

IX. Expansion of the Vedanta Society of Southern California (1976-2018)

1. Affiliated Centers – [San Diego](#), [Washington D.C.](#), [Ridgely Retreat](#), and [Houston](#)
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1. Affiliated Centers: San Diego, Washington, D.C., Ridgely Retreat, and Houston

a. Ramakrishna Monastery, San Diego (1986-Present)

Katherine Tingley (1847-1929) headed the international headquarters of the Theosophical community in Point Loma near San Diego during the years 1900-1929. Prior to this, she had gone on an eight-month World Crusade for Theosophy with two other Americans. In August 1896 they formed the new German Theological Society, which became a leading supporter of Vedanta in the country, publishing the first continental European translations of some of the writings of Vivekananda and Abhedananda, including *Karma Yoga* in 1901. They also published Ramakrishna's parables in their journals (read by Leo Tolstoy in Russia) and wrote a eulogy to Vivekananda.¹

Swami Abhedananda visited San Diego in September 1901 while he was in Los Angeles. In July 1916, during his second trip to the Southern California, Swami Paramananda received an urgent invitation to give a course of lectures and class talks in San Diego. He delivered three lectures September 19-21, 1917 under the auspices of the Theosophical Society. On December 15, 1931 Paramananda was invited to speak to a devoted group in San Diego, and his message was received with a warm response. For several years prior to 1931, a loyal group of San Diego devotees attended his talks in La Crescenta.²

Every other Sunday evening in 1933, Swami Prabhavananda drove to San Diego to give a public lecture at eight in the evening and a yoga class on Monday evenings. In the late 1930s he met George Fitts, the future Swami Krishnananda, who would become his faithful attendant for the rest of the swami's life. Also in San Diego, the wife or widow of the Secretary of the Treasury of the United States invited Prabhavananda to her home. She asserted, "If you can give me back my youth, I will build you a million-dollar temple." Swami told her, "You have come to the wrong man."

Harriet McKindley (1860 or 1861-1955) lived for many years, until her passing at the age of ninety-four, at the El Cortez Hotel in San Diego. She and her sister Isabelle had each seen a great deal of Swami Vivekananda in 1893, when they were living with the Hale family in Chicago. In a letter to Mary Hale, Swamiji wrote that Harriet Hale "has enough of sentiment as to make life sweet, and enough of common sense and gentleness as to soften the hard points in life which must come to everyone. So has Harriet McKindley in a still higher degree" (CW, VIII:389-90). The McKindley sisters attended Swami Abhedananda's lectures at the Greenacre School of Comparative Religion and later, in 1899, visited Swamiji at Ridgely Manor.³

In May 1952 Swami Prabhavananda received an invitation to speak before a study group led by Dr. Peter Lee of San Diego Community College. The attendees asked him intelligent questions, and Dr. Lee presented him with a book he had written. A year later, on August 9, Dr. Lee arranged an address by Swami Areshananda before the Theosophists in San Diego. Judith Tyberg (1902-1980), who had published books on Sanskrit, liked his lectures and visited the Trabuco Monastery later that month. The next year, in August 1954, the Theosophists invited Areshananda to speak. He delivered a series of eight evening lectures in San Diego between October 10, 1954 and January 16, 1955. A Mrs. Theobald described Areshananda as a "wonderful, dear man." Her husband John Theobald (1903-1989), a Professor of English at San Diego State University who was born in India, also attended the talks. In 1957 Prabhavananda met with a small group of San Diego devotees interested in Vedanta. His assistants continued to meet with them, but eventually the meetings were discontinued. Years later a small group resumed meeting, and Swami Asaktananda conducted meditation, reading, and discussion classes in a private home. By June 1972 they met at 418 Gardner Street in El Cajon every two months, with a potluck meal. Prabhavananda had many staunch devotees living in San Diego who would drive up to Hollywood to attend his lectures.⁴

Soon after accepting the responsibility for the VSSC, Swami Swahananda realized the importance of expanding to San Diego, because a group of devotees living in San Diego had been commuting to Trabuco or Hollywood. In the meantime, Violet Eaton (Shankari) had traveled to India where she visited the Vivekananda Kendra, which was run by non-monastic devotees. She was so inspired that after returning to Southern California, she told Swahananda that she wanted to be of use to the Society. He recommended that she sell her home in Santa Barbara and relocate to San Diego. She agreed, and within six months she bought a home at 1145 Stratford Court in Del Mar near San Diego. She offered it for use as the San Diego Center. Swahananda performed the ceremonial rites on September 5, 1977, and dedicated the new shrine at her home on the Krishna Puja day. Since that time, a special worship for Lord Krishna has been celebrated annually in the summer at the San Diego Center. Weekly Tuesday night public classes, which included meditation and a group discussion, were held in Shankari's home.⁵

When Shankari moved to the east coast, Marian Harrington (Girija) rented out her own home in order to carry on the work in Shankari's house. Swami Swahananda sent Bhaktiprana to live there for three months. She held a weekly class and a reading of the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, and performed the daily puja. Bhaktiprana also offered monthly discussions in Del Mar 1979-1980, in La Mesa 1980-1983, and in San Diego 1983-1997.⁶

After two and a half years of its being the headquarters of the San Diego Center, Mrs. Eaton sold the house, and the San Diego Branch Center was formally transferred on May 1980 to the home of Marian Harrington (Girija), at 4419 Nabal Drive. In a grand procession of about a dozen devotees, the shrine pictures of Thakur, Holy Mother, Swamiji, Maharaj, and others were transferred from Del Mar to their new home. A second shrine dedication took place with a regular lecture program and *Gospel* reading, performed by the swamis and pravrajikas. About sixty devotees attended the annual September 1, 1980 Krishna Puja worship performed by Swami Aparananda. Notable visiting guests included Swami Ranganathananda, who later became President of the Ramakrishna Order. Swamis Swahananda, Aparananda, Buddhananda, and Bhaktiprana were the main speakers.

In 1983 the VSSC purchased a house at 1440 Upas Street across the street from Balboa Park, the home of the famous San Diego Zoo. The 3500 square foot house has six bedrooms, a large living room with a fireplace, three and a half baths, office, breakfast room, and a formal dining room. Due to zoning regulations, the house is called the Ramakrishna Monastery.

Bhaktiprana officiated at the "Installation of Shrine Pictures" at the October 21, 1983 dedication ceremony. The shrine was the same one that had been built under the leadership of Swami Buddhananda for Shankari at her Del Mar home. Each devotee carried a holy picture in a procession to the shrine of the new home. A Lakshmi Puja was performed that evening when the pictures were formally installed. Swahananda selected Swami Buddhananda to be the first American resident swami at a Vedanta Center in the U.S. He was there from September 1983 until 1987.

In preparing a permanent home for the San Diego Center, Buddhananda and local devotees decorated the house with spiritual pictures and photographs, together with small shrines devoted to different church faiths. Buddhananda landscaped the yard and decorated the house in an aesthetic and tasteful way. He remained in charge under Swahananda's direction for approximately three and a half years, his last public address given in San Diego in March of 1987.⁷

Buddhananda's assistant, Swami Atmarupananda, took over the center when Buddhananda left, and soon after, it became self-supporting. Atmarupananda had joined the Ramakrishna Order in 1969. He spent seven years in India in monastic and scholastic training, where he was an assistant editor of *Prabuddha Bharata*. At the San Diego Center, public lectures, regular classes, daily meditation, and vesper services are held. Atmarupananda also functioned as a co-founder of the Interreligious Council of San Diego and in 1994-1995 was their Secretary.⁸

In the spirit of social service, beginning around 1993, Atmarupananda organized trips to Mexico to transport school supplies and adult and children's clothing to local community schools. Members of the San Diego Center collected money, clothes, household supplies, and writing materials to help support an elementary school with eleven hundred students located in the outskirts of Tijuana. Funds were used to buy such school items as five hundred ballpoint pens. In 1997, after a very successful tour of duty, Atmarupananda transferred to the newly acquired Vivekananda Retreat at Ridgely in New York State.⁹ He was replaced by Swami Sarvatmananda from May 1997 until 2000, and then by Swami Ishtananda in February 2000. After Ishtananda transferred to St. Petersburg, Florida, he was replaced by Swami Harinamananda who is presently in charge.

The Ramakrishna Monastery, San Diego, [The Ramakrishna Monastery, San Diego](http://sandiegovedanta.org) (sandiegovedanta.org) offers a Tuesday evening Study Circle, a Friday discussion group, Sunday lectures, meditation and vesper services, retreats, and puja celebrations. The highlight of the year is the annual Sri Krishna Puja held in August or September. Spiritual books can be purchased from the bookstore and regular visitors can borrow books and tapes from the library. The Center features a Spiritual Café, a roundtable discussion of provocative topics that meet at different locations. They announce a prescribed topic to be discussed either by the devotees or with members of the interreligious community. These spiritual conversations generate feedback from a variety of religious perspectives. They offered an online course “Introduction to Vedanta,” providing reading material beforehand followed by Vedanta speakers. Guest Sunday lecturers include university professors and senior level yoga instructors.

b. Vedanta Center of Greater Washington, D.C. (1893-Present)¹

At the World Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in September 1893, Swami Vivekananda had two major supporters from Washington, D.C. The first was Irish-born Bishop John Joseph Keane (1839-1918), who at the time of the Parliament was the first Rector of the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. (1889-1997).¹⁰ The second was Merwin-Marie Snell (1863-1921), an instructor at the Catholic University of America who served as President of the erudite Scientific Section of the Parliament of Religions. In January of 1894, Snell mailed a long letter to the editor of the *Pioneer*, an Anglo-Indian newspaper published on March 8 in which he emphatically declared:

By far the most important and typical representative of Hinduism was Swami Vivekananda, who, in fact, was beyond question the most popular and influential man in the Parliament... On all occasions he was received with greater enthusiasm than any other speaker, Christian or ‘Pagan.’ The people thronged him wherever he went and hung with eagerness on his every word.... Never before has so authoritative a representative of genuine Hinduism—as opposed to the emasculated and Anglicized versions of it so common in these days—been accessible to American inquirers.... America thanks India for sending him, and begs her to send many more like him.¹¹

Swami Vivekananda visited the nation’s capital for eleven days (October 22-November 1, 1894) as a guest of the wife of the several times wounded Civil War hero and lawyer, Colonel Enoch Totten (b. 1836). He delivered two lectures in the city, on Sunday, October 28 at the non-denominational People’s Church led by Dr. Alexander Kent (1837-1908), and another in the Typographical Temple, located at 423 G NW (CW, II:497-99; IX:476-79). On November 1, Vivekananda spoke on “Reincarnation” at Metzert Music Hall located at 525 12th NW (CW, IX:479-80).¹² Five years later, in letters to Sister Christine dated November 1 and 4, 1899, Vivekananda wrote, “I will have to go to Washington for a few days.” And “Thence I go for a few days to Washington” (CW, IX: 124). We do not know if this event ever transpired.¹³



Swami Abhedananda

When Swami Abhedananda visited Washington, D.C. (www.vedanta-dc.org) from May 9 to 25, 1898, he too addressed Dr. Alexander Kent’s People’s Church congregation before a large audience and spoke on “The Religion of the Hindus.” While in the nation’s capital he visited the laboratory of Elmer Gates (1859-1923) in nearby Chevy Chase, Maryland. Gates “was making psycho-physical experiments on various subjects to prove that the ‘Mind’ has the controlling power over matter.” He founded and ran the best-furnished private experimental psychology laboratory in the country.¹⁴

On May 19, 1898, Swami Abhedananda visited the White House and was introduced to President William McKinley (1843-1901). Abhedananda remarked:

The President McKinley gave me a cordial reception and asked me several questions about the Vedanta philosophy on which I was lecturing in the city, and showed his interest in the political condition of the people of India under

¹ Editorial assistance provided by Linda Prugh up until 1917

British rule. I was the first Hindu of India who was introduced to the President of the U.S.A.¹⁵

Vedanta University commenced in Washington, DC in the autumn of 1904, under the regent Albert S. Dulin. A long article in the *Washington Times* displays good-sized photographs of Swamis Vivekananda, Abhedananda, and Dulin. It reports:

The university that has been regularly incorporated under the law began its operation only a few short weeks ago. Already forty persons have registered and are taking a course which teaches them the new philosophy.... Although Swami Vivekananda is no longer in this country, he has left behind an able teacher in the person of Swami Abhedananda. The Hindu sage has written many volumes on the subject of Vedanta and has lectured in most of the cities in the Union. Mr. Dulin expects him to come to Washington this winter to deliver lectures and to aid in the firm establishment of the cult here.¹⁶

For one year only, the 1906 *Washington, DC Directory* lists a Vedanta University located at the northwest corner of Connecticut and California Avenues NW.

Swami Abhedananda traveled to Washington, D.C. to present a lecture on March 27, 1905 and returned to New York the following day. He soon revisited the city to deliver a series of talks on the *Bhagavad Gita* beginning April 18. While there he started a Vedanta Society of Washington, D.C. as a branch of the Vedanta Society of New York. It was located in Room 610 of the Corcoran Building.¹⁷ A long article appeared in *The Sunday Star* that quoted Abhedananda's explanation of the Vedanta philosophy. It mentioned the newly formed Vedanta Society. It included the following personal impression, "He is apparently a man in the [his] thirties, but with a face so calm and a bearing so well poised that it is difficult to judge his years.... He speaks excellent English so fluently as to leave no hint whatever of unfamiliarity with the vocabulary or the idioms of the tongue."¹⁸



Swami Paramananda



Sister Devamata

In December 1909 Swami Paramananda founded a Vedanta Centre in a rented three-story building at 1808 Kalorama Road in Washington, DC. Sister Devamata served as its director, administrator, secretary, publicist, housekeeper, laundress, and chief cook. A rotation system was devised whereby Paramananda would teach two series of classes a year, in early fall and spring, each lasting six to eight weeks. During those two periods Devamata took control of the Boston centre. For the rest of the year, Devamata managed and carried on the work in Washington, D.C. This was the arrangement from December 1909 to December 1911. Devamata was the first Western monastic to be in charge of a Vedanta Centre (or Center), though of course she worked to some extent under Paramananda's direction.

On October 22, 1910, the Vedanta Centre moved from the house on Kalorama Road to a large apartment next to a lovely park, at 7 Iowa Circle, nearer the center of the city. In the lecture room they placed an altar holding flowers and fruits, with the pictures of Sri Ramakrishna, Jesus Christ, and Swami Vivekananda. Nearly 150 chairs could be placed in two rooms of the apartment. As attendance remained less than half of that of the Boston centre, Paramananda was somewhat discouraged. Conversely, Devamata, as the chief supporter of the operation after 1911, remained optimistic.¹⁹ Though her valuable assistance was required in Boston, from 1912 to 1917, Devamata continued to visit the nation's capital for one season each year, generally teaching two weekday classes and delivering a Sunday lecture.

Devamata was in demand for outside speaking engagements as well. In a two-month period, March and April of 1915, she received invitations to speak in the main hall of the Public Library, at Rauscher Hall, as part of the “New Thought Alliance,” the Theosophical Society, and the National New Thought Center. She also was a guest speaker at the Sunday morning service of the People’s Church located in the Pythian Temple, 1012 9th NW. Swamis Vivekananda in 1894 and Abhedananda in 1898 had spoken at the People’s Church at a different location in the city. After Devamata’s abandoning the Washington work in 1917, a group of devout members remained to keep the spirit of the religion alive.²⁰

As the unofficial Indian ambassador of Vedanta, Rabindranath Tagore made five visits to the United States totaling seventeen months between the years 1912 and 1930. On November 29 1930 the British ambassador Sir Ronald Lindsay brought Tagore to the White House for a special visit with President Herbert Hoover. Afterwards Tagore reported that the occasion had been, “a delightful one and one that will live in my memory.” Following this event, Henry Morgenthau headed a special Tagore Reception Committee in New York City, which included former President Calvin Coolidge. A formal banquet honoring Tagore was held at the Hotel Biltmore, and Franklin D. Roosevelt was one of five hundred honored guests.²¹

In April 1930 Swami Akhilananda, head of the Vedanta Society in Providence, Rhode Island, went to Washington, D.C. to give a series of lectures. The response was so positive that he decided to establish a permanent center in the city. To this end, he rented a house on N Street NW in June 1931 to put the work on a permanent basis. After Swami Nikhilananda arrived from India in October to be his assistant, they proceeded to Washington to found a new Vedanta Society at 1712 North NW. Swami Vividishananda was summoned from San Francisco to assume the leadership of the Washington Center in November 1932. That year, Akhilananda continued to offer his support, with monthly visits in 1932 as well.²²

On March 8, 1936 the Vedanta Society of Washington, D.C. celebrated the centenary of the birth of Sri Ramakrishna. From February to April the previous year, radio station WOL broadcast a series of seven talks organized by Swami Vividishananda. They were heard in nine eastern states. Guest speakers included Swamis Paramananda, Akhilananda, Nikhilananda, and Dhan Gopal Mukerji. In May of 1936, Vividishananda left the city to form a new Vedanta Center in Denver, Colorado and later in Seattle, Washington. He was replaced in Washington D.C. by Swami Akhilananda, who, for a short time during late 1936-1937, had the assistance of Swami Satprakashananda in Providence. The 1936 United States Census lists forty members for the District of Columbia Vedanta Center.²³

A committee of local Washington, D.C. devotees, with the assistance of the local Indian Embassy in the city, arranged for a centenary celebration of Swami Vivekananda’s birth on October 4, 1963. It was held at the Smithsonian Institute auditorium and attracted several public figures. The list included Swami Nikhilananda, Grayson Kirk, Indian ambassador B. K. Nehru, and Kurt Leidecker, a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Virginia. It was attended by some senior officials of the U.S. government, university presidents and professors, and representatives of various foreign embassies.²⁴ In a well-thought out analysis, Grayson Kirk, the renowned President of Columbia University from 1953 to 1968, said:

I have read of his lectures in America about India, and of his comments in India about America, and I have read some of his letters and essays on these two subjects.... Vivekananda’s travels, lectures and observations in the United States were to serve such a useful purpose in both countries. In this country, his great personal charm, his intellectual brilliance and his spiritual profundity made such a great impression that he was listened to with respect when he sought to dispel some of the strange notions hitherto held by Americans about his people and their customs. They began to glimpse a view of a rich, complicated and ancient civilization quite unlike the India they had read about in Kipling or Henty.... Such a historian could not fail to be mindful of Vivekananda’s service to his people in this respect. They listened to him, not only as a spiritual leader, but as a man who gave them a dream of what the India of the future might be.... Again and again he inveighed by speech and action, against the excesses of the caste system and its debilitating effect upon the achievement either of social or material progress. He warned again and again that India’s opportunities for progress were scanty until or unless the great masses were redeemed from their poverty and illiteracy. He decried the notion that progress in spirituality could be divorced from social consciousness and social progress. “It is a mockery,” he said, “to offer religion to a starving man.”²⁵

After 1970

Most of the post-1970 material concerning the Washington sub-Center was supplied by American-born Swami Atmajnanananda, who holds a Ph.D. in Sanskrit, and whose writings include a translation with copious commentary of Jiva Gosvamin's *Tattvasandarbhā* (1986). This 16th century Vaishnava work, written by one of the greatest theologians India has ever produced, is a classic in Vaishnava literature.²⁶

A Washington, D.C. group of devotees who had periodically met for many years was permanently formed after a lecture tour of Swami Ranganathananda in approximately 1970. In more recent years, Ranganathananda, future President of the Ramakrishna Order (1998-2005), made yearly visits and a number of the local directors of the Vedanta Societies also made frequent visits. Swami Lokeswarananda requested that Swami Swahananda try to establish a center, and Swami Gahanananda (a future President of the Ramakrishna Order) offered encouragement. Swami Brahmarupananda, formerly of the Vedanta Society in Chicago, stayed in the area for three years before the present center in Silver Spring, Maryland was formed. He conducted classes, annual retreats, and worship services on special occasions for local devotees of a private Vedanta Society in this and other areas. The center in Washington, D.C. is the accomplishment of a dedicated group of devotees that met together for informal services for many years.²⁷

Devotees living in the Washington area had a great desire for a permanent Vedanta Center and made repeated requests for permission from headquarters in India. They consulted Swami Swahananda and as a result of his tireless efforts, in December 1996, Belur Math in India granted him permission to establish a Vedanta Center as a sub-Center of the VSSC. In February 1997 the newly formed Vedanta Center of Greater Washington, D.C. purchased a two-story brick house located on five acres of beautiful property, in the Washington suburb of Silver Spring, Maryland. Swami Swahananda dispatched Swami Atmajnanananda from the Ramakrishna Monastery in Trabuco Canyon, CA to look after the new center and within a few years (and after the construction of the present building), Swami Brahmarupananda also moved to the center. Before long it had a full schedule of programs. During the summer, Sunday lectures and special programs were held under a large tent on the property. When the weather turned cold, these activities took place in a nearby community center meeting hall. Swami Swahananda came from Hollywood for the Founding Day program on Ram Navami of 1997. Since then, he made twice-yearly visits to the center, staying nearly two weeks each time. During his visits, many devotees came for inspiration, spiritual instruction, and initiation.²⁸

Within a short period, plans were made for a larger building on the property that would include a meeting hall, dining room, kitchen, living room, and residential wing with eight rooms. Once sufficient funds were raised, the construction began. Upon its completion, Swami Swahananda attended the June 10, 2000 opening ceremony and dedicated the new shrine, while Swami Smaranananda, General Secretary of the Ramakrishna Order, inaugurated the building. The original brick building was then used as a guesthouse for devotees.²⁹

Swamis Atmajnanananda and Brahmarupananda also make occasional visits to other local groups, such as the Chinmaya Mission, a local Thai Buddhist Temple, Kali Temple, and the Shiva Vishnu Temple, as well as some of the nearby universities. The center is also involved in different types of social service work. Its members volunteer to work at a local soup kitchen and homeless shelter each month offering free medical care. During Holy Mother's birthday celebration, money was raised for the girls' school at Jayrambati and funds were also collected for tsunami relief.³⁰

The Vedanta Center of Greater Washington D.C. (www.vedanta-dc.org), located at 3001 Bel Pre Road, Silver Springs, D.C. 20906, is now headed by Swami Sarvadevananda. A new temple was inaugurated April 19-21, 2013, its architecture resembling the main temple at Belur Math in India. The worship hall has a seating capacity of 180 and in the basement is a commercial kitchen and space for special programs. Regular events include a weekly public lecture, two weekly scriptural classes, a daily morning Puja at 7:45 a.m., and an evening worship (arati) at 6:30 p.m. Activities are conducted by the three resident monks Swamis Atmajnanananda, Brahmarupananda, and Chidbrahmananda. In addition there is a Vedanta Summer Camp and a Vedanta Medical Clinic.

c. Vivekananda Retreat, Ridgely (1892-Present)²

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Swami Vivekananda

Francis H. Leggett (1840-1909), a wealthy New York business executive, owned one of the largest wholesale grocery import businesses in the United States. On July 14, 1892, his Ridgely Manor was completed in the Hudson Valley, and it remained in Leggett's ownership until he passed away. It included the Manor house, the Little Cottage, the Big Cottage, and the Inn. There was also the Casino, or recreation center, which many large estates on the East Coast had at the time. It included a bowling alley, gymnasium, and an adjacent tennis court. This beautiful rural estate is located near Stone Ridge, New York, ninety-five miles north of New York City. Its present eighty-two acres of fields and forest several miles from the Hudson River are in sight of the Catskill Mountains.



Francis H. Leggett

Highly supportive of Vivekananda, Leggett invited the Swami to be his guest at Ridgely on three occasions, the first for the Easter holidays, April 13 to 22, 1895. There, as spring approached with its pure air and many blossoming trees, Swamiji was able to get a much-needed rest in the serene country atmosphere. Shortly after his vacation, Francis Leggett remarked, "Vivekananda is the greatest man I ever saw." When asked why, he replied, "He has more common sense than anyone I've ever known."³¹

The swami returned to Ridgely with Francis and Betty Leggett for the Christmas holidays, December 24, 1895 to January 2, 1896. Later, on January 10 in New York City, Francis Leggett wrote to his sister-in-law, Josephine MacLeod, who was in Europe:

One night at Ridgely we were all spellbound by his eloquence. Such thoughts I have never heard expressed by mortal man—such as he uttered for two and a half hours. We were all deeply affected. And I would give a hundred dollars for a typewritten report of it. Swami was inspired to a degree that I have never seen before or since. He leaves us soon and perhaps we shall never see him again, but he will leave an ineffaceable impress on our hearts that will comfort us to the end of our earthly careers.³²

The swami's third trip to Ridgely, the longest and most memorable, occurred during his second visit to the West. He arrived on August 28, 1899 and remained for seventy-one days, leaving on November 7. He had just arrived by ship from England and Scotland and had been away from the United States for over forty months. During the "Great Summer" (and Autumn), he and Swami Turiyananda stayed in the Little Cottage across the drive from the Manor. Swami Turiyananda stayed there until October 27. Swami Abhedananda came and stayed with his two brother monks from September 8 to 17. Swami Vivekananda was surrounded by close and loving friends as well as by his gracious hosts. Also, many of his devotees visited for varying lengths of time. One of the guests, the entertaining and amusing young artist Maud Stumm (1866-1935), later reminisced:

Nearly every day Swami was wonderful in a new way; and now it would be music he dwelt upon, now art.... With his flame-colored robes draped about him, what a figure he was as he strode the lawns of Ridgely! His stride came nearer to the poet's description of a 'step that spurned the earth' than anything I ever expect to see again; and there was a compelling majesty in his presence and carriage that could not be imitated or described.³³

On Sunday afternoon, November 5, in a spontaneous and brief ceremony two days before Swamiji left Ridgely, he gave the gerrua cloth of sannyasa to Sara Bull and Sister Nivedita, who described the event in a letter to Josephine MacLeod:

[Swami Vivekananda] took out a couple of silk turbans to give the girls [probably Alberta Sturges and Olea Vaughn]. Then two pieces of cotton cloth—gerua colour—for Mrs. Bull.... First he shut the door—then he arranged the [gerrua colored cotton] cloth as a skirt & chudder around her [Mrs. Bull's] waist—then he called her a sannyasini &



Frances Leggett

putting one hand on her head & one on mine he said, "I give you all that Ramakrishna P[aramahansa] gave to me. What came to us from a woman [the Divine Mother] I give to you two women. Do what you can with it."³⁴

Maud Stumm's portrait, figure, and still life paintings including the one of Vivekananda can currently be viewed on the Internet

After Francis Leggett passed away in 1909, Ridgely remained the home of his heirs until the VSSC purchased it in 1997 and it became the Vivekananda Retreat, Ridgely.

Unlike Thousand Island Park and Vivekananda House, the Ridgely property was owned by the same family for three generations. They had maintained their contact and sympathies with Vedanta from the beginning. Upon Francis' passing in 1909, his daughter Frances Leggett (1896-1977), who preferred the name France, inherited the estate. Her father left no will, which meant that according to law, his wife would receive only one-third of the inheritance and his daughter the remaining two-thirds. When France came of age, she deeded the property to her mother, Betty Leggett (1852-1931). In 1910 Sister Christine stayed at Ridgely, "a house full of memories," as Tantine's guest.³⁵

On April 21, 1902 Swamiji wrote to Josephine MacLeod, "Give my infinite love to Lady Betty and Mr. Leggett, to Alberta and Holly [Hollister]—the baby [France Leggett] has my blessings from before birth and will have forever" (CW, V:178).

In 1916, France married David Margesson (1890-1965) a high-ranking conservative politician in England. Josephine MacLeod always thought that Swamiji had a hand in their future marriage: he had blessed them both in two separate countries. David's mother, Lady Isabelle, invited Swamiji to speak at her house in London. He gave a class there on November 10, 1895 and that is where he first met Margaret Noble (later Sister Nivedita). Isabelle had David and his two sisters, brought from their beds to be blessed by Swamiji. Vivekananda lived in David's parent's house in 1896 for over two months, while they were away.

Years later, after marrying David Margesson and moving to England, France occasionally took a steamship or, years later, would fly to Ridgely with her husband. In 1925, they visited her mother, Betty Leggett, there for three months. Her cousin Karl R. Whitmarsh (1896-1926) also came to stay as a guest, bringing his young son. Karl, the son of Theodore Whitmarsh and brother of Prasanna (Katherine Whitmarsh), had been present at Ridgely as a young child when Swamiji was there. Hollister Sturges (1879-1935), the son of Betty Leggett by her first marriage, also spent many summers at Ridgely with his family. During the "Great Summer" in 1899, Hollister had exclaimed, "I don't want to be a monk. I want to marry and have children." "All right my boy." Swamiji had replied. "Remember only that you choose the harder path."

Ridgely was placed on the real estate market, but it was soon withdrawn due to lack of interest.³⁶ Upon Betty's death in 1931, it passed back to her daughter France Leggett, who played a pivotal role in preserving Ridgely Manor. One morning in 1899, France received a special blessing from Swamiji. Alberta Sturges and Vivekananda "were sitting in the Hall and the child [France Leggett] came in with some flowers in her hand and gave them to the Swami. 'In India,' he said gravely, 'we give flowers to our teachers' and he pronounced over her some Sanskrit words."

From 1931 to 1940 David Margesson served as the Chief Government Whip in the British parliament. Margesson succeeded Anthony Eden as Winston Churchill's Secretary of State for War 1940-1942. He was instrumental in developing the Women's Armed Services, the Auxiliary Territorial Service, and the Women's Auxiliary Air Force. After Britain suffered severe military setbacks, including the loss of Singapore, Churchill found a replacement for Margesson, who then became the First Viscount.³⁷

France divorced her husband in 1940, left England, and in 1942 returned to live permanently at the Ridgely estate. The physical layout had changed little over the years since her father's passing in 1909. About Ridgely, she remarked, "So far from anywhere, nothing to do, no sport, no people. Only its beauty to commend it, and its peace. Everyone loved to come, no one stayed. You had to live in it to bear its stillness, you had to fill its lovely emptiness with life."

Swami Prabhavananda met France Leggett at Ridgely Manor during a trip to the east in August 1952. In consultation with Prabhavananda in 1967, France attempted to re-edit the letters of Swami Vivekananda, which had already been published. France corrected some grammatical errors, explained who the recipients of the letters were, and explained some

of the wording. She sent her edited work to Prabhavananda for his judgment. Her manuscript, with an introduction by Christopher Isherwood (that appeared in *Vedanta and the West* in 1968), was never published.

Nikhilananda used to visit Ridgely on his way to Thousand Island Park, and he sent France all of his books, cordially signed, "With warm personal regards." France Leggett left us with a history of her family entitled *Late and Soon* (1968) that is based to some extent on the letters of her parents that she had discovered in an old black box at Ridgely. For a period of seventy-eight years (1899-1977), seven of the main occupants of the Ridgely property (all mentioned above), had some meaningful association with Vivekananda.

At France's passing in 1977, the estate was willed to the fourth owner of Ridgely Manor, her son Francis (Frank) Margesson (1922-2014), the Second Viscount, who married the Helena Backstrom (b. 1931) in 1958. He and his wife lived at Ridgely from 1964 and raised their four children there. Margesson joined the staff of the British Consulate-General in New York as an information officer.

In June 1981, Swami Tathagatananda of the New York Westside Center traveled with seventeen of his devotees for a one-day spiritual retreat at Ridgely. Since then, he and many of his devotees have made a pilgrimage to the estate. In 1988 the family put the property up for sale again, but again there were no buyers.³⁸

Over the years a number of distinguished people have signed the Ridgely Manor guest book. Surprisingly, the list includes a disproportionate number of people Swamiji met in France in 1900, such as: Jules Bois, J. C. Bose, Emma Calve, Patrick Geddes, Peer Hyacinth Loyson, and the Harvard philosopher-psychologist William James. Another signer, the Nobel Prize winning Jane Addams, was also in France when Swamiji was staying there. Other noteworthy signers are: Swami Akhilananda; Chauncey Depew, a U. S. Senator from New York 1899-1911; Ramesh C. Dutt, a Bengali writer and President of the Indian National Congress in 1899; Ruth Getting, a famous singing star of the 1930s; artist Stephen Haweis, son of Vivekananda's friend Reverend Hugh Haweis; writer Dhan Gopal Mukherjee; Swami Paramananda; and Sara D. Roosevelt, mother of U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Side Husain, an expert on Bengali literature, wrote that he was pleased to be under "the roof that sheltered Swami Vivekananda and Sister Nivedita."³⁹

Swami Gahanananda, President of the Ramakrishna Order (2005-2007), visited the U.S. in 1993. He had a great interest in having the Vedanta Society purchase the Ridgely property as a place of pilgrimage for devotees. In 1994 Joan Shack, the then head of the Sri Sarada Society, made an extended effort to raise funds for the purchase of Ridgely.⁴⁰ On March 31, 1997, Swami Swahananda received a phone call from Swami Atmasthananda, the General Secretary of the Ramakrishna Order, requesting Swahananda to arrange for the purchase of Ridgely. It was an old and expensive estate, located over twenty-eight hundred miles from Hollywood, with three buildings badly in need of repairs and renovations. Swahananda agreed to help bring about the purchase of the property and to create a new retreat at Ridgely. As with his other purchases, this was done before the rapid escalation of real estate prices.⁴¹



Frank and Helena Margesson

The owner of Ridgely at that time was Frank Margesson (and his wife Helena), the grandson of Swamiji's friend's Francis and Betty Leggett and the son of France Leggett. Mr. Margesson mentioned, "It was her [France Leggett's] love and attention to the estate that helped maintain its character and beauty, without which it would not be what it is today." A wonderful event occurred on the morning of the negotiations. Lady Helena Margesson, a Christian, became quite anxious about the sale. She woke up that morning chanting the name of Sri Ramakrishna. On a previous occasion, when the owners were trying to sell the property through a realtor, Lady Margesson had a dream of Swamiji, who asked her to keep the property in the Ramakrishna Order.⁴²

The Margessons set the purchase price at 1.4 million dollars. Through the generous financial support of many devotees, especially Sister Gargi who donated a half-million dollars, in August of 1997 a sizable down-payment was made. By May of 1999, a total of 1.2 million dollars had been raised. Sister Gargi served as the first President of the Ridgely Board of Trustees. In order to help facilitate the purchase, the VSSC had graciously awarded Ridgely an interest-free loan of \$400,000. In her will, Sister Gargi

left \$200,000 to the Ridgely estate to pay off the loan on the property. As of January 2005, the loan was paid back in full and Ridgely is now debt free.⁴³

“Vivekananda Retreat, Ridgely” was dedicated on October 11, 1997 as an ashram under the Ramakrishna Order of India. Swami Atmasthananda, at the time a Vice-President of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission of India, inaugurated the Vivekananda Retreat as a branch of the Ramakrishna Mission on June 26-28, 1998. Revered Swami Bhuteshananda, the then President of the Order (1989-1998) wrote in a letter dated August 22, 1997:

Swami Vivekananda loved Ridgely, and on all the three occasions that he visited there, he was deeply impressed by the peaceful atmosphere of the place. The strong spiritual current that Swamiji has left behind will never go in vain. As a result of that, the Vivekananda Retreat has come into existence. This is indeed a marvelous gift from Sri Ramakrishna to His admirers and devotees.... I hope the Vivekananda Retreat, Ridgely will be a great source of peace and spiritual support to the seekers of God.⁴⁴

The Vivekananda Retreat at Ridgely (www.Ridgely.org) offers a wonderful opportunity for single devotees or couples without dependents to engage in a life of intense spiritual practice. A person can reside there for a single night or for a much longer period of time. As a year-round place of pilgrimage, it provides an opportunity to live and work in a peaceful and serene ashram environment. Swami Atmarupananda disclosed:

We believe that Swami Vivekananda left something of his presence here at Ridgely, so people come both to see where he lived, and to feel his presence. It is further believed that the visit of many people to a site such as this, trying to commune with someone like Vivekananda, gradually intensifies the atmosphere and his presence.⁴⁵

In 1997, Swami Swahananda sent Swami Atmarupananda, the former leader of the San Diego Center, to be the minister-in-residence of Ridgely. He gave scheduled public classes, together with Sanskrit classes, beginning in September. Special Meditation Intensives began on Friday night and ended at Sunday noon. They involved formal guided meditation periods, classes, discussions, and question-and-answer sessions. Atmarupananda also participated in a Hindu-Jewish conference, and at the well-known Snowmass Interreligious Conference, a prestigious ecumenical body inaugurated by the Catholic Father Thomas Keating in 1955. Atmarupananda describes the conference as a “group of mystical practitioners from different traditions” that meet together each year “to share the depths of spiritual life.” They held the Snowmass Conference at the Vivekananda Ridgely Retreat in 2003.⁴⁶

In the fall of 2004, Swami Atmarupananda requested a leave of absence, and Swahananda appointed Pravrajika Gitaprana to become the new resident minister at Vivekananda Retreat Ridgely (www.Ridgely.org), 101 Leggett Road, Stone Ridge, NY 12484. The 82-acre retreat is open on a daily basis from 9-7 and longer if they have an evening program, except during the winter months of January-March. Her duties, along with her assistant, Pravrajika Shuddhatmaprana, include a Sunday puja, conducting classes in Sanskrit, a kirtan evening, meditation intensives, workdays, and outreach to other spiritual communities. In addition, she works with voluntary live-in day staff, welcomes new retreatants, and helps to maintain the property.

d. Houston, Texas (2002-Present)

Vedanta in Houston (www.houstonvedanta.org) was originally associated with the Chicago Center, and later was given a big boost by the support of Swami Swahananda. In 2003 the Vedanta Society of Greater Houston (www.houstonvedanta.org) was founded. A milestone occurred on September 24 and 25, 2011 with the celebration of the construction of a new temple at 14809 Lindita Drive, Houston, TX 77083. All events are open to the public at no cost. Classes are offered on a weekly basis, swamis are invited to conduct retreats where various spiritual topics are discussed, and a number of pujas are held annually honoring Mother Durga, Ramakrishna, Holy Mother, Vivekananda, the Shiva Ratri, Jesus, and birthdays of the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. In addition, there is a successful Children’s Sunday School and a checkout library. Swami Atmarupananda has been assigned to be head of this center.

2. Private Centers: [Atlanta](#), [Austin](#), [Dallas](#), [Las Vegas](#), [Phoenix](#), [Pittsburgh](#), [Raleigh](#), and [Tucson](#)

Swami Swahananda founded Vedanta groups in seventeen cities. Many of them matured into Vedanta Societies. He inspired the work, provided funds, and became the spiritual advisor for many of these centers. Since the 1990s, devotees in several

areas of the United States have requested Swami Swahananda to send ministers to their local Vedanta Centers. He responded by dispatching monastics as resident ministers to Ridgely, Washington, D.C., Dallas, Phoenix, Atlanta, and on a part-time basis to Las Vegas. In addition, he established Vedanta Centers in Austin, Pittsburgh, Raleigh, and Tucson. Now Swami Sarvadevananda travels frequently to these centers.

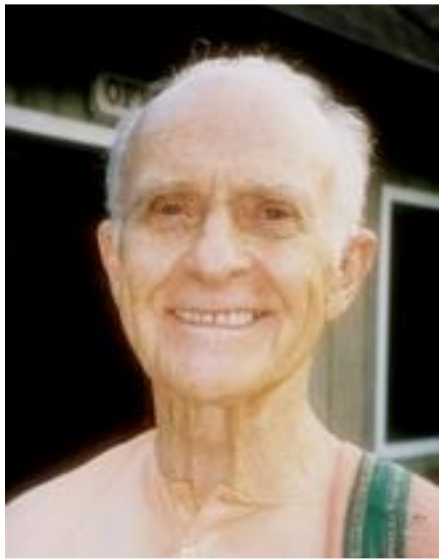
a. Atlanta, Georgia

(www.vedantaatlanta.org)

In America's south, Swami Vivekananda lectured in Memphis (1894) and Swami Saradananda in Nashville, Tennessee (1897). During February and March of 1913, Swami Abhedananda delivered lectures in Fernandina and Jacksonville, Florida and in the state of Georgia, coming to Atlanta, Georgia on the 1st of March. Upon his arrival in the city, he was hailed as "Prince Abhedananda." He was invited to the city by the Atlanta Psychological Society, which had 500 active members. Swami Abhedananda gave several talks in the city and was featured in ten different articles that appeared in the *Atlanta Constitution*. One headline read, "Hindu Philosophy Unfolded by 'Missionary' from India; Atlantans Stand to Listen," under which there was a photo of Abhedananda over sixteen square inches in size. The report said in part:

The Carnegie library fairly swarmed with Atlanta people who wanted to be taught the philosophy of India. The fame of Swami Abhedananda who is the leader of the Vedanta cult in America with headquarters in New York had preceded him. Thus, it happened that the Atlanta Psychological Society which brought the philosopher to Atlanta could not entertain all the guests of the procession and dozens were turned away. Besides the lecture room, the entire basement of the Carnegie library was filled with people who stood up in the hall and stairways and heard the lecture through the door.

Swami Abhedananda also spoke at the Ethical Society at the Auditorium and daily to full houses at the Unitarian and Universalist Churches. More details on Swami Abhedananda visit to Atlanta are found in *Western Admirers of Ramakrishna and His Disciples*, pp. 758-59, 763-64, 841.



Swami Yogeshananda

Six decades later, Swami Bhashyananda (1917-1996), head of the Vedanta Society of Chicago, sent Swami Anamananda, formerly of the Hollywood Monastery, to Atlanta to become the first resident swami. For reasons of failing health, Anamananda had to withdraw, and in his place, Bhashyananda dispatched Swami Yogeshananda in 1981. The infant subcenter continued to grow, but in 1984 headquarters in India ordered all three of the subcenter monks back to their bases. Yogeshananda stayed for three years in Ganges. After protests from the Atlanta devotees, and seeing that the Chicago swami was incapacitated by stroke, informed him that he was returning to Atlanta and did so in 1988.

Over the prior fifty years, the Toronto and Atlanta Societies are the only two organizations that survived with neither an affiliation nor an already existing center. Regarding the latter, meetings and classes were at first held in several rented locations, but with the help of friends, a house was eventually purchased to serve as a permanent Vedanta Center of Atlanta at 2331 Brockett Road in Tucker, GA a suburb of Atlanta. Yogeshananda freely gave his time for regular classes, talks and meditation workshops, as well as personal interviews, and he took part regularly in interfaith dialogue. Yogeshananda reports:

"Sometime after Swami Bhasyananda's passing in 1997, I wrote to Swami Swahananda in California asking him to please have oversight of the Atlanta Center. He was reluctant for a long time, but in the year 2000, when the group moved to the purchased property and really established a center, he came to Atlanta and performed the dedication. Thereafter, he graciously maintained an informal relationship with me and with the center, and took some of our students for initiation etc."⁴⁷

A new chapel was completed in October 2006 and dedicated on January 13, 2007 at the [Vedanta Center of Atlanta](http://www.vedantaatlanta.org) (www.vedantaatlanta.org)." As he was now over 80 years of age, Yogeshananda decided to retire to the Trabuco Monastery. In January 2009, Swami Brahmavidyananda from the Hollywood Center was sent to carry on the work started by

Yogeshananda. Brahmavidyananda decided to return to the Hollywood Center in the summer of 2010, and he was replaced by Br. Shankara, who is now the resident minister of the Atlanta Center. Events include regular classes, talks, guest speakers, evening arati accompanied by a silent meditation, musical concerts and cultural programs, in-house weekend retreats, and interfaith gatherings. Also, a large number of recordings are available online from Audio Archives.

b. Austin, Texas

Swami Swahananda established the [Vedanta Center of Greater Austin](http://www.austinvedanta.org) (www.austinvedanta.org) at 13508 Broadmeade Ave., Austin TX 78729 on October 12, 2012. It is currently under the supervision of the Vedanta Society of Southern California with Swami Sarvadevananda as spiritual advisor. The center conducts a weekly study circle on Sundays, observes special pujas celebrating the birthday of Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother, and Swami Vivekananda, and, from time to time, visiting swamis lead spiritual retreats, deliver lectures, and hold informal sessions.

c. Dallas, Texas



Swami Swahananda

[The Ramakrishna Vedanta Society of North Texas](http://www.vedantadfw.org) (www.vedantadfw.org) is located at 119-125 W. Scotland Drive in Irving, Texas 75062. The present spiritual leader is Swami Sarvadevananda of the Vedanta Society of Southern California; spiritual advisor is Swami Ishtananda of the Vedanta Center of St. Petersburg, Florida; and the resident minister is Pravrajika Brahma-prana. The following information was provided by Pravrajika Brahma-prana. In a significant way, 2015 marks the eighth anniversary of the formal founding of the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society of North Texas, which includes a monastery and chapel on a beautifully landscaped half an acre at 119, and on the adjacent property at 125, a large center, including a lecture hall and shrine, multi-purpose room, office space, and parking lot in Irving, Texas.

The spiritual guidance, encouragement, material and moral support of Swami Swahananda were vital for the founding and growth of the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society of North Texas. The beginnings of the Vedanta movement in the Dallas-Fort Worth (DFW) area started decades before the formal founding of the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society. Monks of the

Ramakrishna Order had visited the DFW area since the late 1960s when Swami Ranganathananda, the thirteenth President of the Ramakrishna Order, was first invited at the request of Western and Indian devotees associated with Dallas' Bishop College. He repeated his visits, as did Swamis Bhashyananda (former minister of the Vivekananda-Vedanta Society of Chicago) and Nihshreyasananda (former head of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe)) in the 1970s and 1980s.

In the mid-1980s, Swami Swahananda began to visit the DFW area and soon saw the potential for establishing a formal Vedanta Center and monastery. In 2006 he organized a committee of core devotees to move ahead and form a Vedanta Society, apply for tax-exempt status, and draw up a formal set of bylaws, the latter of which were based on those of the Vedanta Center of Greater Washington, D.C. During this formative period, Swami Swahananda appointed Swami Ishtananda, then the assistant minister of the Vedanta Society of Southern California, as the spiritual advisor for the new Vedanta Center in Dallas in order to help streamline its decisions and operations.

After receiving the appropriate permissions from the state of Texas and IRS, in the spring of 2006 the Society's next step was to purchase a center for a resident monastic. Swami Swahananda advised the founding members to buy a house in a residential neighborhood.

The formal opening of the Vedanta Center took place on March 3, 2007. Swami Sarvadevananda (then the assistant at the Vedanta Society of Southern California) performed the inaugural puja in the presence of Swami Swahananda. More than 100 people attended the ceremony and many volunteers helped with the traffic management.

In March 2007 Swami Swahananda sent Pravrajika Saradesh-prana from the Vedanta Society of Southern California in Hollywood to the Dallas Center. She came for three months in order to establish the daily puja and arati, Sunday talks, and

nightly scriptural readings. Before returning to Hollywood, Saradeshaprana trained several devotees to continue a small daily worship and nightly arati in the shrine chapel.

In April 2008 Swami Swahananda posted Pravrajika Brahma-prana from the Vedanta Society of Southern California, Hollywood to the Dallas Center to make it fully functional. Scheduled activities include regular Sunday lectures, weekly classes, and evening vespers. She also introduced the annual celebrations of nine major pujas throughout the year, including Easter and Christmas. Private instruction in spiritual practice and interviews are available free of charge. In addition, a large selection of books on Vedanta, MP3 recordings of the lectures and retreat talks, a lending library, and a monthly newsletter are available. All events are open to the public.

d. Las Vegas, Nevada

[The Ramakrishna Vedanta Center of Las Vegas](http://www.vedantalasvegas.org) (www.vedantalasvegas.org) is located at 10732 Balsam Creek, Las Vegas, Nevada 89144. In 2016 they were made an official sub-center of the VSSC by the Trustees of Belur Math. The current minister Swami Atmavidyananda, who is stationed in Hollywood, CA, visits Las Vegas approximately once a month to give lectures, retreats, and to hold worship services. The Swami is also a composer of Western classical style music with Vedantic lyrics. Occasionally, other swamis of the Ramakrishna Order visit the center. The members also conduct classes and lead discussion groups. A place is provided for the practice of meditation, prayer, and worship.



Mahamaya -
Rose Maria Gordon

To a large extent, this center is a continuation of the Vedanta Center of Nevada, which was organized and headed by Mahamaya (Rose Maria Gordon, 1931-2012), a mother of four children and a psychotherapist, who introduced many people to Vedanta, transforming their lives through her love and guidance.

Carolyn Smith, a disciple of Swami Prabhavananda, relates:

I met Rose Maria Gordon in January, 1967. A disciple of Swami Prabhavananda's, John Rudbach, moved to Vegas and through talking with him, a few people became interested in Vedanta. Mahamaya was initiated in the temple by Swami Prabhavananda in the early 70's I believe. After the ceremony, she asked Swami if he had forgotten anything, and he acted as if he didn't know what. She said "My name" and he replied "Mahamaya." A few months later he asked her to hold classes here because there were many people searching at that time. She held three classes a week for a few years in her new home, and had great attendance. Mahamaya always spoke principle, which is truth. Some of us are alive today largely because of her straight-forwardness.

When she was asked to run a women's rehabilitation group in 1974 or so, she was so good Dr. Trione (then Professor of Psychology at UNLV) asked her to get her degree and work under him. She checked with Swami Prabhavananda who told her to do what the doctor said. UNLV paid for her master's degree after she finished her undergraduate work. She didn't have the money to pursue a Ph.D., but her Professors wanted her to do so. She was intuitive and worked many years with recovering addicts. She had her own business, Cocaine Outreach Network back in the 80's for a few years, paid her staff, but eventually closed and took bankruptcy because she never turned down a person who came to her. Her auditor said she had over a million dollars on her books that could not be collected. She said, "What price is a human life?" She was approached by a corporation to open and run for them the same program that had 85% non-recidivism. She asked for two free beds, but one man said they were not a charity. She felt other parts of the program would be cut, piece by piece, and her work would be compromised. She turned down, therefore, a salary of 5 million in 5 years.

I left Las Vegas in 1975 and returned in 2004, after I retired from teaching. Mahamaya was holding a class in her home once or twice a week. Classes began with chanting and reading from the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. She would assign readings in one of the Ramakrishna-Vedanta books, and answer questions from the members. There would be prasad afterwards. Every spring we re-read *The Sermon on the Mount According to Vedanta*, in honor of the Christ, and every year we re-read *How to Know God*. Other books we covered were *Crest Jewel of Discrimination*, *The Doctrine of Karma*, and *The Bhagavad Gita* by Swami P and Isherwood. She helped those who asked with a simple technique of

meditation. We had a Sai Baba devotee on the board (he had at one time been initiated by Swami Prabhavananda, I believe) whom she felt was her spiritual son.

Mahamaya sent several people for initiation: Swami Swahananda told her she was upaguru (a teacher) and he was sadhaguru (one who initiates). Toward the end of their lives, Swami Swahananda sent Swami Atmavidyananda to Las Vegas to look for a building for the devotees here. Finally Ashok Ramnaney bought a house in Summerlin which we use.

I found Mahamaya to be a living example of Vedanta. I was around her daily during her last illness, and hope to meet my passing with one-tenth the strength she had – which came from her knowledge of Vedantic Truth. Her Guru (Swami Prabhavananda) was God to her, and she lived in complete faith that he would take care of her. She never wavered in her faith during her illness, either. She said to me, “I am trying to do what my Guru wants me to do.” Someone gave her a plaque that said, “Stronger than thunder where Principle is concerned.” And so she was. Mahamaya lived what she taught. She gave everything to God: problems, praise and prayer. She taught others by her very life. She became her name.”⁴⁸

Another devotee Cayce Scales (Bhakti) an initiate of Swami Swahananda who met Mahamaya in 1995 indicated:

Mahamaya asked me if I would like to attend the Vedanta classes, so I accepted. It was a room full of devotees and some as myself who were seeking. The energy was vibrant. One day I sat with Mahamaya and shared with her that I did not know if Vedanta was for me; she asked me, “why?” I wasn't very clear with the words and the meanings, so she asked me to go home and pray on it and then come back to the next class and if I still felt I couldn't connect, she would understand. So I did as she asked. The next class I attended, I felt the good vibration of energy and as class began, I started to clearly understand and I felt real connected. Mahamaya faith was like no others that I've known throughout my life. Her compassion, love and devotion as she speaks about Swami Prabhavananda, her face would light up. Her love and compassion for those who came to her for help, she was always there for them. She would never turn her back on anyone who was asking for help, she always had answers and connections with people who could be of service for those who are in need. She was a Divine send and I couldn't have been more grateful for all that she has shared and taught, with love and devotion of her faith. She will be missed.

David Cornsweet, a psychotherapist who met Rose Maria in 1964 when he was 14 years of age, tells us:

I can't really say that I was surprised at her movement beyond her [Catholic] religion but it was truly a gift to many, many spiritual aspirants in the Las Vegas area. Here was a grounded, solid, understanding seeker further along the path, who opened her house and her heart to us. I, along with numerous others, began regularly attending the Vedanta Classes at her home. It was an interesting group as many of us were following seemingly other paths, which Mahamaya helped us realize all were leading to the same goal.... Through her I met Swami P[rabhavananda] and was later initiated by his successor in the Southern California Vedanta Society, Swami Swahananda.... After the passing of my mother, the main reason I returned to Las Vegas was to visit my spiritual mother. It was an absolute pleasure to spend time with her and to see how she was truly becoming the Mahamaya that Swami P had foreseen. I remember the last time I saw her, shortly before her passing. She was in her hospital bed glowing like a light bulb. I almost wrote “little” light bulb but truth to be told, there was nothing “little” about Mahamaya other than her diminutive size. She was a spiritual powerhouse that helped many of us move along our spiritual paths. Mahamaya was a huge presence in my life and I dare say in the lives of many, many others. Open to all, she supported our explorations and delighted in our self-discovery as much as she delighted in hers. As I write this and reflect on all the experiences, I realize what a gift Mahamaya was in my life. What a treasure!!!! As I write this last line as I sit on the banks of the Ganges in Rishikesh, I can almost see the look on her face (she hated praise) and hear her say with a piercing look and an even more piercing tone-“Oh Really!!”⁴⁹

e. Phoenix, Arizona

When Swami Vivekananda travelled from Chicago to Los Angeles (November 30-December 2, 1899) on the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway he passed through the States of New Mexico and Arizona.⁵⁰ The Ramakrishna-Sarada Vedanta Center of Phoenix (www.vedantaphx.org) is currently located at 1138 E. Henry Street, Tempe, Arizona 85281. Swami Sarvadevananda

of the Vedanta Society of Southern California is its spiritual guide, and Pravrajika Akhandaprana serves as the resident monastic of the ashrama.

At the ashrama devotees meditate, pray, sing, and hold lively discussions. Regular weekly classes are offered, along with special retreats, monthly programs, and annual religious celebrations. Visiting swamis, pravrajikas, and devotees come from time to time and take the lead in special retreats and programs.

The Ramakrishna Vedanta movement has been supported by several devotee families in the Greater Phoenix area since about 1974, starting with Mrs. Irma Zillisen, a very active and erudite retiree from Chicago who lived to be 100 years old. Visits to Phoenix were arranged for Swamis Ranganathananda, Hiranmayananda, Nishreyasananda, Bhashyananda from Chicago and Prabuddhananda from San Francisco. Swami Swahananda of the Vedanta Society of Southern California visited the Phoenix/Scottsdale area regularly since 1987 and was a driving force in shaping the movement in the area.

In 1993 three pravrajikas (women sannyasis) of Sri Sarada Math headquartered in Kolkata, India were invited speakers at the Centenary Celebrations of the 1893 Chicago Parliament of Religions. While on the Parliament tour, Pravrajika Vivekaprana and Pravrajika Prabuddhaprana also visited Phoenix where they gave lectures and retreats. Pravrajika Vivekaprana visited again in 1996. Periodic meetings of a Ramakrishna Vedanta Study Circle began in private homes in 2001 with Swami Sarvadevananda holding classes on Shankara's *Vivekachudamani*.

In 2006, through generous donations from Ramakrishna Foundation California, a private house at 1138 E Henry St., Tempe Az. was purchased. In this house, and from time to time, a special caretaker or a monk from Los Angeles would come, but in February 2009, Pravrajika Akhandaprana was posted to stay and be the resident minister. Additionally, in 2012, an empty lot next door was purchased through fund raising and matching funds from donors. Swami Sarvadevananda visits and conducts classes on alternative months, and other monks, nuns, or special guests, including Swami Sridharananda, Swami Baneshananda, Swami Chetanananda, and Swami Prasannatmananda, visit from time to time.

Activities are publicized through the website: www.vedantaphx.org. Public evening arati or meditation is conducted Friday through Monday, sometimes including readings and discussion. Sunday mornings include study circles that begin at 10 am and conclude at 12:30 with a flower offering and lunch, or special talks or programs. Weekly Saturday gatherings include devotional songs, readings, taped lectures, live webcasts, and meditation. Devotees may also call and arrange for other times to visit. Annual birthday pujas are held for Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Devi. For Swami Vivekananda's birthday, some form of community outreach is performed during United Nations World Interfaith Harmony Week (1st week of February). From 2010 to 2013 it was through a "Vivekananda Inter-religious Dialogue Day" at an outside venue (usually a church), which included lunch.

In February 2013 Pravrajika Vivekaprana was a special three-week guest for Vivekananda Inter-religious Dialogue Day in honor of his 150-year birthday celebration. She gave several very inspiring retreats. As a result, a group of devotees was inspired to visit India on pilgrimage and also to attend a retreat at Sarada Math's Pangot Retreat in the foothills of the Himalayas in 2015. Swami Vivekananda worked relentlessly for the empowerment of women both in India and the West in his spirit of embracing all humanity, and Sri Sarada Math is now the largest independent woman's monastic order in the world. It is headquartered in Kolkata, India.

Phoenix is an evolving and diverse locality. Many Asians immigrate to work or study in the area. Arizona State University is located close to the center and the Pima-Maricopa Indian Reservation is about 1 mile away.

f. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

www.vedanta-pitt.org

Before Swami Abhedananda (1866-1939) left the U.S. for India in 1906, a group of twenty associate members in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania formed a branch of the Vedanta Society of New York. In Abhedananda's absence, Swami Bodhananda (1871-1950) a monastic disciple of Swami Vivekananda, arriving fresh from India, took over the New York operation. A reception was held on June 4, 1906.

Soon after returning to the United States, on January 23, 1907, Abhedananda accompanied Bodhananda to Pittsburgh, where he took charge of the newly formed



Swami Bodhananda

Vedanta Society at 940 Beach Avenue, Allegheny. Two days later Swami Abhedananda lectured to an audience of about four hundred in the Carnegie Lecture Hall in Pittsburgh on “The Science of Vedanta.” Abhedananda also accepted an invitation to speak at the New Thought Center in Pittsburgh. Before an earnest and enthusiastic group of students, Bodhananda conducted a weekly *Bhagavad Gita* and *Raja Yoga* class on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and a public lecture on Sundays. Later in the year, a weekly children’s class was added at the home of Dr. Harry Sheppard. The children were taught moral values, posture, breathing, and concentration. Bodhananda conducted classes later at the Century Building on Seventh Street, remaining in the city until 1912.⁵¹ The United States *Bureau of Census: Religious Bodies* lists the Society as having fifty members.⁵² Later Vedanta groups were formed in Philadelphia by Swami Raghavananda (1923-1927) and Swami Yatiswarananda (1942-1949).

Between 1969 and 1971, an active Vedanta group was run in Pittsburgh by the future Swami Brahmarupananda (now at the Vedanta Center of Greater Washington, D.C.), together with several other graduate students and Gul Bhagawanani. Swami Bhashyananda of the Chicago Center visited regularly. Since 1971 Gul Bhagawanani, and later Tarit Dutta have led a Sunday Vedanta discussion group. The location of the discussion group has rotated to different homes of devotees. During this time, Swami Swahananda made regular visits to Pittsburgh. Swami Sarvadevananda and other monks and nuns of the Ramakrishna order visit there frequently.

Ramakrishna Vedanta Ashrama, Pittsburgh (www.vedanta-pitt.org) is located at 417 Beatty Rd, Monroeville, PA 15146. It was inaugurated on September 20, 2009 by Swami Swahananda, and Swami Sarvadevananda is its present spiritual advisor. The ashram holds regular classes, Vedanta discussion groups on philosophical topics, a guided meditation session, and arranges for lectures, retreats, and general spiritual guidance by distinguished monks of the Ramakrishna Order.

g. Raleigh, North Carolina

Swami Bhashyananda was the original inspiration for Vedantists in North Carolina. Two of the present members of the Society (Professor Umesh and Usha Gulati) became his disciples in 1991. He met at their home for satsangs, and as a result, Usha has periodically continued to hold satsangs at their home, watching videotapes of Swami Bhashyananda and other swamis, and inviting at least two swamis a year to give talks. In time, Swami Swahananda came to know them and several other devotees in the area, whom he had met either in Hollywood or there, and decided to give the Society a concrete shape.⁵³

[The Ramakrishna Vedanta Society of North Carolina](http://www.vedantanc.org) (www.vedantanc.org) was incorporated by the state of North Carolina in January 2008. It is located at 3109 Globe Road, Morrisville, NC 27560 near the Raleigh-Durham airport. Though the group was originally inspired by Swami Bhashyananda of Chicago, Swami Swahananda of the VSSC was its spiritual advisor since it organized to incorporate. The Society maintains a small but beautiful center near the Raleigh-Durham airport where daily evening worship (arati) at 7 p.m., regular Sunday classes, a Saturday Scriptural Study Circle, and special pujas are conducted by members of the Society. It trains its youth in the ideals of practical Vedanta. Members are encouraged to pursue spiritual growth through prayer, guided meditation, worship, readings, lectures, and retreats conducted by swamis and pravrajikas of the Ramakrishna Order.

h. Tucson, Arizona

[The Vedanta Society of Tucson](http://www.vedantatucson.org) (www.vedantatucson.org) was established in 2010 at the request of Swami Swahananda. It now is under the guidance of Swami Sarvadevananda who visits approximately every other month for satsang. Meditation and the principles of spiritual life are taught to sincere students on a personal basis without charge. All people are welcome to the bi-weekly meetings and public talks.

3. Websites for Centers Not Affiliated with the Vedanta Society of Southern California

California, Berkeley (www.berkeleyvedanta.org)

California, Sacramento (www.vedantasacto.org)

California, San Francisco (www.sfvedanta.org)

California, San Jose (www.berkeleyvedanta.org)
Colorado, Fort Collins (www.vedanta-luv.org)
Florida, St. Petersburg (www.vedantaflorida.org)
Illinois, Chicago (www.chicagovedanta.org)
Iowa, Cedar Rapids (www.vedantaiowa.org)
Massachusetts, Boston (www.vedantasociety.net)
Missouri, Kansas City (www.vedantakc.org)
Missouri, St. Louis (www.vedantastl.org)
New Jersey, Voorhees (www.vedantasocietynj.com)
New York, New York City (East Side) (www.ramakrishna.org)
New York, New York City (West Side) (www.vedantany.org)
Ohio, Cleveland (www.vedantacleveland.org)
Oregon, Portland (www.vedanta-portland.org)
Rhode Island, Providence (www.vedantaprov.org)
Washington, Seattle (www.vedanta-seattle.org)
Canada, Calgary (www.vedantacalgary.com)
Canada, Toronto (www.vedantatoronto.ca)
Canada, Vancouver (www.vedantavancouver.ca)

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IX. Expansion of the Vedanta Society of Southern California (1976-2018)

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 *WARHD*, pp. 65, 542-47, 753-54.

² *MOTE* (Aug. 1916), p. 192; (Oct. 1917), p. 192; (Dec. 1932), p. 32; Shivani, pp. 195-96, 298.

³ *WWSV*, pp. 19, 27; Burke, IV, p. 128; V, pp. 114-15, 119-20; VI, p. 264.

⁴ Isherwood³, III, p. 16; *Hinduism Comes to America* (Chicago: Vedanta Society, 1933), p. 48; Prabhaprana, p. 19; Diary (May 10, June 14, 1952; Aug. 9, 24, 1953; Aug. 8, Oct. 10, 1954); “First Meeting” (June 6, 1972), VSSC Archives; “History of San Diego Center” VSSC Archives; www.vedanta.org/vssc/centers/sd.html

⁵ *Del Mar News Press* (Aug. 31, 1977), p. 18; (March 2, 1978), p. 22; Pravrajika Bhaktiprana, Meeting with the Hollywood Nuns (Aug. 16, 2005); Varadapranai, pp. 18-19; Varadapranaz, p. 104; Voices (Aug. 2000); Member’s Letter (Sept. 1, 1977); Bulletins.

⁶ Lotus (May 1980; Dec. 1981; Spring 1982); Member’s Letter (Oct. 29, 1980); VK (July 1981), p. 27; Annual Member’s Meeting (April 23, 1981); Bulletins.

⁷ Lotus (Oct. 1983); ‘A letter from Swami Buddhananda to the Vedanta Archives’ (July 12, 2005); Email from Carolyn Kenny to the Vedanta Archives (July 25, 2005); Bulletins; www.vedanta.org/vssc/Centers/sd.html

⁸ Varadapranai, p. 19; Varadapranaz, p. 104; Lotus (Summer 1986); “Annual Report for the San Diego Monastery” (1994-95), VSSC Archives; Web: www.monasticdialog.com/a.php?id=774

⁹ Swami Atmarupananda, Annual Member’s Meeting (April 28, 1994; April 27, 1995).

¹⁰ Burke, I, pp. 124, 126-27; *DAB*, X, pp. 267-68.

¹¹ Basu, pp. 12-14; Burke, I, pp. 79, 85, 93; *WARHD*, p. 418.

¹² Burke, V, p. 221.

¹³ Hohner, pp. 31-34; Burke, II, pp. 212-23; V, pp. 162, 173-74; *Washington, D.C. Directory* (1894).

¹⁴ *CWSA*, X, pp. 17-18, 34-35, 37-38, 40; *NCAB*, X, pp. 354-55.

¹⁵ *CWSA*, X, pp. 39-40; *WARHD*, pp. 706-07.

- ¹⁶ *Washington Times* (Dec. 18, 1904), Magazine Features p. 2; *WARHD*, p. 731.
- ¹⁷ Tathagatananda, p. 170; Shivani, p. 122; *VMB* (May 1905), pp. 28-29.
- ¹⁸ *Brahmavadin* (May 2005), pp. 281-88; Shivani, p. 122; Tathagatananda, p. 170; *Washington Times* (Mar. 26, 1905), p. 6; *Washington Post* (Mar. 26, 1905), p. 57; *VMB* (May 1905), pp. 28-29; *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (Nov. 20, 1905), p. 4; *WARHD*, pp. 731-32.
- ¹⁹ Levinsky, pp. 141-48, 159, 172; Devamata, I, pp. 118-37; *PB* (Jan. 1911), pp. 17-18.
- ²⁰ *MOTE* (1915), pp. 92, 115-16; (1916), pp. 118-19; (1917), p. 96.
- ²¹ Stephen Hay, "Rabindranath Tagore in America," *American Quarterly* 14 (1962), pp. 439, 459; *New York Times* (Nov. 30, 1930), p. 2.
- ²² *PB* (June 1932), p. 312; (April 1933), p. 207; (Aug. 1934), pp. 414-15; (May 1936), p. 434; *VK* (Aug. 1934), p. 159; (Sept. 1935), p. 200; *Vedanta Darpana* (Nov. 1931), pp. 14-15.
- ²³ *PB* (Feb.-March 1936), p. 476; (Sept. 1936), p. 199; *MOTE* (1936), pp. 119-20; Jackson, p. 119.
- ²⁴ *PB* (Dec. 1963), p. 600.
- ²⁵ *PB* (May 1964), pp. 42-43; *WARHD*, pp. 625-26.
- ²⁶ UCLC.
- ²⁷ Jackson, p. 119; Swami Swahananda, "I Remember Swami Lokeshwaranandaji," VSSC Archives.
- ²⁸ Vedanta Center of Greater Washington, D.C. www.vedanta-dc.org; *AV* (Winter 2001), p. 34; "Minutes of the 1998 Annual Member's Meeting" (April 23, 1998), VSSC Archives.
- ²⁹ *AV* (Winter 2001), p. 34.
- ³⁰ "The Changing Shape of the Vedanta Society in America." Pluralism Project. www.pluralism.org/affiliates/student/giles/index.php
- Swami Atmarupananda, Annual Member's Meeting (April 24, 1997).
- ³¹ Burke, III, pp. 73, 76-81; Frances Leggett, *Late and Soon* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), pp. 82-85.
- ³² Burke, III, pp. 377, 384-85; *WARHD*, p. 513.
- ³³ Burke, V, pp. 122, 124; *WARHD*, p. 462.
- ³⁴ Burke, V, p. 141.
- ³⁵ Leggett (1968), pp. 245-48; Burke, V, p. 241; Prabuddhaprana, pp. 141-43.
- ³⁶ Leggett (1968), pp. xiii, 245-51, 316-17; *New York Times* (Sept. 6, 1926), p. 15.
- ³⁷ "David Margesson." Web: www.reference.com/browse/wiki/David_Margesson%2C_1st_Viscount_Margesson Leggett (1968), pp. 235, 245-47, 251-53; Email from Karl Whitmarsh to the Vedanta Archives (Dec. 6, 2005).
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- ⁴⁶ Web: www.pluralism.org/affiliates/student/giles/index.php#growth; www.ridgely.org; www.spiritualpaths.net/site/page/755VII; Web: www.monasticdialog.com/a.php?id=774
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- ⁵¹ *Vedanta Monthly Bulletin* (July 1906), pp. 59-68, 72; (Jan. 1907), pp. 14-16; (Feb. 1907), pp. 207-17, 225; (April 1907), p. 15; (Feb. 1908), pp. 191-92; *Vedanta Magazine* (July-Aug. 1909), p. 158; *Voice of Freedom* (May 1909), p. 31; (Sept. 1909), p. 95; Swami Tathagatananda, *The Vedanta Society of New York* (Vedanta Society of New York, 2000), pp. 190-93. These journals also give the full content of three of Swami Bodhananda lectures offered at that time.
- ⁵² *WARHD*, pp. 739, 745-46, 834.
- ⁵³ Email from Umesh Gulati, April 2014.