

II. Swami Paramananda and Swami Prabhavananda (1893-1929)*

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1. Swami Paramananda (1902-1929)

Swami Paramananda (1884-1940) had the distinction of being the youngest monastic disciple of Swami Vivekananda when he received initiation into *sannyas* in 1902 at the age of seventeen. His first four years as a monk were spent in Madras [now Chennai], where he served under Swami Ramakrishnananda until 1906. In that year he left India for the United States, arriving in December to assist Abhedananda at the New York Vedanta Center. Having joined the Ramakrishna Order at such a young age, Paramananda had never acquired a college degree. Abhedananda urged him to take classes at Columbia University in order to become more familiar with Western culture, but Paramananda refused. Instead, he accepted an invitation from Sarah Bull in January of 1909 to open a Vedanta Centre in Boston. He also opened a centre in Washington, DC in December of the same year. It was to remain active until 1917. And he was the founder and editor of a spiritual journal, *The Message of the East*, in 1912.¹

Reflecting back on his association with Vivekananda, Paramananda later recalled:

I cannot begin to convey merely through words what my experience was with Swami Vivekananda. We imagine a great man as someone who we cannot approach. Swami Vivekananda, however, was the simplest of people. It would have amazed you! His interior was like a child, gentle and mellow, and that was the real Swami Vivekananda. A great, loving heart! Sometimes reading from his books, you do not get quite the picture. I have seen him weeping. I have seen this great soul weeping, when he thought no one saw him, for the suffering poor of India. His heart was heavy with sadness because there was so much suffering in humanity. It is this, not intellectuality that makes people great.²

During a two-month trip to India in 1911, Paramananda stayed at a quiet retreat in Puri with Swami Brahmananda and others, as well as at Belur Math. For 11 days, he held spiritual conversations for hours with crowds of people at Dacca. A piece in the *Prabuddha Bharata* later stated, “The Swami is sincere and humble, and affects no air of teaching others. His unflinching zeal in answering all queries of the audience was admirable. His winning manners made him beloved and revered by all.”³

In late 1912 the *Italian Review* published the following account of the swami:

The Swami Paramananda has just closed a four weeks’ visit at Gryon [Switzerland]. Every afternoon while there he gave a lecture. More than fifty people came to hear him. He has left behind him the impression of a man of profound knowledge in the domain which is peculiarly his own—that of the soul. He impressed us above all by his great spirituality, by his deep realization of that which transcends the human senses, of that which is beyond action, and



Swami Paramananda

* Assistance provided by Chapter Editor Cliff Johnson

speech and human thought. In his spirituality he is a saint; in his knowledge, a scholar; in his humanity, a child. He possesses simplicity joined to great wisdom and overflowing kindness. One feels one's self in the presence of something which goes beyond ordinary comprehension and which one desires to possess or realize. India has sent us one of her best Masters; it rests with us to accept the message of the East and to extend a brotherly and grateful hand to this one who comes to us like a message of love.⁴

Paramananda made his first journey to the West Coast in 1915, arriving initially in San Francisco. At the invitation of Vedanta friends in Los Angeles, he planned to make a short visit to that city. Much to his surprise, he found his audiences in Los Angeles to be twice the size of those in Boston where there was a well-established Vedanta Centre. He was soon speaking to overflow, standing-room only audiences of several hundred people during mid-August and early September 1915. He spoke before audiences at Signal Hill and at the Universal Temple Hall, both in Long Beach, and at the Blanchard Building in Los Angeles. Mornings were devoted to giving individual interviews. In a telegram to a devotee, he wrote, "Last night the lecture went off successfully. There were several hundred people. The people showed great interest and deep appreciation. They are very reluctant to let me go."

There was speculation that the popular swami would be Trigunatita's replacement and become the new head of the San Francisco Center. However, there was such an outcry from his Boston devotees, led by Sister Devamata, that after only three weeks in Los Angeles, Paramananda returned to Boston in response to their request.⁵

Due to repeated and pressing invitations from devotees in Los Angeles, Swami Paramananda returned to the city the following June 12 for a five-month stay. His regular Sunday evening talks showed an average crowd of over two hundred and fifty, and it sometimes exceeded three hundred persons. Meanwhile, local Vedantists urged him to establish a permanent centre in Los Angeles. Acquiescing to their wishes, in August of 1916 Swami Paramananda rented a house at 1071 South Hoover St. as the Los Angeles Vedanta Centre. Over the next few years, he also held speaking engagements in Santa Barbara, Montecito, Hollywood, Pasadena, and Long Beach, and he was invited to lecture in San Diego.⁶

Swami Paramananda gave a special series of informal talks in September 1916 at the home of the playwright and professional lecturer, Mrs. Marion Craig Wentworth (b. 1872), at a lane off Mission Canyon Road in Santa Barbara. The swami astutely recognized that, "the lecture was very successful," and "people there [Santa Barbara] seem to be very eager for more of the teachings." He returned two years later, in the spring of 1918, and the following year he lectured again in Santa Barbara, in both Montecito and at the Theosophical Society. He addressed audiences on several occasions at an artist's studio in Santa Barbara. In August 1927, Marion Wentworth, with Ruth St. Denis and other distinguished guests, together attended a special dinner at the Ananda Ashrama in La Crescenta. She offered her home as a lecture site for Gayatri Devi a year later. In April 1931 Paramananda gave a talk in her private studio in Santa Barbara, where a small group of people had been invited for a buffet supper.

Because of such a positive response to his growing following on the West Coast between the years 1917 and 1918, Paramananda spent as much time in Los Angeles as he did in Boston. He would arrive in Los Angeles early in the year and remain for several months until Sister Devamata came from Boston to replace him. As reported in the *Message of the East*, "He had gone with the thought of discontinuing the work [in Los Angeles] for a time at least, but at all the meetings the attendance was so large and the enthusiasm so great that he was obliged to abandon the idea."⁷

Various organizations, such as the Metaphysical Library, continued to invite him to address their members, and in September he also delivered a series of three speeches in San Diego under the auspices of the Theosophical Society. Many new people were beginning to affiliate themselves with the work and interest in the teachings steadily increased.⁸

The swami began a course of public addresses at Symphony Hall in April through June 1918. In addition to his usual schedule during his stay in the Southland, he also appeared at the New Thought Convention in Long Beach and in Los Angeles, at the Buddhist Temple in Pasadena, as well as in Santa Barbara as mentioned above. The following year his popularity increased and proved to be the most successful period since he had arrived. Many hours were devoted to personal interviews and on Sunday nights the capacity of the two hundred-seat lecture hall was often exceeded.⁹

Two Hindu students had introduced Swami Paramananda to Georgina Jones Walton (1882-1955), the future Sister Daya, when he spoke at the Theosophical Center at Krotona in Los Angeles during April 1919. Her father, John P. Jones (1829-1912), had been a United States Senator from the state of Nevada for thirty years (1874-1904). Georgina joined the Vedanta Centre in Boston in June 1919 and two years later Paramananda ordained her as a Vedanta minister. Eventually, Gayatri Devi and Sister Daya became the primary leaders of Paramananda's organization. Upon his passing in 1940, Sister Daya conducted Sunday services at the La Crescenta Centre from 1940 to 1955.

Sister Daya also wrote a play titled *The Light of Asia*. It is in part a dramatized version of Edwin Arnold's famous book-length mystical poem on the life of Buddha. Both at Krotona and later on Broadway in 1928, the play starred Walter Hampden (1879-1955), a distinguished Shakespearian actor, as Siddhartha (Lord Buddha). Hampden received overwhelming critical acclaim as the foremost Cyrano de Bergerac of his time, playing the role on the stage in over a thousand stage appearances. Through the years, he often visited the Vedanta centres in Boston and La Crescenta. After performing on the stage, he would bring his wife and some members of his acting company to the centre. In May 1934 he sent congratulations to the Boston Vedanta Centre in commemoration of its twenty-fifth anniversary. He also appeared as guest speaker at the Temple of the Universal Spirit in La Crescenta in June 1941 for the first anniversary commemoration of the passing of Paramananda.

The Light of Asia featured an Oriental ballet arranged by Ruth St. Denis, Hindu songs by the eminent Ratan Devi, Hindu dances by the beautiful Ragini, art direction by Claude Bragdon, music on Hindu themes by Elliott Schenck, played by an 18-piece orchestra, and a company of 75 supporting the illustrious Mr. Hampden. Unfortunately, the musical closed after three weeks, running for only twenty-three performances at the Hampden Theatre in New York City. It failed because it did not appeal to the drama critics of the time.¹⁰

Ruth St. Denis (1879-1968), who did the choreography work on *The Light of Asia*, had gone to see a young Swami Paramananda in Surrey, England in August 1911. She described the swami as:

one of the finest spirits among the Indian teachers.... until now I had not met what Tantine [Josephine MacLeod] calls "an authentic Swami," one whose evident sincerity of purpose and luminosity of mind revealed itself at once. This meeting was to prove the beginning of a liberal spiritual education, which later included friendships with many of those disciples of the great Ramakrishna who are bringing out into the world the unsullied truths of the ancient Hindu scriptures.

Years later, in 1917, Ruth St. Denis invited Paramananda to chant Sanskrit hymns at her Denishawn School and Dance Company in Los Angeles. She described the event:

The girls were, of course, all eyes and ears, eagerly waiting to receive his slightest word. He began to breathe rhythmically, and a peculiar aura of peace emanated from him.... We waited five minutes for him to say something.... The Swami sat on and on, and just as their impatience was becoming more and more pronounced an extraordinary tone came from his throat, the pronouncing of *Aum* (God) opened his prayer, and it was done with the extraordinary vibration which is like the striking of a great gong. It was deep and thrilling and seemed to sound throughout his body.... I do not think any of them ever forgot the effect of that afternoon.



Ruth St. Denis as Radha



*Tantine & Ruth St. Denis (bottom row) at Belur Math 1926
from a devotees's family album*

In January 1926, Ruth and her husband, accompanied by Josephine MacLeod, left Calcutta by ferryboat, and proceeded to Belur Math. Years before, Ruth had read Vivekananda's "My Master," the brief biography of Sri Ramakrishna. She gave it unqualified praise, "My soul had fed on that picture of this God-intoxicated man, whose spirit has penetrated to the far ends of the earth! And now, after all these years, I was coming to the tomb of Ramakrishna, and to the place where his monks meditate and send forth their spiritual beauty to the rest of the world."

In her autobiography St. Denis wrote:

India was still and forever my spiritual mother, and I counted among my most honored friends Swami Nikhilananda of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center

in New York. He is one of those modern monks and proselytes of a radiant life.... To me the Swami harmonized in his own being and in his simple and lucid explanations, the deep, underlying spirit of that enduring Hindu philosophy which regards the being of man as sustained by and functioning within the great embrace of Brahma.... Swami Nikhilananda came and translated his beautiful, calm, and luminous personality into words.

As an outstanding American dancer and choreographer, Ruth St. Denis became one of the founders of modern dance. She assembled a company of East Indians and choreographed a dance production, "Radha," which was performed in New York at the Hudson Theatre between 1906 and 1909. It depicted a Hindu goddess who grapples with, and eventually overcomes, temptations of the flesh. In Los Angeles she and her husband formed the Ruth St. Denis School of Dancing, later called the Denishawn School and Dance Company, in 1915. During the summer of 1925, the company embarked on a fifteen-month tour of the Far East, where its Oriental dances were enthusiastically received.¹¹

Responding to a number of requests, Paramananda engaged in a transcontinental public lecture tour. According to one estimate (which seems high), he traveled over 150,000 miles by train, 100,000 by automobile (an average of 686 miles per week) during a seven-year period between 1915 and 1921. Following the example of Vivekananda, Paramananda spoke before a vast number of different groups throughout many cities of the United States. According to one account, he endeavored to present religious ideas in a "simple, direct way, leaving aside all elements that might seem occult or mystifying." He held speaking engagements from Seattle to Los Angeles, from Boston to Louisville, Kentucky, and in many cities between. American Vedantists owe a debt of gratitude to these heroic efforts of the swami to disseminate the message of Vedanta throughout the country. A prominent officer at the Krotona Theosophy Center in the Hollywood Hills wrote, "The Swami's lecture at Krotona was a pronounced success. He was charming and radiant, a very real blessing poured from him. People were appreciative and I think he felt well repaid by their kind words."¹²

In the winter of 1921 Swami Paramananda wired Sister Daya to close down the Los Angeles Vedanta Centre, which had been operating for four and a half years, sell all the furnishings, and return to Boston. "I am in no mood for competition anymore," he wrote. "I like to leave the whole field to those who are keen for it." It appears that he was referring to Abhedananda, who had recently moved to Los Angeles, in December 1920, and had established his own Vedanta group in the city.¹³

A great deal of Paramananda's Los Angeles ministry was conducted by Sister Devamata. She had attended Vivekananda's talks regularly during 1895 and 1896 in New York City.¹⁴ In March 1907 she became Paramananda's first initiated disciple, at



Sister Devamata

which time she received the name Devamata (Mother of the deities). Though she was the swami's elder by only seventeen years, he always addressed his letters to her as "Mother, dear" and ended them with "Your son." At the end of 1907, Devamata traveled to India. She remained there, assisting Ramakrishnananda at the Madras Center until September 1909. Devamata also had the blessed good fortune of taking care of Holy Mother's room and massaging her rheumatic legs. The Mother addressed her as "my sweet daughter." She described the Holy Mother, "Beneath the veil of simplicity which enveloped her, there was a lofty majesty of bearing which caught the heart and bowed it in prayerful homage at her feet. The human covering was too thin to hide the radiance of divine consciousness beneath."

Before leaving India, Holy Mother told her, "Devamata, be careful. If you get even the hem of your garment caught in the American work, you will not get back." Her words proved prophetic. In 1909 she returned to the United States for a short visit, planning to return to India, but it was not to be. She remained in the West for the remainder of her life. In a letter in September of that year, Nivedita wrote to Devamata, "The Holy Mother speaks of you often. The first night, she pointed to your empty place, with great pathos!"¹⁵

For the following thirteen years, Devamata worked at Paramananda's Centres as an administrator, lecturer, secretary, author, and editor of their journal, *The Message of the East*. She also performed a variety of household

tasks. She quickly became one of the most notable of American Vedantists. Aware of her unusual qualities, Paramananda created a community of nuns under her supervision, whom he ordained to teach Vedanta from the platform. Being an ideal disciple, she had the unwavering faith and confidence that her guru placed in her.¹⁶

Quite possibly because of exhaustion, Devamata suffered a severe illness in March of 1922. The doctor in attendance offered little hope of recovery and notified the Board of Health of her imminent death. She asked Paramananda to intercede and save her life, since she had more work to perform:

He took her hand and told her not to worry. "Had not Lazarus been raised from the dead?" he said, and left the room. Paramananda summoned the community to the dining room.... He explained that for the next three days, around the clock, different members of the community would take turns keeping a prayerful vigil before the shrine, while the altar flame would be kept burning steadily.

She recovered, though she was to remain partially paralyzed for the remainder of her life. The attending doctor and nurses were amazed by her miraculous recovery. Though unable to make public speaking appearances anymore, she remained productive, devoting much of her creative talents to literary pursuits. Her most notable works are *Days in an Indian Monastery* (1927), which includes a twenty-page tribute to Swami Ramakrishnananda, and the two-volume *Swami Paramananda and His Work* (1926, 1941).¹⁷

Paramananda told his friends in Boston about California:

We shall create out there a place where the community of workers can live and express their talents along different lines—music, art, industry. It will not be limited to religion, although that will be the soul of it. Silent living, people who dare live and wait patiently whether the world gives them any recognition or not.¹⁸

In March 1923, as a branch of the Vedanta Centre in Boston, Swami Paramananda founded the Ananda Ashrama in La Crescenta, California, some ten miles northwest of Los Angeles. He was able to expand his organization to the West Coast

because he had been able to train outstanding women disciples to teach and function as administrators. Before he saw the property, he had a dream of a stucco and tile building on the site. He told Sister Daya, "This is the place I have been seeking." Later he told her that "he had a dream of the stucco and tile house, exactly as they saw it." Today, the Ashram is an active centre. It is situated in the foothills of the Sierra Madre Mountains at an altitude of over two thousand feet, covering one hundred and thirty-five acres of rolling hillside. The beautiful temple, though dedicated to Sri Ramakrishna, contains a series of niches along its walls where representatives of the world's religions are enshrined.¹⁹

In April 1923 Sisters Devamata and Seva came to California to assist with the new Ashram. The first public services were held on the property on April 29. Soon they moved the publishing business from Boston to La Crescenta, but many unforeseen problems – a lack of adequate water supply, Santa Ana winds, brush fires, wild animals, and a financial drain – brought about long delays in construction activities. It is interesting that Paramananda did not invite any of his fellow Ramakrishna swamis then, nor when he dedicated the temple in 1928.²⁰ Nevertheless, on many occasions over the years, he invited Swamis Nikhilananda, Akhilananda, Prabhavananda, and others to his centres, and they in turn requested that he visit theirs.

James M. Warnack, for many years the Church Editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, in a review of Paramananda's *Soul's Secret Door*, wrote:

Swami Paramananda, one of the best-loved teachers of ancient oriental wisdom in America, and who has just returned to Los Angeles from a long visit in Boston, has written a book of poems, which, for purity of expression alone, comprise a refreshing contribution to contemporary poetry. Author of a score of books, written in English, French, Sanskrit, and all dealing with religious, philosophica and mystic subjects, Swami Paramananda seems to touch the loftiest peaks of thought and feeling when he deals with the theme of devotion. This is probably due to the fact that in such writings he most nearly expresses the motif of his personal life—for his chosen, or natural "path" to that higher consciousness "toward which the whole creation moves" appears to be the path of love, or devotion.²¹

Accompanied by the widowed Mrs. Cara French (Sarala), Paramananda sailed for India on January 9, 1926 and arrived in the month of February. A long-time Vedantist, Mrs. French attended nearly all of the Vivekananda's lectures and classes in San Francisco, was a devoted disciple of Turiyananda, worked hard as a devotee of Trigunatita and corresponding secretary of the Society, and supported Abhedananda when he conducted classes in San Francisco. Her left forearm and thigh were lacerated by a bomb thrown by a mentally disturbed man on December 1914 that brought about Trigunatita's departure from this world the following month. While in India in 1926 she spent some time as Abhedananda's secretary. Paramananda came to India for the purpose of finding two qualified assistants to carry on the work in the U.S. There, he met the nineteen-year-old Gayatri Devi (1906-1995), whose husband had just died.²²

While at sea en route to Calcutta in 1928, Leon Estabrook, Director of the World Census for Agriculture, made this comment:

Through the enterprise of one of the ladies Swami Paramananda, representing Sri Ramakrishna, gave a small group of us an informal discourse in explanation of his mission as a Vedantist in America. Vedantism is a form of Buddhism, or rather it is a combination of many religions based on the sacred writings of the Hindus. The essential thing about it appears to be the living of a pure and good life, belief in an ever-present eternal Holy Spirit, and complete tolerance of all other forms of religious belief.... He is a Hindu priest, has a good presence and a mellow voice. He is rather a picturesque figure.²³



Swami Paramananda



Swami Akhilananda



Swami Dayananda

On May 2, 1926 Paramananda, his new assistant Akhilananda (1894-1962), Dayananda, who became Prabhavananda's replacement in San Francisco, Gayatri Devi, and Mrs. Cara French sailed for America.

Shortly after the founding of Ananda Ashrama, Thomas (Ajoy) and Edith (Viraja Devi) Allan from Northern California began paying it weeklong visits. Viraja Devi's memories of the swami are found in *Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda*. They moved into the Ananda Ashrama guesthouse in April 1926, staying there while Akhilananda was there, and eventually returned to San Francisco, as did Mrs. Cara French, in February 1927. When Vivekananda had come to the Bay Area in 1900, the Allans had become staunch devotees. Hearing Vivekananda speak for the first time, Thomas Allan said:

The impression he made on me was, "Here is a man who *knows* what he is talking about. He is not repeating what some other person told him. He is not relating what he thinks, he is telling what he knows." Going home from the lecture I was walking on air. When I got home I was still acting like a crazy man. When I was asked what sort of man he was, I replied, "He is not a man, he is a god." I can never forget the impression he produced on me.

After his wife, Edith, had her first interview with Swami Vivekananda, she recounted:

I could not speak, but began to weep and kept on weeping as though the floodgates had been opened. [She wept] for about half an hour.... As I went from his presence my problems were solved and my questions were answered, though he had not asked me anything.... it stands out in memory as the greatest blessing of my life.... His face, his hands, his feet, all were beautiful.²⁴

They had taken initiation from Trigunatita and were lifelong friends of Ida Ansell (Ujjvala). In 1935 Mr. Allan (1863/64-1953) became President of the Vedanta Society of San Francisco.²⁵

While Ananda Ashrama was being built, Paramananda lectured at such religious gatherings as the Divine Science Church in Los Angeles, Community Church of La Canada, Hollywood Metaphysical Fellowship, and at the St. Alban, St. Mary's, and All Angels Liberal Catholic Churches. As of 1927, he also spoke on KHJ radio in Los Angeles, KNX radio in Hollywood, and on the KGFH radio station in Glendale.²⁶

Beginning about 1927, a new ecumenical period began at the centre that reflected a growing interest in the Vedanta Society by renowned people in other fields of endeavor. Several distinguished people visited the centre. One of these was English-born Leopold Stokowski (1882-1977), the internationally known conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra (1912-1938), who was to receive an Academy Award for his musical work on the film *Fantasia*. He and his wife visited the centre twice, staying overnight in 1927. They departed for India to study Hindu music. In the latter part of that year, Swami Shivananda wrote Josephine MacLeod:

In the last mail got a letter from Paramananda. He may come again to India in the winter with a Polish musician – Stockowski [sic] or something like that. He is interested in Indian and Eastern music. He has been to the Ananda Ashrama – was very much charmed with Paramananda. As he is an Indian he has requested him to accompany him to India and Java.²⁷

While in India, Mr. Stokowski developed a great appreciation for Indian music. In 1945 he commented:

One of the great characteristics of the music of India to my mind is its flexibility and freedom.... The music of India is always creative, never a mere reproduction of what is written or played.... Every aspect of the music of India is intimately related to every aspect of life and religious beliefs and cosmic conception of the people of India. I felt that Indian music was never separate from Indian life, but closely interwoven with all the thoughts and feelings of the people of India.²⁸

On one occasion, Stokowski brought the actress Greta Garbo with him to the centre. In the summer of 1933 Swami Paramananda dined with Mr. and Mrs. Stokowski in Southern California,²⁹ and in May of 1934, in commemoration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the Boston Vedanta Centre, Mr. Stokowski dispatched a note of congratulations.

Another distinguished guest at both the Ananda Ashrama in La Crescenta and Boston Centre was Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949), a poet and President of the Indian National Congress in 1925. Being a staunch follower of Mahatma Gandhi, she was imprisoned five times during the Indian independence movement, and when India became a self-governed country, she became the first Governor of the state of Uttar Pradesh 1947-1949. Describing her pilgrimage to the La Crescenta Centre in January 1929, she later said, “the very beautiful Ashrama remains among my most precious memories.”³⁰

Irish-born (Belfast) writer and poet James Henry Cousins (1873-1956) and his wife visited the centres in Boston and La Crescenta in April of 1929. After migrating from Ireland to India, Cousins remained there for four decades, in which time he left Theosophy for Hinduism. He took the name of Jayaram in 1915. A noted author and poet, he wrote *The Renaissance in India* (1918) and *The Play of Brahma* (1921).

Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895-1986), the renowned religious philosopher who lived in Ojai, California, lunched with Swami Paramananda at the Ashrama for several hours in May 1929.³¹

In spite of the growing attention paid the centre, attendance at its public events did not reach the expected level. Consequently, they made an extensive effort not to remain isolated and began to expand south into the populous city where most of its devotees lived. In the summer of 1927, Paramananda established two all-day free public reading rooms and Vedanta lending libraries in which public classes were also given. One was at the Los Angeles Branch Centre in the Music Arts Studio Building at 233 South Broadway. The Pasadena Branch Centre served as the home of the second Ashrama Library and Reading Room. Originally, it was located at 19 North Oak Knoll Avenue in Pasadena, but then moved to the New Arcade Building at 690 East Colorado Street. By December of 1927, the twenty-one-year-old Gayatri Devi had been ordained and was conducting services at the Ananda Ashrama for several months while Paramananda was in India. Following the same policy of expansion, the swami established an Ashrama at Cohasset, Massachusetts on June 11, 1929 as an extension of the Boston Centre. It consisted of twenty wooded acres about a mile and a half from the ocean and twenty-three miles south of Boston. He opened a new Los Angeles Branch Centre at 745 W. Adams Street, which was dedicated on January 14, 1930, taking residence there and presenting a weekly class and the regular Sunday evening service. Paramananda also attempted to open a small Hollywood branch Centre at the home of Vina Hagerty, at 1957 Rodney Drive in the Los Feliz area in July 1931. He gave talks every Friday evening, and a place in her charming home was set aside as a reading room and library.³²

Rather than seeking the assistance of a swami of the Ramakrishna Order, in 1928 Swami Paramananda brought his forty-two-year old niece and childhood playmate, Charushila Devi (Jaduma, 1886-1979), to the U.S. The problem for Paramananda was the short stay of assistant swamis. Of the early assistants who came to the U.S. before 1940, their mean and median length of stay at a particular Vedanta Society was only two years. After receiving Westernized training, they either established a new center themselves, transferred to another, or returned to India. Until 1940 Swami Prakashananda was the longest-lasting assistant, remaining for eight years under Swami Trigunatita before founding his own group.

After seven months' training at the Ananda Ashram, Charushila Devi took up residence at the Boston Centre. Utilizing her experience as an Indian schoolteacher, she conducted public services and fulfilled other valuable functions. After two-and-a-half years, her visa could not be renewed and in November 1930, she was forced to return to India. When she arrived in Calcutta (now Kolkata), she paid her respects to Swami Shivananda, President of the Ramakrishna Order. He asked her why, with her teaching skills and experience in the West under Paramananda, she did not strive to benefit underprivileged Indian women. At the time, the wife of Jawaharlal Nehru, the future Prime Minister of India, was a disciple of Swami Shivananda. In response, with loving devotion to her guru, on February 20, 1931 she founded the Ananda Ashrama in Dacca, the capital of East Bengal, as an Indian branch of Paramananda's ashrama. The ashrama was dedicated to providing a practical vocational education together with spiritual training for Indian women.³³

2. Swami Prabhavananda and the Disciples of Sri Ramakrishna (1893-1923)

Swami Prabhavananda was born on December 26, 1893 in the village of Surmanagar, located three miles from Vishnupur, which is west of Calcutta. Holy Mother's native village of Jayrambati is about twenty miles east of Vishnupur, and Sri Ramakrishna's birthplace of Kamarpukur is four miles further to the east. From his parents, he received the name Abanindra (Abani) Nath Ghosh. His charitable father, a successful lawyer, spent most of his surplus money feeding forty to fifty people every day. Consequently, when his father passed away in 1916, the family had only three rupees to their name. Fortunately for them, they owned a considerable amount of property. His mother, Jnanada Sarkar, was extremely devoted. She regularly performed worship, and her nights were filled with dreams of gods and goddesses. Years later, when she met Holy Mother in Vishnupur, the Mother treated her with affection and addressed her as "Abani's mother."³⁴



Hriday

We learn from Saradananda's *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play* that Rajaram, the youngest brother of Hriday (1840-1899), had a dispute involving a business issue and that he hit his opponent on the head with a hubble-bubble. While in Vishnupur, Ramakrishna observed the event and was called to be a witness. He told Rajaram, "Look, you somehow settle with the plaintiff by giving him money; otherwise the case will go against you. I can by no means lie. When asked, I will tell what I have seen and what I know."

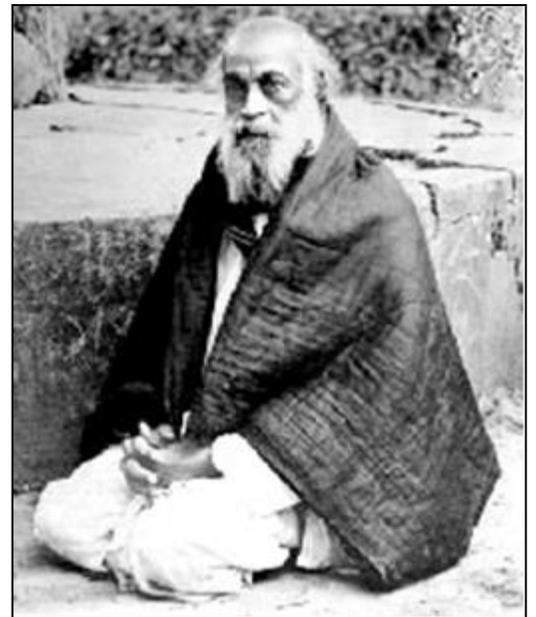
Swami Prabhavananda later said that his grandfather, Ishwar Sarkar, a lawyer, once represented a client in a case in which Sri Ramakrishna was called as a witness. His grandfather said that Sri Ramakrishna had come to Vishnupur one day, stood on the porch of Ishwar's house, and told him, "If I am called as a witness, I will tell the whole truth." Ishwar arranged for the two parties to settle out of court. He said about Sri Ramakrishna, "We

knew him as 'Gadai Pagal (Mad Gadai).'³⁵

After Ramakrishna departed from this world, Swami's grandfather realized his former misjudgment concerning the Master. Prabhavananda stated, "In his old age, my grandfather used to read the *Ramakrishna Punthi* [the life of Sri Ramakrishna in verse form by Akshay Kumar Sen], and weep."

As a youth, Prabhavananda read the life of Sri Chaitanya (*Chaitanya Charitamrita*) and wept at every page. By the age of fourteen, he had read the *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita (The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna)* recorded by Mahendranath Gupta in Bengali.³⁶

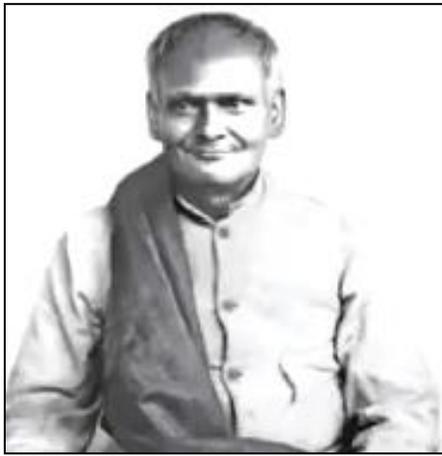
When Sri Ramakrishna remained at Vishnupur because of the legal case, he had the vision of the ancient goddess Mrinmayi, who was worshiped in a temple near the shore of Lalbandh Lake. The image was a "living deity" that made her presence known by communicating with people in the area and helping them in their difficulties. Prabhavananda studied *The Gospel* at Lalbandh Lake.



Mahendranath Gupta

Pictures of Sri Ramakrishna, Maharaj Swami Brahmananda, Swami Vivekananda, and the Hindu Temple in San Francisco were in the living room of Prabhavananda's home in Vishnupur, because an illustration of Trigunatita's Hindu Temple was presented to the subscribers of the *Prabuddha Bharata*. At the time, he did not know where San Francisco was, only that it was in America. Amazingly, during the first two years he lived in the U.S., 1923-1925, he lived in the temple that was pictured in his home.³⁷

Swami Prabhavananda met eleven of the sixteen monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna and had a personal relationship with many of them. By 1916, six of the sixteen disciples had departed from this world. The first monastic disciple of Sri Ramakrishna that Prabhavananda met was Swami Subodhananda (1867-1932). When he was thirteen, in 1907, he made the swami's acquaintance in his hometown of Vishnupur. Being a wandering sadhu, the swami had no established place to stay, so Abani took him to his private tutor, who gave him lodging. It was from this tutor that "for the first time I heard about Sri Ramakrishna and his disciples, and what wonderful people they were. It was through him that I got interested in the Ramakrishna Order." Swami saw Subodhananda (Khoka Maharaj) at a later time in the city of Allahabad, and he occasionally visited him in Calcutta between 1911 and 1913. "He was just a friend. He would send a note to our college for me through our gatekeeper. I used to make a chocolate drink. He would come to our hostel sometimes and share it."³⁸



Swami Subodhananda

Swami Prabhavananda once asked Subodhananda the reason for the all-satisfying love that emanated from Maharaj (Swami Brahmananda). Subodhananda replied: "God is love. Maharaj has realized God. Therefore he is full of love." At Belur Math, he had shared a room with Subodhananda and two other monastics. He recounted:

Swami Premananda would invite guests, so I had to give up my bed. One day Baburam Maharaj brought a guest and told me to go somewhere else. Khoka Maharaj said, 'Abani, come and sleep in my bed.' And of course I did. But I couldn't sleep all night, worrying whether my feet might touch him.³⁹

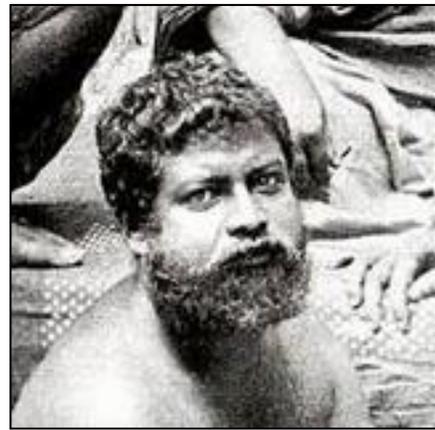
Not long after first meeting Swami Subodhananda in 1907, Prabhavananda's uncle took him to see his older brother who, along with Boshi Sen, were students at the Scottish Church College in Calcutta. They visited the Belur Math where he met Swami Advaitananda (1828-1909), a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna:

I prostrated before him. He smiled a little. He looked like a wild man from Borneo. He was unshaven, wore only a loincloth, and was carrying a stick. He was older than Sri Ramakrishna—an old man of eighty. He looked rather wild, and I was frightened of him.

There was no show with the disciples of Ramakrishna, and for that reason many thought they were not holy men.⁴⁰



Swami Advaitananda



Swami Sadananda

At the Belur Math in 1907, Abani (the future Swami Prabhavananda) also met Swami Sadananda (d. 1911), the first monastic disciple of Swamiji. A year later, Sadananda visited Vishnupur for three months. At that time, he prophetically told Prabhavananda:

“You will go to America to do my Swamiji’s work.”... Swami Sadananda used to talk to me for hours. Afterwards he would say, “I know you don’t understand what I am saying to you now, but I am talking to your subconscious mind. Some day it will all bear fruit.”

He would visit Sadananda every week while he was attending Calcutta City College in 1910.⁴¹



Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi

He had the blessed fortune to meet Holy Mother a number of times. His description of two of his experiences follows:

Her birthplace, Jayrambati, was about twenty miles from my hometown. In order to go to her home from Calcutta, she would take a train to my hometown Vishnupur. She would get off at the railway station there and have to wait for some time before she could get a bullock cart to go to her village. At that time, practically nobody in our district knew about Holy Mother.

She was staying at an inn and was on the porch the day I first saw her. A friend and I were going out for a walk. I was only then 14 or 15 years old and I noticed Radhu, Holy Mother’s niece, standing and holding one of the pillars. Then we noticed a holy man who was seated and surrounded by many women, who were also seated there. As my friend and I continued walking, we criticized this sadhu. “Look at this holy man surrounded by women.” As a result, look what happened to me.⁴² When we returned from our walk, it was a little dark. My friend was to go home in one direction, and I was to go home in another direction. But something drew me back to this holy man. He said, “Will you see Holy Mother?” I got excited

because I had read *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* at that time. You see, as a young boy I was an atheist. And it was *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* that attracted me. As I read *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, Naren and Rakhai, these two names attracted me. Of course, Naren was not living then, so I had Rakhai on my mind.

I said, “Holy Mother. Do you mean Paramahansa’s wife?” “Yes.” She was right there and so I touched her toes. You see we did that with our fingers. And she kissed me like our mothers kiss, by placing her fingers on the chin and then putting them to her lips. Then she said, “Son, haven’t I seen you before?” I said, “No, Mother, I have not seen you.” Of course mothers recognize their children but unfortunately, children do not recognize the mother who is the Mother of the Universe.

One time another friend of mine [who became Swami Amriteswarananda] and I came together to Vishnupur. Unfortunately he died young. If he had lived today, I am sure he would have become the president of our Order. I use to call him Pares. In our home we stayed, and then we hired a bullock cart and traveled, sleeping in the bullock cart, all night. First, we went to Koalpara [about three miles from Jayrambati], where Holy Mother used to come and stay occasionally. In Koalpara there is an adobe house where there is a picture of Holy Mother and Sri Ramakrishna. We saw a picture of Holy Mother, which she installed and worshiped herself. And so we had the blessed fortune to see that picture and bow down to it...

I always carried a picture of Holy Mother. In the Udbodhan Office, I had a friend who gave me that picture. Generally, they did not sell them at that time. I carried that picture all my life. Holy Mother told in a vision, “I see many in America placing my picture on the left of Thakur.” I think I was the first one who did that. That is the picture you see there in the shrine.

As we went to Mother's house, we were late to arrive. She had told her attendant Rashbehari, a swami [Swami Arupananda] who later recorded the teachings of Holy Mother [1909-13, 1918], "Two of Rakhal's sons are coming. Save some food for them." We did not write to her nor was there any telephone, but she knew we were coming. When we would go to her village, she didn't have a veil or anything like that. Then like a mother she served us food on leaf plates. One very interesting thing: she looked like one's own Mother to whoever saw her. So she appeared to me as my own mother. I saw no difference. It was not only like that with me, but also with many others I have known. When we would see her, she would act and behave just like our own mother. She sat by us and asked us if we liked the food, just as our own mother does. If we liked something, then she would give us more. So in that way she fed us. I have never eaten such food in my life. It was like nectar, I still remember that. After finishing the leaf plates, we were going to throw them out. Then Mother said, "What are you doing?" "We cannot leave these leaf plates here. We ate in those." Then she said, "What would you have done if your mother had been present?" So we left them there.

Both of us stayed there for three days and three nights. When we left Holy Mother, she stood by the door and kissed us [as Indian mothers do, with a touch on the chin]. And as far as she could see, she kept looking at us. This was the custom she had with everybody that used to go to her. These were wonderful times. We did not have any teaching or anything; she did not teach us anything. Just to see her and to touch her feet was enough.

While we were there, she initiated one young man. As we came back, we saw he was very sick and was dying. And at the moment of death, he sat straight up and chanted the mantra that Holy Mother gave to him. So it was a wonderful death from that standpoint.⁴³

For a far more extensive written account of Swami Prabhavananda's personal relationship with Holy Mother see Web: vedanta.org/2010/monthly-readings/swami-prabhavananda-on-the-life-of-holy-mother-part-1 and vedanta.org/2010/monthly-readings/swami-prabhavananda-on-the-life-of-holy-mother-part-2



Swami Brahmananda

At age seventeen, in 1911, Swami Prabhavananda went to visit Swami Brahmananda (1863-1922) at Balaram Bose's house in Calcutta. He later reminisced:

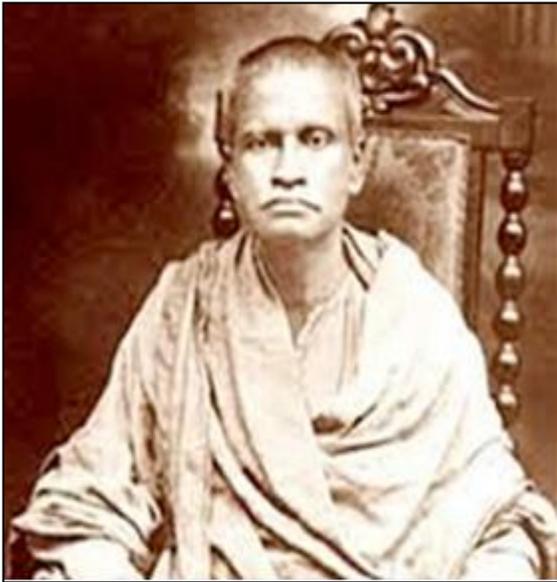
There was such a large crowd, I knew there was no use trying to see him in Calcutta. I waited for him to go to Belur Math and went to see him there on a weekday.... He called me, "Come here." That was the first thing he said to me. Next he asked, "Haven't I seen you before?"... My feeling at the time was something that I had never felt before in my life: a complete fulfillment in his presence. I cannot express it any other way. You see, he was like a magnet! After that I used to go and see him often. When I first met Maharaj, I did not know anything about God or the realization of God, yet I felt drawn to him as to a long-lost friend who was very near and dear to me. I had never felt such love before in my life: it was the love of parents and the love of a friend, all in one. Everyone had the same experience.⁴⁴

Christopher Isherwood noted that in 1959, "Swami told us he believes that he, as an old man during his last incarnation, met Brahmananda as a young man. This was during the eighteen-eighties on the bank of the river Narmada, where they were both practicing austerities." According to historical sources, Brahmananda and Subodhananda left Varanasi and journeyed to Omkarnath on the bank of the holy river Narmada. Swami Brahmananda lived there "continuously in samadhi for six days, completely oblivious of the outside world." Afterwards they traveled to the river Godavari. This event occurred

either in December of 1889 or January of 1890. Shiva was Swami Prabhavananda's Chosen Ideal during that lifetime. His prior

life guru appeared to him in a dream and wanted to initiate him with the Shiva mantra. He refused because he had already received initiation from Maharaj.⁴⁵ Swami recounted:

During the autumn of 1912, I stayed in Kankhal for a month, and then was initiated. When I expressed my desire to join the monastery, Maharaj [Brahmananda] asked me to return to college and finish my education. I told him, “My father might force me to get married,” and Maharaj said, “Then run away and come to me”.... During the time of the worship of Durga, Maharaj was at Kankhal. One day many holy men were invited to a feast, and I had Maharaj’s special chair turned upside down so that nobody else would sit in it. Suddenly I noticed an elderly swami from a different monastic order sitting in this chair. I ran to him and said, “Sir, you can’t sit here.” “Why not?” he asked. “This is our Maharaj’s chair, and we don’t let anybody else use it.” The swami replied, “Maharaj won’t mind.” “But I mind!” And I took his hand and began to pull him out of the chair. Smiling he got up. Later, when I was arranging asanas (small individual rugs) for the swamis on the veranda, I placed a special one for Maharaj. He noticed this and told me, “Oh no! There are several great souls here today. Give me the same kind of asana that everyone else has.” When the swamis had gathered on the veranda, four elderly monks who did not belong to the order were seated on either side of Maharaj. The swami I had pulled out of the chair was in the place of honor, to Maharaj’s right. They were talking and laughing – and I had the distinct impression they were having a good laugh at my expense!⁴⁶



Swami Shuddhananda

Swami Shuddhananda (1872-1938), later the President of the Ramakrishna Order, wanted Prabhavananda to become a monastic. He refused because he thought that Swamiji wanted the students to become revolutionaries in order to help free India from British rule. Prabhavananda recalled a December day in 1914:

One day this old man followed me when I went to prostrate, and he said to Maharaj, “Maharaj, when is this boy going to be a monk?” Maharaj kept silent for a moment. Then, looking at me from head to foot, he said, “When the Lord wills.” As he looked at me, there was an unforgettable sweetness in his eyes, and a sudden transformation took place within me. My whole idea of revolution and all it entailed changed in an instant. I did not say anything to Maharaj but went downstairs and told Swami Shuddhananda, “I have joined the monastery.”⁴⁷

Once I brought some flowers into Maharaj’s room. He asked me: “Have you offered half to Thakur?” I thought to myself, “Oh that is just a picture.” “You think that is just a picture,” he said. “Yes,” I replied. Then he asked me to begin to do the worship. On the third day I offered food to Ramakrishna. I lay down to rest after the offering and went to sleep. I had a dream. I

dreamt that a beautiful young brahmin approached me and said, “You have forgotten to put salt on my food for my cucumber.” Later, I asked one of the older swamis: “Did Thakur like salt with his cucumber?” “Yes he did.” Then I opened the door of the shrine and placed some salt before his picture. From that moment on, I was convinced of the truth behind the worship.⁴⁸

One day Prabhavananda was so discouraged by the criticisms he received from Maharaj that he decided to leave the monastery. He went to prostrate himself before his guru with the idea of leaving him. Maharaj asked, “Do you think you can run away from me?” The kind words the master then spoke dispelled all the young man’s sorrow, “Never before,” Prabhavananda said, “had I been so deeply aware of his love and protection. All thought of running away was forgotten. His words soothed my burning heart.” Then he said: “Our love is so deep that we do not let you know how much we love you.”⁴⁹

Four additional incidences describing the interactions between Swami Brahmananda and Swami Prabhavananda are:

At one time, he was walking with another disciple and myself. He was slightly ahead of us. Suddenly we heard a shout: "Out of the way! There's a mad bull!" An instant later, we saw the bull itself, rushing toward us. There was no time to run. My brother-disciple and I tried to get in front of Maharaj to protect him, but he raised his arms and pushed us back. Although he was now an elderly man, he was still extraordinarily strong. As the bull approached with lowered head, there was a moment's pause; Maharaj stood still, confronting it. Then the bull stopped, shook its head from side to side, lifted it, and walked quietly away.⁵⁰

[A woman disciple of Sri Ramakrishna] Gopal's Mother used to see Gopal, the boy Krishna, playing with her, walking beside her and calling her "Mother." I expressed my opinion that these visions of "Gopal's Mother" belonged to the transcendental plane, and that I did not believe she had actually seen Sri Krishna with her physical eyes. Maharaj, who was sitting in his room, overheard me. He came out and said rather sarcastically, "Ah! So you are so omniscient!" "But Maharaj," I asked, "How can one see God in the external world with physical eyes?" Maharaj simply made this statement in English: "Show me the line of demarcation where matter ends and spirit begins"⁵¹

We were then on very affectionate terms. One day Maharaj was seated on a chair, and I was sitting cross-legged in front of him. His feet were resting on my knees, and I was massaging them. He made me talk freely, but I can't remember a word I said.... I spoke maybe for half an hour or an hour. I can only assume that Maharaj wanted to corroborate his own intuitive knowledge of my past lives and that he therefore put me into this unusual state of consciousness in which I was able to tell him what he wanted to know. While we were with him, he would joke and make us forget who he was. Otherwise we could not have approached him and served him.⁵²

About a week before Maharaj left Madras, I was arranging flowers in his room. I did not notice that he had come in. Suddenly he whispered into my ear: "Lovest thou me?" A thrill passed through my whole being, and for a moment I could neither speak nor move.... I still remember the last words he ever spoke to me [November 1921]. It was on the eve of his departure from Madras; I was cooking a sweet for him and he was walking up and down, close by. Suddenly, he came over and whispered into my ear: "It makes me feel so bad, having to leave you. I shall miss you very much." Later, at the end of a letter, he repeated those same loving words: "I miss you very much."⁵³

For a far more extensive written account of Swami Prabhavananda's personal relationship with Swami Brahmananda see Web: <http://www.gemstone-av.com/Brahmananda-Prabhavananda.pdf>

In 1914 Abani earned a B.A. degree from Calcutta City College. He received a Western education covering many subjects that helped prepare him for his future life in the United States. For the next six months he studied philosophy at Calcutta College under Sir Brajendranath Seal (1864-1938) in preparation for an M.A. degree. Seal used to debate with his friend Swami Vivekananda when they were college students, and later he contributed some writings for Swamiji's biography. Professor Seal is best known for his textbook *The Positive Sciences of the Ancient Hindus* (1915). Seal was elected President of the impressive Sri Ramakrishna Centenary Celebration held in March 1937 in Calcutta.⁵⁴

Abani joined the Ramakrishna Order of India in December 1914 and became a brahmachari in January of the following year, receiving the name of Bhakti Chaitanya.⁵⁵ Soon after he joined the monastery, his favorite niece, Suprabha, who was six or seven years old at the time, died suddenly. Swami Prabhavananda reported that Suprabha told the swami's young sister:

"Don't tell Grandma, but I won't go to school today. They are coming here in a chariot to get me. Don't tell Grandma; she won't let me go." When my mother realized that Suprabha hadn't gone to school, she asked her, "What is the matter?" Suprabha answered, "Grandma, I don't feel good." My mother felt her forehead. She had a high fever. A few hours later she was gone. Before she died, she asked for a picture of me [Swami Prabhavananda]. Holding the picture tightly, she passed away.⁵⁶

On many occasions, Prabhavananda associated with and served Swami Premananda (1861-1918), whom Ramakrishna identified as an Ishvarakoti—an eternally free soul.

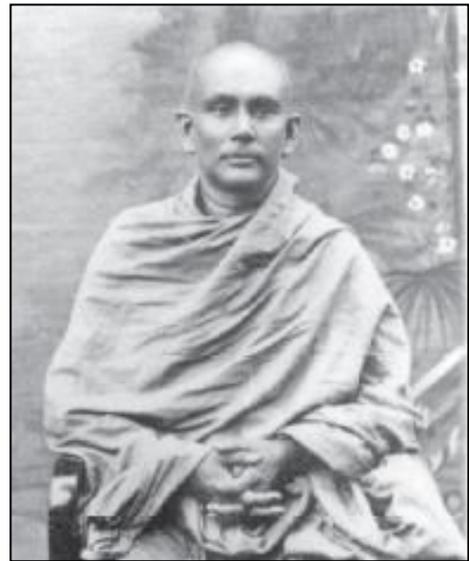
In Benares, Maharaj used to ask Swami Premananda to take me with him to the Ganges for a bath and then to the Vishwanath and Annapurna temples. We went every day for a month [October 1914]. In the crowd, Swami Premananda would hold my hand and draw me after him. When he did that, what a thrill I got.... I had such reverence for him! After we came home, he would wash his feet, and I would dry them. Those were the days! To walk with gods!⁵⁷

During the same month:

One day, after we finished worship in the temple of Annapurna, the head priest placed a garland of marigolds around Swami Premananda's neck. When the swami was about to take the garland off to give it to me, I placed my palms together, bowed before him and said: "No holy sir, please keep the garland yourself. You look so beautiful!" The word "beautiful" reminded the swami of God's beauty, and he went into ecstasy. His face flushed, and then a light began to emanate from his whole body. Walking slowly, he left the temple, and I followed him. The temple lane was crowded as usual, but on either side of us people stared at the swami and made way. It was quite evident that everyone present saw him illumined. We continued to walk through the street of Varanasi while crowds stood still, silently watching Swami Premananda. He was completely absorbed in the thought of God and oblivious of his surroundings. As we approached the outer gate of our monastery, Swami Nirbharananda, the abbot, saw us from the veranda. He immediately ordered the monks to prepare a special welcome for Swami Premananda. We entered the monastery grounds to the sound of gongs and conch shells, and the ringing of bells. Then, when we arrived at the veranda, Swami Premananda took the garland off and placed it around the neck of the abbot. For a brief moment he danced in ecstatic joy. Gradually the ecstasy abated, and the divine light disappeared.⁵⁸



Swami Premananda



Swami Turiyananda

Concerning Swami Turiyananda (1863-1922):

When I was twenty-two years old, I stopped in Varanasi on my way to Mayavati in the Himalayas. There I fell ill with chicken pox.... Every day Swami Turiyananda would come, sit on my bed, and put his hand on my forehead. After a few days, he said to me, "Abani, ask a boon of me." I said, "Maharaj, please do not come and sit on my bed anymore. You may fall sick." Hari Maharaj seemed disappointed and said, "Oh, why do you say such a thing!"... [Days later], he put his hand

on my back and said, “Abani, where is there no contagion? But through Mother’s grace, a big rock floats on water; fire loses its power to burn; water loses its power to drench.”⁵⁹

At suppertime Swami Turiyananda was seated with Maharaj and I was fanning them. The scolding continued. I remained silent. Swami Turiyananda turned to me and asked: “Do you know why Maharaj is so hard on you?” “No,” I replied, “frankly, I don’t. I do not see how I am to blame.” Then Swami Turiyananda said, “The first-class disciple acts even before the guru has had time to think. Maharaj wants you all to become first-class disciples.”⁶⁰

The last time I saw him, Swami Turiyananda reminded me of the first time I had massaged his feet. He said, “I knew that first time that you had a power in you.” He also told me that I belonged to them, and said many other nice things.... I see not what you are, but what you are going to become.”⁶¹

Swami Brahmananda sent Prabhavananda to the Advaita Ashrama in Mayavati where he worked as the assistant editor of the *Prabuddha Bharata* from 1915 to 1917. Before he left, he recounted,

Maharaj asked me to get Holy Mother’s blessings. Three of us went [Swami Prajnananda and the future Swami Atmabodhananda]. Holy Mother gave each of us a flower and kissed us. Holy Mother touched her fingers to each one’s chin and then to her lips. At that time, she lived at the Udbodhan office in Calcutta [now Kolkata] and did not wear a veil. That was the last time I saw her in physical form. The picture you see in my room is the way I saw her then. She took the Devi murti [the form of the Divine Mother]. She appeared very tall.⁶²

The swami was then sent to the Madras Monastery in South India for four years, from 1917 to 1921, where he edited the *Vedanta Kesari*; then to Bhubaneswar for a year in 1921-1922; and finally back to Belur Math. In Madras, he translated from Bengali into English, *St. Durgacharan Nag*, a biography of Nag Mahashay, a saintly householder disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. It was written by Sarat Chandra Chakravarty, a disciple of Swami Vivekananda. At this time, the Nag Mahashay book lists no translator, since the Sri Ramakrishna Math in Madras has no record of who originally translated the book. After being a brahmachari for six years, Abani took his final vows of sannyas by Maharaj in 1921 and was given the name Prabhavananda (one who finds bliss within the Source of all creation).⁶³



Swami Adbhutananda



Swami Abhedananda



Swami Shivananda

Swami Prabhavananda most likely first met Swami Adbhutananda (d. 1920) in or near Calcutta. “I met Latu Maharaj and prostrated before him. Then I went to visit him in his ashrama. He was talking to himself. I did not understand what he was saying, but I found out he was talking to the Lord, complaining about his illness.”⁶⁴

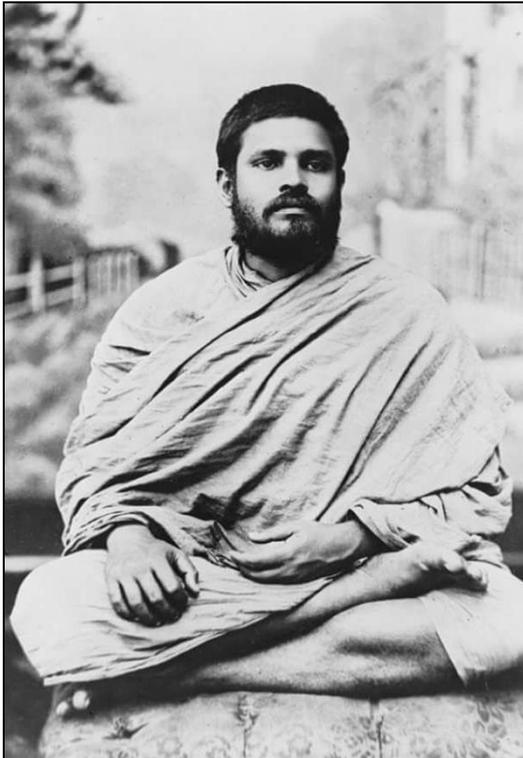
At Belur Math he made the acquaintance of Swami Abhedananda (1866-1939). “Swami Abhedananda was handsome, tall, and well-built. He became fond of me. He used to send for me at the Belur Math.” This was during 1922-1923.⁶⁵

Concerning his relationship with Swami Shivananda (1854-1934):

One day I hesitated to accept something that Maharaj told me. Swami Shivananda was present at the time, and he agreed with Maharaj immediately. I did not like this. Later I talked to Swami Shivananda alone and more or less accused him of being a “yes-man” to Maharaj. Swami Shivananda laughed and said: “My boy, you see in Maharaj only Maharaj; but we see the external form of Maharaj with nothing inside it but God. Whatever Maharaj tells you comes directly from God.”⁶⁶

I lived with Swami Shivananda for quite a long time, because he used to be always with my Master, Swami Brahmananda, and Turiyananda. These three Swamis lived together. So I had the opportunity, while living with my Master, to live with these two great souls. Every day Swami Shivananda would go into the Shrine Room and meditate. There was such intense peace and joy, and something my language fails to express, something emanating from his mind that would charge the whole atmosphere, that would charm all who came, such beauty, such divine peace. We would go and prostrate at his feet. To think of such great lives is of itself meditation.⁶⁷

Swami Brahmananda was the last living Ishvarakoti. After his passing in April 10, 1922, Prabhavananda asked Shivananda, the newly appointed President of the Ramakrishna Order (1922-1934), for permission to go to the Himalayas to practice austerities. Within a week he was sent for and told:



Swami Saradananda

The Swami [Videhananda] in the Malaya Straits [Singapore] wants an assistant.... Will you go?” I said, “Yes, Maharaj, he is a friend of mine. I will go. But please give me a month’s time.” I wanted to go to Benares and visit Swami Turiyananda before leaving India [in June 1922]. When I saw Swami Turiyananda [d. July 21, 1922] in Benares, he said he did not like the idea of my going to Singapore. He said, “As long as they are sending you outside of India, why don’t they send you to America?” He knew Maharaj’s intentions and he wrote a letter to Swami Shivananda.”⁶⁸

When Swami Prabhavananda returned from Benares, he met Swami Subodhananda who asked: “Where are you going?” I said, “I am going to reserve a berth for going to Singapore.” He replied, “All that has been changed, you come with me.” And so I went with him to see Swami Saradananda, who said, “We have other plans for you.” I stayed with Boshi Sen and after a week, I was called back to the Belur Math.⁶⁹

The Trustees of the Math were meeting; Swami Shivananda, Saradananda, Subodhananda, and Shuddhananda were there. I was ushered into the meeting. Swami Shivananda, the President, said, “We have decided to send you to America. Will you go?” I answered, “Of course Maharaj, whatever you ask of me to do I will do.” Then Swami Saradananda made this remark, “Oh, he is so young!” There was a pin drop silence. He stared at me for a long time—maybe for five minutes. Then he said, “He will do.” At that time I was twenty-nine and

looked like a lad of nineteen.⁷⁰

After the meeting I went back to Calcutta with Swami Saradananda in the same boat. Then we went to the Udbodhan; I was walking behind him. Right at the door of the Udbodhan, he turned to me and said, quoting a Bengali saying, “So you are going to cross the seven oceans and the thirteen rivers.” “Yes Maharaj,” I answered, “You are sending me. But I feel nervous. What do I know that I can teach or preach?” Swami Saradananda replied in English, and his words are still ringing in my ears. “That is none of your business! We shall see to that!” And they have seen to it.⁷¹

Swami Prabhavananda also asked Shivananda, "What do I know that I shall teach?" And Shivananda replied, "You have seen the Son of God [Brahmananda], you have seen God." Maharaj taught me one thing, while I was in Madras. We think that we have to preach Thakur, but Thakur does his own preaching, be the witness.⁷²

3. Swami Prabhavananda in the U.S. (1923-1929)



*Swami Prakashananda and
Swami Prabhavananda*

Before his return trip to India, Swami Abhedananda had been in charge of the Vedanta Society of Los Angeles and Long Beach continuously for six months during December 1920 through June 1921. His departure left a void in the Los Angeles area, except for an occasional visit by Paramananda. Consequently, in 1922 Miss Gertrude Topham (Suniti) gave Prakashananda \$1,000 to bring a swami to Los Angeles. If this event had not occurred, Prabhavananda might never have gone there.

Formerly a secretary, Gertrude had been a member of various Vedanta Societies in Los Angeles dating back to 1903. She described a spiritual vision she had in Philadelphia in 1902 before joining the Vedanta Society:

I wakened one morning with a great peace surrounding me, and there before my eyes was a holy vision of Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother sitting together on what seemed to be a high platform. Now, I never heard of Sri Ramakrishna or Holy Mother. But I lay there with a quiet mind looking at them. They were both in yogic posture, although at the time I did not know the posture by name.⁷³

Soon after, Gertrude and her sister moved from Philadelphia, where she had worked as a bookkeeper, to Pasadena. There, Gertrude met Mrs. Taylor, a friend of the Mead sisters, who had known Vivekananda. She later became a disciple of Trigunatita when he journeyed to Los Angeles during April-July 1903 and April-June 1904. Gertrude remained in Los Angeles and exchanged

letters with Trigunatita from 1909 to 1911. She replied in a June 1, 1911 letter, "I have kept up the practice regularly. Held on to Sri Ramakrishna, placed my love and trust in him." When he came to Los Angeles, Trigunatita made her one of the eleven Mothers (and Fathers) of the reorganized 1911 Los Angeles Vedanta Society. Until her passing around 1970, the elderly Miss Topham kept in touch with the Hollywood Vedanta Society. The more youthful nuns would drive her around Los Angeles on her errands.⁷⁴

After receiving the thousand dollars from Gertrude Topham, in October 1922 Prakashananda sailed to India with the future Swami Atulananda (1870-1966), who received sannyas in February 1923, and Sarah Fox (Premika) and her sister Rebecca (Radhika). The two remained in India for three years, teaching at the Nivedita School until they were overcome by



Swami Raghavananda

health problems in December 1925. Prakashananda brought Prabhavananda and Raghavananda back with him to the U.S. on his return journey in April 1923. This was the first time since 1906, a period of seventeen years, that the Belur Math had sent a swami to America.⁷⁵

Mrs. M. L. Barker of the Philadelphia Vedanta Society, informs us that for three years Raghavananda commuted on a weekly basis from New York City to Philadelphia.⁷⁶ However, after three years of extended effort and self-sacrifice from 1924 to 1927, Raghavananda was unable to inaugurate a self-supporting center in that conservative city and due to ill health, he left the U.S. to return to India. It was Swami Yatiswarananda who succeeded in Philadelphia, from 1942-1949.⁷⁷

During a two-month ship voyage from India to the U.S., Prabhavananda and Prakashananda became lasting friends. According to the original intention, Prabhavananda was slated to be trained by Prakashananda in San Francisco and then, when ready, take charge of a new Los Angeles Center.

Raghavananda would assist Bodhananda in New York. When their ship arrived in Boston on June 2, 1923, they received the news from Paramananda that he had purchased the La Crescenta property a few miles north of Los Angeles in March of that year, requiring a change of plans. According to Prabhavananda:

Swami Paramananda said, "Let him stay as my assistant." Then Swami Prakashananda asked me, "What do you want to do?" I replied, "You brought me here, whatever you say that's what I shall do." Then he said, "You come with me to San Francisco."⁷⁸

If he had desired, Prabhavananda could have become the assistant minister in Paramananda's Centers in Boston and La Crescenta.

After living with Paramananda in Boston for over a week, the swamis Prakashananda and Prabhavananda journeyed to New York to stay with Bodhananda for a week, then to Buffalo, Niagara Falls, and Chicago—seeing the sights where Swamiji brought the message of Vedanta to the United States—finally reaching San Francisco on June 24. Prabhavananda was optimistic. He wrote in a 1923 letter to a friend:

We stayed in Boston and had a very pleasant time with Paramanandaji. The sisters were very kind to us and treated us as their own.... I find there is a great awakening in this country to know about our religion and philosophy. The people here have become tired of materialism and they want something practical, healthier and beneficial.⁷⁹

Working as an assistant swami in San Francisco at the Hindu Temple at 2963 Webster Street from 1923 to 1925, Prabhavananda taught a Tuesday evening class on the *Bhagavad Gita* and gave the Sunday evening lecture. He made a ten-day pilgrimage with Prakashananda to the Shanti Ashrama, where years before Turiyananda had given spiritual training to a group of students in 1900-1902. In a letter dated June 6, 1924 to Swami Siddheswarananda at the Madras Math, he wrote, "And the spiritual atmosphere! One could feel it tangibly. The spirit of Hari Maharaj [Turiyananda] is still vibrating. Hari Maharaj once said that the atmosphere of spirituality that he created would remain for at least a century."⁸⁰

Swami Prabhavananda visited the Ananda Ashrama at La Crescenta in June 1924. There he had a wonderful time and was quite popular. Paramananda threw a farewell party for him and invited many of his friends for dinner. Prabhavananda recounted:

Everyone said some funny story. Then came my turn. One of the men folks who told the funniest story, I wanted him to point his fingers to his head and asked him what was the abbreviation for mountain? He had to reply, pointing to his head "mt" (empty). There was a roar of laughter.... They all wanted me to stay there for some more days. But I could not, as Swami Prakashananda wanted me back soon.⁸¹

In San Francisco, Prakashananda always treated Prabhavananda affectionately, like a younger brother. Many devotees were endeared by the older swami's selfless spirit, loving heart and happy nature. Years later, in 1938, they ran out of funds for the new temple then under construction in Hollywood. Prabhavananda refused to borrow. "Swami Prakashananda taught me, 'Never go into debt for anything.' If the Lord wants something done, let him provide the means to get it done." From him I learned never to mortgage to build anything.⁸²

After only two years of seasoning in San Francisco, Prabhavananda became an effective public speaker and administrator. He was ready to be the founder, organizer and leader of a new center. By 1924 the attendance at the lectures and classes were at an all-time high. Swami Prakashananda wanted Swamiji's message to be spread far and wide and consequently desired that Prabhavananda open up a new Vedanta Center. There was an opportunity for expansion in the Pacific Northwest.⁸³

Swami Abhedananda had made his first visit to Portland in 1901. In January 1904:

The Vedanta Society of New York received a letter from Portland, Oregon announcing that a small group of Swami Vivekananda's former students, still full of the enthusiasm and devotion which he infused into all who came in contact

with him, were starting a Vedanta Society in that city, “prepared,” as one of their number stated, “to devote their lives to the work.”⁸⁴

The following year the Vedanta Society of New York reported:

Now word comes to us that Swami Trigunatita, head of the Vedanta Society in San Francisco, is to pay them [Portland] a visit and give them the help and inspiration of his personal direction for a season (beginning June 1905). Swami Atulananda mentioned that Swami Trigunatita’s, “field of action was extended even to the state of Oregon.”⁸⁵



Swami Prakashananda and Swami Prabhavananda

Accompanied by his traveling companion, Herschel Parker, Abhedananda had attended the 1905 Portland Fair for a few days during that summer. Years later, Prakashananda had given a series of eight talks in Portland at the Public Library. He was also invited to lecture at the University of Oregon in Eugene in 1914. Swami Paramananda followed with three speaking engagements in Portland in April 1918 and a brief visit there with his friends during September 1920.⁸⁶

At the invitation of some interested people in Portland, Swami Prabhavananda arrived from San Francisco as a guest speaker on September 22, 1925. At the time he was not thinking of establishing a new Vedanta Center in the Pacific Northwest. He stated, “My only desire is to sow the seed. The harvest is in the hands of God.” The swami spoke in the Library Hall of the Public Library on September 23 and the following Sunday morning at the Assembly Hall of the Portland Hotel, where he offered four classes on Raja Yoga. His first talk:

... was so impressive that the people immediately sought to know when more lectures would be given.... So intense had the interest become that after the last series of [six] lectures a class was readily formed, something like 120 students attending.... Requests came in for a resident swami, and a committee was formed who elected a President, Vice-President, Secretary and Treasurer.

This encounter prepared the ground for a permanent center in Portland.⁸⁷

Theresa Olson, treasurer of the Vedanta Society in Portland for thirty-five years, aided Swami Prabhavananda in his pioneering work. She explained:

At the time I was entertaining a friend who had been ill, and one evening looking over the paper for some place to go, I saw a picture of a face that I seemed almost to recognize, and said, “This is where we will go.” It was to be a meeting in the lobby of the famous Portland Hotel, and there I sat on the front seat with my friend before a person from a foreign land. It was in the year 1925 that Swami Prabhavananda of India came to Portland, and it was before him that I sat on this occasion [September 27th].

A musician had played on a harp, and when the swami began to speak, it was as if a new heaven and a new earth was opened for me, and I said to myself, “Is it possible that this is happening?” but I knew it was and that it was very real because in my very inmost heart I answered “Yes, yes” to every word he said. It was as if I was sitting under a huge fountain of Divine Perfection and Bliss, and cleansed of all doubts and fears and born, and that Bliss is still mine.

Once, Swami Prabhavananda gathered the few of us and gave us our names. Mine is Hari Priya (dear to the Lord), and I still feel the blessing and Divine protection of that occasion.⁸⁸

Swamis like Prabhavananda, Akhilananda, Nikhilananda, and Ashokananda did not serve as assistant swamis in the U.S. for an extended length of time. After a couple of years of seasoning, they were well fit to take charge of a center. With the backing and active encouragement of Prakashananda, Prabhavananda established the Vedanta Society of Portland in the Kraemer Building on November 6, 1925. If Prabhavananda had remained in San Francisco for another year and a half, he might well have become head of the center after Prakashananda left the physical body. Prabhavananda was the first of the second generation swamis to organize a new Western center that is still part of the Ramakrishna Order. Prior to this, the last presently existing center-ashram to be founded was Shanti Ashrama started by Swami Turiyananda in 1900.

Prakashananda told Prabhavananda that he would have to take the elderly and somewhat bossy Mrs. Clara Pettee (Durga Devi) with him. She turned out to be a great aid as a personal secretary while the swami was in Portland. She had been a financial contributor in purchasing the property for the Hindu temple prior to its construction in 1903-1905, and had attended Trigunatita's austere yoga classes at Shanti Ashrama in 1906 and 1910. Between 1908 and 1912 she lived in a convent across the street from the Hindu temple. When Prabhavananda first arrived in San Francisco, Mrs. Pettee was waiting for him at the door, since she occupied a flat in the Temple House.

In response to Prakashananda's earnest appeal, Belur Math sent Dayananda to replace Prabhavananda as the assistant minister in San Francisco in June 1926.⁸⁹ Clara Pettee wrote her friend Nina MacDonald in Tacoma, Washington inviting her to attend the dedication of the new center. She added, "A blessing is in store for you."

Prabhavananda and Prakashananda performed the dedication ceremony for the Vedanta Society of Portland, Oregon on Friday, November 6, 1925. Nina wrote:

[I expected a] picturesque Oriental ceremonial. And what did I find? I found, on the top floor of an office building, a little hall with a seating capacity of perhaps a hundred. The windows, hung with soft gray draperies, had black valances, on which were embroidered in both Sanskrit and English the sacred name—Om. Two pictures hung on the freshly tinted walls—one of the boy Christ, the other a large and very beautiful likeness of Swami Vivekananda, the beloved disciple of the Holy One. The platform, banked with the colorful flowers of autumn, held the reading desk, one large and one small chair, and a rug. Soft black curtains hung at the back, before the door leading into the little room that will serve as the swami's office. The severe purity of the entire effect was rendered doubly impressive by its absolute simplicity. Already an atmosphere of holy calm seemed to hover over the little chapel.

To begin the ceremonies, Prabhavananda introduced Prakashananda, who gave the dedication speech:

With the faint fragrance of incense that filled the air, he spoke, tenderly, humbly, yet with a power.... All too soon came the closing words, and as we bowed our heads to receive his blessing, I felt sure that in the hearts of each and every one of us had been awakened and quickened the longing for God which, in the fullness of time, will increase in intensity until we, too, striving ever upward, will attain to true and full realization.⁹⁰

In 1925 Nina MacDonald "had been a constant attendant at Swami's [Prabhavananda] lectures in Tacoma, Washington, located 145 miles north of Portland."⁹¹ The following year she wrote:

The swami's lectures and lessons in Portland, Oregon, met with instant and joyous response. Earnest souls were hungering and thirsting for the truth he so lovingly, clearly and convincingly presented to them, and when the week's lectures were ended, he was asked to stay with them and establish a center in their city. To that end he returned to Portland as soon as he had completed his itinerancy farther north.... [Nina] was eager to learn more of what seemed to be the purest and sweetest teaching ever presented to the world. My heart told me that, in Swami Prabhavananda, I had, after long, weary years of seeking, found a true teacher of a true teaching.⁹²

Ten years later Nina composed a short poem on Sri Ramakrishna for *Prabuddha Bharata*.

Despite this auspicious beginning, Swami Prabhavananda did not have an easy time of it in Portland. Because of a lack of funds and no permanent home for the Society, the move to Portland proved a difficult adventure. Swami was entirely on his own and received no financial support from India or from another center. He went to Portland with only forty dollars in his pocket, and that was soon spent. During his first winter in Portland, he delivered a course of eight lectures on the Gospel of John.⁹³

Swami Prabhavananda (as well as Paramananda), like Swami Abhedananda who left for India in 1921, placed emphasis on the geographical expansion of the Society. He traveled north to Tacoma, Washington for a second time, giving three talks before a full house in Theosophical Hall February 8-10, 1926. According to the report, "The Swami Prabhavananda presented the truths of his subject so clearly and logically that, at the conclusion, expressions of satisfaction and delight were heard on every side." In the evening, an eager group of enthusiasts gathered, and:

... the swami answered most satisfyingly many questions; it was suggested that a Class for study and the practice of meditation be formed. The idea was taken up with enthusiasm and the group was organized into a small Society. A president and secretary-treasurer were elected, and a committee appointed, looking toward the time when a center can be opened with a swami in charge.⁹⁴

Prakashananda had spent a week in Seattle and given two lectures in Everett, Washington in 1914, and Nobel Prize winning poet Rabindranath Tagore had spoken before the Sunset Club in Seattle on "The Cult of Nationalism" in September of 1916. Thirteen years later Tagore conducted a series of lectures in Vancouver. In March and April of 1918, Paramananda presented eleven public lectures and seven classes in Seattle, attracting capacity crowds of 250 per event. Many hours of each day were devoted to interviews. He also had time to give a talk in Tacoma. A Seattle resident wrote to the center, "Words are not adequate to express our delight in having the privilege of attending these lectures and the meditation classes. The swami's teachings are so broad, practical and full of uplifting Truth."⁹⁵

Paramananda returned to Seattle, where he gave six talks at the New Thought Temple in August and September 1920.

Prabhavananda had spoken before in Seattle and in Everett during his first Tacoma visit in October 1925. He lectured three times in May of 1926 at the Theosophical Lodge, and on Sunday at the Chamber of Commerce Auditorium for the Congress of Religions sponsored by the First Unitarian Church of Seattle They reported:

As on Swami's [Prabhavananda] previous visit, the large hall was crowded to capacity, many standing throughout the entire lecture. By the tense interest during the lectures and the eager questioning afterwards, the people proved they are hungry for the wonderful truths of Vedanta.

Swami Prabhavananda then went to Tacoma for a third time and spent a few hours with Bodhananda before the latter returned to New York City. Before returning to Portland, Prabhavananda gave a talk at the Universalist Church in Tacoma. "In consequence, there has been expressed a great desire for the opening of new centers [in Seattle and Tacoma] with swamis in charge."⁹⁶

In 1926 Prakashananda was to be at the Shanti Ashrama with his students for their annual summer classes, so he asked Prabhavananda to come to San Francisco to receive Swamis Paramananda, Akhilananda, Dayananda, and Gayatri Devi on their arrival from India on June 18th. At the reception, Prabhavananda formally introduced Dayananda to the members and friends of the San Francisco Society.⁹⁷

After a year of operation, the Portland membership had increased, and there was a desire to move to a bigger hall. In that same year, in February 1927, Prabhavananda and Bodhananda traveled to the Hindu temple in San Francisco, where they joined with Dayananda to conduct the memorial service for the sudden passing (February 1927) of their beloved fellow monk, Prakashananda. *Message of the East* tells us:

His selfless spirit, his consecrated life, his great loving heart, his happy nature, endeared him to very many, and those who were privileged to draw close to him are comforted in their loss only by the thought that death for a God-given soul is blessed.

According to Marie Louise Burke, Swami Prakashananda's (1874-1927) older brother was Swami Shuddhananda (1872-1938), the first President of the Ramakrishna Order after Sri Ramakrishna's four disciples (in 1938). Shuddhananda displayed his brilliance by single-handedly translating the entire eight volumes of the *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* from English to Bengali, using sweet and powerful language. Listening to Vivekananda's stirring words, Prakashananda formally joined the monastery in 1896. He received *diksha* from Holy Mother and, after being a monastic for only one year, received sannyas from his hero, Vivekananda. There is a group photograph taken in the Cossipore garden in 1897 in which Prakashananda is the only swami in the photo who was not a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. Swami Dayananda mentioned that at one time:

Swami Vivekananda put his arms about Swami Prakashananda's neck and told him that he had sacrificed his own life in the West and now he, Swami Prakashananda, was to sacrifice his life also (which he did for twenty years) and because of these sacrifices, Great Ones would come out of the West.⁹⁸

Prakashananda's contemporary swamis described him this way:

His cheerful, loving disposition, his sympathy with those who were in trouble, his infinite patience, his childlike simplicity, combined with a deep, devotional nature, endeared the swami to his students in California. They adored him from the bottom of their hearts.⁹⁹

On his departure to India in 1922, Prakashananda's devotees wrote:

We recognize in you the personal representative of the Divine Mother. In your gentleness of spirit we feel Her gentle touch and in your ministrations we have been blessed with the sweetness of her love, for us, Her Western children. Under your fostering watch care the Society has grown in grace and in numbers, with a wonderful underlying harmony in the face of many difficulties.¹⁰⁰

Prakashananda had come to the U.S. to serve as Trigunatita's assistant after the terrible San Francisco earthquake in August 1906. He remained there until 1914. He made a six-week lecture tour of Oregon and Washington and, with the help of Mrs. Clara Pettee, intended to start a new center in West Spokane, Washington in May of 1914. After returning to the Bay Area, he founded the Pacific Vedanta Center at 1362 Post Street in San Francisco in June. Trigunatita did not oppose it. It was largely composed of dissident lay members led by Mrs. Pettee (Durga Devi) who had broken off from the parent Society. When Trigunatita passed away in January 1915, the courts ruled on November 4 that the temple, and all of the property in Trigunatita's estate belonged to the Vedanta Society. There was some talk about Abhedananda or Paramananda being his successor, but Brahmananda and the Trustees at the Belur Math asked Prakashananda to take charge of the San Francisco Center and to close down the Pacific Vedanta Center. He did so on December 1, 1915, and the dissident members returned with him to the main center, where they united with their old friends.¹⁰¹

That year Prabhavananda received an invitation to give a lecture on Vedanta before the students and professors at Reed College in Portland. Afterwards, he was the guest of honor at a luncheon attended by the professors.¹⁰² The following year, Swami Madhavananda of San Francisco, the future President of the Ramakrishna Order, made a visit to the Portland Center. He spoke there twice in the month of June 1928. A few months later, the Vedanta Society of Portland gained legal status with the state of Oregon, becoming officially incorporated on Oct. 4, 1928 with Hal G. Child as president. In January 1929, by a unanimous decision of the official board, the Society moved its headquarters to the Studio Building, which featured a new and modern lecture hall. Membership increased, and all classes and lectures were better attended than anytime in the history of the Society.¹⁰³

The Portland Vedanta Society's report to the *Prabuddha Bharata* read:

At last it seems the Portland public is becoming aware of the splendid work that Swami Prabhavananda is doing. We feel that it is impossible to put into words an estimate of the deep and untiring efforts of the swami to bring to the Western world the ideals of the Vedanta. To those who are in personal touch with him in his work this is a constant inspiration.

As for the unseen influence upon the lives of all who come into contact with the swami, we can only say its effect is beyond estimate.¹⁰⁴

Before relocating to Los Angeles, Swami Prabhavananda wrote twelve articles for the *Vedanta Kesari* (1922-1927) and four for the *Prabuddha Bharata* (1924-1925). He was very interested in reaching the public through the written word. Early in his ministry he came out with three booklets. Sister Devamata (Laura Glenn) reviewed his 16-page *Subconscious Mind and Its Control* in Paramananda's monthly magazine the *Message of the East* (1926, p. 112). She concluded:

The swami brings to bear upon this very popular subject a mind enriched by the profound philosophy of the Indo-Aryans, and fortified by its own realizations.... Not only does the swami illumine with the light of Vedic knowledge the nature and functions of the subconscious, but he also throws light upon the terms and tenets of Eastern thought by relating them to our modern psychological concepts.

Concerning the second pamphlet *Superconscious Vision*, Sister Devamata stressed (*Message of the East*, 1926, p. 196):

It defines with admirable clarity the various fields of human consciousness and leads the reader to the inevitable conclusion that the one goal worthy of the seeking is that supreme state transcending the limitations of the ego, where we are born again into the life of Spirit, the one Universal Self. The swami covers many points in a very few pages, doing away with all sense of confusion by his clear, simple, and one-pointed presentation of certain great, fundamental facts.

His third pamphlet entitled *Cosmology* (1927) was also the title of his 1925 *Vedanta Kesari* article.¹⁰⁵

Swami Prabhavananda's fifty-page *Dynamic Religion* (1927) consists of six essays and is dedicated to Swami Prakashananda. *Message of the East* (Oct. 1927) commented that he "seeks to state the universal truth of the Vedanta philosophy, in a simple, concise manner, free from sectarian bias and suited to the needs of the Western enquirer." The *Vedanta Kesari* (Nov. 1927) reported that the five lectures, "are clear and forceful and give the reader a fairly comprehensive idea of what true spiritual life means and the method for its attainment."

Lydia Kingsmill Commander from Tacoma, Washington prepared the foreword of the book for, "My dear friend, Prabhavananda." She says:

He tells us where the spiritual self is enshrined and how it may be awakened and developed. Entanglements of vanity, pride, sensuousness, materiality, false teachings—all these hold back the spirit from conscious union with the All; but to those who devotedly seek That, That is revealed.

Two decades earlier, Lydia Commander had written a book about family life in the U.S. titled, *The American Idea* (1907), which was concerned with the twenty-five thousand poor, primarily immigrant children who lived without a mother's love in institutions throughout New York State. She had urged the nation's women, especially childless married women, to adopt homeless children. She also served as an ordained pastor of the Free Congregational Church (Unitarian) from 1897, a speaker at the 1904 International Congress of Women in Berlin, Germany and in Toronto, Canada in 1909, a delegate to the National Peace Congress in 1907 and 1909, and the 1908-1909 President of the National Progressive Suffrage Union.¹⁰⁶

A devotee of Swamiji and of Prakashananda invited Prabhavananda to St. Louis. The *Vedanta Kesari* (May 1928) reported:

During the month of October [1927] Prabhavananda, at the urgent requests of friends living in St. Louis, Missouri spent two weeks (October 14-29) in that city lecturing with great success to large and enthusiastic audiences. A permanent interest was created through these lectures and a center established.

Passage money was sent to the Ramakrishna Mission headquarters in India for a swami. Mrs. O. H. Vornbrock, the secretary of the center, wrote:

[Before leaving St. Louis, Swami Prabhavananda] appointed the Executive Officers, and gave us instructions about organizing. After he left, a Constitution and By-Laws were drawn up; notices were sent out early in January 1928, to those who had signified their desire to become members of the Society, and the Constitution was adopted. Eighteen came forward to sign, and we were officially a part of the Mission.¹⁰⁷

Later, in June 1928, it was decided:

Swami Akhilananda is expected to take charge of the center in a short time. Swami Akhilananda informed Swami Shivananda, the President of the Ramakrishna Order, that an anonymous donor had offered sufficient funds to establish a new center. Swami Shivananda had wired back "CABLE CONSIDERED FULLY PROCEED WITHOUT HESITATION TO ST LOUIS ANY OTHER CENTER INADVISABLE."

In return, Akhilananda notified Shivananda that it would mean forfeiting the donation, since the benefactor stipulated the new center must be located in the Eastern section of the country.

Prabhavananda might have gone to St. Louis instead of Hollywood, but he said, "This lady, who was my sponsor, died in the meantime. So it was not possible for me to go." Otto Wade Fallert, the president of the organization in St. Louis, presented a long series of lectures on various aspects of the Vedanta philosophy to a group of nine to twenty-four people in 1928 and 1929. He was a teacher at the Fallert School of Music. A decade later Satprakashananda organized a permanent center in the city of St. Louis in 1938 that is going strong today.¹⁰⁸

Concerning the prior history of Vedanta in St. Louis, Missouri, on May 24, 1904 Swami Abhedananda visited the city to attend the World's Fair. He lectured at the Webster Groves Society there and he arranged for an exhibition of Vedanta literature to be placed in the Book Fair. Abhedananda returned to St. Louis in October 1905 to present an informal talk to an audience of fifty people. In 1908 the *Vedanta Monthly Bulletin* mentions a center (possibly a study group) in St. Louis. Swami Paramananda gave several talks in Saint Louis when he was traveling to and from California (e.g., November 1925).¹⁰⁹

Prabhavananda was invited by Akhilananda to come to his center during the Durga Puja season. The event might have occurred during the dedication of the Providence Center, but the date is uncertain. Prabhavananda recollected:

A girl was present who was to be initiated by Swami Akhilananda. However, after hearing just one of my lectures, the girl requested initiation from me. Swami Akhilananda graciously asked me to initiate her, but of course, it could not be done. I spoke to the girl, and when she insisted said, "All right, you accept me as your guru; and as your guru, I am asking you to be initiated by Swami Akhilananda"¹¹⁰

Prabhavananda called Akhilananda his "twin brother," since they received sannyas together from Swami Brahmananda. In later years, when Akhilananda spoke about Maharaj, he would openly weep. When departing from India, Swami Saradananda told him, "I have been to America. Learn from my experience. Some people will praise you to the skies and glorify you. Others will throw mud on you. Take both equally." Akhilananda remained at La Crescenta to conduct classes for six months until Paramananda called him to replace him in Boston during his absence in November.¹¹¹

Swami Prabhavananda recalled that in 1928:

A woman from Alhambra, whom I had met in San Francisco, had come to Portland. She invited me to go to Los Angeles to give three lectures. I think she knew Swamiji, Swami Turiyananda, and many other devotees. She was a German woman (she changed her name)... Mrs. Wilhelm.

She rented space at the Symphony Hall in the Blanchard Building at 232 South Hill Street. According to the 1912 edition of the *Los Angeles City Directory*, Assembly Hall, Blanchard Hall, Music Hall, and Symphony Hall are located at 232-33 S. between Broadway and Hill Street. Swamis Vivekananda, Turiyananda, Sachchidananda II, Abhedananda, Paramananda, and Prabhavananda each lectured in one or both of these locations.

Mrs. Wilhelm was originally a woman with few assets living in Long Beach, until they struck oil on her property. With this newfound wealth, she and her husband moved to Alhambra and built a large home. She might have been the Mrs. E.

Wilhelm who lived on Signal Hill in Long Beach and was selected by Swami Trigunatita to be one of the “Mothers” who headed a Vedanta sub-Center in 1911. Paramananda had previously lectured on Signal Hill in Long Beach in August 1915. As mentioned in Chapter I, a reorganization meeting was held at the home of Mrs. Harry Wilhelm, the Treasurer of the Vedanta Society of Los Angeles, on Signal Hill in Long Beach, in March 1920. The group successfully requested Abhedananda to relocate to Los Angeles for six months before he departed for India. On numerous occasions, a Mrs. Henry Wilhelm invited Paramananda to her home in Alhambra in 1928 and the following year.¹¹²

Prabhavananda asked his senior brother monk, Madhavananda (later President of the Ramakrishna Order), if he should visit Los Angeles. After receiving Madhavananda’s sanction, he traveled south to San Francisco to be with his friends, then on to Los Angeles and Alhambra during the second fortnight of July. Prabhavananda delivered a series of three talks at Symphony Hall August 7-9, 1928. After hearing his inspiring words and sensing his deep spirituality, a group of devotees wanted him to open a Vedanta Society in Los Angeles.



Sister Lalita

Before his first two public speeches, Paramananda introduced him to the audience. Paramananda extended the swami an invitation to address his congregation at the Ananda Ashrama in La Crescenta, California on August 12. The *Message of the East* concluded, “The visiting Swami [Prabhavananda] spoke eloquently on the subject of universality.... It was very gratifying to Swami Paramananda to have a brother swami as his guest.”¹¹³ At the lectures in Symphony Hall Swami met Mrs. Carrie Mead Wyckoff (Sister Lalita) and her sister Alice Mead Hansbrough (Shanti). Swami Prabhavananda later said:

Before I left Los Angeles to return to Portland, they [Sister Lalita and Shanti] asked me if they could join me in Portland. I said, surely, why not?

He rented a room for both sisters in Portland, but Shanti returned to Los Angeles to be with her daughter Dorothy, and only Lalita remained there for over a year. Swami continues:

We wanted to build an ashrama there. Sister bought land [ten acres] near Lake Oswego, but the Christian Scientists objected. When we got her down payment of \$1,000 back, I felt relieved. Then Sister told me about her house in Hollywood. I wrote to Mahapurush Maharaj [Swami Shivananda], and he wrote back, “Yes, I give you permission to open a center in Los Angeles.” But I

had to wait for Vividishananda to come to Portland.



William Mead

After four years of fruitful service in Portland and at the invitation of Sister Lalita, Prabhavananda moved to the Hollywood Hills to form a new Vedanta Center. The *Prabuddha Bharata* tells us that in addition to Sister Lalita, “Many old students of Swamiji and new friends around Hollywood and the vicinity had been urging Prabhavananda to come down to Hollywood and open a Vedanta Center.” Lalita generously donated the home that her wealthy brother (or son) gave to her at 1946 Ivar Avenue (later named Vedanta Place), and her annuity of three hundred dollars a month from her deceased brother’s (William Mead) estate to establish a Vedanta Society at that location. After a long waiting period of over a year, early in December of 1929, Swami Vividishananda arrived from India to assume leadership of the Portland Center. He had been at the Advaita Ashrama, a monastery of the Ramakrishna Order located in the Himalayas, where

he had been editor of their journal.¹¹⁴

After about half a year as head of the center, in June 1930 Swami Vividishananda (1893-1980) had to withdraw from the Portland Vedanta Society because of ill health and financial difficulty. For a year and a half the Society was without a monastic leader. Vividishananda, like Sachchidananda II before him, had been placed in charge of a center without the benefit of prior Western training. From 1930 until 1932 a small number of ardent devotees continued their studies, holding weekly meetings in the Portland Public Library.



Back row: Swami Turiyananda, Jesse Mead, Dorothy Hansbrough
Front row: Carry Wyckoff, Ralph Wyckoff, Helen Mead, Alice Hansbrough

Before Prabhavananda traveled to Hollywood, Ralph Wyckoff (1882-1925) moved to 1946 Ivar Avenue (now Vedanta Place) in 1922, and his mother Carrie Wyckoff moved in somewhere between 1922 and 1924. He is listed as the householder and Carrie as the resident in 1924. When Swamiji occupied the house in South Pasadena in 1900, Ralph Wyckoff, the seventeen-year-old son of Carrie Wyckoff, was one of the borders. Marie Louise Burke writes that:

Ralph loved Swamiji and served him personally whenever and however he could. He would shine his shoes, fetch his tobacco from upstairs, and do other things that Swamiji asked of him. Often they used to talk together, and Mrs. Hansbrough remembered that once Swamiji asked Ralph: "Can you see your own eyes?" Ralph answered that he could not, except in a mirror. "God is like that," Swamiji told him. "He is as close as your own eyes" (CW, IX:404).¹⁵

Ralph and his four-year-old cousin Dorothy Hansbrough received a sacred blessing from Swamiji (See Sub-chapter I). It was Ralph Wyckoff who brought Turiyananda to the Vivekananda House in July 1900. Years later Ralph, a graduate of Cornell University,

became a civil and landscape engineer, living with his mother at 646 West 35th Place in 1912. Unfortunately, in December 1925, at the age of forty-three Ralph "was fatally injured by the fall of a boulder while doing engineering work on the desert near Mt. San Jacinto," California. After his loss of life in Palm Springs, they held funeral services in the Little Church of the Flowers at Forest Lawn Memorial Cemetery.¹⁶

William Mead (1862-1927), the wealthy brother of Sister Lalita (Carrie Wyckoff), was an important figure in Los Angeles in the early 20th Century. In 1901 he had purchased four acres (equivalent to 139 yards by 139 yards) as a rural retreat. The Vedanta Society in Hollywood now stands on that plot. There is a possibility that Swamis Abhedananda, Turiyananda, or Trigunatita visited the property, though there is no evidence to support this claim. The land was vacant except for Home 245, which Mead had built on the northwest corner of Franklin Avenue and Vine Street sometime before 1906. The estimated population of Hollywood, which was not yet part of Los Angeles, was five hundred in 1900, and by 1905 it had swelled to two thousand. Mead had another building constructed on a hill that he and his wife used as a summerhouse. Eventually Mead subdivided the property into lots and moved a house to it. Either William Mead gave the home (the present Green House minus some rooms later added on) and the lot to Sister Lalita, and her son, or Ralph Wyckoff, bought the house around 1922. The adjoining lot became Sister Lalita's garden and lawn and eventually the site of the Vedanta Temple.¹⁷

After relocating to Los Angeles from Lewistown, Illinois in 1886, William Mead became prominent in the real estate business. He served as a member of the California State Legislature from 1896, the Board that drafted the City Charter, the

Board of Water Commissioners (1903-1907) that brought about a completion of the Aqueduct, and Director of the Chamber of Commerce for six years. As President of Los Angeles's first City Planning Commission and of the Municipal Housing Commission, he had selflessly offered his time to improving living conditions in Los Angeles. He had organized and maintained control of the Central Bank at Fourth Street and Broadway between 1900 and 1908, until he sold his financial interest.

Mead had purchased four hundred acres (equivalent to 1 mile by 5/8th of a mile) adjoining Griffith Park from Colonel Griffith in 1911. He later subdivided the property to form the Los Feliz hillside residential neighborhood, and in 1925 he purchased the remaining one hundred and thirty-two acres of the Griffith estate. These two buys constitute most of the property north of Los Feliz Boulevard from Western Avenue to the Los Angeles River up to Griffith Park. To help buyers purchase a home, he generously provided financial aid. Mead and his wife owned a home on Vermont Avenue near Griffith Park from 1911 before moving to the Beverly Hills Hotel, where he passed away. Upon his passing in 1927, the generous **philanthropist** William Mead left a trust that was supposed to provide incomes of \$300 per month for life, for his three sisters, Mrs. Carrie Wyckoff, Alice Hansbrough of Los Angeles and Mrs. Ida Herman (b. 1856 or 1857) of Santa Monica. Ida was the oldest of the four Mead sisters. William's surviving wife Nella Wilde Mead (1874-1965) managed much of the estate.¹⁸

One cannot help but be impressed by the fact that if a long series of events had not occurred, Swami Prabhavananda would probably not have come to Los Angeles. His final destination could have been somewhere in India, Singapore, Boston, La Crescenta, New York City, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Portland, St. Louis, Chicago, or some other location.

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II. Swami Paramananda and Swami Prabhavananda (1906-1929)

The word meanings for the abbreviations used in the endnotes can be found at the end of the eBook in the “[Bibliography Alphabetized by Abbreviation](#)” Section.

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