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EDITORIAL

Dukkham

The Indian systems of philosophy demonstrate by reasoning what a person ought to do in order to free himself/ herself completely from dukkham – suffering. Cessation of complete suffering. आत्यन्तिक दुःख नवृत्ति, This is also known as highest value of human life – Parama – purusartha, or mukti, or moksha, or liberation is, “the most precious jewel of Indian faith”.

All Indian schools of thought except the Carvaka, accept the theory of karma and rebirth. Karma is the cause of bondage, i.e. dukkham. Again, karma is the cause of liberation, mukti, Bliss. That is the reasons all Indian philosophies have discussed about dukkham, the barriers on the path to liberation.

Carvaka or Lokayata school, the origin of which can be traced back to the days of the Rig Veda do not believe in moksa. Using vitanda-vada, destructive criticism they try to prove – this body is the self hence everything to satisfy the body. They believe that artha (money) and kama (desire) should be the goal of human life. The chief aim of the materialists is pleasure. Pleasure is the sole aim of life. About the suffering, dukkham, Carvakas argument is – “As a non-vegetarian rejects the bones and enjoys the flesh, or as a vegetarian eschews the husk and then relishes the kernel, so should one grab at the pleasures of life and avoid its inevitable pains”.

By following the philosophy of the Carvakas, one is much more likely to face various kinds of suffering.

Dukkham, according to **Nyaya – Vaishesika** schools of Indian philosophy.

These schools believe, Sukha, happiness is the supreme goal of human life and the reach to the goal, Sukha, one should practice Dharma.

By Dharma they mean right action. Action or karma is performed by three different ways – manasika – done mentally,



vachika – by word of mouth, and sharirika – performed through body.

These actions produce merit and demerit samskaras (traces).

To go beyond dukkha, one must be very careful of his/ her actions.

Nyaya – Vaishesika identified twenty one (21) varieties of dukkha or pain – Body, Eye, Ear, Nose, Skin, Tongue, Mind with Form, Sound, Odor, Touch, Taste, also six cognitions – (the mental process of thinking, learning, remembering, discriminating, alertness and judgment – and the objects, pleasure and pain). All together 21.

Pleasure is also considered a type of pain like, honey – mixed with poison. Some are of opinion that Buddhist’s sarvam dukkham has come from the conception of Nyaya-Vaishesika.

Dukkham – according to **Samkhya and Yoga** schools. Samkhya philosophy advocate two existences for creation – Purusha and Prakriti.

Prakriti binds Purusha with seven ropes, so to say, and they are Weakness, Vice, Ignorance, Power, Passion, Dispassion and Virtue.

According to Samkhya philosophy Dukkha are three types. These 3-fold sufferings are – Adhyatmika = arising from the psychological nature of a person.

Adhibhautika = arising out of external worlds around the person.

Adhidaivika = arising from nature.

Yoga philosophy also, like Samkhya, accept three types of dukkha.

Yoga sutra also speak about five reasons of suffering pancha-klesha.

अविद्या अस्मिता राग द्वेष अभिनिवेशः

(Avidya) (Asmita) (Raga) (Dweshya) (Avinivesha)

Avidya -- The root of all dukkha.

Yoga Bhasya (2/15) points out that all pleasure born of sense objects end in bitter disillusionment and grief.

Duhkham: According to **Buddhist concept**

Buddhism emphasizes the misery (dukkha) of life but by the word 'dukkha' they mean a more comprehensive concept than that of suffering, sorrow etc.

'Anicca' (अनित्य) or impermanence of this world is the cause of dukkha. Hence, Buddhism suggests give up everything that is temporary and create dukkha and be free from suffering.

Duhkham: According to **Jainism**

In Jainism, 'mithyatva' or false or 'avidya' wrong notion indicate the root cause of human suffering. There are other four conditions promoting bondage. They are: avirati or non-abstinence, 'Pramada' or inertia, 'Kasaya' or Passions and 'Yoga' or Activity.

Duhkham – according to **Purvamimamsa**

Purvamimamsa a school pursue the ideal of dharma, and not moksha. A person is supposed to act according to the injunctions of the Veda and accumulate dharma. And by that way reach the supreme goal which is 'svarga' (heaven).

Duhkham, may be considered the three fetters which come on the way to reach svarga –

1. Prapancha – the world, binds people to the

physical body which experiences the pleasures and pains.

2. Sense-organs - which binds beings with the sense objects. And,

3. Objective world, which itself stands as a barrier to reach the goal, that is Svargha.

Duhkham: According to **Vedanta or Uttarmimamsa**

The world with its multiplicity, the scene of life, its bondage, suffering, and liberation falls within the boundless realm of maya – the sole cause of all dukkham, sufferings. Adi Shankaracharya used maya, avidya, ajnana, and mithyajnana as synonyms.

According to Advaita Vedanta there is only one existence and not Two – एकम् एव अद्वितीयम् । According to this statement – Jiva, the individual Soul and Brahman are essentially one and the same. If that is so, why discussing about dukkham or suffering? Whose suffering?

In reply Advaita Vedanta say, if it is true Jiva and Brahman are one and the same. But due to the influence of Maya, the unexplainable power of Brahman, the jivas are overpowered and think themselves as bound, limited and suffering beings.

This suffering, like Samkhya, comes from three places – adhidaivika, adhibhautika, and adhyatmika.

By constantly judging, discriminating between the Real or permanent and un-real or impermanent one can realize the Brahman – the unchanging, ever present, all pervading, Absolute. Then and then only dukkham can be overcome.



“Always do your duty to others, but love you must give to God alone. Worldly love always brings in its wake untold misery. If you love any human being you will have to suffer for it.

That person is blessed, indeed, who can love God alone.

There is no suffering in loving God.

Everything will come in time, my child. Be devoted to Him and take shelter at his feet. It is enough to remember that there is Someone — call him Father or Mother — who is always protecting you.”

-- Sri Ma Sarada Devi

Vedantic Monasticism: Nuns in the USA

Pravrajika Virajaprana

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This article is prepared based on the lecture that was delivered on October 19, 2024 at the Home of Harmony



To talk about Vedantic monasticism in the US, we have to back up and begin with Swami Vivekananda. Swamiji fully recognized and supported women's equal rights to spirituality and in particular to women living a monastic life. To this end he felt that the women in India could be uplifted if Holy Mother was upheld as the ideal for Indian women. He was anxious for a monastic order for women to be created with Holy Mother as its inspiration. In 1894 he wrote a fiery letter from the US to his brother monks addressed to Swami Shivananda wherein he said: "You have not understood the wonderful significance of Mother's life—none of you. But gradually you will know. Without shakti [power] there is no regeneration for the world. . . . Mother has been born to revive that wonderful shakti in India; and making her the nucleus, once more will Gargis and Maitreyis be born into the world. . . . Hence it is her Math [convent] that I want first. . . . I am coming to understand things clearer every day; my insight is opening out more and more. Hence we must first build a Math for Mother. First Mother and Mother's daughters, then Father and Father's sons."

Again he said: "With Holy Mother as the centre of inspiration, a Math is to be established on the eastern bank of the Ganges. As brahmacharins and sadhus will be trained in this Math [Belur Math], so in the other Math also brahmacharinis and sadhvis will be trained." Obviously this was very

important to Swamiji; he even gave considerable thought to the details.

Any opposition to this inspired idea of Swamiji was merely dismissed. When he returned to India in 1897, he said in an interview with Prabuddha Bharata, "Sannyasa is recognized in the Vedas without making any distinction between men and women." Warming to the topic he added, "Do you remember how Yajnavalkya was questioned at the court of King Janaka? His principal examiner was Vacaknavi, the maiden orator . . . Her gender is not even commented upon. Again, could anything be more complete than the equality of boys and girls in our old forest universities?"

Repeatedly Swamiji defended women's position. However, in spite of his ardent wish, a women's math or convent could not be fulfilled during his lifetime. But he sowed the seeds for the future. When the first convent associated with the Ramakrishna Order finally took shape, it was on the fertile soil of America. This does seem fitting given that Swamiji had such a high opinion of American women and their capabilities and love of freedom.

Although Swamiji did not start any convent, he encouraged several of his women disciples to lead the life of renunciation. He gave sannyasa to a French woman named Mlle. Marie Louise in 1895 at Thousand Island Park in New York, giving her the name Swami Abhayananda. His sole sannyasini was not of much use to his work, but she was the beginning of much more to come in future. He gave the vows of brahmacharya to Sister Christine and to Sister Nivedita, both of whom were of immense value to him and his work

and may be said “to have cleared the way for future Vedanta convents.” Brahmacharini Yatimata (Miss Sara Waldo) another of Swamiji’s monastic disciples, performed invaluable service to Swamiji and to all of us Vedantins through her expert editing of his lectures and her notes taken at Thousand Island Park which have come down to us as “Inspired Talks.”

Some of his brother disciples inspired Western women to lead lives of renunciation and for the greater good. Swami Abhedananda gave monastic vows to at least one woman devotee in New York. In addition, Swami Ramakrishnananda greatly encouraged Laura Glenn, later Sister Devamata, to live the life of a nun. Eventually, she took monastic vows along with eight other women from Swami Paramananda in Boston. Swami Paramananda was one of Swamiji’s disciples.

However, it was Swami Trigunatita who was responsible for the first convent in the West in 1908. When he was in charge of the Vedanta Society of San Francisco, some women devotees requested his permission to live in a separate facility dedicated to a monastic life of intense spiritual practices. Swami Trigunatita approved and set up guidelines based on those he had established for the monastery. A house was rented across the street from the Old Temple and the women moved in (it’s still there). Since there were no separate funds available to support them, they had to work. Though all were sincere seekers, for various reasons the convent had to disband four years later in 1912 after a heroic effort. However, a convent started by a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna is a great blessing whose effect is powerful, bearing fruit years later not only in San Francisco and Hollywood, but in other American cities as well.

Since Swami Trigunatita’s time, several groups of women began living together dedicated to the ideal of renunciation and the lives and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother and Swami Vivekananda. Many of the women worked to support themselves, but in all other ways lived the

life of a nun. The two convents that later were established in Southern California Hollywood/Santa Barbara and San Francisco/San Rafael in Northern California were the results of these communities.

Swami Prabhavananda founded the Vedanta Society of Southern California in Hollywood in 1930. A group of women began living at the Vedanta Society in the late 30s in the home of Sister Lalita, Carrie Mead Wyckoff, a disciple of Swami Turiyananda and one of the Mead sisters who had hosted Swami Vivekananda in South Pasadena.

The first nun came in 1941 and moved into Sister Lalita’s house with the other women. Two years later the future Pravrajika Baradaprana joined. Baradaprana was an unusually gifted musician who adapted many verses of the Bhagavad Gita to beautiful music for the choir; she was also a good tabla player accompanying the choir every evening during arati. She also learned ritualistic worship from one of the main pujaris of Belur Math. For many years she performed both ten and sixteen-item pujas in Santa Barbara and also taught the pujas to the junior nuns. About convent living, Baradaprana once smilingly told a younger nun, “The first fifty years are the hardest.”

In 1946 Belur Math granted permission to Swami Prabhavananda to establish both a monastery and a convent, and empowered him to give the vows of brahmacharya, preliminary monastic vows. In the Vedanta Society of Southern California archives the official acceptance of the women by the Ramakrishna Order is documented in a letter. The May 10, 1946, letter signed by the then-General Secretary, Swami Madhavananda said: that the monastic workers of the Order in the U.S.A. should be accepted and that Swami Prabhavananda be permitted to start a monastery and a convent. This is the first time that a convent in any part of the world was officially authorized by the Ramakrishna Order.

Included in this correspondence was the Ramakrishna’s Math’s “Scheme for Western People

Desiring to Join the Ramakrishna Order," which contained the noble objective to be achieved, the goal of human life— spiritual freedom. "Both of these institutions [convent and the monastery] will aim at God-realization through the unfoldment of the inner life, following a course of spiritual discipline, self-sacrifice, and performance of household duties on lines set forth in the rules of the Belur Math framed by Swami Vivekananda."

The Sarada Convent branches in Hollywood and Santa Barbara officially began in 1947 under Swami Prabhavananda. Thus the convent was established under the umbrella of the Ramakrishna Order. This was a big step for the future of women's monasticism in the West.

By 1947 the monastic membership in Southern California had grown. In the same year brahmacharya vows were given to two of the nuns. Shortly thereafter most of the nuns shifted from Hollywood to Santa Barbara to establish the Sarada Convent there. Later a few of the nuns returned to Hollywood to help out with the service in that center. Eventually, other women joined in Hollywood. Two years later in 1949, several brahmacharinis made their first pilgrimage to India accompanied by Swami Prabhavananda. In 1959, permission was given by the Trustees of Belur Math for a group of five nuns to receive sannyasa, final vows. They were the first Western women to receive sannyasa. Swamiji's initial precedent had borne fruit, as it has continued to do since then. At that time guidelines for running and maintaining the convent were given. The letter was written by the General Secretary of the Ramakrishna Order who further clarified the Western nuns' standing.

Swami Ashokananda came to San Francisco in Northern California in 1931. During his time in San Francisco as in Southern California, women were living together as nuns, but also working to support themselves. In 1949, two women were living in Oakland in the house of Sarah Fox, a saintly disciple of Swami Saradananda. There were also a few women living together in San Francisco as well. Over a few years there had been several experiments in San Francisco of groups of women

living together as nuns on Green Street a few blocks from the Old Temple. The first group was as early as the 1930s. But by 1952 six women were living in the Harrigan house, next to what was to become the New Temple on Vallejo Street. The Harrigan house became the convent in the latter part of 1950, until the nuns had to move one block away to Steiner Street to accommodate the new swami, Swami Prabuddhananda who came in 1970. Shortly thereafter several of the nuns began living in a house in San Rafael about nineteen miles north of San Francisco.

So the late 1940s and mid-50s were the official beginnings of the two convents in California. It is a matter of interest that when Swami Vivekananda came to the West the second time in the summer of 1899, besides New York, he was basically just in California until he left for India in June 1900 via Europe and the Middle East. Swamiji had wanted convents for women and curiously that is exactly where the two convents were established where he had spent time, in Southern California and San Francisco, which by the way are the two largest

However, initially the establishment of both of the convents was a bit rocky as far as negotiating with Belur Math, 8,000 miles away, was concerned and proved to be a challenge for both Swami Ashokananda and Prabhavananda. Both of whom we owe a great deal of gratitude for their devoted efforts, thoughtful discussions with Belur Math, and foresight regarding the need and value of convents in the West. Without their persistence, it is doubtful that the convents would have been established when they were.

On a visit to San Francisco in 1956, Swami Madhavananda seems to have given the convent his blessings, implying that the Ramakrishna Order had accepted them. However, a glitch appeared two years later in December 1958 when Swami Madhavananda wrote to Swami Ashokananda: "As we are soon going to separate the women's section here into an independent organization, as envisaged by Swamiji, we shall have no more convents in the U.S.A." Of course, he meant in addition to Hollywood and Santa Barbara. This alarming news prompted Swami

Ashokananda to send an urgent cablegram to Belur Math. Swami Prabhavananda also wrote at some length about the convent issue.

In response Swami Ashokananda wrote a letter to Swami Madhavananda, two months later in February 1959: "The purpose of our work here is to teach aspirants to approach God essentially thru the practice of contemplation and renunciation. It is thru the lives of monks and nuns that renunciation can be truly demonstrated. As the Society membership is growing," he added, "a permanent and large body of dependable workers is generally found among those who have renounced the world, who have no other loyalties or obligations and who are eager to devote themselves exclusively to the cause. It is, in short, men and women monastics who will more and more have to carry the burden of the work of the center."

After several animated if not anxious letters back and forth, the historic correspondence between Swami Ashokananda and Swami Madhavananda swung the board of Trustees at Belur Math in favor of Swami Ashokananda's contentions.

Just as an aside: in India in 1959, the first nuns of Sri Sarada Math were also given sannyasa (as had the five nuns in Southern California in the same year) by the then-President of the Ramakrishna Order, Swami Shankarananda. Sri Sarada Math was started in 1954, the year of Holy Mother's birth centenary. At that time a small piece of land with a few buildings was purchased at Dakshineswar, thus fulfilling Swamiji's earlier prophecy. Going forward, Sri Sarada Math was recognized as a completely independent organization and the nuns were given complete administration by the Ramakrishna Order. So according to Swamiji's original wish the Ramakrishna Order and Sri Sarada Math are completely distinct organizations, separate in every way except for having the same sacred spiritual lineage.

Although the separation of the Ramakrishna Math and Sarada Math is the ideal, we must remember that both Swamis Prabhavananda and

Ashokananda knew that separating the convents from the Vedanta Societies as independent organizations would not be feasible in the West. The authorities at Belur Math understood this as well, until some years later when a doubt arose. But more of that later.

Swami Madhavananda wrote a later in April 1959: "The Trustees readily agree with you that it would not be possible to separate the convents there, as we are doing in India. Nor did they consider it practical to attach them to the Sarada Math. So those convents must continue to be parts of particular centers, forming a different category from those in India."

A month later in May, Swami Madhavananda wrote to Swami Ashokananda: "You will be happy to know that the following resolution was passed by the Trustees on May 5, 1959: 'Resolved that Swami Ashokananda be permitted to start a convent according to the scheme passed by the Trustees on November 29, 1958.' You already have a copy of the above scheme. Please follow it. We shall be glad to hear from time to time about the development of the convent."

Swami Ashokananda wrote back that they were not "permitting" a convent to be started, but were agreeing to recognize a convent that had been in existence for at least one year, if not for many years and whose members were fully ready for brahmacharya, if not for sannyasa. The Trustees agreed and four women then received their brahmacharya in San Francisco in 1961. Brahmacharini Deepti was one of the original women in the first convent in 1949. She was one of the nuns who took the first vows. Later, when she took sannyasa, she was given the name Pravrajika Nirbhayaprana. She literally embodied her name, nirbhaya; she was totally fearless. She worked closely with Swami Ashokananda in establishing the Society's many gardens, including in Sacramento.

However, this was not the end of the story. In August 1966, Swami Gambhirananda, the then-General Secretary of the Order, suddenly wrote to Swami Prabhavananda and sent a copy of his letter to Swami Ashokananda. Swami Gambhirananda's

surprising letter read in part: “The Trustees [have] raised several questions which need early consideration. . . . First—what is the status of the nunneries in [the] U.S.A. and the nuns living there? Do the nunneries . . . form a part of the Ramakrishna Math and do the nuns also belong to the Ramakrishna Math? Possibly not. . . . Kindly give this matter your earnest thought and send me some practical suggestions for placing before the Trustees here.”

After all this time with both convents running smoothly and growing steadily, with vows already given several times, the receipt of this letter was somewhat of a shock to Swami Prabhavananda. Too ill to write at the time, he dictated a letter to Swami Ashokananda requesting him to write to the General Secretary. Swami Ashokananda did not write immediately as he was also not well then. In the meantime, Swami Prabhavananda had written his own letters to both Swami Gambhirananda and Swami Vireswarananda, then the president of the Order. He received a reassuring letter from the latter. The trustees and he himself, Swami Vireswarananda wrote, had forgotten about the previous resolution. They “would not in any way change the decision already arrived at.” So this unexpected flare-up subsided. The resolution of May 5, 1959 was in place and fortunately has remained there.

All of this back and forth between Belur Math and the swamis in this country should not be surprising given the unusual situation of accepting Western convents in the late 1940s and 50s under the protection of the Ramakrishna Math & Mission, a men’s Order. But as stated earlier there was no other way at that time for the convents to come into being in this country.

When two other sannyasinis and I were in India in 1991, we were in Swami Atmasthananda’s office one day. He was the General Secretary at the time. We were dressed in gerua saris (“When in Rome, do as the Romans do.”). A Bengali lady came into his office and cheerfully said, “Oh, you are from Sarada Math.” Swami Atmasthananda forcefully replied, “No, they belong to us! In America it is

different.” That was a very encouraging response coming from the General Secretary.

Our monastic vows both in Hollywood/Santa Barbara and San Francisco are to the Ramakrishna Order of India, and the nuns are directly under the guidance of the swami who is the head of the center, under the larger umbrella of the Ramakrishna Order. We are from the same Puri Sampradaya of the Dasanami Order founded by Shankaracharya; he established four maths in India one in each direction—north, west, south and east; our Order hails from the south, Sringeri. It was the senior swamis of the Order that decided about the names that the Sarada Math nuns as well as those in the US would have—they would have the prefix Pravrajika (mendicant nun or sannyasini) and the name would end in prana (one whose life is devoted to spirituality.)

We take the same vows as the monks at Belur Math and write to the president of the Order for his blessing and permission to take the holy vows of sannyasa. The nuns receive their vows in their respective centers from a senior swami in the country, usually the most senior. For many years quite a few of us were blessed by having Revered Swami Areshananda, a disciple of the Holy Mother, and head of the Portland Vedanta center, give us our brahmacharya and sannyasa vows. The swami once remarked that he considered giving monastic vows as a great honor. We also share the common motto and ideals of the Ramakrishna Order—Atmano mokshartham/jagat hitaya ca. “For one’s own liberation and for the benefit of humanity.”

Nuns’ Service

The nuns in both convents serve in a variety of ways depending on the need of the center. Southern California’s routine in Hollywood and Santa Barbara differs in some respects from San Francisco, especially after Swami Swahananda became the head of the Vedanta Society in 1976 following Swami Prabhavananda’s passing some months before. Swami Swahananda had a firm conviction regarding American women’s strength and capabilities. He felt they had much to give to

the Vedanta movement. He certainly encouraged the nuns to be more active in public Vedantic activities. The nuns began to give talks in various schools and colleges and also began participating in interfaith programs. In Santa Barbara the nuns took part in a program of feeding the homeless. Some of the sisters served as hospital chaplains and Hospice representatives, while others wrote articles for the Order's journals as well as writing and editing books.

Swami Swahananda even sent nuns to be resident ministers at the Vivekananda Retreat in New York (Ridgely Manor), Ramakrishna Vedanta Society of North Texas, in Irving, a suburb of Dallas, and Ramakrishna Sarada Vedanta Center in Phoenix. This arrangement still stands today.

In San Francisco Swami Prabuddhananda who took charge at the very end of 1970 was more conservative in terms of public outreach. His emphasis was first and foremost to build up the spiritual lives of the nuns. To that end he gave unstintingly a weekly philosophy class to the convent as well as individual instructions, and a Sanskrit chanting class for all who were interested. In addition, he also met regularly with most of the sisters to answer questions, guide them in their spiritual practices, and discuss details of various projects that they were involved in. Several of the sisters spoke to schools and also wrote articles for the Ramakrishna Order's journals and did editing work. Eventually, some of the sisters also began giving talks and not only in the center, but also in other centers as well as to groups associated with the Vedanta Society.

Besides "atmano mokshartham," the nuns' personal routines of prayer, meditation, worship, and study, their service "jagat hitaya" extends far and wide. Obviously not all nuns serve in the same capacity. For example, in San Francisco: some of our service includes: managing the bookshop and sales; taking care of both the Society's New and Old Temple gardens; worship twice daily in the New Temple and in the convent; office work; monthly bulletin and announcements for special programs; managing the appointments and

reservations for the retreat houses in Olema; altar flower vases twice a week at the main temple and once a week at the Old Temple; teaching the Sunday School; child care during Sunday services and special programs; caretaking at the New Temple (which involves one sister staying for a month in the temple in a small apartment off the entrance lobby); managing the temple coverage schedule—sisters cover the temple twenty-four hours daily, which means answering the phone and the front door, taking care of visitors and talking with people who come to the temple; temple cleaning; weekly arati; major responsibilities during pujas, including cooking for several hundred people, flower arrangements, and worship preparation; Olema retreat work, which includes flower gardens, orchard, Vivekananda grove, and field work. We also have two main programs a year: the Shanti Ashrama pilgrimage and the Memorial Day Retreat at Olema, both of which involve many areas of preparation. And then of course there are also all the necessities of running the convent that need to be attended to, from accounting and investments, grocery shopping to cleaning and cooking. There are many nuances to this list.

Recently in 2021 because Covid had closed many in-person classes and meetings, Gitaprana of our Vivekananda Retreat in Ridgely Manor started an online Zoom discussion called "Ask the Sisters" on Sunday afternoons. This discussion is open to all. Devotees submit questions beforehand and the sisters answer. Sisters from Hollywood, Santa Barbara, San Francisco, Ridgely Manor, and occasionally San Rafael participate in this open and lively Q & A. This discussion group has become quite popular, as we are now heading into our fourth year.

How the convents will develop in future remains to be seen. At present if a young woman wants to join a Vedanta convent, she has to come to California. Young women in this country from any center are welcome. Under the current scenario there are just two convents in the US. in Southern and Northern California. There is limited scope for

horizontal expansion under this arrangement, but there is certainly ample opportunity for vertical expansion; that all depends on each individual sister. In both convents Sri Ramakrishna and

Mother have provided everything for us to grow spiritually. In fact, once when Swami Aseshananda was visiting the San Francisco convent, he was asked what was going to happen to our convent. He replied, "Nothing will happen to this convent. Holy Mother lives here." This, of course, was very reassuring.

We are all pioneers in a big movement. It is up to us to take advantage of the opportunity we have been given. Hopefully, someday the convents will be independent as Swami Vivekananda had envisioned and will run just as Sarada Math. But for that to happen, practically speaking, many changes will have to take place, including the expansion of the thirteen Vedanta centers in this country. When you consider that there are so few official centers here, having independent convents is surely something for future generations to work out.

As of now, the women devotees and the nuns contribute enormously to the successful running of

the centers. If the convents were to separate from the Vedanta Societies, most of the women devotees, the children, and perhaps even some of the men devotees would gravitate to those centers. So clearly our situation in this country is very different than in India. One of the major differences is the number of nuns and monks available.

But in my humble opinion, whatever Mother wills, is going to happen regardless of our speculations or opinions, or the availability of monks and nuns. We can only be grateful for the opportunity to wholeheartedly serve Sri Ramakrishna and Mother and practice our spiritual disciplines to the best of our capacity. Through their boundless grace and protection, we have come this far. Let us see where we go next.

References: Information about the convent in Southern California courtesy of Pravrajika Vrajaprana, Sarada Convent, Santa Barbara.

Information about the early days of the convent in Northern California based on: A Heart Poured Out: A Story of Swami Ashokananda, Sister Gargi (Marie Louise Burke).



Swami Prabhavananda in the 1940s

Vedanta nuns and monks at the Memorial Service of Swami Prabuddhananda San Francisco, 2014



A Taste of Sufi Practices and Psychology

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This article is prepared based on the lecture that was delivered on November 02, 2024 at the Home of Harmony



The topic of this presentation concerns Sufi practices and psychology. Sufism is the mystical path within the Islamic religious tradition. Sometimes I mention this to my students, and they then ask, "What is mysticism?" We can define mysticism as having a direct experience of the ultimate, or the ultimate being, in the here and now, especially if one has a theistic perspective.

Muslims believe that mysticism was introduced along with the teachings of Islam by the Prophet Muhammad and that the Quran—the Islamic scripture or holy book—provides guidance for a mystical path. For example, a few verses from the Quran, roughly translated, include the divine statement, "We are closer to you than your jugular vein," signifying an immanent closeness to the Divine Being. Another verse mentions, "The signs of God are on the horizons and in yourself," echoing the Jesuit notion of seeking God in all things. This underscores the omnipresence of the divine while emphasizing an inner search for the Divine within.

When discussing Sufi sources, I am conscious that we are addressing an audience at the Vedanta Society. This provides an opportunity for comparative discussion between Islamic Sufism and the riches of the Hindu tradition. Muslims believe that Sufism is inherent to and perhaps the core of the Islamic tradition. Thus, the Quran and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), both through his personal example and his sayings, are seen as essential sources of direction.

This guidance applies not only to outward aspects of life and regular religious practices but also to inner, mystical dimensions.

The Prophet Muhammad himself is considered a model of the mystical path. He would retreat to a cave known as the Cave of Hira, where he received his first revelation. He also experienced a mystical ascension, known as the Mi'raj, which serves as a prototypical mystical experience.

Sources of Sufi Practices and Psychology

When discussing Sufi psychology, we delve into theological anthropology, which examines the nature of the human being. Psychology, in its classical sense, is the science or knowledge of the soul. Sufi psychology emerges from this framework. Within approximately 150 years of the Prophet's time, Islam encountered and embraced Greek wisdom, particularly the works of Plato, Aristotle, and later Neoplatonism. This Greek heritage contributed to the intellectual framing of Sufi psychology, making it conversant with other Western traditions.

Islam was likely the first tradition to extensively engage with this philosophical heritage, though Christianity also developed in a Hellenistic environment. For instance, the Gospels were written in Greek, and Christianity incorporated Neoplatonic influences. Islamic tradition later introduced and expanded upon this heritage.

In addition to these influences, Sufism has interacted with other traditions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and even Turkish shamanism. As Islam spread across North Africa, Central Asia, Iran, and beyond, Sufi mystics engaged with local cultural traditions, often acting as front-line ambassadors

of Islam to new populations. Sufi practices adapted to and enriched these encounters.

Sufism eventually developed into various organized groups known as Sufi orders, or tariqas. The word tariqa means "method" or "path." Much like the Hindu margas, these are distinct spiritual paths to God. Each Sufi order has its own unique methods, such as specific chants, breathing practices, or movements. These orders trace their spiritual lineage back to the Prophet Muhammad through a chain of initiation.

The development of Sufi psychology involves understanding the stages and states on the spiritual path. For example, the first stage might involve the fear of God, which later evolves into love for God and eventually culminates in stages of bewilderment or annihilation in Divine consciousness (fana). After annihilation, the individual returns to the world, embodying and manifesting divine awareness—a concept akin to being "in the world but not of it."

States, unlike stages, are temporary experiences on the path. They include highs and lows, such as mystical ecstasy or spiritual contraction and expansion. Sufis have long discussed these fluctuations, drawing parallels to Christian concepts like the "Dark Night of the Soul" described by St. John of the Cross.

To illustrate, the Naqshbandi order, a prominent Sufi group originating in Central Asia, teaches eight specific practices. These include breath awareness, mindfulness in movement, and constant remembrance of the Divine. This idea of structured steps recalls the Buddhist Eightfold Path, reflecting the cultural exchanges between Sufism and other traditions like Buddhism, which influenced regions where Islam expanded.

Sufi psychology also considers the dual nature of the human being, as described in the Quran: humans are both material and spiritual. God created Adam from clay but breathed the divine spirit into him, placing humanity between the earthly and the angelic. This duality requires balance. For instance, Sufi theorists like Al-Ghazali described human beings as having both angelic

and animalistic qualities, each requiring cultivation or restraint.

The concept of nafs is central to Sufi psychology. This term has multiple meanings: it can refer to the soul, the self, or the ego. Depending on the context, nafs may signify the rational soul that sets humans apart from animals or the ego that requires discipline. Different practices, such as fasting or meditation, are prescribed to tame or refine the nafs.

The Sufi psychologists described various levels of the soul, and these terms originate from the Quran. The term "nafs al-ammara" refers to the commanding self. This part of the self often drives us to pursue desires, akin to the Buddhist concept of the rooster, pig, and snake, or what Freud might call raw instincts or desires. Beyond this, there is the "nafs al-lawwama," or the blaming self, which functions similarly to Freud's concept of the superego. It embodies internalized societal and parental norms, often leading to self-reproach or, at times, driving one

Philosophical aspects of Sufism

These are just the beginning levels of the soul. As one progresses, there are higher states such as "the soul at peace," "the soul that is pleased," and "the soul that is pleasing." All these stages are rooted in Quranic terminology. Sufis integrate practical wisdom, Greek philosophy, psychology, and Islamic concepts from the Quran to map the journey of the soul's expansion. They propose that every individual inherently possesses all these levels of the soul. The spiritual challenge lies in realizing them, as humans often live in confusion or ignorance despite having the Divine breath within.

In Sufi philosophy, the Divine is not separate from reality. Among the three Abrahamic traditions, Islam is considered the most monistic, emphasizing the oneness of all existence. Monism posits that everything is interconnected as one, in contrast to dualism, which separates the Divine and the material world. Sufism, with its monistic leanings, resembles Advaita (a form of non-

dualism). It upholds the paradox that while the world is not entirely Divine, it is also not separate from the Divine

To explain the unity of the many and the one, Sufi philosophers drew from Neoplatonism. This philosophy describes a process of emanation starting from "the One," an ultimate reality. In Islamic adaptation, the Quran affirms, "God is not like anything else" and declares, "There is only God." From the One emanates Divine names and attributes, such as "The Merciful" and "The Compassionate." These attributes manifest in creation, with each soul uniquely reflecting a combination of these Divine qualities. Through spiritual practices, individuals awaken to these attributes and embark on the path of ascent, paralleling the prophet's spiritual journey.

Sufi cosmology describes a descent from the Divine essence into the material world, followed by the potential for spiritual ascent. The Quran states, "Indeed, we come from Allah, and to Allah we return." For Sufis, this return signifies a spiritual ascent. Prayer, referred to as "the path of ascent for the believer," is central to this journey. Sufis also recognize the signs of God in the external world and within themselves, purify the soul, and "polish the heart" through the remembrance of God (dhikr).

A glimpse of Sufi practices

Modern Sufi teachings, such as those in the book *Physicians of the Heart*, blend traditional practices with contemporary psychology. These teachings use the 99 beautiful names of Allah as a framework for healing and self-discovery,

addressing modern concerns such as family dynamics and personal struggles.

Sufi practices include understanding subtle spiritual centers (Lata'if) within the self, similar to the concept of chakras in Hinduism. These centers, described in Islamic spiritual traditions, correspond to various levels of spiritual refinement, from the material to the angelic.

The three paths of Hindu yoga—jnana (wisdom), bhakti (devotion), and karma (selfless action)—have parallels in Sufism. Jnana corresponds to the intellectual understanding of Divine names and cosmology. Bhakti aligns with devotion to Allah, the Prophet, and one's spiritual guide, serving as a pathway to the Divine. Karma finds a parallel in the Sufi practice of ihsan (spiritual excellence), where every action is performed with awareness of the Divine presence, letting go of ego.

Finally, dhikr (remembrance of God) is a core Sufi practice. The Quran speaks of a primordial covenant in which all souls affirmed Allah as their Lord. Dhikr helps individuals awaken to this truth, which they forget upon entering the material world. Through the repetition of sacred phrases, such as "There is no god but God," Sufis cultivate a state of perpetual remembrance and connection with the Divine.

While many Sufi practices were once esoteric, meant to be shared only within teacher-student relationships, the modern era has seen a democratization of this knowledge. Today, such practices are more widely accessible, fostering a greater understanding of Sufism and its spiritual depth.



As wind removes the cloud, so the name of God destroys the cloud of worldliness.

Repeating the name of God once, when the mind is controlled, is equivalent to a million repetitions when the mind is away from God. You may repeat the name for the whole day, but if the mind be elsewhere, that does not produce much result. The repetition must be accompanied by concentration. Then alone one gets the grace of God.

One must repeat the mantra at least fifteen to twenty thousand times a day, then only one will get some results.

-- Sri Sri Ma Sarada

BHAGAVATA (25): SUPREME BEING INCARNATED AS SUPER HUMAN

Swami Ishatmananda

In our last discussion, The Greatest Gift, we know how the Supreme God, in the form of a Dwarf appeared King Bali, who was very proud about his wealth and charity.

King Bali was warned by his Guru, Shukracharya, and he also understood the Supreme God has come in the form of a Dwarf, वामन अवतार - but decided to stick to his promise. When Lord God took the huge form covering the whole 3 worlds by his 2 steps and asked Bali where to keep his 3rd step King Bali, who introduced himself as humble decendent of the great devotee of the Vishnu, Pralhada, with devotion and confidence answered –

पदं तृतीयं कुरु शीर्ष्णि मे निजम् (8.22.2)

padam tṛtīyaṁ kuru śīrṣṇi me nijam

Be pleased to place Thy 3rd step on my head.

Being pleased with King Bali's devotion and determination to truth, the Supreme God blessed him सदा सन्निहितं वीर तत्र मां द्रक्ष्यते भवान् (8/22/35) sadā sannihitaṁ vīra tatra māṁ draṅsyate bhavān: You'll ever feel My presence and I'll protect you - रक्षिष्ये सर्वतोऽहं त्वां (8/22/35)

rakṣiṣye sarvato 'haṁ tvāṁ

Bhagavata gives us very interesting description of different incarnations of the Supreme God along with the list of kings and their families.

We shall skip those and read Book 9, chapter 10 where the description has been given of the Supreme Being Incarnated as the Super Human – Sri Rama.

From Sri Suka we come to know that very powerful Kshtriya King खट्वा इग's son is दीर्घबाहु and from दीर्घबाहु was born famous रघु, his son अज and his son दशरथ - (खट्वाबङ्ग दीर्घबाहु रघु अज दशरथ श्रीराम).

The Supreme Hari being pleased with honest King Dasharatha was born by a fraction of Himself divided into Four Parts as the Four sons of

Dasharatha,

Hindus believe that God has created this world and to protect His creation He Himself has taken different names & forms in different ages. In त्रेतायुग, the Supreme God took the form of a perfect Human to give a guideline to human society. This Super Human being is Sri Rama. 9th Skandha, 10th chapter of the Bhagavata describes how Sri Vishnu took the form of Sri Rama & his three brothers.

But we find a wonderful description, an excellent introduction of Sri Rama by great Rishi Narada to the great Biographer of Sri Rama Rishi Valmiki. This biography of Sri Rama is famous as Ramayana.

Today we shall take the help of Ramayana to understand the unique personality of Sri Rama, the perfect incarnation of Shri Vishnu.

Narad Muni was visiting Rishi Valmiki who was sitting with an unhappy mood in front of his cottage. When always happy Narada met him – Valmiki asked Narada

O Narada : को न्वस्मिन् साम्प्रतं लोके गुणवान् कश्च वीर्यवान् ।

ko nvasmin sāmpratam loke gunavan kascha vīryavan

Is there anyone in this present time who is Noble and Heroic

धर्मज्ञश्च कृतज्ञश्च सत्यवाक्यो दृढव्रतः ॥ (१-१-२)

Dharmagyascha kritgyascha satyāvakyo dridhvratah Virtuous and Grateful Faithful and Determined (in his promise)

आत्मवान् को जितक्रोधो द्युतिमान् कोऽनसूयकः ।

Ātmavan ko jit-krodho dyutimān ko'ansuyakah Self-Confident and can control is anger, Handsome, Forgiver.

कस्य बिभ्यति देवाश्च जातरोषस्य संयुगे ॥ १-१-४

kasya bibhyati devascha jatrossya saṁyugo Whom even Gods are afraid of when he becomes angry?

In reply Narada said – (Ramayana 1-18)
विष्णुना सदृशो वीर्ये - In might, he is like Vishnu
सोमवत्त्रियदर्शनः - In beauty, he is like the Moon
कालाग्निसदृशः क्रोधे - In anger, he is like Fire
क्षमया पृथिवीसमः - In forbearance he is like the Earth.

To introduce Sri Ramachandra, Tulasidas, who meditated although his life on Sri Rama, the great incarnation of Lord Vishnu quoted the conversation of Siva and Parvati.

Parvati asked Siva, O Lord, is it true that Rama, son of Dasharatha is Absolute Brahman? Can Formless, Eternal Absolute become a human?

Lord Siva said, Dear Parvati, you are aware that to protect 'Dharma' and to save the people from suffering, Supreme Lord takes form and this time He has taken the form as Sri Rama.

Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna, who was a great devotee of Ram-Lala, the child Rama also mentioned from his realization – Sri Rama is apparently the son of Dasharatha, but in reality, He is the all-pervading God. He is very close to everyone because He resides in every heart.

Padma-Puran very beautifully defines Sri Rama
रमन्ते योगिनो-अन्ते सत्यानन्दे चिदात्मनि
इति रामपदेनासो परम ब्रह्म-अभिदियते ॥
ramante yogino-ante satyanande chidatmani
iti rama-padenaaso param brahma-abhidiyate

The Yogis enjoys the Bliss in the meditation and call that (Bliss) as Rama.

The Supreme Bring who created this world and Incarnated in different name and form to guide the people in the path of righteousness, took the form of Sri Rama to shape a perfect human society.

Human Society is made of human being. If every individual becomes perfect the society will become perfect, and this earth will be heaven.

What are the good qualities required to become a perfect person like Sri Rama Conquerors of senses – जितेन्द्रिय

Conquerors of Mind – संयत चित्त

Capable to understand subtle knowledge – प्रतिमान

Intelligent - बुद्धिमान

Energetic - वीर्यवान

Knower of Moral laws - नीविज्व

Good natured – श्रीमान

Rama lived in this world for 69 years, 1 month, 20 days. At the age of 12 went with Rishi Vishwamitra. At the age of 13 got married with Sita showing his might by breaking Haradhanu (The great bow of Siva)

Next 12 years lived happily in Ayodhya ,

Next 14 years lived in exile

At the age of 39 became king

Ruled 30 years 1 month 10 days.



Repeat the name of God always in the innermost core of your heart and in all sincerity take refuge in Sri Ramakrishna. Do not bother to know how your mind is reacting to things around. And do not waste time in calculating and worrying over whether or not you are progressing in the path of spirituality. It is egotism to judge progress for oneself. Have faith in the grace of your guru and God.

Why are you so restless, my child? Why don't you stick on to what you have got? Always remember, "I have at least a Mother, if none else."

-- Sri Sarada Devi

Introduction to the Cover Page: I Am All Ears

Pravrajika Matriprana

Sarada Convent

Vedanta Society of Southern California

शृण्वन्तु विश्वे अमृतस्य पुत्रा
आ ये धामानि दिव्यानि तस्थुः ॥
वेदाहमेतं पुरुषं महान्तमादित्यवर्णं तमसः परस्तात्।
तमेव विदित्वातिमृत्युमिति नान्यः पन्था विद्यतेऽयनाय ॥

śṛṇvantu viśve amṛtasya putrā

ā ye dhāmāni divyāni tasthuh

vedāhametaṁ puruṣaṁ mahāntam ādityavarṇaṁ

tamaśaḥ parastāt,

tameva viditvātimṛtyumeti nānyaḥ panthā

vidiyate'yanāya.

Swami Vivekananda translated this as: “Hear, ye children of immortality, all those that reside in this plane and all those that reside in the heavens above, I have found the secret”, says the great sage. “I have found Him who is beyond all darkness. Through His mercy alone we cross this ocean of life.”

This translation is part of one of Swamiji's lectures delivered in April 1900. Swamiji quoted these verses from the *Shvetashvatara* Upanishad in various contexts, as they have multiple layers of meaning. Here, the focus is on the first word *śṛṇvantu* – “Listen”. The Upanishads are often called *śruti*, meaning “that which is heard.” Whatever the student hears from the teacher is then transmitted to the next generation of students. This transfer of knowledge continues through an unbroken lineage of teachers and disciples, not only in Hinduism but in all Indian religions such as Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism.

In fact, this translation by Swamiji was first heard in his lectures. This particular translation is adapted from his talk “*Worshipper and Worshipped*,” which was published in *Vedanta and the West*, a journal by the Vedanta Society of Southern California.

It is worth noting that Swami Vivekananda arrived in Los Angeles on December 3, 1899, from New York via Chicago. This was his second and final visit to the U.S., and thus, the years 2024–2025 mark the 125th anniversary of Swamiji's arrival on

the West Coast. During his visit, his admirers heard him not only give lectures but also participate in nearly daily interviews and informal classes. In fact, he gave at least forty to fifty major addresses over the span of three or four months. These lectures were recorded by stenographers—though none were professional—and the transcripts were later made available to us.

Just as the Upanishads were recorded, they were primarily meant to be listened to, emphasizing the profound importance of listening repeatedly. For the ultimate realization of Truth, the first step is listening—*śravaṇa* (hearing), *manana* (reflection), and *nididhyāsana* (deep absorption). Listening and hearing are often used interchangeably, but they refer to different processes, especially in the context of communication and understanding. Hearing is a passive, physiological process, while listening is an active, intentional act that requires focus, engagement, and empathy. Developing strong listening skills is essential for effective communication, fostering better relationships, and deepening understanding in both personal and professional settings.

The majority of people in society are poor listeners and remain so throughout most of their lives. Only those who practice effective listening and actively work on improving this skill truly benefit from it. Leaders, in particular, must possess this quality. For everyone, the ability to listen effectively provides an advantage in nearly every situation.

Typically, there are three levels of listening, each with its own purpose and approach. At Level 1, one listens to speak or to focus on one's own inner thoughts. In this state, the person is not truly listening to others but is instead preoccupied with thinking about what to say next. This “Listening to

Speak" often leads to misunderstandings, as crucial information in the conversation is missed.

A motivated listener progresses to Level 2, which is to listen in order to understand or to listen attentively to another person. At this level, the listener is not distracted by other thoughts or thinking about their next response. Instead, they are completely focused on the speaker. Great listeners engage attentively with every person they converse with, not just some.

The final level is listening to understand, or listening to others in the context of their entire surroundings. This is the highest level of listening, and very few people reach it without intentional practice. At this level, one is not only paying attention to what others are saying but also to what they mean — the underlying feelings or thoughts behind their words.

As mentioned, listening is generally considered a conscious process because it involves active attention and awareness. When one listens, one does not just hear sounds but also interprets and makes sense of them. This requires engaging cognitive functions such as focus, comprehension, and memory. However, the degree of consciousness involved in listening can vary.

Active listening involves full awareness; one is consciously paying attention to what is being said, processing the information, and responding appropriately. This requires focus and effort. Passive hearing (such as when sounds are in the background) may occur without conscious attention, but true "listening" implies that one is aware and engaged in processing the auditory input.

In neuroscience, conscious listening involves not only the brain's auditory cortex but also other regions that process meaning, attention, and memory. While hearing can occur unconsciously, listening typically involves a higher level of consciousness. However, artificial intelligence (AI), which lacks consciousness and subjective awareness, can still "listen." The cover picture is a good example: the AI followed instructions and created the image. Its process of "listening" differs from human listening. It involves pattern

recognition (such as voice recognition software analyzing sound waves or text input using algorithms to detect patterns like speech or commands), predefined rules and models (matching sounds or words to trained data or recognizing keywords and sentence structures), and processing. This process is entirely mechanical and based on computation. AI "listening" is an automatic, non-conscious process that simulates the effect of listening and responding without truly experiencing the world.

Starting from the gross level of audible frequency, listening can attain the subtlest level, where one can "see" what is listened to. *Vāk-Vaikharī* is heard or written; *madhyamā* is listened to by the heart; *pashyanti* is seen by the intellect through the power of analysis; and finally, when one attains ultimate realization, listening is connected with *parā*. Depending on the competency of the student, the same mantra is heard from the guru at four different levels. At the time of Sannyasa, when Sri Chaitanya took the final vows of renunciation, he listened to the mahā-vākya from his guru, Keshav Bharati, and was overwhelmed with ecstasy.

When one's mind is ready, one can perceive the message even if the guru is not someone like Shankaracharya or Sri Ramakrishna. For example, Lala Babu, a landlord in the 1800s, once heard a laundry lady telling her daughter at sunset, "The day is gone. When are you going to set fire to the vāsnā?" Though vāsnā typically means desires, it also refers to the ashes prepared by burning banana leaves, which were used as detergent in earlier times. Lala Babu listened to his heart and heard it asking, "When are you going to set fire to all my desires?" He left his home and wealth and spent the rest of his life in Vrindavan, chanting the name of Lord Krishna.

In Vedanta, śravaṇa refers to the practice of deep, attentive listening to spiritual teachers and scriptures, helping one understand the true nature of the Self (Ātman) and leading toward self-realization. It is a foundational practice in Jnana Yoga, which focuses on knowledge as the path to liberation.

According to all spiritual scriptures, listening plays a central role in spiritual growth and transformation, closely paralleling the concept of śravaṇa (listening) in Vedānta.

In Christianity, listening to the Word of God—whether through scripture or spiritual teachings—as well as listening to the guidance of the Holy Spirit (an internal voice) are fundamental to a believer's faith journey. As it is said in Romans 10:17: "*So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.*" In the Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:1–23), Jesus speaks about different types of soil representing people's hearts, and how well they "hear" the Word of God. The "good soil" symbolizes those who hear, understand, and act upon the Word. In Christian thought, true listening is not just hearing words; it is responding with faith and obedience. James 1:22 instructs clearly, "*But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.*"

In Zoroastrianism, listening to the divine teachings of Ahura Mazda, the supreme God, and the holy scripture Avesta emphasizes the importance of paying close attention to the words of wisdom and guidance, Asha (the Divine Truth), and the sacred hymns of Zarathustra (Zoroaster), known as the Gathas. In Islam, listening to the Qur'an—the direct Word of God as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad—as well as the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (Hadiths) and the stories of his life help one better understand God's will. In Buddhism, the practice of suta-maya-paññā (wisdom gained through hearing) involves listening to the Dharma, the teachings of the Buddha. In all spiritual traditions, listening is transformative and requires openness and discernment.

Though listening often carries a stronger implication of acceptance, it does not necessarily mean "obeying" or "agreeing" with the speaker. A deep, empathetic way of listening can lead to the speaker's expectation of validation for their feelings, even if the listener does not agree with them. In this sense, listening does imply a form of acceptance, but it does not always mean full agreement or compliance. Listening is often a

prerequisite for obedience, as understanding the instruction is necessary for proper compliance. In a secular sense, listening often lays the foundation for acceptance, but the equation Listening ≠ Obeying holds, as obedience is about compliance.

In monastic traditions, practices such as meditation involve deep or mindful listening that enhances obedience to one's spiritual vows and intentions. Listening is an essential practice that underpins obedience. These two concepts are deeply intertwined in monastic life across various spiritual traditions. Together, they create a framework for spiritual growth, community harmony, and alignment with higher values. The relationship between listening and obedience helps monks and nuns cultivate deeper understanding, commitment to their spiritual path, and a sense of belonging within their community.

In spiritual life, especially within monastic settings, attentive listening to the teachings of spiritual leaders or scriptures is often viewed as an act of obedience. Life in these settings frequently involves direct guidance from a spiritual teacher or abbot. Monks and nuns are encouraged to listen attentively to the words of their teachers, believing that such teachings are vital for their spiritual growth and essential for understanding their path and responsibilities within the community. Effective listening also helps resolve conflicts and misunderstandings within the community.

Many times, the Upanishads describe how an obedient student attains the highest knowledge through wholehearted listening. The story of Satyakama is one such example (Chandogya Upanishad, 4.4–4.8).

Once, a boy named Satyakama Jabala came to the ashrama of sage Haridrumata Gautama with a request to become a student. He sought to acquire the knowledge of Brahman. Gautama accepted him as a student, and after a few days, the sage sorted out four hundred lean and weak cows and asked Satyakama to take them to the forest to graze. It is important to note that although Satyakama came to the ashrama to attain the highest knowledge through scriptural study, he was given a completely different kind of task.

Nevertheless, he did not hesitate to obey his teacher. Satyakama bowed down with submission and promised not to return until the cows had multiplied into a thousand.

Satyakama lived in the forest and looked after the cows. Years passed. One day, towards evening, Satyakama heard a bull informing him that the cows had become a thousand. Through an attentive listening to the bull, Satyakama learned one quarter of Brahman—that is, *prakāshavān* or the Radiant. *"He who meditates on Brahman as the Radiant becomes radiant in this world."* The next evening, when Satyakama kindled a fire and sat behind it, facing east, he heard the Fire God, Agni, address him. Agni told him that he would teach him another quarter of Brahman—that is, *anantavān* or the endless. *"One who knows That to be thus and meditates upon That as Endless becomes endless in this world."* On the following day, towards evening, when Satyakama kindled a fire and sat near it, a swan suddenly appeared and spoke. He listened intently to the swan, who said: *"Satyakama! I shall teach you the third quarter of Brahman. He is called Jyotishmān or the Effulgent. One who knows Him thus and meditates upon Him as the Effulgent becomes effulgent in this world."* On the fourth day, towards evening, as he sat near the fire, Satyakama listened attentively to a waterfowl, which told him: *"Satyakama! I shall teach you the fourth and last part of Brahman. He is āyatanavān or the All-supporting. One who knows That thus and meditates upon That as the All-supporting becomes That in this world."* It should be noted that Satyakama listened and obeyed all respectfully. When Satyakama returned to the guru's ashram with the thousand cows, sage Gautama saw that his student's face shone with the knowledge of Brahman. Satyakama shared his experiences with the four teachers, but at the end, he humbly submitted himself to listen to the final word from his teacher, Gautama, knowing that the knowledge received directly from one's own guru is perfect.

At the beginning, it is necessary to lay the foundation; the final touch comes through listening when one attains knowledge. Listening is the means; it is, indeed, the way. In the fourth

chapter of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, Sage Yajnavalkya asked King Janaka what other teachers had taught him about Brahman. Janaka had heard about Brahman from six teachers. Each taught him to meditate on a particular aspect of Brahman. Sage Gardabhivipita taught Janaka that the ear (the quarters) is Brahman. The ears represent the infinite, ananta aspect of Brahman. Yajnavalkya asked, *"What can a person have who cannot hear? But did he tell you about its abode and support?"* Janaka did not know further. So Yajnavalkya told him, *"The ear is its abode, and the ether (Akasha, the Undifferentiated) is its support. It should be meditated upon as infinite. Infinity is that, to whatever direction one may go, one never reaches its end. (Hence) the quarters are infinite. The quarters, O Emperor, are the ear, and the ear, is the Supreme Brahman. The ear never leaves him who, knowing thus, meditates upon it; all beings eagerly come to him, and being a god, he attains the gods."* Janaka learned from Yajnavalkya that symbols are necessary to realize That, which is beyond all representations. It is within That that all things are created. Being everywhere, it is beyond creation, and that is why it is endless—*ananta iti enat upāsita*.

point, became very anxious to meet his devotees, whom he had previously seen in his yogic visions. His anxiety was boundless. With great difficulty, he would endure this constant anxiety throughout the day, barely managing to listen to the mundane topics of worldly people, which seemed like poison to him. But when evening came, he could no longer control the surge of anxiety, no matter how much patience he tried to master. He would go up to the roof of the mansion of the proprietors, call out at the top of his voice, and, with tears in his eyes, express his longing: *"Where are you, my children? Do come, one and all. I cannot do without seeing you any more"*. *The restlessness was like a mother, who desires so intensely to meet her child. A few days after this, the devotees began to come one by one."*

It is to be remembered not all who came could continue. As it is said in the Bible (King James Version of Matthew 22:14): *"Many are called, but few are chosen"*. The phrase could be seen as the balance between ones hearing and listening

capabilities. God calls everyone and gives them the power to respond. To be chosen, we must respond to the call.

Swami Vivekananda, the foremost of all disciples of Sri Ramakrishna was the chosen one. Some time in 1884, in Sri Ramakrishna's room in Dakshineswar, some spiritual discussion was going on. Narendra (later Vivekananda) also was present there. Swami Saradananda recorded in the "Leela-prasanga", in the context of Vaishnava religion, the Master said, "That doctrine teaches that one should always be careful to observe three things, namely, a taste for God's name, kindness to all beings and the worship of Vaishnavas. ... one should have the conviction in one's heart that the whole universe belongs to Krishna; therefore, compassion for all beings is what one should practise." No sooner had he uttered the words, "compassion for all beings", than he suddenly went into ecstasy. Regaining partial normal consciousness in a short time, he continued, "Talk of compassion for beings! Will you, all little animals, bestow compassion on beings? You wretch, who are you to bestow it? No, no; not compassion to Jivas but service to them as Siva."

All went on listening to those words of the Master spoken in that ecstatic mood; but it was Swamiji alone who could detect and understand their hidden import at that time. He only said, "Ah, What a wonderful light have I got today from the Master's words! In synthesizing the Vedantic knowledge, which was generally regarded as dry, austere and even cruel, with sweet devotion to the Lord, what a new mellowed means of experiencing the Truth has he revealed today! In order to attain the non-dual knowledge, we have been told so long, one should have to renounce the world and the company of men altogether and retire to the forest and mercilessly uproot and throw away love, devotion and other soft and tender emotions from the heart. ...

"But, from what the Master in ecstasy said today, it is gathered that the Vedanta of the forest can be brought to human habitation and that it can be applied in practice to the work-a-day world. Those, with whom he comes in contact every moment of his life, whom he loves, respects and honours, ... and Thus serving the Jivas as Siva, he will have his heart purified and be convinced in a short time that he himself is also a part of

God, the eternally pure, awake and free, and bliss Absolute.

"We get a great light on the path of devotion too from these words of the Master. Until he sees God in all beings, the aspirant has not the remotest chance of realizing true transcendental devotion. ... For, as embodied beings can never rest for a moment without doing work, it goes without saying that it is only the work of the service of Jivas as Siva that should be performed, and action done in that spirit will enable them to reach the goal sooner than otherwise. If the divine Lord ever grants me an opportunity, I'll proclaim everywhere in the world this wonderful truth I have heard today. I will preach this truth to the learned and the ignorant, to the rich and the poor, to the Brahmins and the Chandalas." Narendra went into an ecstatic mood, as it were, and established a new way of attaining spiritual freedom.

Swami Vivekananda is regarded as Shiva. By listening to him one is sure to attain moksha. When the Master visited Varanasi, he described his This infinite Brahman, when manifesting as incarnation, imparts its spiritual power to the competent ones. Sri Ramakrishna, too, at a wonderful vision to Mathur and others, explaining how the Shiva of Kashi bestows liberation. He said, "I saw a tall, white person with tawny matted hair walking with solemn steps to each pyre in the burning-ghat, raising carefully every Jiva and imparting into his ear the Mantra of supreme Brahman. On the other side of the pyre, the all-powerful Mahakali was untying all the knots of bondage, gross, subtle and causal of the Jiva produced by past impressions and sending him to the indivisible sphere by opening with Her own hands the door to liberation. Thus did Visvanatha, the divine Lord of the universe, endow him in an instant with the infinite Bliss of experiencing non-duality, which ordinarily results from the practice of Yoga and austerity for many cycles. Thus did He fulfil the perfection of the Jiva's life." Mantra shakti, the power of mantra enters through ears. That power leads one to know that bright One who is beyond all ignorance.

The new year is around the corner; it may be the right time to pray for new ears, a helpful instrument of mindful listening, to attain freedom.

HOMER GLEN CENTER 2024 REPORT

Annual Programs

In 2024, the center hosted Sunday services and Wednesday classes. The center also conducted monthly Ram Nam programs, in addition to multiple special events throughout the year. Swami Ishatmanandaji conducted monthly programs for outside groups in person or via zoom upon invitation.



eZine

The center's quarterly magazine, started in 2014 dedicated to spirituality and culture, has gained tremendous popularity and appreciation from across the globe.

Book Store

VVSC is home to one of the largest Vedanta Bookstores in the country. Our bookstore, located at the center and online at vedantabooks.com, was widely utilized and appreciated.

Guest Accommodation

We are delighted to announce that our ashrama can now accommodate more than 30 devotees on our premises. We have repaired the aqueducts that supply water to the Holy Mother's cottage and expanded the space to cater to the increasing demand for guests to stay on campus.

Special Programs

- Kalpataru Day
- Holy Mother - Retreat at Vivekananda Vedanta Center of Connecticut
- Holy Mother Tithi Puja
- Swami Vivekananda Tithi Puja
- Shiva Ratri Puja
- Sri Ramakrishna Birthday Celebrations
- Special Talk: Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu
- Sunday Talk: Easter
- Realization of the Infinite & Be a Devotee - Hindu Temple of San Antonio, TX
- Satsang - Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Society of Dallas, TX
- Sri Rama: The Eternal Inspirer - Ramakrishna Vedanta Society of North Texas
- The Last Message of Sri Krishna - Ramakrishna Vedanta Ashrama Pittsburg
- Special Talk by Swami Tyagarupananda, Ramakrishna Mission, Malda, India
- Special Talk: Sri Ramachandra Purushottama
- Special Talk: Message of the Ramayana
- Special Talk: Mother Worship of Adi Shankaracharya
- Special Talk: The Eternal Message of Lord Buddha
- When Two Becomes One: Vedanta Study Circle of Minneapolis, MN
- Four Pillars of Dharma - VSC Huntsville, AL
- Spiritual Picnic - VSC, Charlotte, NC
- Special Talk: GURU
- Special Talk: MUKTI
- Spirituality: The Life Force of the Hindus, OSA 2024 Convention, Nashville, TN
- Sadhu Sangha & Four Pillars of Dharma - Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Vedanta Centre of Ottawa, Canada
- Special Talk: Sri Krishna
- This is That - Vedanta Center of Cleveland, OH
- SatSang - Ramakrishna Vedanta Ashrama of Warren, MI
- Special Talk: One Should Not Forget One's Dignity
- Sri Sri Durga Puja
- Sri Sri Kali Puja
- Annual Fall Banquet
- Can Human Become God? Hindu Temple of North Alabama
- SatSang - Vedanta Study Circle of Huntsville, AL
- Special Talk: She is My Shakti
- Holy Mother Tithi Puja
- Christmas Eve Celebration
- Can Human Become God? Vedanta Society of New Jersey
- She is my Shakti - Vedanta Center of Connecticut

Home of Harmony – 2024 Report

In 2024, Home of Harmony organized a series of guest lectures, music performances, Yoga and Meditation sessions, and the All Faiths Summit and offered online courses on 7 World Religions.

Saturday Intrafaith & Interfaith Event Series

Total Events: **31** (March- December)

These events include lectures on topics related to various religions and are delivered by scholars, professors, and religious leaders. The events also include cultural programs in which musicians from various cultural and religious traditions present their traditional music.

The lectures are delivered as part of the **Know and Love** event series.

Number of lecture events: 24

2024 Guest Speakers:

Dr Colleen Sen, Reverend Kara Wagner Sherer, Dr. David Gitomer, Dr. Jeffrey Long, Swami Sahajananda (Kriya Yoga), Sister Sue Kilduski, Shayda Safapour, John Safapour, Audrey Kitagawa, Pravrajika Virajaprana, Dr. Marcia Hermansen, Reverend Nathan Perrin and Swami Ishatmananda.

The cultural programs are part of the Meditation Through Music series.

Number of cultural events: 7

The events included music from Christianity, Sikhism, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Hindu-Vaishnavism, and Hindu Shakta tradition. Genres included Carnatic & Hindustani classical and regional folk music.

The Yoga sessions are held on Sundays at 11 AM from March to December.

Total Sessions: 26

Cumulative participants benefiting from these sessions: 160

Special Events

All Faiths Summit: Peace is the Goal of My Faith, 12 faith representatives from 10 major religions.

Speakers and Music performers: Swami Ishatmananda (Hinduism), Rohinton Rivetna (Zoroastrianism), Prof. Jeffery Long (Jainism), Sensei Tricia Teater (Buddhism), Sharan Kaur Singh (Sikhism), Rabbi Reni Dickman (Judaism), Daniel Olsen (Catholicism), Bishop Simon Gordon (Protestantism), and Imam Kareem Irfan (Islam), Kathleen Sherman (Christian music), William Bullholtz (Native American)

Around 100 attended.

The visit of Most Revered Swami Divyananda, Vice-President of the Ramakrishna Order, was hosted.

Guest and Visitor Services

Overnight Guests between June-September: 15
Guided Tours offered to visitors from around the world.

School of World Religions (Mar. – Dec.)

A new course on Buddhism with five modules was introduced in collaboration with the Tzu Chi Foundation.

747 students enrolled in 4 Cohort-based courses:

Hinduism – A Systematic Study of the Sanatana Dharma (78)

Buddhism – Past, Present, and Future (615)

Introductory Course on Eastern Religions (34)

Introductory Course on Abrahamic Religions (20)



VIVEKANANDA RETREAT CENTER, GANGES

2024 REPORT

RETREATS

In 2024, Ganges Retreat Center hosted a series of **Summer Retreats**, attended by devotees from across North America, Canada and India. In August, **Rev. Swami Divyananadaji Maharaj**, Vice-President, Ramakrishna Math & Mission along with Swami Kripamayandanaji visited Ganges Retreat Center. Throughout the year, the center also welcomed **Yoga groups** and private **individual and group retreatants**. The center's **Shrine Trail** was a source of spiritual sojourn to many local members of the community.

May Retreat
"All Life is Yoga"
Swami
Medhananda

July Retreat
"Isha Upanishad"
"Life: A Pilgrimage"
Swami Ishadhyanananda
Swami Shivarchanananda

September Retreat
"Four Steps to
Brahma Jnana"
Swami
Ishatmananda

June Retreat
"Bodhicaryavatara"
Swami
Yogatmananda

August Retreat
"Ego, Its Derivatives, and
Spiritual Life"
Swami
Prasannatmananda



One must do some work. Through work alone one can remove the bondage of work, not by avoiding work. Total detachment comes later on. One should not be without work even for a moment.

How many are there who can meditate and practice japa all the time? At first they earnestly practice these disciplines, but their brains become heated in the long run by sitting constantly on their prayer rugs. They become very vain. They also suffer from mental worries by reflecting on different things. It is much better to work than to allow the mind to roam at large. For when the mind gets a free scope to wander, it creates much confusion. My Naren (Swami Vivekananda) thought of these things and wisely founded institutions where people would do disinterested work.

-- Sri Sri Ma Sarada Devi



PRESS RELEASE

115TH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE RAMAKRISHNA MISSION

The **115th Annual General Meeting** of the Ramakrishna Mission was held at Belur Math on Sunday, the 15th of Dec 2024, at 3.30 p.m., in which, the General Secretary of Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission presented the 'Report of the Governing Body of the Ramakrishna Mission' on the working of the association during FY 2023-24'. The synopsis of the report is as follows:

1) Awards & Recognitions:

- A. The **Ramakrishna Mission** received (i) *Governor's Award for Excellence* from the Governor of West Bengal in recognition of the Mission's contribution to the field of social service and (ii) *Arunachal Pradesh state Award* in recognition of the meritorious services rendered by the Mission in Arunachal Pradesh.
- B. Students of **Vivekananda University** secured 1 gold, 1 silver and 1 bronze medals in All India Sanskrit Students Talent Festival conducted by National Sanskrit University, Tirupati.
- C. The school at Viveknagar, **Agartala** was commended as an exemplary CBSE school by the chairperson of the Central Board of Secondary Education and the students of the school secured 6th position in a national level boot camp conducted by Niti Aayog, Government of India.

2) New Branch Centres:

- A. Six new branch centres of the Ramakrishna Mission were started at **Gurugram** in Haryana, **Kalyani** in West Bengal, **Kharupetia** in Assam, **Sakwar** in Maharashtra, **Thirumukkudal** in Tamil Nadu, and **Ujjain** in Madhya Pradesh.
- B. Three new branch centres of the Ramakrishna Math were started at **Amarkantak** in Madhya Pradesh, **Dakshineswar** in West Bengal and **Venkatapura** in Karnataka.

3) Activities in India:

The Ramakrishna Mission and the Ramakrishna Math, through their **235** Indian branch centres and sub-centres, spent Rs.1292.03 crore towards various services as per the following details:

Name of the Sector	Number of beneficiaries in lakhs	Amount spent in Rupees (Crore)
Relief & Rehabilitation	5.23	8.56
General Welfare	56.34	29.07
Medical	79.28	496.70
Educational	2.87	712.89
Rural Development	2.40	18.31
Publication of literature		26.50
		Total 1,292.03

4) Activities outside India:

The Ramakrishna Mission and the Ramakrishna Math, through their 100 centres and sub centers situated in 24 countries outside India, did various service activities.

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



Suivirananda

(Swami Suvirananda)
General Secretary

Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission

15 Dec 2024

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.

2025
Calendar of the
Vivekananda Vedanta Society of Chicago

The Society visits some
Places of Worship
in connection with the life and teachings of
Sri Ramakrishna

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

Email: info@chicagovedanta.org Website: chicagovedanta.org
Media: YouTube.com/@chicagovedanta

**Society's Annual
Calendar is now available
for \$15 for pick up from
the Society's bookshop;
\$20 for shipping within
the US. Order:
info@chicagovedanta.org**

This year marks the completion of the centenary of the founding of the Vivekananda and Brahmananda temples on the campus of Belur Math. This calendar is part of the centenary celebrations of these temples.

Swami Brahmananda Temple
Swami Vivekananda Temple

"Work, devotion, discrimination—each one is a path to reach union with God. With the same wholehearted devotion with which a devotee worships the Lord in the shrine, he must serve the Lord in the poor, in the sick, in the lowly."
— Swami Brahmananda

"The moment I have realized God sitting in the temple of every human body, the moment I stand in reverence before every human being and see God in him - that moment I am free from bondage, everything that binds vanishes, and I am free."
— Swami Vivekananda

Vivekananda Vedanta Society of Chicago, Email: info@chicagovedanta.org, Web: chicagovedanta.org, Media: YouTube.com/@chicagovedanta

**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