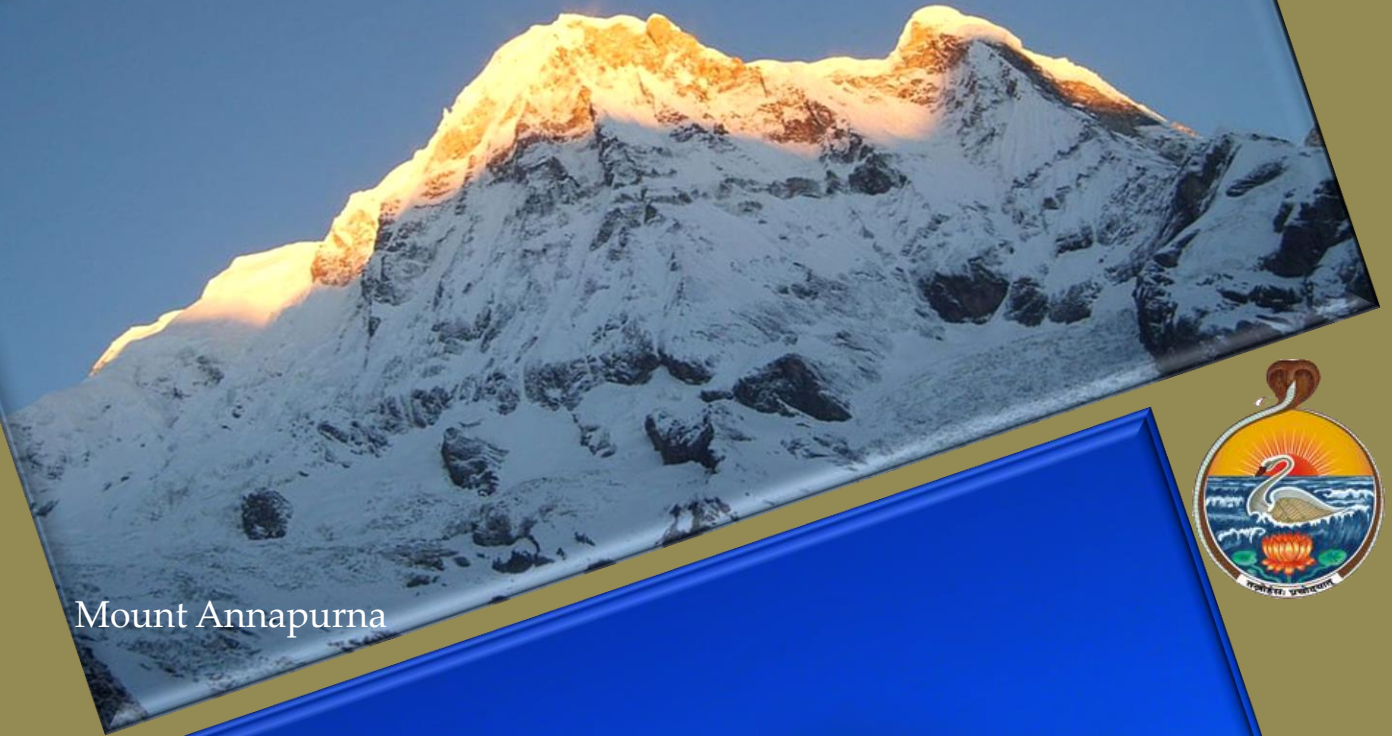
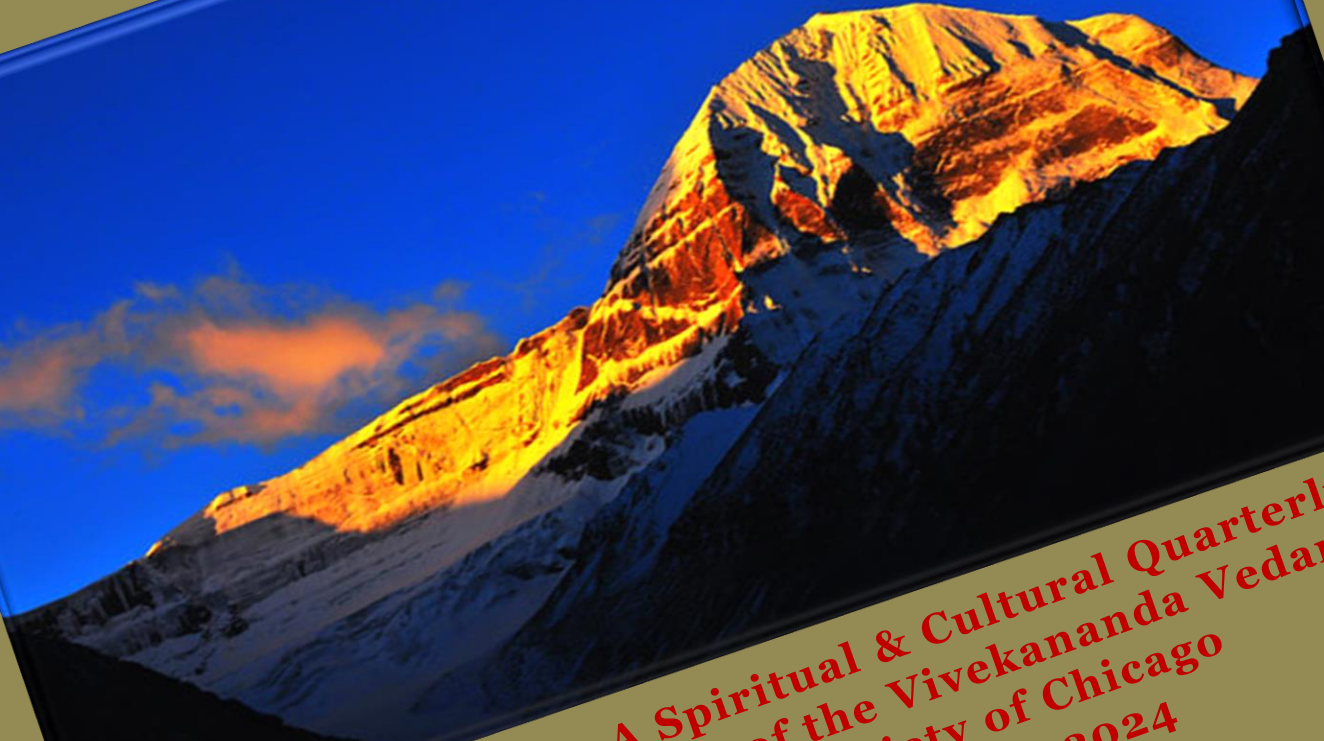


# CHICAGO CALLING



Mount Annapurna



Mount Kailash

A Spiritual & Cultural Quarterly  
eZine of the Vivekananda Vedanta  
Society of Chicago  
No. 43, 2024

# Table of Contents



	<b>Page</b>
<b>EDITORIAL: BRAHMAN IS KALI</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>ASHOKA AND AKBAR: THE TRADITION OF RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE IN INDIA</b> <i>COLLEEN TAYLOR SEN</i>	<b>4</b>
<b>EPISCOPAL AEROBICS: HOW ANGLICANS PRAY</b> <i>CARA WAGNER</i>	<b>8</b>
<b>BHAGAVATA (24): THE GREATEST GIFT</b> <i>SWAMI ISHATMANANDA</i>	<b>14</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION TO THE COVER PAGE</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>ADVERTISEMENTS</b>	<b>29</b>

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

**©Copyright:**  
**Swami-in-Charge**  
**Vivekananda Vedanta Society of Chicago**



## EDITORIAL

### *Brahman is Kali*

Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna used to say, *whom you call Brahman, I call that Kali.*

In the beginning Brahman alone existed. this state is known as nishkala or

without Prakriti. This Brahman is *Para-Brahman* – Absolute, Supreme, all-pervading consciousness. The shruti says, It thought to Itself – *Aham Bahu Shyam* – May I be many.

This ichha, desire is the first manifestation of Shakti with this desire one, absolute, non-dual Brahman manifested jagat – name and form. This stage of Brahman is known as *Apara – Brahman*. Also *Sakala – Brahman – Brahman* with attributes.

‘Saradatilaka’ (ch. 1) says – *Saccidananda Vibhat Sakalat Parameshvarat Asichehha-Ktistato Nada, Nada bindu Samudbhavah* meaning From the Parameshvara, Existence – Knowledge – Bliss Absolute, possessed of prakriti issued shakti; from shakti came nada; from nada generated bindu.

In Tantra we find three bindus – Shiva, Shakti and Shiva – Shakti.

The bindu is also known as *Parang – bindu* which is Shiva and Shakti or Prakriti – Purusha – also known as *Aparabrahman*.

‘Sharadatilak’ (ch. 1) says, from the unfolding *Parang-Bindu* arose an indistinct sound. This bindu is therefore known as *shabda-Brahma*. This *Nada* or *shabda* (sound) is the cosmic energy. This is the soul of the universe – this is again the all pervading Consciousness.

This consciousness in gross form support as the soul of the individual beings and in the subtle form it is *Chinmayi Kala* or Absolute Goddess or *Parameshvari*.

From this point that which is Brahman to the *Jnani* is *Kali* to the *Tantrik*.

*Jnani* or the follower of the path of knowledge after discrimination and detachment realize the Truth that everything is nothing but consciousness.

Similarly *Tantrik*, the worshiper of Shakti after

practicing Tantra and Mantra realize that Mother *Kali*, the symbol of Shakti or power is also Knowledge – the union of Shiva and Shakti. Everything – creation, sustenance and dissolution is constantly going on because of the union of Consciousness (Shiva) and action (Kali).

Image of *Kali* is the symbol of this Truth.

First *Shiva – Parama Shiva* – pale color without any *guna* or epithet.

2nd *Shiva – Lying on Parama Siva* – white color – eyes open is *Sada Shiva – Brahman* with *gunas* wishing to be many.

3rd *Kali – Standing on the Sada – Siva*. Mother image because creating and sustaining. Dark color because she is unknown to ordinary souls. Having human skulls as garland is the symbol of knowledge. Human head is the symbol of knowledge and human hands hanging from her waist is the symbol of action.

*Shiva* and *Kali* are not different – they are one and the same. Brahman when inactive in *Shiva* and the same Brahman when active is known as *Kali*.

There are different types of actions. *Kali* realizing the individual souls in the cremation ground (*Shmashan Kali*), *Kali* removing the cruel thoughts, selfish thoughts – *Danava – Dalani* and many other forms.

The form which *Sri Ramakrishna Dev* worshipped in *Dakshineswar Temple* is famous as *Bhava-tarani* (savior of the universe). This image has Four hands. Right two hands – upper showing “Assurance (अभय)” and the lower hand giving material boons (वर). Left two hands – upper holding a sword indicating, ‘cur down your ego and be free’ and the left lower hand holding a human head, the symbol of knowledge. A jackal is seating and looking at it, as if asking to give that to him but Mother saying – Knowledge, Mukti, Liberation is only for the human being. Mother *Kali* the bestower of *Mukti*.

Brahman is *Kali* and *Kali* is Brahman.





# Ashoka and Akbar: The Tradition of Religious Tolerance in India

Colleen Taylor Sen  
Author

*This article is prepared based on the lecture that was delivered on April 6, 2024 at Home of Harmony*

Although they lived many centuries apart, two of India's greatest rulers, Ashoka Maurya (302 -238 BCE) and the Mughal emperor Jamaluddin Muhammad Akbar (1542-1605 CE), both adopted a policy of tolerance to different religious groups in their kingdoms and personally espoused practices that would appeal to many of their subjects.

Ashoka, the grandson of Chandragupta Maurya, founder of the Maurya dynasty, was born in Pataliputra (today's Patna). He came to the throne in 270 BCE, perhaps following a struggle with his brothers for succession. During his 32-year reign, he expanded his empire to cover almost the entire subcontinent, including modern-day Pakistan and Afghanistan, and signed treaties with independent kingdoms in the south. In 262 BCE he conquered the kingdom of Kalinga (modern day Orissa) in a bloody war after which he regretted the suffering he had caused and renounced war. He wrote "A hundred and fifty thousand people were deported, a hundred thousand were killed, and many more died from other causes. . . . I felt deep remorse for the killing, death and deportation of the people." He also expressed the hope that his "sons and great-grandsons may not think they have to make new military conquests, or if they do, they should take pleasure in mercy and mild punishments and consider the victory of Dharma as the only true victory." [These and subsequent quotations can be found in Sen, Colleen Taylor. *Ashoka and the Maurya Dynasty*. London: Reaktion, 2023]

Following his death, his empire quickly fell apart and in 185 BCE the last Mauryan emperor was overthrown by his general Pushyamitra Shunga. The cause of this rapid decline has been disputed. Most likely Ashoka's successors lacked

his vision and ability to hold together an empire of such size and diversity, which would be a challenge for any ruler, especially in the absence of a well-trained national civil service.

Today Ashoka's legacy lives on in the Indian flag, which has the wheel of dharma at its center, and the official seal of India which features a statue of four lions at the top of a pillar at Sanchi in Madhya Pradesh. [Fig. 1] Ashoka has been praised as one of the world's greatest rulers by Jawaharlal Nehru, Amartya Sen, H.G. Wells, and many others not because of his conquests but because of his renunciation of conquest and his promulgation of his philosophy or moral code called dharma (Sanskrit Dharma, although it is different from the Hindu version.).

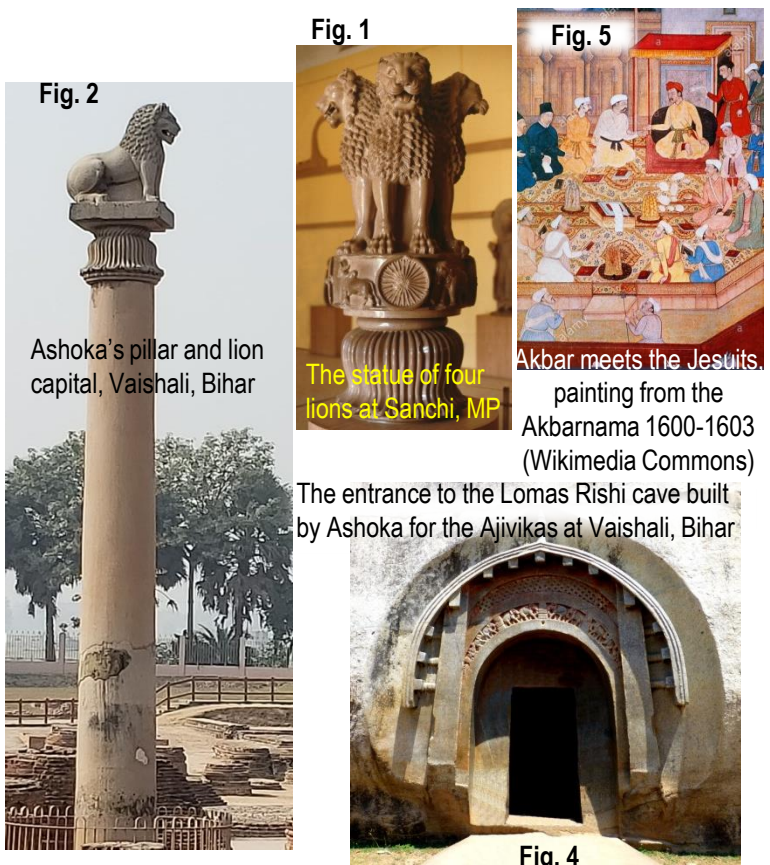


Fig. 2

Ashoka's pillar and lion capital, Vaishali, Bihar

Fig. 1

The statue of four lions at Sanchi, MP

Fig. 5

Akbar meets the Jesuits. painting from the Akbarnama 1600-1603 (Wikimedia Commons)

The entrance to the Lomas Rishi cave built by Ashoka for the Ajivikas at Vaishali, Bihar

Fig. 4

His purpose was to try to make his people live better, happier lives and to promote harmony in his kingdom. He defined and propagated this moral code on 150 inscriptions comprising more than thirty individual texts that were carved on stone pillars and large rocks throughout his empire. [Figs 2 and 3] (They are often called edicts, but this is a misnomer. Edicts are official orders issued by a monarch. Ashoka's inscriptions can better be described as recommendations or requests.) These inscriptions were read aloud by local officials since most people at the time were illiterate. These officials also spread his message to foreign countries, including Sri Lanka and the Greek territories to the north. The elements of Ashoka's dhamma include the following:

- Compassion and kindness to all living beings
- Abstention from killing animals during festivals and rituals
- Obedience to mother, father, and elders
- Courtesy and generosity to Brahmins and Sramanas (ascetic sects)
- Fair treatment of servants, slaves and the poor
- Generosity to friends, relatives and others
- Speaking the truth: "Satyamev Jayate" "truth always wins" (the official motto of India)
- Purity of thought
- Self-control and restraint of speech
- Honoring teachers
- Moderation in spending
- Avoidance of rituals and ceremonies
- Fair treatment of prisoners
- Tolerance of all religious communities

Promoting religious tolerance was extremely important because this was a time of great religious diversity. Hinduism by that name did not exist; religious practices, sometimes called Brahmanism, involved animal sacrifices administered by hereditary priests. At the same time wandering ascetics preached new doctrines which attracted followers and eventually coalesced into movements. The ones we know about were the Jains, who practiced extreme asceticism and preached nonviolence; the Buddhists, who advocated a more moderate "Middle Way;" the

Ajivikas, who believed in strict determinism, and the Charvakas, who rejected the Vedas and preached a philosophy of enjoying life. There are probably many others, who are lost in the tides of history. The Mauryan emperors supported different groups: At the end of his life, Chandragupta became a Jain, Bindusara supported the Ajivikas, while Ashoka, though a Buddhist, built caves for the Ajivikas where they lived during the rainy season. [Fig. 4]

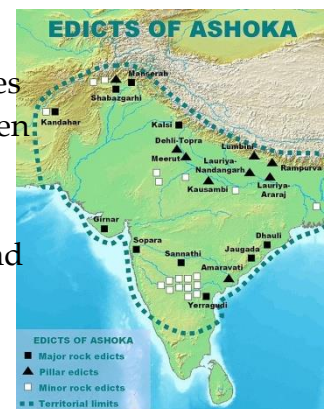
There were disputes among these different groups which Ashoka wanted to reconcile. In one of his inscriptions, he writes:

The King honors the ascetics and laypeople of all religious communities with gifts and various honors, but he does not consider this to be as important as promoting the essential doctrine of all religions. This can be done in many ways, but its root is to control one's own speech by not praising one's own religion or disparaging that of others on inappropriate occasions, or at least to do so with moderation.

By doing this, a person is promoting his own religion and another person's religion as well; he is increasing the influence of his own religion and benefitting that of others. Acting otherwise harms both one's own religion and that of others . . . Therefore, concord alone is commendable, so that people may hear about each other's principles and follow them. This is my wish: That all religions should be well informed and pure in doctrine and that their followers should be told 'The King does not consider gifts or honor to be as important as the promotion of the essential doctrines of all religions.

Although Ashoka sometimes holds out the promise of heaven to those who follow his recommendations, his descriptions of this afterlife and his references to deities are vague and made only in passing.

Ashoka's tolerance has its limits. Fig 2: Map showing Ashoka's inscriptions. (Wikimedia Commons)



He opposes certain festivals and ceremonies, especially those involving animal sacrifice. The following inscription can be found at several sites:

Here no living being is to be killed and sacrificed and no festivals are to be held. For I see much evil in festivals, although there are some I approve of. Formerly, in my kitchen, hundreds of thousands of animals were killed daily for meat but now, writing this inscription, only three animals are killed, two peacocks and one deer, and the deer not all the time. And even these three animals will not be killed in the future.

People conduct various ceremonies [samaja] during illnesses, at their children's weddings, at the birth of a son, and when setting out on a journey. Women especially perform many of these ceremonies, which are trivial and useless . . . The only ceremony that has great value is that of Dhamma. This includes the appropriate treatment of slaves and servants, respect for elders, kindness to animals and liberal donations to Sramanas and Brahmins.

His policy of kindness to animals was not new: The Jains and Buddhists had condemned Vedic sacrifices and to different degrees banned the eating of meat. Sacrifices were expensive and a burden on the farmers who had to donate their animals. Ashoka himself cut back his eating of meat, with the promise that he would entirely eliminate it from his diet. He abandoned hunting, the traditional sport of kings. He built hospitals for animals – another idea borrowed from the Jains – and supported the training of doctors in veterinary medicine. Today his wheel is on the logo of the Indian Veterinary Society.

We know from several inscriptions that Ashoka was a practising Buddhist. He made pilgrimages to Buddhist sites, erected a pillar erected at the Buddha's birthplace, Lumbini, and even sought to mediate a schism in the Buddhist community. But his message was not explicitly Buddhist. He never specifically mentioned Nirvana, the Four Noble Truths, or other key Buddhist concepts and advocated no particular religious creed or form worship. The eminent historian Romila Thapar writes: *[Ashoka] does not refer to [Dhamma] as the*

*teachings of the Buddha. It would seem that he was attempting to universalize a code focused on social ethics and on the accommodation of divine views. His Dhamma did not derive from divine inspiration, even if its observance promised heaven.* [Romila Thapar, 'Ashoka: A Retrospective', in *Reimagining Aśoka: Memory and History*, ed. Janice Leoshko and Himanshu Prabha Ray (New Delhi, 2012), p. 19.]

Perhaps the question of whether Ashoka was a Buddhist is irrelevant. There was no elaborate conversion ceremony in Buddhism equivalent, say, to Christian baptism. The boundaries between religions were fluid. Even the Brahmanical religion did not require a profession of faith, just an acceptance of Brahmanical authority and conformity to caste rules and regulations. Many of Ashoka's ideas, such as kindness to animals and abstention from meat, were 'in the air' at the time and shared by other religious communities.

Contrary to popular belief, there is no direct evidence that Ashoka sent Buddhist missionaries, including his son and daughter, to Sri Lanka and other countries. His inscriptions refer only to special officials who promoted his message of Dhamma. His children are mentioned only in the Sri Lankan Buddhist texts and may have reflected a desire on the part of the Sri Lanka kings to associate themselves with the mightiest ruler of the time and indirectly to the Buddha himself.

Nearly two millennia later the Mughal Emperor Akbar advocated the religious neutrality of the state. Babur, founder of the Mughal empire, and his son Humayun were practicing Sunni Muslims but were not hostile to the Shiites and as a child Akbar was exposed to Sunni and Shia doctrines. For the first twenty years of his reign Akbar remained an orthodox Sunni Muslim.

However, he adopted certain measures to reconcile his Hindu subjects to his reign. He removed the tax on Hindu pilgrims and the jizya or tax on non-Muslims. He also ended a ban on the construction of new non-Muslim temples.

To expand his empire, he formed an alliance with Raja Bihari Mal of Amber (now Jaipur) who offered his daughter in marriage as a way of strengthening their alliance. Akbar accepted the



offer and the Raja's' sons rose in Akbar's service. He adopted this policy with other Rajput chiefs who attained the highest ranks in his service as generals and governors without having to convert to Islam.

Akbar lacked a male heir, and in 1569 visited the Sufi hermit Chishti, who was living in the village of Sikri near Agra. Chishti predicted that Akbar's wish for an heir would be gratified with the birth of a son, who was born in Sikri later that year. According to some scholars, this brought him under the influence of Sufi doctrine. One aspect of Sufism was a belief in the transcendent unity of religions while understanding their unique differences. The grateful Akbar built a walled city and his palace here. It served as his capital from 1571 to 1585 but abandoned in 1610.

In 1575 Akbar built the Ibadat Khana (House of Worship) at Fatehpur Sikri to hold religious discussions. At first it was open only for Muslim sects but later he invited representatives of other religions and communities to take part in the discussions: Suni, Shia and Ismaili Muslims; different Sufi orders; Shaivites and Vaishnavs; the disciples of Kabir; Jains, Zoroastrians; and even Christians. When Akbar heard about the presence of Portuguese Jesuits in Goa, he summoned them to his court. They thought they were on the verge of the most spectacular conversion of all time, but their expectations were disappointed. However, he listened to the Jesuits on the evils of sati and later put restrictions on the practice. [Fig. 5] In the late 1570s Akbar commissioned a translation of the Mahabharata into Persian.

Akbar eventually found these debates futile, since they did not lead to better understanding among religions. He closed the Ibadat Khana and in 1582 ended the debates. He then developed an ideology that centered around his imperial person: Din i-Ilahi, which means Faith in God, although the term seems never to have been used by Akbar himself. There is no written treatise on the subject and there are a lot of conflicting interpretations about what it meant or whether it is a religion at all. There were no priests. It was a community of disciples who were both Hindu and Muslim and

were not expected to abandon their own religions. These disciples were divided into four classes depending on their degree of loyalty. This faith, however, was not for the masses. In fact, the only "converts" were the upper nobility of Akbar's court. Historians have so far been able to identify only 18 members of this new religion, including his closest minister Birbal. In an administrative regulation issued around 1584, Akbar does not refer to any favoured doctrine, instead simply ordering toleration of the religion (*kesh-o-din*) held by people on the ground that none could be sure who was right or wrong in matters of religion. There is no instruction at all to promote any particular beliefs, let alone Akbar's own. [Habib, Irfan. "Akbar and his search for spiritual truth." *Studies in History*. 2022 38 i:75-89]

Like Ashoka, Akbar also abandoned hunting and became a near vegetarian. His Prime Minister Abul Fazl writes: *His majesty cares very little for meat, and often expresses himself to that effect. It is indeed from ignorance and cruelty that, although various kinds of foods are obtainable, men are bent upon injuring living creatures and lending a ready hand in killing and eating them; none seems to have an eye for the beauty inherent in the prevention of cruelty but makes himself a tomb or animals. If his Majesty had not the burden of the world on his shoulders; he would at once totally abstain from meat; and now it is his intention to quit it by degrees, conforming, however, a little to the spirit of the age.* [Allami Abu'l Fazl, *A'in-i-Akbari*, trans. H. Blochmann (New Delhi, 1989), vol. 1, p. 64 ]

In conclusion, both Emperors ruled massive multicultural, multiethnic kingdoms with many religions and sects. They encouraged and preached tolerance among different groups but did not enforce it. They banned animal slaughter on certain days and limited their own meat consumption. Both gave up hunting. But it was not a question of influence: Ashoka's inscriptions were not translated until the mid-19th century, so Akbar knew nothing of him. We cannot know their motives, but these policies were likely motivated by a combination of personal conviction and political pragmatism.





## Episcopal Aerobics: How Anglicans Pray

Reverend Cara Wagner  
Pastor of St. John's Episcopal Church, Chicago

*This article is prepared based on the lecture that was delivered on April 27, 2024 at Home of Harmony*

The topic for today's talk is: Episcopal aerobics with a subtitle "Embodied Worship." In other words, one of the important things I would argue in Christian worship, but specifically in the Episcopal Anglican tradition, is the use of all the senses and the whole body. I thought it would be helpful, since this is a place that studies many paths and ways to connect with the Holy, that you might actually interject as I'm talking. I'm going to discuss different symbols and embodiments, and I have some familiarity with other religions, but not much. So I will invite you to think of examples from other religions that you might know.

I'm going to start with a very basic initiation rite that Christians use: baptism, which involves water. Water is a symbol in many faiths and has significant meaning in the Christian faith. Water is considered to be that which comes from God, a creation of God. It embodies life because it's necessary for survival, and all the different ways in which water is portrayed in the world carry symbolism in our faith. Water is seen as cleansing, necessary for life, and powerful. We can use it to generate power; it can erode, be poisoned, or be pure—there are many ways in which water is an essential part of our existence.

In the Christian faith, baptism by immersion in water symbolizes entrance into the community. I realize we have a guest, Swami; thank you for being here. Water is also used in our Eucharist, which is the celebration of communion where we use bread and wine. In everything that I will discuss—and I think this is true in other faiths—everything has a practical significance and a spiritual significance. Often the practical significance comes first; we need water to cleanse

our bodies, and then it becomes a symbol of cleansing the soul or mind.

We also use water in our worship because, in the ancient Middle East, wine was, of course, a way to have something wet to drink. By making it alcoholic, it killed germs. Wine was often thick and needed to be mixed with water, so you will see a priest adding some water to the wine, even though our wine is no longer in need of dilution, though it is often highly alcoholic to kill germs. Because we share a common cup, you will also often see the priest washing their hands before performing the rites. There's something that I say when that happens, which is a quote from the Jewish scriptures: "Let justice flow down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." So it's a symbol of our call for justice in the world.

Another time we use water in our worship is during one service out of the year, on the Thursday before we celebrate Easter, in which we reenact the story of Jesus having the Last Supper with his friends and then getting up from the table to wash their feet. He asks them, "What am I doing?" and they reply, "No, don't wash our feet." He says, "If I, your teacher, your rabbi, your guru, wash your feet, so must you do for others." So that is symbolic; we wash each other's feet on that night.

I have been to temples in Japan where you walk in and there is water to wash your face and hands. When you often go to a Muslim place of worship, you wash your feet and remove your shoes. Many places require us to remove our shoes in order to worship. Water has that primal importance in many religions. Does anyone want to share another way in which water is significant in a tradition that you know about, or one that I've



forgotten? Does anything come to mind?

Of course! I was just in India, where Gandhi, after his body was burned, had his ashes go into the seven holy rivers. So there's another example of water as an important element in religious life. In the Christian tradition, we baptize both babies and adults—children, probably babies more, but I think that's changing. But that is the entrance rite, the beginning of entrance into the community.

The second thing that happens when a baby is baptized is that they are given oil, the sign of a cross in oil. It's simple olive oil, but with a very expensive perfume, the essence of balsam wood—it's very costly. This chrism, this application of oil, has practical meaning: in a dry culture, after taking a bath, you need to apply moisturizer to preserve the moisture in your skin. That's the practical meaning. The theological, spiritual meaning is that baptism is a reminder that we are children of God and that nothing can take that away. We are sealed with the oil to show that the holiness is there and can't be washed away.

The baby is given the oil at baptism. We use oil as part of the senses, right? Water to drink, water to bathe, oil. We use oil when someone is sick. People can come forward to have oil applied to their heads, with hands placed on their heads, and prayers said in hopes of their healing. I want to make a note about Christian healing: it is not about a cure; it's not about a magical remedy. Do I believe miracles happen? Yes, but often when we're praying for healing, it is for the rebalancing and integration of body, mind, and soul. What we're praying for, as we know from Eastern medicine, Western medicine, and all forms of medicine, is that the body is connected. You can't just heal one part of the body; the spirit and soul also need to be integrated in that healing.

That oil is a symbol of healing, and we use oil in healing. We also use it in perfumes; it's also a symbol of wealth. Oil is expensive in many different cultures. All these things are precious. Another symbol of the oil is one of royalty, especially with the perfume mixed in. It is also used at the ordination of a priest, where the oil is

placed on the hands to remind the priests that their hands are for healing.

If anybody watched the enthronement of King Charles of England, they put oil on his hands as well. It is a symbol of kings, queens, and prophets. In the Jewish tradition, the prophets were anointed with oil as a symbol of their office. Finally, we use the oil when someone is dying. It's similar to the healing rites, but it's a last reminder of their preciousness in God's eyes and a sealing before death.

Can anyone think of other ways in which oil is significant?

Oh yes! So I can repeat the question. Yes, when you think about oil, it's also used for cooking. It encompasses many of the same things we talked about with water—cooking, eating. It is fuel; you can create light with it. It is, again, an essential part of who we are as humans. I think in our world we know that we have fought many wars over oil in one form, and we will probably fight wars over water in the future given the way the world is going. So yes, oil is a symbol of many things: power, energy, and light.

I'm trying to think of other ways in which I've seen oil used. I can't recall other religious examples, but that's excellent. In the Hindu tradition, oil is used for lamps, and they're often left burning. Oh, and of course, I'm forgetting—in the Christian tradition, when we bless the bread and wine, we place them near an oil lamp that burns perpetually to symbolize that the bread and wine are present. I was just thinking of the Jewish tradition; Hanukkah celebrates the miracle of oil lasting longer than it was supposed to.

So thank you for that, and please keep adding to this learning. The first Christian rite of initiation involves water and oil, and then the second very important Christian sacrament is the bread and wine. The communion that is blessed—the symbol of the bread and wine—represents things created by God and human hands. We don't just share wheat and grapes; it is the combination of God's gifts in the wheat and grapes, along with the effort of human hands in making the wine and the bread

that we offer. It's a symbol of how the world is meant to function.

In Christian theology, if we believe that God created the world and that it is a gift to us, we are to use it for the betterment of ourselves and others, not for exploitation. The bread and wine symbolize that when we work with God, good things happen, and people are fed. At St. John's, we buy the wine, but we make the bread. We say certain prayers over it, and there are four basic elements of communion: every communion must be offered, given, blessed, and the bread must be broken. This breaking symbolizes the brokenness of the world, as well as Jesus Christ's death, and it also represents humanity's brokenness.

Moreover, the bread must be shared, symbolizing that everyone receives a piece. In our tradition, babies, toddlers, children, and adults all receive communion. We welcome everyone to partake in communion, but we understand that we often have people of other faiths in our pews, and they are not obligated to come forward if they don't wish to. It's not important for someone who is Jewish or Hindu, for example, to receive communion, but they are welcome to if they choose.

This symbol carries a lot of meaning around the meal. One other significant aspect of this meal is that we don't throw away the extras. The wine is either saved to be brought to people who are sick and couldn't attend, consumed, or returned to the Earth. Sometimes you'll see breadcrumbs being thrown out of the window because they need to be returned to the Earth; they're not meant to go down the sewer. This practice symbolizes the abundance we have received from God: nothing is wasted, everyone is fed, and nothing is discarded.

When I was in India in February, we visited a Sikh temple where we took off our shoes and socks and covered our heads. We learned that this particular Sikh temple serves 30,000 people a day and 80,000 on Sundays during meals. The significance of this is tied to their rejection of the caste system; when you eat, you sit with anyone—similar to our communion idea. We also witnessed

scriptures being chanted, and then we were given a small ball of honey and wheat, which felt very much like communion because they placed it in your hand for you to eat. That's my most recent example of bread in a different context.

Of course, in the Jewish tradition, it's Passover right now, and they use unleavened bread for symbolic reasons. Can anyone think of other instances of bread and wine in other faiths?

Oh, yes! There's also *pām* in certain traditions, and what about consecrated food like fruit? Yes, and in Buddhism, you often see altars with offerings of food in front of them, right? Thank you all for contributing!

Those were some basic concepts I wanted to share, and now I'm really going to get into the aerobics aspect, but we've been touching on both symbolism and movement. In Christian worship, one of the foundational elements—something I know you're familiar with since I participated in a procession when this building was opened—is the importance of processions. We wear specific outfits and carry particular items during these processions.

One of my favorite traditions, though it has become less common in many Christian churches, occurs on certain days of the year, usually in the spring and fall, called rogation days. There is a tradition known as "beating the bounds," where the priest and the congregation walk to the edges of the parish, marking and blessing the boundary posts and areas surrounding the church. This serves as a way to express gratitude for the seasons and to bless the harvest and the workers in the fields. It's a lively procession to witness.

You might be more familiar with Palm Sunday, which takes place the week before Easter. This reenacts Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, where we wave palms. Different cultures have their unique ways of celebrating this. In many Roman Catholic countries, there are processions on Good Friday that may involve carrying a cross with a person on it, reenacting the crucifixion. During our own processions—whether just around the block or into our garden—you might see participants carrying

crosses, candles, and sometimes incense, which is common in many religious traditions.

In the Christian Church, as you all know, Christianity is relatively young compared to religions like Hinduism and Buddhism. I find it interesting how religious groups often distance themselves from one another, only to later rediscover certain practices. For a long time, in an effort to separate themselves from Roman traditions, many Christian churches avoided using incense, but it eventually returned with new meanings. Historically, I've been told that in the Middle Ages, when bathing was less frequent, incense helped clear the air in cathedrals. Now, it also symbolizes prayers rising to heaven and heightens our awareness of God.

Perhaps someone could share the significance of incense in Hinduism or other faiths. In Hinduism, one of the key elements is the connection to earth, air, water, and fire. Incense is an offering that symbolizes the air element as it rises toward a deity. Thank you for that insight.

In some Christian cultures, there are processions where statues of Mary, Jesus, or the Infant Jesus are carried. For instance, in Chicago, there is a significant procession for the Virgin of Guadalupe. Similarly, in Hinduism, statues are also carried in procession. This demonstrates how religious communities learn from one another, imitating and adapting practices to enhance their own understanding.

Processions are an important aspect of worship. In particular, Episcopalian traditions enjoy singing, and one thing you'll notice is that we often sing while walking. We take pride in being able to do this, as it requires balancing books while walking without tripping!

So, the second example of embodied worship is standing. I invite you to stand, if you're able, because standing allows us to learn and experience things differently; it helps us embody our actions in a new way. The earliest form of Christian prayer was to stand like this. What does this posture do? It opens your heart and sometimes encourages you to look up, right? We stand to praise God, to

sing—since you can sing better when your lungs aren't compressed—and to pray. Standing becomes a posture of awareness. I believe this holds true in many faith traditions: we tend to pay attention in a different way when we are standing.

Can anyone share other examples of official standing in worship? Yes, exactly! In the Russian Orthodox tradition, for instance, they don't have pews, so people can move around. Yes, in Orthodox services, standing is common, though you may choose to sit if you wish.

In some ways, I joke with my congregation that we do a lot of standing, sitting, and kneeling throughout the service—stand, sit, kneel, repeat! However, particularly during the prayer over the bread and wine, we all stand if we're able. For some parts, we can also kneel, but during the prayer, the priest holds her hands like this, and it's a longer prayer. I often joke that I'm paid to hold my hands like this, but really, everyone could adopt this posture because it's our prayer together.

Then there's sitting, which you're doing now. In our tradition, we sit to listen, as you are doing so attentively. We also sit to meditate. While Christian meditation is a relatively young practice compared to the ancient traditions of Hinduism, it dates back about 2,000 years in Christian worship. Meditation time is essential, although Americans often struggle with it due to a culture that emphasizes speed. With the advent of television and smart phones, we can lose the ability to take time for silence.

I want to emphasize this point: while it's important for individuals to sit in silence alone, there's also something profoundly powerful about sitting in silence together as a community. Our meditation can include singing, speaking, and chanting, as we see in many religious traditions. Chanting is simply an extended form of speech; I could sing this to illustrate how elongating the words transforms the experience. This practice is ancient and found in many cultures.

During my time in India, I experienced a lot of chanting, both with and without instrumentation. I've read that scientists are researching the effects



of singing and chanting, particularly how they can impact our well-being. One striking realization during the pandemic was how we worshiped on Zoom from our own rooms. Because of the nature of Zoom, everyone had to be muted to avoid a cacophony. However, I noticed that people were singing at home on their own, which made the experience much more engaging than simply watching.

Finally, let's talk about kneeling. In the Christian tradition, kneeling was originally intended for receiving communion at the altar rail, allowing worshipers to kneel and receive the bread and wine. We also have kneelers for prayers; however, we don't kneel as often as we used to, perhaps due to concerns about people's knees. But kneeling is still a part of our practice.

You might also notice the act of genuflecting, which is a fancy term for kneeling on one knee. This gesture is often performed when entering the worship space as a sign of reverence. Additionally, many people bow their heads, which I consider another form of kneeling — just a nod of respect.

In the Christian tradition, bowing serves a similar purpose to how we honor someone important when they enter a space. In early Christian worship, there were no priests; rather, someone would preside over the service, and this individual could change from week to week. The presider would have a designated seat, and worshipers would bow to recognize whoever was leading the service. This practice is somewhat akin to how Muslims often do not have a paid clergy; imams frequently hold other jobs. The concept of a paid professional religious leader is a more recent development in Christianity.

Bowing signifies acknowledgment of the service leader and serves as a sign of honor. Episcopalians, in particular, bow when a cross passes by because it symbolizes Jesus's death and resurrection. You'll notice that in a Christian worship service, whenever the name of Jesus Christ is mentioned, there is often a bow as well.

These small acts of recognition symbolize honor. During my time in India, I observed a constant

exchange of honor among people, a practice that is less common in the Christian and Western traditions, though some elements remain.

In summary, we have kneeling for prayer, bowing for reverence, and genuflecting toward the presider or the cross. Additionally, people bow to the area in the church where the bread and wine are reserved for the sick, often accompanied by an oil lamp—this is a gesture recognizing the holy presence in that space.

Christians typically express two perspectives on holiness: we acknowledge that God is present in this place, while also recognizing that God is everywhere. Our focus encompasses both; this dual awareness reminds us that God is present not only in the bread and wine but also throughout the world—and, as we understand, present in each other when we bow to one another.

Another important gesture related to kneeling and bowing is prostration, which I will demonstrate. This act is not performed every Sunday but is reserved for specific occasions, such as Good Friday when we remember Jesus's crucifixion. On this day, priests and others involved in the service lie prostrate as a sign of solemnity. Before I was ordained and had prayers chanted over me, I lay prostrate as well—this practice embodies a very ancient form of humility. Does anyone want to share examples from other religious traditions involving kneeling and bowing? Yes, I recall visiting the Muslim Community Center, where worshipers kneel at specific moments during prayer based on the words being recited. During my time in India, I also noticed that in both Sikh and Hindu temples, kneeling was a common practice.

Another symbol used in Christianity is crossing oneself. This gesture, which reflects the form of the cross, signifies Jesus's death and resurrection and is often performed when his name is mentioned. It has become customary for worshipers to dip their fingers in a bowl of water at the church entrance—either from a baptism or a smaller amount—to remember their baptism and to cross themselves as an act of honor.

There are various moments in the service when we cross ourselves, including when referencing Jesus's death and resurrection in the Creed. However, some of these practices have become less common over time.

Another important symbol in our worship occurs when we read the words and stories of Jesus. A special book is used for this purpose; while some scriptures are read from a podium, the words of Jesus are read from the center of the space, often accompanied by candles and a procession. When I say, "The Gospel according to Matthew," I make the sign of the cross over the book, on my forehead, my lips, and my heart. Others often do the same. This gesture signifies that these words should reside in our minds, be spoken by our lips, and dwell in our hearts.

These are some additional gestures of worship. Yes, on Ash Wednesday, we receive ashes on our foreheads as a reminder of our mortality. The palms we wave on Palm Sunday are saved because they are blessed; the following year, we burn them and use the ashes on our foreheads. It was somewhat ironic this year, as I was in India when Lent began on Ash Wednesday. Almost everywhere I went in India, I received a blessing with a little orange or red dot, which felt so joyful and welcoming. I tried to find ashes, but the Christian churches had inadequate websites, making it hard to locate one. Although there are only a small number of Christians in India, we did attend Christian worship services and sang during our visit.

Reflecting on that solemn day while experiencing such joy was an interesting contrast for me. While it's important to remember our mortality, the celebrations I encountered were a stark difference.

One aspect I haven't mentioned yet is dancing. It seems that Christians used to dance more until the tradition became more serious. When I was in college, I was part of a dance group that performed in Christian churches. Our leader had researched ancient Christian worship dancing, so we incorporated movements like five steps forward and two steps back as a way to enter the space. If you think of Sufi dancing, ecstatic dancing exists in many cultures and religions.

In Christian worship, dancing is usually

spontaneous and joyful, often not scripted. I believe we should incorporate more dancing into worship as it expresses the full range of human experience and is a deeply embodied practice.

To summarize, I've shared symbols of water and oil, bread and wine, light, and various movements such as processing, dancing, standing, sitting, kneeling, bowing, and crossing oneself. The two fundamental symbols of Christianity are baptism and the Eucharist (or communion). Other rituals also exist, such as marriage, which wasn't a formal practice in Christian churches until about a thousand years after Jesus.

In marriage ceremonies, the priest wears a stole as a symbol. It resembles a yoke that connects oxen, symbolizing a bond to both the community and God. When the couple holds hands, the stole is wrapped around their clasped hands, which is where the phrase "tying the knot" originated; it symbolizes Christian unity.

We also have rituals surrounding infant baptism. For those who are older and wish to choose to continue in the Christian faith their parents introduced them to, we have a practice called confirmation. This will be one of my roles as a bishop. Unlike priests, bishops symbolize the connection within the community. Bishops lay hands on those being confirmed in their faith, marking an adult acknowledgment of the path their parents chose and the desire to continue on that journey.

We have funeral rites that incorporate many of the same practices as in our other rituals. For instance, we often use water to symbolize baptism and include communion in the service. Traditionally, Christians were buried, but cremation has become much more common in recent years.

We don't have strict rules about when a funeral takes place. Generally, when someone is buried, it happens quickly; however, for a memorial service following cremation, we usually bring either the body in a coffin or the ashes into the church. This is done as a way to honor their continued presence in the community during the communion service.

Additionally, ordination is another significant rite, as it involves the consecration of deacons, priests, and bishops.



## BHAGAVATA (24): THE GREATEST GIFT

Swami Ishatmananda

We have learnt how the Supreme Being advised to churn the ocean to find Eternal Bliss, अमृत nectar.

Devas and ashuras both with the help of the Great God, discovered अमृत but that nectar was drunk only by Aditi's sons, Devas. They did not allow the Ditis sons Ashuras to drink nectar.

From then onwards devas and ashuras became archenemy. Sri Shuka Deva then gave the list of different मन्वन्तर (manvantara). At the end of four Yuga, the great seven rishis through their spiritual power re-discover Vedas – and revival of Sanatana Dharma happen.

At this time at the behest of Maha-Vishnu, the Manus (मनु) endowed with Self-Control would, in their respected time, set the dharma (different actions/ responsibilities) in motion.

Each period is known as Manvantara. In 8th book, 15<sup>th</sup> chapter, we find King Parikshit asking Sri Suka Deva, the narrator of Bhagavata about an incident that happened when the Lord Himself begged some land from a famous ashura king Bali - why? Please tell us, why? महत्कौतूहलं हि नः - we are greatly curious. Sri Sukha narrated the incident Bali, the grand son of Prahlada, the legendary devotee of Lord Vishnu, was himself a noble person. He was defeated by Indra but luckily got the shelter of a great spiritually powerful sage, an Acharya, teacher Shukracharya from the clan of Bhrgu.

Devas accepted Brihaspati as the teacher & guide. Hence, Shukracharya himself came to the Ashura camp and they received him with great honor. Under the teachings of Shukracharya, Bali became very powerful and taking his blessings attacked Indra, the king of gods.

Indra and other gods shout the advice of Brihaspati - but the teacher of the gods said – ओजस्विनं बलिं जेतुं न समर्थोऽस्ति कश्चन ।

भवद्विधो भवान्वापि वर्जयित्वेश्वरं हरिम् ।  
विजेष्यति न कोऽप्येनं ब्रह्मतेजःसमेधितम् ।  
नास्य शक्तः पुरः स्थातुं कृतान्तस्य यथा जनाः ॥ २९ ॥

*ojasvinam balim jetum na samartho 'sti kaścana  
bhavad-vidho bhavān vāpi varjayitveśvaram harim  
vijeṣyati na ko 'py enam brahma-tejah-samedhitam  
nāsya śaktaḥ puraḥ sthātum kṛtāntasya yathā janāḥ*  
O Indra, I know that the cause of the enhancement of power of your enemy is because of the blessings and guidance of Bhrgu, Bali's teacher Shukracharya is very powerful – he has many mystical power.

Hence, Neither you or any other celestials can stand before him. You better abandon heaven and hide until time returns. Bali's power will reduce when he will become egoistic.

Rishi Kashyap was neutral. He did not take any side.

In Devotional practices five moods are suggested - शान्त, दास्य, वातसल्य, मधुर, सख्य (Shanta, Dashya, Batsalya, Madhur, Shakhya). Shanta is the attitude of the Rishis. They are not perturbed because they know the truth of creation.

But Mothers are mothers.

One day when Kashyap came back to the cottage of Aditi the mother of Devas, he noticed the Aditi's face – there was sign of mental suffering. O Noble Lady, he asked, has anything adverse happened? You are the Mistress of my household. She is supposed to take care of three fold responsibilities of a home-maker: 1) Religious Merits; 2) Wealth; 3) Happiness.

Aditi then submitted her petition – O Lord, you are father of both devas and ashuras. But why my children are suffering – please do something to save them. Kashyap then sought refuge in Vasudeva, the Supreme Being. He then taught her the '(पयोव्रत) Paya-vrata' a system of austerity and also 'mantra' to invoke Maha-Vishnu.



In chapter 16 of book from verses 22-58 details description of 'Payo-Vrata' has been given.

In conclusion Rishi Kashyap said to his wife Aditi – listen Four qualities that make the Great God very pleased, तप, Austerity, दान, Charity, व्रत, Ritual, यज्ञ, Sacrifice.

Though mother of gods, but like a true mother She also was ready to do anything for the happiness of her children. Aditi practiced austerity for 12 days as taught by her husband and teacher Kashyap and finally – BG 8/17/4

तस्याः प्रादुरभूतात् भगवानादिपुरुषः ।

पीतवासाश्चतुर्बाहुः शङ्खचक्रगदाधरः ॥ ८/ १७/ ४ ॥

tasyāḥ prādurabhūt tāta

bhagavān ādi-puruṣaḥ

pīta-vāsāś catur-bāhuḥ

śaṅkha-cakra-gadā-dharaḥ

There appeared the Lord, the Origin of all, in yellow cloth, having 4 arms holding the Conch – the symbol of calling the devotees.

Discus – the symbol of Circle of Creation

Lotus – the symbol of Devotion

Mace – the symbol of Punishment

Mother Aditi started trembling with emotion seeing the Supreme Being in front of her, O Mother of the celestials, I am pleased with your faith and devotion – (8/17/18)

स्वांशेन पुत्रत्वमुपेत्य ते सुतान्

गोप्तास्मि मारीचतपस्यधिष्ठितः ॥ ८/ १७/ १८ ॥

svāṁśena putratvam upetya te sutān

goptāsmi mārīca-tapasy adhiṣṭhitaḥ

I shall be born, a part of mine, as your son to protect your children. You should not reveal these matters to others even if questioned.

Matters of divine significance have to be protected from publicity, if they are to fructify. Rishi Kashyap also in his meditation realized that Lord will be adventing as his son. Bhagavat describe the birth of the Supreme Lord but mysteriously He took the form of a dwarf (वामन).

In the meantime the king of Ashuras began to give in charity whatever a seeker may pray. The best way to achieve spiritual merit is दानम् - Charity. In the Gita, Lord Sri Krishna also praised some activities and instructed not to give up – यज्ञ, दान, तप ।

Charity should be done according to one's capacity and also – श्रद्धा देयम् । अश्रद्धयाऽदेयम् । श्रिया देयम् । ह्रिया देयम् । भिया देयम् । संविदा देयम् ।

An offering should be made with honor; the offering should not be made with dishonor. The offering should be made according to one's prosperity. The offering should be made with modesty. The offering should be made with awe. The offering should be made in a friendly way. The wonderful child Brahmana appeared in the hall of Bali and when asked said – O King, त्रीणि पदान्येव वृणे - A land that I can cover with my three steps.

King Bali could not believe his ear – O holy Brahmana, You want only three steps? The teacher of the Ashuras, Shukracharya, understood that Dwarf Brahmana was none other than Vishnu, “मया मनवक हरिः” Sri Hari, the great Lord Vishnu has taken the human form through His power of maya. O son of Virochana, this is Lord Vishnu do not keep your promise – Only by Truth you can not survive. In this worldly life you can say untruth, false – it is prescribed –

- 1) To please the wife
- 2) To finalize the marriage
- 3) To save one's livelihood
- 4) To save one from Death
- 5) To save another from trouble

Hearing the words of the teacher King Vali said, O Lord, I the grandson of the great king and devotee Prahlada cannot behave like a cheat and refuse the Brahmana. King Vali's wife Queen Vindyavali also washed the feet of the Lord Vishnu in the form of dwarf Brahmana.



## Introduction to the Cover Page Another Tale of Two Mountains

*Pravrajika Matriprana*  
Sarada Convent  
Vedanta Society of Southern California

This story must begin with an acknowledgment of gratitude. It should start with a recognition of the debt owed to those from whom the cover photos are sourced. The photo of Mount Annapurna is adopted from Wikipedia, while the Mount Kailash image is from tibettravel.org.

The words "taking," "accepting," and "adopting" may overlap, but they have distinct meanings. "Taking" generally implies grabbing or receiving something, often with a sense of control or ownership. It can refer to a physical object or an abstract one (like an idea). "Accepting" involves acknowledging or agreeing to something that is offered or presented, typically with a sense of willingness or approval, such as accepting a gift or an idea, but it does not necessarily imply ownership. These photos on the cover are accepted with acknowledgment. "Adopting" can also be used, as it refers to the act of choosing to take something on as one's own, often involving a deeper commitment. Readers are welcome to explore both the content of the photos and the deeper significance of the words.

According to Hindu mythology, Mount Kailash is renowned as the abode of Lord Shiva, the all-auspicious one. Devotees of Shiva often see their Lord through the natural outline of the mountain. Mother Annapurna is the bestower of food and the power to express total existence. Existence is manifest because it is there; they are one and the same, and none can be neglected. According to the *Linga Purana*, the story goes like this: Once, there was an argument between Shiva and his power Divine Mother Parvati about food. Shiva claimed all materialistic needs are nothing but illusion. Divine Mother left the place and there was a great famine worldwide. Even Shiva's own city, Kashi, ran out of food. To save the lives of all created beings, Shiva approached Annapurna, a form of

Parvati, and accepted alms from her. As Brahman, Shiva might have outgrown hunger; but his followers had not. This act established the glory of the immanent form of Shiva.

This simple story of materialistic acceptance illustrates how timeless existence is manifested through love. This love represents an eternal narrative of acceptance — a story of becoming Shiva as a *jīva*, or realizing Brahman identity while remaining in personal identity. In the words of Sri Ramakrishna, it is a journey from *kānchā āmi* (unripe I) to *pākā āmi* (ripe I).

When Shiva — the Lord of the universe, the eternal renunciate — approaches Mother Annapurna with a begging bowl, accepting her offerings, there is no feeling of belittlement or greed; it is total self-surrender. Self-surrender is the goal of all spiritual practices, beginning with *aparigraha*, or non-acceptance.

*Aparigraha* is a mandatory habit that one must develop at the outset of Patanjali's yoga practices. The practice of non-acceptance often leads to confusion in day-to-day transactions: What should I do — accept or not?

However, this confusion ought not to occur. Since the spiritual journey is closely tied to internal transformation, one must check the purpose of acceptance. It is essential to be alert to this purpose. Spiritual aspirants should shun any acceptance that merely satisfies worldly desires and instigates greed. On the other hand, accepting things that benefit others transforms into spiritual practice itself. Shiva came to Annapurna for the benefit of others. In recent history, Swami Vivekananda reached out to American women for the material upliftment of Indian society, filling his own begging bowl.

Swami Vivekananda expressed his admiration and gratefulness for American women in a letter

written to the Maharaja of Khetri of Rajasthan in 1894: *"American women! A hundred lives would not be sufficient to pay my deep debt of gratitude to you! Last year I came to this country in summer, a wandering preacher of a far distant country, without name, fame, wealth, or learning to recommend me — friendless, helpless, almost in a state of destitution; and American women befriended me, gave me shelter and food, took me to their homes, and treated me as their own son, their own brother. They stood as my friends even when their own priests were trying to persuade them to give up the 'dangerous heathen' — even when, day after day, their best friends had told them not to stand by this 'unknown foreigner, maybe of dangerous character.' But they are better judges of character and soul — for it is the pure mirror that catches the reflection."*

Adi Shankaracharya composed this story of accepting alms from Annapurna in musical verses in Sanskrit. At the end he prayed to the Divine Mother *jñāna, vairāgyam, siddhartham, bhikṣām dehi me pārvati* that is, please grant me the alms of your grace, to awaken within me spiritual knowledge and freedom from all worldly desires.

Indeed, one of the founding pillars of the Ramakrishna Vedanta philosophy is the concept of acceptance. All inclusiveness. He stands for any faith, that leads to the ultimate realization. His proclamation is, *As many faiths, so many paths*. The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna records, during his conversation with devotees how the Master announced his acceptance of Advaita, qualified Advaita, the path of Knowledge and the path of devotion in one shot. The Master said, *"But for my part I accept everything: Turiya and also the three states of waking, dream; and deep sleep. I accept all three states. I accept all- Brahman and also maya, the universe, and its living beings. If I accepted less I should not get the full weight."* He clarifies further, *"Brahman is qualified by the universe and its living beings. At the beginning, while following the method of 'Not this, not this', one has to eliminate the universe and its living beings. But as long as 'I-consciousness' remains, one cannot but feel that it is God Himself who has become everything. He alone has become the twenty-four cosmic principles.*

*"When a man speaks of the essential part of the bell-fruit, he means its flesh only, and not the seeds and*

*shell. But if he wants to speak of the total weight of the fruit, it will not do for him to weigh only the flesh. He must accept the whole thing: seeds and shell and flesh. Seeds and shell and flesh belong to one and the same fruit.*

*"The Nitya and the Lila belong to the same Reality. Therefore I accept everything, the Relative as well as the Absolute. I don't explain away the world as maya. Were I to do that I should get short weight."*

*'The jnanis regard everything as illusory, like a dream; but the bhaktas accept all the states. The milk flows only in dribblets from the Jnani. (All laugh.) There are some cows that pick and choose their fodder; hence their milk flows only in dribblets. But cows that don't discriminate so much, and eat whatever they get, give milk in torrents. A superior devotee of God accepts both the Absolute and the Relative; therefore he is able to enjoy the Divine even when his mind comes down from the Absolute. Such a devotee is like the cows that give milk in torrents.'* (All laugh.) Jokingly one of the devotees raised the point, *"But the milk of a cow that eats without discrimination smells a little."* The Master agreed smilingly and continued, *"That's true, no doubt: Therefore that milk should be boiled. One should boil such milk over the fire a little while; there will be no smell whatever if you boil the milk over the fire of Knowledge. (All laugh.)"*

Years later, Swami Vivekananda, the chief disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, introduced himself at the Parliament of the World's Religion by saying, *"I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance."*

This all-encompassing acceptance has special characteristics as well. It involves not only embracing the good but also having the peaceful willingness to accept the unprofitable aspects at a personal level. According to Hindu mythology, during the churning of the ocean, the poison emerged before the nectar. The very presence of this deadly poison troubled all of creation. No god, goddess, human, or demon stepped forward — only Lord Shiva. He alone accepted the bowl of poison with the same love he showed when accepting food from the Divine Mother.

This loving acceptance is a motherly quality. In the life of Sri Sarada Devi this characteristics came out again and again. Even if someone had fallen,



she was aware, “*Suppose one of my children has smeared himself with dirt. It is I, and no one else, who shall have to wash him clean and take him in my arms.*” This complete acceptance transcended her from being an ordinary wife of a spiritual teacher to becoming the universal Mother—a compassionate Mother. Compassion is nothing more than responding with kindness rather than judgment.

Swami Madhavananda, a direct disciple of Sri Sarada Devi, once listened to a Swami who was complaining about some newcomer monastics. In the latter's opinion, the Order should be more judgmental before accepting someone as a monastic member. Like Guru, like disciple, Swami Madhavananda replied, who is he to judge? Mother accepted him without judging; otherwise, is he virtuous enough to seek shelter at her lotus feet?

It is important to remember that Sri Sarada Devi was an embodiment of power. That is why she is capable of washing away all vices. However, for a beginner on the spiritual path, the scriptures recommend a bee-like behavior in the context of acceptance. An ordinary fly goes for both filth and flowers, but bees accept only honey — nothing else. While it is true that ultimately everything will be realized as one and the same, it is essential to recognize that the starting point and the end point are not the same for an aspirant. One practical way to achieve this is to accept through the five organs of perception only as much as the five organs of action can help one progress spiritually and transcend the limitations of the body-mind complex. This is why, in every religion, acceptance is seen as a mode of spiritual practice, with common element found in various traditions.

The acceptance of *prasad*, or consecrated food, is done with reverence and gratitude, embodying the idea of receiving divine grace. Acceptance of spiritual knowledge from teachers is also crucial; a qualified teacher helps the student realize the ultimate Truth. According to Hinduism, devotion cannot be attained through worldly actions but comes as Divine grace, which a devotee must accept through self-surrender. Acceptance of charity is permitted in all religions, but its unethical use is prohibited.

Similar to Hinduism, Buddhist philosophy emphasizes that *dukkha* (suffering) and *tanha* (desire) are closely linked, and it also places utmost importance on *aparigraha*, which is a major spiritual practice. *Aparigraha* involves non-taking or non-possessiveness; it requires consciously choosing not to accumulate excess and not becoming attached to material possessions. It is about moderating one's desires and being content with what one has to prevent further attachment or suffering.

In general, according to Eastern religions, by accepting change and the impermanent nature of life, practitioners learn to let go of attachments and expectations, thereby reducing suffering. Acceptance involves non-resistance, which in turn allows for a deeper understanding of experiences without judgment. Acceptance means trusting the flow of life and recognizing that not everything is within our control. It is not just a meditative practice but should be extended to everyday interactions and experiences, promoting a sense of peace and equanimity.

Especially in Zen Buddhism, acceptance serves as a profound spiritual practice. By embracing acceptance, Zen practitioners find a pathway to deeper understanding, compassion, and ultimately, liberation from suffering. Acceptance encourages fully experiencing each moment, allowing feelings and thoughts to arise without clinging to or rejecting them. The practice of mindfulness is the key technique that helps cultivate awareness of the present moment. Mindfulness requires psychological stability. If that stability is compromised due to any unwelcome conditions, the process of acceptance can become a lengthy practice.

There are at least five steps to reach a state of acceptance. First comes denial. In this initial stage, individuals try to avoid acknowledging what has happened. Next comes anger. As denial fades, feelings of frustration, confusion, or anger can emerge. Gradually, they attempt to regain control by negotiating or making deals, often focusing on what could have been done differently. This is the state of bargaining, marked by “what if” ideas. The darkest phase comes just before the sunrise,

which is the phase of depression. As reality sets in, individuals may experience profound sadness or despair. This phase involves processing loss and can feel overwhelming, leading to withdrawal and reflection. Finally, acceptance occurs. Acceptance does not mean that the loss or change is alright; rather, it signifies that individuals can acknowledge it and begin to move forward, integrating the experience into their lives.

These phases can vary widely in duration and intensity, and individuals may cycle back and forth between stages rather than moving through them linearly. The process is deeply personal and can lead to growth and understanding over time.

Acceptance holds a significant position in all three Abrahamic religions — Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. There is a fiction titled “A Tale of Two Mountains” that explores the scopes of law and grace, fear and love, and obligation and relationship, inviting readers to reflect on their own spiritual journeys and the balance between these two dimensions of faith. The mountains are Sinai, associated with Moses, and Zion, linked to Christ — the Old and New Testaments, or the Ten Commandments and the teachings of Jesus. The two mountains serve as powerful symbols of the complexities of belief and the transformative nature of spiritual experience in that tale. Each tradition emphasizes acceptance in the context of trust in God — accepting God's will even in difficult times. Recognizing the good and cultivating gratitude can make acceptance of one's circumstances easier.

Christianity encourages the acceptance of “poverty” as one of the vows for those interested in embracing monastic life. This is similar to the practice of *aparigraha* in the sense of non-hoarding. However, the goal emphasizes acceptance through the lens of grace and forgiveness. The teachings of Jesus focus on accepting others, including enemies, and embracing God's unconditional love. The concept of surrendering to God's will is central, encouraging believers to accept their lives as part of a greater divine plan. This is often reflected in prayer and meditation, where individuals seek to align their will with God's.

In Islam, acceptance is embodied in patience and perseverance in the face of adversity. The practice of submission to God is a central theme in Islam — the word itself means “submission.” This fosters a sense of peace and acceptance of life's trials as part of a larger purpose.

The cover of this issue contains the images of Mounts Annapurna and Kailash and the story started with Mother Annapurna and Lord Shiva. Just as a trivia note, both are of very high altitude—Annapurna at 26,545 ft and Kailash at 21,778 ft. Hikers claim that, in terms of difficulty, reaching the peak of Annapurna is second only to Mount Everest, the highest peak in the world. Yet, many hikers have climbed Mount Annapurna, while to date, none have reached the top of Kailash. Perhaps Mother Nature's message is: the glory of the giver is undoubtedly higher, but those who see acceptance as a spiritual practice become insurmountable.

Through this practice of acceptance, one can be transformed into a Buddha in calmness, a Jesus in forgiveness, a Sri Ramakrishna in renunciation, a Sarada Devi in compassion, or a Swami Vivekananda in knowledge. It begins with the humble acceptance of material objects, then progresses to the grateful acceptance of ideas and the submissive acceptance of ideals, continuing until one becomes infinite — endless.

This is same as Rabindranath Tagore's unique realization expressed in the very first song of the *Gitanjali* (Song Offerings). This book is a collection of prose translations made by the author from the original Bengali:

*THOU hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure.  
This frail vessel thou emptiest again and again, and  
fillest it ever with fresh life.*

*This little flute of a reed thou hast carried over  
hills and dales, and hast breathed through it melodies  
eternally new.*

*At the immortal touch of thy hands my little heart  
loses its limits in joy and gives birth to utterance  
ineffable.*

*Thy infinite gifts come to me only on these very  
small hands of mine. Ages pass, and still thou pourest,  
and still there is room to fill.*

## Advertisements

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

Ramakrishna-Vivekananda & Vedanta Literature available

Order can be placed online: <http://www.vedantabooks.com/>

**Eternal Literature** : The Vedas, Bhagavad Gita, Bhagavatam, Brahma Sutra, Upanishads in original Sanskrit with English translations. The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vedanta scriptures, Sanskrit texts.



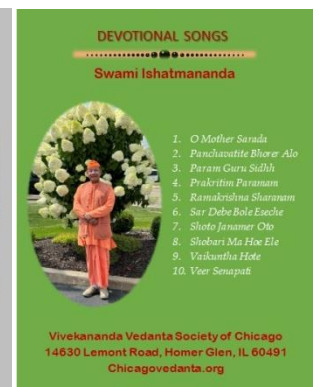
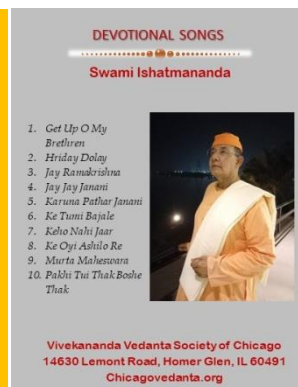
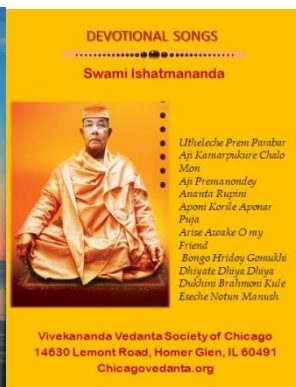
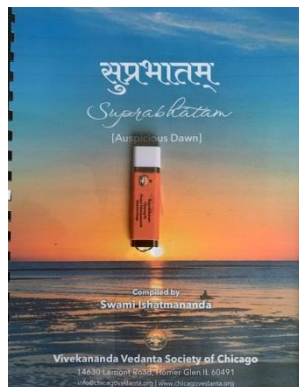
### Bookshop Hours:

**Homer Glen** (14630 Lemont Road, Homer Glen, IL 60491) : Daily from 9 am to 7 pm.

**Home of Harmony** (3801 N Keeler Ave., Irving Park, Chicago, IL 60641) : Saturday & Sunday 9 am to 7 pm & by appointment.

**Vivekananda Retreat** (6723, 122nd Ave, Ganges, MI 49408) : Daily from 9 am to 7 pm.

**New Arrivals:**  
Daily prayer  
"Suprabhatam"  
and  
Devotional Songs  
Booklet & USB  
By Swami  
Ishatmananda



Read  
Offline!

'Chicago Calling'

A Quarterly eZine of Vivekananda Vedanta Society of Chicago  
Printed copies of eZine are available from VVSC bookstore.

Read  
Online!

[eZine@chicagovedanta.org](mailto:eZine@chicagovedanta.org)