

What is This Center and Why are We Here?

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GOOD MORNING... ANNOUNCEMENTS

- Center closed in July

July is a month for study of Jnana Yoga (Advaita Vedanta). As a jnana yogi, you practice discrimination, reason, detachment, and *satyagraha* (insistence on Truth).

The goal is freedom from limitation (*moksha*). Our teachers say that all miseries in life are caused by seeing *inaccurately*. An earnest and persistent jnani may break through this misapprehension (*maya*) and see only the Divine Presence everywhere, in everything and everyone.

CHANT • SONG • WELCOME • TOPIC

What is This Center and Why are We Here?

This morning that question will be answered in some detail.

We'll start in 1881, when a teenager named Narendranath Dutta met Sri Ramakrishna. According to Narendra, Ramakrishna carefully trained him for the mission he was to undertake. That training took six years — from 1881, when Narendra was 18 years old, until 1886, when the Master passed away. Narendra was 23.

Over the next seven years, from 1886 to 1893, Narendra became Swami Vivekananda, fit for the work Ramakrishna had in mind. The Swami left for America at age 30. He took ship from Mumbai on May 31st, 1893 and docked in Vancouver, British Columbia on July 25th.

Then, on September 11th, at the first World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago, Swami Vivekananda spoke the words that began to unfold his destiny as a teacher of Vedanta in the West: "Sisters and brothers of America," he said, and an audience of thousands rose to offer him a two-minute standing ovation.

Vivekananda went on to become the 16-day-long event's most popular and influential speaker. He stayed to teach in the West for most of the next 10 years; as he said in February 1895, "I have a message to the West as Buddha had a message to the East."

Swamiji called that message Vedanta. It has resonated with spiritual seekers throughout the Americas, from the early 1890s until today. That resonance, and what has resulted from it, is what we will define and explore this morning.

By and large, Swamiji's message has been offered here in the West through Vedanta Societies and Centers. These outposts are most often headed by a Swami or Pravrajika of the Ramakrishna Order. In the United States, there are

both official centers (name some), and those which are not yet official, such as your Center here in Atlanta.

Vivekananda himself founded two Vedanta Societies — one in New York City in 1894, and another in San Francisco in 1900. Swamiji also sent his brother disciples — Swamis Saradnanda, Turiyananda, Abhedananda, and Trigunatitananda — to lead these Centers and teach Swamiji's Vedanta to a growing audience in the West.

In the early decades of the 20th Century other Swamis of the Ramakrishna Order of India — disciples of Holy Mother, Brahmananda, and Swamiji — were sent here to start Vedanta Societies in major cities throughout the U.S, and a few in Europe.

Among these was the Vivekananda Vedanta Society of Chicago, established by Swami Jnaneswarananda in 1930.

Swami Bhashyananda became Minister-in-charge of the Chicago Society in 1965. Under his guidance, the society expanded rapidly.

With help from the founder of Xerox, Bhashyananda established a campus at 5423 S Hyde Park Blvd in 1966. He also started the Vivekananda Retreat in Ganges, Michigan in 1971.

Swami Bhashyananda was a true “missionary;” he went on to establish many satellite Vedanta groups throughout the United States and Canada.

The Swami started one of these groups in Atlanta; it first met in the home of Swarna Shah. During the 1970s, Bhashyanandaji sent American Swamis to expand the work in several Southern cities. These included Atmarupananda, Anamananda, Atmavratananda, and Yogeshananda.

In the early 1980's, Swami Yogeshananda decided to stay on here in Atlanta. After a few years, he established **The Eternal Quest**, a non-profit organization, to promote the study and practice of Vedanta. Meetings and classes were held in various rented locations. Then, in 1999, the property in Tucker was purchased to establish a permanent campus, which was named the **Vedanta Center of Atlanta**.

Our Chapel was dedicated on January 13, 2007. Swami Yogeshananda retired to the Trabuco Monastery in California two years later, in January of 2009. To carry on Yogeshananda's work, Swami Swahananda, head of the Vedanta Society of Southern California, sent Swami Brahmavidyananda here.

Swami Brahmavidyanandaji returned to the Hollywood campus in May of 2010.

In June of that year, Swami Swahanandaji assigned me to serve as spiritual director and Resident Minister of this Center; I arrived here in August. Which brings us to this morning, almost 10 years later.

And that's half the answer to “What is This Center and Why are We Here?”

We are a small, yet so far successful place where you can study, with a warm-hearted and sincere congregation, the art of spirituality.

Which begins to address the question, **why** are are here? This Center exists because four Divine personalities lived among us in the late 19th and early 20th Cs: Sri Ramakishma, Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, Swami Vivekananda, and Swami Brahmananda. We are here to accomplish the purposes for which they came, and for which they lived.

Swami Vivekananda very clearly articulated these purposes when he said:

- Each soul is potentially divine.
- The goal is to manifest this Divinity within by controlling nature, external and internal.
- Do this either by work, or worship, or psychic control, or philosophy -- by one, or more, or all of these -- and be free.
- This is the whole of religion. Doctrines, or dogmas, or rituals, or books, or temples, or forms, are but secondary details.

Work, worship, psychic control, philosophy — these are the Four Yogas that Swamiji taught here in the West — Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Raja Yoga, and Jnana Yoga. He called on us to practice one, or more, or all of these, and be free.

So, freedom is our goal, and the four yogas are the tools left to us by Swamij, to win our freedom. If you carefully study the record of Swamiji's work in the West — which is thoroughly documented in his Complete Works — you will find that he spent the vast majority of his time with us, teaching these four yogas.

He spent very little energy on the secondary details, except to sometimes explain, in context, why they ARE secondary details.

So Swamiji left us instruction on how to be free, how to break the spell of Maya, the primordial and inborn ignorance that comes with taking the human form.

As it says in the Chandi — 700 verses that praise the Divine Feminine in the form of Mother Durga —

“O Mother, you cause this universe to whirl about again and again within the dense darkness of the depths of attachment.”

So, if we wish to be free, each of us must come out of Her dense darkness, awaken, and break the bonds of that attachment.

And that is why the Center is here — to be of service to you in that effort!

Therefore, let us go forward together as a congregation, learning and using the tools that Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother, Swami Vivekananda and Swami Brahmananda left us, to win our freedom.

As Vivekananda wrote in his prayer to Sri Ramakrishna, “Breaker of This World’s Chain:” *How great was Thy sacrifice, freely choosing Thy birth in this prison, our Iron Age, to unchain us and set us free...*”

And so that is our focus, from week to week, month to month, year to year: What do **you** need to know, and what do **you** need to do, to align yourself with Ramakrishna’s intention and accept his offer of freedom?

Swamiji’s exhortation to us is, *Arise! Awake! And stop not till the goal is reached!* Shall we listen to him, heed his call? He told us:

This is the whole of religion. Doctrines, or dogmas, or rituals, or books, or temples, or forms, are but secondary details.

Do we have doctrines? Of course, yes, there are principles — the Yamas and Niyamas of Patanjali are good examples.

Are there dogmas? **Dogmatically**, I say no.

If you ever catch me preaching any other dogma, please point that out

Rituals? Yes, we have rituals — Arati is a ritual; chanting of the Chandi hymns on Saturdays and Tuesdays is a ritual; Tithi Pujas — the celebration of our Holy Quartets’ birthdays — are rituals. Durga Puja, Christmas Eve, thee too are rituals.

Yet, they are **NOT** our primary emphasis — as Swamiji said, they are secondary. Which means what? They are **supports** for our **primary** activity — **the daily assimilation and practice of:**

- Finding reverence (bhakti yoga)
- Abandoning selfishness (karma yoga)
- Sinking into silence (raja yoga)
- Setting aside the mirror (jnana yoga)

Swami Prabhavananda often recited this hymn at the beginning or end of a talk — well close with it:

"Our salutations to that Supreme Being, who is one without a second; whom the sages call by various names.

Our salutations to Him, whose glory has been sung through the rapturous hymns of the worlds, but whose limitless and infinite glory none can comprehend.

But again, whom the sages and devotees realize within their deepest contemplation.

Him we salute again and again.

May he shine in our hearts, manifest there in all His glory, and dispel all darkness and ignorance.”

DISCUSSION AND COMMENTS.

Regular Closing prayer