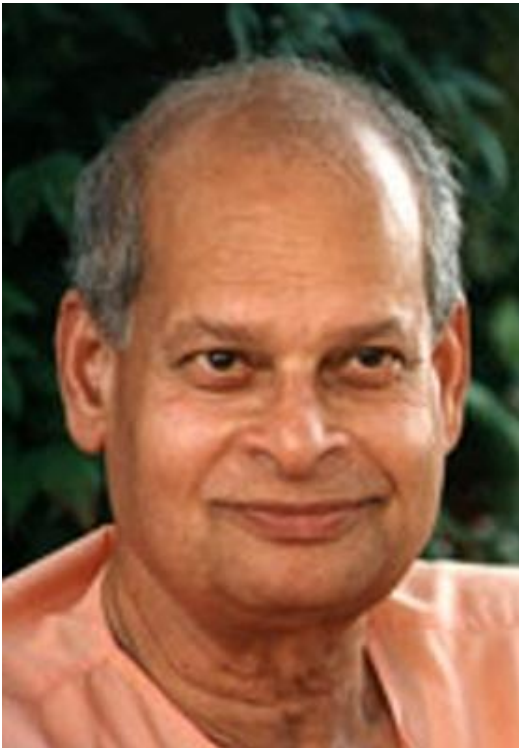


VII. The Swami Swahananda Era (1976-2012)

1. [Swami Swahananda's Background](#)
2. [Swami Swahananda's Major Objectives](#)
3. [Swami Swahananda at the Vedanta Society of Southern California](#)
4. [The Assistant Swamis](#)
5. [Functional Departments of the Vedanta Society](#)
6. [Charitable Organizations](#)
7. [Santa Barbara Temple and Convent](#)
8. [Ramakrishna Monastery, Trabuco Canyon](#)
9. [Vivekananda House, South Pasadena \(1955-2012\)](#)

1. Swami Swahananda's Background*

After Swami Prabhavananda passed away on July 4, 1976, Swami Chetanananda was assigned the position of head of the Vedanta Society of Southern California (VSSC). Swamis Vireswarananda and Bhuteshananda, President and Vice-President of the Ramakrishna Order, urged Swami Swahananda to take over the VSSC. They realized that a man with his talents and capabilities should be in charge of a large center.



Swami Swahananda

Swahananda agreed to leave the quiet life of Berkeley for the more challenging work in the Southland. Having previously been in charge of the large New Delhi Center in the capital of India, he was up to the task and assumed leadership of the VSSC on December 15, 1976. He was enthusiastically welcomed, and soon became well established in the life of the Society.

Swami Swahananda was born on June 29, 1921 in Habiganj, Sylhet in Bengal (now in Bangladesh). His father had been a government official and an initiated disciple of Holy Mother. He had wanted to renounce the world and become a monk, but Holy Mother reportedly had told him, "No, my child, but from your family two shall come." (As well as Swahananda, a nephew also later joined the Ramakrishna Order).

When he was a boy, Swahananda had begun to associate with the Ramakrishna Math in Habiganj. Swami Akhandananda, the third President of the Ramakrishna Order from 1934 to 1937, wrote in a letter to him, "If you build up your life with Sri Ramakrishna as the center, whatever is good for you will automatically come to you." He was later blessed with initiation in 1937 by Swami Vijnanananda (1868-1938), the last monastic disciple of Sri Ramakrishna to become President of the Order, from 1937-1938.

Swami Swahananda earned two Masters degrees, one in English Literature and the other in English Language, at the University of Calcutta in 1945 and 1946. The following year he joined the Ramakrishna Order at Pathuriaghata Student's Home, which later developed into Narendrapur. Consequently, he served for two years at Vidya Mandir College near Belur Math as a lecturer and superintendent of the hostel. Then for twelve years, from 1949 until 1961, he worked in the Madras Math (now Chennai), including one year at the Mysore Study Circle in 1954, and one year 1961-1962 in the Himalayas where he lived the life of an

*Editorial assistance provided by Amrita Salm

austere sadhu. He was given brahmacharya vows in 1952 and sannyas vows were conferred on him in 1956. Both vows were conferred by Swami Shankarananda the President of the Ramakrishna Order.¹

Swami Premeshananda (1884-1967) was a highly respected monk of the Ramakrishna Order, and a disciple of the Holy Mother. Swahananda met Premeshananda in 1937, when he came to receive initiation from Vijnanananda. Premeshananda took a fatherly interest in motivating the future Swami Swahananda. Throughout his lifetime he wrote the young monk thirty-eight letters, from 1939 to 1964. In 1942 Premeshananda told him, “I shall die happy if I see that you have awakened. The very day you realize the infinite joy of the inner world of consciousness, you will become an instrument of Sri Ramakrishna.” Seven years later he affirmed in a 1949 letter to Swahananda:

It is rare indeed for someone to be able to overlook a person’s customs, behavior, language, and the like, and consider him one’s very own. But that is just what we have to do.... If you make the attempt, you can enjoy the bliss of jivan-mukti (liberation while still living) in this very body.²

While stationed at Madras, Swami Swahananda was a pujari for two and a half years. It was a full-time position that ran from 4:00 in the morning until 9:00 at night. He then succeeded Swami Budhananda (who later went to Hollywood) as the Editor of *Vedanta Kesari* (1956-1961). Gertrude Topham, who in 1922 had given Prakashananda a thousand dollars to get a Swami for Los Angeles—resulting in Swami Prabhavananda’s being sent—was greatly impressed by an editorial she read in the *Vedanta Kesari* (March 1960). Swami Kailasananda, who became the Vice-President of the Order, informed her that it was written by Swahananda, whom he described as being “a really good scholar.”

Swami Madhavananda, a disciple of Holy Mother, wrote to Swahananda that translating “is like killing bugs, one by one; i.e., word for word.” When visiting Madras, Madhavananda prophetically foretold Swahananda’s future: “He will give initiation.”

Swahananda then became the youngest swami to be placed in charge of the large New Delhi Center (1962-1968), succeeding Swami Ranganathananda, the famous orator. Swami Gokulananda (1929-2007) describes meeting Swahananda in the 1960s when he served as head of the New Delhi Center. He explained:

I was very impressed by his smiling countenance, unassuming nature and utter humility. I knew that as head of the New Delhi Centre he was very popular—quite a number of young boys joined under him, and some of them are now occupying responsible positions in the Order. While in New Delhi, he would often visit Gopesh Maharaj in Vrindavan for inspiration and guidance.

This great saint had been a close attendant of Holy Mother. Once Swahananda asked him, “What kind of consolation can I offer the bereaved?” Gopesh Maharaj replied, “It is not the words of consolation that are effective. You have lived a life of meditation and renunciation, and have acquired some measure of calmness and serenity. These will go to the bereaved person unconsciously.”³

In Madras and New Delhi, many young men joined the Order as a result of Swahananda’s inspiration. Swami Tanmayananda, Director of the Kuala Lumpur Center, relates:

Like me, numerous youths came in contact with Swamiji during his Madras days between the years 1950 and 1960. Most of them were immensely benefited in spiritual and other aspects of life and they happily recount their association with Swamiji.... I am much benefitted by the Swami’s contact in the early days of my Madras Math days. Swamiji had played an important role in my joining the Mission. All along he was guiding and advising me.... he was the first monk to write to me letters of affection, showing his love for me and concern for my welfare.⁴

During Vivekananda’s Centenary, when Swami Swahananda was in New Delhi, he had part of the *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* translated into Urdu.

Swahananda knew many leading figures of the Ramakrishna Order intimately: Swamis Shuddhananda (d. 1938), Jagadananda (d. 1951), Premeshananda (d. 1967), and Saradeshanda (Gopesh Maharaj, d. 1988). He also corresponded with

many sadhus, some of whose letters were later compiled for inspiring books, including *Go Forward*, *Letters of Swami Premeshananda* and various articles. Swahananda knew some swamis intimately who were disciples of Holy Mother.

Swami Swahananda came to the U.S. in 1968 as an assistant to Swami Ashokananda in San Francisco. Two years later, after the Berkeley Center separated from the San Francisco Center, he became its first head minister (1970-1976). Swahananda remained enthusiastic about preaching the ideas of Swamiji. He believed in having a house for the devotees in a fixed location, rather than holding temporary group meetings. Accordingly, when he guided the Berkeley Center, he bought a house in San Jose in 1975 and another in Stockton in 1976 to serve as branches of the Berkeley Center. He had no money, but he encouraged the devotees to give interest-free loans to buy the houses. The San Jose Center is a branch of the Berkeley Center to this day.

Swami Swahananda had the opportunity to become acquainted with the VSSC on many occasions. He visited as a guest speaker almost every year from 1968 to 1976. After arriving in the U.S., he undertook speaking engagements in Hollywood and Santa Barbara each year until his transfer, with the exception of 1973 when he went to India for a three-month pilgrimage. During this trip he stayed for a month in the Japanese Center, conducting talks and lectures and motivating the devotees.⁵

Swami Swahananda was part of a major transition that took place at the Vedanta Societies throughout the United States between 1969 and 1980. Swamis Ashokananda (1969), Nihilananda (1973), Prabhavananda (1976), Pavitrananda (1977), Satprakashananda (1979), and Vividishananda (1980) all passed from this life. No swami who had come to America before 1945 was still here. A new generation of swamis took charge of many key centers in the U.S., bringing innovations with them.

2. Swami Swahananda's Major Objectives[†]

Swami Swahananda's goal at the VSSC was to put into practice the ideals propounded by Vivekananda and other early swamis in the West. He wanted to perpetuate the role and reputation established by Swami Prabhavananda as a leader of the Vedanta movement in the United States. In order to facilitate these goals, and with his organizational skills, he had five long-range interrelated objectives in mind. Two fundamental goals were the expansion of the Society and the creative involvement of as many people as possible in this process. Work on these two goals brought many changes over three decades. Swahananda had a conceptual and visionary mind that viewed a situation from a long-range perspective; because of this, things seemed to naturally fall into place. The American Swami Atmarupananda observed, "As everyone knows, Swami Swahanandaji has made immense contributions to the Vedanta work.... The Swami is a very important figure in the Vedanta movement, and his place in history is already secure."⁶

His first intention was to prepare as many qualified American monastics as possible to deliver lectures and classes and to be in charge of Vedanta sub-Centers. If the Ramakrishna Movement were to grow in the West, he thought it was imperative to train American-born monastics for leadership positions. The Ramakrishna Movement in India could not spare the personnel to meet the needs of a rapidly expanding Western organization. As Mary Phillips had written to Sara Bull in November 1896, "The Swami Vivekananda wrote to me that Vedanta would never succeed in America until the Americans themselves became teachers."⁷

Giving opportunities to young monastics was not new for Swami Swahananda. He had encouraged the monastics in New Delhi to prepare and give classes and lectures. With a limited number of official centers in America, he felt that it was necessary for local monastics to take an important part in spreading the message. This is what Vivekananda wanted, and Swahananda believed that now was the time to encourage monastics to prepare for the responsibility. Their addresses, he felt, should convey a proper interpretation and appraisal of Vedantic thought and its full implications in a modern context. They should be educational, informative, and inspirational, designed to deepen the spiritual awareness of the congregation. Swami Prabhavananda and other older swamis stressed that a monastic should first acquire spiritual strength. Swami

[†] Editorial assistance provided by Amrita Salm

Swahananda thought the time was right for more outreach and sharing with others the spiritual qualities acquired by the monastics.

Swahananda continued services in the summer as usual, and he also added a series of new lectures in Trabuco and San Diego as part of a plan of giving more scope to local monastics. A number of American swamis and brahmacharis were recruited. According to the *Monthly Bulletins*, the new phase began on July 10, 1977 when Nitya Chaitanya presented a Sunday lecture on “Approaches to Vedanta” at the Santa Barbara Temple.⁸

Before his first address, Nitya had approached Swami Swahananda and said:

“I really do not see what I have to offer, since I have not done a lot of studying, and I do not feel that I have anything to offer.” Swami replied, “You have been here so many years, your life will speak!” That was it. There was no more argument with him.

When the monastic speakers were at the dinner table, someone brought up the fact that Sri Ramakrishna said you should have a commission from God before teaching. Swahananda clarified that it is okay to “explain” to others without this commission. A divine commission, he said, was for those people who impart personal teachings or individualized spiritual instructions to others.⁹

On September 18, 1977, after a lull of eleven years, weekly Sunday lectures were revived at the Trabuco Monastery. When he finished speaking in Hollywood on Sundays, Swami Swahananda would go to Trabuco for a late afternoon talk and to meet with the devotees. With an abundance of public speakers, it became possible to use a rotation system. Lectures could be provided in four different centers: Hollywood, Santa Barbara, Trabuco, and San Diego concurrently on Sunday mornings. It also became possible to send monastics out to lecture before various educational and religious groups throughout Southern California and to give monthly public talks at Vivekananda House in South Pasadena. These were conducted by Vedarupananda from August 1985 to June 1991, and re-established by Swami Sarvadevananda in October 1995 until the present. Many midweek classes were added to the program schedule in Hollywood.

A Hollywood nun once pointed out another virtue of Swahananda that was deeply appreciated. He gave his speakers freedom concerning the topics they selected and the manner in which they presented their material. He did not ask to review the speech beforehand, and he did not critique it in any way. He had implicit faith in the speaker and assumed that what he or she spoke would be in good taste and appropriate. Others realized that Swahananda had an incredible faith that Sri Ramakrishna was doing everything and that he was the witness. This often allowed him to step back and allow things to happen without interfering in any way.¹⁰

A second goal of the VSSC was to place women in the forefront in terms of responsibilities and leadership. Today they give lectures and classes at colleges and universities and also take part in interreligious meetings and public events. As a precedent, the first Western monastic to speak at the VSSC had been Pravrajika Saradaprana, who, on December 29, 1963, had delivered a Sunday lecture in Santa Barbara on “Holy Mother.” The first pravrajika stationed in Hollywood to lecture was Bhaktiprana, who, on March 13, 1979 began giving talks in Del Mar. Later, Swami Swahananda gave permission to some of the nuns to start new classes on their own. Vivekaprana conducted classes on Advaita Vedanta texts, and Gitaprana taught Sanskrit in Hollywood. Other nuns began to speak at universities and colleges, interreligious and public events, as well as to represent Vedanta at international conventions. In Hollywood, women monastics began to conduct the homa fire ritual, assist with relic blessings, and aid in the major puja worship. This had been practiced in Santa Barbara since the beginning of public pujas there. Swahananda continued the custom, introduced by Prabhavananda, of having nuns perform the noon worship in the Hollywood Temple.¹¹

Swami Swahananda pointed out:

Sri Ramakrishna accepted a woman, the Bhairavi Brahmani as one of his gurus, worshiped God in the form of a woman, Kali, the Divine Mother, and looked upon his own wife and mother as visible manifestations of the Divine Mother, even worshiping his wife, Holy Mother, in the form of Goddess Shodasi. After the passing away of Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother was looked upon by Sri Ramakrishna’s devotees and monastics disciples as the spiritual guide and inspiration for

the Movement. She herself gave initiation to many sincere seekers of God. Thus, a great feeling of reverence for women as special manifestations of the divine has existed in the Ramakrishna tradition from its very beginning.

In the early days of the movement, Swami Vivekananda utilized the help of Sister Christine, Sarah Bull, Sara Waldo, Josephine MacLeod, Abhayananda, Sister Nivedita, Charlotte Sevier and Alice Hansbrough to organize the work and preach his message. Swami Paramananda received assistance from Sisters Devamata and Daya, as well as from Gayatri Devi and Charushila Devi. Prabhavananda had nuns working as his personal secretary, shrine pujarinis, bookshop and Sunday School management, Treasurer of the Society, and Director of the Women's Choir. By 1993 Pravrajikas Anandaprana, Brahmaprana, Bhavaprana, Prabhaprana, Varadaprana, and Vrajaprana; Swamis Atmajnanananda and Atmarupananda, Nirvana Chaitanya, Elizabeth Harding, Nancy Pope Mayorga, Edith Tipple, and Katherine Whitmarsh were producing high-quality books and multiple articles on Vedantic subjects (See Chapter X for more details). Over three-fourths of these productive individuals are females, indicating a positive change in the role of women in the VSSC vs. the society at large.¹²

A third activity of great interest to Swami Swahananda was establishing sub-centers in areas where there was a sizable indigenous support group. As mentioned before, while he served in Northern California, Swahananda initiated the San Jose and Stockton Centers. A major goal of the Order is to impart and promote the teachings of Vedanta and its principles, as propounded by Ramakrishna, Holy Mother, and Vivekananda, together with their disciples, throughout the world. Both Prabhavananda and Ashokananda spoke of a time in the future when the American Vedanta Society would be a sizable organization. Prabhavananda told a disciple, "This is the Sri Ramakrishna Age. Great crowds will come.... Our Lord didn't come for just a few, but for the whole world—for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many." Swahananda believed that now was the time to prepare for the actuality. He demonstrated a missionary zeal and willingness to take risks.

His propagation process began in 1977 in San Diego—first in the house of Violet Eaton in Del Mar, and later in Giriya's home in El Cajon. The swami himself used to go twice a month on Tuesdays to talk individually and in groups to devotees, in addition to giving lectures. Buddhananda and Bhaktiprana went on the other two Tuesdays. Monks or nuns also conducted several retreats there. After six years, in 1983, they bought a spacious house in San Diego to accommodate the center.¹³

In an interview for the *American Vedantist* (Special Issue 2009), Swami Swahananda expressed the following views concerning the expansion of the Vedanta Society in America:

During our whole life we have been inspired by Swamiji – that we must manifest our rajas; our active tendency is to be manifested. But, this is combined with a contemplative life. I had the idea—a sort if a passion you could say—that Swamiji's ideas must be spread out. I used to move around lecturing, but now more purposively I go to certain groups who have a desire to organize—the idea of an organization, the idea of an ashrama. When you go and give a lecture, a few people may be impressed. But you don't see the results. Whereas if an ashrama or a center is organized, then it will be continued. As an organization we can say we get involved with activities, but there is always the encouragement of a deeper spiritual life. That is what really attracts people. So that is the major inspiration behind my life. It is better to wear out than to rust out.

My interest was more at one time [in] studies; scholarship was my main interest. But as I grew older, it became this type of ashrama, or expansion—encouraging others. Not that I myself want to do too many things, because my management style is to inspire others to do it. Why should I do it? That was my idea. That way the other people also manifest their energies, they open up. Find other people and give them scope; that is the idea. That is why I organized some private centers. My major argument was, you yourselves run it, you yourself lecture, you must express yourself.

A fourth and related goal was to encourage the running of smaller centers by lay members in devotee homes across America. This allowed married Vedantists a greater opportunity to participate in the activities of the Society. Swami Vivekananda declared, "The first manifest effect of life is expansion. You must expand if you want to live. The moment you have ceased to expand, death is upon you, danger is ahead" (CW, III:272). Swahananda always believed that expansion is life and contraction is death. Swami Swahananda made bi-annual trips to the East Coast to visit the two sub-centers (Washington, DC and Ridgely), and for many years he visited cities where groups of devotees lived. He started many study

groups in these places and encouraged the devotees to meet regularly. For many years he frequently visited different communities in Connecticut, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Virginia, North Carolina, Puerto Rico, Texas, and several locations in Arizona.

In addition, Swami Swahananda supported the establishment of Vedanta Centers in cities not attached to the VSSC. A devotee in Toronto, Canada writes:

Since our first meeting, the swami owns our hearts through his child-like simplicity, loving personality, guidance, spiritual wisdom, and a deep sense of humor. Since his first visit, he used to come visit us whenever we requested him to come to Toronto.... When some of our longtime friends and members gave up hope that we would not be able to establish a permanent centre here and left us, we received faith, guidance and constant inspiration from him to carry on. He sent them a check for their building fund.¹⁴

The Ramakrishna Institute of Culture (www.ramakrishnainstitute.org) is another of the swami's efforts to promote the study of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. The Institute offers programs most often held in Corona, California. They are designed to increase cultural knowledge and to bring harmony, mutual understanding, respect and cooperation between the religions of the world. This activity is managed entirely by the devotees, who themselves often present papers and lectures, or invite visiting speakers.¹⁵

Swami Swahananda's fifth objective was to involve many lay and monastic devotees in literary, creative, and practical activities. He realized the importance of generating a productive and creative laity. He felt that lay members should not be passive recipients, but consciously active participants sharing in the roles, mission and functions of the Society. All qualified members of the Society have the right and responsibility to contribute to its inner life and organization.

Swami Prabhavananda used professional writers as his co-authors, and encouraged three of his monks and nuns to publish books. He published the periodical *Vedanta and the West* with contributions by some of his followers, as well as by professional writers. Prabhavananda also invited a number of professors and authors to lecture on Sunday. Swahananda had devotees edit a few of his own books and articles, and he also encouraged them to study and to research topics of interest to them. This led to a highly productive group of lay and monastic members who contributed articles to many Vedanta journals.

Another example is our representation at the Parliament of the World's Religions (CPWR) (Web: www.parliamentofreligions.org) that officially dates from 1988 when two monks from the Vivekananda Society of Chicago suggested organizing a centennial celebration of the 1893 World's Parliaments of Religions, held in Chicago in conjunction with the Columbian exposition. In 1993, the Parliament of World's Religions was convened in Chicago, with 8,000 people from all over the world coming together to celebrate diversity and harmony and to explore religious and spiritual responses to critical issues that confront us all. The VSSC representative to this organization Swami Atmatattwananda gave a presentation at the December 1999, Third World Parliament of Religions in Cape Town, South Africa on the subject "What is Vedanta?" and at the fourth July 2004 Parliament in Barcelona, Spain. He attended the 2009 Parliament and has been present at many meetings of the local Los Angeles group, one of which was held in the temple at the VSSC. The next parliament meeting is scheduled for Toronto, Canada during November 1-7, 2018. The Swami has also presented many lectures on various subjects at the VSSC.

Other creative activities included the production of plays, musicals, videos, and original music, all centering around the lives of Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother, and Swami Vivekananda. These creative endeavors that helped to spread the tenets of the Vedanta are covered in Chapter X.

3. Swami Swahananda at the Vedanta Society of Southern California

Swami Shivananda used to say that doing one hundred thousand japa is equal to performing an elaborate Durga Puja. He added, "Repeat his name often. The repetition of his name will purify your body and mind, washing away all impurities.... When one goes on repeating the name of the chosen deity with intense love, one becomes gradually filled with an ineffable bliss."

When Swami Swahananda lived in Madras 1949-1961, a large group of devotees were organized to perform the japa. At the VSSC, Swahananda began the tradition of having the devotees perform extra japa during Durga Puja in the fall, for a period running from ten to twelve days. During this period, devotees volunteer to chant their own mantram, or the Navaratri (nine nights) chanting of “Jai Sri Durga” at home before the shrine, or in any location. Repetitious chanting is to be performed with devotion. Devotees and monastics from each center pledge to perform this chanting, and every year hundreds of thousands of japam have been performed during the Navaratri period. In 1991 the total number of collective japam exceeded one million. It has been considered that such a group procedure has proved to be an excellent technique for intensifying spiritual fervor in devotees.¹⁶

At Madras, Swami Swahananda was instrumental in organizing a ceremonial reading (*parayana*) by having 108 people read the *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*. The idea caught on and was introduced at Cossipore and other locations. After coming to Hollywood, Swahananda established two major retreat days, a custom that has continued for over twenty-five years. On Memorial Day, the *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, in its entirety of over forty-eight hundred pages, is read in silence in one morning by seventy to a hundred devotees. Similarly, on Labor Day, the unabridged *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* is read in its entirety. For both events, a large number of retreatants spend the morning in silence, each quietly reading a portion of these works. After a delicious prasad meal, the afternoon program often consists of discussion groups, talks, devotional music, and a religious film, video, or play. As a result of these public events, devotees are inspired to deepen their spiritual practices.¹⁷

Swamis Vivekananda, Abhedananda, and Paramananda journeyed tens of thousands of miles, speaking to large numbers of people. Swahananda has spread the message of Vedanta in many countries of the world. In 1987 Paratparananda invited him to Argentina in South America to attend a brahmacharya ceremony. The future Swami Arunananda wrote:

We all had days of great joy, and all the devotees were charmed with his personality.... He was all love, and patient to everybody, and we all felt uplifted and happy during his stay. I mention all, because in my case I was obviously happy, after having received so many blessings.

In 1988 Swami Swahananda appeared as a guest speaker before Vedanta groups in many Western European countries,¹⁸ and in October 1989, he visited the Soviet Union at the invitation of the Writer’s Union and Vivekananda Society of Moscow. Their Society began in 1988 under the inspiration of Swami Lokeswarananda (1909-1998). On various occasions, Lokeswarananda had visited the Soviet Union, where he was admired by many writers and intellectuals. Years before, Swami Ranganathananda (1908-2005) met Dr. E. P. Chelishv (b. 1921), an Indologist from Russia in New Delhi. He encouraged Chelishv to organize a series of lectures at Moscow University in honor of the 1963 Vivekananda Centenary. Ever since then, Moscow University and the Institute of Oriental Studies have included a significant study of the Ramakrishna Movement in India and the Neo-Hindu Movement in America and the West. In a November 28, 1983 letter, Chelishv wrote Swami Lokeswarananda of the Ramakrishna Order:

The name of Swami Vivekananda is very popular in Soviet Russia and he is held in high esteem by our countrymen. Soviet people respect him as a great democrat, humanist and patriot who contributed immensely in the development of national consciousness and the anti-colonial liberation movement in India. They also consider that his message and the message of Sri Ramakrishna, which are really one, are absolutely necessary for the survival of the human civilization, which is now in great danger due to the menace of the devastating nuclear war.¹⁹

Swahananda spoke at the 1989 Nicholas Roerich: Peace through Culture Conference. He read a paper, “Working for Peace,” which the editors later submitted to the Vedanta Kesari (January 1990). Distinguished representatives from nineteen countries attended the Conference. He and Lokeswarananda were interviewed on national television, and the program was seen by two hundred million viewers. In public, the Russian people showed great respect for the swamis.²⁰

Swami Swahananda always considered the Hollywood Center to be a holy ashram that should provide hospitality to sincere visitors. Accordingly, from the 1990s up to the present, he insisted that one or two of the Society’s rentals should be converted into a Guest House. The facilities were to be spacious enough to accommodate a small family in a relatively

austere atmosphere. They have been occupied by a steady stream of visitors from other Vedanta Centers in the U.S. and other parts of the world.

Swami Swahananda went to visit the New York Westside Center one day, and Pravrajika Gayatriprana noticed that he had an abscess in his finger. It was deep and serious and had to be taken care of soon. He said, "Can't you just do it here?" She replied, "I can sharpen up one of the kitchen knives and sterilize it in the gas flame. But what about the anesthesia? Would you like to be like Swami Turiyananda and withdraw your mind from the pain?" He exclaimed boldly, "I'm ready," and he held his arm out, fully extended. She then backed off.

While head of the VSSC, Swami Swahananda, an extensive traveler, returned to India on several pilgrimages. His third visit to India in 1984, when he visited all four corners of the country—Madras, Bombay, New Delhi, and Kolkata – lasted four months. He was in demand as a speaker and was invited to give over fifty addresses before religious and university groups.²¹

As the following three tributes bear out, he is very respected by his fellow swamis in India. Swami Muktinathananda, head of the Lucknow Ashram, said of him:

Swami Swahanandaji is gifted with an optimum mix of wit, humour, joy and spirituality. He emerges as one of those Vedantic "children of immortal bliss" who radiate joy in every path they tread. So stimulating is his aura that no one can remain morose or miserable in his company ... a monk who distinctly stands out as one of the most distinguished monks of the Ramakrishna Order.... He seems to have a solution for all those in distress and despair, and with his deep insight, he provides a suitable solution for all who reach out to him for help and provides inspiration for life and living. He is a great soul that benevolently endows a disciple with immense blessings, kindly leading him to the path of ultimate bliss and contentment.

Swami Tanmayananda, who was head of the Kuala Lumpur Center, added:

His charming personality with a divine touch, and his informal talks with a keen sense of humour and sharp intellect, can never escape the attention of devotees of even a casual acquaintance, what to speak of his admirers and intimate friends and devotees! His unselfish love and interest in others' welfare simply attract people to him. In this respect he is unique, and he has a special place in the hearts of people who are close to him.

A swami at the Advaita Ashrama wrote:

Swami Swahanandaji's sweet nature, simple, frank and loving conversation based on a modern, rational outlook have always delighted and impressed me. His advice on certain occasions about our life in the Order has been of great value and importance to me.... Above all, the ways of his life, his large-heartedness, his sweet behaviour, his care and concern for monks, devotees and stray visitors alike are a source of education to me now as in the past.²²

Swami Swahananda was also very popular with devotees. At the celebration of his 80th birthday, seven devotees wrote the following:

- 1) This is a great opportunity to tell you how much I appreciate your presence in my life. Your words of wisdom, your loving heart, your kindness, and spiritual guidance have touched my soul and transformed my life.
- 2) His kind words and unconditional love and acceptance have been a source of strength in my weak moments, a source of faith when in doubt and most of all, his faith in me has given me a sense of fearlessness, the feeling that no matter how many times I fail in my own eyes, the grace of God and the guru never fails.
- 3) His amazing ability to love everyone in a non-partial way and yet remain completely detached, for me at least, is a reflection of Holy Mother's love. I can see his renunciation and detachment in so many of his actions.... He has taken Vedanta as taught him by his teachers and put it into practice in day-to-day life. And so my life, too, has been changed and molded and influenced by having the good fortune and blessings of knowing this man, Swami Swahanandaji Maharaj.

4) Swami Swahananda has always been so affectionate and compassionate to our whole family, in addition to providing us with spiritual guidance, blessings and direction since 1980 when we first met him. We have always been able to ask him for guidance during the good and bad times of our life, and he has always been there for us.

5) Swami Swahananda has been an inspiration to our whole family. His gentle guidance and support in our day-to-day life as well as spiritual life have been a great strength to us. It has helped us overcome many difficulties and provided us with inspiration when dealing with many others.

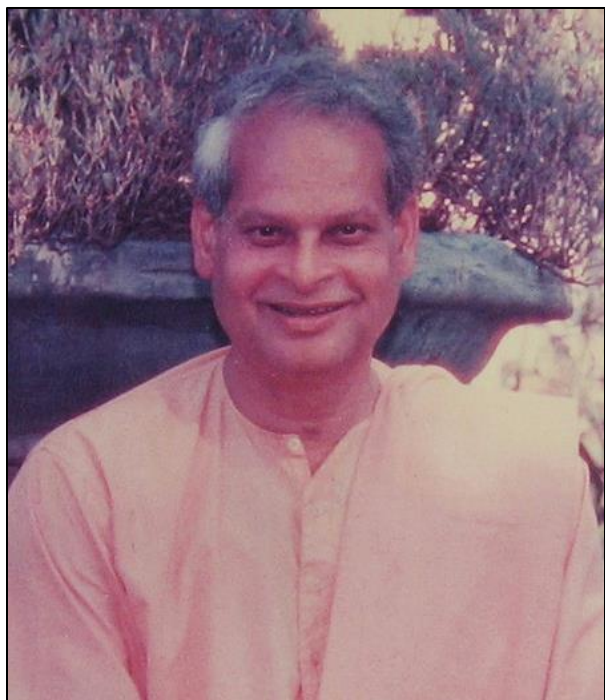
6) He is ever gracious to all the devotees, ever approachable and ever mindful of their needs, spiritual as well as mental and material. He is always eager to help in any way that is possible.

7) He is always able to console us in times of distress. He is so close and dear to our family, and his spiritual advice has been invaluable to us. His personality is sometimes that of a friend, or like a mother, but no matter what, he is always the spiritual guru.”²³

Swami Swahananda has also been a highly productive author of scholarly works. His literary contributions fall into four major categories:

a) Translations of Sanskrit texts:

The *Chandogya Upanishad* (1956), based on the commentary of Sri Shankara, is a scholarly and erudite translation, accompanied by elaborate notes and commentary.



Swami Swahananda

A reviewer noted:

The Sri Ramakrishna Math Madras, has placed the reading public under a deep debt of gratitude by bringing out this beautiful volume.... Swami Swahananda has exercised utmost care in supplying word for word translation. He has also given brief but very useful notes based on Sri Sankara's commentary and the gloss by Anandagiri (Prabuddha Bharata, February 1957).

He also translated and supplied commentary for the fourteenth-century *Pancadasi of Vidyaranya Swami* (1967), a post-Shankara Advaita Vedanta text. It deals with the metaphysics of Vedanta and the methods that lead to the realization of the Supreme Truth. Translating the *Pancadasi* required a deep understanding of the Advaita philosophy and the Sanskrit language. In the Introduction, T. M. P. Mahadevan, a leading Indian philosopher at the University of Madras, had this to say about the over six hundred page translation and commentary, “The *Pancadasi* is a veritable mine of Vedantic treasure. The Ramakrishna Math, Madras, has added a precious gem to its list of publications by bringing out the present fresh English translation of the *Pancadasi*.”

b) Edited translations of Bengali books into English, with editing:

Swami Swahananda translated the three volumes *Go Forward: Letters of Swami Premeshananda* (1992, 1995, 2003). A disciple of Holy Mother, Premeshananda's inspiring correspondence covers a period of over three decades, from Holy Mother to many swamis of the Ramakrishna Order. As a young man, Swahananda met Premeshananda (1884-1967) and was profoundly influenced by him. Useful advice is given in the letters concerning how to go forward on the spiritual path. Knowledge and devotion are blended, together with insight, humor, love and affection. A reviewer stresses:

From the point of view of the devotee, this book answers questions and self-doubts that appear from time to time, about the depth of one's devotion, the efficacy of one's spiritual practices.... Springing from the heights of spiritual realization, these letters are full of inspiration and encouragement for the devotee (Vedanta Kesari, May 1993).

Satchidananda Dhar who compiled the Letters concluded:

As soon as Volume I of the *Letters of Swami Premeshananda* was published, it was very warmly embraced by seekers of truth and spirituality, whether householders or renunciants, monks or nuns. Even many intellectual readers who seemed to show no outward signs of interest in religion or spiritual life have been greatly charmed by reading this book.

Concerning volume II, the *Vedanta Kesari* (June 1997) declared:

Swami Premeshanandaji has remained a source of lasting inspiration to all types of spiritual seekers through these volumes.... Anyone who reads the book—fully, partly, or for that matter, any letter or writing at random—will imbibe the spirit of spiritual striving and feel that he or she has to attain something in spiritual life.

M. Sivaramkrishna, head of the Department of English at Osmania University, wrote:

Swami Swahananda is not someone who needs introduction to the admirers and devotees of the Ramakrishna Vedanta tradition. Readers are familiar with the revered Swami's books: his translations of *Chandogya Upanishad* and that great classic *Pancadasi of Vidyaranya Swami*. Similarly, his lucid book on *Meditation* is a significant contribution to this difficult subject. Above all, *Go Forward* (two volumes) has now become a classic of spiritual counseling (*Prabuddha Bharata*, December 2005).

Swami followed this with a translation of *Mahapurush Maharaj as We Knew Him: Reminiscences of Swami Shivananda* (1997), a monastic disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. It is a collection of reminiscences about a great soul whom his devotees considered to be "a motiveless ocean of mercy." The spiritual power of Swami Shivananda is described by the saintly people he influenced. More recently, Swami Swahananda translated two Bengali biographies of disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, *Swami Premananda: Love Incarnate* (2003), and *Swami Akhandananda as We Saw Him* (2004).²⁴

c) Collections of previously published articles, lectures, and radio talks:

Service and Spirituality (1979) is primarily a group of essays written when Swahananda edited the *Vedanta Kesari*. It covers Karma Yoga and other aspects of spiritual life.²⁵ His *Meditation and Other Spiritual Disciplines* (1983) places the emphasis on japam, prayer, ritual, self-effort, and spiritual disciplines. Concerning the Swami's *Hindu Symbology and Other Essays* (1983), a reviewer for *The Hindu* (February 28, 1984) noted:

He traces the use of symbols, in Judaism and Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. He devotes a major part of the manuscript to symbology in Mantras, Yantras and Images. He explains the rationale of the modes of puja and the significance of the articles offered.... Altogether this is a stimulating volume providing plenty of food for thought.

Swami Swahananda's *Mother Worship* (2001) is a collection of essays on worshiping the Mother in different Indian traditions. It explains the philosophy behind worshiping God as Mother. The volume also includes technical information on different facets of ritualistic worship practiced in the Tantric traditions.

More recently, his *Vedanta and Ramakrishna* (2003), edited by Pamela Reid (Prem), contains a wide-ranging selection of Swami Swahananda's essays on Vedanta and its relevance in modern times. One reviewer concludes:

He is a scholar who writes well and can easily hold the attention of his reader.... The author is extremely well-read and his essays and talks enlivened with relevant quotations.... Vedanta and Ramakrishna is a gem of a book and is a welcome addition to recent spiritual literature (Bulletin of the Ramakrishna Mission of Culture, July 2004).²⁶

Another writes:

Thus the volume is a sumptuous feast, a veritable compendium of the crucial aspects of Vedanta. In short, here is [a] significant volume which deepens, intensifies and enriches our understanding of Vedanta as exemplified by Sri Ramakrishna, its greatest exemplar. As such, it is indispensable reading for the interested general readers, devotees as well as scholars interested in the study of this great movement and their illustrious exemplars (Prabuddha Bharata, December 2005).

d) Edited collections of essays written by Swahananda as well as authors:

Monasteries in South India (1989), edited by Swahananda, supplies relevant information on all the important ancient Indian monasteries in separate essays, each written by a competent scholar (Vedanta Kesari, June 1990).

Five days before he left the physical body, Swami Swahananda mentioned to his doctor, who was also a devotee that he would die of a stroke. The doctor objected that such a tragedy would cause pain and disability. On the contrary, Swahananda replied, “Not the kind I’m going to have. I’m going to have a big one. And that will be it.” And that is what happened. After being head of the VSSC for 36 years, Swami Swahananda, the most senior Vedanta monk in the United States, passed away on October 19, 2012 at the age of 91.

One of his devotees, Mukti (Silver Parnell), wrote, “Broad, expansive, selfless, humble, devoted, faithful to the end; Swami Swahananda has gone on to his reward and his well-deserved rest. He leaves behind many devotees who love him and are very grateful for the huge impact he made on all our lives. Thank you, Swamiji, You are in our hearts forever.”²⁷

4. The Assistant Swamis

During his tour of duty, Swami Swahananda had five competent assistants. After Prabhavananda passed away, Chetanananda was placed in charge of the center from July to December 1976 until Swahananda arrived to take charge. Swami Chetanananda stayed on for over a year, until March 1978, and then was reassigned to the St. Louis Center. Upon Swami Satprakashananda’s passing in November 1979, he became the head of the Vedanta Center of St. Louis. Swami Satprakashananda (1888-1979) was initiated by Swami Brahmananda and received Sannyas from Swami Shivananda in 1927. Eleven years later he founded the Vedanta Society of St. Louis. Huston Smith of Washington University mentioned in 1953, “the marked increase of interest in Eastern Philosophy here in St. Louis is due to the presence of Swami Satprakashananda in this city.” An erudite scholar, the Swami is best known for *Methods of Knowledge according to Advaita Vedanta* (1965) and *Hinduism and Christianity* (1975).²⁸



Swami Chetanananda

For many years, Chetanananda continued to make yearly appearances in Southern California – in 1978-1989, 1993, 2004-2005, and more recently. He is a very popular public speaker and has been seen on YouTube frequently. He also possesses a unique gift for writing and translating as exemplified by his many books. His *Ramakrishna As We Saw Him* (1990) is a collection of forty detailed reminiscences from his monastic and lay disciples, friends, and relatives who witnessed his God-intoxicated life and daily activities. *God Lived With Them* (1997) presents life stories of the sixteen monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. Chetanananda also wrote *How to Live With God* (2008), an in-depth study of Ramakrishna’s life and message, and two biographies, *Mahendranath Gupta (M.)*

and *Girish Ghosh*. In addition, Chetanananda produced two videos: *Ramakrishna: A Documentary*, based on his life and teachings; and *Vivekananda As We Saw Him*, featuring many photos of Swamiji and five personal reminiscences of Vivekananda.²⁹

Swami Aparananda knew Swami Swahananda in New Delhi in the 1960s, and admired the fact that he constantly thought of the welfare of others. Before arriving in Southern California on December 13, 1978, Aparananda served as the Swami-in-charge of the Mauritius Center. He received the warmest of welcomes from Swahananda and the Hollywood devotees. To this day, Aparananda remembers that occasion with great love and gratitude. During his stay in Southern California, he lectured in Santa Barbara, Hollywood, Trabuco, and San Diego. Aparananda had the wonderful idea of dubbing the Indian motion picture “Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna” in English.³⁰

When Swami Aparananda left Southern California, Al Eschner (Govinda), the President of the VSSC, expressed appreciation for him at the Annual Member’s Meeting:

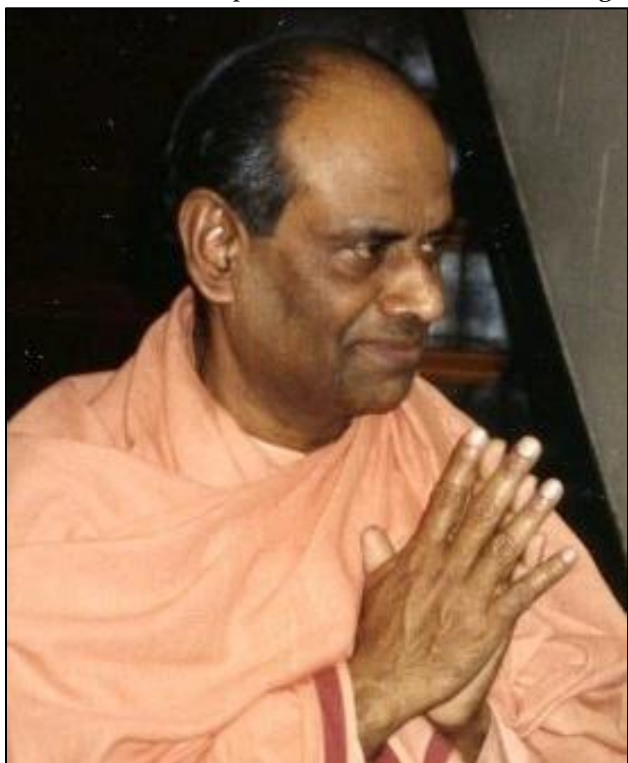


Swami Aparananda

We appreciate very much all he has done for us in the past six years. He showed us intense devotion to Thakur. He has shown loving care for us devotees. We appreciate his kind concern and cheerful good nature to all of us. We specially are going to miss the beautiful worship that he does with such loving detail. We want him to return and visit us frequently, especially at pujas, and we are going to miss him a lot.³¹

On May 1, 1985, after Swami Swananda (not Swahananda) of the Vedanta Society of Berkeley returned to India. Swami Aparananda assumed his duties of swami-in-charge in Berkeley, which included making two visits a month to San Jose, California. Nearly every year since 1979, Swami Aparananda has been the pujari at the Hollywood Temple of the annual sixteen-item Kali Puja worship, a major celebration.³²

Swami Sarvatmananda (1937-2015) arrived in America in October 1985 to serve as assistant minister at the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society, Boston, and the Vedanta Society of Providence, under Swami Sarvagatananda. In April 1997, Swami Sarvatmananda was posted to the Vedanta Society of Southern California as assistant minister, under Swami Swahananda. He stayed at the Trabuco monastery for six months, before becoming the Resident Swami at the San Diego branch in October 1997. He also engaged in outside activities, such as conducting 1999 summer retreats in Dallas, Texas and Vancouver BC, and speaking at universities. Sarvatmananda left Southern California to become the head Swami at the Ramakrishna Vedanta Centrum in Amsterdam in the Netherlands from May 2000. He then returned to Belur Math in 2014 and eventually passed away on October 12, 2015. He is remembered for his personal qualities of simplicity, self-reliance, devotion, and love for others.³³



Swami Sarvatmananda



Swami Ishtananda

Belur Math selected Swami Ishtananda to be the resident minister at the Ramakrishna Monastery in San Diego. He arrived there on February 5, 2000. Ishtananda “was instrumental in building up a congregation in San Diego in which the regular members could come closer to each other, feeling as if they belonged to a spiritual family.” Under Ishtananda’s guidance, there was the development of a very popular choir. He undertook a great deal of interfaith lecturing in the San Diego area, and he held the post of Vice-President of the Interreligious Council of San Diego. In December 2007, Ishtananda was posted to the Vedanta Society in St. Petersburg, Florida. He was replaced by American-born Swami Harinamananda.³⁴

5. Functional Departments of the Vedanta Society

a. Board of Trustees

The Vedanta Society has a Board of Trustees that meet regularly to address the business matters of the Vedanta Society. Bert DePry served as the President of the Board from 1950 until May 1981. At that time he was replaced by John Hench who held the position until the following April. His successor Al Eschner (Govinda) presided until June 1992. The President of the Board until 2011 was Bill Fray who was replaced by Karl Whitmarsh. Bill Fray did a wonderful job in preserving the privacy of the Trabuco Monastery (See: 8. Ramakrishna Monastery, Trabuco Canyon). As a professional manager he formed new groups like the Rental Committee and Finance Committee for matters that required special and focused attention. There have been many issues for the Board to address: the management of our assets and businesses, maintenance of our buildings, a Rental Committee, attending to the growing needs of our monastic Centers, and many more have made the responsibilities of board members a most rewarding experience.

Each year in the month of April, the Annual Member’s Meeting is held in the Temple in Hollywood. The meeting is an informative and joyous coming together of the members of the Vedanta Society. The purpose of the meeting is to hear the financial report for the prior year; to elect board members for the coming year; to hear the annual reports of the activities of the various branches of the Vedanta Society; and to hear any other business that may come before the body. Business affairs are conducted by a Board of Trustees, which consists of fifteen members, nine monastic and six lay members.³⁵

b. Bequests

The VSSC has been maintained by generous bequests of several devotees. Since then sizable gifts have been made by Ormond and Ruth Flood, John and Lowry Hench, Gladys and John Adams, Christine Mainer, Robert Owen, Evelyn and Bill Park, Harriet Elizabeth Huntington, and Barbara Beavens Pierce.

c. Vedanta Archives

Vedanta Archives consists primarily of Swami Krishnananda’s massive archival collection. After his passing in 1997, hundreds of trunks and boxes were found that he had accumulated during his lifetime. They contained an estimated 15,000 cassette tapes, 14,400 slides, 10,100 quarter inch reel-to-reel tapes, thousands of photographs, 2,400 acetate record albums, 1,890 transcriptions, letters, and manuscripts, and 780 wire recordings, together with films, videos, and a vast collection of notes. The sound recordings cover audio of over seventy-five swamis, including seven presidents of the Ramakrishna Order going back to Swami Shankarananda, twelve pravrajikas, and six associates of Swami Vivekananda. There is a repository of personal audio reminiscences of Swamis Vivekananda, Brahmananda, Saradananda, Shivananda, and Vijnanananda, given by the Ramakrishna Vedanta swamis who knew them when they were young men. In addition, the recordings of Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, S. Radhakrishnan, Huxley, Isherwood, Heard, Krishnamurti, John Archibald Wheeler, and many other dignitaries have been preserved. Krishnananda left a bequest to process this material for a Vedanta Archives that was eventually used up. It comprises the nucleus of the presently-existing Archives.³⁶



Swami Krishnananda

Swami Krishnananda (George Fitts, 1904-1997) for many years was Swami Prabhavananda's exemplary personal attendant. During his final year, Krishnananda's attendant was the Franciscan Brother John who later wrote, "I still find it difficult to accept his death, but do know that our Lord called him home to his eternal reward. His whole life was one of service and love to his fellow man.... He was such a kind soul and a gentle one. He never asked for very much and did seem to be content. I pray for him all the time and will until my time comes to leave this mortal body. I will never forget our beloved Swami Krishnananda. May his soul rest in peace."

d. Newsletter

For over thirty years the devotees learned of many important events from the very informative "Letter to the Members," signed by Bert L. De Pry the President of the Society. After Bert resigned in 1981 and for the next twelve years, the "Lotus Line" under the direction of Betty Bunn (Anandamayi) took over the function of informing the members about recent and upcoming events. After which to serve our members better, Jnana Chaitanya the monthly newsletter editor originally with the assistance of Gary Kemper (Shankara), initiated a new monthly publication entitled "Vedanta Voices" as of May 1999. It was mailed to all members of the VSSC as a primary source of

information concerning the events and happenings at the Society.³⁷

6. Charitable Organizations

The Ramakrishna Movement is dedicated to the humanitarian service of all living creatures. The Order places emphasis on serving others, not only as a way of improving society, but as a path to God. The idea is that by serving the suffering with the right attitude, one is serving God. The spiritual goal of community service is to experience God within all beings by the performance of selfless work as worship. All of the great religions put forth the ideal of charity, but Sri Ramakrishna emphasized serving the divine in men and women.

In 1980 Swami Swahananda was invited to attend and speak at the 75th Jubilees of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission in India. Noting that some of the devotees were interested in various aspects of service, he asked them to attend as delegates. Since its inception, the Ramakrishna Order has built hospitals and schools and conducted rural programs that serve to uplift the people and provide sustainable results. For two of the delegates, the impact of this Indian experience was immediate. It led Violet Eaton to initiate the first San Diego Center in Del Mar. Barbara Piner, and a few like-minded devotees motivated by Swahananda, got together one rainy afternoon in November of 1980 and started the organization called American Service to India (ASTI, Web: astii.com), which officially became a channel for service the following year.

Under the direction of its President Barbara Piner and the ten volunteer board members, by 2005 the total donations reached nearly a million dollars annually. Unlike many other charitable organizations, no person connected with ASTI receives any financial compensation for their services. Consequently, one hundred percent of all financial donations reach their designated recipient in India. The organization is now able to provide donors the opportunity to support nearly one hundred and fifty Missions. A donor to ASTI can specify which of the many Indian charitable organizations they desire to aid. The organizations have a record of efficiency in providing expansion of and maintenance of medical service and equipment, orphanages, and disaster relief; rural support such as rebuilding schools, and providing deep wells for pure drinking water; and educational outreach programs dealing with explaining to farmers improved agricultural techniques and training in hygiene.³⁸

The Los Angeles based Ramakrishna Foundation (www.geocities.ws/ramakrishnafoundation/rfk_about.htm) was organized by Vedanta devotees and encouraged by Swami Swahananda. The purpose of the foundation is to enable people living in the United States to give direct help and financial support to any organization that promotes religious harmony, to all schools, colleges, orphanages, and hospitals affiliated with such institutions, and to foster cultural and educational activities that promote the harmony of religions. One hundred percent of all financial donations are transferred to the designated recipient.³⁹

To honor his humanitarian teaching, at the time of Swami Vivekananda's birthday puja, we have an annual food drive under the direction of Pravrajika Saradeshaprana. We request you to participate by bringing non-perishable food items to the Hollywood Bookshop. All food collected is given to the Los Angeles Regional Food Bank, which collects and distributes food and personal items to individuals and over 900 charitable organizations throughout Los Angeles County.

7. Santa Barbara Temple and Convent

The Santa Barbara nuns wrote most of this sub-chapter.

They observed:

We have seen a lot of changes since 1976, particularly in our public work, which has grown exponentially. In the "old days" when we were the only residence on Ladera Lane, being on the temple schedule meant being alone with the Lord. Now, there is hardly a time when there is not someone in the temple. People come and go all day, to meditate, pray, or just to get a little respite from the outside world. We often hear people remark on the peaceful atmosphere and the beauty of the grounds. Outdoor landscaping and maintenance is a full time job and is supervised by the nuns.

Several local newspapers and magazine reports have appeared that feature the Vedanta temple and bookstore, and their reports often stress the beauty and peaceful surroundings there.⁴⁰

In 1985 until the present time, churches in Santa Barbara have maintained an overnight shelter for the homeless. Since its inception and as part of their community service program, the Vedanta nuns have been part of the church-run Transition House organization that feeds and shelters women and children. Once a month, several of the Santa Barbara nuns and devotees volunteer to cook food and serve the evening meal to about seventy-five homeless people – men, women, and children. They provide the food, do night proctoring, and take care of managerial services at the overnight shelter. Many of the homeless have told the sisters that they look forward to the convent meals the most. In later years, Anandaprana joined a program that offers personal counseling to recovering cancer patients. The nuns also participate in the hospice volunteer program.⁴¹ All these activities provide a meaningful form of karma yoga, or path to God, through action or service to our fellow beings.

Three promising and hardworking Santa Barbara nuns, Pravrajikas Bhavaprana (Bhavani), Deviprana (Jamuna) and Vrajaprana (Uma) received sannyas in 1988. Since 1987, several nuns of the convent have embarked on literary projects. A team of about a dozen people, composed of Santa Barbara nuns and devotees, worked on the huge task of meticulously typing nine volumes of the *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* into a computer. The deadline set for completing the transcriptions was the 1993 hundredth anniversary of Swamiji's arrival in the West. This digitized work made it possible to quickly locate any word or phrase in the text. With the help of devotees, other volumes have also been digitalized, including the *Upanishads*, *Crest Jewel of Discrimination*, *Eternal Companion*, and the *Bhagavad Gita*.⁴²

In 1995 the VSSC, under the direction of the Santa Barbara nuns led by Pravrajika Bhavaprana, set up its own website with the address; www.vedanta.org. It was launched in 1996. Vedantic philosophy, principles, and its organizations can now be explored through the website to a much wider audience throughout the world. With the increased exposure, possibly one-quarter to one-half of VSSC business orders come from the website. Through the years, the website has grown into a two-hundred and fifty-page site, getting over a million hits a month. It is now at the top of the list in a Google "Vedanta" search. It has proven to be a great innovation.

Many but not all of the features found on the vedanta.org Websites Sitemap include:

- 1) Events—Classes, Pujas, Retreats and Other Events, Student Program, Upcoming Events, Volunteer, and Worship. Talks—Audio Talks, Vedanta Media Sources, Video Talks, and Weekend Talks. Membership—Become a Member, Become a Monastic, Monasteries and Convents, Donate, and Subscribe to Mailing List. Books—Bookstores, Sarada Ma Publishing, and Vedanta Press.
- 2) Locations—Hollywood Temple, Piñon Hills, San Diego Monastery, Santa Barbara Temple, Sarada Convent, Hollywood, Sarada Convent, Santa Barbara, Trabuco Canyon Monastery, Vivekananda House, North America Centers, Contact, and Photo Gallery.
- 3) History and biography—The Ramakrishna Order, Our Teachers (Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, and Swami Vivekananda), Swami Vivekananda in Southern California, Vedanta Society (Swami Prabhavananda, Swami Sarvadevananda, and Swami Swahananda).
- 4) Information—Blog, Frequently Asked Questions, Glossary of Sanskrit Terms, Monthly Readings, Q & A Clips, and Suggested Reading. Basic concepts—What is Vedanta? (Ethical Principles: Niyama-Yama, Harmony of Religions, Karma and Reincarnation, Monthly Readings, The Avatar: God in Human Form, The Concept of Maya, and The Oneness of Existence). Yoga—Spiritual Practice (The Path of Knowledge—Jnana Yoga, The Path of Love—Bhakti Yoga, The Path of Meditation—Raja Yoga, and The Path of Work—Karma Yoga).

The three Santa Barbara nuns who maintain the website have noticed an increase in the number of people who come to the temple who found out about it online. Many comment on the wealth of online information. It has resulted in email from people all over the world. These emails vary widely in subject matter, from asking for spiritual advice to seeking a Vedanta Society near them, or answers to academic questions on Hinduism in America. Many of the emails express appreciation of the site and tell what Vedanta has done for them.

The Santa Barbara nuns have numerous invitations for speaking engagements. Over the years, the sisters have been asked to speak at universities and colleges, junior high and high schools, retirement communities, the interreligious programs of Hospice, Cottage Hospital, the Santa Barbara Newcomers Club, retirement homes, and interfaith and philosophical forums.⁴³ Public lectures are given by Pravrajikas Bhavaprana, Krishnaprana, and Virajaprana.

There has also been an increase in the wide array of organized groups and classes that come to the center. Teachers bring their students on a regular basis for talks on Vedanta, followed by a tour of the property. They come from the University of California at Santa Barbara and many other schools and religious groups in the area. A wide array of other groups come for field trips, including architectural tours to see the unique beauty and design of the temple; the Newcomers Club comprised of people newly arrived in Santa Barbara; garden club tours; art classes; retirement home residents; and Alzheimer groups. The nuns discuss the many aspects of Vedanta and their way of life with the visitors.

Santa Barbara's Bookstore at the Vedanta Temple opened its doors in 1975 in what used to be the gatehouse of the temple. It has seen tremendous growth. When it first opened, the nuns were lucky if one or two people showed up during the week. Now it is rare that an hour goes by without someone coming in. The bookshop currently carries about four thousand titles. In 2004, dry rot was discovered in one of the main pillars in the bookstore, which meant it had to be replaced. Once the shelves were bare, the nuns looked outside, and saw the beautiful view and the light pouring in through the windows, and decided not to hide the view again with merchandise. So they redesigned the store to give it a cleaner, more spacious look.⁴⁴

When Spencer Kellogg built his shrine, he had a stained-glass inset behind the statue of Sri Ramakrishna. For many years, there were curtains in front of it, so few people even knew of its existence. Now, however, the curtains are open during the summer months to allow the sunlight to come in through the stained-glass window. Another change to the shrine is that the altar has been raised to accommodate pujarinis with knee restrictions. They can now sit in a chair and do the worship. Many have commented that the raising of the altar has improved the proportions of the shrine.⁴⁵

At the Santa Barbara Temple the public speakers include Pravrajikas Bhavaprana, Krishnaprana, Vrajaprana, and people from other Centers. For decades Anadi has taken care of the guesthouse.

8. Ramakrishna Monastery, Trabuco Canyon

Since its inception, the Trabuco Monastery at 19961 Live Oak Canyon Road has functioned as a sanctuary for countless spiritual seekers. It is open to visitors daily for two hours in the morning and in the afternoon. Pilgrims come to the retreat for spiritual upliftment, solitude, meditation, and holy company. As an oasis of peace, the holy vibration, tranquility, and breathtaking natural scenery of the grounds have provided a haven for scores of people. Visiting Trabuco helps to recharge one's spiritual battery, and offers an impetus to live a serene life in the world. Some people just come and sit by the pond for an afternoon; others come and sit in the shrine for an hour and thank the monastics because it is so peaceful.⁴⁶

The first annual Vivekananda Summer Retreat for young men aged 15-25 was held at the Trabuco Monastery during the week of August 20-24, 2001. Swami Ishtananda served as the spiritual director, and Swami Atmavidyananda as general camp coordinator. Trabuco monks hosting the five-day event provided spiritual encouragement, a pleasant social environment, and great meals. Retreat activities included seminars on Vedantic ideas, chanting, the daily worship, yoga techniques, meditation, discussions, music, hikes, videos, skits, recreational basketball and badminton. In subsequent years, the annual summer retreat has been expanded to men of all ages.⁴⁷

Sympathetic accounts of life at the monastery occasionally appear in the *Los Angeles Times* and other daily newspapers. On December 22, 2002, the *Times* mentioned how suburbia has sprung up around the secluded canyon:

In 1950, when the Ramakrishna Monastery was being established in Trabuco Canyon, there were 2,200 homes within a 10-mile radius of the religious compound. Today there are 85,900 homes, a quarter of which were built in the last 10 years.



Bill Fray

Bill Fray, an engineering supervisor and consultant, became the President of the Vedanta Society's Board in June 1992. The biggest challenge he has faced during his administration occurred in 1998, when the Orange County Planning Commission approved the Saddleback Meadows development of 299 homes on 222 acres northwest of the Trabuco Monastery. Two years later, the Orange County Superior Court ruled that there were procedural flaws in the County's 1998 approval of Saddleback Meadows. Key issues involved endangering wildlife and instability of the land. Previously, in March 1974, the Vedanta Society had donated 232 acres to the County to add to O'Neill Park. A condition of the gift was that there would be no future building on the land. The Vedanta Society's attorney defending the monastery, Ed Connor, affirmed, "You would think the County would recognize that and say, 'We really shouldn't be putting 300 houses there.' The Ramakrishna Monastery has vowed to take back the land if the development goes through." In 2002, Bill Fray informed the VSSC lawyers that the Society could no longer afford to continue and would have to drop the lawsuit. Due in

part to the hard work, genuine enthusiasm, and positive attitude of Bill Fray, Ed Connor assured him "he was not quitting, that the monastery had to be saved!" They carried the Vedanta Society for several hundred thousand dollars' worth of fees at their expense. Ed Connor's "expertise, not only in the law and in housing development, but in negotiation, drove the other side to the concessions which were made.... His strength, fortitude, and dedication cannot be adequately described."⁴⁸

Subsequently, in November 2002, the Vedanta Society again legally challenged the County's approval of a 283-unit single-family housing project adjacent to the monastery. Negotiations conducted over the first six months of 2004 produced the following results: "In return for the Vedanta Society and its co-plaintiffs agreeing to drop the lawsuits, California Quartet, the owner of the Saddleback Meadows property, has agreed to changes which make the planned development far more acceptable to us." The developers agreed to the following legally binding commitments:

- (1) expand the wildlife corridor along the southeasterly boundary of the property;
- (2) impose restrictions to permanently preserve and protect the open space areas located throughout the project; and
- (3) construct a thirty-foot high earthen berm along the southerly portion of the property to screen most of the development from view from the monastery. This berm, which will be approximately two hundred feet wide at its base will

hide all of the homes on the slope which face the monastery ... [and] block virtually all homeowner noise from our shrine trail.

The settlement was signed by the Ramakrishna Monastery and the St. Michael's Abbey, Endangered Habitats League, Saddleback Meadows Land Conservancy, and the Sea and Sage Audubon Society.⁴⁹

Brahmachari Asim Chaitanya (1924-2005) passed away after living a record breaking fifty-one years at the Ramakrishna Monastery in Trabuco from 1953 until 2005. For decades, he was in charge of maintenance, property repair and gardening on the property. Asim was an exemplary monastic who never visited another center outside of Southern California during his long stay at Trabuco. He earnestly served the Monastery until his last days, even when he was in poor health and short of breath. On a yearly basis, Asim entertained the devotees with his humorous reports on Trabuco, which he presented at the annual member meeting of the VSSC in Hollywood.

9. Vivekananda House, South Pasadena (1955-2012)

In 1955 John Yale, the future Swami Vidyatmananda, had dinner with a devotee (Don Montague), who received the name Virabhadra from Swami Prabhavananda. John surprised Virabhadra by telling him that in 1900 Swami Vivekananda had lived for weeks in a house not far from where he resided in South Pasadena. To Virabhadra, he said:

We have often wished the Society might acquire it as a permanent memorial to Swamiji; but there is the problem of the purchase price and also we would need someone to look after the house should it become the Society's responsibility. We drove over and looked at Sister's [Lalita] former residence at 309 Monterey Road. One could see that it had never been much changed, much rebuilt. You could tell by its style that the front door was the original front door by which Swamiji had entered and left the house. The wooden front steps and porch were worn; so much so that it was apparent that they had never been replaced. The planks were the very planks that his feet had touched. We arranged to gain entrance to the house. It was being used as a workshop for light manufacturing.

Built some time before 1877, the two-story house is an excellent example of Victorian architecture with its gabled roof and distinctive sunburst designs. "Soon a sale was consummated. Virabhadra helped buy the house for the Society and made his home there as caretaker." A number of devotees provided funds and labor to restore and decorate the house in the Victorian style, and to landscape the garden. The upstairs room that Swamiji occupied was consecrated as a shrine room.⁵⁰

About a week after the Santa Barbara Temple was dedicated, the building in South Pasadena received an official dedication on February 24, 1956 as the Vivekananda House. It was consecrated as a permanent memorial to Swamiji. In the presence of Swamis Nirvanananda, Vandanananda, and fifty devotees, Madhavananda (a disciple of Holy Mother) invoked Vivekananda's blessings, and Prabhavananda told of several incidents of Swamiji's second visit to America, which he learned from Sister Lalita.⁵¹

Since that time, Vivekananda House in South Pasadena:

has been restored to its original decor wherever possible. The bedroom where Vivekananda slept is now a sanctuary for meditation. The table at which he dined is still downstairs near the fireplace. Devotees can walk through the parlor where he spoke, the kitchen where he cooked, and stroll in the garden where he often played with the children. Each tangible reminder of the life of the Swami recalls the great principles for which he stood.

Vivekananda house continues to serve as a place of pilgrimage, and is a valuable source of inspiration for devotees.⁵²

In May 1983, The Cultural Heritage Commission of the city of South Pasadena officially recognized the two-story Victorian Vivekananda House as Cultural Heritage Landmark No. 29. As a historical landmark, the house on Monterey Road acquired a special tax incentive. It is protected by the city from being torn down in the future. At the time, it was being restored to look as it did when Swamiji lived there in the winter of 1900. John Hench, who designed many rides at Disneyland, possessed a special expertise in furnishing whatever was needed to correspond to a particular time period. He

was appointed to be in charge of re-designing the Vivekananda House to make it resemble turn-of-the-Century architecture. Paul

Norton and other devotees re-painted the outside of the house, rebuilt the entire porch, and painted it in its original color of yellow with green trim. On the inside, the plaster on all the walls was replaced by dry wall, and period wallpaper and lighting fixtures were added. During the years 1983-1985, the fireplace was torn down and rebuilt, and the garden was landscaped. Victorian furniture was placed in the dining room.⁵³

Swami Vedarupananda has lived at Vivekananda House since the mid-1980s. For years, he conducted an annual January expedition of devotees to climb the trail behind it to the top of Mt. Lowe. There, they explored the ruins of the Echo Mountain House in the Angeles National Forest and recalled Swami Vivekananda's visit to the site on January 13, 1900. They meditated, chanted, read from the works of Vivekananda, and experienced the lofty vision of the mountains above and the valleys below. Swamiji had ascended to the top of Mt. Lowe (elevation five thousand feet) by riding on a funicular that no longer exists. He resided in the Echo Mountain House for one night, meditated, and the next day gave a morning talk.⁵⁴

[Return to TOC](#)

©2018 Gopal Stavig

[Next Chapter](#)

Photographs provided courtesy of the Ramakrishna Order of India, Advaita Ashrama, the Vedanta Society of Southern California, the Vedanta Society of Northern California, the Vedanta Society of St. Louis, the Vedanta Society of Portland, and others.
All rights remain the property of the owners.

VII. The Swami Swahananda Era (1976-2012)

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.

- ¹ Swami Swahananda, "My Days in Madras Math," *VK* (1997), pp. 551-53, 559.
- ² Swami Swahananda, tr., *Go Forward* (Satchidananda Dhar: Calcutta, 1992), pp. 1-33.
- ³ Swahananda (1997), pp. 559-61; "A Scrapbook of Reminiscence of Swami Swahananda" (June 29, 2001), VSSC Archives.
- ⁴ "Scrapbook" (June 29, 2001).
- ⁵ Email from Swami Swahananda to the Vedanta Archives (Aug. 3, 2005). "Swami Swahananda." VSSC. www.vedanta.org/vssc/swahananda.html
- ⁶ "Scrapbook" (June 29, 2001).
- ⁷ Burke, IV, p. 341.
- ⁸ Bulletins.
- ⁹ Nita Chaitanya, Meeting with the Hollywood Nuns (Aug. 16, 2005).
- ¹⁰ Jackson, pp. 123-24, 129; Member's Letter (Sept. 1, 1977); Bulletins; Meeting with the Hollywood Nuns (Aug. 16, 2005).
- ¹¹ Pravrajika Saradeshprana, Meeting with the Hollywood Nuns (Aug. 16, 2005); Bhaktiprana; Bulletins.
- ¹² Swami Swahananda, "Vedanta Convents in the West," *VK* (1990), p. 486; Jackson, pp. 142-43.
- ¹³ Jackson, p. 117; Anandaprana, pp. 119, 122.
- ¹⁴ "Scrapbook" (June 29, 2001)
- ¹⁵ Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture. Web: www.ramakrishnainstitute.org
- ¹⁶ Vardapranaz, p. 104; Varadapranai, p. 18; Lotus (Fall 1982; Autumn 1989); Swahananda (1997), p. 554; Shivananda, pp. 82, 160; Lotus (Fall 1991); Voices (Sept. 2000).
- ¹⁷ Email from Swami Swahananda to the Vedanta Archives (Aug. 3, 2005); Swahananda (1997), p. 555.
- ¹⁸ "Scrapbook" (June 29, 2001); Lotus (Aug. 1988).
- ¹⁹ Swami Tathagatananda, *Journey of the Upanishads to the West* (New York: Vedanta Society of New York, 2002), p. 549; Russian Indology. www.russian-centre-umbai.org/russianindology/personalities.htm; *WARHD*, pp. 580-81.
- ²⁰ Amrita Salm, "Roerich: Peace through Culture Conference," *VK* (March 1990), pp. 112-16; Lotus (Winter 1989).
- ²¹ Lotus (Winter 1985).
- ²² "Scrapbook" (June 29, 2001).
- ²³ "Scrapbook" (June 29, 2001).
- ²⁴ Catalog.
- ²⁵ Lotus (May 1981).
- ²⁶ Catalog.
- ²⁷ Web: <http://www.independent.com/news/2012/nov/14/swami-swahananda-1921-2012>; vedantamemories.blogspot.com/2012/10/swami-swahananda-personal-memoir.html
- ²⁸ *VK*(March 1953), p. 485; www.geocities.com/.../Swami_Satprakashananda.html
- ²⁹ Catalog; "St. Louis Center." Vedanta Society of St. Louis. www.vedantastl.org/StLouisCenter/StLCenter.htm; ELC (Library of Congress, Canada).
- ³⁰ Email from Swami Aparananda to the Vedanta Archives (2005); Times (June 2, 1983), p. WS 13.
- ³¹ Al Eschner, Annual Member's Meeting (April 27, 1984).
- ³² "Services Provided." Vedanta Society Berkeley. Web: www.vedantaberkeley.org/services.htm; Email from Swami Aparananda to the Vedanta Archives (July 30, 2005).
- ³³ "Minutes of the 2000 Annual Member's Meeting" (2000), VSSC Archives; Newsletter VSSC (2015); Ramakrishna Vedanta Vereniging Nederland. Web: www.vedanta-nederland.org
- ³⁴ St. Petersburg Times (Dec. 26, 2007), p. 14; "Report of the San Diego Center Annual Members Meeting" (April 2004), VSSC Archives; Voices (2000-07, Jan. 2008).
- ³⁵ President Bill Fray, Annual Member's Meeting (April, 28, 2005).
- ³⁶ Vedanta Archives. www.vedantaarchives.org.
- ³⁷ Voices (May 1999).

³⁸ A good portion of this section on ASTI was written by Barbara Piner (May 2005); ASTI News (2005).

³⁹ "Ramakrishna Foundation." www.geocities.com/rkfoundation; Voices (Feb. 2005).

⁴⁰ Email from the Santa Barbara Convent to the Vedanta Archives (Aug. 17, 2005); Varadapranaz, p. 107.

⁴¹ Varadapranai, p. 20; Varadapranaz, p. 106; Pravrajika Brahmaprana, "The Vedanta Movement in America (1970-93)", p. 232; Pravrajika Krishnaprana, Annual Member's Meeting (April 27, 1995).

⁴² Pravrajika Brahmaprana, Annual Member's Meeting (April 28, 1994); Lotus (Spring 1989); Varadapranai, p. 22; Varadapranaz, p. 105; Email from the Santa Barbara Convent to the Vedanta Archives (Aug. 17, 2005).

⁴³ Pravrajika Vrajaprana, Annual Member's Meeting (April 28, 2005); Pravrajika Brahmaprana, Annual Member's Meeting (April 28, 1994; April 26, 2001).

⁴⁴ Email from the Santa Barbara Convent to the Vedanta Archives (Aug. 17, 2005); Pravrajika Vrajaprana, Annual Member's Meeting (April 28, 2005).

⁴⁵ Email from the Santa Barbara Convent to the Vedanta Archives (Aug. 17, 2005).

⁴⁶ Ananda, Annual Member's Meeting (April 26, 2001); Lal Chand, Labor Day Retreat in Hollywood (Sept. 5, 2005).

⁴⁷ Voices (Oct. 2001; Oct. 2004); Email from Swami Atmavidyananda to the Vedanta Archives (July 29, 2005).

⁴⁸ Voices (April 2000; Aug. 2004); *Orange County Register* (May 28, 2004), p. cover; *Times* (Feb. 24, 2000), p. 3; (July 7, 2002), B3; (Dec. 22, 2002), p. K1; Email from Bill Fray to the Vedanta Archives (Aug. 17, 2005).

⁴⁹ Voices (Aug. 2004); Email from Bill Fray to the Vedanta Archives (Aug. 17, 2005).

⁵⁰ Vidyatmananda3; *Vedanta*, p. 47.

⁵¹ VK (May 1956), p. 86; Varadapranai, pp. 15-16.

⁵² "Vivekananda House." VSSC. www.vedanta.org/vssc/Centers/pasadena.html; Lotus (Winter 1985).

⁵³ Lotus (June 1983; Winter 1985); *Times* (May 19, 1983), p. SG1; *South Pasadena Journal* (May 18, 1983).

⁵⁴ Swami Vedarupanda, Annual Member's Meeting (April 28, 2005); Varadapranai, p. 16; "Vivekananda Expedition" (Jan. 1987), VSSC Archives.