

## VIII. The Swami Sarvadevananda Era (2012-2018)

1. [Swami Sarvadevananda](#)
2. [The Assistant Swamis](#)
3. [Hollywood Monastery and Convent](#)
4. [Lectures, Classes, and Educational Events at the Vedanta Society](#)
5. [Devotional Events at the Vedanta Society](#)
6. [Functional Departments of the Vedanta Society](#)
7. [Santa Barbara Temple and Convent](#)
8. [Ramakrishna Monastery, Trabuco Canyon](#)
9. [Vivekananda House, South Pasadena](#)
10. [Piñon Hills](#)

The Ramakrishna Order with headquarters in Calcutta is one of the largest, and most respected religious orders in India today. The Order was inspired by the great Bengali saint, Sri Ramakrishna (1836-1886). He entrusted the care of these young men to Swami Vivekananda, who later, in 1897, founded the Ramakrishna Order in India. There are over one hundred and forty official Centers of the Ramakrishna Order, and many more unofficial, or unaffiliated ones. These Centers not only cover the length and breadth of the Indian subcontinent, but can also be found in Europe, Russia, Japan, South America, Africa, Canada, and the United States. The work of the Vedanta Societies in the West has primarily been devoted to spiritual activities, though many of them perform some form of social service.

### 1. Swami Sarvadevananda

Swami Sarvadevananda was initiated by Swami Shankarananda, the seventh President of the Ramakrishna Order, in 1961. He joined the monastery at Belur Math, the Order's headquarters in Kolkata, in 1965, and completed his monastic training while serving in various capacities, including working in a camp for refugees who had barely escaped with their lives during the Bangladesh war in 1971. The Swami lived near Belur Math from 1960 onward and thus had the opportunity to come in contact with many monks who were initiated by Holy Mother, Swami Brahmananda, Swami Shivananda, and other direct disciples of Ramakrishna. He spent the next two decades at Saradapitha, a major educational and technical training institution in Kolkata, imparting Vedantic spiritual values as part of the high school and university level curriculum. Swami Sarvadevananda became the head of the Ramakrishna Mission of Sikra [Kulingram, the birthplace of Swami Brahmananda] in 1988, where he was very well loved. While there, he initiated literacy and health programs for hundreds of underprivileged villagers and performed relief and rehabilitation work for the homeless. Both Sikra Kulingram and Saradapitha College, where Sarvadevananda served as Principal, are located in West Bengal.<sup>1</sup>



*Swami Sarvadevananda*

In May 1993, Swami Sarvadevananda was posted as Assistant Minister at the Vedanta Society of Southern California in Hollywood. After his predecessor, Swami Swahananda passed away he became the spiritual leader of the Society. Whenever he is called upon, in addition to regular lectures and classes, he addresses schools, colleges, and other religious groups throughout Southern California and other parts of the United States. Swami's enthusiasm for spiritual life and large-heartedness toward all who cross his path is unending and greatly cherished in the United States.

As of October 1, 1995, he established a policy of providing a monthly retreat on Sunday afternoons at the Vivekananda House in South Pasadena. The spiritual event comprises chanting, readings, meditation, and a religious discussion.

Since taking command of the Vedanta Society of Southern California in November 2012, Swami Sarvadevananda has created a very cordial atmosphere for all of the devotees. He is faithfully continuing the policies laid down by Swamis Prabhavananda and Swahananda. Not only has he traveled to most of the major Vedanta Centers in the U.S.; every year

Swami Sarvadevananda makes regular visits to the Vedanta Centers established by Swami Swahananda in San Diego, CA; Phoenix and Tucson, AZ; Las Vegas, NV; Austin, Dallas, and Houston, TX; Atlanta, GA; Raleigh, NC; Washington DC; Ridgely Retreat, NY; and Pittsburgh, PA where he is very welcomed. He also visits the Vedanta Centers in Connecticut, Delaware, Voorhees, New Jersey; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Morrisville, North Carolina; Cedar Rapids, Iowa; Vancouver, BC; Puerto Rico, and other areas, where he meets with devotees and conducts classes and retreats.

In addition since 2016, Swami Sarvadevananda has conducted classes and given speeches at the at the Malibu Hindu Temple, Sri Venkata Krishna Temple in Thousand Oaks, Guibord Center in Los Angeles, and at the Vivekananda Vidyapith, New Jersey an Academy of Indian Philosophy and Culture established in 1976.

The energetic and hardworking Swami Sarvadevananda gives a minimum of three public lectures and classes a week, along with offering extra classes for a more limited group of monastic and lay devotees. Many of his lectures can be viewed on YouTube.<sup>2</sup> In 1996, Swami Sarvadevananda interviewed Tulsi Ma, one of the last living disciples of the Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi. The interview was videotape and is now available with English subtitles. This fascinating video, as well as many other videos with recent and historical footage, can be seen at vedantavideo.com.

Swami Sarvadevananda is accessible on a one-on-one basis to all devotees who possess a sincere interest in religion, and has attracted many devotees to the Vedanta Society. To these spiritual aspirants, he offers pertinent advice and encouragement.

Motivated by Swami Vivekananda's message to spread the teachings as far as possible, Swami Sarvadevananda has been particularly interested in making contact with groups outside the parameters of the Vedanta Society. The Ramakrishna Order supports a pluralistic outlook whereby all genuine religions are recognized as valid paths to the Supreme Reality. Consequently, interaction with other religions has always been welcomed, from the days of Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, and Abhedananda to the present. He represents the Vedanta Society on the Interreligious Council of Southern California and the Hindu-Catholic and Hindu-Episcopal Dialogue of Los Angeles. As a guest speaker, Sarvadevananda has represented Vedanta-Hinduism at many interfaith events. He has established a special rapport with Roman Catholic organizations. At the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, he delivered the invocation for the annual February 2001 Ecumenical Leadership Luncheon, a gathering of many outstanding religious and lay leaders in the Los Angeles area. Besides making many appearances at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles, he has taken a very active role at the annual Hindu-Catholic Dialogue Conference, and at Loyola Marymount University. He represented Hinduism at the January 23, 2002 Peace Service organized by Cardinal Mahoney, and the following month attended the Cardinal's annual Ecumenical Luncheon.<sup>3</sup>

Swami Sarvadevananda has also represented Vedanta-Hinduism and delivered lectures at the Unitarian Universalist, Baptist, Buddhist Thai, Baha'i and various Hindu groups. At the interfaith retreat held at the Casa de Maria in Santa Barbara, he was a co-speaker with Catholic Father Thomas Keating, founder of the Centering Prayer movement and Contemplative Outreach, and Carol Lee Flinders, a teacher from the Blue Mountain community founded by Eknath Easwaran.<sup>4</sup>

The Swami sustains many university contacts. At the request of Rabbi Susan Laemmle, Dean of Religious Life, in March 2002, he accepted the position of Religious Director of the Hindu Students Organization (HSO) at the University of Southern California. Hinduism is one of the largest ethnic subdivisions on the campus. Through email, HSO has contact with nearly three hundred students, and Sarvadevananda was required to visit the campus on a twice-monthly basis. Through open forums, guest speakers, and study, the group explores the many facets of the Hindu faith. In addition, the Swami is available for counseling with the students. Sarvadevananda has received a warm reception because he believes that all religions must be connected through dignity and respect. The Religious Director of the Campus Crusade for Christ acknowledged, "I do respect him and his views and the dialogue that can result." Swami Atmavidyananda shares this responsibility as co-Director of the HSO at USC. Atmavidyananda is also the Hindu representative at the Interfaith Center located at California State University in Long Beach, California, and is active with the Antelope Valley Interfaith Council, and the UCLA University Religious Conference.<sup>5</sup>

When Swami Sarvadevananda met with Steven B. Sample, the dynamic President of the University of Southern California, he presented Sample with a copy of the book Education, compiled from the speeches and writings of Vivekananda. In a letter of reply written on August 23, 2004, the President wrote to Sarvadevananda:

Thank you for the copy of Swami Vivekananda's essays on education. I am, of course, familiar with him from his introduction of Hinduism in America, but I had not before seen this particular work. I particularly like the comment quoted in the back of the volume - "We want that education by which character is formed, strength of mind is

increased, the intellect is expanded, and by which one can stand on one's own feet" - and I looked forward to giving his thoughts the attention they deserve. Swami, again, thank you. Best wishes for a successful fall semester.

Bob Pool, a feature writer for the Los Angeles Times, interviewed Swami Sarvadevananda concerning the Vedanta Society Temple. Swami told him (October 2, 2003):

There have been vibrations here for 75 years. This place appeals to many intellectual people. Great writers such as Aldous Huxley and Christopher Isherwood were influenced by this place. All day long people come. Everyone is welcomed. Our main teaching is harmony and respect for everyone.

The year 2018 was a busy year for Swami Sarvadevananda who traveled with Swami Atmajnanananda of the Vedanta Center of Greater Washington DC. to India and Bangladesh. He departed on February 21 and returned to Hollywood from his long journey on March 30, 2018. In India, he went to Kamarpukur and Jayrambati, among other locations. The main purpose of the trip was to find a new Assistant Swami for the Vedanta Society of Southern California that now encompasses many Centers located throughout the nation (see Chapter IX for a list of many of them). In June, he visited Swami Sridharananda in Australia and made a quick stop at the Island country of Fiji returning on July 2.

Swami Dhireshananda, a monk of the Ramakrishna Order, translated the Yoga Vasishtha Sara into Bengali, publishing it in 1968. Swami Sarvadevananda devoted more than two years to translating this book into English with the title Nectar of Supreme Knowledge. Chennai Math published it in 2014. The Yoga Vasishtha (estimated to have been completed some time between the 6th and 14th century) is an important Vedanta scripture, which explains the lofty principles of Advaita philosophy, in a dialogue between the enlightened Sage Vasishtha and Prince Rama. Years later, an anonymous learned scholar authored Yoga Vasishtha Sara with 223 verses, a smaller treatise that includes only the essential philosophical contents of the original text. The translations and the explanations are superb and unique, with the commentary of Mahidhara, which present complex Vedanta doctrines and philosophies in a language both scholarly and understandable to the educated public.

Later in the year Sarvadevananda came out with an English rendering of The Life of Sri Ramakrishna originally written in 1890 in Bengali by Ramachandra Dutta (or Ram Chandra Datta, 1851-1899). Ramachandra Dutta was a householder disciple of Ramakrishna whom he first visited in November 1879 at Dakshineswar. He was a relative of Swami Vivekananda and by profession a chemist and medical practitioner at Calcutta Medical College. This was the turning point in his life, and he thereafter became a staunch householder devotee of Ramakrishna to the extent that he considered him an Avatar of God. In turn Ramakrishna visited Ram's house on 2 June 1886 and he felt blessed on this occasion. Due to his dedication and love for the Master, he delivered 18 public lectures between 1893 and 1897 in Calcutta extolling Sri Ramakrishna's life and teachings. This eyewitness account of the extraordinary life of Sri Ramakrishna was written by a disciple who was transformed by his Master, who knew him personally, talked to him, and was blessed by him. After Ramakrishna's passing, Ramachandra spread the teachings of the Master through lectures, books, and articles, maintained his Temple, organized festivals celebrating his birth, and gave initiation. This faithful and clear translation depicts the entire life of Ramakrishna.<sup>6</sup>

Swami Sarvadevananda along with Pravrajika Sevaprana and others spoke on "Spirituality and the Future of Humanity" at the Parliament of World Religions held in Salt Lake City on October 15-19, 2015. In addition Swami Atmatattwananda was one of the speakers on "Inclusivity: How to Expand Your City's Role in Interfaith Engagement," and Pravrajika Krishnaprana on "Vivekananda: A Hindu Yogi and His Legacy." As a continuation of the interfaith Parliament of World's Religions that began in Chicago in 1893, ten thousand people from around the world attended representing over 80 countries and 50 different religious and spiritual traditions.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. The Assistant Swamis

Swami Sarvapriyananda

Swami Sarvapriyananda became an Assistant Swami at the Vedanta Society of Southern California (VSSC) in December 2015. He had joined the Ramakrishna Math and Mission in 1994 and received Sannyas in 2004. At Belur Math he served the



Swami Sarvapriyananda

Ramakrishna Order as the Principal of the Shikshana Mandira Teacher Education College, first Registrar of the Vivekananda University, and the acharya (teacher) of the monastic probationers' training centre.

At the VSSC, Swami Sarvapriyananda was very popular particularly as a public speaker. From the platform, he simplifies the deepest philosophical concepts presenting his ideas in a lucid manner. He focuses on the essential questions of life, providing an abundance of material for thinking and pondering over. His range of subjects includes Advaita Vedanta and other aspects of Hinduism. Many of his video lectures are available on YouTube including a single lecture that garnered over 1,940,000 hits. For over an hour Sarvapriyananda held an interesting discussion on Advaita Vedanta with the distinguished Deepak Chopra, titled "Exploring Reality with Swami Sarvapriyananda" on YouTube (<https://youtu.be/uHzFd6R12Lo>). Their discussion begins about 4:30 into the video presentation. After thirteen months at the VSSC, Belur Math appointed him as Minister and Spiritual Leader of the Vedanta

Society of New York (West Side), duties that he assumed on January 6, 2017. On a yearly basis, he continues to offer lectures at the VSSC during the month of July.

### Swami Satyamayananda

It was announced at the April 2018 Members' Meeting that Swami Satyamayananda (Ananda Maharaj) has been assigned by the Belur Math to be the new Assistant Minister at the Vedanta Society of Southern California. He joined the Order at Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata. An initiated disciple of Swami Bhuteshananda, he served in various capacities at Advaita Ashrama including Acharya at the Probationers' Training Centre, Belur Math. He edited the distinguished *Prabuddha Bharata* journal from November 2010 to July 2014, after which he was appointed as the Secretary of Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Kanpur in 2014, before becoming the Assistant Minister at the Vedanta Society of Southern California in December 2018.<sup>8</sup>



Swami Satyamayananda

Swami Satyamayananda was one of three editors for the volume *Approaching Ramakrishna* (2011), published by Advaita Ashrama to commemorate the 175th birth anniversary of Sri Ramakrishna. The book comprises a collection of essays that appeared in the January 2011 edition of *Prabuddha Bharata*, three months after Satyamayananda had become editor of the journal. The series of essays discuss the phenomena of Ramakrishna, attempting to fathom his expansive personality according to each author's unique perception.

He is the author of *Ancient Sages* (2012), a volume published by Advaita Ashrama. It contains a collection of stories about the ancient sages of India including Narada, Markandeya, and Valmiki the author of the Ramayana. These sages are the all-renouncing rishis and seers of truth from whom the Indian religion traces its roots.

The Swami's, *Encountering the Memory-Self* (2016) examines how the mind stores memories; different aspects of memory, its processes and impressions, and how it manifests on the physical plane; the memory's relation to karma, and its higher dimensions. This volume, published by the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, was written from the author's personal enquiry into how human self-consciousness is the basis of memory and karma

### 3. Hollywood Monastery and Convent

A community of monks maintain the: monastery and ashram property composed of several buildings that include a Temple, living quarters for monastics, ashramites, and guests, monastery kitchen and dining hall, business office, Vedanta Press and Catalog office, bookshop, library, pujari work area, room for classes, public kitchen for special events, and a Sunday School. Across the street are a couple of dozen rentals that garner a sufficient income for the Vedanta Society and a flower garden for the daily pujas.

For the monks, domestic duties include shopping, cooking, house cleaning, repair work, and gardening. Functional work duties consist of managing the Vedanta Press, sending out packages of books, incense, etc. all over the world, and managing the Society's financial accounts. For the devotees they setup the Temple for public events, cook for the annual pujas, welcome guests who stay for one or more nights, run a Sunday School for children, maintain a library so that members can have borrowing privileges, offer pastoral care for ailing devotees, and manage a monthly Karma Yoga Day. Volunteer devotees and ashramites participate in many of these events.

Many monastics offer lectures and classes in six Vedanta Centers (Santa Barbara, Hollywood, South Pasadena, Trabuco, San Diego, and Piñon Hills) in Southern California. They participate in interfaith meetings such as the Interreligious Council of Southern California, speak with visiting student groups, serve as Hindu Chaplain at the University of Southern California, and direct the choir. In addition, they process Sunday lecture recordings for our YouTube channel and regularly email out "Newsletter VSSC," to keep the devotees posted on recent events. More details of these activities are found in the Sections that follow.<sup>9</sup>

The daily routine of the nuns consists mainly in working for the Vedanta Society, meditation, individual study, and attending the classes at the Center. Household activities consist in purchasing groceries, cooking and cleaning, directing maintenance repair workers, taking care of visiting nuns and women devotees who stay temporarily at the Convent, cataloging the Convent library, and gardening. They also perform office and computer work that includes running church affairs, operating a bookstore, assisting elderly devotees at their home, and lecturing, writing, and as representatives at Interreligious council meetings.<sup>10</sup>

### Pravrajika Vivekaprana



*Pravrajika Vivekaprana*

Senior nun Pravrajika Vivekaprana (1934–2018) of the Hollywood Convent left the body in the afternoon of April 11, 2018. Her passing was very peaceful, and three of her sister nuns were present, chanting the holy name. She was remarkably cheerful. The staff of the Care Center were struck by her loving demeanor, and noted that she never complained to them about anything. An initiated disciple of Swami Prabhavananda, she joined the Hollywood Convent in 1966, received Brahmacharya initiation in 1973 (as Dipika), and was ordained a Sannyasini in 1979. Over the years, Vivekaprana served in various positions at the Vedanta Society: Vedanta Catalog editor, Secretary of the VSSC, cash manager for the Society, and convent representative on the Board of Trustees. She also gave classes on the Gita, and established the Vedanta Study Circle, which met on Saturdays for many years to study Vedanta Philosophy and the Brahma Sutras. Swami Swahananda once stated, "Vivekaprana is one of the success stories of Vedanta."<sup>11</sup>

## 4. Lectures, Classes, and Educational Events at the Vedanta Society<sup>12</sup>

Swami Sarvadevananda encourages a large number of events for the devotees. Public speakers include Swamis Sarvadevananda, Atmatattwananda, Atmavidyananda, Brahavidyananda, Dhyanyogananda, Harinamananda, Mahayogananda, Vedarupananda, and Yogeshananda; Pravrajikas Krishnaprana, Saradeshaprana, Sevaprana, Vidyaprana, and Vrajaprana; Dr. Debiprosad Nayak, Jon Monday, David Nelson and others. These lectures can be viewed on YouTube at [www.youtube.com/channel/UCoeQCikDRajouABKHfHJUdw](http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCoeQCikDRajouABKHfHJUdw). Another excellent source for Vedanta Videos is [www.vedantavideo.com](http://www.vedantavideo.com).

Between 2015 and 2018 guest speakers of the Ramakrishna Order that delivered lectures at the Vedanta Society of Southern California included: Swamis Atmaghanananda (Kanchipuram, India), Atmapriyananda (Vice-chancellor, Vivekananda University, Belur Math), Pranavananda (Rameswaram, India), Purnatmananda (Kolkata, India), and Suhitananda (General Secretary of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission); Baneshananda (Germany), Kripamayananda (Toronto), Sridharananda (Sydney and its five branches in Australia), Veetamohananda (Gretz, France) and Vimokshananda (Dublin, Ireland); Atmarupananda (Houston), Chetanananda (St. Louis), Sarvapriyananda (New York, West Side), Shantarupananda (Portland, OR), Tyagananda (Boston), and Yogatmananda (Providence, RI). Also, Swami Anubhavananda Saraswati has visited a number of times.

Families and children have always been important at the VSSC. The first Sunday School was organized by Amiya Corbin for a few children, and was held in Swami Prabhavananda's room. From time to time, various other members of the Vedanta Society have been in charge of the Sunday School or produced children's plays. For around twenty years, Vedanta Child Care and its special activities were under the leadership of Pravrajika Akhandaprana. It existed for the benefit of parents, so they could attend the Sunday lecture. The Child Care Center worked like a one-room schoolhouse, where children learned to relate to and help each other. Since the children were often from various cultures and religions, universal values and teachings were emphasized. Activities conducted through loving guidance involved taking a turn at waving the incense around a religious picture, and uttering relevant chants, including OM. Events also included children's plays, seasonal celebrations, and creating a CD of interfaith songs. These experiences presented a positive image of the Vedanta Society for the young children.<sup>13</sup> The present Hollywood Temple Sunday School serves children and teens ages 6 and up during Sunday morning lectures from 11 am to 12 noon. The Sunday School operating under the guidance of Swami Sarvadevananda focuses on character building. Guidance is provided by Jaya Sri Whitmarsh and other experienced teachers. They offer instruction in Vedantic principles and the yogas through worship, prayer, chanting, singing, hatha yoga and examining the lives of Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, Swami Vivekananda, and other incarnations and saints of Hinduism and other faiths.

A Spanish-language Scripture Class is conducted every Sunday at 2:30 pm that meets in the Green House at the Hollywood Vedanta Center. It is guided by Swami Dhyanayogananda, originally from Argentina, to enrich one's spiritual life by the study of the Hindu Scriptures in the light of Swami Vivekananda and his teacher Sri Ramakrishna. All are invited to take part in these talks open to discussion and participation in Spanish. Occasionally the class is given via Skype. Ramakrishna-Vedanta books written in the Spanish language can be ordered online from [www.saradamapublishing.org](http://www.saradamapublishing.org) or purchased at the bookstore.

As a little historical background, in 1912, Swami Abhedananda's English language translation of the Ramakrishna Kathamrita (The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna) was rendered into Spanish, under the title *El Evangelio de Ramakrishna* by the Sociedad Vedanta of Buenos Aires. By 1922, the Buenos Aires Society had published Spanish language translations of Swami Vivekananda's Karma Yoga, Raja Yoga, and Jnana Yoga (translated by M. Lopez Villamil and Ricardo Vivie). Ricardo Vivie was a wealthy man in Buenos Aires who owned a milk products business called "Santa Brígida," which presently exists under another name. In 1924, Ananda put out edited versions of Vivekananda's Karma Yoga, Jnana Yoga, and Yoga Philosophy in Santiago, Chile. By the 1930s, Federico Climent Terror had translated Bhakti Yoga, Jnana Yoga, Raja Yoga, Practical Vedanta and other works of Swami Vivekananda in Barcelona Spain. These volumes helped to spread the message of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda in Spanish-speaking countries. As a result, distinguished Hispanic thinkers became interested in the teachings of Ramakrishna and writings of Vivekananda. They include Amado (Ruiz de) Nervo (1870-1919) the Mexican Ambassador to Argentina and Uruguay who is widely regarded as one of the foremost Mexican writers of the modernist period, and Ricardo Güiraldes (1886-1927) one of the most significant Argentine novelists of his era.<sup>14</sup> In addition, there are an amazing number of similarities between the humanitarian social ideas presented by Swami Vivekananda and those taught by the contemporary Latin America liberation theologians. A discussion of the subject is found in the article "Swami Vivekananda and Liberation Theology," at [www.vedantawritings.com](http://www.vedantawritings.com)

A Sanskrit Class is taught at the Hollywood Temple Library every Sundays, 9-10:35 am. The class is conducted by a very competent teacher of Sanskrit. All levels of students are welcomed.

The remodeled religious library in Hollywood is open to the devotees to check out books before and after the Sunday lectures.

The second World Hindu Congress was held in Chicago, Illinois from September 7-9, 2018. On the eve of the 125th anniversary of Swami Vivekananda's historic address to the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago, Hindus from all over the world and of all backgrounds are invited to participate. The Dalai Lama, Ravi Shankara, United States Hindu Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard (the chairperson), and many other celebrities will attend.

In 2015, the 6th Parliament of the World's Religions was held in Salt Lake City featuring speakers like Swami Suhitananda, now Vice-president of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission. The 7th Parliament of the World's Religions is hosted by the city of Toronto, Canada, November 1-8, 2018. The Parliament features more than 500 programs and events with an expected attendance that will exceed 10,000 persons from 80 nations and more than 200 unique spiritual backgrounds. Parliament presenters include clergy, interfaith leaders, spiritual luminaries, scholars, Nobel Laureates, city mayors, best-selling authors, globally recognized entertainers, thought leaders, students, and more. In addition, the

Southern CA Committee for a Parliament of the World's Religions stages large-scale local events and is represented by Swami Atmatattwananda of the Vedanta Society.

John Dobson



*John Dobson*

An outstanding educator at the Vedanta Society was John Lowry Dobson (1915-2014) who served as a monastic in San Francisco and Sacramento for twenty-three years (1944-67). Swami Ashokananda assigned him the task of reconciling Advaita Vedanta and modern physics. For many years, he visited the Vedanta Society of Southern California (1978-79, 1985, 1992-2004) for several months at a stretch. When residing at the Vedanta Society, he presented a series of interesting cosmology classes over a month in length. Twice while visiting Southern California, he appeared as a guest on the "Johnny Carson Tonight Show," a national late night television production. He wrote *Advaita Vedanta and Modern Science* (1979). John also penned two articles in *Prabuddha Bharata* (1985-86) and six in *Vedanta Kesari* (1988-96). Nearly all of these addresses and writings were on the subject of Vedanta and modern physics, particularly in relation to the scientific cosmology of Albert Einstein. The last few years of his life, John resided at the Hollywood monastery of the Vedanta Society. He impressed many with his zeal for life, and his regular meditation habit. He left his body on Wednesday January 15, 2014.

John Dobson was selected by *Smithsonian Magazine* (November 1, 2005) as one of the thirty-five greatest innovators of our times, in company with dignitaries like Bill Gates and Steven Spielberg. He received this honor for his involvement with the Sidewalk Astronomers and the innovation of the Dobsonian telescope. In 1968 along with two associates, he founded the San Francisco Sidewalk Astronomers. Dobson took the lead by barnstorming the country and persuading large numbers of people to gaze at the skies through his telescope. He became the father of sidewalk astronomy. With chapters across the country and abroad, Sidewalk Astronomers branched out to about 10,000 members worldwide. Nearly a million people have looked through Dobson's telescopes. He gave lectures and workshops as far away as Russia and China. Jeffrey Jacobs' entertaining and educational documentary "A Sidewalk Astronomer" (2005) chronicling Dobson is available on DVD and videocassette from Vedanta Press and Catalog, and Amazon.com.

Secondly, he is the designer of the portable Dobsonian mount that supports a large inexpensive telescope. His associates have remarked, "I think every advanced amateur astronomer in the world has at least one Dobson telescope." [And,] "It is one of the most popular telescopes on the market." In 1995, the Dobsonian telescope was used in the discovery of the farthest comet ever discovered by an amateur astronomer. Dobson did not patent his telescope; consequently, he received no royalties for his low price eight-inch Dobsonian telescope that commercial manufactures sell to the public. He replied, "These are gifts to humanity."<sup>15</sup>

## 5. Devotional Events at the Vedanta Society<sup>16</sup>

In Hollywood on a daily basis, the spiritual atmosphere is maintained by devotional pujas performed by the pujaris.

Major public religious celebrations conducted at the Hollywood Temple and other Vedanta locations in chronological order include: Kalpataru Day (January), Swami Vivekananda Puja (January), Swami Brahmananda Puja (January-February), Shiva Rati and Sri Ramakrishna Puja (February-March), Buddha Purnima (April-May), Memorial Day Retreat (May), Vivekananda Day in Trabuco and South Pasadena (July), Sri Krishna Puja in San Diego (August-September), Labor Day Retreat (September), Durga Chanting and Durga Puja in Santa Barbara (September-October), Kali Puja and Immersion (October-November), Christmas Eve Service, Holy Mother Puja, and New Years Eve Mediation (December).

As originally encouraged by Swami Swahananda, in conjunction with the Durga Puja devotees are asked to pledge an extra amount of Japa (repetition of a mantra) each day. Devotees pledge a certain number of repetitions of "Jai Sri Durga" Japa during the auspicious Navaratri, the "nine nights" and ten days sacred to the Divine Mother. The benefits include an increase in the capacity for spiritual practice for the individual and greater spiritual energy and merit for the group.

A monthly Ram Nam (literally the Name of Rama) includes devotional music often accompanied by a harmonium, a tampura (an Indian string instrument), tabla (Indian drums), and cymbals. Invoked are the Divine presence of the Avatar

Lord Rama, his wife Sita, brother Lakshmana, and servant Hanuman. This ancient Indian prayer has been traditionally chanted in South India, and was introduced by Swami Brahmananda in all the Ramakrishna ashramas in India. An informal potluck supper and a dialogue with the resident Swami in the living room, follows the Ram Nam service.<sup>17</sup>

Once every year most often in April since 2005, Tara Taylor Donlan invites chanting devotees from all over the area for an All Day Hanuman Jayanti celebration in the Hollywood Temple. The event comprises the chanting of 108 Hanuman Chalisas, starting at 4 am, with breaks for morning meditation and noon worship. Hanuman Chalisa is the forty verses on Sri Hanuman, originally composed by Tulsidas (c. 1532-1623).

Pravrajika Dayaprana, a Vedanta Society nun originally from Japan, conducts a yearly Buddha Purnima worship of Buddha (April-May). It involves chanting, a flower offering, bathing of an image of the baby Buddha, and a visual presentation. The purpose of watching and listening to the visual presentation in the Temple is so the devotee can meditate on the life of Buddha.

The numerous Kirtans directed by Jit Sarkar at the Hollywood Vedanta Temple are highly creative musical festivals. These delightful programs combine local musical talent with various kirtan groups throughout the city like the Ananda Ashram, Art of Living, Sathya Sai Baba Center of Hollywood, Temple Bhajan Band, Nikunj Ras, Kamini Natarajan Kirtan, Deva, and Ananda. A major event is the All-Day Maha Kirtan generally held on a Saturday in the month of September. A yearly highlight of the Kirtan is the presence of the Swami Nirvanananda Saraswati (originally from Italy) [www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=nirvananda](http://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=nirvananda)) who travels extensively and sings devotional chants in Europe, the United States, and India. A gifted musician, his bhakti-filled presence and melodious chants lift our minds to a higher realm and enhancing the spiritual atmosphere of the Temple. He has dedicated his life to raising funds for various humanitarian projects in India including service and support to orphans' and children's healthcare, education, and for the well-being of the less fortunate.

Every New Year's Eve night from 11:30 pm (or earlier) there is a silent meditation in the Temple, and a special arati (waving of the lights) at midnight to usher in the New Year in a spiritual way.

Once a month during a vigil the lay devotees take turns, each for an hour to chant "Jai Sri Ramakrishna" continuously in the Hollywood Temple. It's a wonderful opportunity to sit in the inner shrine close to the Lord. Through repeated chanting of the Lord's holy name, a sublime atmosphere is created in the Temple, and the devotee is provided an opportunity for the expression of their spiritual devotion. This practice of repeating the name of Sri Ramakrishna continuously for 24 hours has been a tradition at the Hollywood Temple for several decades. Dennis Dorney is in charge of setting up the schedule for the devotional offering.

The Hollywood Vedanta Choir under the direction of Swami Atmavidyananda is present to sing religious songs before the congregation at the Sunday lectures. Swami Brahmananda (1863-1922) encouraged his disciples to sing devotional songs, and he would always keep in his company a few who were expert musicians. He had the following to say about music: "Don't you realize that sound is Brahman? You see, you love music and singing. You must remember that God can also be approached through music. Music is 'sound-Brahman'. This truth is experienced, if one meditates. Play with God, sing his glory; enjoy the fun!"

Many devotees maintain their own private household shrine, informally honoring one or more saints or deities within their household. A home shrine may be located in a small room, especially set off solely for the purpose of worship. The shrine often consists of religious pictures set up on a table or platform, or hung on a wall, along with three-dimensional images, flower vases, and an incense holder. Some devotees offer flowers, wave incense, and meditate in front of their shrine. Swami Vivekananda gave the following advice:

Those of you who can afford it will do better to have a room for this practice alone. Do not sleep in that room, it must be kept holy. You must not enter the room until you have bathed and are perfectly clean in body and mind. Place flowers in that room always; they are the best surroundings for a Yogi; also pictures that are pleasing. Burn incense morning and evening. Have no quarrelling, nor anger, nor unholy thought in that room. Only allow those persons to enter it who are of the same thought as you. Then gradually there will be an atmosphere of holiness in the room, so that when you are miserable, sorrowful, doubtful, or your mind is disturbed, the very fact of entering that room will make you calm. This was the idea of the Temple and the Church, and in some Temples and Churches you will find it even now, but in the majority of them the very idea has been lost. The idea is that by keeping holy vibrations there the place becomes and remains illumined (CW: I: 145).

On a Saturday morning once a month beginning at 9 am, there is a Karma Yoga day in Hollywood where volunteers work on projects in the garden, convent, monastery, and library. Afterwards they meditate and enjoy lunch prasad together.

## 6. Functional Departments of the Vedanta Society

### a. Business Office and Maintenance

The business office under the direction of Swami Atmavidyananda and assisted by Alok Sahagun, and Deborah Debus is involved in bookkeeping, and maintaining financial accounts and records on the Society's personnel, equipment and facilities; processing requisitions and purchase orders, mailing out the monthly bulletins, and meeting with building repair personnel. Most of the correspondence is done through the Internet, which has become a major source of global outreach and influence. The business office also oversees the management of about two-dozen rentals, which are adjacent to the Society's compound. These residences provide the opportunity for a lay devotee to live in a spiritually supportive and friendly community atmosphere. Internal social relations among the members are based on mutual affection and cooperation, which enhances their dedication and the vitality of the movement.

Over the years, the property maintenance staff continues to make sure that the buildings and gardens are well cared for. The property on both sides of Vedanta Terrace is maintained and upgraded by American Pine Knot under the direction of Gary Polizzi assisted by Kenn Requa, Andres, Mateo, and others. The gardening is under the supervision of Eduardo. For years, ashramites Myron Goldsby, Mark Lewis, and Rakhil have performed a wide assortment of duties to maintain the Society.

### b. Vedanta Press and Catalog

The online Vedanta Catalog ([www.vedanta.com](http://www.vedanta.com)) specializes in books on the philosophy of Vedanta, particularly in the Ramakrishna Vivekananda tradition. It offers adult and children's books, audio and video recordings (CDs, DVDs, and MP3s), religious images, photographs, and incense. The mail-order department is maintained for both retail and wholesale business. By going to [www.vedanta.com/store/Vedanta\\_Press\\_Newsletter.html](http://www.vedanta.com/store/Vedanta_Press_Newsletter.html) one can sign up for Vedanta e-Newsletter and receive announcements of new books, read excerpts from their books, and be notified of sales. Vedanta Press publishes a number of important books on Indian philosophy and the Vedanta tradition, both original works and translations of Sanskrit scriptures. Two recent volumes are: *A Light to the West: The Life and Teachings of Swami Prabhavananda* (2016) and *Swami Swahananda: A Profile in Greatness* (2017). Its biggest customer is Amazon.com.

As part of the Vedanta Society of Southern California, Sarada Ma Publishing is a Spanish-language publishing company of Ramakrishna-Vedanta books. Its website is located at [www.saradamapublishing.org](http://www.saradamapublishing.org). The site offers both traditional and electronic books (Kindle) at a very reasonable price. Translated into the Spanish language you will find such titles as: Nikhilananda's *Life of Ramakrishna and the Life of Sri Sarada Devi*, Abhedananda's *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, Christopher Isherwood's *Ramakrishna and His Disciples*, Chetanananda's compilation of Vivekananda's lectures titled *Vedanta: Voice of Freedom*, Nivedita's biography of Vivekananda *The Master As I Saw Him*, the *Katha Upanishads*, Shankara's classic *the Brahma Sutra Bhashya*, and Prabhavananda and Isherwood's *How to Know God: The Yoga Aphorisms of Patanjali*. Sarada Ma Publishing was formerly headed by Brahmacharini Jayanti (Yanina Olmos) a third generation Vedantin originally from Argentina.

### c. Hollywood Bookshop

For many people, the first contact they have with the Vedanta Society is through the bookshop, which is maintained as a major spiritual resource in the community for people of all faiths (<https://vedanta.org/bookstores>). Many parents have said how much they appreciate the quality of spiritually-based books for their children. In recent years, book sections have been added on such subjects as how to maintain spiritual practice in the workplace, and emphasizing a spiritual approach to the physical environment. In addition, it offers photographs of spiritual personalities, images of deities, posters, video and audio recordings and CDs of lectures and musical presentations, meditation shawls and beads, various types of incense and other imported gifts particularly from the Hindu-Vedanta and Buddhist traditions. It continues to have a good selection of books from all the major religious faiths. They also receive phone calls to answer general questions from the public and to connect

them with the monastics. The Bookshop in Hollywood is presently attended to by volunteers Atma Bergfeldt, Jayanta Kumar, Rene Pineda, and Karl Whitmarsh.

d. Lending Library

The Vedanta Society member's library in Hollywood contains over four thousand volumes specializing in Vedantic studies and information on world religions. Most of these volumes, many of which are out-of-print books, can be borrowed by the Society's members.

e. Newsletter

The recent version of the Newsletter tradition that goes back to 1950 is the highly informative computerized "Newsletter VSSC" available at Web: [newsletter@vedanta.org](mailto:newsletter@vedanta.org). This newsletter written by Swami Mahayogananda is emailed to members and friends roughly five times per month. Its purpose is to keep members and others informed about events and activities occurring at the Southern California Centers. The easy to read newsletters are intended to increase interest in the Society's programs, by encouraging the members to participate in them. This heightens a feeling of belonging by acquainting members with one another, and making them feel they are part of a family. Since its inception, these newsletters have proven to be a valuable source for identifying the major events in the history of our Center.

f. Online Videos and Audios

Hour long lectures on religious topics given at the Vedanta Society of Southern California are available online at [www.youtube.com/channel/UCoeQClkDRajouABKHfHTUdw](http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCoeQClkDRajouABKHfHTUdw). Featured speakers include the Swamis and Pravrajikas of the Vedanta Society of Southern California, plus many guest speakers from other Centers. A source of Vedanta media is GemsTone's [www.gemstone-av.com/](http://www.gemstone-av.com/), an audio/visual label that has released CDs and DVDs of new and archival Vedanta materials, including recordings licensed from Vedanta Press. GemsTone's Vedanta Quarter ([www.gemstone-av.com/gtiVQ.htm](http://www.gemstone-av.com/gtiVQ.htm)) portal focuses on Vedanta-related titles and links, which include lectures and events by Swami Prabhavananda, Swami Shraddhananda, Aldous Huxley, Christopher Isherwood and locations such as the legendary Shanti Ashrama. Many of the titles are produced in conjunction with and are available from Vedanta Press [www.vedanta.com](http://www.vedanta.com), which also offers free download of lectures and classes. A related non-commercial website, Vedanta Video [www.vedantavideo.com](http://www.vedantavideo.com), offers free viewing of a variety of lectures and historic footage of senior Swamis of the Ramakrishna Order, including Swamis Prabhavananda, Aseshananda, Shraddhananda, Ranganathananda, Tathagatananda, Chetanananda, Sarvadevananda, Sarvapriyananda, and many more.

## 7. Santa Barbara Temple and Convent

During December 2017 and January 2018 the area surrounding the Santa Barbara convent was subject to major fires, winds, and floods. Being the worst disaster in Santa Barbara history, the death toll reached 23. Reports from the email Newsletter VSSC informed us that beginning on December 9, Temple events including pujas and spiritual talks were cancelled:

The Temple is in an evacuation zone and the fire department is staging in the Temple parking lot (December 8, 2017). This is a reminder that the Santa Barbara temple is closed, and the Sunday lecture cancelled, due to the Thomas wildfire. The convent residents have now evacuated and are safe (Dec. 10). The Santa Barbara Temple is safe and the residents have started to move back (Dec. 21). They are concerned about flooding and debris flow below the burn area, so the puja and homa fire have been cancelled (Jan. 7, 2018).

The Santa Barbara Temple was not directly affected by the terrible mudslides and flash floods in Montecito, and the residents are fine. However, they have been indirectly affected—electric power was lost for about 48 hours, and there is still no running water. Accessing the Temple is not possible yet, with roads blocked by mudslides. All programs are suspended until roads are cleared and running water is restored (Jan. 11).

Montecito is gradually digging out of the terrible mudslides of January 9, but the toll, both physical and emotional, has been very heavy for the community. At least twenty residents of the town perished in the disaster. The Santa Barbara Temple was spared flooding and mudslides; it is fortunately situated on a plateau above mudslide routes. But areas in the immediate surroundings have been devastated. Currently, access is open only to residents

with ID, and emergency personnel. The Santa Barbara Temple is operating with a bare skeleton crew, as the area is still under mandatory evacuation orders. The crew has had to face loss of electric power, and a recent three-day loss of gas (and heat). But most challenging is that there is still no running water; the only water available is bottled water. Cooking, bathing, laundry, flushing toilets—all these activities have been curtailed and re-invented with minimum water usage. The crew is maintaining the daily worship in the temple and shrine, but there is no public access at all (Jan. 18).

We are very grateful to have stationed on site, a professional cleaning company, sent by our insurers. They are cleaning the Temple, bookstore, and all our buildings top to bottom with very heavy-duty machinery. They assess that the work will take 3 weeks and they cannot have people around themselves or the machinery. We have a significant amount of smoke and ash damage from the Thomas Fire that needs addressing. Even more importantly, there is a major disaster relief going on continually in the creek/debris dam across the street, directly attached to our garden. There are trucks going up and down Ladera Lane constantly, truly constantly, and these big trucks are filled with millions of tons of massive boulders. The work with the heavy equipment and the boulders goes on 7 days a week, nearly all hours of the day and night. When cars come up the road, it interferes with their progress, they have to stop their trucks, which isn't easy since they're so big and heavy, and it delays the overall recovery work, which directly impacts us and our neighbors (Jan. 26). All public services will remain suspended until the Temple reopens on February 11 (Feb. 1).<sup>18</sup>

The problem of access roads to the Temple being washed out persisted from many months.

## **8. Ramakrishna Monastery, Trabuco Canyon**

The monastery is now being run by Swami Dhyanyogananda originally from Argentina who gives lectures and teaches a Spanish-language scriptural class in Hollywood. He is accompanied by Swamis Yogeshananda, an author of many Vedanta books (see Chapter X), and Parameshananda, and one or two new monastics. Religious duties include performing daily worship (puja, arati), meditation, and reading the Gospel in the evening.

The workload of the monks includes upkeep of the monastery buildings, property, and a shrine trail; maintenance of the vegetable gardens for food and the flower gardens for the daily worship; domestic duties such as shopping, cooking, and cleaning the area; keeping business accounts; managing the bookshop with assistance from devotees; and cordially receiving guests, showing them around the property, and in some cases having them stay overnight.

In the last couple of years, new flowers and trees were planted along with an electric water system; buildings like the toolshed, woodshop, and carport were upgraded and a new chicken coup was added; and an outdoor shrine that fell down due to heavy winds was restored. A service project referred to as the Holy Mother Mission collects food donated by supermarkets and then feeds poor families.

To accommodate the growing number of people often over one hundred devotees who are attending the Sunday morning lectures, a new parking lot was created. In January 2017, they initiated a Sunday School guided by a devotee that includes children's books on Ramakrishna, Holy Mother, and Vivekananda. In 2017, over 400 devotees attended the Swami Vivekananda celebration held on the 4th of July in Trabuco. To increase devotee participation they initiated a Karma Yoga day held every two months.<sup>19</sup>

## **9. Vivekananda House, South Pasadena**

This is the house where Swamis Vivekananda lived for four weeks in January-February 1900, Turiyananda in 1900, 1901, and 1902, Abhedananda in 1901, and Trigunatitananda in 1903.

Swami Vedarupananda takes care of the house and garden, performs necessary repairs, and trims and replaces plants and garden trees. He also discusses various aspects of Vedanta at schools, churches, and with the guests.

Swamis and devotees from around the world visit the Vivekananda House, tour the gardens, and meditate in the shrine room. Swami Sarvadevananda conducts a monthly retreat there, generally on the second Sunday of the month. And each year, most often on the Saturday following the Fourth of July, devotees and their guests are cordially invited to attend an Annual Open House celebration. During the celebration in honor of Vivekananda, a special worship is performed and

excerpts are read from Sister Gargi's Swami Vivekananda in the West that pertain to Swamiji's visit to this home of the Mead family. A prasad meal follows.

## 10. Piñon Hills

In 2006, Barbara Beavens Pierce (Sati) generously gifted the VSSC with a house and property located in the Piñon Hills area of San Bernardino County in the high desert northeast of Los Angeles. It is located 80 miles northeast of the Hollywood Center, midway between Palmdale and Victorville about four thousand feet in elevation. Situated only a few miles from the pine forests of Wrightwood, the air is clean and the atmosphere serene. The house that she and her late husband built is an incredibly well constructed building on 12.5 enclosed acres. There are five bedrooms and four complete baths, a commercial kitchen, large meeting room with a cathedral ceiling, and a shrine room. It features an incredible scenic view of the high desert to the north and the San Gabriel Mountains to the south.

Swami Arupeshananda who moved permanently to the Piñon Hills house in 2017, takes care of the property, and gives spiritual talks at this location that are listed in the monthly bulletin. Being the first Swami to live on the property, he also teaches a guided meditation class for new people to get them oriented to Vedanta. The facility is also used by the Society for one-day Antaryoga Retreats often conducted by Pravrajika Dayaprana. The event includes group readings and singing, silent meditation, and sharing a meal in silence.

[Return to TOC](#)

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[Next Chapter](#)

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## VIII. The Swami Sarvadevananda Era (2012-2018)

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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.

<sup>1</sup> <http://vedanta.org/swami-sarvadevananda>

<sup>2</sup> Newsletter VSSC (2015-2018).

<sup>3</sup> Times (Sept. 11, 2002), p. B12; Voices (March, Dec. 2001; March, Oct. 2002; July, Sept. 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Voices (1999-2005).

<sup>5</sup> Voices (Dec. 2000-2005); "Hindu Student Organization at USC" (2005); *Daily Trojan* (March 19, 2002), pp. 1, 13-14.

<sup>6</sup> VK, (Feb. 2016), p. 82.

<sup>7</sup> 2015 Parliament of World Religions, *Reclaiming the Heart of our Humanity* (Salt Lake City), pp. 17, 84, 98, 139.

<sup>8</sup> [www.rkmkanpur.org/our-secretaries](http://www.rkmkanpur.org/our-secretaries)

<sup>9</sup> Annual Member's Meeting (April 2017, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> [www.vedanta.org/monasteries-and-convents](http://www.vedanta.org/monasteries-and-convents)

<sup>11</sup> Newsletter VSSC (2018).

<sup>12</sup> Much of this section is from material in the email "Newsletter VSSC" (2015-2018) written by Swami Mahayogananda.

<sup>13</sup> This portion of the Sunday school section was written by Pravrajika Akhandaprana.

<sup>14</sup> WorldCat: *Prabuddha Bharata* (Jan. 1991), p. 47.

<sup>15</sup> Don Moser, "Smithsonian's 35 Who Made a Difference: Innovators of our time," *Smithsonian* 36.8 (Nov. 2005), pp. 58-60; *Variety* 399 (June 20, 2005), p. 32; *Los Angeles Times*, January 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Much of this section is from material in the email “Newsletter VSSC” (2015-2018) written by Swami Mahayogananda.

<sup>17</sup> Anandaprana, p. 121; “The Vedanta Society of Southern California,” p. 6, VSSC Archives.

<sup>18</sup> Newsletter VSSC (December 8-10, 21, 2017; January 7, 11, 18, 26, 2018; February 1, 2018).

<sup>19</sup> Annual Member’s Meeting (April 2017, 2018).