Its value is 1.6180339, and that number never ends. It's just like pi. It goes on forever, because when you're dealing with infinity, you can't have rational numbers.

The golden ratio was used everywhere. This series is the calculated ratio that is seen in nature. That's what I want to show you next.

Nature makes the tree branches. If you consider looking at the tree branches, they are formed by this Fibonacci pattern number series. It goes with one down on the trunk, then up to two for the two trunks. Then it's to three, five, eight, thirteen, and twenty-one. That is the Fibonacci series nature uses to make the tree branches.

You can see the sunflower down there. Those seeds, you have to get really close, but they're arranged in a swirl that starts in the center and goes around and around and around. It's more obvious in that nautilus shell that's up there. You can see the pattern of the swirl. That is the pattern that is made by certain numbers of the Fibonacci series.

It's really important because it's found all over nature. It helps us as humans to understand not only the life of nature, but also that the series is used in the shape of a hurricane, and the shape of our Milky Way is the same.

These numbers are also used in music composition. It's used in architecture. It's used in art. It's used in just about everything that we do. There are people who are artists or musicians, and they want to try to have different ways of making their music, composing it, or composing their pictures. They'll incorporate the series into their work.

Bartok, in his third movement of Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta, used the series one, two, three, five, eight to create growing or decaying rhythm cycles. There are several rock bands that have used it in their music, and it gives

it a special quality because, once they say, "Oh, this was formed out of the Fibonacci series," people tend to notice.

I have another quote in this book which talks about all this: "When we trace what attracts us in this beauty that we see in all forms, we shall find that it is the movement of beauty, the music. All forms of nature, the flowers so perfectly formed and colored, the planets and stars, the earth, all give the idea of harmony, of music."

We have another person that we're going to talk about now. This is 1400 years later than the Fibonacci series, and also Pythagoras. It was Johannes Kepler.

Kepler actually wrote his thesis about the music of the planets, and he built on the work that Pythagoras started. He strongly believed that the varying angular speeds of planets in their elliptical orbits create pitches that resonate, with planets singing in different musical ranges such as soprano, alto, tenor, and bass. His calculation derived from harmonic ratios, associating planets with specific notes like mi fa mi, which is the one he uses to describe the Earth's sound.

There's a very informative YouTube on this. It's called Math Adam ADHD, made in April 2021, and you can read the actual musical notations that he used for the planets. It's written in chant style, so they use the same solfège signs. He uses the same solfège to determine that sound.

This is pretty similar to what we heard when we heard that microwave background noise talked about in the beginning. He was able to put sound to something that was happening in the universe.

Discharges of lightning resonated at a low frequency, ranging between 7.86 hertz to 8 hertz. He determined that this frequency was, in essence, the Earth's heartbeat. It has since been called Schumann's resonance. This is not Schumann the composer; it's Winfried Otto Schumann.

His doctoral candidate, Herbert König, who was working on this theory, studied the connection between Schumann's resonances and found them to match various levels of human brain activity. By

using EEG recordings with the Earth's electromagnetic fields, he discovered that the resonances matched five different brainwave states: delta, theta, alpha, beta, and gamma. These are the brain states that occur naturally during all activities, from sleeping to creating to learning.

Again, these people were able to link our human condition, mathematics, and physics to our place in the universe and to the universe itself. That's what the whole idea is about here.

I'll sum it up here. Tesla wrote, "If you want to find the secrets of the universe, think in terms of energy, frequency, and vibration."

Those terms have been discussed throughout this talk. Ancient cultures used the metaphor that the universe is actually a cosmic symphony singing a

song to the creator. This ancient wisdom aligns with modern science. This concept is supported by quantum theory, which also proposes that the cosmos is a kind of symphony of vibrations.

Cultures around the Earth believe our unique role in our existence is to play our particular note as perfectly as possible to make creation complete.

I've got one more quote from our dear Sufi:

"Every person is gifted. God has given him a certain pitch, a natural note. And if that pitch develops and he develops that natural note, it is a magic. He can perform a miracle. But he must think about the hall where he has to sing and how loud he must shout."

My last words to you are, "Keep on singing."



*"In every district and village you may visit, you will find only the sound of the Khol and Kartal! Are not drums made in the country? Are not trumpets and kettle – drums available in India? Make the boys hear the deep – toned sound of these instruments. Hearing from boyhood the sound of these effeminate forms of music and listening to the kirtana, the country is well – nigh converted into a country of women. What more degradation can you expect? Even the poet's imagination fails to draw this picture! The Damaru and horn have to be sounded, drums are to be beaten so as to raise the deep and martial notes, and with "Mahavira, Mahavira" on your lips and shouting "Hara, Hara, Vyom, Vyom", the quarters are to be reverberated. The music which awakens only the softer feelings of man is to be stopped now for some time. Stopping the light tunes such as Kheal and Tappa for some time, the people are to be accustomed to hear the Dhrupad music.*

*Through the thunder – roll of the dignified Vedic hymns, life is to be brought back into the country. In everything the austere spirit of heroic manhood is to be revived. In following such an ideal lies the good of the people and the country. If you can build your character after such an ideal, then a thousand others will follow. But take care that you do not swerve an inch from the ideal. Never lose heart. In eating, dressing, or lying, in singing or playing, in enjoyment or disease, always manifest the highest moral courage. Then only will you attain the grace of Mahashakti, the Divine Mother."*

-- Swami Vivekananda, CW 7



## It's All About Grace

Rev. Dr. Erin Bouman

Pastor of Irving Park Lutheran Church, Chicago

*An excerpt from one of the "Know and Love" series lectures  
that was delivered on May 9, 2026 at Home of Harmony*

What I want to do now is discuss seven important things Luther said, and one funny one, and what they meant.

**"When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ said, 'Repent,' [Matthew 4:17] he called for the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."** – Ninety-five Theses (1517)

The Ninety-five Theses were really the instigating moment. There were a lot of moments leading up to it, but there is a famous story that the friar Martin Luther was so fed up with the problems in the Catholic Church that he wrote and listed out 95 things that they needed to correct. I have heard somebody say, "Well, isn't that just so very German to make a list and 95 different problems?" And he pounded it on the wall of the church.

One of them here is repent. Now, the word repent sometimes gets a really negative connotation: "Repent! You're evil." Luther probably would have agreed, "Yeah, you've got some really bad stuff going on inside of you."

The Lutheran understanding of the human self is both that God created us good, right? In Genesis, God said, "Good. Good. Good." Of the world, and of humanity too. But within every human being there is a huge capacity for not good. We have a somewhat dim or negative view of what people can do, which I think aligns well with the newspaper also.

But the idea of repent is that there is an opportunity to be different, to live differently, to change your ways. Repent, in a very simple sense, is a change of direction. You have been going like this; start moving like that. Every day is an opportunity for renewal.

There is a story that Martin Luther said he would wake up every morning and say, "I am baptized." This is a new day. This is a new opportunity. Because of baptism, which Luther very much understood, and Lutherans understand, as God saying, "I love you, you're my child, live in a new way. I give you the power of the Holy Spirit to do so." That you can. That you can.

**"The Law says, 'do this,' and it's never done. Grace says, 'believe in this,' and everything is already done."** – Heidelberg Disputation (1518)

Lutherans have put a great emphasis on talking about things as law and gospel. Law is the understanding of where we let God and fellow human beings down. How have we done things in ways that are not appropriate, are not adequate? The law is a good thing. It guides our behavior and helps us live in ways that protect ourselves and protect our neighbor.

But the key point for Luther, and the key reason he just could not abide by what the Catholic Church was teaching, is that he felt the Catholic Church at the time was saying, if you do enough good stuff, you will be okay. Luther said that is impossible. That is impossible.

The emphasis is not on what I can do so that God will love me. The emphasis is God loves me, and therefore I respond by doing good, by loving my neighbor. Luther said, God doesn't need your good works. Your neighbor does. That is how you live. That is what you do.

There is incredible freedom when you accept—a famous Lutheran professor of theology, systematic theologian Paul Tillich, has a sermon, "Accept that you are accepted." At our core, there is this sense

of unworthiness, self-doubt, insecurity, anxiety. Luther's message is that the gospel says you are accepted. You are worthy, not because of how hard you worked.

In America, where it is all about showing what you can do and working and the Protestant work ethic, that is a real misunderstanding of Lutheran Protestantism. Lutheran Protestantism says God loves you. You start from that. Nothing that you did deserved it or earned it. It is given to you. It is a gift. It is grace.

That is baptism. That is why we baptize as Lutherans. We baptize infants because we say it is not about you thinking, "Hmm, I think this all makes sense to me. I'm going to go for it." Which is important. It is a downfall of Lutheranism sometimes to say, "Oh, it's all great. God loves me. I'm good." No, you have to do something with that too.

But we baptize infants because we say this is a great picture of how God's love and grace works. A baby cannot decide to accept God into their hearts. A baby cannot do good works to earn God's favor. God gives it to that child out of pure goodness and givingness, which is who God is, and then the child responds.

**"A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."** – The Freedom of a Christian (1520)

Lutherans like both/and. We like paradoxes. You will ask, "So, you know, does What's the answer to this question?" And you give two answers, and you say, "Yes, both of those are correct."

Luther said, and this is one of his great articles, The Freedom of a Christian: you are perfectly free. God made you to be what you want to do. You are not beholden to anyone.

One of the big things in the Protestant Reformation for Luther was a new understanding of the role of a priest. Priests had had a specialized place in the culture, and they were seen as the only way through which you can have access to God and access to God's grace. This person had been trained to read the Bible and interpret scripture,

and many people who were members of the church did not have a Bible, could not read it, especially because most of the Bibles were not in their language.

One of the huge accomplishments of Martin Luther was that he translated the Bible into German so that Germans could read it. In fact, by doing so, he made the German language a little bit more developed, a common understanding of how German grammar would work, which was a very interesting thing.

At the same time, he was a big proponent of education as well. Then you had the printing press. People could now own a Bible and read scripture and interpret it. They didn't need to go to the priest to do this for them, which has a lot of pluses and also has some challenges too, with the rise of, this is what I think it says. And are we interpreting scripture together?

There is this strong emphasis on the individual, on the person's own ability to interpret and think and to be independent. All of this, of course, is tied up with movements within world history. Honestly, the Protestant Reformation was part of movements toward democracy, the development of the rise of the individual and the rise of democracies, a precursor to the Enlightenment as well.

You have this: a Christian is free. A Christian is lord of all. You don't need this special intermediary in the priest. Subject to none. At the same time, a Christian is perfectly dutiful servant of all. Subject to all. You are there to be everybody's helper. You are there to serve everybody around you. Both of those things. You are both lord and servant of everybody.

That is very much in line with Luther's interpretation, the Lutheran interpretation, of who Jesus was: that Jesus was God and yet came as a human being, who was in a humble setting and came to serve.

**"Unless I'm convinced by the testimony of the scriptures or by clear reason...I'm bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will**

**not retract anything, since it's neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me, Amen."** – Speech at the Diet of Worms (April 15, 1521)

"Here I stand." That was a famous phrase that Luther said. Here it is in this speech. It has a funny title, the Diet of Worms. It does not mean he was having a dish of worms. A diet was a name for a group of people gathered together, and Worms is a town in Germany. So it was the gathering of people in this particular town.

He was called to answer because he was being such a rabble-rouser, and they said, "Listen, you're going to get kicked out unless you retract these things that you're saying." And Luther said, "Here I stand. Unless you can show me where in the scripture and by my reasoning that I have done wrong, I'm not going to take it back." And he didn't.

There again, there is a boldness and a rebelliousness to Lutheranism, which doesn't always show up in the way that Lutherans are, in some ways. But it is very much that we started from a rebellious protest movement at our heart.

**"Be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly, for he is victorious over sin, death, and the world."** – Letter to Philip Melanchthon (August 1, 1521)

When I was going to school down in Hyde Park, there was a Lutheran church there that had a campus ministry component. They reached out to the University of Chicago students, and they got T-shirts once that said, "Sin boldly." College students would love to wear that shirt. It is a quote from Luther, "Sin boldly." But people also sometimes forget the second part. But I like the first part too.

Luther had a big personality, and he was actually writing this to his good friend Philip Melanchthon. I think Luther was hidden away in a castle because people were trying to kill him while he was translating the Bible, and Melanchthon was trying to hold down the fort. He was a little bit more of a nervous type, and I heard somebody say,

"Well, we can cut Melanchthon some slack. He had to balance all these things going on, and it was his first reformation." He hadn't done this before.

But Luther said, "Listen, you're going to make mistakes. It is a given. You're going to screw some things up. Be a sinner and sin boldly. Go for it, knowing you're going to mess up, but know that it's ultimately in God's hands, and God is there, and God's grace is even more powerful than any of the mess-ups we make. Trust even more in God's victory in Christ over anything that we could mess up."

**"This is most certainly true."** – Small Catechism (1529)

Luther said that at the end of his Small Catechism. Luther was a prolific writer. One of the things that he did is he recognized that people in the German churches didn't know a lot about the faith, and he said, "Let me put together a little handbook that they can learn that explains to them what are the Ten Commandments, what is the Lord's Prayer, what is the Apostles' Creed?"

He would end every three-sentence explanation with, "This is most certainly true." Again, I think it underscores Luther's confidence that ultimately we have trust and assurance in God. He was a proponent of open your heart, accept, go from there.

**"It's true, we're beggars."** – Luther's last written words (February 16, 1546)

This is the last thing that he wrote before he died. I have heard it conveyed, "We're beggars all." At the end, we just hope on God's goodness, and we are all fundamentally in need. It is kind of an interesting last piece. In the end, we can just hope in God.

**"Your manure cure didn't help me, either."** – Letter to Katie Luther (1537)

Apparently, his wife, Katie—this was revolutionary—Martin Luther married a nun, which people thought, "Oh my gosh, are they going to have children with three heads? This doesn't make sense." But it was partially a statement of rethinking who is a priest and what a

priest can do, and the kind of specialized place for priests, and just rethinking the whole structures of the Catholic Church. He encouraged priests to marry, and so he did too. He got married to a nun named Katie, and they had a number of children. She was, by many accounts, a very active, vigorous, helpful supporter. She held down the fort and made income while he was off writing books and giving speeches and everything.

One kind of interesting thing is that I believe, in his will, he left a number of things to Katie in a way that was not typical at the time. So that is kind of interesting.

But he was known as a somewhat earthy type of person. Luther loved his beer, and he was not shy about using examples from daily life that were very sensory. I think there is a famous sermon where he talks about smelly diapers that babies have. He was familiar with them. And he was known to be a very good preacher.

It is all about grace. We are beggars all. We trust in God. I would be remiss if I didn't have a couple of Bible verses in here.

A key one for Lutherans is from the letter to the Ephesians: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing. It is the gift of God."

That is something that is just fundamental to our understanding.

And from the book of Romans—Luther really had a breakthrough when he read the book of Romans. That was the epistle, the part of Holy Scripture that really spoke to him and made him understand that he was getting at it in the wrong way.

"God proves his love for us in this, that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Luther says again and again, Christ died for the ungodly. It wasn't for the people who had it all figured out, because everybody doesn't have it figured out. God came to help people in need. Jesus himself said something like that too: the sick have no need for a physician, and we are all sick.

What does it mean to be a Lutheran nowadays?

What does that look like? I talked a lot about Luther.

At our church, Irving Park Lutheran, it means we have weekly worship Sunday mornings. For all that Luther had a lot of critique of the Catholic Church, I have a lot of people who grew up Catholic who are part of my church or will come to the church for different things. They have a Catholic background, and they will say, "That seemed really Catholic to me. There's a lot of similarities."

Now, they say, "Except for you that you are you're the pastor," which is a difference because Catholics still don't have women who are pastors. But there are an awful lot of similarities within Catholic worship.

For all that Catholics and Lutherans were separate for a long time, there have been a lot of ways that we have come together as church institutions and said, "Listen, we had some different emphases, and we both had some issues with how things were being presented, but we are coming along and seeing a lot within each other that are similar."

We have two sacraments; Catholics have seven. We have women pastors; Catholics don't. There are a lot of nuances. But honestly, there are some nuances within Lutheran churches too.

Our church looks a little bit more like a Catholic church than some Lutheran churches do. When I was in the upper Midwest, there were some more plain churches. You might find churches that have praise bands and look a little bit more like a non-denominational church.

A huge missing piece in that family tree of Christianity was non-denominational Christianity, which has been a huge emphasis in the United States in the last, I guess, probably about 40 years or so. I am talking all about a denominational Christian standpoint. Non-denominational Christianity—I would be curious to see. I am sure it is maybe as many as Baptists. It is a huge shift in Christian practices, and Pentecostals have grown quite a bit too.

# Pilgrimage Reflections (3): United Kingdom, Transmission, and Return

Brian VandenBos

Photo: Photos: Kris Bass and Rajib Samanta

## Introduction

The final stage of our pilgrimage brought us from India to the United Kingdom, where the journey began to take on a quieter and more reflective character. After days spent amid the sacred geography of Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother, and Swami Vivekananda, England offered a different kind of atmosphere: restrained, contemplative, and deeply meaningful in its own way. It was not a separate conclusion to the pilgrimage, but a continuation of it in another key.

In India, we had encountered the source: temples, ashramas, villages, and living centers of the Ramakrishna Order. In England, the emphasis shifted toward transmission, especially Swami Vivekananda's work in London during his visits of 1895, 1896, and 1899. The experience helped me see more clearly how Vedanta moved from India into the modern West, and how the current that began with Sri Ramakrishna continues to flow through many lands, cultures, and lives.

## Leicester: Hospitality and Satsanga

We arrived in London on the morning of November 28 after an early flight from Delhi. From the airplane window, somewhere between India and England, I saw the Black Sea and a vast expanse of stars, perhaps more than I had ever seen at one time. It felt like a quiet blessing between worlds.

In England, Rajib and Anu Samanta received us with great generosity and care. From the airport, we traveled north to Leicester, the largest city in the East Midlands and a place known for its multicultural character and vibrant Indian community. That evening, Swami Ishatmananda (referred to as Swamiji hereafter) gave a parlor talk

in Rajib and Anu's home.

After the scale and intensity of India, this setting felt intimate and familial. A home became a place of satsanga, and the spirit of pilgrimage continued in a living room filled with devotion, attention, and quiet receptivity.



Leicester Parlor Talk

## Rugby and London: Outer Movement and Inner Purification

The following day, Swamiji led a retreat in Rugby on the theme "Detoxify Our Mind," speaking on the qualifications of the spiritual aspirant, the purification of the mind, and the teachings of the Manah Suddhi Prakarana. Although Kris and I were not present for the Rugby retreat, the theme itself felt deeply appropriate at this stage of the journey. After so many sacred places and powerful impressions, the mind itself remained the central field of practice.

That same day, Kris and I visited London sites associated with Swami Vivekananda's work in England. This created an unexpected harmony. While Swamiji taught on purification of the mind, we walked through places connected with the transmission of Vedanta to the West. The outer streets of London and the inner work of purification seemed to belong to the same pilgrimage.

Swami Vivekananda taught, “Each soul is potentially divine.” The work of spiritual life, then, is to remove what obscures that divinity. Whether through a retreat hall in Rugby or a quiet walk through London’s historic streets, the essential teaching remained the same: the mind must become a fit instrument for truth.

### **Bourne End: Rest, Retreat, and a Quiet Bridge Home**

We arrived at the Ramakrishna Vedanta Centre in Bourne End on the evening of November 29 and stayed there for two nights. After the intensity of India and the movement through London, Bourne End felt like a gentle bridge between pilgrimage abroad and the eventual return home.

Founded in 1948, the Ramakrishna Vedanta Centre is the only branch center of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission in the United Kingdom. Since 1977, it has been housed in a stately country estate in Buckinghamshire, about forty-five kilometers from central London. The setting itself encouraged quietness: spacious grounds, a peaceful shrine, and a rhythm of life that felt both relaxed and reverent.

On November 30, Swamiji led a daylong retreat there, speaking on themes that had appeared earlier in the journey: “Come, Become Man” and “Now We Have to Become God.” Hearing these teachings in England gave them a wider resonance. They were no longer connected only with the sacred atmosphere of India, but with the universal call of Vedanta wherever sincere seekers gather.

I was struck by the kindness and joy of the

devotees and volunteers at Bourne End. Throughout the entire pilgrimage, unexpected help and small acts of care seemed to appear again and again. At Bourne End, that sense of being quietly looked after became especially vivid. The center gave us rest, but also a reminder that spiritual hospitality is itself a form of worship.

### **London: Swami Vivekananda and the Sacred Geography of Transmission**

London carried a special significance in the final days of the pilgrimage. In India, we had visited places sanctified by the lives of Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother. In London, we walked through places associated with Swami Vivekananda’s work in the West. These were not pilgrimage sites in the outward form of temples or shrines. Many were ordinary streets, altered buildings, or addresses where the original structures no longer remain. Yet their meaning lay precisely there. Vedanta entered the West not only through great public events, but through rented rooms, lecture halls, private homes, and meetings between teacher and seeker.

During his visits to England in 1895, 1896, and 1899, Swami Vivekananda lectured, taught classes, met seekers, and helped establish Vedanta in the Western mind. London, then the heart of the British Empire, became one of the great centers from which his message spread. He once said, “The British Empire with all its drawbacks is the greatest machine that ever existed for the dissemination of ideas.” His intention was to place Vedanta at the center of that machine so that it might reach the world.



Ramakrishna Vedanta Centre U.K.

We visited several London sites connected with this work. At 171 Victoria Street, the original building no longer stands, but the location was associated with the Sesame Club, where Margaret Noble, later Sister Nivedita, was a member. Swamiji gave lectures there, including one on education. At 196 Piccadilly, formerly Princes' Hall, many of his classes and lectures were held, along with his farewell reception in 1896. At 39 Victoria Street, he conducted important talks and classes. We also visited the Westminster area connected with the former Royal Aquarium, where Swamiji had gone with his disciple and stenographer J. J. Goodwin.

Perhaps the most moving site was 63 St. George's Drive, where Swamiji held intimate classes for close students and where Sister Nivedita first met him. The English Heritage blue plaque there quietly marks his presence. Standing before that building, I felt how history sometimes turns through moments that appear outwardly small. A teacher speaks, a seeker listens, and a new channel opens for spiritual work across nations and generations.

We also visited Greycoat Street, where Swamiji had lived for a time with brother disciples and others, though we later realized we had not found the exact address. Even this small uncertainty felt appropriate in its own way. The value of the pilgrimage did not depend on perfect historical possession, but on reverent remembrance. To walk those streets with awareness was itself meaningful.

London in the reign of King Charles III is very different from the London Swami Vivekananda knew. Yet something of the city's historical role remains. It is still a meeting place of nations, cultures, and ideas. To stand there after visiting India was to feel the extraordinary arc of Swamiji's mission: from the sacred soil of India to the centers of the modern West, from the direct realization of Sri Ramakrishna to a message offered to all humanity.

### **The Circle of the Pilgrimage**

For those of us connected with the Vivekananda Vedanta Society of Chicago, London also brought a quiet sense of completion. Swami Vivekananda's appearance at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 first brought his message powerfully before the Western world. His later work in England helped deepen and stabilize that message, giving it intellectual form, dedicated students, and a wider reach.

This connection between Chicago and London felt especially meaningful. The pilgrimage had taken us through India, where the lives of Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother, and Swami Vivekananda remain tangibly present. It then brought us to England, where Swamiji's message entered Western thought with force and clarity. Returning to Chicago, one could feel that these places were not separate points on a map, but parts of one living movement.

The sacred geography of London is quieter than that of Dakshineswar, Kamarpukur, Jayrambati, or



With devotees of at Bourne End



Methodist Central Hall (former Royal Aquarium)

Belur Math. It does not announce itself in the same way. Yet its significance is profound. It reminds us that Vedanta is not bound to one landscape. The same truth may be realized in a temple, taught in a drawing room, contemplated in a country ashram, or remembered on a city street.

## Reflections

By the time we prepared to return to Chicago, the pilgrimage had become quieter within me. The outward journey had included many places, teachings, companions, and impressions, but what remained was simple: gratitude for the opportunity, reverence for the lineage, and a renewed awareness that spiritual life must be lived wherever one stands.

England helped me understand this more clearly. India had given the experience of sacred origin and living presence. England revealed the courage and universality of transmission. Swami Vivekananda did not keep Vedanta confined to one land or one people. Through his life and work, he carried it into the modern world, declaring its truth to be universal.

On December 1, we flew back to Chicago. Yet the pilgrimage did not end when the plane landed. It continued inwardly as reflection, remembrance, and responsibility. The dust of India, the quiet of Bourne End, the streets of London, and Swamiji's guiding presence all seemed to gather into one simple lesson: to remember God, to serve sincerely, and to carry the spirit of pilgrimage into daily life.



63 St. George's Drive



U.K. devotees

Additional photos from the pilgrimage, including albums by Kris Bass and Anup Pan, may be viewed here: [Pilgrimage Photo Album](#).

Printed readers may scan the QR code below.



Vivekananda Vedanta Society of Chicago travel group in India

*The Western scientist seeks for unity in the atom or the molecule. When he finds it, there is nothing further for him to discover, and so when we find that Unity of Soul or Self, which is called Atman, we can go no further. It becomes clear that everything in the sense world is a manifestation of that One Substance.*

– Swami Vivekananda

Vedanta as a Factor in Civilisation  
(Extract from an address delivered in Ridgeway Gardens, England)

# BHAGAVATA (31): SECRET ABOUT THE DIVINE POWER MAYA: THE ROOT CAUSE OF MISERY

Swami Ishatmananda

The first of the Nine Yogi brothers, Kavi, replied to King Nimi's first question: "Which is the easiest way to realize God?" The second brother of Nava Yogis, Hari, answered the King's second question: "How to recognize a Realized Soul?"

Nimi, the King of Videha, was very happy hearing the replies by Yogi Kavi and Yogi Hari. King Nimi now knew that the cause of all bondage and miseries is maya, hence he asked:

परस्य विष्णोरैश्वर्यं मायिनामपि मोहिनीम् ।

मायां वेदितुमिच्छामो भगवन्तो ब्रुवन्तु नः ॥11/3/1 ॥

*parasya viṣṇor aiśvarya māyinām api mohinīm*

*māyām veditum icchāmo bhagavanto bruvantu naḥ*

Bhagavanto bruvantu naḥ - O Master, please tell us about maya.

*māyām veditum icchāmo* - What is maya?

*Parasya viṣṇor aiśvarya-* divine power of the Supreme Lord Mahavishnu

What does maya do? *Māyinām api mohinīm* – maya deludes the minds of all.

King Nimi says to the Nine Yogis—O, honorable teacher, we would like to know all about 'maya', the divine power of the Supreme Lord Mahavishnu.

This third question was picked up by Yogi Antariksha. Students of Vedanta know how difficult it is to explain maya. Again, without knowing about what maya is, 'Mukti' or liberation is not possible.

The best exponent of Vedanta, Adi Shankaracharya, in his wonderful book 'Viveka Chudamani,' Crest Jewel of Discrimination, tried to give the definition of maya –

अव्यक्तनाम्नी परमेशशक्तिः अनाद्यविद्या त्रिगुणात्मिका परा ।

कार्यानुमेया सुधियैव माया यया जगत्सर्वमिदं प्रसूयते ॥ १०८ ॥

*avyaktanāmnī paramēśaśaktiḥ anādyavidyā*

*triguṇātmikā parā,*

*kāryānumeyā sudhiyaiva māyā yayā*

*jagatsarvamidam prasūyate* ॥ 108 ॥

Maya is undifferentiated, and a perfect balance of the three gunas – Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas. It is the power of the Lord (different from that of Prakriti in Sankhya Philosophy, which is independent of the Purusha).

Maya is without beginning – Anadi, Nescience – Avidya, and is made up of the three gunas, yet superior to them – Para.

The intelligent people - Sudhiyaiva, can understand 'maya' from its effects. From maya, this universe is created.

To answer King Nimi's question, Yogi Antariksha also explained maya by describing the effect –

एभिर्भूतानि भूतात्मा महाभूतैर्महाभुज ।

ससर्जोच्चावचान्याद्यः स्वमात्रात्मप्रसिद्धये ॥11/3/3 ॥

*ebhir bhūtāni bhūtātma mahābhūtair mahābhuja*

*sarjo uccāvacānyādyah sva-mātrātma-prasiddhaye*

O King! The Supreme Being, who is the soul of all, projected (not created) all beings, high and low, so that these beings, according to their 'Karma,' enjoy, suffer, or attain liberation. This power is known as 'maya'.

In the Bhagavatam's 11<sup>th</sup> book (skanda), 3rd chapter, and in verses 3 to 16, Yogi Antariksha explained 'maya', the power of the Supreme Being, through its effects.

In the 4<sup>th</sup> verse, it is said that the bodies of all beings were made of the five elements – kshiti (earth), Ap (water), Tveja (fire), Marut (air), Vyom (ether). The Supreme Being entered into them by virtue of His power and diversified Himself as the mind and ten sense organs (five sense organs of action and five sense organs of knowledge), providing the Jiva with objects for enjoyment with the senses – this is maya.

गुणैर्गुणान् स भुञ्जान आत्मप्रद्योतितैः प्रभुः ।

मन्यमान इदं सृष्टमात्मानमिह सज्जते ॥ 11/3/5 ॥

The Jiva starts thinking that it is the master of body and mind, gets attached and suffers the travails of samsara – this is Maya.

कर्माणि कर्मभिः कुर्वन् सनिमित्तानि देहभृत् । तत्तत्कर्मफलं गृह्णन् भ्रमतीह सुखेतरम् ॥ 11/3/6 ॥

As a result, the Jiva's 'Karma' keeps on producing results – This is Maya.

तस्माद् भवति संनादति यदा दैवात् पराभवः । तदा तस्य परं ब्रह्म निर्वृत्तं चेतसि स्थितम् ॥ 11/3/7 ॥

Till dissolution, the Jiva goes on in the circle of birth and death.

यदा मनः सङ्कल्पति तदोत्पद्येत पञ्चधा । तद्यत्तं भूतसूक्ष्मं च तन्मात्रं च गुणाश्रयम् ॥ 11/3/8 ॥

Dissolution is also the 'Maya.'

Verses 9 to 15 describe how, through a terrific drought, fire dissolved the creation. Again, a new creation takes root.

ततस्त्वष्टा ततः सूर्यस्ततोऽग्निरन्तरीक्षतः ।

ततः सवायुरव्यक्तमव्यक्तात् परमं पदम् ॥ 11/3/9 ॥

पुरुषोऽव्यक्तसम्भूतः पुरुषात् सोऽन्य उच्यते । ततः परं ब्रह्म तदोपरि स्थितं निर्मलम् ॥ 11/3/10 ॥

एतावद् यद् भवेत् त्रैगुण्यं विकारः कारणम् । अविकारोऽप्यु अविद्याख्यः कारणाविकृतः परः ॥ 11/3/11 ॥

ततो विरजं उत्सृज्य वैराजः पुरुषो नृप । अव्यक्तं विसते सूक्ष्मं निरीन्धन इवानलः ॥ 11/3/12 ॥

वायुना हतगन्धभूः सालिलत्वाय कल्पते । सालिलं तद् धृतरसम् ज्योतिष्वायोपकल्पते ॥ 11/3/13 ॥

ततो रसं हतं तेजस्तेजो रूपं हतं ततः । रूपं तद् हतशब्दं च शब्दं तच्च छुद्भमोहितम् ॥ 11/3/14 ॥

एवं तन्मात्रं हतं गुणैः गुणाश्चाविक्रियः परः । परः परं परमात्मा तमसः परतः परः ॥ 11/3/15 ॥

The 16th verse summarizes thus:

एषा माया भगवतः सर्गस्थित्यन्तकारिणी । त्रिवर्णा वर्णितास्माभिः किं भूयः श्रोतुमिच्छसि ॥ 11/3/16 ॥

*eṣā māyā bhagavataḥ sarga-sthity-anta-kāriṇī*

*tri-varṇā varṇitāsmābhiḥ kiṁ bhūyaḥ śrotum icchasi*

Such is the Lord's Maya, the cause of Creation, Preservation, and Dissolution, with its three aspects: Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas.

Then King Nimi asked, "Please tell me the way by which even an ordinary person can overcome maya?"



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

## Introduction to the Cover Page: “*agnerāpaḥ*”, From Fire, Water

*Pravrajika Matriprana*  
Sarada Convent  
Vedanta Society of Southern California

Purity, or *pavitratā* in Sanskrit, is a remarkable word. It is the foundation and culmination of spiritual life.

Interestingly, long before its literal and etymological meaning emerged, the word had already acquired a practical significance. When the idea of purity first entered human consciousness, human beings themselves were still in a primitive stage of development. That was the story of Homo sapiens in prehistoric Africa about 300,000 years ago. Around that time, the practice of bathing in rivers, lakes, or other bodies of water was probably beginning to develop. There is no clear evidence of religion or formal worship among humans of that period. Yet they understood the necessity of cleanliness. They bathed in streams and scrubbed different parts of their bodies to remove parasites and germs. The primary purposes of bathing were to cool the body, remove mud and dirt, reduce parasites, and keep wounds clean. In other words, bathing was practiced primarily for hygiene.

Then, roughly between 100,000 and 70,000 years ago, symbolic thinking began to develop rapidly among humans. Archaeological evidence from this period includes the burial of the dead, the use of red or ocher, and the wearing of ornaments. Here, for the first time, physical actions acquired symbolic meaning.

Around 50,000 to 30,000 years ago, following the "Cognitive Revolution," humans began creating cave paintings, performing rituals, and developing shamanic traditions. From this period onward, water was no longer merely something that cleansed. It became a symbol of life, rebirth, mystery, and invisible power.

Between approximately 10,000 and 8,000 BCE, the advent of agriculture led to permanent

settlements. Disease, waste, pollution, corpses, and animal excrement made cleanliness a social necessity. Gradually, the concepts of the clean and the unclean came into existence.

By around 4000 or 3000 BCE, in Mesopotamia and Egypt, washing the hands, sprinkling water, and cleansing the body became obligatory before entering temples, and cleanliness became synonymous with religious preparation. As an example, one may mention the Indus Valley Civilization, flourishing between 2600 and 1900 BCE, as one of the world's oldest civilizations. The Great Bath of Mohenjo-daro is one of the earliest large public bathing structures in human civilization. According to many scholars, it was not intended merely for hygiene. It was probably used for communal religious bathing, ritual purification, and social ceremonies. Perhaps it was here that cleanliness first attained religious significance.

The word *pavitra* appears many times in the Rig Veda in connection with the Soma *yajna* or sacrifice. There, the Soma juice was purified by being strained through a woolen filter. That filter itself was called *pavitra*. The Sanskrit suffix *-tra* generally denotes an instrument or means. For example: *mantra* is an instrument of thought; *yantra* is an instrument of control; *pavitra* is an instrument of purification. Every Sanskrit word belongs to either the masculine, or feminine, or neuter gender. Originally, the word *pavitra* was used as a neuter noun.

Deep behind the Sanskrit root *pav* or *pū* lies an ancient Indo-European root, generally reconstructed by linguists as *peuH-* or *puH-*. The English word purity comes from Late Latin *puritatem* (nominative *puritas*), meaning "cleanness, pureness," from Latin *purus*, which

gave birth to the concepts of cleanliness, purity, unmixed; chaste, undefiled. From the mid-fifteenth century, it also came to mean "freedom from admixture or adulteration." Although in the Vedic sacrificial culture of India the meaning of *pavitra* was simply "to purify," "to clean," "to filter," "to flow," or "to remove impurities," at the Proto-Indo-European level the meaning was still primarily one of physical purification.

Around 1500 – 1200 BCE, during the Vedic period, the spiritual journey of the word purity truly began. That which removed impurity and preserved the sanctity of the sacrifice was called *pavitra*. Although the word initially referred to a physical instrument, a parallel and fundamental transformation was taking place on the spiritual plane.

During the age of the Upanishads, the use of the word underwent what may be described as a revolution. Its meaning expanded beyond external cleanliness to include the purification of the mind, intellect, heart, and ego. The Śruti declared that true purity is the purification of the inner instrument (*citta-śuddhi*). From the standpoint of Vedanta, purity certainly includes morality, but it goes far beyond it. It signifies the attenuation of desires, the reduction of egoism, the transparency of the mind, God-centeredness, and the manifestation of one's true Self. Purity is not the acquisition of something new; rather, it is the removal of the coverings of impurity superimposed upon the Self. The Self is eternally pure. The purpose of spiritual practice is not to purify the Self, but to remove the veil of ignorance that obscures its eternally pure nature.

Both Buddhism and Jainism, around the fifth century BCE, also declared that bathing alone does not make a person pure. A moral life, nonviolence, freedom from greed, and compassion, these alone constitute true purity.

The historical roots of baptism lie in ancient Jewish ritual cleansing. Theologically, baptism is deeply connected with purity. Derived from the Greek word *baptisma*, meaning "to wash, dip, or

immerse," it is universally practiced as a religious rite of washing and consecration.

From the first century BCE onward, in the Bhakti traditions, along with ritual bathing, the remembrance of God's name, devotion, and divine love became the principal means of attaining purity. During the medieval period of Indian history, from approximately the eighth to the eighteenth century CE, the Tantric and Bhakti movements introduced a new understanding. True impurity is not external—it is lust, anger, greed, delusion, ego, and jealousy. Purity came to be understood as a mind wholly directed toward God.

God is *Īśvara*, the *pati* or Lord of the universe, and the Creator and Sustainer of the world – is the Lord of all. A mind exclusively devoted to this Lord is called *pativratā*. The closest translation of *pativratā* is chastity. For a serious spiritual aspirant out of the three vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience, chastity comes first and foremost. Without chastity, or one-pointedness, nothing can be achieved. Interestingly, if one rearranges the middle letters of the Sanskrit word *pativratā*, one obtains the word *pavitratā* (purity).

In any case, the meaning of the word *pavitra* gradually expanded to include pure, holy, sanctifying, and stainless. Water is the primordial instrument of purification. The Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa declares that even the purifying power of water itself is sanctified by the rays of the Divine Mother, "It is only through the touch of the rays of Your hands that water and all other objects become pure. Even sacred acts such as fire offerings and charity cannot produce their beneficial results unless they are connected with Your rays." (78.10)

This evolution reminds us of a fundamental truth: just as purifying fire refines gold into its pure form, *tapasya* is an inward process of purification through which the unnecessary, impure, and limiting elements of life fall away, allowing the innate divinity within to shine forth gradually. It is from this understanding that the idea of the fire of austerity *tapasya* (*tapasyāgni*)

arises.

The person who has remained, through the ages, the supreme embodiment of *tapasya* and purity in the Indian mind is Sītā, the beloved of Rāma, as portrayed by Vālmīki. Śrī Rāma declares:

अनन्या हि मया सीता भास्करस्य प्रभा यथा॥ १९॥

विशुद्धा त्रिषु लोकेषु मैथिली जनकात्मजा॥ २०॥

"Sita is inseparable from me, just as radiance is inseparable from the sun. Maithili, the daughter of Janaka, is absolutely pure in all the three worlds."

In the life of Sri Ramakrishna, the very beginning of his divine visions was blessed by the grace of Mother Sita. Later he recounted: "One day at that time I was sitting under the Panchavati — not meditating, merely sitting — when an incomparable, effulgent female figure appeared before me, illumining the whole place. It was not that figure alone that I saw then, but also the trees and plants of the Panchavati, the Ganga and all other objects. I saw that the figure was that of a woman; for there were in her no signs of a goddess, such as the possession of three eyes, etc. But the extraordinary, spirited, and solemn expression of that face, manifesting love, sorrow, compassion, and endurance, was not generally seen even in the figures of goddesses. Looking graciously at me, that goddess-woman was advancing from north to south towards me with a slow, grave gait. I wondered who she might be, when a black-faced monkey came suddenly, nobody knew whence, and sat at her feet, and someone within my mind exclaimed, 'Sita, Sita who was all sorrow all her life, Sita the daughter of King Janaka, Sita to whom Rama was her very life!' Saying 'Mother' repeatedly, I was then going to fling myself at her feet, when she came quickly and entered this (showing his own body). Overwhelmed with joy and wonder, I lost all consciousness and fell down. Before that, I had had no vision in that manner without meditating or thinking. That was the first vision of its kind. I have been suffering like her all my life, perhaps because I saw first of all Sita, who was miserable from her birth." It was not only Mother Sita's

sorrow that Sri Ramakrishna inherited, her smile too left its imprint upon his lips for the rest of his life.

Sita's entire life was centered on Rama. Sri Ramakrishna's life, likewise, was wholly centered on God. Therefore, while fully acknowledging the importance of external cleanliness, Sri Ramakrishna repeatedly emphasized that it is inner purity, the purity capable of holding truth and nurturing divine love, that is of supreme importance.

Sri Ramakrishna declared that holding fast to truth is the *tapasya* of the Kali Yuga, this iron age, because truth alone reflects the presence of God with perfect clarity. Renunciation of attachment to lust and gold (*kāma-kāñcana*), simplicity, love of God, and seeing God in all beings are themes that recur again and again in Sri Ramakrishna's teachings whenever he speaks of purity.

Sita faced numerous trials throughout her life of *tapasya*. In the end, in the supreme test of her purity, she surpassed even Agni, the all-purifying fire. Standing before the sacred fire, she declared

यथा मे हृदयं नित्यं नापसर्पति राघवात्।

तथा लोकस्य साक्षी मां सर्वतः पातु पावकः॥

"Just as my heart never departs from Rāghava (Rama), so may Agni (*pāvaka*), the witness of the whole world, protect me on every side."

In this single prayer, Sita stands forth as the perfect embodiment of both *pativrata* (absolute fidelity to her husband) and *pavitratā* (purity).

Oneness of Mothers Sita and Sarada is documented through the analysis of their characteristics many times. Sri Sarada Devi is referred to as the burning power (*dāhikā śakti*) of the fire that is Sri Ramakrishna. Sri Ramakrishna himself declared this inseparable indistinguishability between them, just as Sri Rama spoke of the inseparability of the sun and its radiance. Like Sita, the very embodiment of purity, the whole of Sri Sarada Devi's life was an expression of purity. Her purity was far greater than mere external austerity. It manifested itself through her boundless motherhood, forgiveness,

forbearance, all-embracing acceptance, and above all, through her love expressed in the principle of "never seeing the faults of others."

This inner purity became possible through selfless, desireless service. Sri Sarada Devi shared some of her stories from Dakshineswar days with Nikunja Devi, her disciple and the wife of M, the writer of the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna. These incidents were published later in monthly Basumati and Udbodhan notable magazines in Bengali. One day, after she had come to Dakshineswar, Sri Ramakrishna asked her, "Who are you?" Sarada Devi replied, "I am here to serve you." As if he had not heard, he asked again, "What?" Once more she answered, "I am here to serve you." Sri Ramakrishna then asked, "Don't you know anyone other than me?" Sarada Devi gave the simple and guileless reply, "No. This is the absolute truth (*tin satyi*)."

Devotees witnessed that Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual mood would sometimes so completely possess her that during those moments her gestures, mannerisms, and conduct became exactly like his. Truly, she became *tad-bhāva-rañjitākārā*, one whose entire being was suffused with his spiritual mood and embodiment of purity, *pavitratā-swarūpinī*.

After Sri Ramakrishna's physical passing, for the next thirty-four years it was she who stood before ordinary people even as the living image of Sri Ramakrishna — his embodied spiritual ideal, and his living interpretation. She truly fulfilled her role as his divine companion in the play, *līlā-saṅginī*.

A moving picture of her extraordinary self-effacement is found in Sister Nivedita's letter to Nell Hammond: Can you imagine anyone who worshipped her husband as she did, yet would not even let him see her face? She might naturally have cherished the hope that, by allowing him to see her, she would sometimes arise in his thoughts. But no, her self-effacement was beyond compare. Even that she did not desire. I shudder whenever I think of it.

Sri Ramakrishna repeatedly placed her in situations that amounted to trials by fire. In this context, one may speak of her confronting the six primordial enemies (*ṣaḍ-ripu*). The most formidable weapon of *māyā* is lust. After Sarada Devi arrived at Dakshineswar, the Master pointedly asked her: "Do you want to drag me down into maya?" Sarada Devi's reply was immediate and unequivocal: "Why should I do so? I have come only to help you in your path of religious life." A noble answer indeed—from a true *pativratā* and an ideal *sahadharminī*, divine consort. Only a woman of immaculate purity of mind could have given such a reply. There was no artifice in it, no hypocrisy, nor any attempt to please anyone. It was the spontaneous expression of her lofty nature and of the exalted ideal of life that had become as naturally hers as it was her husband's.

The Master therefore made use of Sarada Devi's presence at Dakshineswar both to grant her the full rights of a wife and to test how completely his realization of Brahman had raised him above bodily consciousness. For about six months, this ascetic of ascetics had his wife sleep in his own room, subjecting the spiritual awareness of both to the severest test. They passed it magnificently. The Master's mind would enter deep samadhi and was never disturbed by bodily passion. At the same time, he gave equal credit to Sarada Devi when he remarked: "Had she not been so pure, who knows whether I would not have lost my self-control?"

In the Bhagavad Gita, Sri Krishna teaches that when lust or desire is obstructed, anger arises. But in a desireless pure mind there is no place for anger. Hriday, Sri Ramakrishna's nephew, had served him from 1855 onward. Gradually, however, he developed a possessive attitude toward the Master and became increasingly domineering.

In March 1881, Sarada Devi came from Jayrambati to visit her husband at Dakshineswar, accompanied by her mother and a few neighbors. As soon as they arrived, Hriday treated them rudely and told Sarada Devi that she was not

wanted here. With tearful eyes, she and her mother returned to Jayrambati that very day.

Sri Ramakrishna was helpless. He feared provoking Hriday and therefore remained silent at the time. Later, however, he sternly warned him, "Look here. You may insult me, but do not hurt her feelings. If He who dwells in this body [pointing to himself] hisses, you may somehow escape. But if He who dwells in her [Sarada Devi] hisses, no one, not even Brahma, Vishnu, or Shiva, will be able to protect you."

Holy Mother was deeply hurt, but she never became angry. Instead, with folded hands she prayed to Mother Bhavatarini Kali, "If You grant me the opportunity again, I shall return to serve You once again." She knew Sri Ramakrishna is one and the same with his chosen ideal Divine Mother Kali. It is the power of purity that only would allow anyone to absorb this insult of Hriday!

Service, service, service. It was this spirit of selfless service that enabled Sarada Devi to triumph in yet another trial by fire, establishing forever her image as one completely free from greed. Sri Ramakrishna was, in Swami Vivekananda's words, *tyāgīśvara*, the Lord of Renunciates. As the ideal *pativrata*, Holy Mother erased her separate individuality and merged her very existence in Sri Ramakrishna. In doing so, she herself became the very embodiment of renunciation and purity, *pavitrata-swarūpinī*.

Sri Ramakrishna had a Marwari devotee named Lakshmi Narayan, a wealthy businessman. Out of deep reverence for the Master, he proposed depositing Rs. 10,000 in a bank in Sri Ramakrishna's name to meet his expenses. At that time Sri Ramakrishna's monthly salary as the priest of the Dakshineswar temple was only Rs. 7. But Sri Ramakrishna, renunciation personified, later said that the proposal felt as though "someone were sawing my head with a hack-saw." He repeatedly and firmly refused the offer. When Lakshmi Narayan remained determined, he suggested instead that the money be deposited in the name of Sri Sarada Devi.

Perhaps Sri Ramakrishna saw this as an opportunity to test her. When Holy Mother entered his room, he said, "Look here, Lakshmi Narayan wants to give me Rs. 10,000. Since I have said that I do not touch money, he now wants to deposit that amount in your name. If you wish, you may accept it. What do you say?" Without the slightest hesitation she replied, "How could that be? If you have rejected the money, how could I accept it? Besides, even if I accepted it, it would only be spent for your needs. That would really mean that you had accepted it. People love, honor, and revere you chiefly because of your complete renunciation. Therefore, there is no question of my accepting the money." She had nothing separate of her own, other than Sri Ramakrishna. Whatever she used came as the blessed remnants of what was meant for Sri Ramakrishna's service. When Sri Ramakrishna heard her answer, he was deeply pleased.

The Lakshmi Narayan episode could have ended simply as an illustration of her victory over the third inner enemy, greed (*lobha*). But Sri Ramakrishna himself revealed that it also demonstrated her complete freedom from attachment (*moha*).

Many people, especially married women, naturally feel attracted to ornaments and jewelry. Yet this common human attachment left not the slightest stain on her character. Sister Devamata writes in Reminiscences of Sri Sarada Devi (Advaita Ashrama, p. 138): "She (Sri Sarada Devi) had no wants. Among Sri Ramakrishna's followers were many merchants who in August and September would bring him great quantities of rice, pulses and other stores. One day one of them came with ten thousand rupees ... sewed up in a pillow. 'I do not want them,' Sri Ramakrishna said to him. 'What should I do with them? Take them to Mother.' And Mother continued: 'He brought the money to me and Thakur (the Master) came with him. As if to test me, he said, 'Why not take it and buy jewels and ornaments which you have never had?'"

"But what should I do with jewels and ornaments? I do not want them," I replied. And the man had to take his money away."

Renouncing attachment to external objects may sometimes be achieved through determined effort. But remaining completely free from the stain of "I" and "mine" while living amidst worldly life, like remaining spotless in a room filled with soot, is virtually impossible. Yet even the fire of *mada*, the ego born of possessiveness and self-importance, was powerless before her. To her, she herself was nothing; Sri Ramakrishna was everything. This was the very heartbeat of her life. She always preferred to remain hidden behind him. She regarded this hiddenness not as a deprivation but as her finest jewelry, the power of purity, stainless character.

On one occasion Ma Sarada said, "What am I, my child? Thakur (the Master) alone is everything. Pray to Thakur like this, (folding her hands before his picture) "May no sense of 'I' ever arise in me."

And finally there is *mātsarya*, jealousy. The fire of jealousy burns a person more fiercely than even the most terrifying hells described in the religious literature of the world. Yet that fire did not dare to touch Holy Mother. Her universal motherhood crowned her with the garland of victory over jealousy.

At Dakshineswar there used to come a mentally disturbed woman who regarded Sri Ramakrishna as the object of her *madhura-bhāva* (the attitude of the Divine Beloved). But the Master's own attitude toward everyone was that of the Divine Mother.

Sri Ramakrishna used to say that *mātri-bhāva*, the attitude of motherhood, is the purest spiritual attitude. Although he had practiced *madhura-bhāva* during an earlier stage of his spiritual life, after attaining perfection he lived for the most part in the attitude of being the child of the Divine Mother. Naturally, Sri Ramakrishna first warned this disturbed woman that her attitude was incompatible with his own. When she persisted, Sri Ramakrishna became annoyed and sharply rebuked her.

Swami Nikhilananda records in Holy Mother, "Sarada Devi, when she learnt of it, said to Golap-Ma in a distressed voice: 'See what he has done. If the girl acted foolishly, why didn't he send her to me? Why did he scold her?' Then she sent for the woman and said to her: 'My child, if he is annoyed by your presence, don't go to him. Why don't you come to me?'" (Holy Mother, Sri Ramakrishna Math, Chennai, p. 86)

For any married woman, it would ordinarily be extremely difficult to tolerate another woman who desired her husband as her beloved. Yet Holy Mother went far beyond mere tolerance. She opened the doors of her heart in love and compassion. She not only served Sri Ramakrishna with utter selflessness but also came forward to serve even this devotee of his with the same spirit of selfless love.

Holy Mother's trials by fire were not merely symbolic. As discussed at the beginning of this essay, the Sanskrit word for austerity is *tapas*. *Tapas* literally means "heat." *Tapas* is practiced to purify the mind by burning away its impurities.

After Sri Ramakrishna's physical passing, Holy Mother literally undertook the Pañcatapā austerity. It involves sitting in meditation throughout the day surrounded by four blazing fires, with the scorching midday sun overhead serving as the fifth fire. Later, the embodiment of purity herself Sri Sarada Devi recalled, "After my morning bath I approached the fires and saw them burning brightly. I was seized with much fear. I wondered how I would be able to enter the area and remain seated there until sunset. But repeating the name of the Master, I entered the area and the fires seemed to have lost their heat. I practised this discipline for seven days."

There is some disagreement regarding the exact dates of this austerity, but there is no difference in opinions regarding the year it was conducted – 1893. It was most probably toward the end of June, during the longest days of the year in the Northern Hemisphere, when she spent the entire period from sunrise to sunset absorbed in japa and

meditation. The austerity was performed on the terrace of Nilambar Mukherjee's garden house, near the site of today's Belur Math. Holy Mother entered the circle of fire repeating Sri Ramakrishna's name, just as Mother Sita entered the fire invoking her unwavering fidelity and devotion to Sri Rama.

In that very same year, 1893, that fire of austerity was lightened up in Swami Vivekananda's heart. This part of the story parallels the Ramayana. Hanuman, the great devotee of Rama, was inspired to jump across the ocean by the thought of Mother Sita. It was because of the captive Sita in the golden city of Lanka that Hanuman reached those who had become immersed in worldly luxury and material splendor. By setting Lanka ablaze, he burned away the pride of external wealth. With Holy Mother's blessings, Swami Vivekananda arrived in America to participate in the World's Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago during the World's Columbian Exposition commemorating the four-hundredth anniversary of Columbus's voyage. This month, as the country celebrates its 250th year of independence, it is worth revisiting that day of days. The purity before which even fire itself

grows dim, that fire of Vedantic truth, Swami Vivekananda brought into contact with the materialism of America. Blind obedience in matters of religion was set aflame. The doctrine of inherent sinfulness began to burn away, while the Western mind came into contact with the transforming power of purity.

Swamiji presented purity as the very foundation of character, self-control, and spiritual strength. He declared that: As Buddha had a message to the East, I have a message to the West. His own message for the west indeed. At the heart of that message was selfless work. He proclaimed that serving living beings as manifestations of Shiva, in a spirit of complete selflessness, is the path to liberation. In his own words, "Purity, Patience, and Perseverance are the three essentials to success, and above all, love."

Purity, or *pavitrata* in Sanskrit, is a remarkable word, in which water and fire get merged together, and its inevitable culmination is love. It is that love which Sage Narada describes as *parama-prema-rūpā*, devotion in the form of supreme divine love.

With that love begins another story.  
Let's reserve it for another day.

*Some gave up home and love of friends,  
And went in quest of thee, self-banished,  
Through dreary oceans, through primeval forests,  
Each step a struggle for their life or death;  
Then came the day when work bore fruit,  
And worship, love, and sacrifice,  
Fulfilled, accepted, and complete.  
Then thou, propitious, rose to shed  
The light of Freedom on mankind.  
Move on, O Lord, in thy resistless path!  
Till thy high noon o'erspreads the world.  
Till every land reflects thy light,  
Till men and women, with uplifted head,  
Behold their shackles broken, and  
Know, in springing joy, their life renewed!*  
*Part of the poem "To the fourth of July"*  
*by Swami Vivekananda*



Swami Vivekananda in  
Kashmir, 1898

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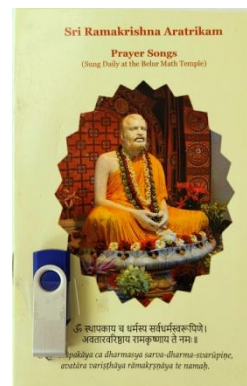


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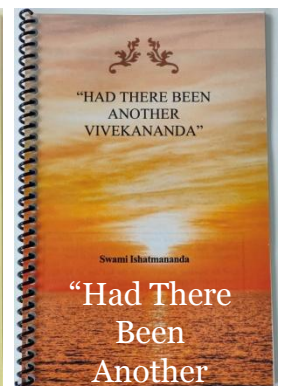
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