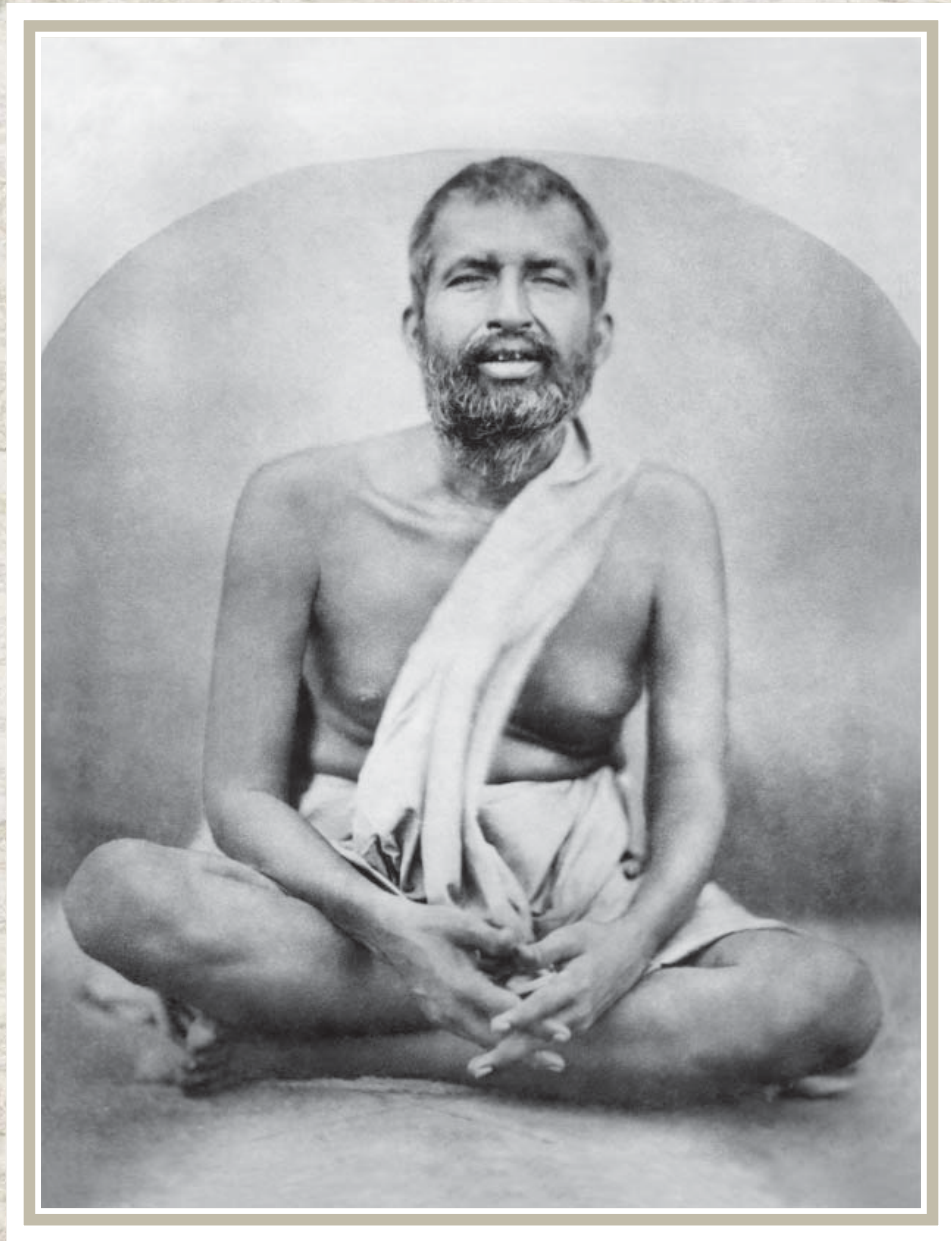


THE FIRST UNIVERSAL HINDU TEMPLE  
IN THE WEST



*Sri Ramakrishna, 1836-1886*

THE FIRST UNIVERSAL HINDU TEMPLE  
IN THE WEST

A LANDMARK OF SAN FRANCISCO

*2016 Temple Rededication Commemorative Volume*

Edited by  
Swami Tattwamayananda



Vedanta Society of Northern California  
San Francisco

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# Preface

*Professor Michael Nagler*

A “COINCIDENCE,” THEY SAY, IS GOD’S WAY OF ACTING ANONYMOUSLY. There is one “coincidence,” or synchronicity, that hardly anyone has noticed, so anonymously and without fanfare did it occur. It must give us pause for thought that Swami Vivekananda set sail for America at the same time that Mahatma Gandhi, not having been able to establish himself in a law practice in Bombay, sailed off to seek a new life in South Africa. It was late spring, 1893. Gandhi went on to confront colonialism, the “fourfold evil,” as he would later call it, and in order to do so he discovered the “matchless weapon” of *satyagraha*, which has sparked a worldwide social/spiritual impulse. Swami Vivekananda’s impact was in the spiritual and philosophical realm, but quite complementary. Both knew perfectly well that the real evil was not just colonialism or spiritual narrowness, but the erosive character of materialism that had come to possess Western civilization.

Their coming has parallels to the great reformers of history: Jesus and Buddha. They, too, came at a moment when “dharma, righteousness, was declining and *adharma*, lawlessness, rising” (Bhagavad Gita, IV, 7). On the one hand, Jewish monotheism and devotion to God had almost succumbed to the ruthless organization of the Roman legions; on the other hand, the living faith of India’s ancient religious systems, in their unity and diversity, was sinking under the weight of custom, empty ritual, and the social tyranny of the privileged over the oppressed. Only this time, in 1893, an entire world was involved. The impact of the two, Sri Ramakrishna in the persons of Swamiji and Mahatma Gandhi, still has to be fully recognized and appreciated. We are now facing not just the loss of dharma in one civilization or another, but the possible loss of the entire human experiment.

Swami Trigunatita, who originally inspired the design of the temple which is now being rededicated, fully understood and appreciated the historical importance of this new spiritual experiment that he was guiding here. He saw the advantage to both the East and to

the West that there should be a merger of the positive, helpful aspects of each for the benefit of both.

In order to broaden the sympathies of Americans, he constructed a building designed to move them beyond their narrow, parochial understanding, for those who needed it, and he also felt it to be necessary to open the ancient Indian wisdom to modern scrutiny and practice. He felt it to be the imperative need of that generation to begin the broadening out to the universal. This temple, so elaborately planned and constructed, at what may be considered the beginning of the modern era, could be considered one of the first tipping points from a worn-out age of narrow parochialism to a disturbingly challenging modernity. Thus, this temple could be considered to form one of the first bridges to bring ancient wisdom to revitalize the, as yet, not fully expressed needs of the dawning age.

It is of primary importance, therefore, for every one of us, to understand that this “clash of civilizations” should become a blending of what is superior in

each and to understand what forces have emerged to bring about success in this effort. We find ourselves in a time of rising violence and dissolution on the one hand and a quiet renaissance of hopeful tendencies on the other. I don't want to be overly dramatic, but it is hard to discount the belief held by some that nothing less than the continuation of life on earth depends on those hopeful tendencies being allowed to prevail.

Contemporary thinkers have been aware of this clash, or confrontation, for some time now. They speak of the "old story" (of materialism and separateness) and of a "new story" struggling to emerge. The "old story" (or narrative, or worldview, or paradigm) has us trapped in the operative assumption that we are mere bodies, physical objects, at the mercy of outside forces in a meaningless universe governed by chance, condemned to lives of competition and violence—unless, that is, the depletion of the earth's resources puts an end to it all. The "new story" is far more hopeful, more beautiful, more challenging, and more realistic. It has percolated its way into the popular consciousness, or, as it has sometimes been phrased:

WE ARE NOT HUMAN BEINGS  
HAVING A SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE,

WE ARE SPIRITUAL BEINGS  
HAVING A HUMAN EXPERIENCE.

That is, however miraculous may be these bodies of ours (and science is steadily unearthing more of this miracle and its mysteriously ordered complexity), in relation to our whole being they are nothing more than what the Great Master, Sri Ramakrishna, called in his colorful way "a pillow case," in which our spiritual nature temporarily operates. And that operation is profoundly meaningful because our every thought, not to mention our words and actions, shapes the destiny toward which our spiritual being tends. In contrast to the "old story," this inspiring narrative maintains:

- We are body, mind, and spirit (in the Vedanta there are subtler and more articulate hierarchies);
- We are not separate packages but are deeply interconnected, indeed, in an inseparable unity with all of life;
- We are responsible for and can take positive control of our destiny individually and as a civilization, and
- We are "not there yet." Human evolution is far from over. We stand about midway between our origin

as inert matter/energy at the great "Manifestation" some 13.7 billion years ago and the spiritual beings we can become (or realize that we are).

Swami Ramdas, whose pilgrimage to Dakshineswar, where Swami Trigunatita and his brother disciples sat at the feet of Sri Ramakrishna, makes such inspiring reading, has summed this up beautifully: "On the physical plane man is but an animal. On the intellectual plane he is a rational being. On the moral plane he is a power for good. On the spiritual plane he is a radiant being full of divine light, love, and bliss. Humanity's ascent from one plane to another is its natural movement."

How new, then, is the "new story"? Professor Max Müller, the great nineteenth-century student of Indian civilization and language stated: "There are some truths worth repeating until everyone believes them." In other words, the story itself is not new at all. Critically, however, it is new to us. It is a perennial story. But "generation after generation," as the Gita says, "dharma declines" and has to be renewed (IV, 1-5). Moreover, perennial truths do need to be adjusted and adapted to fit changing times. This, again, is the role of those great souls who are born from time to time for this purpose, for, as is said in India, "religion is like paths through the jungle: if no one walks on them, they become overgrown." This temple, that has just been renovated and is now being rededicated, has served for more than a century as a channel through which the ancient wisdom tradition could flow to a newly consolidated and still experimental environment very much searching for meaning and for roots.

The two great emissaries sent out by India's ancient civilization at the turn of the last century exemplify this adaptation to the particular characteristic of our times: a scientific outlook. Even though there is a disturbing number of people, particularly in America today, who dismiss science when they think (very wrongly) it is convenient to do so, we remain a scientific people—as Willis Harman used to say, science is the "knowledge validating system" of our culture. If something is not "scientific," we will have a hard time believing that it is real. Swamiji and Gandhiji too, for that matter, as children of the Vedanta, were completely scientific in their outlooks. Swamiji, in his spectacular address to the first World Parliament of Religions in 1893, made bold to say, "Science has proved to me that the idea that I am limited to an illusory body is an illusion." That was a bold claim to make in 1893, but, by another astonishing

“coincidence,” it would be only two years later that William Röntgen discovered radiation, initiating the atomic age, and a few years after that that Planck and Einstein proved that the solid, continuous nature of the world is precisely what Vedanta had been saying for millennia: only appearance (māyā). In reality, as Planck later said (1931):

"I regard consciousness as fundamental. I regard matter as derivative from consciousness.... Everything that we talk about, everything that we regard as existing, postulates consciousness."

He might have been paraphrasing the wisdom condensed into a two-word formula or Mahāvākya, great utterance, of the Vedas: *prajñānam brahmah*, “The supreme Reality is (nothing but) consciousness.” No wonder that Dr. Raja Ramanna, chair of India’s Department of Energy, said, “It is only the Vedanta philosophy which seems to be in a position to absorb

the tremendous impact of the new science.” This realization has the profoundest ethical consequences. Swamiji declared: “Western civilization has in vain endeavored to find a reason for altruism. Here it is. I am my brother, and his pain is mine. I cannot injure him without injuring myself, or do ill to other beings without bringing that ill upon my own soul,”—an “ill” which has now been documented by psychologist Rachel MacNair in her discovery of Perpetration-Induced Traumatic Stress (PITS) and is unendurable.

When Swami Trigunatitananda dedicated the temple on January 7, 1906, whose rededication is the subject of this fascinating book, he described it as “the very best of India planted permanently on American soil.” What that swami so courageously planted has sent out many branches, and, if we nurture it correctly and well, its fruit will be nothing less than a sustainable future for humanity. ∞

*“Vedanta is the basic principle of all ethics, philosophies, and religions. It is absolutely unsectarian and universal. It harmonizes science with religion, world with God, matter with Spirit, and practical life with the Truth. It does not aim to make proselytes, but endeavors to make the followers of different walks of life and of religions broader, better, and more useful and practical, in their own persuasions, by opening their eyes to the fundamental unity of all paths and religions—that all creeds and courses of life are true, and lead, sooner or later, to the realization of one and the same Supreme Spirit which is—Absolute Existence, Knowledge, and Bliss.”*

*~ Swami Trigunatita  
“A Message from the Hindu Temple”*



# Acknowledgements

When we think deeply about any endeavor, we realize that it is almost always a concerted effort by many, both visible and hidden. Certainly, the renovation of the Old Temple is an obvious and concrete example of what has been achieved by the talent, skill, and hard work of many individuals coming together and creating something new while keeping the best elements of the old. The production of this commemorative volume, honoring those efforts, also falls into that category.

I am indebted to all the contributors of the articles, to the revered swamis who sent us messages of support appearing in this volume, as well as to Professor Michael Nagler for writing the preface.

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Swami Tattwamayananda  
Vedanta Society of Northern California  
San Francisco  
August 25, 2016

# Introduction

*Swami Tattwamayananda*

**T**EMPLES IN INDIA HAVE A LONG HISTORY. Building a temple in the Hindu tradition was considered to be a spiritually meritorious act that brought spiritual merit to the builder and sanctity to the place. As a religious institution, temples have always played an important role in the history of religious practices in Hinduism, where traditionally a temple is conceived as a symbol or a combination of various symbols and, much like a human organism, is considered to be the abode of God, the immanent divine spirit.

A temple is also a symbol of the omnipresent, cosmic, and transcendental dimension of God. The *Brihat Samhita* states that a temple is a microcosm of creation. Temples were conceived to be everlasting spiritual symbols of human effort and devotion (*Yaavat chandraarkamedini*—“as long as the moon, the sun, and the earth exist”). From the standpoint of the individual spiritual seeker, a temple represents the subtle body with the seven psychic centers mentioned in the Tantrik texts. A temple, in essence, is the link between man and God which helps us to evolve from the earthly level to the transcendental divine realm. Texts like *Aparajitaprichcha* (a well-known text on traditional Hindu architecture) present the temple structure itself as the form of creation or as the physical body of God. *Agni Purana*, on the other hand, considers the sanctum sanctorum alone as the body of the presiding deity. All rituals performed in temples symbolize different stages in our spiritual journey to discover the presence of the immanent divine reality, or God, as residing in our own heart.

It is said that the history of God and religion is the evolution of the human consciousness of the divine, the history of our ideas and concepts of God. In the history of Hinduism, especially after the Vedic age, temples were centers of religious life. But

conventional temple worship did not have anything to do with religious universalism as understood today. Credit should go to Swami Trigunatitananda for giving a universal dimension to the very concept of temple worship by building the Hindu Temple in San Francisco that has stood out as a picturesque landmark in the urban landscape of San Francisco.

Swami Trigunatitananda’s universal Hindu Temple was built as a symbol (*pratika*) of the great Vedantic ideal that the ultimate reality is one and that every religion is an equally valid path leading to the same spiritual goal. Every religion represents an expression of the same eternal, transcendental truth. This integral view of the ultimate reality and the diverse human attempts to reach that goal, as taught by Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, formed the philosophical and spiritual symbolism of the Hindu Temple of San Francisco built by Swami Trigunatitananda.

A whole lifetime could have been spent in building a structure like this; but Swami Trigunatitananda seemed to be always in a hurry. Immediately after landing in San Francisco, he set himself to work. He had a clear idea about his mission. He reorganized the Vedanta Society and established it on a secure,

traditional spiritual foundation. Every act of his remaining twelve years seemed to have spiritual significance, as evidenced, for instance, by the planning and building of the Hindu Temple in 1905.

### ***Symbolism in Temple Worship***

Symbols represent our efforts to understand the invisible and the abstract through the visible and the concrete. They help us to conceive of a higher and transcendental idea through concrete representations.

Symbolism plays a very important role in Hinduism, especially in the construction of temples and the rituals performed therein. Every act of worship and every form of the deity is raised to a higher level through philosophical and spiritual reinterpretation. The whole idea of temple worship is built on symbolism. Sound symbols, such as OM, the *Gayatri-Mantra*, *Bija-Mantras*, and the sacred mantras chanted in various ceremonies, as well as the form symbols of different conceptions of deities, diagrammatic symbols like yantras, the Shiva-linga and the Salagrama, the lotus, the different elements and rituals of formal worship of various deities, especially in the temple installation ceremony, the *upacharas* (five, ten, sixteen, sixty-four, or one hundred eight items, or articles, ceremonially offered with appropriate mantras to the deity invoked in the temple image), and the elaborate celebrations, like the Car Festival of Lord Jagannath of the Puri temple, all these have a deep symbolic significance.

The symbolism of temples, as well as of all aspects of temple worship, are meant to help us to eventually realize the immanent presence of God in our own heart, because the light in the temple ultimately represents the light of our own soul, the atman. Thus, symbolism helps spiritual aspirants to transcend external rituals and ceremonies. A devotee experiences the fact that God, whom he worships in the temple, is, in reality, the divine spirit present in his own heart. Finally, this living presence of God then vividly manifests in one's everyday life.

### ***Symbolism in the Features of the Old Temple and Its Architecture***

All the distinguishing features of the San Francisco Hindu Temple, or the Old Temple, as it is now referred to, are symbolic of a basic concept which Swami Trigunatitananda expressed in these words: "This Temple may be considered as a combination of a Hindu temple, a Christian

church, a Mohammedan mosque, a Hindu Math or monastery, and an American residence."

The large round tower at the northeast corner of the building is fashioned after some of the modern provincial temples of Shiva of Bengal, complete with the usual emblems common to Shiva temples.

The next tower, west of it, is a model of one of the twelve small Shiva temples along the Ganges at Dakshineswar, near Kolkata, where Sri Ramakrishna lived and Swami Vivekananda and the other disciples of Sri Ramakrishna first came under his influence and training. This middle tower is surmounted by a combination of three symbols. First, it has a crescent form at the bottom, which is a Turkish or Mohammedan symbol, but this is also the type of symbol used by some Hindu devotional sects, as well, and represents the spiritual path of devotion to God. Second, the middle sign looks like the sun: Without sunlight and heat, we cannot grow, and, therefore, this symbol indicates the path of work or karma. The third symbol, in this group of three, is the trident, which in Hindu tradition is the scepter of Shiva, who destroys ignorance, and, therefore, it symbolizes the path of knowledge or of spiritual inquiry and philosophy.

The particular order of these three symbols on one staff has additional meaning: Generally speaking, one must have a little faith and love to start some real kind of work. Therefore, the sign for the path of devotion has been put first. Then through love and faith comes a true sense of duty or work. Therefore, the path of karma has been put next. Then when we finish all our karma or work, and, when we become pure, we pierce through the veil of ignorance. Therefore, the sign of the path of knowledge has been put last. Another meaning can also be derived, as follows: Unless our spiritual culture transcends in greatness the sun, moon, and everything, we cannot reach the ultimate truth.

The next tower to the west, with its cluster of multiple small, pointed domes surrounding a large central dome, is a replica of one of the principal temples of Varanasi, the most ancient center of Hindu learning and spiritual tradition. This tower has also a little similarity with the top of the temple of Mother Kali at Dakshineswar, as mentioned earlier.

The small tower farther west, high above the entrance to the temple, is a miniature, modeled after the Taj Mahal at Agra in North India. On the southeast corner of the building is a crenelated round tower modeled after some of the old castle towers of Europe,

which belong to the medieval era of Christianity. The veranda that runs along the third floor on the north and east sides of the building is lined with sculpted arches in Moorish style.

Over the entrance door to the temple is a canopy with further symbolism to illustrate the soul's rise to spiritual insight and illumination. It also contains a mosaic inscription in Sanskrit which reads: *Om Namō Bhagavate Ramakrishnaya*, which means: "OM, salutation to the blessed Lord Ramakrishna"; OM being a word indicative of divinity in its most universal aspect, *namo* or *namah* refers to salutation. The word *bhagavate* or *bhagavan*, signifying Lord, implies that the holy personality, Sri Ramakrishna, named in this verse, is considered to have a divine, rather than a merely human origin and function.

The metal canopy above the entrance door is decorated around its edge with a fringe of lotus petals, symbolizing the inner mental lotuses of increasing beauty seen by mystics in meditation. The whole is surmounted, as though protected, by an American eagle with wings outspread. The eagle seems to fly beyond this world, which is the realm of creation, preservation, and destruction—the realm of relativities. The eagle can also be seen as expressive of the Hindu mythological bird, Garuda, the symbol of great strength, spiritual devotion, and of steady and rapid progress.<sup>1</sup>

Swami Trigunatitananda, while answering a question as to whether one had to believe in rebirth or in any such doctrine, in order to reach the highest spiritual goal, said: "There are many faiths and religious sects in the world, which do not believe in nor care to believe in such doctrines; according to Vedantism, they, too, reach the very highest; one should simply go on sincerely, ardently, and steadily along one's own faith, with one's own beliefs, with a view to advance to the very highest."<sup>2</sup>

Swami Trigunatitananda wanted to construct a building in San Francisco that would be an architectural representation of the message of religious harmony, a medium for communicating the Vedantic universalism that was the central theme of Sri Ramakrishna's message to the modern world, as so ably expounded by Swami Vivekananda. That partly explains his decision to build a temple so unlike the traditional Hindu temples in India, yet incorporating many of their aspects like the pointed towers, domes, etc. The message of the Old Temple was the message of religious harmony, based on the fact that spiritual experience knows no barriers of race, nationality, or external practices.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the whole work was the amazing speed of the construction of the temple—an astonishing feat accomplished within less than five months! Swami Trigunatitananda installed the cornerstone on August 21, 1905, and the dedication ceremony was held on January 7, 1906. This original structure had only the tower at the northeast corner of the building. That tower was removed in 1908, and an additional floor was added to the building. Along with all the other towers now seen, the corner tower was reinstalled.

These events were historically significant when we remember the cultural and spiritual landscape of America during this period. The country was undergoing a radical transformation in the field of religion and spirituality. New concepts and movements like Theosophy, Christian Science, and Unitarianism were becoming popular among the social elites in the United States. Higher Hinduism, or Vedanta, had just been introduced to American society by Swami Vivekananda in the World's Parliament of Religions at Chicago in 1893 and subsequently through his lectures and classes. Its catholicity, rationality, and especially its open acceptance of other faith-systems were in sharp contrast to the narrow dogmatism of the contemporary Christian church. The intellectual challenges of Darwinist, humanist, and atheistic movements, as well as the criticism of the admirers of the latest scientific discoveries, posed a great threat to exclusivist claims of established religions.

In conclusion, the earliest temples of North and central India belonging to the Gupta period (320-650 A.D.), the rock-cut temples of South India belonging to the periods of the Pallavas, Chalukyas, and Rashtrakutas, as well as the temples of Angkor Wat in Cambodia, are marvels of ancient Hindu architecture, as are the temples belonging to the Vijayanagar period and the great ancient Indian temples that exist in places like Kashi, Vrindavan, and Mathura.

From an architectural point of view the San Francisco Hindu Temple is different from both the South Indian or Dravida and Chalukya temples with their characteristic tiered *vimana* shrines, their axial and peripheral *mandapa* adjuncts, and towering *gopura* entrances (gates), as well as from the North Indian temples with their own distinctive features like a square plan and curvilinear towers, representing the *nagara* style. Also, there is no evidence to show that Swami Trigunatitananda fully adhered to the principles of temple construction as laid down in the traditional texts on Vastu Shastra like the *Brihat Sambhita*.



Swami Trigunatitananda, a great traditionalist, must have performed all the rituals before the temple construction, like sanctifying the earth, Vastu puja, *garbha-nyasa*, etc. But, since the Temple did not have a traditional inner sanctum sanctorum like the traditional orthodox Hindu temples in India, many of the rituals were perhaps not required.

### *A Spiritual Saga of Dedication and Service*

Considering the circumstances under which he was deputed by Swami Vivekananda to take up the Vedanta work in San Francisco, Swami Trigunatitananda knew it was to be a heroic task. The reorganization of the Vedanta Society, keeping the congregation together, and carrying on the task of spreading the message of Vedanta in northern California—all these endeavors demanded exceptional organizational skills, spiritual insight, moral strength, ingenuity, drive, iron determination, and, above all, a blending of the dedicated action of a missionary and the profound spirituality of a saint.

It was remarkable that, even in the midst of Swami Trigunatitananda's active dynamism on display throughout his more than twelve years of spiritual ministrations in San Francisco, there were always glimpses of his monastic humility and contemplative nature. About this builder of the Hindu Temple, one may well say what William Arthur Ward stated about an ideal teacher: "The mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires." Swami Trigunatitananda's sense of dedication was an inspiring example for all those who worked with him to build the Temple.

The universal Hindu Temple of San Francisco has a special significance in the present age which is characterized by a widespread urge for anything universal. Unity in variety is the theme for our times. This urge for universality, especially in the field of spirituality, is bound to prompt thinking people everywhere to study the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and his ideal of universal religious harmony symbolized in the universal Hindu Temple of San Francisco.

Was the building of the Hindu Temple an accident? If Swami Turiyananda had not left San Francisco in 1902 and Swami Trigunatitananda had not arrived in 1903, probably it would never have been built. But, when we look back after more than a century, we can see that there was a divine hand and divine plan behind it.

Swami Trigunatitananda experienced this as a fact, as he revealed from time to time. On one such occasion,

he said, regarding this first Hindu Temple in the West: "I shall not live to enjoy, others will come later who will enjoy." With reference to his own motivation, he boldly stated: "Believe me, believe me, if there is the least tinge of selfishness in building the temple, it will fall, but if it is the Master's work, it will stand."<sup>3</sup> And it has stood, weathering more than a century, including the catastrophic 1906 earthquake and the fire ignited by it, which was fanned by unrelenting winds to within six blocks of the Temple, before suddenly being diverted by a providential reversal of wind direction.

The story of the universal Hindu Temple of San Francisco is not just the story of a temple. It is the saga of a saint—a humbling, inspiring model for all spiritual seekers.

This commemorative volume is a humble tribute to Swami Trigunatitananda and his work: the universal Hindu Temple of San Francisco. He spent the last twelve years of his life spreading Vedanta in San Francisco and in the Bay Area and, quite literally, died in its cause. This volume contains photos, newspaper reports, articles, and several other items related to the universal Hindu Temple in its one hundred ten year history. It also takes the reader on a spiritual journey that explores several little-known aspects of a heroic spiritual saga that unfolded during the early decades of the 20th century. ∞

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1. Sister Gargi (Marie Louise Burke), *Swami Trigunatita: His Life and Work* (San Francisco: Vedanta Society of Northern California, 1997), 198-203.

2. *Ibid.*, 373.

3. His Western Disciples, "The Work of Swami Trigunatita in the West," *Prabuddha Bharata*, March 1928: 132.



*Old Temple, Sri Ramakrishna's birthday, 1952*



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*Sri Ramakrishna Sharanam*

## **MESSAGE**

29<sup>th</sup> October 2016

I am glad to know that the Vedanta Society of Northern California, San Francisco is having the 'Re-dedication Ceremony of the renovated Temple' on Saturday, 29<sup>th</sup> October, 2016, Sri Sri Kali Puja day, and that a commemorative souvenir will be published to memorialize this grand event.

We all know that Swami Vivekananda's second trip to the west occurred in 1899-1900 and he worked in and around San Francisco, California during the first half of 1900. During this period he delivered a number of soul-stirring lectures such as "Vedanta and Christianity", "The Claims of Hinduism on the Modern World", "Christ's Message to the world", "Buddha's Message to the world", "Is Vedanta the Future Religion?" etc. which generated a spiritual current ultimately crystalizing in the form of the 'Vedanta Society' inaugurated on 14<sup>th</sup> April 1900.

In 1906, the first Vedanta Temple was established and dedicated by Swami Trigunatitanandaji Maharaj, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, who was sent by the authorities of Belur Math, India in 1903. This Temple became the permanent footing for the Vedanta Society. As the condition of the Old Temple was little impaired, it has been now thoroughly renovated.

Vedanta teaches that the ultimate truth is 'Oneness', which is called 'Brahman'. Although it is very difficult to grasp this Oneness behind the diversified universe, still it is the same consciousness that pervades everything. So, the harmony that is brought out in the perceived diversity is based on this principle of Oneness and this forms the main theme of the 'Universal Religion'. This harmony was fully exemplified in the life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. After having a direct experience of this harmony, Sri Ramakrishna preached thus: "All paths are true, and they reach the same reality." Swami Vivekananda also says: "We must learn that truth may be expressed in a hundred thousand ways, and that each of these ways is true as far as it goes. ... Through high philosophy or low, through the most exalted mythology or the grossest, through the most refined ritualism or arrant fetishism, every sect, every soul, every nation, every religion, consciously or unconsciously, is struggling upward, towards God; every vision of truth that man has, is a vision of Him and of none else." The Vedanta temple also signifies this Unity.

I pray that may Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda bless the Ceremony as well as the souvenir.

(Swami Atmasthananda)  
President

Ramakrishna Math & Ramakrishna Mission

Swami Tattwamayanda  
Vedanta Society of Northern California,  
San Francisco.

**RAMAKRISHNA MATH**  
(The Headquarters)  
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### **MESSAGE**

I am glad to learn from the letter of Swami Tattwamayananda that the Vedanta Society of Northern California, San Francisco, will be re-dedicating its renovated and rebuilt 'Old Temple' on October 29, 2016, the Kalipuja day and to commemorate the occasion a souvenir would be published.

The temple was constructed between August 1905 and January 1906. Having combined the Eastern and Western cultures, both sacred and secular, the architectural design of the temple was planned by Swami Trigunatitanandaji. Expressing his ideas, in a pamphlet that he published during the time, he wrote: "This temple may be considered as a combination of a Hindu Temple, a Christian church, a Mahomedan mosque, a Hindu math or monastery and an American residence." Regarding this temple Sister Gargi wrote: To Swami Trigunatita the first Hindu temple in the whole western world would be a vital piece of India planted on American soil. The temple represented the influx of India's great spiritual wisdom into the culture of the West—there to grow and flourish, as Swami Vivekananda had wanted."

I pray to Bhagavan Ramakrishna, Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi and Srimat Swami Vivekanandaji—to make the programmes and the publication a grand success.

I convey my good wishes to all.

(Swami Smaranananda)  
Vice-President

March 4, 2016



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## RAMAKRISHNA MATH

( The Headquarters )  
P.O. BELUR MATH, DIST. HOWRAH  
WEST BENGAL : 711202  
INDIA

### Message

The Vedanta Society of Northern California, San Francisco, is a branch of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission of India. I am happy to learn that the renovated Old Temple of the Vedanta Society, the first Hindu Temple in the West, is going to be re-dedicated on the auspicious day of Kali Puja, October 29, 2016, Saturday, and on this occasion a commemorative Souvenir will be published to memorialize this event.

I sincerely invoke the blessings of Sri Sri Thakur, Sri Sri Maa and Sri Swamiji Maharaj for the success of the Celebration as well as of the Souvenir.

*Swami Prabhananda*

(Swami Prabhananda)  
Vice President

Date : 2 April 2016



**VEDANTA SOCIETY OF NEW YORK**  
*Founded by Swami Vivekananda in 1894*  
34 West, 71<sup>st</sup> Street, New York, NY 10023

April 19, 2016

Dear Swami Tattwamayananda,

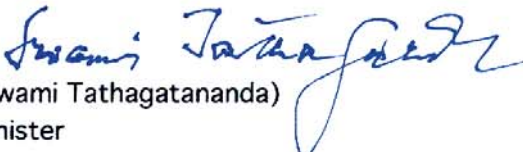
I am very glad to know from your letter dated March 9, 2016 that you are planning to re-dedicate the old temple of San Francisco Center, which is undergoing renovation work, on Saturday, the 29th October, 2016, the Kali Puja day. And to commemorate this great event you propose to bring out a souvenir.

Swami Vivekananda founded two centers in USA. One is Vedanta Society of New York and the other is Vedanta Society of Northern California, San Francisco. San Francisco center is also associated with two more direct monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna—Swami Turiyanandaji Maharaj and Swami Trigunatitanandaji Maharaj. After building the first Hindu temple in USA, Swami Trigunatitananda said, 'Believe me, believe me, if there is the least tinge of selfishness in building this Temple it will fall, but if it is the Master's work, it will stand.' The temple was dedicated to the cause of humanity on 7 January 1906 and the first services were held on Sunday 15 January. All these years the temple is standing raising its head. Many earthquakes have seen by the people of San Francisco. But this temple of Sri Ramakrishna did not affect by that. I hope the renovated temple will also face the many earthquakes and other hazards like the old one and prove the same as Swami Trigunatita said.

I pray to Bhagawan Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, Swami Vivekananda, Swami Turiyanandaji and Swami Trigunatitanandaji, may they shower their blessings on everyone who are directly or indirectly associated with this noble work.

My hearty good wishes to you.

Yours in Mother,

  
(Swami Tathagatananda)  
Minister

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## Message

The **Old Temple** of Vedanta Society of Northern California, San Francisco, is a standing monument of the ennobling and spiritualizing impact of the Vedanta Movement on the American soil made possible through the stupendous efforts of monks of Ramakrishna Order beginning from Swami Vivekananda himself. Revered Swami Trigunatita's courage and the hardship he endured in building this temple are legendary. He depended on none but Sri Ramakrishna in accomplishing this great feat. When it was completed he used to proudly refer to it as the 'first Hindu Temple in the whole Western World.' The design of the temple is as exquisite as it is unique. Above all, an air of holiness and living presence of the Lord permeates the temple thanks to the devoted worship offered there by many great Swamis of our Order and countless number of devotees over the last eleven decades.

I am very glad that the Old Temple has now been thoroughly renovated and made strong to welcome devotees for many more centuries to come. On this happy occasion of rededication of the temple we may remind ourselves of the words Swami Trigunatita spoke on the dedication ceremony of the temple on January 7, 1906. He said, "My dearest friends, this little place has been dedicated to the service of God. Not to any particular person, not to any particular society, not to any particular religion, not to any particular sect, but for all creeds, for all religions, for persons of all faiths and activities of life. ... This place is meant for that purpose, to cultivate our intellect and spiritual life towards that end. What end? To discover and realize that we are one; we are the children of one father, to whom this has been dedicated."

I pray to Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda for their blessings on the rededication ceremony of the Old Temple. May they in their mercy continue to make the Old Temple a special place for enlightening the seekers of truth who gather there.

March 26, 2016

(Swami Suhitananda)  
General Secretary

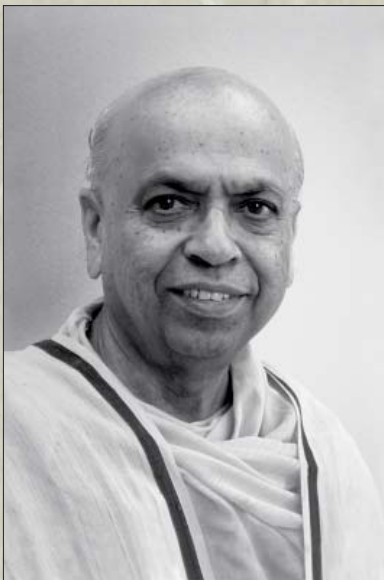


## Swamis in Charge of the Vedanta Society of Northern California

The Society has been blessed with the leadership of three direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, as well as with a wonderful later succession of swamis, who have guided it and its members from its inception to the present day. Through their leadership a solid foundation has been created, and the Society has gradually expanded its activities, becoming a steady source of spiritual knowledge and inspiration.



*Above: Swami Vivekananda, founder, 1900  
Top right: Swami Turiyananda, 1900-1902  
Right: Swami Trigunatitananda, 1903-1915*



*Top row, left to right:*

*Swami Prakashananda, 1916-1927*

*Swami Dayananda, 1927-1931*

*Swami Madhavananda, 1927-1929*

*Middle row, left to right:*

*Swami Vividishananda, 1931-1932*

*Swami Ashokananda, 1932-1969*

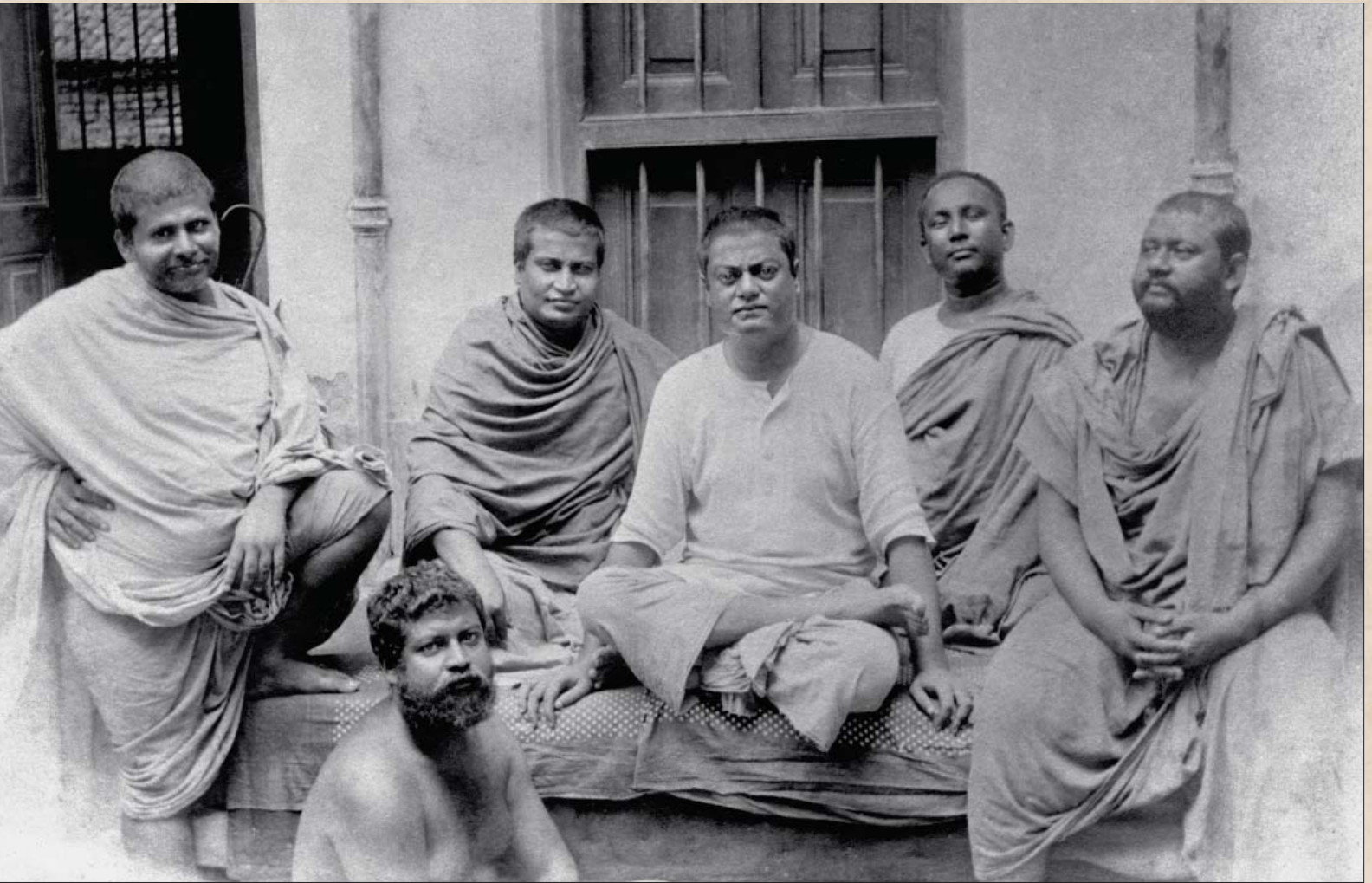
*Swami Shantaswarupananda, 1970*

*Bottom row, left to right:*

*Swami Prabuddhananda, 1970-2014*

*Swami Tattwamayananda, 2014-*





*Left to right: Swamis Trigunatitananda, Sadananda, Shivananda, Vivekananda, Turiyananda, and Brahmananda*

This 1899 photo includes the three direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, Swami Turiyananda, and Swami Trigunatita, who were to play integral roles in the establishment of the Vedanta Society in San Francisco. The photo was taken the day Swamis Vivekananda and Turiyananda boarded the ship that would bring them to America. Holy Mother had invited the swamis and some devotees to a feast on the day of their departure, and Haripada Mitra, a lay disciple of Swami Vivekananda, took this photo.

Cara French, Swami Trigunatita's disciple, visited India after the swami's death, and, while staying at Belur Math, she met Haripada Mitra. In her reminiscences, she recounts:

“Mr. H. Mitra, of Vivekananda Kutir, Burdwan, Bengal, called a number of times to see Tantine [Josephine MacLeod], pausing frequently to visit me also. He told me he and his wife were the first lay disciples of Swami Vivekananda; and that it was he who took the photographs of the various groups of disciples shown in M's *Gospel*. And while talking of them, he autographed his name and address on one of the pictures [this photo] in my personal copy of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*: ‘Photo taken by H. Mitra, Viveka Kutir, Bhaita P.O. (Burdwan), Bengal, E. J. R. Saktistur Station.’” ∞

## Trigunatitananda or Trigunatita?

Sarada Prasanna Mitra was among the first direct disciples to take formal monastic vows at the Baranagore monastery. At that time Swami Vivekananda gave him the name Swami Trigunatitananda, which means one whose bliss is in transcending the three *gunas* or qualities. A few years later, in 1895, Swami Vivekananda wrote to his brother monk from America praising his dedicated work and ironically teasing him about his long name and asking him to shorten it:

228 W. 39, New York  
17<sup>th</sup> Jan., 1895

Dear Sarada,

Your two letters are at hand . . .

Never mind anything! In your lips and hands the Goddess of Learning will make Her seat; the Lord of infinite power will be seated on your chest; you will do works that will strike the world with wonder. By the bye, can't you shorten your name a bit, my boy? What a long, long name!—a single name enough to fill a volume! Well, you hear people say that the Lord's name keeps away death! It is not the simple name Hari, mind you. It is those deep and sonorous names, such as अघभगनरकवनिशन (Destroyer of Agha, Bhaga, and Naraka), त्रपुरिमदभञ्जन (Subduer of the pride of Tripura, demon of the "three cities"), and अशेषनःशेषकल्याणकर (Giver of infinite and endless blessings), and so forth—that put to rout King Death and his whole party. Won't it look nice if you simplify yours a little? But, believe me, it is a world-entrancing, death-defying name that you have got!

Yours affectionately,  
Vivekananda

And so, at his beloved brother's behest, the swami shortened his name to Swami Trigunatita, and this is the name he used throughout his ministry in San Francisco.

Right: Swami Trigunatita's card







*Emblem of the Ramakrishna Order, designed by Swami Vivekananda*

# The Ramakrishna-Vedanta Movement: Its Significance for the West

*Swami Bhajananda*

**S**WAMI VIVEKANANDA HAS STATED THAT AT THE INTERVAL OF EVERY FIVE HUNDRED YEARS a new set of universal ideas appears in some part of the globe. These ideas manifest themselves through an extraordinary person known as a prophet or avatar. Speaking about the function of a prophet, Swamiji says: "He focuses in his own mind the thought of the age in which he is living and gives it back to mankind in concrete form."<sup>1</sup>

This was what Sri Ramakrishna, who is regarded as the avatar of the present age by millions of people, did. He came with a message, a new set of ideas suited to the needs of the present age. He first applied it in his own life and charged it with power. He trained a group of young disciples to be the torchbearers of his message, and through them laid the foundation of a new monastic order, which came to be known later as the Ramakrishna Math [monastery]. As in a hydroelectric project, electricity is first generated by giant turbines and is then transmitted to different places through high-tension power mains, so also the spiritual power generated by Sri Ramakrishna through his unprecedented *sadhana*s and prayers got transmitted to different parts of India and the world through his direct disciples. Subsequently, through the disciples of those direct disciples and through successive generations of disciples, the message and power of Sri Ramakrishna have been spreading in ever-widening circles to form the Ramakrishna Movement or, as it is known in the West, the "Vedanta Movement."

## *The Ramakrishna-Vedanta Movement*

We have already mentioned that the original power, inspiration, and message of Sri Ramakrishna are no longer confined to the Ramakrishna Math or

Mission but have been spreading in ever-widening circles, influencing people in different walks of life, to become a movement. What does a movement mean? In common parlance any general trend in society involving a large number of people is a movement. The *Random House Dictionary* defines a movement as "a diffusely organized or heterogeneous group of people or organizations tending toward or favoring a generalized goal." Sociologists give a more precise definition. One such definition is: "A social movement is an organized attempt on the part of a section of a society to bring about either partial or total change in society through collective mobilization based on an ideology."

Every social trend, every idea followed by a group of people, does not necessarily become a movement. According to sociologists, to be called a "movement," a social trend must have the following components:

(a) Leadership: A movement is led or inspired by a charismatic personality. In the case of a religious movement it is inspired by a prophet, saint, or sage who is adored and followed by large numbers of people.

(b) Ideology: Ideology is a set of concepts and principles centered around certain ideals. Ideology is the philosophy of action in a movement. It is ideology that gives identity to a movement.



(c) Organization: A movement can be sustained for long only if it is supported by a strong organization. Otherwise, the movement will become too diffuse and peter out.

(d) Participation by a large number of people belonging to different walks of life.

All these four components of a movement are present in the Ramakrishna Movement. The Movement is inspired and powered by the “Holy Trio”—Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother, and Swami Vivekananda—who also form the common goal and ideal for all the members of the Movement. Then there are the other direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, each of whom was a spiritual giant. It may be stated in this context that the Ramakrishna Movement has the distinction of producing the largest number of illumined souls, sages, and saints in recent centuries. As regards the followers of the Movement, they may be now counted in millions. The Movement has a comprehensive ideology which has stood the test of time. The Movement is sustained, held together, and directed by the two organizations: the Ramakrishna Math and the Ramakrishna Mission, which form the core of the Movement. Apart from these, there are other organizations.

There is, however, one basic difference between the Ramakrishna Movement and other movements. Most social movements and many religious or spiritual movements peter out after a certain period of time. The Ramakrishna Movement is built on the strong foundation of spirituality, morality, and monasticism, it has a firm orientation towards the future, and is sustained by the power of the avatar of the age. It is therefore expected to thrive for centuries. This future orientation, the keen awareness that the Ramakrishna Sangha [community] is destined to play an important role in human history, is a distinctive feature of the Ramakrishna Movement.

### ***Five Streams***

The Ramakrishna Movement has now become a big river which is the confluence of several streams. The Ramakrishna Math and Mission, with all their branch centers together, constitute the main stream. In this connection we may remember Sister Nivedita’s words: “The Ramakrishna Mission is a symphony of many movements.” The women’s monastic order, Sri Sarada Math, and Ramakrishna Sarada Mission, constitute another stream. The hundreds of thousands of lay devotees attached to these institutions form the third stream. Apart from these, there are hundreds of

unaffiliated, independent ashramas and study circles bearing the name of Sri Ramakrishna or Sri Sarada Devi or Swami Vivekananda; they together make the fourth stream of the Ramakrishna Movement. The Vedanta Movement in the West, which has several unique features, constitutes the independent fifth stream of the Ramakrishna Movement.

### ***Origins***

The story of the Ramakrishna Math began when Sri Ramakrishna climbed to the terrace of the house in Dakshineswar and called out: “O my children, wherever you are, come to me. My heart yearns to see you.” This happened after he had completed the practice of various spiritual disciplines and people had started coming to see him. In response to that mystic call, young spiritual seekers, most of whom were studying in school or college, began to gather around him. Under his guidance they practiced intense spiritual disciplines. During Sri Ramakrishna’s last illness, these young men nursed him day and night. He instilled in their minds the spirit of monastic renunciation and also brotherly love for one another. Among them the Master [Sri Ramakrishna] earmarked Narendra (who later became the world-famous Swami Vivekananda) to be the leader of the group.

After the Master’s passing in August 1886, these young disciples started living in a dilapidated house at Baranagore in north Calcutta. A few months later, they took the formal vows of *sannyasa*, assumed new names, and thus formed a new monastic order which came to be known later as the Ramakrishna Math. The monastery was moved six years later to another place in Alambazar, and from there it was finally moved to its own permanent premises at Belur in Howrah District in 1898. It was registered as a trust in 1899, and since then it is being administered by a board of trustees, consisting of senior monks of the Ramakrishna Order.

Unlike the Ramakrishna Math, which is a purely monastic order, the Ramakrishna Mission is a social service society in which the monks of the Ramakrishna Math and lay supporters cooperate in conducting different forms of social service such as running schools, hospitals, rural development, etc. It was founded by Swami Vivekananda on May 1, 1897, soon after his return from the West. The original idea probably was that the Mission would be managed by lay devotees. But since this did not materialize, owing to the unfavorable socioeconomic conditions which prevailed in India in the early decades of the 20th century, the monks of the



*Sri Ramakrishna, 1836-1886*

Ramakrishna Order took over the administration of the Mission also. The Ramakrishna Mission was registered as a charitable society in 1909.

### ***Swamiji's Four-fold Vision***

All the activities of the Ramakrishna Math and the Ramakrishna Mission, and their outlook on society and the world, are based on Swami Vivekananda's four insights or four-fold vision.

Swamiji's first insight was into the true meaning and purpose of Sri Ramakrishna's life. During the early years of his contact with the Master, Swamiji had difficulty in accepting him as an avatar, but later revelations gave him the conviction that Sri Ramakrishna was the avatar of the present age. Whereas most of the other followers of Sri Ramakrishna thought of him in relation to their own personal salvation, Swamiji thought of him in relation to the welfare of the whole of humankind.

It is generally seen that the followers of a spiritual personage tend to create a cult or sect around him. Swami Vivekananda prevented this from happening in the case of Sri Ramakrishna. Swamiji established the view that Sri Ramakrishna is the avatar of the modern age, who came as the culmination of a spiritual tradition of India of five thousand years.



*Sri Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother, 1853-1920*

Swamiji showed that Sri Ramakrishna was born to rejuvenate the whole of Hinduism and the spiritual life of humanity as a whole. He also showed that Sri Ramakrishna's life was the verification of not only the eternal truths of religion discovered by the ancient sages of India but also the essential truths of all religions. This provided a new understanding of religion itself and a new criterion to judge the truth claims of different religions. Sri Ramakrishna was the embodiment of the highest truths of the Hindu scriptures like the Vedas, Puranas, and Tantras as well as the scriptures of other religions; and all these scriptures can be properly understood in modern times only in the light of Sri Ramakrishna's life and teachings.

Furthermore, Sri Ramakrishna served as the new door to salvation which was open to all without the distinctions of caste, religion, or race. Sri Ramakrishna had, through his life, shown a new way of life and, based on this, it was possible to create a new society which aimed at spiritual fulfillment and followed the principles of equality, harmony of religions, service as worship, and renunciation of lust and lucre. This insight into the significance of Sri Ramakrishna's avatarhood gave Swamiji the faith that, with Sri Ramakrishna as the center, a new India was gathering forces and would finally emerge in the world scene as the dominant spiritual power.

Swamiji's second insight was into the real cause of India's downfall and the means of uplifting her. While traveling all over India as a mendicant monk a few years after Sri Ramakrishna's passing, Swamiji saw with his own eyes the utter poverty and backwardness into which the masses, belonging to the lower strata of society, had sunk. And he realized that it was the neglect of these poor masses which produced all the wealth of the nation that was the primary cause of India's downfall. It is surprising that none of the religious leaders and social reformers in 19th century India other than Swami Vivekananda realized this simple truth.

Swamiji saw that what the masses immediately needed was the bare necessities of life like food and clothing, and for this they should be taught improved methods of agriculture and village industries. This meant secular education should spread among the masses.

However, Swamiji also saw that secular education alone was not enough. For, owing to centuries of neglect and social oppression, the poor in India had lost the capacity to take initiative for their betterment. It was therefore necessary to infuse in them self-confidence and courage to take up new ventures. Since religion played a vital role in the life of the poor, Swamiji believed that this could be done by giving them knowledge of the life-giving principles of Vedanta. This meant that, along with secular education, spiritual education must also spread among the poor.

Once Swamiji arrived at this conclusion, it also became clear to him that this project of two-fold education could be worked out and sustained only with the help of a powerful organization of dedicated workers. As he stated later, he wanted "to set in motion a machinery which will bring noblest ideas to the doorstep of even the poorest and the meanest." To set in motion such a social service machinery the primary requirement was money. One of the main reasons for Swamiji's going to the West, apart from attending the World's Parliament of Religions, was to collect funds for his mass education program in India. However, as it turned out later on, he did not succeed in collecting a lot of funds. It was as an alternative to his mass education program that Swami Vivekananda founded the Ramakrishna Mission soon after his return from his first visit to the West in 1897.

Swami Vivekananda's third insight was about India's spiritual contribution to world culture. Swamiji has pointed out that, although religion is a universal phenomenon associated with every culture, there is something unique about India's religious tradition.

It was in ancient India that the fundamental truths, principles, and laws of spiritual life pertaining to the true nature of the ultimate reality (Brahman), the true nature of the human soul (atman), man's ultimate destiny (*mukti*), different techniques (yogas) of getting spiritual experiences, creation of the world, and so on were discovered. Just as science is one and universal, so also spirituality is one and universal.

This universal spirituality was developed in India by the ancient *rishis* or seers of the Upanishads, and is known as *brahmavidya* or Vedanta. This universal Vedantic spirituality, which Swamiji called "universal religion," is not against science, but complements it. This universal religion is not contradictory to any other religion but forms the common ground of all religions. Furthermore, its basic principles, when applied in practical life, can solve the existential problems of life.

In the course of his stay in the West, Swamiji saw that, although the people there had attained great material prosperity and power, the rise of science and rational thinking had undermined the bases of faith in traditional religion and morality. As a result, there was a sort of spiritual vacuum in Western society and various psychological and existential problems had begun to appear. Swamiji believed that the eternal, universal principles of Vedanta, as lived and taught by Sri Ramakrishna, would be able to fill up the spiritual vacuum in Western society, meet the challenges of science, and provide the Western people a satisfying view of reality and a meaningful way of life. For that to happen, India must contribute her spiritual wealth to world culture. As a matter of fact, it was the failure of India to maintain her contribution to world culture, owing to her isolation caused by foreign invasions and conquests, that was yet another reason for India's downfall.

Swamiji's fourth insight was into the positive aspects of Western culture. He understood that, in spite of certain drawbacks, Western culture had contributed much to the socioeconomic elevation and intellectual advancement of Western people. Swamiji saw that the positive aspects of Western culture were universally valid and universally beneficial. These positive aspects of Western culture were the result of centuries of human struggle and development, the culmination of the dialectics of history, and marked a major change in human consciousness.

Among the positive aspects of Western culture, first place is occupied by science. Swamiji regarded science as the correct way of understanding the physical universe. He believed that knowledge of science would remove superstition and ignorance

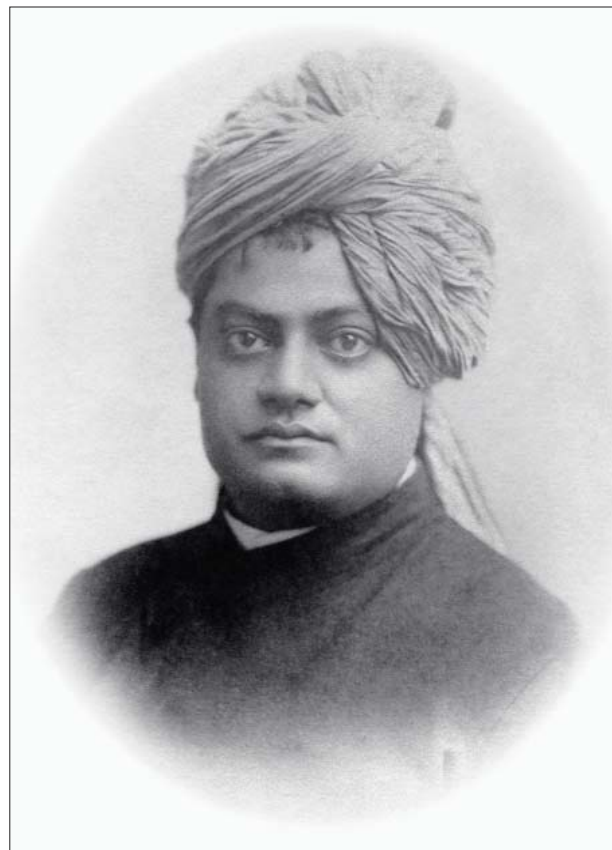
from the human mind. According to him, science is a discipline for the pursuit of ultimate truth. In this respect it is similar to yoga. Whereas yoga seeks the ultimate truth in the transcendent plane, science seeks truth in the empirical plane. As such, science and spirituality are not contradictory to each other but are complementary.

Not only that, Swamiji held that religion (that is, spirituality) itself is a science—the science of consciousness. In his introduction to *Raja Yoga*, in his lecture on “Reason and Religion,” and in several other places, Swami Vivekananda showed that both the scientific method and the method of Vedanta are based on the two fundamental principles of inductive logic and naturalism (as opposed to supernaturalism).<sup>2</sup> In several of his lectures, Swami Vivekananda advocated the scientific approach to the study of religions in order to separate the eternal truths of spirituality from superstitious beliefs, mythological stories, and dogmatism which characterize traditional belief patterns.

Swami Vivekananda was deeply impressed by the stupendous developments of technology achieved by Western culture, which had enabled Western people to acquire great power and material prosperity. Unlike some of the political leaders in pre-independent India, who believed that Western technology would harm India’s village industries, Swamiji believed that Western technology was necessary to lift the marginalized people of India from penury to prosperity. During his stay in America, Swamiji visited the Throop Polytechnic Institute several times (which later became famous as the California Institute of Technology). After his return to India in 1897, when he founded the Ramakrishna Mission, he made “starting industrial institutes and giving vocational training to youths” one of the objectives of the Mission.

Some of the other aspects of Western culture which Swamiji considered to be of universal value, and which he wanted to be incorporated into Indian society and body politic, were: humanism (a view of reality and a way of life centered on man and concerned with human welfare and progress), democracy, and an open society based on freedom, equality, and justice. “We have many things to learn from the West: we should learn from the West her arts and sciences,” Swamiji said once, “We have to gain a little in material knowledge, in the power of organization, in the ability to handle powers... in bringing the best results out of the smallest of causes.”<sup>4</sup>

However, the aspect of Western culture which Swamiji admired most is the Western person’s faith



*Swami Vivekananda, Chicago, 1893*

in him or herself, their courage and energy. Referring to this Swamiji wrote in the very first issue of the journal *Udbodhan*: “What we should have is what we have not, perhaps what our forefathers even had not—that which the Yavanas (ancient Greeks) had; that, impelled by the life-vibration of which is issuing forth in rapid succession from the great dynamo of Europe, the electric flow of that tremendous power vivifying the whole world, we want that. We want that energy, that love of independence, that spirit of self-reliance, that immovable fortitude, that dexterity in action, that bond of unity of purpose, that thirst for improvement.”<sup>5</sup>

### ***Swami Vivekananda’s Mission in the West***

Swami Vivekananda’s visit to the West was a historic event. He did not go there as an ordinary man with a personal agenda. As stated earlier, one of the reasons for his deciding to go was to attempt to collect funds for his work of uplifting the downtrodden masses of India. Another reason, of course, was to attend the World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago. But even before he left the shores of India, perhaps during his meditation in Kanyakumari, Swamiji had gained the conviction that he had a larger mission in the West as a messenger of his Master, Sri Ramakrishna, and



as a messenger of the timeless spiritual wisdom of India. On the occasion of the celebration of Swami Vivekananda's birth centenary in New York in 1963, U Thant, the second Secretary-General of the United Nations, stated: "Swami Vivekananda, as most of you are aware, was the greatest spiritual ambassador of India." Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, in the course of a speech, described Swami Vivekananda as "the spokesman of the divine Logos."

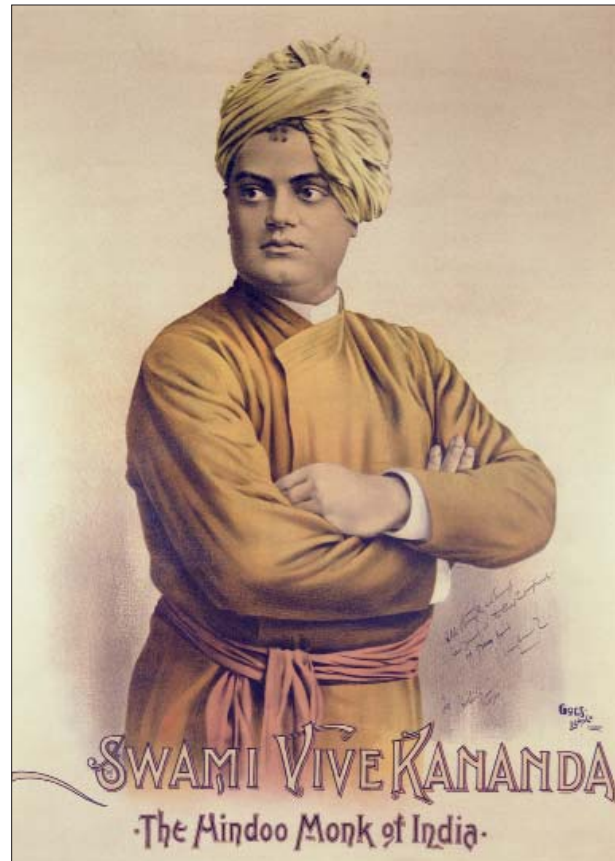
After his momentous participation in the World's Parliament of Religions in September 1893, Swami Vivekananda spent the next two years giving lectures in Chicago and the towns and cities around it. In August 1895 he visited France and England and returned to New York in December of that year. From the experiences he had gained during those two years, he decided to take some important steps. In the first place, he gave up his plan to collect funds for his project of uplifting the poor in India. Secondly, he realized that Western society was in need of the timeless spiritual wisdom of India and that his main mission in the West was to deliver that message to the people there. As he said later on, "I have a message to the West as Buddha had a message to the East."<sup>6</sup>

Swamiji also found that a more effective way to spread Vedanta was to conduct classes for common people and also to give parlor talks. The notes taken of these classes were compiled and brought out in the form of the four books on yoga (*Jnana Yoga*, *Karma Yoga*, *Bhakti Yoga*, and *Raja Yoga*), which provided a much-needed textual foundation to Swamiji's message.

In November 1894 Swami Vivekananda inaugurated the Vedanta Society of New York. Although the function of this society was mostly financial, it served as a sort of rallying point for Swamiji's work.

Another step Swamiji took at this time was to ensure the continuity of his work in the West. For this he brought two of his monastic brothers from India: Swami Saradananda and Swami Abhedananda—the former for work in America and the latter for work in England. Saradananda, however, could work in America only for two years, since he was called back to India to shoulder the responsibilities of the rejuvenated monastic order and the newly started Ramakrishna Mission. Swami Abhedananda then moved to New York.

In this way Swami Vivekananda established the Vedanta work on a firm foundation in the United States, before leaving for England in April 1896. In England he stayed for three months during which



*Poster at the Parliament of Religions, 1893*

time he gave several brilliant lectures. After short visits to Switzerland and Germany, he returned to India which he reached in January 1897. In all, his work in the West during his first visit lasted nearly three and a half years.

During his second visit to the West, he was accompanied by Swami Turiyananda. They traveled via London and reached New York in August 1899. After taking some rest and giving a few classes in New York, Swamiji went to the West Coast where he gave a series of lectures on a variety of subjects which were of a high philosophical level. But, unfortunately, many of these lectures were not recorded. At the request of his followers, Swamiji founded the Vedanta Society of San Francisco. Leaving his California work in the hands of Swami Turiyananda, Swami Vivekananda left New York for France in July 1900. He left France after three months and returned to India, visiting Istanbul, Athens, Cairo, and a few other places en route. During his second visit Swamiji stayed in the West for about one and one half years.

With Swami Vivekananda's departure from the West the teaching and preaching work that he had done there became an independent movement. In the



*Old Temple auditorium, 1983*

*Swami Vivekananda, San Francisco, 1900*







THE HINDU TEMPLE IN SAN FRANCISCO.

SWAMI (OR FATHER) TRIGUNABITA.

lumination—up to an American eagle. Each of the towers is a copy of a distinctive part of some one of the great temples of India.

The interior of the temple is disappointing from the standpoint of the spectacular. Nothing there is in keeping with the ancient temples of the East. The assembly hall is neatly furnished in American style, with plain wooden chairs and a small platform at one end. It will hold two hundred persons, and the audiences range from forty persons to its capacity. On the walls hang pictures of leaders of the sect and one picture of Jesus Christ in Yogi costume, painted by a Hindu artist.

The services which are held in this room are simple, consisting of an opening chant, a period of silent meditation and a lecture by one of the swamis, with an invitation to ask questions. Services are held daily. On Sunday three services are open to the public, and there are also classes for those who desire to become initiated into the faith.

One indication of the growing importance of the Vedanta is the recent establishment of a nunnery a short distance from the temple. About half a dozen American girls have taken up their abode there and live the life of Catholic nuns, under the supervision of the swamis. A distinctly interesting feature of the life of the cult is its yearly pilgrimage to its colony in the San Antonio Valley, about twenty-five miles from Mount Hamilton. In the midst of a large grove the society has built a few small houses, and for a month of each year the entire sect is resident there engaged in "the practice of Yogi."

It is perfectly clear that there is much about the Vedanta which the observer will never understand. The society lives a retired life, and while questions are met with sincerity and politeness little is divulged. If there are rites and ceremonies which follow those of the East they are kept carefully in the background, and to all appearances the religion and practices of the sect contain nothing of a strange or mysterious nature.

**TO CONVERT AMERICANS.**

*Such Is Aim of Vedanta Mission in San Francisco.*

The Pacific Coast is not a stranger to the Orient. San Francisco, cosmopolitan city that it is, has learned to look without curiosity upon the manners and customs of the many peoples which make up its population. A year ago, however, the dedication of the first Hindu temple in the western world caused more than a passing interest at the Golden Gate. The planting of a mission in San Francisco for the conversion of Christians to the theology and philosophy of India was a trifle bizarre to the American mind, and the mysticism always associated with the Far East and its religions served to make it doubly interesting.

To-day the temple is a firmly established institution, and its cult of Vedanta is apparently taking root. The curious visitor to one of the "lectures" at the temple will see an audience which generally fills the small assembly hall, and one undoubtedly interested in the doctrines expounded from the platform. It is a fact that the swamis, or priests, of the San Francisco temple are not there to minister to their own people. Although every one is welcome to the meetings, the audience is composed practically entirely of whites, and the active partisans and financial helpers in the movement are American citizens.

The Vedanta Society of America was founded in this country some fifteen years ago by Yogi Swami Vivekananda, and it first came to San Francisco in 1900. The founder of the order in America is now dead and his place is filled in the Gate City by two other swamis, Trigunatita and Prakashananda, quiet spoken men, with a good command of English and little to tell of their nationality except their dark skin. They rarely appear in the native robe and turban and always deliver their sermons in the conventional English garb.

The temple stands at Filbert and Webster streets, well away from the centre of the city. It is a substantial wooden structure, and its design was taken from that of the many gorgeous temples of Vedanta which are scattered throughout India. Ideas were borrowed from the great Taj Mahal, of Agra, and from the ancient holy cities of India; from the temple garden of Dakshinwar, in Calcutta, where Sri Ramkrishna, the master of the religion, once lived, and from temples of Shiva. The straight lines of an American home are embodied in the lower structure.

An open balcony, with Moorish columns, runs about the third story, and here the neophytes, or Brahmacharins, of the monastery walk and meditate upon the teachings of their master. There are ten of these students, all white men, who are living there in seclusion with the swami teachers. Their life is hardly different from that of Roman Catholic monks. They are sworn to celibacy and they have certain sacred work to do about the temple. Neither the swamis nor their students accept money, beyond that necessary for life. There are others actively interested in the work, who support it financially but do not reside in the temple itself.

Above the temple rise the towers and minarets, which are the most interesting part of the structure. All have their significance. The canopy over the mosaic and marble entrance to the auditorium represents the supposed thousand-petalled lotus of the brain. The tubular

lights on the side of the canopy are roughly symbolic of Ida and Pingala, certain deities of the faith. This temple being the first in America, the appreciation of the sect has been shown by carrying the architectural art of the temple, the Sushumna—the main channel of spiritual il-

*Left: New-York Daily Tribune, Feb. 20, 1910*

*Below: Newspaper article, 1906*

San Francisco Has First Hindu Temple in the Western World

Wedanta Mission Established Here

The Hindu Temple at Filbert and Webster streets and the Resident Priest, Swami Trigunatita.



eastern part of America, the Vedanta work was carried on by Swami Abhedananda until his return to India in 1921. In the West Coast, Swami Turiyananda, because of his deteriorating health, had to be sent back to India in 1902. In his place Swami Trigunatita came in January 1903.

Under the dynamic leadership of Swami Trigunatita the Vedanta Society of San Francisco expanded its membership and activities considerably. Being a strict disciplinarian, he introduced “Rules and Regulations” meant to govern the life of Vedanta students. A plot of land was bought and a temple with living quarters, consisting of two floors, was built in 1905; a third floor was added in 1908. The towers of the temple resembled the places of worship in different religions, and so the temple represented “Universal Religion” as propounded by Swami Vivekananda. However, it came to be known as the “First Hindu Temple of the Western World.” Trigunatita also started a monastery for men, a convent for women, and also a lay community in another locality. With the unexpected death of Swami Trigunatita on January 10, 1915, the first phase of the Vedanta movement in the West, which had been guided by some of the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, came to an end.

The second phase was guided by the disciples of the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. This phase continued more or less the traditions of the first phase, but the emphasis was shifted from Vedanta lectures to mystical and devotional life. Meditation and *japa* [repetition of the Lord’s name] came to occupy a central place in spiritual life, and the importance of ritualistic worship became recognized. Initiation through a mantra came to be stressed more than acceptance of Vedantic concepts.

The second phase continued up to the 1970s and 1980s. Then began the third phase which is now continuing. This will be dealt with later.

### ***Unique Features of the Western Vedanta Movement***

In the earlier part of this article we mentioned the “five streams” of the Ramakrishna Movement. The Vedanta Movement in the West constitutes the fifth stream. It, however, differs from the other four streams so drastically that it forms an almost independent movement. It has several unique features some of which are mentioned below.

#### **1. Based on principles rather than personality**

The three societies established by Swami Vivekananda were called “Vedanta Societies” and not “Ramakrishna Societies,” because he wanted to emphasize Vedantic

principles rather than the personality of Sri Ramakrishna. Emphasis on personality can develop into a cult, and a cult can lead to the formation of a sect which Swamiji wanted to avoid. He wanted the Western people to discover for themselves the greatness of Sri Ramakrishna by understanding properly the principles of Vedanta. Swamiji knew that the spirituality of Sri Ramakrishna would create an impact by its own power on the minds of the people. Swamiji once stated, “The real thing is the religion taught by Sri Ramakrishna, let Hindus call it Hinduism—and others call it in their own way.”

#### **2. A movement of loosely knit communities**

An overall view of the Vedanta societies in the West gives one the impression that they belong not to a congregation (*sangha*) but to a movement consisting of loosely knit communities. This was perhaps the way Swami Vivekananda wanted Vedanta to be popularized in the West—as a movement, not as an organization or congregation.

#### **3. Vedanta as a philosophy, religion, and way of life**

The word “Vedanta” is used in three senses:

(1) the Upanishads;

(2) the *Vedanta-darsana*, one of the six systems of Hindu philosophy which is based on the *Brahma-sutras*;

(3) *brahma-vidya*, the “science of consciousness,” spiritual knowledge, the eternal and universal truths taught in the Upanishads.

Swami Vivekananda used “Vedanta” mostly in the third sense, the universal truths of spiritual life contained in the Upanishads, as lived and taught by Sri Ramakrishna.

In India the distinctions between philosophy, religion, and way of life do not exist. The majority of Hindus have no idea of the Upanishads, but they gain some idea of the basic principles of spiritual life such as atman, *paramatman*, karma, dharma, bhakti, *jnana*, etc., through the two epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* in which they are adumbrated in the form of myths and stories. In India by religion is meant *sanatana-dharma*, the beginningless spiritual traditions of the subcontinent which are embedded in the matrix of the social ethos of the people. Swami Vivekananda took the Vedanta philosophy out of this matrix and gave it to Western people in a universalized form. This universal Vedanta is to be properly integrated into Western culture and social

Certified that the bearer of this, Swami Trigunatita is a monk of the Order of Sri Ram-Krishna of India, a member of the committee of Trustees of the Math and an authorised preacher of the Vedic Religion (popularly known as Hinduism) under the religious body known as the Ramakrishna Mission, having its headquarters in the Math on the Ganges at Behur in the district of Howrah, near Calcutta, the metropolis of India, — and as such is entitled to all the privileges enjoyed by other missionary bodies all over the world.



The Math, Behur,  
Howrah.

The 20<sup>th</sup> July, 1905

Brahmananda,  
President to the Committee  
of Trustees of the Math,  
Order, and Mission.

A certificate sent in 1905 by Swami Brahmananda, president of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, on behalf of Swami Trigunatita

ethos. Only then can it become a “religion.” Until that happens, Vedanta can serve as a “way of life.”

#### **4. Non-proselytizing, non-propagandist**

The Vedanta Movement in the West does not attempt to convert people from their religious traditions. It gives them freedom to study and understand the sacred books of all religions. Hindu rituals based on universal principles such as divinization of man and spiritualization of natural elements (air, fire, water, etc.) are being followed in Vedanta centers, but no attempt is being made to “Hinduize” the socio-cultural life of the members.

The Ramakrishna Movement, neither in India nor in the West, attempts to increase its membership or influence through propaganda or media blazoning. The movement spreads by the power of the truth inherent in its message, by responding to the quest of sincere seekers, and by the spiritual power radiated by Sri Ramakrishna, the avatar of the present age.

#### **5. Harmony of religions and universal religion**

It is well known that the doctrine of harmony of religions originated with Sri Ramakrishna in modern times. This doctrine of the harmony of religions is based on his own direct experience, and it was his message of the experiential harmony of religions that Swami Vivekananda carried to the West. The scriptures of world religions, however, give different versions of religions. In order to reconcile these views it is necessary to develop a universal hermeneutics. Swami Vivekananda has given certain ideas which could form the basis for such a universal hermeneutics, but his ideas have not been developed into a self-consistent logical system.

Apart from the “Harmony of Religions,” Swamiji also spoke of a “Universal Religion” on several occasions. In some place Swamiji refers to it as “one eternal religion” of which all world religions are manifestations. In another place he refers to it as the sum total of all the existing religions. At the Chicago World’s Parliament of Religions Swamiji introduced a new kind of universal religion as universal spirituality, transcending all social and cultural limitations, beyond the confines of existing religions. This idea of universal religion is a distinctive feature of the Vedanta movement, although it is not widely understood or followed.

#### **6. Respect for womanhood**

One of the important teachings of Sri Ramakrishna is to treat all women with respect as embodiments of divine motherhood. The woman as a manifestation

of the Divine Mother found its highest ideal in the Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi, who has an honored place in the Ramakrishna Movement in India and even in the Vedanta Movement in the West, which is only next to, or often equal to, that of Sri Ramakrishna. Therefore, not only is there no gender discrimination but all women are treated with respect in the Movement. This is not a chivalrous attitude, which Swami Vivekananda did not approve of, but is based on respect for the motherhood, potential or actual, in women.

#### **7. Emphasis on inner purity; no place for miracle mongering**

Among the distinctive features of the Western Vedanta Movement is the important emphasis on inner purity rather than on outer piety. The monks of the Ramakrishna Order who live in American monasteries, with a few exceptions, wear the dress of common people except on special occasions when they wear the formal ochre robes. However, with the shining purity of Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, and Holy Mother as the ideal for monks and lay devotees, there can be no compromise on inner purity and strict moral conduct.

The Movement also does not favor the seeking or display of psychic powers or miracles.

#### **8. God realization as the ultimate goal**

In modern times hundreds of spiritual organizations, led by charismatic individuals, have come up in the Western world which promise for its members freedom from stress, success in professional life, psychosomatic health, and other temporal benefits. In contrast to such institutions, the Ramakrishna-Vedanta Movement has always stood for God realization as the ultimate goal of life which is in accordance with the central teaching of Sri Ramakrishna. The same idea was expressed by Swami Vivekananda in another way as the “manifestation of the inherent divinity of the soul” and the divinization of life.

#### **9. Divinization of human relationships**

Divinization of life is not a self-centered way of life, for it means divinization of human relationships. Since the standard of living is very high in Western society and the needs of the poor are taken care of by the government and voluntary organizations to a great extent, the Western Vedanta Movement may not have given an important place to service to the poor, the old, and the sick in the scheme of its activities. The emphasis is more on spiritual, intellectual, and cultural



services. But all forms of service are undertaken in accordance with the principle, *Shiva Jnane Jiva Seva*, "Service to man is service to God," as taught by Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother, and Swami Vivekananda. Such an attitude of service naturally flows from the ideal of divinization of human relationships.

### ***Swamiji's Message of Vedanta to the West***

Nearly one hundred and twenty years have passed since Swami Vivekananda founded three Vedanta Societies and the Vedanta Movement in the West. The time has come for us to pause and think of the contributions the Vedanta Movement has made to the elevation of human life in the Western world and how and to what extent the Movement has benefited the Western people. What significance does the Vedanta Movement hold for Western people in the present-day world and for the future? This is a vast subject which needs a great deal of discussion which cannot, however, be attempted here.

At the outset we have to remember that Swamiji's going to the West was not like a Christian missionary's going to an African forest and preaching to them to stop cannibalism. The society that Swamiji had to deal with in America was a highly educated and cultured one rooted in an advanced civilization. The people there had the refinement to recognize the intellectual and spiritual qualities of a total stranger, a heathen to boot, like Swami Vivekananda, and accept and follow him.

Western people had solved many of their socioeconomic problems. Their real problems were of an existential nature. Existential problems have apparently no external causes; they arise from the peculiar nature of man's self-existence, from man's encountering himself in the depths of his soul. These problems include: meaninglessness, loneliness, ennui, angst, lovelessness, unfulfillment, and guilt conscience. These problems have only a spiritual solution.

What the people of America needed was, not an intellectual theory, but a living, awakening, enlightening, liberating message. And that was what they got when the living message of Vedanta boomed out upon them from the awakened, enlightened, liberated soul of Swami Vivekananda. "Burn all books," Swamiji once told his students at Thousand Island Park. "Go into your room and get the Upanishads out of your own Self. You are the greatest book that ever was or ever will be, the infinite repository of all that is. Until the inner teacher opens, all outside teaching is in vain."<sup>7</sup>

The basic existential problem is what Victor Frankl has termed "man's quest for meaning." Vedanta goes to the root of the problem. According to Vedanta, the root cause of meaninglessness is self-alienation, which means alienation of the lower self (mental self) from the higher Self, the atman, which is our true nature. The way to overcome self-alienation is to realize our true nature as the atman.

The atman is pure awareness or consciousness. It is an inseparable aspect of an infinitude of consciousness known as Brahman, popularly known as God. This means our true nature is divine. But, owing to ignorance, we are not aware of our true divine nature. Swami Vivekananda combined these three ideas of the atman, Brahman, and ignorance into one telling phrase, the "potential divinity of the soul."

In order to realize our true divine nature we have to first overcome ignorance. This ignorance is not intellectual ignorance but existential ignorance. The means of overcoming this existential ignorance is known as yoga. There are four yogas, each of which represents the development of one faculty: cognitive (*jnana yoga*), affective (*bhakti yoga*), conative (*karma yoga*), and volitional (*raja yoga*).

The realization of one's true divine nature as atman-Brahman is not a matter of mere intellectual conviction but a matter of direct transcendental experience, which is possible for all to attain. The principle of direct transcendental experience, the potential divinity of the soul, the harmony of religions, and the basic spiritual unity of all existence—these four concepts constitute the cardinal tenets of the Vedanta that Swami Vivekananda taught in the West.

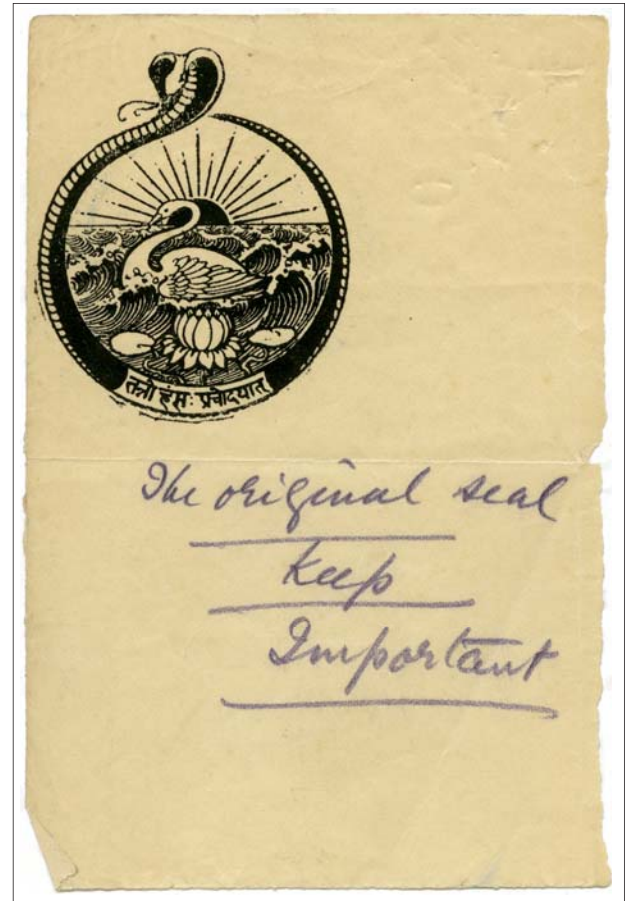
These principles in their original form remained locked in the ancient Hindu scriptures which were the exclusive possession of a class of privileged people. Swami Vivekananda freed these precious truths from the hold of orthodoxy, made them available to all, and showed that they are universally valid and underlie all world religions. Swamiji also showed that these Vedantic concepts have immense practical significance in the modern world. Universal Vedanta and practical Vedanta constitute Swamiji's message of Vedanta to the West.

### ***Practical Significance of Vedanta Concepts***

Before Swami Vivekananda came, the sole aim and purpose of Vedanta was believed to be *mukti* or final liberation. Swamiji showed that, seen in the light of Vedanta, worldly phenomena assume a new significance. Vedanta can spiritualize or divinize

individual life, family life, social life, and make human life meaningful, purposeful, and supremely fulfilling. By interpreting Vedanta in the light of modern Western thought Swamiji developed several new concepts which constitute significant contributions to world thought and to the enlightenment, progress, and welfare of humanity. Owing to limitations of space and time, here we can only just mention some of these contributions of Swamiji:

1. Swamiji gave a new concept of man as potentially divine, endowed with immense possibilities, riding the crest of psychosocial evolution, reaching out to the stars.
2. The idea of total human development by the harmonious development of all the human faculties through synthesis of the yogas.
3. A positive approach to life. Life is looked upon neither as illusory nor as full of evil and suffering but as a moral gymnasium, as a struggle for freedom, as manifestation of the inherent perfection of the soul, as undivided consecration to the service of God as humanity.
4. A new conception of morality based not on compulsion or fear (of God or karma) but on the inherent purity of the atman.
5. A true basis for love. Love is generally regarded as an emotion which finds expression as social obligation or physical attraction. In Catholic theology, the basis of true love is God's love for man (known as agape) which unifies human beings and returns to God as man's love for God, thus completing the divine pleroma. This is a noble idea indeed, but the Church restricts God's love only to baptized Christians. Swami Vivekananda showed that the true basis of love in all human beings is spiritual unity caused by the presence of God as the supreme Self in all people. It is the (usually unconscious) sense of unity of all individual selves with the supreme Self dwelling in all that is the true basis of human love. When this love is directed towards God, it becomes bhakti. Thus, love is divine and is present in all people. It is ignorance of this fact that causes hatred. This is the Vedantic concept of love as interpreted by Swami Vivekananda.
6. Swamiji gave a new view of religion: (a) which is based on the direct realization of man's true divine nature, (b) which is free from superstitions and dogmatism, (c) which fosters harmony of religions, (d) which is in harmony with science, and (e) which upholds a new concept of universal religion.
7. Swamiji laid the foundation for a global civilization, which combines the best elements of the cultures of the West and the East, on the basis of the principle



*Swami Trigunatita carefully preserved this emblem of the Ramakrishna Order.*

of “unity in diversity.” He built four kinds of bridges between the East and the West:

- (a) a bridge of philosophical concepts, which enables people to understand Indian philosophy in the light of modern Western thought;
- (b) a bridge of emotional relationships, which enables people of the East and the West to understand and interact with each other at deep personal levels;
- (c) a bridge of social institutions, such as the Vedanta Societies and the monastic order, which enable people to become members of Indian and Western societies;
- (d) a bridge of spirituality which enables Western people to receive spiritual knowledge and guidance from authentic Indian sources.

There is no doubt that future historians will regard Swami Vivekananda as one of the architects of global unity.

All the above contributions of Swami Vivekananda to the modern world have been neatly summed up by Prof. A. L. Basham, the eminent Australian historian and Indologist, who wrote in 1963 on the

occasion of the celebration of Swami Vivekananda's birth centenary: "The passing of the years and many stupendous and unexpected events which have occurred since then suggest that in centuries to come he [Swami Vivekananda] will be remembered as one of the main moulders of the modern world."

### ***The Vedanta Movement in the 21st Century***

As was stated earlier, the third phase of the development of the Western Vedanta Movement is now going on in the 21st century. What is the future of this Movement in the present century? To answer this question we have to find the answer to the question: what are the psychosocial and cultural forces operating in the present-day world?

If we go by newspaper reports, we may see in the world only the ever-increasing occurrences of crime, violence, immorality, drug abuse, corruption, financial fluctuation, and above all, the enormous increase in the utterly senseless, cruel, and tragic destruction of precious human lives by terrorism. But if we look beyond these shadows, we can see clear signs of the emergence of a better and brighter world in the form of a new global civilization.

These clear signs are in the form of sociocultural and attitudinal revolutions. Traditional religions and even science are reeling under the impact of these revolutions. But Vedanta can easily face, surmount, and supersede them. For the Ramakrishna-Vedanta Movement these modern "revolutions" are not challenges but opportunities to establish its relevance, significance, and necessity in the present-day world.

The electronic revolution led to great advancements made in information and communications technology (ICT). This has very greatly increased human connectivity. It has brought people all over the world closer together than ever before. It has also led to the "knowledge explosion," an increase in knowledge to an unimaginable extent. For the Vedanta Movement this provides an opportunity to make spiritual knowledge available to all people all over the world.

The second modern revolution is the knowledge revolution. By knowledge revolution is meant not merely the enormous increase and diversity of knowledge but a radical change in our understanding of the very *nature of knowledge*. According to the view originated by the 19th century thinker Wilhelm Dilthey, which was developed further by Wittgenstein, Paul Ricoeur, Heidegger, and Gadamer, all human knowledge is the result of interpretation.

A child learns by interpreting the knowledge that is presented to her. In this way she constructs her own world and lives in it. Everyone does the same. The role of the teacher is only to "enable" the child to interpret correctly. This view is similar to the Advaita idea of *adhyaropa* or superimposition. In his *Inspired Talks* given at Thousand Island Park, Swami Vivekananda stated: "The senses cheat you day and night. Vedanta found that out ages ago; modern science is just discovering the same fact.... Out of the reality we manufacture the different views in conformity with our mistaken perceptions of name and form.... When you cease utterly to know and see the world, then you realize the Atman. The superseding of relative knowledge is what we want."<sup>8</sup>

Another line of thinking, which originated with the Swiss thinker Saussure, developed by Michael Polanyi, Karl Popper, and the Post-structuralists, and supported by some recent thinking on quantum physics, leads to the conclusion that many of the concepts of science are reductionist in nature and that the "strict objectivity" claimed by science is actually the uniformity of "intersubjectivity." Some of the Post-modernists therefore say that many of the conceptual structures raised by Western thinkers and scientists need to be "deconstructed." The Vedantic idea of *apavada* or desuperimposition may be regarded as a higher form of "deconstruction."

The knowledge revolution is bringing into existence a new society known as the "knowledge society." In a knowledge society economy is driven not by money but by knowledge—every kind of knowledge. This is precisely the time when Vedantic concepts assume great relevance and significance. This is the time when Vedantic knowledge must spread among all people.

There has been a paradigm shift in educational thinking in recent years. The UNESCO appointed the Faure Commission in 1972 and the Delors Commission in 1993. Both commissions agree on two points: (1) lifelong education—education should continue all through one's life; (2) "learning to be" should be given as much importance as "learning to do." What does "learning to be" mean? According to the Delors Commission's report: Life offers different complex situations. To respond to these situations one must have the freedom of thought, judgment, feeling, and the freedom to take correct decisions and to act morally. In other words, "learning to be" means self-empowerment. Self-empowerment is now being regarded as the goal of education. In this context Swamiji's



concept of the “potential divinity of the soul” assumes great importance. According to Swamiji, man’s true nature is neither the body nor the mind but the atman or Self, and the atman is inherently endowed with unlimited power. This message of Swamiji should spread among Western youths.

A revolution is going on in the corporate world. The three key ideas involved in this are: globalization of economy, importance of “human capital,” and the discovery of “emotional intelligence.” Vedanta has much to contribute to this field.

Another paradigm shift in present-day social attitudes is moral relativism. With the erosion of faith in traditional religions, the days of absolute standards of morality are gone. The present trend is to separate personal conduct from the purview of religious codes. Some ways of life or codes of conduct which were once regarded as abnormal or immoral are now treated as normal and moral. In this situation Swami Vivekananda’s view that morality should be based on the intrinsic purity of the atman, or individual Self, and its oneness with the supreme Self, provides a universal concept of morality (and metaethics) which is free from fear and compulsion. The view of morality must also spread among the Western youths.

As far as the Western Vedanta Movement is concerned, the most significant sociocultural change in the present-day world is the ongoing phenomenon known as the “Global Spiritual Movement.” Unlike the spiritual movement known as “counterculture,” which originated in the 1960s and 1970s and led to the hippie movement, the present spiritual movement belongs to the mainstream of social life and appears to be the natural result of an authentic evolution of the spiritual consciousness of humanity.

In religions of Indian origin, spiritual life has always remained the core of religious life. In the Abrahamic religions spirituality forms a side-stream of religion known as “mysticism.” In recent years mysticism has been demystified and secularized to such an extent that it has become an independent view of reality and way of life known as “spirituality” or “secular spirituality.” Recent polls indicate that more than 30% of Americans consider themselves to be “spiritual” rather than “religious.” This separation of spirituality from religion has been hailed as a “spiritual revolution.”

One of the chief characteristics of this movement is that it counteracts religious dogmatism and exclusivism and makes the harmony of religions a natural phenomenon. In harmony with the teachings

of Vedanta and Swami Vivekananda, the global spiritual movement accepts the body-mind-spirit division of the human personality and makes religion a matter of personal quest rather than conformity to dogmas and social customs. This movement has given rise to hundreds of spiritual organizations and spiritual teachers and has brought out thousands of books, some of which are sold in millions. Some of the institutions are very huge with hundreds of thousands of followers. But they are centered on charismatic individuals, and, after the death of those individuals, the institutions peter out.

The Ramakrishna-Vedanta Movement has its own distinct profile and identity based on the avatarhood of Sri Ramakrishna, strict morality, centrality of monasticism, the ideal of God realization as the goal of life, harmony of religions, service as a way of life, etc. Not characterized by mushroom-like growth, this Movement is built to last many centuries; it has a sacred spiritual heritage to protect and noble traditions to follow. It cannot therefore allow itself to drift with the stream of the global spiritual movement. The Ramakrishna-Vedanta Movement has to remain firm on its own solid foundations, towering above the welter of spiritual institutions, cults, and movements in the world, as an unfailing source of inspiration, guidance, and universal love, shedding its spiritual light on humanity for centuries to come. ∞

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1. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 8 vols, Mayavati Memorial Edition (Mayavati, Himalayas: Advaita Ashrama, 1956), 6: 134.
  2. *Complete Works*, 1: 366ff.
  3. *Ibid.*, 125-136 cf. (see also)
  4. *Complete Works*, 3: 149.
  5. *Complete Works*, 4: 404.
  6. *Complete Works*, 5: 314.
  7. *Complete Works*, 7: 71.
  8. *Ibid.*, 74-75.

## *From the Archives . . .*

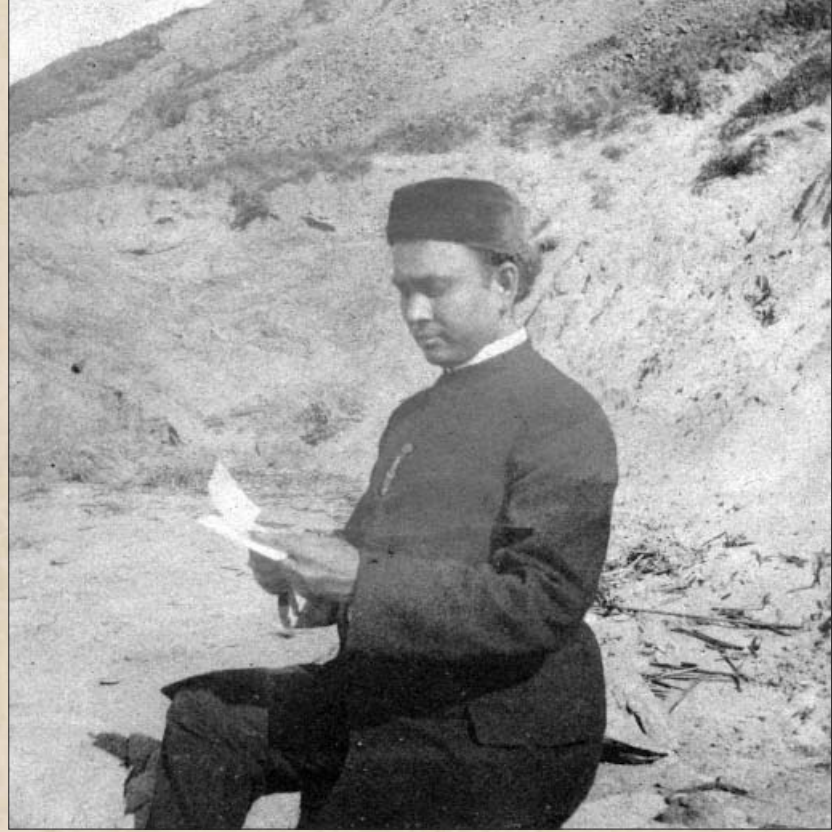
In 1900, when in San Francisco, Swami Turiyananda used to stay at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Carl F. Petersen, which was located on Buchanan Street on the corner of Pixley Alley. This location was a mere two blocks from what was to become Swami Trigunatita's future Hindu Temple. From there it was a very short walk to the sand dunes near the bay.

Prior to the 1906 earthquake, what is now the Marina District consisted of tidal pools, sand dunes, and marshland. The water's edge of San Francisco Bay was just past Chestnut Street. After the earthquake thousands of tons of rubble were dumped into the bay, and the Marina District was born with the new water's edge almost a mile north of Chestnut Street.

In her reminiscences Cara French wrote the following about this photograph of Swami Turiyananda:

"I was present when the picture of Swami Turiyananda was snapped by Dhira [Mrs. Petersen]. Not then built up in this section [of the city], Swami Turiyananda liked to go down to the water's edge. That afternoon after lunch, Dhira, Mrs. Hood and I, walked with him the short distance down Buchanan Street to the bay, where the tide water lapped the sand.

"Unconcerned about what she was doing, Swami Turiyananda sat quietly on a rock, while Dhira focused



*Swami Turiyananda, San Francisco,  
near the water's edge, 1900*

the camera and took the snapshot of him. Then, just as unconcernedly, at her request he obligingly took the camera from her hands and snapped us, grouped together on the sand in front of him. This picture, taken by him, reposes, among recollections of past decades, in an old scrapbook." ∞

*This photo was taken from the roof of the Hindu Temple, probably in 1908, and shows Webster Street intersecting Greenwich Street. Farther down Webster Street abruptly ends near what is now Chestnut Street.*





Cara French was drawn to Vedantic teachings. She and her husband, Clinton, were responsible for printing the tickets and other materials for Swami Vivekananda's San Francisco lectures. She recounted how that happened:

"So intense was my desire to attend Swami Vivekananda's lectures and classes, the way seemed to open. Mrs. Hansbrough and others in charge needed advertising matter. We had a printing shop. So through Mr. Wiseman, caretaker at the Home of Truth, a mutually favorable arrangement was made. Copy with the cuts of Swamiji reached our desk; and presently they had dodgers (handbills), quarter-cards (for window display), and tickets—and I, the coveted admissions to his course of lectures.

"I had no personal conversations with Swami Vivekananda. With abundant opportunity, it was my own fault that I did not. Others crowded about him



*Cara French*

*Right: Announcement for Swami Vivekananda's lectures in San Francisco*



*Photo taken by Swami Turiyananda  
Left to right: Bertha Petersen (Dhira), Cara French,  
and Mrs. Hood*

with questions or in greeting; I slipped out quietly, where I was obliged to pass around him to reach the stairway in leaving."

However, Mrs. French did have the great fortune of associating with several other direct disciples, including Swamis Turiyananda, Trigunatita, and Abhedananda. She became a disciple of Swami Trigunatita and eventually made a pilgrimage to India. We are grateful to Swami Ashokananda for encouraging her to write her reminiscences about the swamis. ~

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*Swami Turiyananda, Shanti Ashrama, 1900*

# Swami Turiyananda in the West

*Swami Chetanananda*

**W**HEN GOD INCARNATES ON THIS EARTH AS A HUMAN BEING, he is called an avatar, which literally means “one who descends.” The avatar comes to restore religion when it has been degraded. Ramakrishna said that just as the same moon rises again and again, the same God appears in different places at different times, according to the need of the age. The avatar does not come alone; he is accompanied by companions who help to fulfill his mission. These companions are not ordinary mortals: some of them are *ishwarakotis* (godlike souls) and some are *nitya-siddhas* (ever-free souls). They are born to serve humanity and not for any personal motive.

God’s power works through the avatar. He transmits that power to his disciples so they can carry out his mission. Ramakrishna empowered each of his disciples according to each one’s capacity. Ramakrishna’s mission is as deep as the ocean and as vast as the sky. His main teachings were: The goal of human life is to realize God; serve human beings as God; be unattached and do your duty; be pure and love all; practice yoga and respect others’ faiths. Ramakrishna said: “When flowers bloom, bees come of their own accord. They do not need to be invited. It is an inexplicable spiritual law that if love and devotion for God are truly manifest within you, those who have dedicated their lives to searching for God and experiencing the Truth, or have resolved to do so, will definitely come to you.”<sup>1</sup>

The great monk Swami Turiyananda was austere by nature. He wanted nothing more than to pass his days practicing spiritual disciplines. In 1897-98 Vivekananda was suffering from various physical problems, so his physicians advised him to return to the West to recuperate. He wanted Turiyananda to accompany him, but the latter was reluctant. Swamiji insisted: “Brother, can’t you see I have been laying down my life, inch by inch, in fulfilling the

mission of the Master, till I am on the verge of death? Can you merely stand looking on and not come to my help by relieving me of a part of my great burden?”<sup>2</sup> Turiyananda could not refuse his leader’s entreaties.

In June 1899 Turiyananda left for England and America with Vivekananda and his Irish disciple, Sister Nivedita. On the boat to England, Turiyananda asked Nivedita to teach him Western customs. She explained with an illustration. Picking up a knife, she held the sharp edge in her hand and gave the handle to Turiyananda, saying, “Swami, whenever you give something to someone, always take the inconvenient and unpleasant side yourself, and give the convenient and pleasant side to the other.”<sup>3</sup>

After spending a short time in England, Vivekananda and Turiyananda left for America on August 16, 1899. Soon after their arrival in New York, they went to Ridgely Manor, the Leggett family’s country home, where they rested for a few weeks. One day Mrs. Leggett visited Swamiji’s cottage and found Turiyananda’s mattress and bedding on the floor. “What is the matter, swami?” she exclaimed. “Is something wrong with the bed?”

“No, no,” he assured her; “the bed is fine. But, you see, I cannot bring myself to sleep on the same level with Swamiji—so I have put the mattress on the floor.”<sup>4</sup> This shows how much love and reverence Turiyananda had for Swamiji.

Seeing that Turiyananda was hesitant to give lectures and classes, Swamiji said to him: “Don’t be frightened when I say you have to conduct classes and lectures. Whatever you say will do good to the people. Show them what spirituality is.”<sup>5</sup>



*Ridgely Manor, New York, September 1899*

*Standing, left to right: Swamis Turiyananda and Abhedananda*

*Sitting, left to right: Swami Vivekananda, Alberta Sturges, Betty Leggett, hidden, Josephine MacLeod, and a friend of Alberta’s*

Turiyananda moved to Mrs. Wheeler’s residence at Montclair in New Jersey, forty miles from New York City, where the Vedanta Society was led by Abhedananda. Turiyananda carried on the Vedanta work in the New York area for a year; during that time Vivekananda preached in California. Turiyananda startled the sophisticated Western audience with the bold, uncompromising message of Vedanta: “Brahman alone is real; everything else is unreal. The human soul is that Brahman. We are bound by the delusion of ignorance. Tear away the delusion and be free. All power is within you, for you are the Atman. Assert your divine nature.”

Students of the New York Vedanta Society found Turiyananda to be an inexhaustible mine of spiritual wisdom. While walking, eating, or sitting, his spiritual conversation flowed like a perennial spring. Once he was asked: “Swami, how is it possible for you to always speak of holy subjects? Don’t you ever get exhausted?”

Turiyananda replied: “You see, I have lived this life from my youth; it has become a part and parcel of me. And the Divine Mother keeps the supply filled up. Her store can never be exhausted. Whatever goes out, She at once fills up again.”<sup>6</sup>

Some of the Vedanta students considered the big city with all its comforts to be unsuitable for spiritual practice, and they wanted a quiet spot where they might devote themselves to a life of renunciation. One of the students, Minnie C. Boock, offered 160 acres in Northern California for a retreat. When Vivekananda arrived in New York in June 1900, he accepted her offer and asked Turiyananda to take up the project, but he did not want to assume this responsibility. Swamiji said, “It is the will of the Mother that you should take charge of the work there.”<sup>7</sup> When Turiyananda agreed to the proposal, Swamiji said: “Don’t trouble yourself about lecturing. You just live the life. Be an example to them. Let them see how men of renunciation live.”<sup>8</sup>

On July 4, 1900, Turiyananda left New York by train, accompanied by Swamiji and Miss Boock. This was the last time the two brother disciples would be together. Just before Swamiji disembarked at Detroit, Turiyananda

asked for advice regarding his future work. Swamiji told him: “Go and establish the ashrama in California. Hoist the flag of Vedanta there. From this moment destroy even the memory of India. Above all, live the life, and Mother will do the rest.”<sup>9</sup> Turiyananda arrived in Los Angeles on July 8, 1900. He became the guest of Miss Boock’s sister in Alhambra and later went to the Mead sisters’ house in Pasadena. After a couple of weeks, he went to San Francisco, where he was cordially received by members of the Vedanta Society. They told him that Vivekananda had said, “I will send you a real Hindu monk, who lives what I talk about.” Turiyananda responded: “I



am a rowboat: I can take two or three to the other side of this ocean of the world. But Swamiji is an Atlantic liner: he can take thousands.”<sup>10</sup> While he was in San Francisco, he gave lectures and conducted morning meditation.

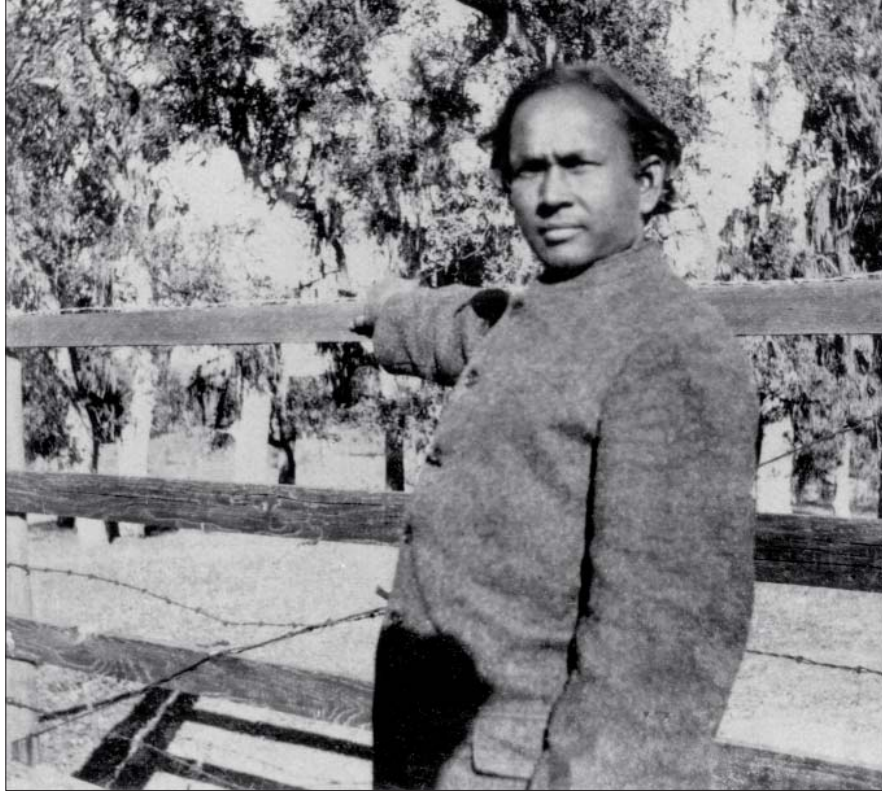
On August 2 he left for the new retreat with a dozen enthusiastic men and women. They traveled by train to San Jose, by four-horse stagecoach to Mount Hamilton, and then by private horse carriage some twenty-two miles over narrow mountain roads to the San Antonio Valley. Ashrama life began under primitive conditions: There was no running water, no electricity, and no bathroom facilities. There were snakes, scorpions, and tarantulas all around. They had to bring water from a distance of six miles; they lived on vegetarian food. There was no market nearby. Turiyananda found himself in a wilderness, with all these people depending on him. He was disheartened.

He complained to the Divine Mother: “Mother, what have You done? What do You mean by this? These people will die. No shelter, no water—what shall they do?” Agnes Stanley immediately said to him: “Swami, why are you dejected? Have you lost faith in Her? You have less faith than even Baby [Ida Ansell].” Having said this, she emptied her purse in his lap.

Turiyananda now caught a glimpse of the enterprising American mind. These students came from old pioneer stock and were not about to be cowed by hardships. Turiyananda was delighted to hear Mrs. Stanley’s bold words. He said to her: “You are right. Mother will protect us. How great is your faith! Your name henceforth will be Shradha [one who has firm faith in God].”<sup>11</sup>

The ordeals and hardships continued in that remote, rugged mountain area. The students, however, had a wonderful teacher of Vedanta, who had the power to raise their minds to a higher realm of spirituality where they could lose body-consciousness. In the beginning they had only one small cabin and a shed, and their first meal was boiled rice and brown sugar. After supper they gathered around a campfire, and the swami chanted: “We meditate on the adorable and effulgent light of Brahman who has produced this universe. May He enlighten our understanding.”

Turiyananda named the retreat “Shanti Ashrama,” the abode of peace. Everyone worked hard to create a spiritual atmosphere there. First, they built the



*Swami Turiyananda at Shanti Ashrama*

meditation cabin; then they gradually added more cabins for the Ashrama members. Although there was an informal daily routine in the Ashrama, one day someone suggested that formal rules be set. Turiyananda replied: “Why do you want rules? Is not everything going on nicely and orderly without formal rules? Don’t you see how punctual everyone is—how regular we all are? No one is ever absent from the classes or meditations. Mother has made Her own rules. Let us be satisfied with that. Why should we make rules of our own? Let there be freedom, but no license. That is Mother’s way of ruling. We have no organization, but see how organized we are. This kind of organization is lasting, but all other kinds of organization break up in time. This kind of organization makes one free; all other kinds are binding. This is the highest organization; it is based on spiritual laws.”<sup>12</sup>

In Shanti Ashrama, Turiyananda’s main focus was to build his students’ characters according to the Vedantic way. He told them: “Be yourself and be strong. Realization is only for the strong, the pure, and the upright. Remember that you are the Atman. Swamiji has taught you that every soul is potentially divine. Realize your divinity, then you will realize that all souls are divine. Remove the cloud of ignorance, and the Atman will reveal itself in your heart.”

When asked how this can be realized, he answered: “Through meditation. Meditation is the key that

opens the door to Truth. Meditate till light flashes into your mind and the Atman stands self-revealed.”<sup>13</sup>

After teaching Vedanta for three years in the West, Turiyananda’s health broke down due to excessive austerity. He decided to return to India. In addition, Swamiji wanted to see him. Turiyananda handed over responsibility for Shanti Ashrama to Brahmachari Gurudas (later Swami Atulananda) and instructed him: “Control your passions, anger, jealousy, pride. And never speak ill of others behind their backs. Let everything be open and free. When anything has to be done, always be the first to do it. Others will

servant of all. Only he who knows how to serve is fit to rule. But you have studied many years; teach what you know. As you give out, so you will receive.”

“Swami,” Gurudas ventured, “when you are gone we will be like sheep without a shepherd.” “But I will be with you in spirit,” Turiyananda said solemnly.<sup>14</sup>

Swami Turiyananda lived in the West from July 1899 to June 1902. On June 6, 1902, Turiyananda left San Francisco by boat. When he arrived in Rangoon, he read in the newspaper that Swamiji had passed away on July 4. Broken-hearted, he arrived at Belur Math on July 14, 1902. ∞



*Mail day was special since the post office was five miles away.*

follow. But unless you do it first, no one will. You know how I have done all kinds of physical work here, only for that reason.”

Gurudas asked, “But what about the classes, swami? What shall I teach? I am a student myself.”

Turiyananda replied, “Don’t you know yet, my boy, that it is life that counts? Life creates life. Serve! Serve! Serve! That is the great teaching. Be humble. Be the

1. Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*, trans. Swami Chetanananda (Vedanta Society: St. Louis, 2003), 547.
2. Swami Ritajananda, *Swami Turiyananda* (Ramakrishna Math: Madras, 1973), 46-47.
3. *Ibid.*, 47.
4. Marie Louis Burke, *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries* (Advaita Ashrama: Calcutta, 1987), 5:112.
5. Ritajananda, *Swami Turiyananda*, 53.
6. *Ibid.*, 52.
7. *Ibid.*, 57.
8. *Ibid.*, 55.
9. *Ibid.*, 58.
10. Ida Ansell, “Memories of Swami Turiyananda,” *Vedanta and the West*, May 1952: 135.
11. Ritajananda, *Swami Turiyananda*, 61-62.
12. Swami Atulananda, *With the Swamis in America and India*, ed. Pravrajika Brahma-prana (Advaita Ashrama: Calcutta, 1988), 69.
13. *Ibid.*, 76.
14. “Talks with Swami Turiyananda at Benares,” *Prabuddha Bharata*, January 1925: 3-4.

# Last Days with Swami Turiyananda in Shanti Ashrama

*Swami Atulananda*

Swami Turiyananda had been at Shanti Ashrama about a year and a half. He took his work seriously, and the mental strain of the constant teaching and training of many disciples of different temperaments and strong preconceived ideas had been great. His nervous system became affected, and his health broke down. It became evident that he needed a change and rest.

On more than one occasion the swami had expressed his ardent desire to see his beloved brother disciple Swami Vivekananda again. It was therefore decided to offer him a first-class passage to India, in the hope that the long sea voyage and his meeting with Swamiji would have a beneficial effect on his health, and that he would come back to us with renewed zeal and strength. The offer was accepted, and the date of sailing fixed.

During the remaining days he suffered repeatedly from nervous depression. But at intervals he became himself again, full of power and spiritual zeal, when he would talk constantly of the Divine Mother, of Sri Ramakrishna, and of Swamiji. Physical weakness never in the least clouded his mind. "It is only nerves," he said to me repeatedly, "my mind is as clear and strong as ever. I need rest now and, after seeing Swamiji, I will come back."

One evening, just after dusk, when I entered the little cabin we shared together, the swami told me of a vision he had had. The Divine Mother had come to him and had asked him to remain in the Ashrama. But he had refused. Then She told him that, if he stayed in the Ashrama, the work would grow rapidly, and many beautiful buildings would be erected. Still he had refused. At last She showed him the place full of disciples. "Let me go to Swamiji first," he had said. And the Mother, with grave countenance, vanished from his sight.

The vision had left him unhappy and disturbed in mind. "I have done wrong," he said with a sigh, "but it cannot be helped now." A few days later he started for San Francisco.

On the last morning, while I was busily engaged arranging for his departure, the swami sent for me. As I entered the cabin, I found him seated on the

floor as usual. He looked serene. Motioning me to be seated opposite him, he said in a very sweet voice, "Gurudas, I have made this Ashrama for you; live here happily." After a few moments of thoughtful silence, he added, "and for those who want to live here as Mother's children, I leave you in full charge. I have told you everything. I have kept nothing hidden from you. I have told you the most secret thoughts of my mind. You have seen how I have lived here. Now try to do the same."

"But that is impossible, Swami," I interposed.



*Gurudas (Swami Atulananda) at the Meditation Cabin*

Looking at me very tenderly, the swami said, "Depend on Mother for everything. Trust in Her and She will guide you. She will not let you go astray. I am sure of that. One thing remember: never boss any one. Look upon all alike, treat all alike. No favorites. Hear all, and be just."

"Swami, I will try. But it is a great responsibility," I said. "Why should you feel responsibility?" the swami questioned. "Mother alone is responsible. You have devoted your life to Her service. What have you to fear? Only be sincere, and remember Her always." ∞

*- Selection from: Swami Atulananda, "Last Days with Swami Turiyananda in the Shanti Ashrama, U.S.A.," Prabuddha Bharata, January 1925: 1-3. (Reprinted with permission.)*



## Swami Atulananda and Swami Yogeshananda

Swami Atulananda and Swami Yogeshananda were two early Western monks of the Ramakrishna Order who were connected for a significant amount of time with the San Francisco Vedanta Society.

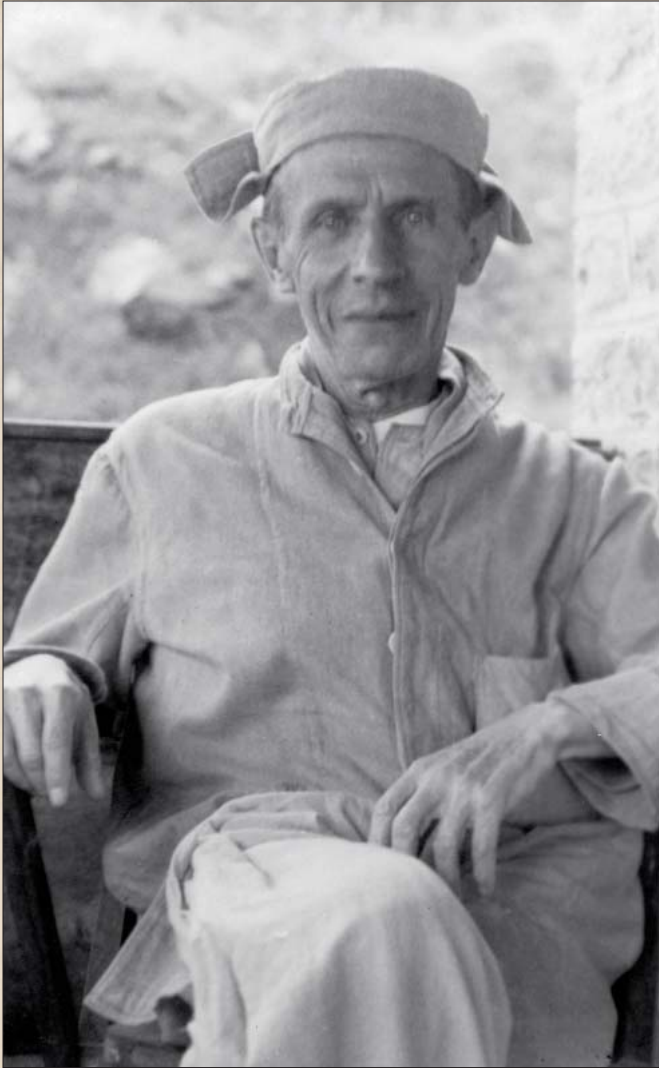
Gurudas (Cornelis Heijblom), later Swami Atulananda, met Swami Vivekananda in New York and was given *brahmacharya* vows by Swami Abhedananda. The acquisition of this new Western novice prompted Swamiji to accept a gift of land in California which later became known as Shanti



*Gurudas standing outside the Hindu Temple, circa 1922*

Ashrama. Under the influence and guidance of Swami Turiyananda, Gurudas led an intense monastic life there. After Swami Turiyananda returned to India, Gurudas was placed in charge of Shanti Ashrama and continued to live there for several years, interrupted by two trips to India. He also spent time at the Hindu Temple, primarily in the early 1920s, prior to his final departure for India with Swami Prakashananda in 1922. He received his vows of *sannyasa* in 1923 and lived out his days in India until his passing away in 1966.

*Left: Prashanta at Shanti Ashrama, circa 1925*



*Swami Atulananda (Gurudas) in India, 1930s*

Prashanta (Henry Pelikan), later Swami Yogeshananda, (not to be confused with the Swami Yogeshananda whose reminiscences appear in this volume), was inspired to lead a monastic life by Swami Prakashananda. He stayed at Shanti Ashrama for several years and also spent some time in the monastery at the Hindu Temple. He went to India in 1927, where he received the vows of *brahmacharya* and later *sannyasa*. He spent several months with Swami Akhandananda in Sargachi. Unfortunately, while practicing austerities he contracted typhoid fever and passed away in 1930 in Uttarkashi. ☪



*Right: Swami Yogeshananda (Prashanta) in India, circa 1928*





*Swami Trigunatitananda, San Francisco, 1903*



# Swami Trigunatitananda in San Francisco

*Swami Chetanananda*

**B**Y 1902 SWAMI TURIYANANDA HAD WORKED STRENUOUSLY FOR THREE YEARS IN AMERICA. When his health broke down, he decided to return to India. Dr. M. H. Logan, the president of the Vedanta Society of San Francisco, wrote to Vivekananda and asked him to send another swami. Swamiji asked Trigunatita to replace Turiyananda. Trigunatita handed over charge of the *Udbodhan* to Swami Shuddhananda and began to make the necessary arrangements for his departure. Meanwhile, Vivekananda passed away on July 4, 1902. Despite this tragedy, Trigunatita sailed for the United States in the early part of November via Colombo and Japan and arrived in San Francisco on January 2, 1903. Believing, in his simplicity, that there might not be any vegetables in America, he went fully prepared to live on bread and water. He was determined to remain a vegetarian at all costs. He found afterwards, of course, that vegetables and cereals of all kinds were available in America in great abundance.

Trigunatita was well received by Dr. Logan, Mr. and Mrs. C. F. Petersen, and other members of the Society. He began lecturing at the Petersens' house, but it could not accommodate the large crowds. So, in March 1903, the Society rented a commodious house at 40 Steiner Street, where Trigunatita and the Petersen family could live and he could conduct the services. Trigunatita gave classes on the Gita on Monday evenings and on the Upanishads on Thursday evenings; he lectured in the morning and evening on Sundays. Music, of course, was part of every service.

In 1904 some students invited Trigunatita to start a Vedanta center in Los Angeles, nearly 500 miles south of San Francisco. The swami began the work there, but later found it difficult to manage both places; so he asked for an assistant from India. The authorities of Belur Math sent Swami Satchidananda, who received a hearty welcome in San Francisco and then, under Trigunatita's guidance, started the work in Los Angeles. But after only a year, Satchidananda was compelled to return to India because of poor health.<sup>1</sup>

In the same year, the work in San Francisco had grown to such proportions that Trigunatita felt the Society should have a suitable building of its own. With Trigunatita, to think was to act, and a committee was at once appointed to look for a suitable site. Soon a meeting of all the members was called, the funds were quickly raised, and a plot of land was purchased on the corner of Webster and Filbert Streets. On August 25, 1905, with appropriate ceremonies, the cornerstone was laid. Regarding the future of the temple, Trigunatita said, "I shall not live to enjoy; others will come later who will enjoy"; and, referring to his own participation, he boldly proclaimed: "Believe me, if there is the least tinge of selfishness in building this temple, it will fall; but if it is the Master's work, it will stand."<sup>2</sup> It is amazing that the terrible earthquake and fire of 1906, which destroyed much of San Francisco, did no damage to the temple. This was the first Hindu temple in the Western world. It was dedicated on January 7, 1906, and the first services were held there on Sunday, January 15, 1906.

Trigunatita was ingenious. He planned the temple himself, combining ideas from a Hindu temple, a Christian church, a Muslim mosque, and an American residence. It was designed by the architect Joseph A. Leonard, in a style generally called Pointed Architecture of Grecian and Roman origin. All the moldings, ornaments, and the arches of the veranda are of Moorish style. The points of the domes, towers, and pinnacles, directed upwards to the sky, have a religious meaning—moving towards God, or rising higher and higher until we reach the very highest.<sup>3</sup>

Shortly after the dedication of the temple, Trigunatita was inspired to start a monastery for young American students. He recruited ten and put them on the third floor and in the tower rooms on the roof. The young men were all engaged in various occupations and continued to earn their own living, contributing their share of the expenses of the monastery, until such time as each might be ready, in the swami's judgment, to take first monastic vows.

These young men were subjected to strict discipline. They had to rise early in the morning, meditate regularly, and do household duties such as cleaning, sweeping, and gardening. Trigunatita taught them that all works connected with the temple were holy and, if performed in the right spirit, would purify their minds

and advance their meditation. He himself joined the students in doing the household work; over and above that, he cooked all the meals so that the young men might eat pure, *sattvic* food, which is essential for spiritual growth. The meals began with a chant and ended with a few minutes of silent meditation. Each student in turn read from one of the scriptures of the world. This was followed by questions, with answers by the swami. Every meal indeed became a sacrament.

Trigunatita was fond of teaching by means of forceful maxims. When someone at the table recited the great watchword of the American Republic, "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty," he made him repeat it. Some of the mottoes hanging in every room of the monastery were: "Live like a hermit, but work like a horse"; "Do it now"; "Watch and pray"; "Do or die—but you will not die."<sup>4</sup> The swami believed in singing as a devotional exercise, and led his young male disciples in hymns and chants up on the roof of the temple, or down by the harbor in the early morning, astonishing the fishermen and sailors.

Trigunatita was an uncompromising ascetic. He taught his students through personal example more than through words. He was a consistent example of regularity and punctuality. He would go to bed last and rise before any of the other members of

### THE INTERIOR OF THE HINDU MONASTERY, HINDU TEMPLE, SAN FRANCISCO,

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the monastery. His office was his bedroom, and he had no bed: He would spread one blanket on the carpet, put another blanket over himself, and use the upper part of his right arm as his pillow.<sup>5</sup> The swami strongly believed that through discipline one can form a strong character, which is absolutely essential as a foundation for spiritual life. To the earnest disciple he would say: "I don't mind if I break every bone in your body if I can drag you up to the shores of the ocean of Immortality and throw you in. Then my work will be finished."<sup>6</sup>

Swami Atulananda left these reminiscences:

Swami Trigunatita was a man of austere type. When he first came to San Francisco, he fasted once for three days—maybe to accumulate power to carry on the work. He was a strict disciplinarian. Once on Sri Ramakrishna's birthday he spent fifteen hours in worship from 6:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. and delivered three lectures, all without leaving the platform.... He was a very jolly type of man and very active too. He encouraged others also to follow a tight routine—meditation, study, work, and so on. At lectures there would be no chairs on the platform. He had a desk only and, when speaking, he used to lean on it.

He ran a bookstall and he himself kept the accounts. One day he found the account five dollars short. He was worried, and for days together he worked, trying to make the account balance. Then at long last he wrote at the bottom of the page: "Five dollars short. However, let it go." In that way he tallied the account. He wouldn't take anybody's advice. Once he had to purchase a suit. He went to the market and the trade people sold him a cheap suit. When he came home Mrs. Petersen said, "Oh, swami, what have you done? It is the kind of thing that racetrack people wear. You cannot go out in this dress." Then a compromise was worked out in which the swami was permitted to wear the suit only at home. Another day he purchased a dark red collar, put it on, and came home all the way, feeling quite proud of it. Seeing him with that collar, Mrs. Petersen exclaimed, "Oh, what have you done? These collars are used by gamblers. You cannot use it. I am going to hide it."<sup>7</sup>

Trigunatita had an undaunted personality. He boldly faced all the challenges of his life. In the anteroom next to the monastery kitchen there were

several strings stretched across one end from wall to wall. Dangling from these were a number of lifelike artificial spiders of different sizes and kinds. The young members were curious about it. First they thought they were there simply as decoration, but later Trigunatita revealed the mystery behind the spiders. Once while bathing in the Ganges he had been trapped by a swarm of water spiders. He had received such a shock that to overcome that phobia, or rather to make sure that it no longer existed, he hung up the artificial spiders where he could see them a number of times each day.<sup>8</sup>

Trigunatita also started a convent as a separate community at the earnest entreaties of some women disciples who wanted to live a life of discipline under his guidance. They did their cooking and household work in the spirit of worship and service to humanity and faithfully adhered to the established rules. These women were all self-supporting, working in the daytime outside and then doing their duties in the convent in the morning and evening. In spite of their hard work, they were happy as they felt they were on the path that would lead them to God-realization. Trigunatita sensed that the convent might be the seed of spiritual awakening among American women, but for a number of reasons it came to an end in 1912.<sup>9</sup>

The life of Trigunatita was one long sacrifice, and those who were privileged to be in his presence found that their doubts and troubles melted away like snow before the sun. He veritably radiated holiness, for he always lived in the consciousness of the Divine Mother. However, he was overworked and his health was failing. So, in April 1906, Swami Prakashananda was sent to assist him. The new swami took over the cooking and other monastery responsibilities, and he won the hearts of the members of the Society with his gentle and loving disposition. Nevertheless, the membership of the monastery began to dwindle for various reasons from 1913 on until finally, after the death of Swami Trigunatita, it was closed in 1915.

One of the members of the monastery, a Hungarian named Joseph Horvath, was a printer; this gave Trigunatita the idea of starting a printing press in the temple basement. A complete printing outfit was secured, and Mr. Horvath devoted all his time to the swami's publication projects.

In April 1909 Trigunatita started a monthly magazine called *Voice of Freedom*. This magazine served as a channel through which the message of Vedanta reached





*Swami Trigunatita and his students at Shanti Ashrama*

many souls who could not attend the swami's lectures. Within three years the magazine was an established success with a growing list of interested friends and subscribers. The swami wanted to blend the thoughts and culture of the East and the West through this magazine. It was mentioned in the prospectus of the first issue (April 1909): "This periodical is called *Voice of Freedom* because, when Freedom is realized, its voice and power reign supreme everywhere, whether in heaven or on earth, or beyond, in every age, whether within the span of history, or before or after. The idea of freedom is inborn in man."

By a special arrangement with M., Trigunatita published an American edition of his *Gospel* in 1912, which was circulated widely. In 1914 Mr. Horvath left for Hungary to visit his parents and no one could be found with the necessary experience to take his place. However, Trigunatita managed to print the *Voice of Freedom* with the help of another member of the Society. The *Voice of Freedom* continued until March 1916, one year after Trigunatita's death.

While Vivekananda was in America from 1899 to 1900, one of his disciples, Minnie C. Boock, offered, as a gift for the work, a tract of land, 160 acres in the San Antonio Valley. This remote property is eighteen miles southeast of Mount Hamilton, California, the site of the world-famous Lick Observatory. Swamiji accepted the offer and sent Turiyananda to build a retreat for the American Vedanta students. Turiyananda began the work with the help of a dozen students and named the retreat Shanti Ashrama. However, he had to return to India in 1902 and Gurudas (later Swami Atulananda) was temporarily placed in charge of the ashrama. When Trigunatita came to San Francisco, he took charge of Shanti Ashrama, but Gurudas continued to manage it.

Atulananda reminisced: "I lived with Swami Trigunatita at Shanti Ashrama. For one month every year he used to come there with his students, thirty or forty in number, men and women both. He separated men from the women. Of course, even before, men and women used to live in separate tents. There were separate bathrooms for the two

sexes. But the swami effected separate dining tables also. We used to make fun of it.”<sup>10</sup>

Trigunatita planned a rigorous schedule for the retreat. From 3:45 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. the students were busy with chanting, meditation, and scripture classes, along with chopping wood, carrying water, cooking, cleaning, and maintenance. They were also placed on a strict vegetarian diet. The swami provided plenty of relaxation in between periods of work. Wednesday and Saturday afternoons were declared holidays, and a stream of genuine fun and merriment relieved the students from any monotony or strain that might have resulted from the rigorous routine. At night Trigunatita would tell stories about Sri Ramakrishna, as well as stories about his own life, ranging from his adventures in eating, traveling, and seeing ghosts, to visions of God. On the full-moon night the swami would hold a *dhuni* fire ceremony (a ritual where an aspirant pours oblations into the fire, signifying the destruction of his ego and worldly desires) on a hill under the open sky, and the students would sit around the fire and spend the whole night in spiritual practices.<sup>11</sup>

Those who had the privilege of attending the classes at Shanti Ashrama could hardly forget their unique experiences. They were surcharged with the spirituality of Trigunatita. On the top of the meditation cabin was a wooden flag bearing the inscription “Om Ramakrishna,” carved in relief by Trigunatita himself. The same inscription appeared on a flagpole on Dhuni Hill and on the entrance gate to Shanti Ashrama. The swami, in spite of his rheumatism and other physical troubles, kept the spirit of Vedanta and Sri Ramakrishna alive in the minds of his American students.

A part from Shanti Ashrama, Trigunatita had a master plan for a Vedanta colony with a temple, library, orphanage, hospital, and an area where members could retire and live comfortably in their old age. For this purpose, he bought 200 acres of fertile land on the outskirts of Concord, one and a half hour’s drive from San Francisco. He kept twenty-five acres for the Society, and the rest was distributed among the members who wished to settle in the colony. Some members built houses, sunk wells, planted orchards, and started crops. In addition to his regular duties in San Francisco, the swami went to the colony once every week to supervise its progress and inspire its members. Improvements continued until January

1914, but unfortunately after his passing away the colony project came to an end.<sup>12</sup>

In 1915 the Panama-Pacific International Exposition was held in the Marina District of San Francisco, just inside the Golden Gate and only three blocks from the temple. In preparation for the great event, Trigunatita had purchased the national flags of various countries for display, and had also installed a new system of electric lights that could be seen from the Exposition grounds and made the Hindu Temple look like a fairyland at night. Trigunatita also got permission from the city of San Francisco to build a garden around the temple. An ornamental lattice iron fence atop the wall protected the plants and flowers from passersby. Statues and other decorative features made the garden one of the attractions of the neighborhood and even today the Hindu Temple is a landmark in San Francisco. Unfortunately, the swami did not live to see the opening of the Exposition.<sup>13</sup>

Trigunatita was not a cloistered monk. He personally knew many distinguished people of San Francisco



*Swami Trigunatita lectured in formal Western attire.*



and neighboring cities. They came to know him either through the business of the Society or through his lectures and classes. He was a likable person and made friends with neighbors as well as with the mayor of the city. With his students he acted like an affectionate mother as well as a chastising father. He expected the best from them and trained them to give public speeches. Trigunatita gave the following instructions to help his students prepare for a lecture:

1. The lesson or lecture is to be taken sincerely and faithfully as a spiritual service and religious practice for one's own spiritual advancement.
2. Sit in a sincere and prayerful mood.
3. Make the mind blank. Drive off all the desires and thoughts of the secular side of work.
4. Meditate on God.
5. Then meditate on the subject intensely.
6. Then offer the lesson or lecture as a sacred sacrifice to God.
7. Bow down in the spirit of thankfulness to God and ask for his blessing.
8. Finally, when you come to the platform to speak, remember that you are talking to God. God is the only audience.<sup>14</sup>

Trigunatita was a man of truth. Once he was invited to dinner by a noted clergyman. This man was a good friend and an admirer of the swami. After dinner the clergyman asked the swami, "Is the food all right?" The swami was reluctant to say anything. When the host insisted on knowing Trigunatita's opinion, he replied: "It is hard for me to tell you the harsh truth. Truly, I don't relish this kind of food." The clergyman was a little shocked, but he appreciated Trigunatita's frankness and love for truth. He said to the swami: "I know you will not deviate from truth, even for the sake of social etiquette or friendship. But let me tell you, if you are invited by somebody in the future, please don't say such a harsh truth; otherwise, they will criticize you." Rather than be put in that position again, from that time on the swami never accepted another dinner invitation.<sup>15</sup>

For the last five years of his life, Trigunatita continuously suffered from rheumatism and Bright's disease. However, he continued to follow his routine punctually, did not deviate from his strict diet, and would not reduce his workload. As a result, his health broke down even further. Once he told a disciple: "A number of times during moments of excruciating pain, I would think, 'Let the body go,



*Swami Trigunatita, circa 1914*

and end it all.' But I could not do it—the thought would come that the Mother's work must go on, and I set my will to force the body to carry on. This body has become a mere shell and may go to pieces at any time. For three years now I have held the body together by sheer force of will."<sup>16</sup>

In December 1914 Trigunatita asked one of his disciples to comment on his lectures. When the disciple pointed out to him that his voice quivered during the lecture, he replied, "I have tried my utmost to control it, but, as I go onto the platform, my Divine Mother appears to me and fills me full of such feelings of love that it is sometimes difficult for me to articulate."<sup>17</sup>

Trigunatita must have had a premonition of his end. On December 24, 1914, he said to a young disciple: "I want you to promise me that if anything should happen to me in the near future you will see to it that after my death my brain is removed and presented to a scientific institution to be preserved in alcohol for analysis."<sup>18</sup> It was his belief that the brain of a yogi would be found to differ in size and structure from that of a worldly person, and that when this was demonstrated the scientific world would be compelled to acknowledge it. Thus he planned that even in death his body might serve the truth.



On Friday, December 25, 1914, Trigunatita conducted the all-day Christmas service from 6:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. This comprised three lectures (at 11:00 a.m., 3:00 p.m., and 6:00 p.m.), chanting and singing, reading and exposition of the scriptures. It was a divine experience for those privileged to be present on that day when the advent of Jesus Christ, an incarnation of God, was celebrated by a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, another incarnation of God. The floral decorations, the illumination of Christ's picture, the fragrance of incense, the devotional songs and instrumental music, and the holy presence of the swami created an uplifting atmosphere. As on other occasions, the swami did not leave the platform even for a moment during the whole day. How he mastered his physical ailments and made his pain-racked body endure the fifteen hours, only he could say.<sup>19</sup>

Two days later, on Sunday afternoon, December 27, 1914, Trigunatita was lecturing from the podium of the Hindu Temple of San Francisco. All of a sudden a mentally unbalanced young man threw a bomb onto the pulpit; there was an explosion and a cloud of dense blue smoke obscured the platform. When the smoke cleared it was found that the young man, a former student of Trigunatita, had been killed and that the swami had received severe injuries. He was taken at once to the Affiliated Colleges Hospital. On his way to the hospital, the swami inquired, "Where is X, poor fellow?" Sometime previously Trigunatita had observed the man's mental condition and had recommended that he find a job in the country, where the surroundings would be soothing. Even in the midst of excruciating pain the swami's mind was filled with pity for his mentally ill student.<sup>20</sup>

A number of devotees visited Trigunatita daily and reported his progress to those at the temple. In addition to regular nurses, a male attendant was appointed to lift and carefully move the swami's heavy body. One nurse made a comment, "I have never seen such a calm, uncomplaining, and enduring patient in my life." From his hospital bed, the swami asked Mrs. Petersen to arrange the repair of the damage to the temple. Accordingly, she collected the funds and his wishes were carried out. The doctor gave Trigunatita a high dosage of sleep medication to reduce his pain, and as a result he was not always conscious. Although he received the best medical care, the infection that resulted from his wounds could not be abated.

On the afternoon of January 9, the swami told one of his young disciples that he would leave his body the next day, which was the birthday of Vivekananda, according to the Indian lunar calendar. And, as he

foretold, Swami Trigunatitananda, the great yogi and disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, passed away at 7:30 p.m. on January 10, 1915. As the news of his death spread, a large number of people, including the Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish religious leaders of San Francisco, came to pay the swami homage. His body was cremated according to his wishes at Cypress Lawn Cemetery. On April 13, 1916, Swami Prakashananda carried Swami Trigunatitananda's relics to Shanti Ashrama and installed them on the top of the highest hill, Siddha Giri, the "Hill of Realization."<sup>21</sup>

Swami Trigunatitananda's ashes remain as a mute symbol of his vanished form, but his immortal message lives on after him: Work hard. Discipline yourself. Build your character. Endure to the end. Realize your Self. And be free. ☺

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1. His Western Disciples, "The Work of Swami Trigunatita in the West," *Prabuddha Bharata*, March 1928: 131-132.
  2. *Ibid.*, 132.
  3. *Voice of Freedom* (San Francisco), May 1909: vi-viii.
  4. Disciples, *Prabuddha Bharata*, April 1928: 162.
  5. *Udbodhan*, 37: 303.
  6. Disciples, *Prabuddha Bharata*, April 1928: 163.
  7. Swami Atulananda, *Atman Alone Abides* (Ramakrishna Math: Madras, 1978), 170-171.
  8. Disciples, *Prabuddha Bharata*, April 1928: 164-165.
  9. Disciples, *Prabuddha Bharata*, May 1928: 227.
  10. Atulananda, *Atman Alone Abides*, 171.
  11. Disciples, *Prabuddha Bharata*, May 1928: 230-232.
  12. Disciples, *Prabuddha Bharata*, October 1928: 465-467.
  13. Disciples, *Prabuddha Bharata*, November 1928: 524-525.
  14. Disciples, *Prabuddha Bharata*, August 1928: 355-356.
  15. *Udbodhan*, 37: 303.
  16. Disciples, *Prabuddha Bharata*, November 1928: 525.
  17. *Ibid.*, 526.
  18. *Ibid.*, 526.
  19. *Ibid.*, 526-527.
  20. Disciples, *Prabuddha Bharata*, December 1928: 564-565.
  21. *Ibid.*, 564-565.

## The First Vedanta Convent

Swami Trigunatita not only started a monastery for Americans but he also encouraged the establishment of a convent (nunnery) for women. That he felt the need for a convent from the beginning of his ministry in San Francisco is evident from an early pamphlet stating that the method of Vedanta work in America included “establishing, if possible, Hindu monasteries and nunneries or peace retreats, where living instances of practical Vedantin lives can be witnessed.”

In providing this opportunity for American women to lead an exclusively spiritual life, he followed the lead of his beloved elder brother Swami Vivekananda, who had opened up what had previously been the sole province of Indian men after Buddhistic times. To include not only Western men but also Western women was a revolutionary idea, giving witness to the vast and open heart of their Master, Sri Ramakrishna, and the inclusiveness of his teachings.

The convent was a trial balloon, to be sure, and it disbanded in 1912, “after a valiant try,” as Sister Gargi put it. But the fact that Swami Trigunatita made every attempt to encourage it laid the spiritual foundation of the convent that was later reestablished by Swami Ashokananda, blessed by Belur Math, and nurtured by Swami Prabuddhananda. ∞

***From the Minutes of the San Francisco Vedanta Society, Nov. 1, 1908:***

“Nucleus of the first nunnery of Ramakrishna Mission in the Western World was established on Sunday, Oct. 25, 1908. Mrs. Reynolds & Mrs. Pettee agreed to help such a nunnery by their coming to live together as the members of the institution in the top flat of the building on Webster; N.E. Cor. Of Filbert (opp. H. Temple). Mrs. (Dr.) Sinclair consented to be a member on the 30th Oct. On 31st Oct. Mrs. Alexander joined the nunnery. Dhirananda [Bertha Petersen] and Ujjala [sic] [Ida Ansell] embraced the principles of the nunnery in their hearts, but could not come to live as inmates & had to live separately in their respective homes owing to their household duties.”



*Mrs. Pettee*



*Mrs. Alexander*



*Dr. Sinclair*



*Left: First convent of the Vedanta Society in the top flat of the building on the northeast corner of Filbert and Webster Streets, cater-corner from the Hindu Temple*



## Dedicated Devotees

Having been inspired by Swami Vivekananda and his lectures, several steadfast devotees supported the nascent Vedanta Society from its earliest years through a succession of swamis. Among the supporters were Thomas and Edith Allan, Albert and Claudia Wollberg, Clinton and Cara French, and Carl and Bertha Petersen. The Petersens were especially noteworthy, since they turned over their own residence as the venue for the Society's activities during Swami Turiyananda's time and later during Swami Trigunatita's early years. Later, they occupied a flat on the second floor of the Hindu Temple.

After the tragic bomb explosion in December 1914, Bertha Petersen (Dhirananda) supervised the restoration of the Hindu Temple's auditorium. The "Monastery Notes" read, "This great work [the auditorium's restoration] was almost entirely due to the untiring efforts of Mrs. Petersen. The young men—Edward and Arthur Schenderlein and Mr. Garfelt—did the hard work of cleaning, etc., but the new painting, glass and all colors and material were selected and paid for with money which Mrs. Petersen solicited." Additionally, Mr. Petersen regularly held the Thursday evening class and Mrs. Petersen took



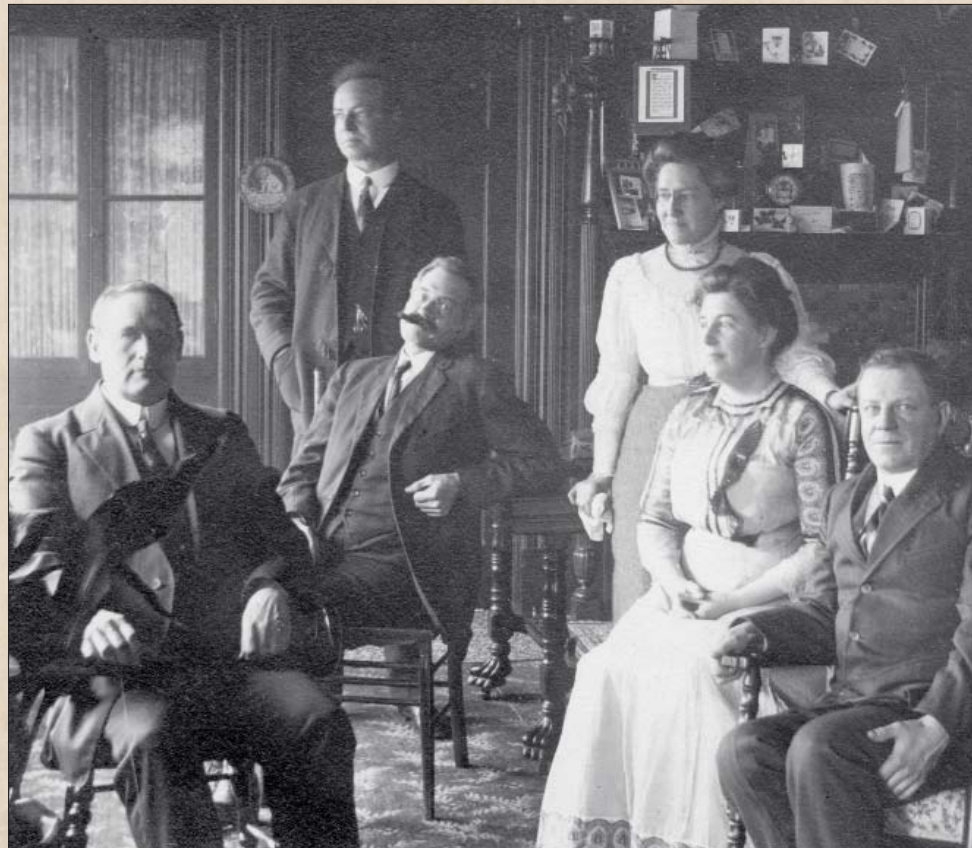
*At Shanti Ashrama, left to right: Claudia Wollberg, Cara French, Bertha Petersen, Edith Allan, unknown*

charge of the Gita class. As Ida Ansell wrote in her reminiscences: "[Dhirananda] did her best to carry out [Swami Trigunatita's] wishes, conducting the evening classes herself and assisting in the Sunday lectures [that were given] by the visiting Swamis Abhedananda and Paramananda." ∞



*Bertha Petersen (Dhirananda)*

*Below, left to right: Clinton French, Thomas Allan, Carl Petersen, Cara French, Edith Allan, unknown*







*Swami Trigunatitananda, 1865-1915*

# Swami Trigunatitananda: Was He a Martyr?

*Swami Prabhananda*

**S**WAMI SARADANANDA ONCE RECOUNTED AN INTERESTING EVENT to Cara French, an American disciple of Swami Trigunatitananda. It seems that one day Swami Trigunatita asked his brother disciple Swami Saradananda what a martyr was. On hearing Swami Saradananda's explanation, a happy Trigunatita said that he himself would like the role of a martyr.

In the study of the world's hagiographic literature we come across many cases of martyrdom. However, in the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda literature martyrdom and such associated ideas are rather new.

Swami Trigunatita's biographer Sister Gargi correctly mentions "his unshakable will, his scorn of hardship, his welcome of death—if death was the price of pushing forward to attain his goal—his inner strength that knew no defeat."<sup>1</sup> These characteristics were clearly evident in his lone journey to Tibet; his role as the founder, editor, publisher, and printer of the *Udbodhan*, a Bengali journal; and in his pioneering service to the famine-stricken people of Mahula in Murshidabad and of Dinajpore—all of which culminated in his arduous service in laying a strong foundation for the Vedanta Society of Northern California. Swami Trigunatita's life ended as a martyr on January 10, 1915, in a hospital where he was being treated for injuries suffered in a bomb explosion triggered for unknown reasons by a mentally disturbed, former student.

The word martyr in Greek means witness. A martyr is somebody who suffers persecution and/or death for advocating a belief or cause. The death of a martyr, or the value attributed to it, is called martyrdom. Jesus is recorded as the greatest martyr, on account of his crucifixion.

Sri Ramakrishna's monastic disciples, each sincerely dedicated to the Master, all had unique personalities, and all of them acknowledged the unfathomable mystic power of their Master. Another common trait they shared was the bond of love for one another and universal love for all. In Saradaprasanna (Swami Trigunatita's premonastic name), we find that, if he considered something worth striving for or if it was in response to a command of Swami Vivekananda or of the Holy Mother, he invested his whole mind and soul in it. Even if this characteristic was seen in other monastic disciples of the Master, in Saradaprasanna it was something extra special. To cite some examples: He was assigned the responsibility of starting a magazine in Bengali (later named *Udbodhan*), which was a very difficult task in those days. Disgusted with this uphill task, Trigunatita one day faced Swami Vivekananda, who had laid this task on him. Apprehending his reluctance, Swamiji rebuked him harshly for his faint-heartedness and eloquently inspired him to continue the struggle. In the course of conversation between the two, Trigunatita said, "Brother, how wonderful is your brain! Can you give me your brain?" On learning that Trigunatita had been ill with a high temperature in the morning and, in the afternoon, had eaten large quantities of Bengali curries and sweets, Swamiji laughed and said, "You fellow! Give me your stomach. I shall change the face of this earth!" (In later life

Swami Vivekananda was subject to frequent illness and indisposition). Whereupon those present burst out laughing. After this exchange, Trigunatita redoubled his efforts and the *Udbodhan* became the one absorbing interest of his life. He placed the publication on a firm foundation and it is now considered a shining star in the domain of Bengali literature, particularly in the area of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda literature, having just completed one hundred years of publication.



*Swami Trigunatita*

Swami Trigunatitananda had his own way of organizing activities in the San Francisco Vedanta Society, and he introduced various rules for the benefit of both monastic and lay devotees. In a letter of June 19, 1908, addressed to Swami Saradananda, secretary of the Ramakrishna Order of monks, he wrote:

At first when I introduced such rules here, I had to meet many difficulties and pass through many persecutions. Of course, I expected all this. But, now, by the grace of our Master, I am quite successful. The Lord, our Master, has given me such a power that no one has ever been able to baffle my arguments. I had to give series after series of lectures on every one of those strict rules. Great oppositions came at first, but at last all were silenced. Hundreds of questions, written and oral,

in public meetings and private interviews, poured unto me; every one of them was answered with great courage and ability in the name of the Truth and the Lord our Saviour. By His power and grace none of those answers could be a failure.

Here we see a glimpse of the Swami's unique personality and strength of character. The intellectual's advocacy of participatory democracy has become quite popular in community life now. Against this liberal approach the swami's behavior may seem to be quite intriguing. Swami Trigunatita was mighty and did not hesitate to impose his will on other people, particularly the members of the group he was guiding. He was dominating and single-minded, and it seems he liked molding other people to his opinions. Sister Gargi's observation seems to be quite valuable. She writes, "He was at times eccentric—his way of life, his way of work, his mode of expression were all markedly his own and were now and then astonishing—but pervading and overriding the idiosyncrasies of his personality was the sheer force of his being. 'That strong will, that energy that could not be broken by anything! That was Swami Trigunatita,' Carl Petersen would say of him years later. There was none who did not feel the swami's power, and few who did not benefit by it."<sup>2</sup>

No doubt, "the sheer force of his being," which appeared in full blaze in the last phase of his Western mission, manifested in the early days of his life. To make my point clear, I may mention a few cases by way of illustration:

1. The publishing of the *Udbodhan* magazine and placing it on a strong foundation may appear to be phenomenal. The way Saradaprasanna gave his soul and strength to it is almost unbelievable but inspiring to all, both to monastic and lay devotees.

2. After the death of Swami Yogananda in March 1899, Swami Trigunatita became Holy Mother's chief attendant while working for the *Udbodhan* during the day. During this period Swami Trigunatita once accompanied Holy Mother (Sarada Devi) to Jairambati, her native village. After crossing the river Damodar, Sarada Devi got into a bullock cart and Swami Trigunatita walked in front with a staff on his shoulder like a bodyguard. On the way the party faced a challenging situation. A portion of the road had been washed away by a flood which created a depression. Saradaprasanna lay down in the depression, so that Mother's cart could cross without difficulty. Fortunately, the Mother woke up and reproved Trigunatita for his rash act. This incident not only shows his deep devotion towards



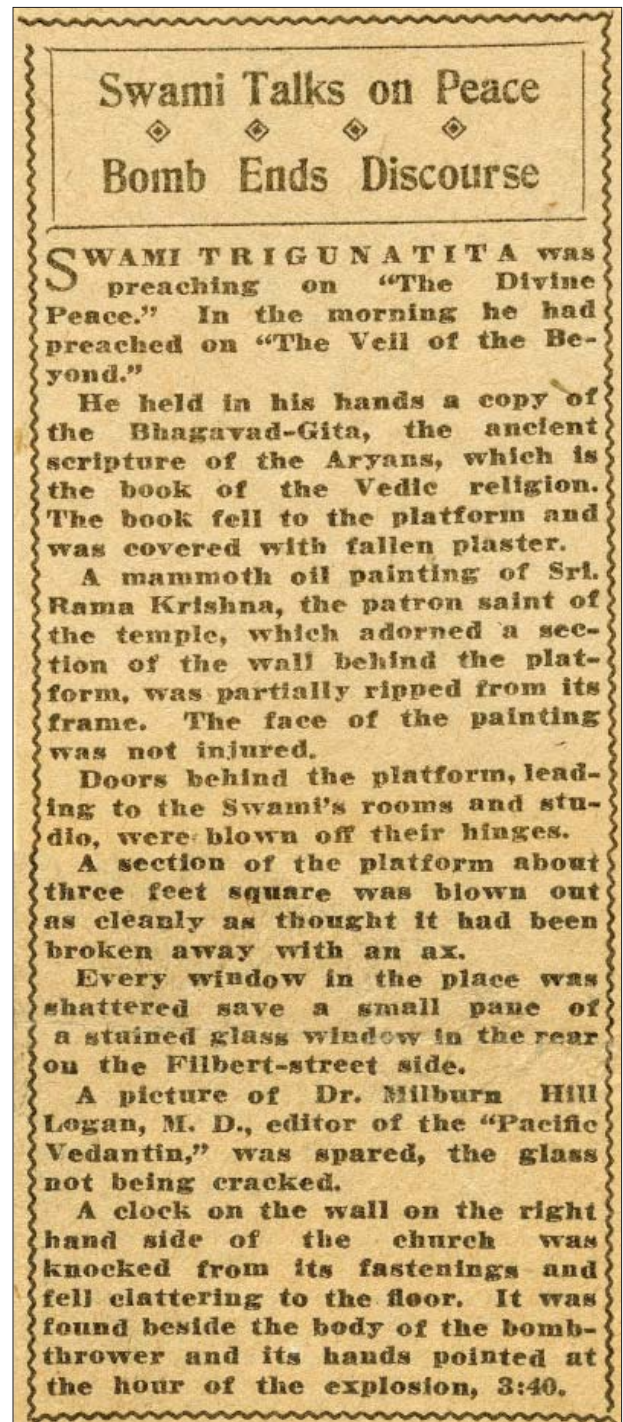
the Holy Mother, his guru (spiritual guide), but behind his devoted deed was the sheer force of his being and heroic temperament.

3. Earlier his “sheer force of being” manifested in entirely a new area of daredevil activity. The journal of the Mahabodhi Society for January 1896 reported: “Swami Trigunatitananda, the Sannyasi disciple of Paramahansa Ramakrishna, undertook a few months ago a perilous journey over the snowy ranges of the Himalayan Mountains, with a view to visit the holy shrines of Mount Kailas and Lake Manassarovara, so sacred to the Hindus. The Swami, with commendable zeal and fortitude, had to go on foot for days together through perpetual snow ranges at an attitude of 22,000 feet. After an eventful journey, he has come back to Calcutta.” We learn that Swami Trigunatita had set out from Calcutta on June 5, 1895.

4. The fourth case to be mentioned, his service in America, covered one fourth of his life, but herein shines the essence of his character against the horizon of the Ramakrishna movement. Let us remember, he was born on January 30, 1865, and died on January 10, 1915. Another point to remember is that his disciples and followers repeatedly felt that he was moving under the guidance of a divine force. Simultaneously, his companions felt that he was boundlessly loving and endlessly patient, but his will was indomitable, his mind was brilliant; his work was totally dedicated to Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda.

The name “Trigunatita” refers to one who is beyond the three characteristic primary human qualities (*gunas*)—namely *sattwa* (equanimity and balance), *rajas* (energetic activity), and *tamas* (dullness and inertia)—by having gone to the higher level of divine experience. Sarada’s parents believed that Sarada was born to them through the grace of Divine Mother Durga and, therefore, they named the child Saradaprasanna after her. He had some extraordinary qualities, as, for example, he could live for days together on only one piece of fruit for his daily meal, and, if he wished, he could also eat the quantity of food which four healthy persons would normally consume. One finds that, when the situation demanded, his daring and adventurous spirit carried him through. The swami radiated holiness, for he lived in the consciousness of the Divine Mother. He felt he was always under divine protection.

Swami Vivekananda paid tribute to him by saying, “I am a disciple of Sarada.” On the other hand, we should not fail to notice that he chose the day of his passing away to be Swamiji’s birthday. A victim of a



*This newspaper clipping, from Cara French’s scrapbook, appeared soon after the tragic incident.*

bomb injury, Swami Trigunatita told others that he would leave his body on Swamiji’s birthday, 1915. And he kept his promise. ☪

1. Sister Gargi (Marie Louise Burke), *Swami Trigunatita: His Life and Work* (San Francisco: Vedanta Society of Northern California, 1997), 41.
2. *Ibid.*, 96.

## *From the Archives . . .*

Except for a faded newspaper reproduction, the only extant photograph of the original two-story Temple that was dedicated in January 1906 is a half-tone screen produced by Swami Trigunatita, copies of which were to be sent to India for including into issues of the journal *Prabuddha Bharata*. In a Bengali letter to Swami Prakashananda, then stationed in the journal's editorial offices in the Himalayas, Swami Trigunatita explains his idea for sharing the photograph. (A few months later Swami Prakashananda was to join him in San Francisco as an assistant.)

The translation reads:

*Lotus feet of Sri Sri Gurudev my only refuge*

*2963 Webster Street  
San Francisco, Calif., USA  
The 3rd March 1906*

*My dear Prakashanandaji,*

*I received all the news from your letter dated January 29. Please accept my thanks. What has been published about us in Prabuddha Bharata is quite well written. People were pleased to read it. Please convey our gratitude to the editor. From now on, whenever we send any of our publications to you, we will mark them "For Review." If you or Swarupananda come here, you will be able to do wonderful work. Whenever it becomes convenient or you feel inclined to come, just write to me. Revered Mrs. Sevier had written to me earlier that she would be very happy if I could bring one or two more swamis from the Advaita Ashrama. She is very eager to help in such matters. May God bless her. Give her my respectful Namaskar. Same to you all, my brothers.*

*The servant, Sarada*

*I shall send about a thousand copies of half-tone photographs of our Vedanta Temple to Prabuddha Bharata. Have them inserted in all the copies of any issue. If there is any problem, let me know. -S*

However, it is uncertain whether the reproductions were, in fact, distributed. In the September 1906 issue of *Prabuddha Bharata* (pages 178-179), we find the following notice:

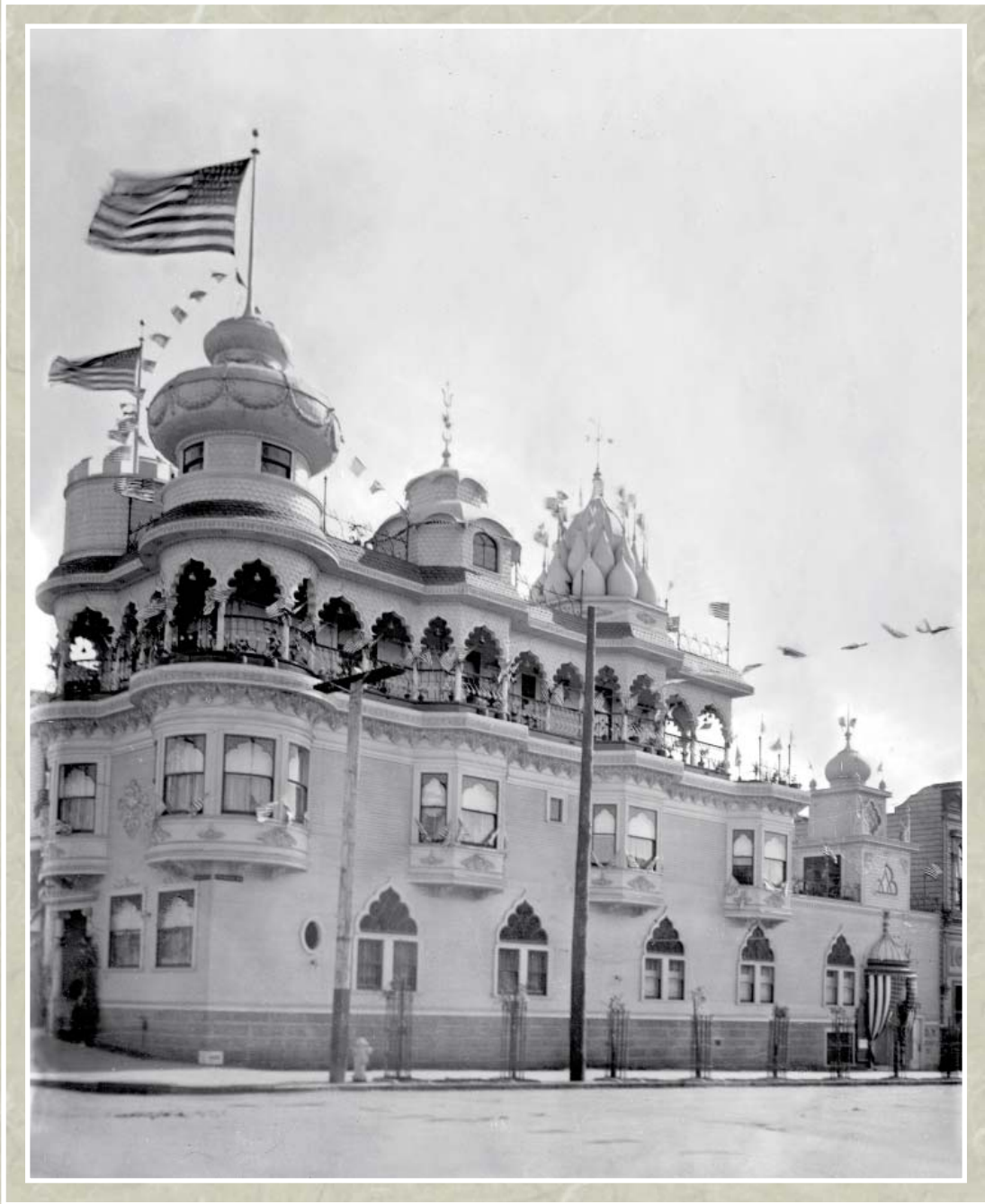
Thanks to the courtesy of the Vedanta Society of San Francisco, we have much pleasure in presenting to our subscribers with the current number, an illustration of the Hindu Temple in San Francisco, which was dedicated in January last by Swami Trigunatita. It is a curious fact, that while nearly the whole city of San Francisco was destroyed by the last terrible earthquake, and better-built and more massive edifices were razed to the ground, this new building remained entirely unaffected. Finding, on going to Press, that we have an insufficient number of the pictures to send to all our subscribers, we have asked for more, and hope to receive them in due course.

Perhaps, by this time, since the Temple's third floor and additional towers were being planned, it was decided that there would be little point in printing more copies of the original photo, since a newer, grander building was in the offing. ☺









*"The First Hindu Temple in the Whole Western World," 1909*

# Building the Hindu Temple

*Sister Gargi (Marie Louise Burke)*

THE FIRST HINDU TEMPLE IN THE WHOLE WESTERN WORLD,” as Swami Trigunatita would call it with childlike exuberance, was an extremely bold venture. What was its ideal? To Swami Trigunatita the first Hindu Temple in the whole Western world would be a vital piece of India planted on American soil. The temple represented the influx of India’s great spiritual wisdom into the culture of the West—there to grow and flourish, as Swami Vivekananda had wanted. Swami Trigunatita never doubted for a minute that Swamiji stood behind the San Francisco Vedanta Society, and he was ready to risk his all for a temple that would permanently house it. To his disciple Cara French he said, “You have had the intellectual; my work is to give you the practical.” “And what an exponent and exemplar he was!” she exclaimed and continued: “Swamiji had given the philosophy; Swami Turiyananda had revealed the ideal *sannyasin*; and here was the practical ‘work without attachment,’ outrivalling all our boasted efficiency, energy, business acumen, foresight, and endurance. Even the architect, Mr. Leonard, who built the Hindu Temple declared that he learned more from swami than swami did from him in its construction.”

The temple was, in fact, designed by Swami Trigunatita; Joseph A. Leonard, the architect-builder, put the swami’s ideas into blueprint form, and, with astounding rapidity, the building came into being.

The cornerstone was laid with due ceremonies on the 21st day of August, 1905 [Mr. Allan wrote in his notes.] And the building was finished and occupied before Christmas 1905. As originally built it was a two-story building; the upper story was an apartment for Mr. and Mrs. C. F. Petersen and their son, Alexander Carl. The lower part consisted of the Auditorium and quarters for Swami Trigunatita. The funds necessary for the purchase of the land [in the name of Swami Trigunatita] and the erection of the building, were subscribed by the students, according as they felt they could give. The temple was dedicated on the 7th January, 1906, and the first service in the temple was on Sunday 16th January, 1906.

The cornerstone document opened with a brief history of the Society’s first five years and then continued:

It being the aim and great purpose of Swami Trigunatita to establish a permanent center of the Vedanta work on the Pacific Coast, not only for the present work but also for that of future generations. He presented the project of building a permanent home for the Society at a special meeting called to consider that purpose on the 11th of December, 1904, at 40 Steiner Street, with the condition that a sufficient fund be collected to secure a suitable location. The present lot having been purchased, Swami was enabled, through the help of Mr. Joseph Leonard of the S.F. and Suburban Home Building Society to erect a suitable building which is now under course of construction here. This property is to be the home of the swamis of the Belur Math, India, and to be a meeting place for the holding of lectures and

classes on the Vedanta thought as taught by Sri Ramakrishna for the benefit and instruction of the public at large. This property is a public religious property belonging to the Vedanta Society of San Francisco, under the sole management of the Belur Math, India. The intention is to incorporate the Vedanta Society of San Francisco in the near future—said incorporation to be under the control of the Math.



*1905 white granite cornerstone*

On the evening of January 7, 1906, Swami Trigunatita dedicated the “First Hindu Temple in the Whole Western World” and invoked the Supreme Spirit, which even today is still a living presence. That strange new building, sitting with Victorian solidity in the middle of San Francisco’s Cow Hollow

District, was crowned on its northeast corner with a bulbous tower shaped in the style of “some of the old-fashioned temples of the province of Bengal.” The building, which in two years or so would grow stranger still, another story and more unlikely towers being added, became not only a well-loved San Francisco landmark, but to those who came to know it as a spiritual home, a place vibrant with holiness. It became as Swami Trigunatita had intended, the very best of India planted permanently on American soil.

The dedication made headlines. The *San Francisco Chronicle* ran a large photograph of the two-story building with its three Moorish style windows, which adorned only the auditorium at this date, and its single Bengali tower, which, as a later pamphlet would explain, had something to do with a *Shiva-Lingam*. An inset showed the swami in his robe and turban.

A typed copy of what Swami Trigunatita actually said at this historic 1906 dedication of the Hindu Temple reads in part and in substance:

My dear friends of America—my dear friends of the great land of liberty.

Not only are you the friends of the country from which I come, not only are you the friends of one country on the face of the earth, but your fame and your ideas of liberty, and of love, and of sincerity, have gone to all parts of the world, and have made you the dearest friends of the whole world. So, my dear friends, you are not only the friends of one country alone; you are not only the friends of two countries—three countries, but of all the countries of the world. Why? Because the Truth must flourish and the Truth must lead you to all parts of the world without any obstruction. Your ideas of liberty have not simply been confined to your own country, but have extended to all parts of the world; and not only to the modern civilized world but even to the far remotest part—to your antipodes, India.... Your banner of liberty [the American flag] does not simply shine, does not simply flourish in the political kingdom, but even in the religious kingdom. You will find today your political banner of liberty even hoisted at the top of the Hindu Temple. Why? So long Hinduism was known to be the most orthodox religion in the world, narrowest religion in the world. Even if you take it as such, still that narrowest religion, that orthodox religion takes up your banner of liberty.... Your ideas of truth, your love of truth, your love of liberty have made you so beloved



# DEDICATION OF FIRST HINDOO TEMPLE

New Auditorium Is Crowded to  
Doors With Spectators Who  
Follow the Exercises Closely

The formal dedication of the first Hindoo temple to be erected in America for the propagation in this country of the Vedanta philosophy was celebrated last night at the new auditorium of the local order at 2115 Filbert street with appropriate ceremonies before a throng of curious and interested spectators, who filled the hall to the doors and overflowed upon the sidewalk long before the hour set for the exercises. Many were attracted by a genuine interest in the Vedanta faith, but many more were attracted by the expectation of beholding some form of Eastern mysticism or symbolism in the dedicatory ceremonies. The ceremonies, however, were very simple, the only touch that at all resembled Orientalism being the robe and tunic of Swami Trigunatita, expounder, missionary and lecturer of the Vedanta philosophy. The auditorium decorations were simple, a few ferns and greens being festooned about the walls.

The ceremonies were opened by C. F. Petersen, president of the San Francisco Vedanta Society, who devoted a few words to a general introduction regarding the Vedanta society in San Francisco, which has grown in the past five years from a membership of twenty to a membership of over sixty. Albert Wollberg followed with a brief talk as to the desire of the society to welcome the public to meetings. Then followed the prayer of Rama Krishna, which the devotee of the faith addresses to God. After music came a short lecture by Swami Trigunatita on the ideals of the Vedanta philosophy. The large audience followed the speaker closely. He said in part, in defining the philosophy:

"The very word 'Vedanta' means the end of all knowledge. It is composed of two simple Sanskrit words, veda and anta. Veda means knowledge; anta means the end. Vedanta means the end or goal of all knowledge or wisdom, the finality of things, the great conclusion of all arguments—of all departments of knowledge. It leads any person to the realization of the great ultimate, absolute truth. The Vedanta does not deny the world, but explains it to you better, and shows it to you in its true colors. It establishes man's position in the world and his relations to it firmly and eternally.

"It is the name of a religion and philosophy based on the Vedas, the earliest and the greatest scriptures of the Aryans, the most ancient forefathers of the human race. It is a religion and philosophy most rationally devoted to the truth and the practical knowledge of the self and of our relation to the world."

of the world that even the Indians come to you, and you like them so much, you sympathize with them, you extend your kindness to them even. So allow me, my friends, to offer you a few words of... thankfulness and gratefulness to you for your kind attendance in the Hindu Temple....

You will find in these few years, only three years, that this Society has been organized, and in such a short time, owing to your liberal heart and your love of truth, this Society has been so successful as to invite you to the opening of its home. Now, my friends, tonight we mean to dedicate this temple. You know what the word dedication means. To set apart for sacred purposes, to consecrate, to dedicate.... No matter what you do, you are working towards the Truth. You are working out your salvation. God is not reserved for one person, for one church, nor for one particular religion on the face of the earth or in the universe. God is really the common Father of all, the Creator of all.... We don't think God can be reached only by this particular religion or that. But God knows we are all his children. No matter whether we quarrel, or whether we fight, or whether we become jealous of each other, still He will call us all to Him, sooner or later.

My dearest friends, this little place has been dedicated to the service of God. Not to any particular person, not to any particular society, not to any particular religion, not to any particular sect, [but] for all creeds, for all religions, for persons of all faiths and activities of life. Here there is no idea of sin, no particular idea of virtue. All one, my brethren, it is all one. This place is meant for that purpose, to cultivate our intellect and spiritual life towards that end. What end? To discover and realize that we are one; we are the children of one father, to whom this has been dedicated. And when it has been dedicated to Him, it has been indirectly and logically dedicated to one and all of you. You, being His children, you have every right. Every one of you—all sects, all persons, young and old, rich and poor, wise and ignorant, religious and irreligious, virtuous and sinful even—all can come. You all will go to our one Father who brought us to this world.

"Now, friends," the swami continued, "you may have heard more than once the word 'Vedanta' or at least the word 'Vedas.'" He then spoke of the Aryans and of Sanskrit, "the most ancient language of the world... from which all other languages



*Temple auditorium, 1906*

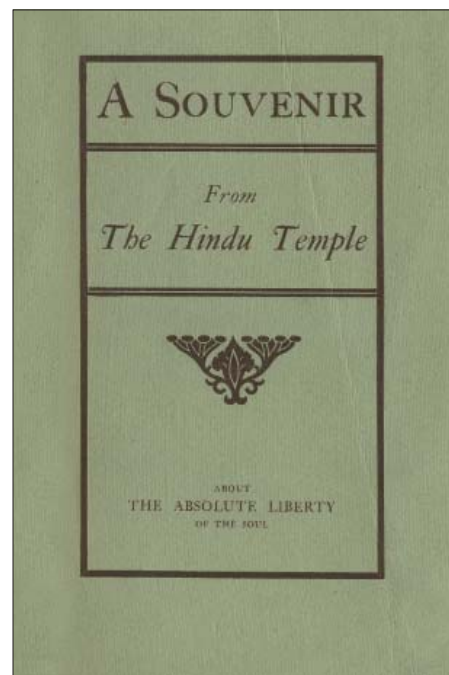
have emanated.” He explained the “Vedas” and the etymology of the word Vedanta.

The swami concluded:

So Vedantism does not mean that it is Hinduism in that orthodox sense in which you so long used to take it—not you, but the world. You have now understood a little the glory of the Vedanta.... If you yourself study Vedantism, then you will understand what Vedantism is. You need not accept the doctrines;... you need not go to the Vedanta Society; you need not be a Vedantist; but still, if you read, you will find that you yourself have kept aside a friend, a dear friend, that will be good and serviceable and beneficial to you whenever you will be in need of it. For that reason the little souvenir has been published. It contains certain ideas. You will find one on each chair.

The “souvenir” to which the swami referred was a sixteen-page little booklet that contained a short article entitled “What is Vedanta?”; quotations from the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, and Swami Vivekananda; sayings of Sri Ramakrishna; opinions of famous people regarding Vedanta; and a brief idea of the Society and its activities. The booklet was titled on its cover: “A SOUVENIR from The Hindu Temple about The Absolute Liberty of the Soul.”

The year 1907 was memorable for a more spectacular change: A third floor and three large towers were added to the temple, which gave the building a grandeur and air of extraordinariness that it did not have before. No longer could it be called



*1906 Dedication Souvenir*



typical of anything at all. The construction was begun in the last week of August and was completed by the first week of February 1908. And here again, as when the first two floors of the temple were built, Swami Trigunatita met with stiff opposition from some of the members of the Society, who found this expansion to be an unnecessary and outlandish expense. The third floor with its balcony and towers was called by some "Swami's Palace." But, as though opposition were nothing more than an expected spell of inclement weather, the swami went right ahead. "Do not forget," he would sometimes say to those who knew and sympathized with the difficulties he faced, "The lot of

Swami Trigunatita's immediate reason for building the third floor was his fond hope that Swami Brahmananda, president of the Ramakrishna Order, would pay a visit and stay for at least a few months. According to Mr. Brown's memoirs, Swami Trigunatita conceived this idea not long after the two-story temple was completed in 1905.

The rooms comprising the floor [Brown wrote] were a large front living room, kitchen, bedroom and bathroom, all fitted with every modern convenience. A veranda lighted at night by many electric lights, ornamented its full length with pillars and Moorish arches of oriental design, and



*"Swami's Palace"*

the pioneer is not easy." Not until several months after the third floor was built and the temple rededicated did he explain things to the members of the Society. On June first, 1908, at a "Social Meeting," such as was usually held on the first Monday of the month, he invited written questions regarding "Swami's Palace," the Minutes read, "and cleared away all doubts and misunderstandings, by replying to the questions at length. He did this for the public good."

protected by an iron railing running all around the east and north side.

But as the quarters neared completion, "[Swami Brahmananda] sent final word that he could not leave the work in India. Swami accepted his decision as the will of the Divine Mother, and after a short time, on the urge of Mr. and Mrs. Petersen and others, he took up his own residence in the flat."



It does not seem improbable that Swami Trigunatita's dream that Swami Brahmananda might pay a visit to America would inspire him to build a spacious apartment where his highly beloved and revered brother disciple might live. No "palace" would be too good. Nor is there much wonder that some of the members of the Vedanta Society were aghast and perhaps frightened—for where was the money for this third floor and these towers coming from? Only later were the members to learn that the swami did not operate in accordance with the rules of the marketplace. Writing of a later venture, Cara French reflected, "With Swami the purpose to do a thing was synonymous with the act, and the means to do were never lacking. Most truly of him was the proverb written:

*On him who saves even the fraction of a cowrie shell yet when occasion requires it spends large sums royally like a king, on him the Goddess of Fortune pours her blessings.*

To illustrate, Cara French recalled how money came for the third floor of the Temple. The first mortgage of \$5,000, together with \$3,000 for a previous loan, was owing to Mr. Juhl at seven percent interest. This was in addition to smaller debts (amounting to \$1800) lent by four of the members. All in all, the total indebtedness of the Society was \$10,948 (not including Swami Trigunatita's personal savings of \$2,500, which he had freely thrown into the kitty). Considering that around this time a solid-oak ladies' writing desk cost \$9.80, and a pair of ladies' dress oxfords \$1.50, \$10,948 was a staggering amount, but it was perhaps the \$8,000 at seven percent interest that worried the swami the most.

While Mr. Juhl was generous and always willing to help the Vedanta Society, he was also a businessman; and business was business. The Vedanta Society Minutes for August 29, 1908, read:

A new document has been made today regarding mortgage and signed by Mr. Juhl in the office of attorney Mr. Edmond Tauzsky. If Swami Trigunatita or society fail to pay interest consecutively for six months during 10 years, then Mr. Juhl or his heirs would be able to foreclose the mortgage [at] anytime they like or after 10 years. For details *vide* document inside the steel safe in the 3rd [floor] flat.

The document that had once been inside the steel safe no longer exists, it no doubt having been destroyed when the mortgage was paid off. But prior to this, the threat of foreclosure must at times have hung heavily

over Swami Trigunatita's head. Money to pay the monthly interest was often nowhere in sight.

While he was problemizing over the funds for the addition of the third story [Cara French related], the front door bell rang and an old member, bent with age and crippled with rheumatism, but full of devotion to the cause and love for Swami, appeared, assisted by a friend, bearing a hand satchel with \$8,000.00 in gold to be applied to the building of the addition.

In gold? That must have been a very heavy satchel for an old person, or even for the friend, to carry. But there it was, \$8,000!

At another time a bill for \$1,000 was due to be paid the next day. The swami's funds were exhausted; there was no money on hand. What to do? That evening a member of the Society came with nearly the full amount as a gift; the swami was able to secure the remainder the next morning, paying the bill in full. It had been a close call, and it was perhaps of this time (although there were many other financial crises) that Cara French would write:

Only *once*—in the 12 years of my association and training—did I ever know that stalwart soul to waver in his vision of the Leela and his own part in it. Harassed by debt in the furtherance of the work, his honor and his business sagacity assailed, he was desperately in need of immediate cash. Already drained to our utmost, none of us could help.

Telling me all this in the privacy of an interview, I could gauge something of the weight of the burden he carried by the relief he manifested when stating that on the previous day—just in time—a large sum of money had come to him unsolicited from an outside source. And deep was the contrition in his voice and in his eyes, as he added: "and I doubted Him. *I doubted Him!*"

And so would money miraculously appear whenever Swami Trigunatita felt desperate over its lack. And this he felt often. As late as 1911, shortly before a trip to Los Angeles, he wrote to Mrs. Hansbrough, thanking her for her April dues—a very small amount:

It seems to be harder & harder every month for me to meet the monthly interests here, specially this month. And your kind dues were God sent as it were. I shdn't have said "As it were", because it is so. He is All-Knowing. May God bless you and help you in your work dear Mrs.

Hansbrough. Please start your class soon—don't be lazy.

Always the needed money would come. "Saraswati [Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth]," Mr. Brown commented, "literally showered him with her blessings for he had no thought to use them for himself. Was it not the Divine Mother's work that was being done? Therefore the goddess gave gladly." But generally at the last moment.

The temple with its third floor and five towers (including the tower over the auditorium entrance) was now a distinguished and graceful building, looking rather like a galleon in full sail which could brave all seas. A detailed description of it was given in a pamphlet issued by the Society and entitled "The San Francisco Vedanta Society and Hindu Temple." Under a photograph of the completed building the proud caption still read: "The First Hindu Temple in the Whole Western World." A large American flag flew from the top of the Shiva Tower, which had been lifted bodily from what had been the roof of the second floor to what was now the roof of the third. The text read in part:

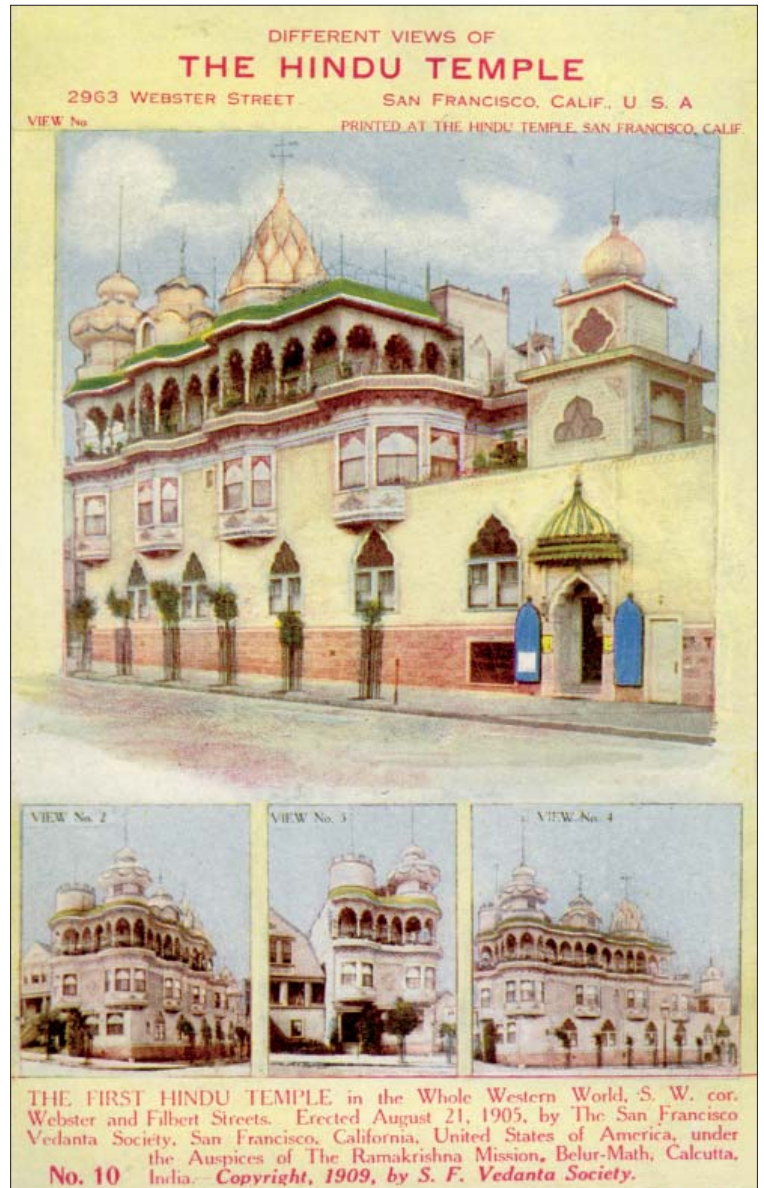
#### General Features of the Hindu Temple

##### THE STYLE.

This Temple has been built after the lowest miniature styles:

- 1st. Of the great *Taj Mahal* of Agra, India, one of the seven wonders of the world.
- 2nd. Of one of the famous Temples of Benares (one of the ancient holy cities of India).
- 3rd. Of the modern provincial *Shiva-Mandirs* (Temples of Shiva) of Bengal, India.
- 4th. Of the Temple-garden of Dakshineswar, Calcutta, India, where Paramahansa Sri Ramakrishna, the great master of Swami Vivekananda and many other Swamis, used to live; and
- 5th. Of some of the old castles of Europe.

The arches have been constructed after the Moorish style of those of the corridors of many a fine stone built palace and temple in India.



One of several postcards printed at the Hindu Temple, 1909

This Temple may be considered as a combination of a Hindu Temple, a Christian church, a Mahomedan mosque, a Hindu math or monastery, and an American residence.

##### THE SYMBOLS.

(It is to be remembered that the following is only a rough representation of the main or original symbols.)

**The Tower over the Entrance to the Auditorium,** which looks like a bell-tower of a Christian church, and like a little Mahomedan mosque, and which has a gross partial miniature style of the great Taj Mahal of Agra, is used here as a conservatory, thus representing a partial symbol of nature and of natural growth.

**The First Tower** (commencing from the west) on the top roof, which is an exact miniature of one of the temples of Benares. It has the western weather vane at the top.... This tower has also a little similarity with the top of the temple of goddess Kali the mother at Dakshineswar.

**The Second Tower** (from the west), on the top roof, is like one of the Shivamandirs of the Kali Temple of Dakshineswar. The tower has a combination of three symbols at the top: First: it has a crescent form at the bottom; this crescent is a Turkish or Mahomedan emblem; one of the Hindu sects (a class of Vaishnavas) also used a modified form of that crescent as their emblem; since it looks like the moon, it expresses the idea of softness, tenderness, love and affection, in short—the path of devotion. Second: the middle sign looks like the sun: without the sunlight

and heat we cannot grow, we cannot work well; so it means the path of Karma or work. Third: the trident: In Roman mythology trident is the scepter of Neptune the monarch of the ocean. In Hindu mythology, this particular kind of trident is the scepter of Shiva (God the destroyer). It stands for the symbol of destruction of ignorance, or the path of Jnana Yoga....

**The Third Tower** (northeast corner) on the top roof, is a little specimen of the style of some of the old fashioned temples of the province of Bengal. Therefore, it might give to some, an idea of antiquity.

This tower together with the shed in its front, has a great meaning to many a Hindu of the higher Tantrik order. It means the great Shiva-Lingam (here produced in architecture). Shiva means the destroyer of ignorance, and Lingam means



*Left to right: First Tower (Benares temple replica); Second Tower (like one of the Shivamandirs of the Kali Temple, Dakshineswar); Third Tower (Shiva Mandir); Fourth Tower (castle tower of Europe)*



the sign or symbol. Most of the Hindus worship Shiva first in their prayers, every day. They make a little figure of sacred clay every day, of Shiva-Lingam, and then worship it. Just as some of the Christians make crosses out of metal as the symbol of Jesus....

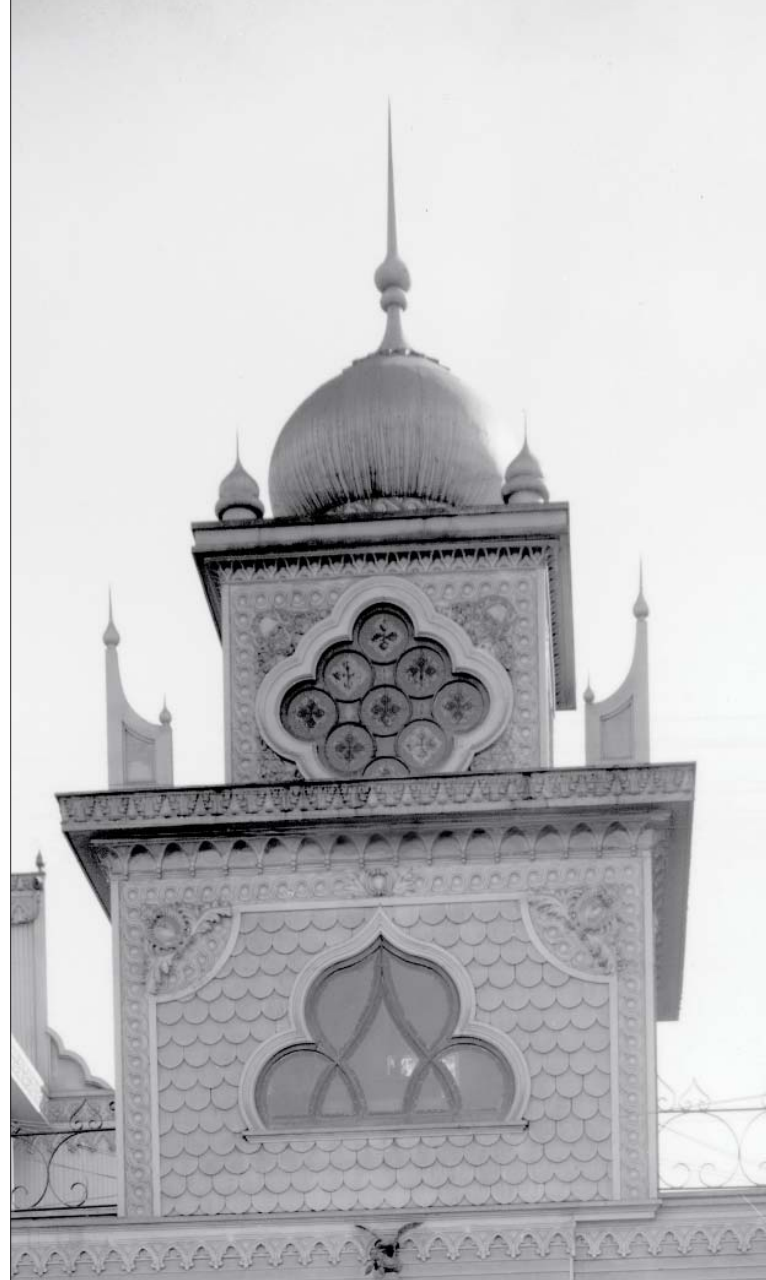
Many Hindus attach a great importance to the northeast corner of a place; therefore they would prefer such a corner for an important worship or ceremony. This important tower has therefore been placed on the northeast corner of the building.

**The Fourth Tower**, (the southeast corner) which is a specimen of some castle-towers of Europe, stands for the great strength of character and spiritual culture.

Several years later an article on the Vedanta Society appeared in a San Francisco newspaper. In the course of it, the extraordinary architecture of the Hindu Temple was not inaccurately described:

The Temple was completed in 1908, and shortly afterward was dedicated under the direction of the Ramakrishna Mission, Belur Math, Calcutta, India.... The Temple itself is one of the most striking meeting places of any cult in San Francisco. While covering but a comparatively small area, its cluster of gourd-like domes, its tower of meditation, and its minarets invest it with the appearance of having been transplanted from sacred Benares. The architecture of the roof is a composite of detail from the Taj Mahal at Agra, the Temple of Shiva at Bengal, and of the Temple Garden of Dakshineswar at Calcutta, where Paramahansa Sri Ramakrishna, the great master of Swami Vivekananda, and other adepts once lived.

A canopy over the mosaic and marble entrance to the auditorium is made to represent the thousand-petaled lotus in the brain, which, when opened through concentration and meditation, the Vedantists believe, brings the highest spiritual illumination. A Sanskrit inscription on the mosaic arch of the auditorium entrance reads, "Ong Namō Bhagavatey Ramakrishnaya." "Ong" is the symbolic word for "the absolute," and is frequently chanted or repeated in spiritual meditation. "Namō" means salutation, and "Bhagavatey Ramakrishnaya" means "to the blessed Lord, Ramakrishna."

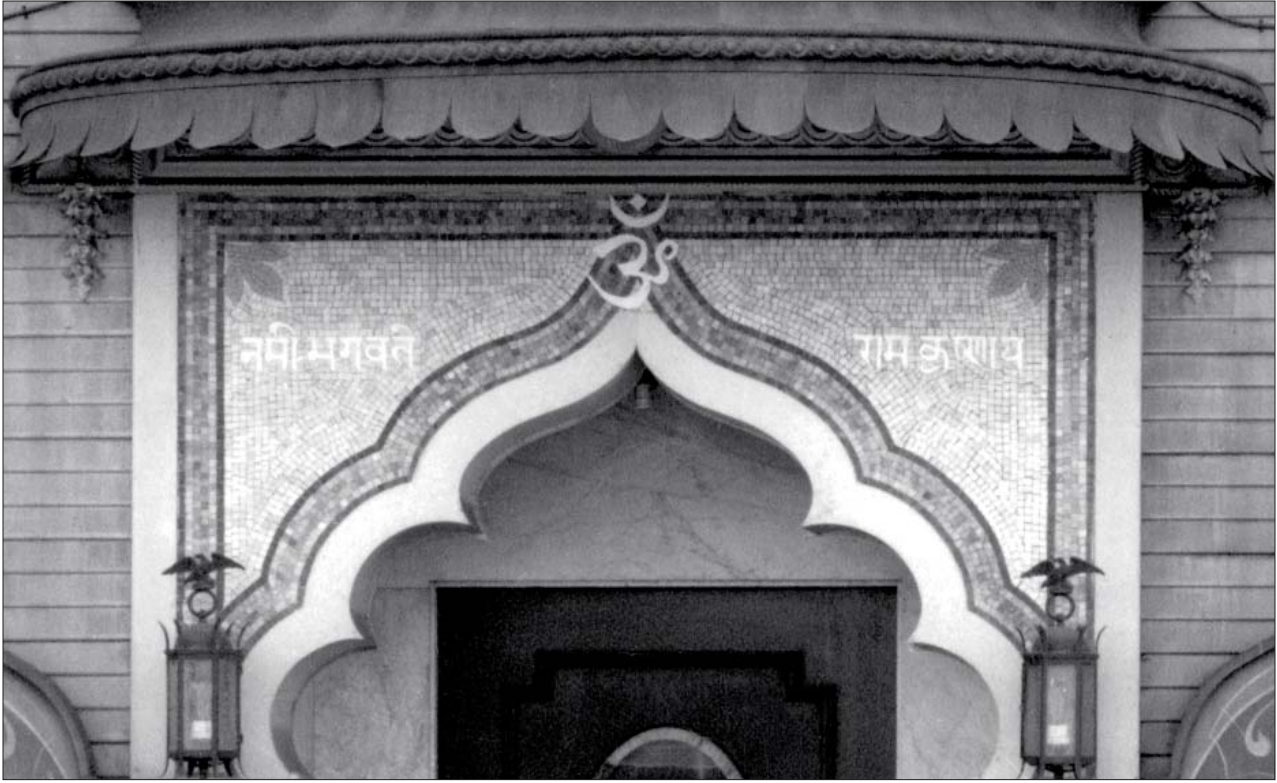


*Auditorium Entrance Tower  
(Christian church bell-tower/Mosque/Taj Mahal, Agra)*

There are four main towers on the roof. The tower of meditation is toward the east. Its rug and odd shapes and vessels of brass are in keeping with the symbolism that is carried out throughout the architecture of the temple. The moldings and applied ornaments are of Moorish design. The arches of the verandas also suggest the Moorish.

The "Hindu Temple" with its third floor and towers, complete and adorned with flags and banners, was dedicated on the evening of Sunday, April 5, 1908. The service was described in the Society's Minutes:

There was no morning lecture owing to "Dedication of the Temple" service in the evening, which commenced at 7:30 P.M. The auditorium



*The Sanskrit inscription on the mosaic arch reads, “Om Namo Bhagavate Ramakrishnaya,”  
“Salutation to the Blessed Lord Ramakrishna”*

was beautifully decorated with ferns, flowers, flags, etc. by Mr. & Mrs. Petersen assisted by Mr. & Mrs. French, Mr. Clarke & Mrs. Wollberg. Balcony of the new third flat & towers were also decorated. The whole building was illuminated in the evening. The whole auditorium was full to overflowing. Many had to stand up in the reception hall as well as near [the] auditorium door. [That is to say, in the small entry, which was jammed with people, and on the stairs leading from the entry to the auditorium.] Many had to go away owing to the big crowd which tried to push their way in. Collection—\$28.45. Swami Trigunatita conducted the [usual] service.

Immediately following this usual service came the Special Program for the Dedication, which, according to the Minutes, consisted of (1) Introduction, (2) Dedication Hymn, (3) Ceremony of Offerings, (4) Lecture on Dedication [by Swami Trigunatita], (5) Petition and passing subscription cards for the building fund of the Temple & instrumental music, (6) Vocal solo by Mrs. Allan, (7) Good wishes by the Swami and Dismissal.

After the formal dedication, Mr. Petersen conducted a tour for those who wished to see the third-story balcony, while the members of the Society and their

“nearest friends” were treated to ice cream by Mr. and Mrs. Petersen in their second-story flat.

Swami Trigunatita did not attend this private festivity.... Building an enduring society, molding raw students into strong workers who could dedicate themselves and all they had to God, filling the Temple with the light of his own constant awareness, if not his immediate vision of God (and how often it was the latter, one cannot know!)—Swami Trigunatita’s bond with his students was on a level where bonds are unbreakable; it was not on the level of small talk, rivalries, and the play of egos. He did not have to endure any of that, and did not....

That evening Swami Trigunatita had other plans. Bidding a small and select number of students to follow him, Cara French recalled, “he escaped through the crowded auditorium, up the rear stairs to the Shiva Mandir [the Shiva tower, inside of which was a shrine]. Here he held a Hindu service: first calling the women one by one, then the men, to take part in it. Like the full-moon dhuni nights on Shanti Ashrama’s hills, it linked us with India and Vedic rites.” This was indeed a proper worship, with all the many prescribed utensils and ingredients, which Swami Trigunatita had the previous year asked his friend Purna Chandra Seth to send to him.

On April 6, 1908, the *San Francisco Chronicle* ran a picture of the temple and an article, which read in part:

FIRST HINDOO TEMPLE IN WEST  
FORMALLY DEDICATED

**Swami Trigunatita Expounds the Views of  
His Sect to a Large Crowd**

Under the auspices of the Ramakrishna Mission, Belur Math, Calcutta, the first Hindoo temple in the Western world was dedicated last night....

The auditorium of the temple was packed to the doors last night by members of the society and their friends who had come to witness the dedication exercises. The only speaker was Swami Trigunatita, teacher of the society, and who designed the building....

The main and primary principle of Hindooism, according to the speaker, is to follow any path of faith suitable to one's own self very sincerely, and with an ardent view of mental, moral and spiritual development.

An orchestra composed of members of the society rendered "Love's Repose," and the Intermezzo from "Cavalleria Rusticana," during the passing of envelopes in which the members were to make their dedicatory offerings.

After the service, which concluded with the singing of "America," all were invited to inspect the temple and most of the audience took advantage of the invitation....

Thus was dedicated the tall, towered new temple, which came to be known some fifty years later as the "Old Temple" and which still stands, a holy shrine for Vedantists and a remarkable landmark of the city.

An addition was made to the inside of the auditorium in this same year of 1908. This was a painting of Jesus Christ sitting in yoga posture in the wilderness, with a rabbit, two doves, a tiger, and a snake at their ease around him. The painting was made by a Mrs. Eugene (Theodosia) Oliver, who, according to her diary, first came to the Vedanta Society in February of 1908. After that date, she made frequent

entries in her diary to the effect that she visited the Society, often talked with Swami Trigunatita, and at least once took spiritual instruction from him. She did not, however, give up her own religion, Catholicism; indeed as time went on her devotion to the Roman Catholic Church seems only to have increased, her attendance at mass becoming more and more frequent. Later she joined the Third Order of Carmelites and went to mass every day until her death in 1932. The first entry in Mrs. Oliver's diary regarding the painting of Christ occurs on June 26, 1908: "Went to see Swami Trigunatita about the picture and showed him the sketch I had made. He approved it, suggesting some slight alterations." According to Mrs. French's reminiscences, it was from the Tibetan photograph of Jesus (the authenticity of which the swami had



*Third Tower (Shiva Mandir)  
where Swami Trigunatita performed worships*





Mrs. Oliver's painting of Jesus Christ

apparently never questioned) that he conveyed to Mrs. Oliver his ideas for the painting.

*Jesus Christ in His Yoga Posture* was completed in September of 1908, and Swami Trigunatita, who was pleased with it, saw to it that Mrs. Oliver had it copyrighted; he then bought the copyright from her for twenty-five dollars, which in those days was a fair sum. (Prints of the painting were sold at the Hindu Temple for prices ranging from one dollar and a half to fifty cents, according to size.) In November 1908, the painting was framed and installed in the temple. "It is hung in a very bad light," Mrs. Oliver noted with displeasure in her diary. Later the painting was moved to a spot on the north wall between two windows.

The auditorium was furnished in a somewhat haphazard way by the members of the Society, particularly by those who were closely connected, such as the Frenchs, the Petersens, and the Wollbergs. "How we saved the dimes and dollars!" Cara French wrote in her memoirs. The money went to purchase "flowers for the Altar vases, jardinières, teakwood taborets and stands; picture frames; rugs, the player-organ; and, finally, the linoleum to cover the entire auditorium floor, [which sloped upward toward the back], and a carpet runner to replace the matting in the aisle. Each item was truly a love offering." The chairs

THE IDEA OF THIS PICTURE ORIGINATED IN THE MIND OF A HINDU MONK OF THE RAMAKRISHNA MISSION, BELUR MATH, BELUR, CALCUTTA, INDIA.

IT WAS DESIGNED AND PAINTED, ACCORDING TO THE VERBAL DESCRIPTIONS OF THE ABOVE MONK, BY A CHRISTIAN LADY, MRS. T. P. OLIVER, 227 WEST CLAY STREET, SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA, U. S. AMERICA, FOR THE LOVE OF GOD AND THE TRUTH.—October, 1908.

All kinds of paintings and drawings of this picture, are copyrighted, 1908, by the above artist, Mrs. T. P. OLIVER.

And all kinds of reproductions of this picture, through any printing processes, e. g., photography, lithography, halftone, etc., are copyrighted, 1908, by the San Francisco Vedanta Society, through their Agent, Swami Trigunatita, San Francisco.

*N. B.— It is hereby understood between the said Mrs. T. P. Oliver the Artist, and the said Swami Trigunatita, that the said Mrs. T. P. Oliver the Artist is at liberty to take any reproduction of the Painting in question, i.e. The Picture "Jesus in His Yoga Posture", through any process of printing, only for the sake of producing paintings or drawings of the said picture, by herself, but not for selling the printed reproductions, nor for having it painted by any other person but by herself. Oct. 21, 1908. Swami Trigunatita.*

The agreement between Swami Trigunatita and Theodosia Oliver regarding the copyright to the Jesus in His Yoga Posture painting

for the congregation (a few spindle-backed, but most folding with solid wood seats and backs) were moveable and arranged in rows. The auditorium could perhaps accommodate one hundred such chairs, and except on special days of celebration, such as the dedication days, this was more than enough. The player-organ stood in front at the right of the platform (as one faced it). A large photograph of Swamiji hung in the center of the back wall, and on the left of the platform hung a huge canopied oil painting of Sri Ramakrishna, standing with one hand raised, as in the photograph taken at the home of Keshab Chandra Sen. Below the painting was an improvised altar of the items listed by Mrs. French—teakwood taborets, stands, and jardinières; there was also a piano bench. Dhirananda [Mrs. Petersen] and Cara French arranged fresh flowers every Saturday on this altar, until, later on, one of the members of the monastery took over this task and faithfully continued it for many years.



*Mrs. Wollberg's painting of Sri Ramakrishna in the Temple auditorium*

The steps leading from the auditorium floor to the spacious platform rose from the central aisle, thereby enabling those who wanted access to the office rooms behind, or who lived in the building, to race down the aisle, take the steps at two bounds and disappear through the door at the back. The ladies, of course, used this route more decorously, but used it nonetheless as a convenient passageway. Swami Trigunatita soon put a stop to this casual use of the platform, obliging even the Petersens to take a roundabout way to their second-floor flat. The auditorium was to him a holy shrine and the platform its chancel; he was exceedingly careful to see that it was treated as such. "Nothing was said in public lectures," Mrs. French recalled, "but in classes Swami Trigunatita constantly stressed the sacredness of the Temple Auditorium. If we *must* talk, not to do so inside: wait until we reached the sidewalk beyond the door. And [he] urged us not to dissipate in idle, useless chatter all the good derived from the meditation [session] or from listening to the lecture." The

platform on which Swami Trigunatita had stood Sunday after Sunday, lecturing, talking of God, chanting, sometimes barely controlling a state of God-consciousness was saturated with holiness. ∞

*- Excerpts from Swami Trigunatita: His Life and Work, Sister Gargi (Marie Louise Burke)*



## The *Voice of Freedom* Magazine

Several among Swami Trigunatita's students had typesetting and printing skills: Mr. and Mrs. French, James Horvath, and E. C. Brown. The swami was also skilled in the art, having produced the *Udbodhan* in India before coming to San Francisco. Swami Trigunatita authorized the purchase of a printing press in 1909, and the monastery members, especially Mr. Horvath, applied their energies to printing bulletins, postcards, and pamphlets. Sister Gargi writes in *Swami Trigunatita: His Life and Work*:

The "Monastery Notes" for March 1, 1909, read: "Mr. Horvath begins to make preparations and inquiries about the installation of the printing plant." He ordered a power press, fonts of type and other equipment from the American Type Foundry Company, and the whole printing plant arrived at the Temple the next day. That same day "Mr. Horvath and Mr. Anderson were hard at work all day setting up the press" in the [small] basement area, and by March 6 it was in running order. A week later Mr. Kruger ran off a sample cover with gold and white ink on a wine-colored stock selected by the swami. "This was satisfactory to all and adopted."

The "Monastery Notes" for March 18 read: "Everybody helping on Magazine. Mr. Horvath working very hard [at setting type and making proofs]. Swami Trigunatita is chief editor; Swami Prakashananda is assistant editor. Both correct proofs. Mr. Kruger giving *some* assistance in composition and suggestions, while Mr. Page also assisted in reading proof, etc.

"A committee composed of Mr. and Mrs. Petersen, Mr. and Mrs. Wollberg, and Swami Trigunatita has been formed to correct articles for the magazine." And on April 3 the "Monastery Notes" read: "Magazine all finished (April issue the first number). One hundred copies bound." April 7: "Magazine all bound and distribution begins."

Thus was launched the *Voice of Freedom*. Inside its elegant cover were twenty-two well-printed pages on heavy, slick paper, with a red line border around each type page. A descriptive portion of its prospectus read in part: "The Main Features of *Voice of Freedom* is never to think even of hurting in any shape or form, or of excluding, or of destroying, directly or indirectly, any thought, or faith, or organization, ancient or modern, orthodox or liberal—but to help them sincerely and practically to fulfill their mission in every way."

After printing a few issues of *Voice of Freedom*, the lack of space became a real issue. To solve this problem an addition to the building was constructed in the backyard area in order to provide typesetting space on the ground floor and a storage area on the next floor. The "Monastery Notes" include the following entries regarding the addition constructed to provide more space for the printing operation:

1909 July 28:

Mr. Wisler came p.m. to talk with Mr. Horvath about putting up an addition in backyard to hold the Composing Room and store the Magazine and other Publications in the future.

1909 July 29:

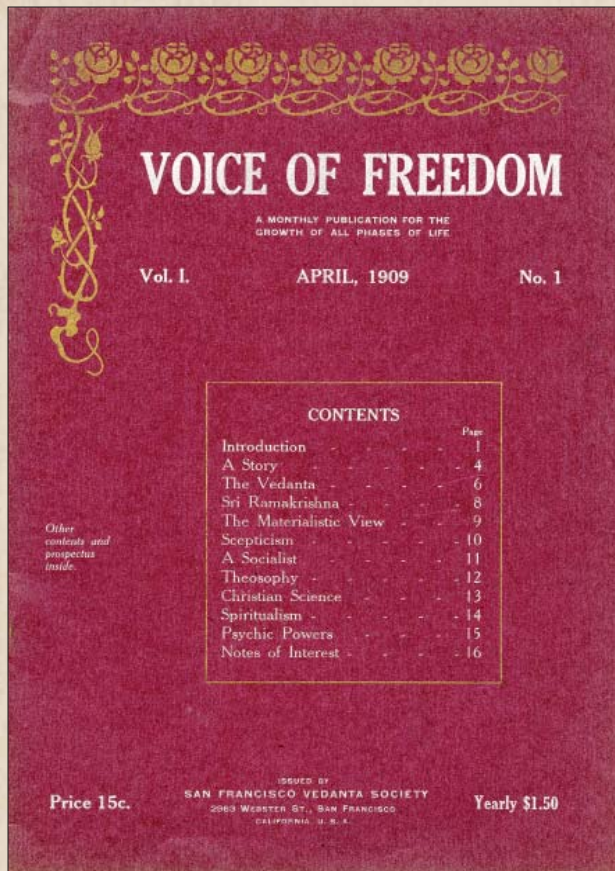
The lumber came for the Printing Office addition to the back of the Temple. The lower floor will be for the Composing Room and the top floor will store the Magazine and other Publications.

1909 July 30:

Building commences on the Addition.

After Swami Trigunatita's passing away the press was removed and the area was converted into a garage with a "flower room" above. ∞





*The first issue of Voice of Freedom, April 1909*

*“Those Beautiful Little Magazines”*

Swami Trigunatita bought a printing press; it used to be here in the back of this auditorium—in the basement there. One of the monks was a printer. They even printed books here such as *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. The swami also started a magazine, a monthly magazine which he called *Voice of Freedom*.

I remember those days. I was a high school student [in Bengal, India], and one of our teachers, a follower of Vedanta, who had come to know about this new magazine [*Voice of Freedom*] being published by the swami in America, subscribed to it.

I still remember those beautiful little magazines printed on white glossy papers and having yellowish ochre-colored paper covers on them with neatly printed, short articles, and rather decorative lettering. Oh, we just used to read those things with great enthusiasm!

~ Swami Ashokananda  
*“The Story of a San Francisco Mystic”*  
January 18, 1953, Old Temple

*Below: Mr. Horvath working at the Temple’s press*





*From the Archives . . .*

## The Making of a Hindu Temple Postcard

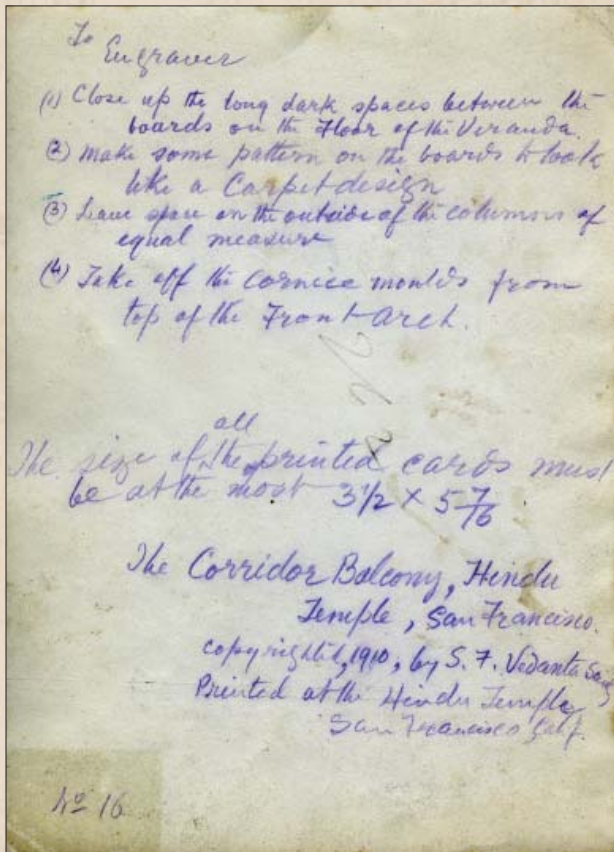
Swami Trigunatita printed several postcard views of the Hindu Temple on the press in the basement. He oversaw every detail of the process:

First, a professional photographer was engaged to take various views of the Temple.

Next, the swami selected an image and gave detailed instructions about altering it, according to his taste.

Then, after the image was altered by the engraver, the final printer's "cuts" were prepared.

Finally, the postcard was printed. Voilà! ☺



*Original photograph of the corridor balcony*

*Swami Trigunatita's instructions to the engraver*





*Corridor Balcony, Hindu Temple, San Francisco.*

*The retouched photograph*

**THE CORRIDOR BALCONY, HINDU TEMPLE, SAN FRANCISCO.**

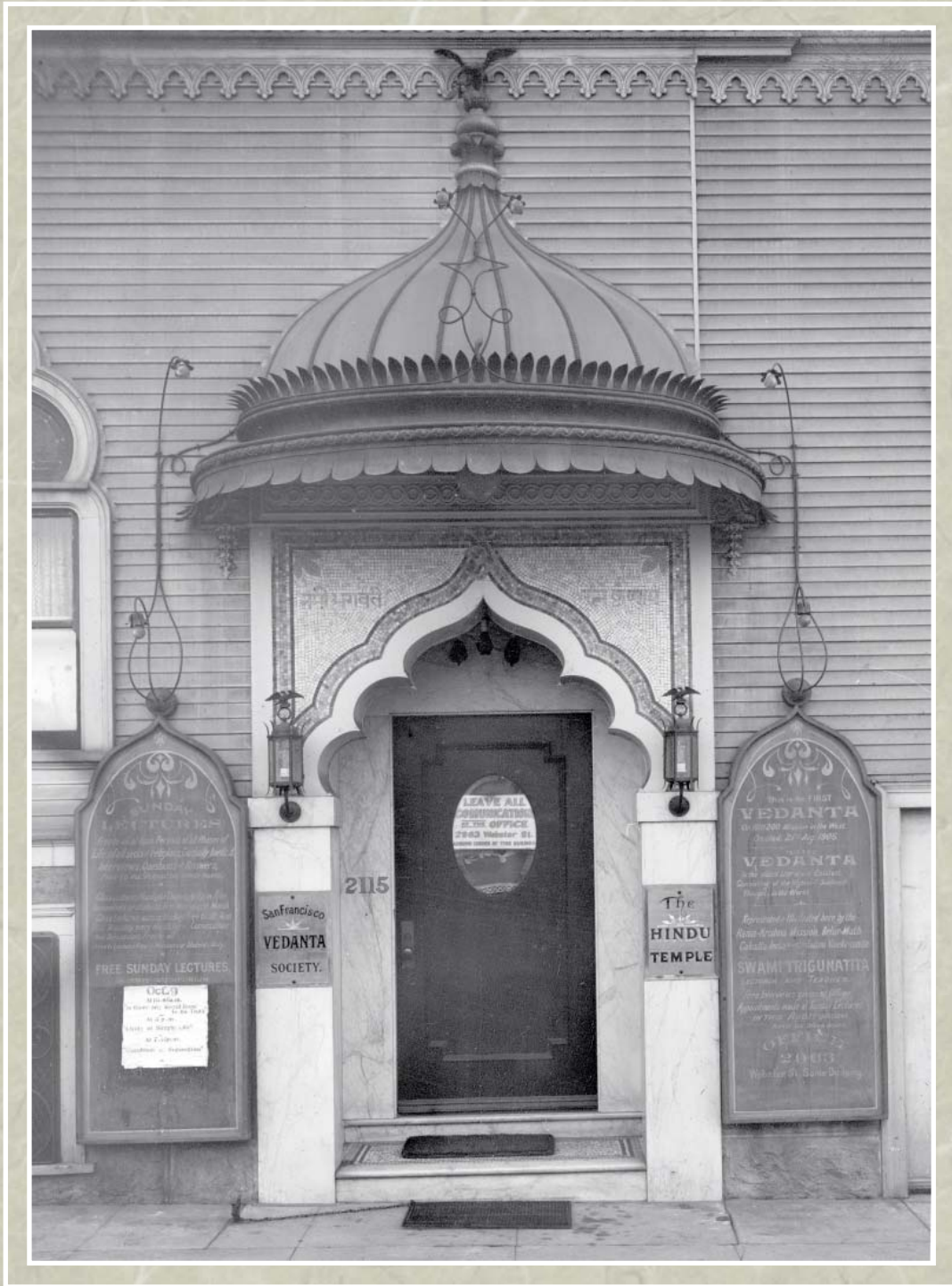
Copyrighted, 1910, by the S. F. Vedanta Society

PRINTED AT THE HINDU TEMPLE, SAN FRANCISCO, CALIF.



*The completed postcard*





*Hindu Temple auditorium entrance, circa 1910*



# The Hindu Temple: An Overview

*Pravrajika Madhavaprana*

**T**HE OUTSIDE OF THE HINDU TEMPLE IN SAN FRANCISCO'S MARINA DISTRICT has been portrayed many times in the century since it was dedicated. It has been described, sketched, painted, photographed, studied by architects, and shown by tour guides, often as a unique symbol of San Francisco of its time. Viewers have wondered about this building: what is it used for; who lives there; who built it; and what goes on within its walls. This will be the story.

The Hindu Temple, now referred to as the Old Temple, belongs to the Vedanta Society of Northern California, which was founded by Swami Vivekananda in 1900. The headquarters of the Vedanta Society is at its New Temple, four blocks away at the corner of Fillmore and Vallejo Streets. The Society's principal beliefs are universal: All people and all things are essentially divine; individuals can realize their divinity by spiritual practice; and all religions are true and lead to the same goal. The architecture and history of the Hindu Temple is a demonstration of these beliefs.

## *The Mission Explained*

The creation of the Hindu Temple in San Francisco, and the inauguration of the Vedanta work therein, is a story of divine and miraculous proportions. It matches the time, the people, and the city where it was built. Swami Trigunatita, the temple's designer and soul, so to speak, was a person who always lived in the higher realms of thought and spirit. He was a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, the God-man who lived in nineteenth-century India. Like his brother disciple Swami Vivekananda, Swami Trigunatita believed that India and America would bring about a spiritual uplift of humanity, and that he was sent by his Master and his Master's chief disciple, Swami Vivekananda, to help with this great mission. He further believed that the city of San Francisco was divinely blessed to

have the Hindu Temple built there. In the pamphlet he published about the temple, he wrote: "We are glad and proud to say that God has given San Francisco, the golden city of the West, U.S.A., the privilege, honor, and glory of erecting and establishing the first Hindu Temple in the whole Western World."

## *The Site near the Bay*

The people and the press of San Francisco welcomed Vedanta and the early swamis to their city: Swami Vivekananda; Swami Turiyananda, who founded the first Vedanta retreat in California; and Swami Trigunatita, who built the first Hindu Temple in San Francisco.

The Vedanta Society already had a foothold in San Francisco when Swami Trigunatita arrived from India in January of 1903. He lived and taught Vedanta for the first three years while living with Mr. and Mrs. Carl Petersen, two staunch disciples of his predecessor, Swami Turiyananda. In fact, he continued to live with the Petersens throughout his stay in San Francisco, since they later occupied the flat on the second floor of the temple, thus making the temple into what the swami proudly called an American residence, in addition to being a Hindu temple.

In 1904 a core group of pioneer American Vedantins went with Swami Trigunatita in search of a place to build the temple. They found a corner lot near the

bay for \$8,000. Mr. Juhl, a restaurant owner, who knew and was devoted to Swami Vivekananda, gave \$1,000 as a down payment and a \$7,000 loan at 6% interest to Swami Trigunatita. This was the first big debt the swami took on and that was just to purchase the land for the temple. The building would cost twice as much.

Nevertheless, they boldly started construction of the building. The Society employed the architect Joseph A. Leonard, who worked closely with the swami in planning the two-story residential structure which would be the temple. At this time the first financial miracle happened: A donation of \$7,000 came from a Los Angeles woman to clear the mortgage on the land.

Vedantins, none of whom were rich, made small donations for the construction of the temple. The largest was \$900 anonymously listed as by "a woman disciple of Sri Ramakrishna," most probably Swami Vivekananda's disciple Mrs. Ole Bull.

**VEDANTA SOCIETY**  
**2963 Webster St., cor Filbert**  
**RE-OPENING LECTURES, 1906**  
 By the Eminent and Refined Hindoo Missionary  
**Swami Trigunatita**  
**Exponent of the Doctrine of Kindness, which has**  
**made the Hindoos the most unselfish**  
**race in the world**

**R**EPRESENTS a religion most rationally devoted to the Truth and the practical knowledge of the Self and of our relation to the world. An ancient religion founded on the Vedas, the earliest and the grandest scriptures of the Aryans—the most ancient forefathers of the human race. A religion that can now save the nations from selfishness.

SWAMI TRIGUNATITA

a truth teacher, India's son, native of Calcutta, is the lecturer. He is learned in Sanskrit literature, the oldest known language of the civilized world. He lectures in fine English. His non-sectarian and brotherly feelings are remarkable. All sects and denominations, all clubs and societies, persons of all classes and of all phases of life are cordially invited to his Sunday lectures at 8 p. m.

*Admission Free*

Private interviews with him, by appointment, for talks, enquiries and answers, are free.

His Monday and Thursday classes and private lessons are free only to members or students of the society. Dues, \$1.50 per month.

He gives lessons in correspondence also. Make arrangements.

Lessons in Sanskrit, 50c. each.

*Swami Trigunatita's flier for lectures and classes*

### *Surviving the Earthquake*

Swami Trigunatita was totally selfless about taking credit for the Hindu Temple and the work. He always gave credit either to his Master, Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, or to the Divine Mother for anything he accomplished in San Francisco. In the case of the temple, he declared that if there were any selfishness in its building, it would fall, and if it were the Master's work, it would stand. Three months after the dedication the temple survived, unscathed, the great 1906 earthquake and fire, which killed 3,000 people and destroyed much of the city. San Franciscans, with a spirit and enthusiasm to match the swami's, rebuilt their city, using the rubble as landfill to create the Marina District, and, in less than ten years afterwards, built the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in the vicinity of the temple.

### *The Towers Are Added*

In 1907 Swami Trigunatita decided to add a third floor to the temple and towers which represented various religions and cultures of the world. He wanted Swami Brahmananda, president of the Ramakrishna Mission, to come from India on a visit and to stay for at least a few months. When that plan fell through, he started a monastery. The dedication of the new additions to the temple took place on April 5, 1908.

Just as in the case of the first dedication in 1906, the event made headlines in the San Francisco newspapers, and a large sympathetic crowd attended. This dedication was more elaborate than the first one in 1906. In 1906 the Society officers Mr. Petersen and Mr. Wollberg gave welcoming talks. Then the swami addressed the attentive audience as "my dear friends of the land of liberty." He thanked the Americans for their tolerance of Vedanta and all religions and for spreading ideas of liberty and tolerance throughout the world. He added that the American flag would fly above the temple as a tribute. The *San Francisco Chronicle* reported that the only trace of Orientalism in this event was the swami's robes.

In the 1908 dedication the swami treated the crowd to a visit to the towers where he performed *arati*, a Hindu-style evening worship, in one of the towers. According to a newspaper reporter, the audience was very much impressed. Some of the Vedanta Society members objected to the towers and the exotic worships which the swami introduced. The swami explained to a disciple the noble idea behind these symbols and rituals. He said he wanted to blend Indian and American customs in the temple and in





*Special worship was offered in the Shiva Tower.*

his ministry. He recognized that there was deep-seated prejudice against other peoples, religions, and cultures in the human mind, and that this unfortunate trait would impede the work as well as an individual's spiritual growth. So he introduced practices in the work to "disarm and break down prejudice and bigotry and ignorance [in order to] harmonize and make the path smooth for those who would follow and carry on the work." As though to support the swami's stand, another financial miracle came about that paid off the mortgage he had taken upon himself for the temple additions: Unexpectedly, an old member arrived at the temple with a donation of \$8,000 in gold.

### *Teaching Americans*

What activities took place in this "First Hindu Temple in the whole Western World"? From the first day in 1906, Swami Trigunatita's main focus was the training of students. He called this training *brahmacharya*. He gave classes on the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads as well as on the Sanskrit language; and he taught the students to conduct classes and give lectures themselves. He initiated disciples, taught them to meditate, gave interviews, and trained them in self-analysis and karma yoga, the technique of working without attachment. He encouraged art, music, and chanting. For the public he gave a weekly program of lectures, a program very similar to what the Christian churches provided for their congregations. Likewise, music was included in the services. In August of 1906, Swami Prakashananda came from India and joined enthusiastically in the work. After 1908, when the monastery was shifted to the third floor, a strict and separate routine was established for the monks. Thus the Hindu Temple with two Indian swamis and a group of earnest

American men brought Ramakrishna-Vivekananda monasticism to the West.

Swami Trigunatita himself was intensely austere and set a very high standard for the students. An example of this was a fifteen-hour service he gave every year on Sri Ramakrishna's birthday as well as on Christmas. All fifteen hours of the day he fasted and remained standing on the auditorium platform, meditating, and talking about Sri Ramakrishna or Jesus Christ. Some of the students sat in their seats for the entire time. The first such service for his Master, Sri Ramakrishna, was held in the Petersens' home before the temple was built. He wrote to a friend in India about it, saying that some of his talks were so good that almost everyone cried. During the services, his talks were interspersed with music and chanting by Swami Prakashananda and the devotees.

To help disseminate the teachings of Vedanta, Swami Trigunatita and the members started a magazine, *Voice of Freedom*. It was printed on a press in the temple basement by one of the monks. The magazine was widely circulated, even reaching as far as East Bengal, India. Swami Ashokananda told how, when he was in



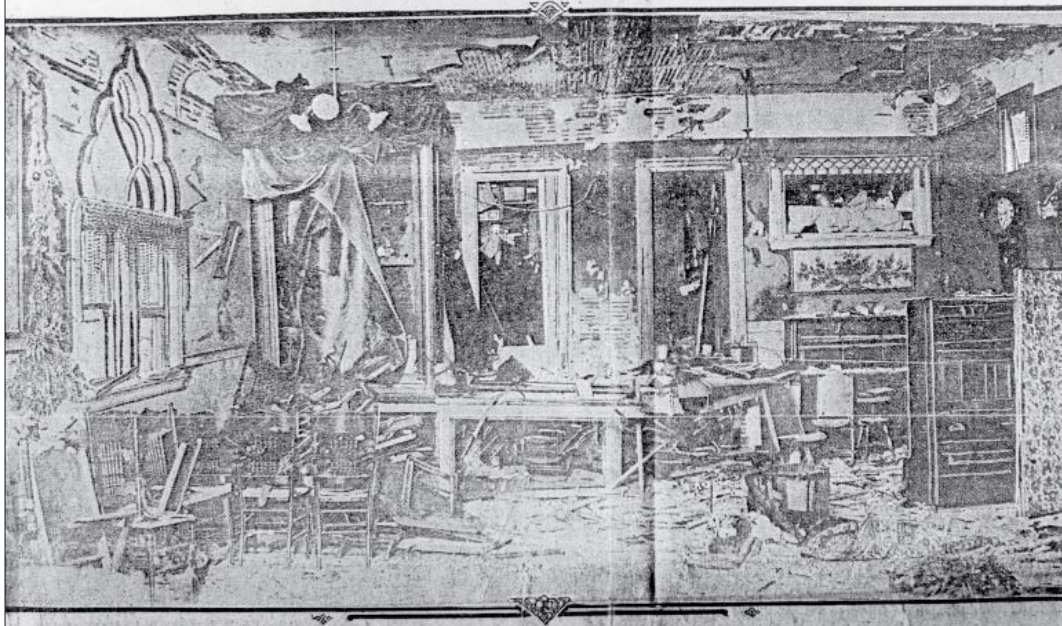
*The firehouse next door*

high school, his teacher subscribed to the magazine and allowed his students to read it.

Swami Trigunatita was loved and respected by the many different people he encountered in his work, from children to the mayor of San Francisco. The mayor gave permission for a garden around the

# SLAYS, AND WRECKS HINDU TEMPLE

PORTION of Hindu Temple that was partially wrecked yesterday by a bomb thrown by Louis Vavra. In the rear center, just to the right of the chairs, is the platform, badly shattered, from which Swami Trigunatita was preaching. He was hurled through the door directly behind the torn part of the platform. Vavra was hurled backward, falling dead at the rear of the upturned rug that is shown at the right of the picture.



## EXPLOSION IN MIDST OF WOMEN OCCULTISTS

Maniacal Devotee of Vedantic Teachings Walks Into Temple of Cult With Missile of Death Hid in Hat While Service Is On

Houses Around Sanctuary at Webster and Filbert Are Shaken by Terrific Blast Which Wrecks Interior of Building

Disgruntled Student Is Hurled Into Eternity by Bursting Shell. Swami of Cult, at Whose Feet It Explodes, Is Fatally Injured

**D**RIVEN mad by his failure to master the secrets of the esoteric writings of the adepts, Louis Vavra, student of the occult, until recently employed in the Southern Pacific machine shops at Oakland, entered the Hindu Temple at Webster and Filbert streets yesterday afternoon and exploded a bomb at the feet of the Swami Trigunatita, who was standing on a platform expounding the beauties of the Vedanta.

The dark-hued Hindu preacher

San Francisco Examiner, December 28, 1914, the day after

temple, allowing an easement that extended into the sidewalk. The swami used to send *prasad*, offered food from the worships, to the firemen, his friends next door. Children of the devotees got special attention from the swami too; they could move freely in his office, touching everything of interest to them.

### Tragedy

The Society members and the work at the temple received a severe blow on December 27, 1914, when a mentally unbalanced student exploded a bomb at the feet of their beloved Swami Trigunatita, while he was speaking in the auditorium. The student was killed instantly. The swami was badly injured and was taken to a hospital where he gave up his body two weeks later on Swami Vivekananda's birthday, January 10, 1915. Several members were badly wounded, and the auditorium was in ruins. First responders were the firemen next door, who cared for the injured until the ambulances arrived.

It took more than a year before the temple returned to any semblance of normalcy. Mrs. Petersen supervised the repair of the damaged pictures and the interior of the auditorium. Two of the monks repaired and painted the exterior of the building. The authorities of the Ramakrishna Order at the Belur Math headquarters

asked Swami Prakashananda to take leadership of the Vedanta Society. As Swami Prakashananda had started a separate Vedanta center the year before, he was asked to join that center to the Hindu Temple Vedanta Society, which he did, taking charge of the combined centers in December 1915.



Swamis Prakashananda and Prabhavananda,  
Hindu Temple, 1923



### *Swami Prakashananda*

Swami Prakashananda was a gentle soul whose quiet, dedicated work helped heal the terrible blow of Swami Trigunatita's death. His service as assistant and then as minister in charge helped establish Vedanta firmly in San Francisco. Having worked at the temple since 1906, he was able to restore almost immediately the basic programs at the temple for members and the public: lectures, classes, interviews, and training of students in meditation and spiritual life. Soon after he assumed leadership, he conducted the traditional fifteen-hour service on Sri Ramakrishna's birthday, March 1916.

welcome from his brother monks. There was a joyful exchange of news and ideas about India and America.

### *Transition*

Swami Prakashananda returned to the United States with two young swamis, Swami Prabhavananda and Swami Raghavananda. The latter stayed in New York to assist Swami Bodhananda. Swami Prabhavananda came to San Francisco and served as assistant minister but shortly thereafter went to Portland, Oregon, and ultimately went to southern California to found a Vedanta society there.



*Swami Prakashananda on the roof of the Hindu Temple, circa 1925*

It is true that many of the outreach programs of Swami Trigunatita's time had to be discontinued or reduced. This was partly due to the hard times for the people of San Francisco caused by World War I and the flu epidemic. The new colony and retreat which had been established across the bay in Concord was closed and sold. The magazine, *Voice of Freedom*, ended in March 1916, and the monastery membership decreased. Regular retreats at Shanti Ashrama were discontinued, though the property and buildings were maintained.

In October 1922 Swami Prakashananda visited India for four months. Swami Atulananda (Gurudas) and Sarah Fox, who went with him, said he received a hero's

Swami Dayananda was sent from India and arrived in June 1926 to assist the ailing Swami Prakashananda. Swami Prakashananda died on February 13, 1927. A beautiful funeral was held for him in the auditorium of the temple. At this solemn occasion Swami Dayananda eulogized him by saying that his guru, Swami Vivekananda, had asked him to sacrifice himself for others. Surely, Swami Prakashananda had done that in San Francisco, as Swamiji himself had done so in the West and in India. To take Swami Prakashananda's place as head of the San Francisco Vedanta Society the authorities at Belur Math sent Swami Madhavananda, one of the Order's finest young leaders and president of Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati. He was the head of the Society from June



*Swami Prakashananda's funeral, Temple auditorium, February 16, 1927  
Left to right: Swamis Prabhavananda, Dayananda, and Bodhananda*

1927 to May 1929, when he was recalled to India to serve in the administration of the Order.

Swami Dayananda, the assistant, then assumed leadership of the Vedanta Society, but stayed only until 1931, at which time his assistant, Swami Vividishananda, took over. Swami Dayananda, who left in August 1931, wanted to found an organization in India to help Indian mothers and infants. He took the help of nurses whom he had met in America. This ultimately resulted in the Kolkata medical center and hospital known as Seva Pratishthan.

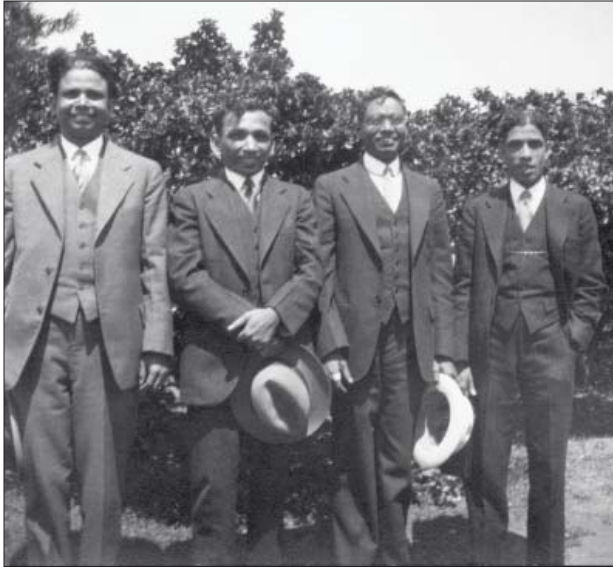
The next leaders of the Hindu Temple were Swami Vividishananda with his assistant, Swami Ashokananda. Unfortunately, after two years, Swami Vividishananda fell seriously ill and went to the center in Providence, Rhode Island, for medical treatment. When he recovered, he returned to the West Coast in 1932, where he later established a Vedanta center in Seattle, Washington.

All these comings and goings in America and between India and America could be called a partial fulfillment of Swami Trigunatita's vision of the future of the Hindu Temple, as described earlier.

### ***Swami Ashokananda on the Legacy of Swami Trigunatita***

Swami Ashokananda, the spiritual leader of the Vedanta Society from 1932-1969, believed in the truth of Swami Trigunatita's vision that Vedanta would spread and thrive in America for many years to come. When Swami Ashokananda arrived at the Hindu Temple, he sensed a deep holiness that Swami Trigunatita had brought there, and, over the years, he was inspired to continue the work that the great swami had inaugurated. In a 1954 lecture entitled "An Apostle of an Incarnation," which he delivered on Swami Trigunatita's birthday, Swami Ashokananda spoke about the ideas and ideals behind his work. He said





*Swamis Akhilananda, Vividishananda, Ashokananda, and Dayananda, San Francisco, August 15, 1931*

that Swami Trigunatita had a comprehensive vision of what the work would be. Knowing that Vedanta was a religion based on renunciation and contemplation, Swami Trigunatita started a monastery, a convent, a retreat for contemplation in Concord, close to San Francisco, and a magazine to spread the universal ideals of Vedanta. He saw the complete picture, both the transcendental and the practical. Even though some of the programs Swami Trigunatita started did not survive his death, they would inevitably be taken up by his successors.

The concluding words of Swami Ashokananda's lecture reveal the divine power behind Swami Trigunatita's work:

But it is maintained in India that whatever a great soul wishes is bound to be fulfilled. And we find that his motives are continually pressing forward to find expression. And I have not the least doubt that all the things that he tried to accomplish and started, although temporarily discontinued, will begin to take shape and form and again begin to function. When this will happen will depend upon our devotion and our own abilities. But we may say, therefore, that for a long time to come we shall have to follow in the footsteps of this great swami, in the method of his work and in the things he tried to accomplish. The beauty of his work lies in his utter devotion to the ideals of his Master and of Swami Vivekananda. . . and in the resourcefulness he showed in the fulfillment of these duties which were imposed upon him.

Not a day passes in which I am not reminded of him. Because this is his place, a place on which he lavished so much care, and for which he gave his very best energies, he, no doubt, dwells here. No doubt he looks upon us all with his compassionate eye, because such souls have only one purpose and one motive: compassion and love.

In two ministries spanning more than eighty years, from 1932 to 2014, we see the spirit behind the original Hindu Temple manifesting more and more. The Vedanta Society led by Swami Ashokananda (1932-1969) and Swami Prabuddhananda (1970-2014) made Vedanta a respected religion in the San Francisco Bay Area. Although the impressive development that was to come was not without its challenges, both internally and externally, progress in the Society's growth continued.

### ***Swami Ashokananda***

Swami Ashokananda lived in the Hindu Temple his entire life in America. Utterly devoted to Vedanta, as lived by Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother, and Swamiji, Swami Ashokananda lived, meditated, taught, and worked for the Vedanta Society in this temple. For nearly forty years he gave hundreds of classes and lectures here and initiated and taught many students how to live, meditate, and work spiritually. Adopting the ideals of Vedanta, these students, both monastic and lay, became dedicated workers of the Vedanta Society.

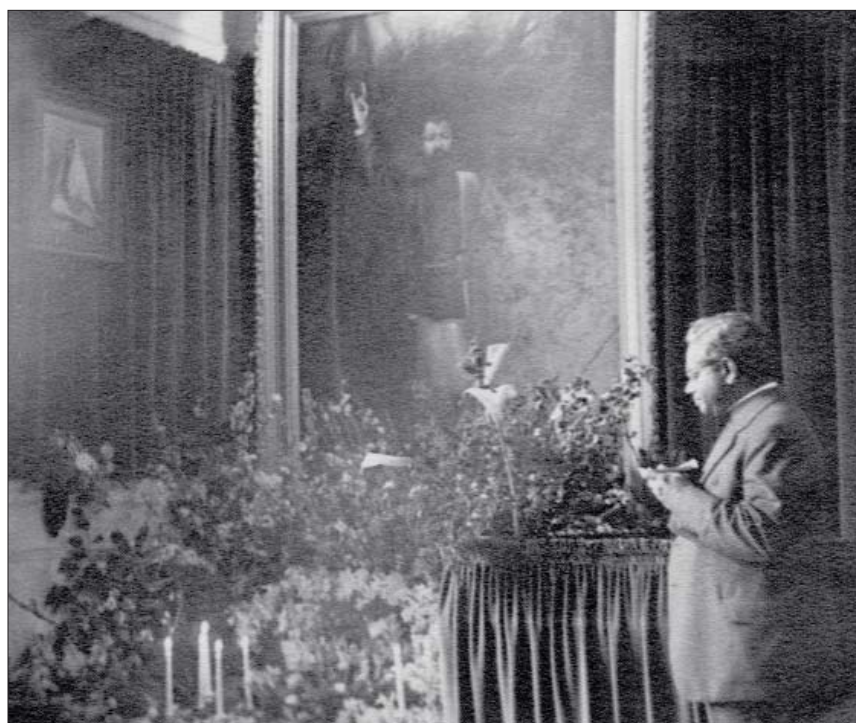
One of the first things the swami did was to bring two young men into the monastery, which, at that time, had only one member, Mr. Henry Page,



*Swami Ashokananda in his Temple office, early 1930s*

from Swami Trigunatita's days. One of these young men was Mr. Alfred Clifton, who accompanied Swami Ashokananda to India in the 1930s and received initiation and *brahmacharya* from Swami Akhandananda, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. In 1961 Mr. Clifton went to India to take the vows of *sannyasa* and became Swami Chidrupananda, an excellent assistant to Swami Ashokananda and to his successors, first Swami Shantaswarupananda and then Swami Prabuddhananda. The monastery continued to grow throughout Swami Ashokananda's ministry. He also started a convent under the auspices of the Ramakrishna Order.

Many swamis have lived in the upstairs monastery, either as guests or as assistants, including Swami



*Swami Ashokananda offering worship in the Temple auditorium on a celebration day*

Shantaswarupananda, Swami Shraddhananda, and Swami Swahananda. One special guest who stayed and gave classes for some months was Swami Yatiswarananda, a disciple of Swami Brahmananda, who had lived for some time in Germany and then in Philadelphia before returning to India.

Turning now to the first floor of the temple, it is amazing how much was accomplished by the swami and members in the three offices, auditorium, and flower room. In the 1940s two devotees who had an interior decoration business redid the furnishings

and carpets. For the auditorium new altars were built and pictures were made for the worships of Christ, Lord Buddha, and Sri Krishna. A beautiful photo of a statue of Lord Buddha, taken by the famous San Francisco photographer Ansel Adams, was placed later on the south wall of the auditorium.

For Christ's worship a lovely reproduction of Raphael's *Madonna and Child* was beautifully decorated on a special altar set up for Christmas. Worships for these three incarnations were added to the yearly program of public worships in the auditorium in addition to worships of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. Later, a larger painting of the Holy Mother was placed in the auditorium. Swami Ashokananda gave lectures Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings, and a scripture class was held on Friday nights, beginning with a thirty-to forty-minute meditation.

The offices at the front of the auditorium were a beehive of activity. Swami Ashokananda had started a Sunday school for children on Swami Vivekananda's birthday in 1941. On Sundays, during the lecture, Sunday school classes were held in one of the front offices. A library was located in another front office where members could read and check out books after the lectures or wait for an interview with the swami. The middle office was the swami's. There interviews would take place or meetings with writers concerning the Vedanta Society publications, such as *The Voice of India* magazine; the monthly bulletin, which was mimeographed

in the temple; and Marie Louise Burke's *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries* volumes, which were ultimately published in India.

All of the Vedanta Society's business was conducted by its dedicated members in these offices. One could say that the Society's physical as well as spiritual expansion up to 1969 radiated from this small space in the temple: the Lake Tahoe ashrama; the Berkeley temple; the Olema retreat; the New Temple; the convent buildings in San Francisco and San Rafael; and the Sacramento temple.



Swami Ashokananda stressed meditation as an essential, beneficial spiritual practice, and he invited students to meditate daily in the temple. Furthermore, the main purpose of the Society's purchase of the property at Olema was to have a place for devotee and monastic members to spend time in a meditative environment away from the city.

After the dedication of the New Temple on Durga Puja 1959, the main Vedanta Society activities shifted to its new headquarters at the New Temple. Office work, lectures, worships, and individual daily meditation took place there. However, some items of business continued to be conducted in what was now known as the Old Temple. Throughout the sixties Swami Ashokananda, Swami Chidrupananda, and a few monks lived there. Most of the monks, however, lived and worked at the Olema retreat or the Sacramento center. Swami Shraddhananda lived part of each week at the Old Temple and gave the Friday night class in the auditorium. Swami Ashokananda gave lectures and interviews at the New Temple on Sundays. On other days of the week he met with people in his office at the Old Temple.

In August 1968, Swami Swahananda, the new assistant swami, came from India and lived in the upstairs monastery. In 1968 because of his deteriorating health, Swami Ashokananda moved to the main floor of the Old Temple and was cared for by professional nurses. As head of the center, the swami's last project was to find a new building for the convent so that the house next door to the New Temple, which had been purchased and was occupied by convent members, could be used as a monastery and residence for his successor.

After Swami Ashokananda's death on December 13, 1969, his chief assistant, Swami Shantaswarupananda, came from Berkeley to live at the Old Temple as swami in charge until he left for India in December 1970. His main focus was orienting the new swami in charge, Swami Prabuddhananda, who had come from India in June of the same year.



*Swami Prabuddhananda, Old Temple auditorium, 1981*

### ***Swami Prabuddhananda***

Although Swami Prabuddhananda did not live at the Old Temple, but rather at the main monastery adjacent to the New Temple, he continued to give the older temple an important place in the work of the Vedanta Society. In 1972 he asked Swami Chidrupananda to supervise a professional shoring up of the old structure so it would be safe for continued use.

The upstairs monastery continued with a few monks until 1996, when Swami Chidrupananda passed away. This revered swami was cared for upstairs in his last years by brother monks on a rotating basis. Later the



*Swami Prabuddhananda, Society's 75th Anniversary observance, Old Temple, 1975*

upstairs rooms of the monastery frequently served as a guest house for visiting swamis and men devotees during Swami Prabuddhananda's ministry.

The auditorium continued to be used for the regular Friday evening scripture class, meetings for members, and for special occasions. In 1973 Swami Prabuddhananda arranged for three American men (*brahmacharis*) to go to India to take the vows of *sannyasa*. When they returned the swami held a meeting for the Vedanta Society members in the Old Temple to hear the new *sannyasins* talk about their India experience. The same year he also held a beautiful ceremony on Jagaddhatri Puja to reinaugurate the Vedanta Sunday school, which had been discontinued earlier. In 1975 on the occasion of the Society's 75th anniversary, Society members, guest swamis, and members from other Vedanta centers gathered for a special program. Another meeting honoring monastics took place in 1987, when eight women (*brahmacharinis*) of the Vedanta Convent took the vows of *sannyasa*.

The swami had great respect for Swami Trigunatita and his work in the West. As a tribute to him, he asked Sister Gargi (Marie Louise Burke) to write a biography, which was published, both by the Vedanta Society of Northern California and Advaita Ashrama in 1997, under the title *Swami Trigunatita: His Life and Work*.

Swami Tattwamayananda arrived from Belur Math, India, in January 2012 to serve as assistant minister to

Swami Prabuddhananda. Soon thereafter he started giving the Old Temple Friday evening scripture class. On July 2, 2014, Swami Prabuddhananda passed away and Swami Tattwamayananda became the swami in charge. He continued giving the Friday evening class at the Old Temple, and his last Friday class before the temple's renovation was on March 28, 2014, on "Yoga in the Bhagavad Gita."

The Annual Membership Meeting of the San Francisco Vedanta Society has been traditionally held in the Old Temple. Inspiring talks have been given over the years by the attending swamis at the close of the meeting. In Swami Prabuddhananda's final message,

at his last meeting in the Old Temple auditorium on March 22, 2014, he emphasized that there will always be ups and downs in the hard work that service entails, but that on the whole *ananda*, blissful satisfaction, is the result; we should be grateful for the opportunity we have been given. He invoked the blessings of Sri Ramakrishna, Mother, and Swamiji to inspire us to cooperate with one another and to serve unselfishly in this spirit. He concluded, "We are all part of a big mission. Though we may work in the office, Olema, convent, or monastery, that mission will be fulfilled. May He bless each one of us." And, as if to extend this blessing, it was he, who, at the end of his life, sanctioned the renovation of the Old Temple for the continued preservation of this holy site. ☺



*Women's Choir (primarily convent members), 75th Anniversary observance*



## “Establishing Vedanta in San Francisco”

It was not easy to have built this temple. First of all, there were financial difficulties. Secondly, Swami Trigunatita wanted to make this temple, which was “The first Hindu Temple,” as he called it, to be the first “in the whole Western world.” And it can be truly said that it was the first permanent home of any of the Vedanta centers in this country. For that matter, there were not many Vedanta centers here. There was this temple, and there was the one in New York City; although there had been one in Los Angeles, it really did not amount to much and petered out. So he wanted to make this temple representative of the ideas for which Vedanta stood, make it representative of all the different religious ideals and religions. That is the reason for the towers; they represent different countries and different religious beliefs. Afterwards, when the whole thing was built, he wrote a description of this temple, interpreting every phase of it. Occasionally, I have come upon this leaflet, and it shows how much thought he lavished on the building of this temple. We merely look at it and see it, but every little thing had a meaning for him.

You must remember that he worked here from 1903 to 1915—twelve years only. During these twelve years he accomplished a tremendous amount. Not only did he build this temple, but he organized the Society and established its regular functioning, such as holding regular services twice or three times a week, regular classes, regular private training and interviews to the students and teaching them how to become spiritual. He also started a magazine, a monthly magazine which he called *Voice of Freedom*, which lasted till a short time after his passing and then had to be discontinued.

He started a monastery in this temple. When he built the third floor, he had a fond hope that he would be able to persuade Swami Brahmananda, who had become the president of our Order, after the passing of Swami Vivekananda, to come and live here. And so he built this third floor with great care for the comfort of the great Swami Brahmananda. Of course, Swami Brahmananda let him know later on that he couldn't come here, he had to live in India. However, since this third floor was here already, he felt that there were some young people, young men, who had a desire to



*Swami Trigunatita, San Francisco, 1903*

live the life of renunciation, the monastic life, and so he started the monastery. (I may say that because of the desire of some of the women students he also allowed them to start a convent, and he laid down certain rules for their life, but that was discontinued.) In this monastery he also used to live in those days on the third floor along with the monks, but very soon he found it inconvenient and he came down to this floor where we have our library now; that used to be his office as well as his bedroom. He used to spread his blanket on the floor at night, and then he would roll up his bedding and put it away and convert it into the office early in the morning. ☺

*-Swami Ashokananda  
“The Story of a San Francisco Mystic”  
January 18, 1953, Old Temple*



*From the Archives . . .*

## Special Celebrations in the 1950s



*Sri Ramakrishna, 1951*



*Peggy Monahan, Elna Olsen,  
Josephine Stanbury, 1956*



*Lynn Muirhead, Josephine Stanbury*



*Christmas, 1953*





*Swami Vivekananda, 1957*



*Lord Buddha, 1950*



*Sri Krishna, 1951*



*Christmas, 1952*

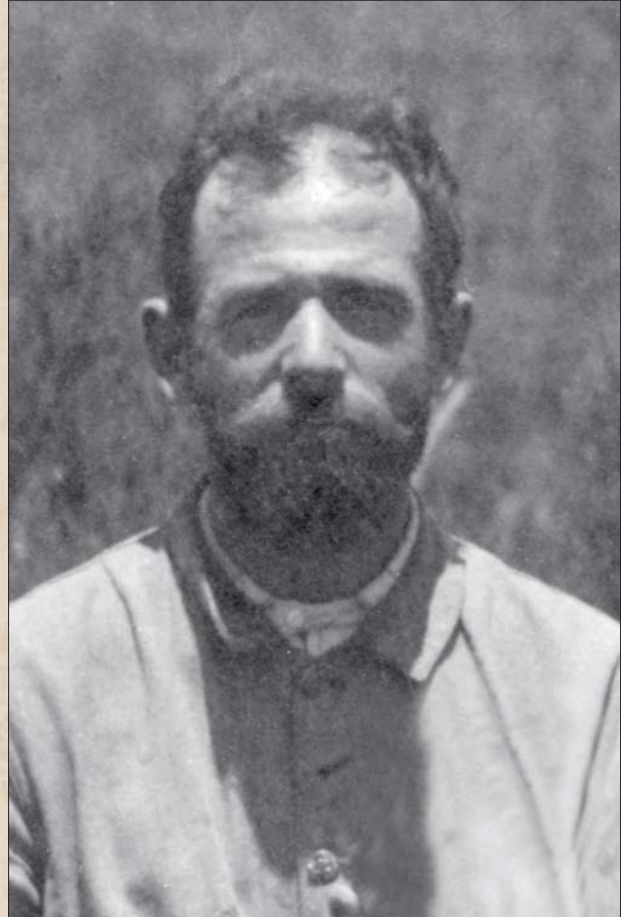


## E. C. Brown and Henry F. Page

Ernest C. Brown, always known as Mr. Brown, was one of the first members of Swami Trigunatita's monastery. One of his duties was to keep a monastery diary, which he called "Monastery Notes." Mr. Brown was responsible for writing an extensive narrative of Swami Trigunatita's life, which was published serially in *Prabuddha Bharata* throughout 1928. It was not attributed to him but was published as "The Work of Swami Trigunatita in the West" by His Western Disciples. That series of articles has become a primary source of information on Swami Trigunatita. Mr. Brown did not claim authorship since the reminiscences included a short passage by Henry F. Page, another member of Swami Trigunatita's monastery.



*Henry F. Page at Shanti Ashrama, 1909*



*E. C. Brown at Shanti Ashrama, 1909*

Henry F. Page lived as a monastic in the Hindu Temple for many years, which adds weight to the argument that Western membership in the San Francisco monastery dates back continuously to Swami Trigunatita's time. In fact, when Adolph Gschwend and Alfred Clifton joined the monastery in the 1930s, Mr. Page was still arranging flower vases for the Temple's altars.

Mr. Brown left the monastery shortly after Swami Trigunatita passed away, but, in the 1920s, he returned and lived in the Temple once again, where he faithfully served the Society for many years. In 1958 he traveled to India and lived out his days at the Bangalore Ashrama through the kindness of Swami Yatiswarananda. ∞



6/15/25

My dear Mr. Brown:-

The old Hebrew prophet fervently prayed, "Oh that mine enemy would write a book!" Enemies you may not and should not have, but critics and cypics your printed thoughts must encounter.

To soften the inevitable blow and to disarm the captious, I have shown no tenderness toward the flowery phrase and the soaring but audacious fancy. Though your wings are clipped, your feet are kept on the common earth.

Radical changes in your copy have been made, and whole lines and paragraphs deleted. The typist should be told of your preferred spelling of thru or through. Both appear in copy.

Notes attached to pp. 55 and 57 suggest omission. Quotations from Swami's lectures seem admissible, if not necessary, and attached to p. 54 you will find some selections.

If you think you are beholden to me for this merciless slaughter, forget it. I am not forgetful.

H. F. P.

Letter from Henry Page to E. C. Brown regarding edits to "The Work of Swami Trigunatita in the West"

### "Early Morning Meditation Class"

Since the water's edge was so close to the Hindu Temple, members of the newly-formed monastery could meditate on the beach in the early morning. In the "Monastery Notes" for March 3, 1909, Mr. Brown recorded:

"Mr. Kruger, Mr. Clark, Mr. Anderson, Mr. Page and Mr. Brown went to the Beach at the foot of Webster Street for the early morning meditation class. Swami

Trigunatita followed and presided. All left promptly at 4 o'clock and arrived at 4:15. Meditation from 4:15 to 4:45. Swami Prakashananda chanted and the members sang 'God Calling Yet' and 'Nearer My God to Thee.' Left for the Temple at 5:00." ∞





*Snapshot of Swami Ashokananda and E. C. Brown, Shanti Ashrama, 1934*



# Vedanta in America: My Reminiscences

*E. C. Brown*

**I**N A CITY ACROSS THE BAY OF SAN FRANCISCO CALLED OAKLAND, I was attending a religious center called the Home of Truth. Its teachings were a diluted version of Vedanta philosophy. The Home dealt largely in success and prosperity and that sort of thing, but they also had some knowledge of Vedanta. Now, the head of this Home of Truth was a Christian devotee. I was astonished to find him meditating five or six hours a day. He was a German-Pole, a great patriot, and lover of freedom. One Sunday morning he said: "Now, you folks have been wanting me to show you a real renouncer such as I have been telling you about—one who has renounced everything for the Truth. Very well, a great teacher has recently come from India. His name is Swami Vivekananda. I advise you all to go and hear him. He is one of the greatest teachers and greatest ascetics India has ever produced." The hall was empty the next Sunday morning, much to his surprise and astonishment. The only people left in the hall were an elderly German lady and myself.

In the afternoon we also went to hear the Swami. He was not there when we arrived, so we took our seats and waited. Then someone in an orange-colored robe walked from a little side-room out on the platform, and I said to myself, "Who is that? An emperor?" His walk was that of a god, a man accustomed to ruling. When he sat down the audience burst into tumultuous applause. But he sat there unmoved, his face reflecting the perfect calm within. Then he rose and just held up his hands with palms facing the audience, and at once there was a silence that you could feel, it was so tense, so palpable. I said to my companion, "Who is this person who can make a large audience like this yield and in a moment give silence? He is obviously accustomed to commanding others." Then he began his lecture. We listened, and at the close I went up to shake hands with him. Other people were lining up so I went along too. Then he said a few words which were not of significance to me then, because I did not know his greatness. I did not appreciate them until years afterwards.

Among the devoted members of the public and private classes of Swami Vivekananda were Mr. and Mrs. Allan. Mr. Allan was very active and had charge of the seating arrangements. The Swami was giving lectures then to several hundred people. The Sunday following my first meeting there—the meeting was always at two o'clock in that hall—the Swami was late. Mr. Allan became anxious and went up the street which led to the San Francisco Home of Truth where the Swami was staying. Sure enough, half a mile in the distance, there was the Swami leisurely making his way down to the hall. Mr. Allan hurried on up the street and said, "Swami, don't you know you're late? The audience has been waiting." The Swami replied, "Mr. Allan, I am never late. I have all the time in the world. All time is mine." "Well, Swami, the audience may not feel the same as you do." However, they went on—the Swami at the same leisurely pace. Soon they came to a boot-black stand. "Oh, Mr. Allan, look, there's a boot-black stand. Just what I want, a



*Thomas Allan*

shine”—and he had to have a shine. So he climbed up on the stand and made Mr. Allan go up with him. The Swami insisted on paying for both of them, much to Mr. Allan’s embarrassment. They climbed down and went to the hall. It was now 2:30. The audience had been waiting for more than half an hour; but the Swami spoke for two hours

after that. The audience never moved and no one left. But after the meeting Mr. Allan said to the Swami, “Now, Swami, you talked too long. The audience is accustomed to going home to their Sunday afternoon dinner and it isn’t fair to keep them.” The Swami said, “All right. Now, I’ll tell you what to do. Next Sunday, when you think I have spoken long enough, just hold up your watch in the air and wave it like this, and I’ll see it and see what I can do.”

Now, like most Swamis, Swami Vivekananda was quite a tease. So the next Sunday afternoon, when Mr. Allan thought that the Swami had spoken long enough, he held up his watch and waved it about so that he would see it. And the Swami said, “Say, folks, there’s that man with a watch at the back of the hall. He wants me to stop. What do you say?” There were loud shouts of “Go on, go on.” So he went on, but very soon stopped. Mr. Allan thought, “I see, he’s going to play with me.” Now Mr. Allan had one of those grandfather’s watches—nearly the size of a modern alarm clock—which he brought along, and when the Swami saw it, he knew that Mr. Allen was turning the tables on him. He stopped and said, “There’s that man with the watch again. I think I had better stop; after all, he is a Britisher and I come from India.” So he stopped a few minutes later.

I attended nearly all of Swami Vivekananda’s lectures and all of his public classes at that time. He held some private classes, but I was not able to go to those because I was employed in the daytime, but Mrs. Allan did. One morning, at the close of the class when they were beginning to leave, the Swami called out to Mrs. Allan, “You stay, please; I wish to see you.” So Mrs. Allan stayed, and when the people had gone

he led the way to a side door. Mrs. Allan followed him through into the kitchen and the Swami began to warm up a meal, inviting Mrs. Allan to eat with him. As they talked and were getting along with the meal, the Swami finally said, “Now, Mrs. Allan, see here. I wanted to tell you this. No matter whether I am living or dead, here or in India or in England, or wherever it may be, I want you to know that whenever you call upon me in an emergency I will come to your aid.” I have reason to believe that Mrs. Allan took that exactly as the Swami meant it.

After a period of many years’ membership in the Vedanta Society, Mr. Allan passed away from heart trouble. Mrs. Allan, who had been an invalid for a number of years and was taken to a private hospital, followed him a year later—approximately 1952—and her funeral service was held in the same funeral parlor as Mr. Allan’s. Ten days previous to her death, Swami Ashokananda had been compelled to retire



*Swami Vivekananda, San Francisco, 1900*





*Edith Allan*

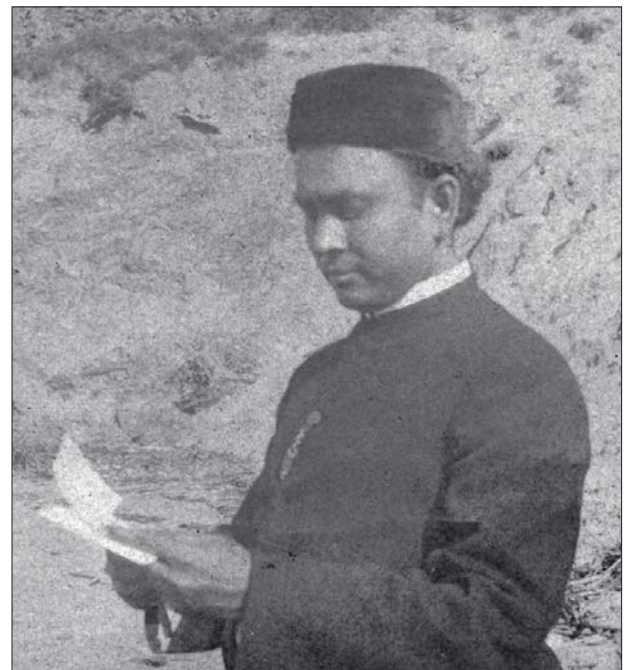
to our Lake Tahoe Ashrama for his health, where he was convalescing under the doctor's care. He told the secretary that if anything happened to Mrs. Allan in his absence, Swami Shantaswarupananda would take charge of the service. Mrs. Allan did pass away during his absence, and Swami Shantaswarupananda did take charge of the service. We have a wealth of musical talent in nearly all of our branches and one of Mrs. Allan's favourite singers sang some of her favourite songs, one of which was that song in which occur the words "All that is, Thou art. All in all, Thou Art." I forget the rest of it, but it means the Lord has made every heart His own and that everyone can find refuge in Him. One of our violinists also accompanied the singing. Now when the music began I felt a new atmosphere beginning to steal into the funeral auditorium. Then the Swami began his beautiful service—a very beautiful funeral service—and as he went on, this atmosphere began to grow more and more evident until at last I felt that some great being, as it were, was there. After the service, I said to Swami Shantaswarupananda, "Swami, did you notice the different atmosphere in the auditorium as though there were a presence in the room other than Mrs. Allan?"; and he said, "Yes, I did. I felt that Swami Vivekananda had kept his promise to Mrs. Allan and had come here today."

My custom was, as president of the Vedanta Society, to accompany the hearse to the funeral grounds, because Swamis always conclude the service on the premises and never go to the crematorium. So I accompanied the

coffin to the cremation building and, after the official procedure had been observed, I went with the casket to the furnace room. They put the casket into the furnace and I sat down to meditate as usual. As I sat there, when the cremation was half-way through, I felt as though the room was just filled with heavenly beings, just as when, in Indian mythology, Vishnu's chariot and his attendants came to take away King Parikshit to his abode; and Mrs. Allan seemed transformed—no longer an invalid but a new and radiant being full of youth and vigour and health. When the body had been consumed I left, feeling that she had tried to give me the impression that she was perfectly satisfied, that the Swami had kept his promise, and that she was being taken to her future abode.

### *Swami Turiyananda*

When Swami Vivekananda left San Francisco, you will remember that Swami Turiyananda was sent by him to a nearby place called (by the latter) the Shanti Ashrama (Peace Retreat). He spent weeks and months trying to build up a core of spiritual disciples, but the bulk of the material he had to work with was not fitted for the teaching and only a very few really took the spirit of his lessons and classes and carried it into their daily lives. No one knows how much he suffered.



*Swami Turiyananda, San Francisco, 1900*

He became quite ill and had to come occasionally to San Francisco for medical attention. When he finally came to San Francisco en route for India, where they



*Swami Trigunatita, San Francisco, circa 1914*

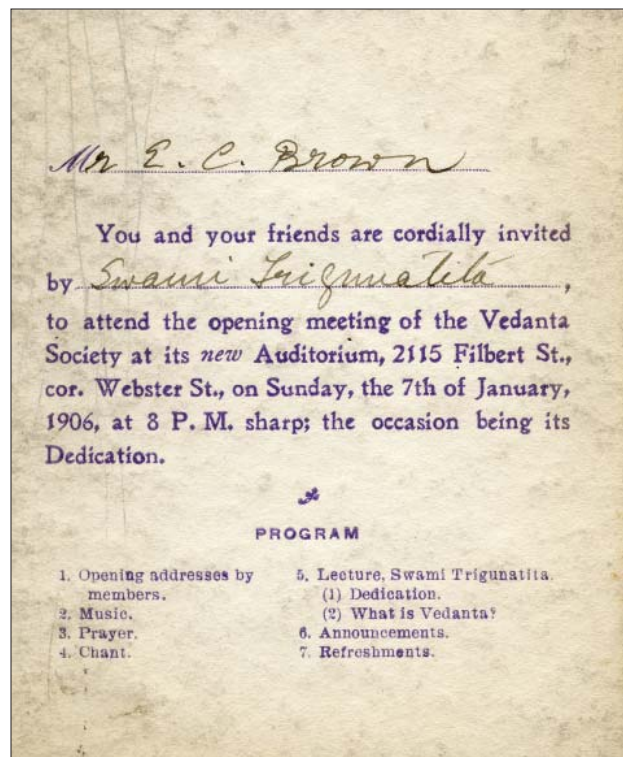
wanted him to return on account of his illness, he held some classes in the home of some friends of mine. I lived near their house in East Oakland and went to those classes. At the first class I could hardly take my eyes off the Swami. He was not just a lecturer, but one of Sri Ramakrishna's most spiritual disciples; he was really a holy man, no doubt about it. At the end of the class I went up to shake hands with him and he said, "Did you have something to say to me?" I said, "No, Swami, I thought perhaps you might have something to say to me." "No, I have nothing especially to say to you." But I held his hand and, although he spoke no words, I later realized that I did receive a blessing which I had never expected. He awakened a love which drew me like a magnet to all the classes at that home and which grew with the years. As you know, he finally left for India and died there.

### ***Swami Trigunatita***

Then came Swami Trigunatitananda (shortened to Trigunatita), another direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. Swami Trigunatita at once gathered together the fragments of the work, which had been left behind by his brother disciples, into a consolidated group to be formally known as the Vedanta Society of San Francisco. The meetings were held in a private home at first, but it proved not big enough and

Swami felt the need of a temple of their own. He appointed a committee, who [sic] looked all over the city and finally decided on the present site. After the building had been completed up to the second story, a great thought came into his mind that if Swami Brahmananda, Sri Ramakrishna's great disciple, could be induced to come to America to take charge of the work as a whole in the different areas and inspire it, the work would grow like a prairie fire. So he wrote to Swami Brahmananda—Maharaj as he was called—and Maharaj looked favourably on the idea. He then added a third story to the temple for the residence of Maharaj, from where he would watch over the spiritual empire of the Vedanta Society in America. But when the time finally came for him to leave, Belur Math, the principal seat of the Ramakrishna Order, put their [sic] foot down and said, "We can't stand for this. We need you here too badly." So, regretfully, he had to write to Swami that he was unable to come. Afterwards he became president of the Order.

Swami Trigunatita never lost his spirit of asceticism. He slept upon a board in his office with a single blanket over it and then a thin blanket over him, retiring at 11 or 12 p.m. and rising at 4 a.m. through winter and summer, until finally he contracted rheumatism, which became almost unbearable. He had to wear two sets of thick underwear, a heavy woolen suit over that,



*Mr. Brown's personalized invitation from Swami Trigunatita to the 1906 Hindu Temple Dedication*





*Someone's room in the Hindu Temple, circa 1910*

and lastly his everyday clothes. Always he had this rheumatism. Mrs. Petersen, the wife of the president of the Society, insisted upon his giving up his bed in the office and taking the third story premises which he had intended for Maharaj.

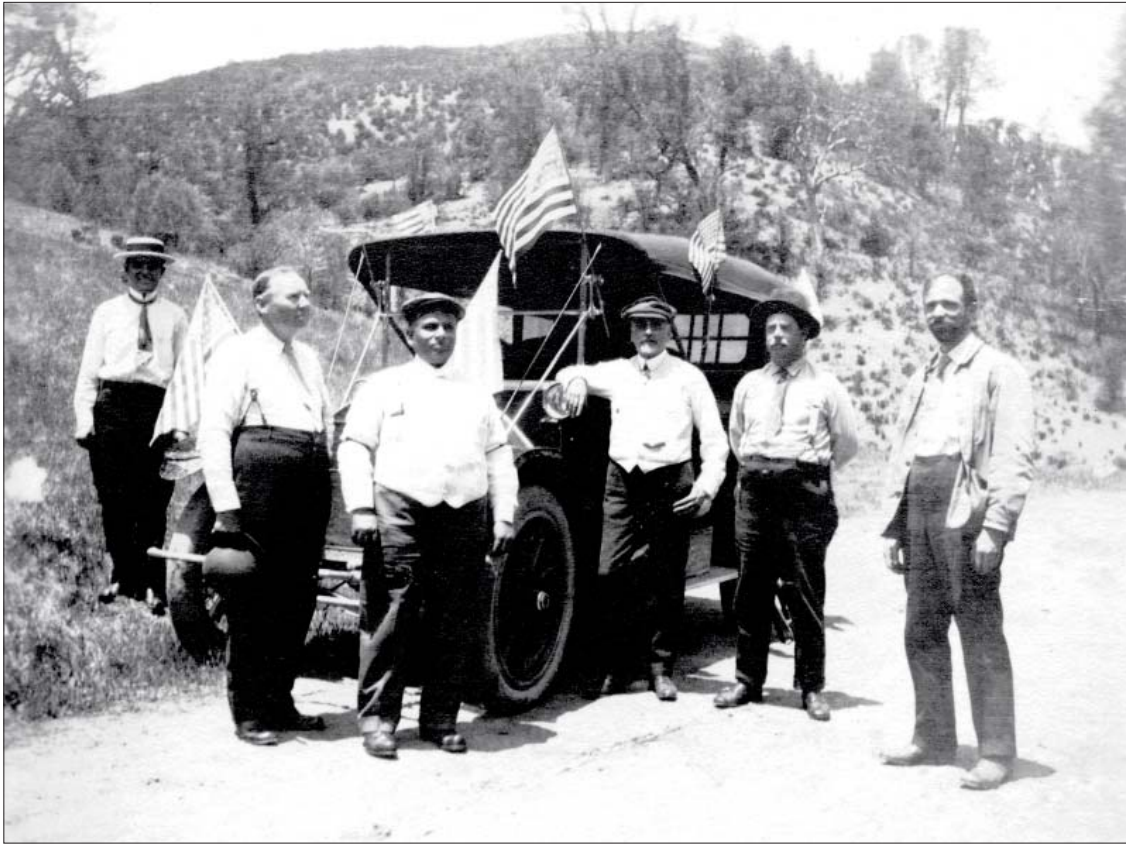
### ***San Francisco Monastery***

I was living across the street at the time and he invited me to share this room with him. After I had been there some four or five months a new idea came to him about this third story. "Mr. Brown," he said one day, "I want to start a monastery here. There are ten or twelve young men who attend the lectures; you ask them if they would like to join the monastery." I did so and not one of them refused. Swami Turiyananda was in India and Gurudas Maharaj—now Swami Atulananda—was then in charge of the Shanti Ashrama, but he wanted to go to India again, so Swami sent two of these young men to take charge of the Ashrama.

Until Swami Prakashananda came, Swami Trigunatita did all the cooking; he cooked breakfast and supper, which were named morning and evening service because of the reading and chanting at each. The members were employed during the day, but they took their supper and breakfast in the Temple. One

morning, after the monastery had been running a short while, Swami said, "We have been getting up here in the monastery at all kinds of hours. Six o'clock, six-thirty, and so forth. Now in India they get up at three o'clock in the morning, and I suggest that we get up at least somewhere near that." The young men just gasped for breath. Three o'clock in the morning! So someone said, "But, Swami, we have to work for a living. I think five-thirty, or perhaps we might first get up at five." Then someone else said, "We might get up at 4:30." But Swami replied, "Well, that's pretty late. What do you say if we try four o'clock?" Again they gasped—it was beyond their previous experience or conception. However, anything to escape three o'clock, so they said, practically all together, "Well, we'll try to get up at four." "All right, then, it will be four o'clock," replied Swami. That is what he really wanted all the time—four o'clock! Swami liked fun. All Swamis are like that, I think.

There was an elderly German member, a Mr. Kruger, who was very critical. This was difficult to bear at times, but all remonstrance seemed futile. So one evening, just before the night of Thanksgiving Day, when boys go around with lanterns made out of big pumpkins, some of the young men came to Swami Trigunatita and asked him if they could do



*En route to Shanti Ashrama, circa 1913*

*Left to right: Mr. Roach, Carl Petersen, Swami Trigunatita, Albert Wollberg, Louis Juhl, Ernest C. Brown*

something about this elderly member. And Swami said, "All right, but you take the consequences and I won't object." Well, after supper that evening Mr. Kruger sauntered out of the kitchen and down the two flights of stairs to his room which was next to Swami's office. When he opened the door and turned on the light there was a huge devil's face staring at him. Some of his victims had put one of those cut-out pumpkins over the electric light so that when the light was turned on there appeared a horrible face. He at once indignantly called Swami, but Swami simply said, "I warned you," and allowed the lesson to sink in.

When the Swami was able to accept, it was naturally a pleasure for me to invite him to the luncheons of the various civic clubs of which I was a member. One day at the Advertising Club, where the members knew about him, the chairman asked, "Swami, do you have any advertising men in India?" Swami said "Yes, we have some. We are developing some crooks there, too." The advertising men just roared with laughter. Swami liked people: On New Year's Eve he would go alone down to the centers of merry-making and mix with the people celebrating New

Year's Eve, returning to the Temple at two o'clock in the morning, his coat sprinkled with confetti. He was well acquainted with the mayor of San Francisco and other officials and many of the leading businessmen of the city who respected him highly.

#### *Appreciation of Shanti Ashrama*

Swami Trigunatita greatly appreciated the work done by his beloved brother disciple Swami Turiyananda in building up the spiritual atmosphere of the Shanti Ashrama. In the first year of his arrival and for many years thereafter, he took large classes there, organized on a daily routine from 4 o'clock in the early morning, ending with the evening meal at 6 p.m.—meditation, men's class, class for women, physical exercise, rest hours, games for men and women, weekly holidays, three meals daily with spiritual reading at breakfast and supper. He installed a modern windmill and a second well; he also installed a water-pipe system and built a large headquarters building, a large barn, and many other buildings, including cottages for the men's and women's sections, which were separate. It thus became one of the treasured assets of the Society.



### *Indian Pilgrimages*

It seems he was a great pilgrim in his *sannyasin* days. On one of his pilgrimages he came to a river. It was dusk when he arrived, but there was bright moonlight. He looked up and down the swiftly flowing river, but there was no bridge or other crossing. He went on walking in the moonlight and came to an old ruined dam with gaps in it, some of them as much as two feet wide. He determined to make use of the dam and started across with great caution. He thought, "One false step and I shall be swept away and drowned." When he got in the middle of the dam, the moon went behind the clouds with visibility almost zero; only the sound of the rushing waters greeted his senses. He stopped and said to himself, "The Master is with me just as much here as he was at Dakshineswar, and so I will put my faith in Him," and he prayed to the Master. Soon he heard a voice saying, "Swami, won't you please take my hand; I shall get you safely over." The Swami knew the Master had answered his prayer; he held out his hand, a hand grasped his, and soon his feet touched solid ground. When he reached the other side the moon came out from behind the clouds once more, as bright as day. He looked up and down the river bank, but no one was in sight. Then he realized that Sri Ramakrishna had again come to his aid, and that everywhere he could trust in Him.

On another pilgrimage he came to an old ruined temple, with a high wall around it, near a village somewhere in the north of India. At night the temple gates were closed and no one was admitted. The Swami wanted to know the reason for this. He was told that two miles away was a marsh full of mosquitoes and at dusk they came in a cloud and settled in the ruins. At times people who had been left inside were found dead or dying in the morning due to poison from the mosquitoes' bites. This was all that the Swami needed to fire his pilgrim zeal: that thing I see in the faces here in England—courage and independence and so forth—he possessed in full measure. He insisted on being allowed to stay inside; so with great reluctance they let him remain there. When six o'clock came they locked the gates, and he sat down to watch. All he had with him was his single blanket. Soon he heard a sound in the air like that of an aeroplane of today; it was the mosquitoes on their way to the temple. Why they went there no one knew. Presently they landed and then his curiosity was satisfied. The mosquitoes settled on him with a vengeance. All night he kept trying to ward them off by waving his blanket about. With the dawn they gradually withdrew and soon the anxious villagers rushed in with the village doctor

to give him needed attention. He felt again that Sri Ramakrishna had given him strength to endure the outcome of his curiosity, although it took him several weeks to recover from the ordeal.

### *San Francisco Again*

In the year 1915 a great world exposition came to San Francisco, called the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, covering more than one square mile of ground. It was in full view of the Vedanta Temple and comprised magnificent buildings and their exhibits—brilliant spectacles by night, attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors. The Swami conceived the plan of also making the Temple an attraction for the exposition visitors; he decorated the building with the flags of all nations and provided brilliant illumination by night, and a garden surrounding the building and other ornamental features by day. However, notwithstanding the months of arduous preparation, he was not to see the fruition of his labours, for Sri



*Swami Abhedananda, California, circa 1919*

Ramakrishna called him to Himself in February [January] of that same year, two months before the opening of the exposition. The Society and the Temple remain as a monument to his zeal and all-renouncing sacrifice for the cause of his Master.

### ***Swami Abhedananda***

After the passing away of Swami Trigunatita, Swami Prakashananda, who had previously come as Assisting Swami, was called to be the Swami in Charge, which office he held successfully for 18 years, before he also passed away in San Francisco. It was during his time that Swami Abhedananda, another direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, came to San Francisco, to see if he could get his books printed there at prices he could afford to pay—with the added convenience that San Francisco was closer to India. He was a very prolific writer and the work in America has been greatly forwarded by his writing. He wrote in a popular and pleasing style for the masses. You can find his books in many libraries throughout America. He opened an office very close to where I was employed and the endeavor to get suitable prices for him began. But San Francisco could not compete with New York and Chicago in efficiency, their prices being one-third less; he had therefore to continue publishing his books in those cities. Then he made up his mind to go to India and complete his work there.

It was my privilege to take Swami Abhedananda out to lunch occasionally, and I remember taking him to the Advertising Club where I used to take Swami Trigunatita, and how I was always impressed by his abstinence in food. When he had finished, nothing could persuade him to take another mouthful. His dignified carriage, like that of his brother disciple Swami Vivekananda, invariably attracted attention, and his serious air had a pleasing effect on all who met him. On the invitation of Swami Prakashananda, the Swami in Charge, he gave several lectures at the Center. He returned to India and passed away in Calcutta in 1939.

### ***The San Francisco Vedanta Society***

The San Francisco Center of the Ramakrishna Order, without doubt one of the largest, has been brought to its present stature through the participation of eleven Swamis: Swami Vivekananda, its founder and perpetual inspiration; Swami Turiyananda, who by his holy life assisted in establishing the holy atmosphere of the Shanti Ashrama; Swami Trigunatita, who gave the Society organization, continuity, and a deathless example of renunciation and realization. These three were direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. Since that time



*Left to right: Swamis Vividishananda & Yatiswarananda, E. C. Brown, Swami Ashokananda, Lake Tahoe, 1940s*

the San Francisco Society has had eight other Swamis: Swami Prakashananda, assistant to Swami Trigunatita; Swami Prabhavananda, the present Swami in Charge of the Vedanta Society of Southern California; Swami Dayananda and Swami Madhavananda, both of whom are engaged in the Ramakrishna Mission's work in India; Swami Vividishananda, now in charge of the Vedanta Society of Seattle; and Swami Ashokananda, the Swami at present in charge of the Vedanta Society of Northern California, as the San Francisco Center is called, with Swami Shantaswarupananda and Swami Shraddhananda, his assistants. The Society was founded by Swami Vivekananda and the others helped in the building. The expansion of the Society, however, really began with Swami Ashokananda. Gradually, under his administration, the work grew and began to spread; there are now seven branches. Calls have come asking us to start centers in other cities, but Swami Ashokananda could not spread his time and physical energy over a dozen different centers at once, and more Swamis were not available. ∞

*(Text of a talk given in London on October 19, 1958.)*

*- E. C. Brown, "Vedanta in America: My Reminiscences," Vedanta for East and West, July-August 1959, 186-192.*

*- Brown, September-October 1959, 14-18. (Reprinted with permission.)*



*From the Archives . . .*

## Swami Abhedananda

The fourth direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna who blessed the San Francisco Vedanta Society with his presence was Swami Abhedananda. He spread the message of Vedanta on the East Coast for several years, and he also spent time at the San Francisco Vedanta Society. The swami gave a moving talk on March 18, 1915, to the members of the Society, soon after the passing away of Swami Trigunatita. Below is an excerpt from that talk:

“It fills my heart with sadness to think of the past unfortunate things that have happened in this auditorium. Our brother, Swami Trigunatita, was a great soul. I have known him many years. Even before he became Swami Trigunatita, we were together at the feet of our divine Master, Sri Ramakrishna. We lived together and worked together. Before he came to this country, I was here. I knew Mr. Petersen, Mr. Wollberg, and many other friends. I have seen a great many changes that this movement has gone through... but still our ideal is harmony, peace, love, brotherhood—not only brotherhood, but absolute oneness in the spirit. . . .

“The spirit of Swami Trigunatita is here with you, and he is working with you and through you to accomplish that which he did not succeed in gaining while he was on this plane. He will be your guide and will help in all your efforts. So do not be disturbed. When you are true followers of your master, and when you have love for him, and when you are faithful to the cause and to your master, you also accomplish the great ideal which he tried to establish in this Temple. The spirit of Ramakrishna is also with you. . . . You will be the cornerstones of this Temple which might grow infinitely larger than what it is today. You ought to be proud of this small Temple. . . . May the blessings of Sri Ramakrishna and the blessings of Swami Vivekananda be with you all. May our Divine Mother bless us all and lead us toward the ultimate goal.” ∞



*Swami Abhedananda, California, circa 1919*

## Early Vedanta Society Residences

When the Vedanta Society was founded in 1900, Dr. Milburn Logan's office was the first venue for the Society's classes with Swami Vivekananda; later they were held in his home on Oak Street.

During Swami Turiyananda's time, when he was not at Shanti Ashrama, classes were held at the home of Carl and Bertha Petersen on Buchanan Street. With Swami Trigunatita's arrival in 1903, he, too, stayed with the Petersens and later moved with them to larger quarters at 40 Steiner Street, where he continued to hold classes. In 1905, in order to provide a permanent home for the Society, Swami Trigunatita was able to build a temple, which he called "The First Hindu Temple in the Whole Western World."

The name "Hindu Temple" was misleading to some people. In *Swami Trigunatita: His Life and Work*, Sister Gargi explains: "To the end of his life Swami Trigunatita insisted that the name of the Vedanta Society be 'The Hindu Temple.' Yet he stoutly declared that 'The Hindu Temple' was for Americans, not for Hindus. In actual fact, the Temple was not in any sense Hindu—not in organization, activities, membership, architecture, or decor."



*Dr. Logan's house at Steiner and Oak Streets*



After Swami Trigunatita's passing away, the members of the Vedanta Society usually referred to the temple simply as the "Temple"; only rarely was it officially called the "Hindu Temple." In the 1950s, when Swami Ashokananda was building a more spacious facility on Vallejo Street, in order to accommodate the increased attendance at lectures and classes, the building under construction was referred to as the "New Temple." Eventually that became, in the lexicon, the New Temple, and the original, beloved structure on Webster and Filbert became officially known as the Old Temple. ☺

*The Petersens' second-floor flat on Buchanan Street (1930's photo)*





*Above: 40 Steiner Street, top floor (1930s' photo)*

*Left: Bulletin of the Vedanta Society from 1904*

*Below: Emblem of the Ramakrishna Order on the San Francisco Vedanta Society's stationery*

**....The Vedanta Society....**  
**SAN FRANCISCO**



Represented by the  
 Ram Krishna Mission  
 Belur Math,  
 Calcutta, India

**HEADQUARTERS, 40 STEINER STREET**  
 (Corner Hermann, by Haight or Fillmore Cars)

*Fifth Edition, San Francisco, Jan. 1, 1904.*



**Vedanta Society**

**40 STEINER ST.**  
**SAN FRANCISCO, CAL.**

**U. S. A.**



*Swami Ashokananda, San Francisco, early 1930s*



# Old Temple Memories

*Swami Yogeshananda*

**E**VEN IN THE DAZZLING AND ECCENTRIC ERA OF THE EARLY 1900S, this temple must have unsettled both neighbors and tourists. It was built in an incredibly short time. The cornerstone was laid in August 1905 and within four months the construction was completed. The “First Hindu Temple in the Whole Western World” was dedicated on January 7, 1906. It reflects the nature of its designer, Swami Trigunatita, an original personality, recognized as such even among the other monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. Swami Vivekananda had requested his brother monk to come to San Francisco, which he did in 1903. After reviving the work begun at Shanti Ashrama by Swami Turiyananda, the swami stayed at the Vedanta Society’s headquarters on Steiner Street until the temple was finished. When temple services were announced, a small congregation gathered to hear the weekly discourses of the forceful and brilliant monk.

Many swamis stayed in this temple between 1915 and 1969, including: Swami Prakashananda, (Swami Trigunatita’s assistant and successor), as well as Swamis Prabhavananda, Dayananda, Madhavananda, Vividishananda, Ashokananda, and Shantaswarupananda.

My introduction to the Old Temple was during Swami Ashokananda’s ministry. Swami Yatiswarananda was the first swami I had met while in Philadelphia in 1944. It was he, who having learned of my monastic tendencies, encouraged me to investigate the San Francisco monastery. He emphasized that the San Francisco center had a spiritual tradition of monastic life which had been established over the years since the time of Swami Trigunatita.

After deciding to go to San Francisco, I arrived at the Old Temple having taken a streetcar along Union Street in the Marina District. It dropped me at the corner of Webster and in full view of what I was seeking: across, and down one block, the headquarters

of the Vedanta Society of Northern California, now known as the Old Temple. And what a sight it was! Is this, I thought, to be my monastic home for the rest of my life? How odd! Yet there was even then a dignity about the place, something indefinable which showed through the unmatched towers and turrets and Victorian gingerbread and through the lath fences and frames, the pillars and quaint dormer windows. In that first untutored impression the feeling came through that here aristocracy was housed—an influence that was not to be trifled with.

The street front presented two doors and I rang at the one marked “Monastery,” wondering just what it would mean to join one and what in the world I would do if my plea were accepted. A lean man, a bit older than I, appeared at the door which revealed a long staircase to the floor above. Clearly he was pleased that I wished to meet the swami and to know about the monastery. I would have to go through the secretary to see swami, he said; hers was the other door.

She was a beaming, welcoming woman who seated me in a reception room. Above me on one of the walls was an enlarged photograph of an extraordinary face. I could suppose it was a swami, but he was dressed in the clerical collar and black jacket of a Catholic or Episcopal priest. The eyes were luminous.

“Is this a picture of Swami Ashokananda?” I asked, as the secretary was leaving. “No,” she replied, “it’s Swami Trigunatita, the first swami here, who started the work.”

Presently Swami Ashokananda came in to greet me, and I rose. He was more-than-average height, well-built, with wavy hair about to turn gray, his skin quite dark in color and his eyes bright: he wore glasses and immaculate “sport clothes.” There seemed to be just a suggestion of a permanent frown, but behind the eyes, even on that first day, I sensed a kind of mirth going on. I greeted him with a handshake and that seemed to be all he was expecting.

“I am a friend of Swami Yatiswarananda,” I said, not disciple or student, for I did not then consider myself initiated. He was very cordial and asked me into his small office. He spoke slowly and with dignity. Giving first a brief history of myself, I stepped out on the tipsy raft of monastic aspiration. He asked a number of pointed questions. The conversation is much clearer in my memory than if it had happened yesterday.

Swami: “Are you a vegetarian?”

I: “Yes, swami, I have been for a couple of years.”

Swami: “That’s good. Our monastery is vegetarian. Do you practice continence?”

I: “Yes, sir.”

Swami: “In thought, word and deed?” (He spoke seriously and very slowly with emphasis on each word. His eyes bored holes through me. I gulped, and he continued.)

Swami: “Did you like Swami Yatiswarananda?”

I: “Yes, very much. But he had no place where he could keep me.”

Swami: “Did he give you any instructions, how to meditate or anything?”

I: “Oh, he just gave me some general instructions; there was nothing formal about it.”

Swami: “But how do you know you will like me?”

I (embarrassed): “Well, I think I know what a swami is; they are all qualified teachers.”

Swami: “You mean you think all swamis are alike?”

I: “Yes, something like that.”

Swami (flatly): “No. All swamis are not alike. Why did you not stay with Swami Prabhavananda in Hollywood?”



*Swami Ashokananda in his Old Temple office*

I: (taking all my courage in hand): “Because the swami is fond of cigarettes!”

Swami (starting to laugh): “That does not matter. That is not a serious thing. Well, I am afraid you will find many faults in me.”

I: (now really dismayed): “No, no. I don’t mean to be critical.”

Swami: “But you must know: whatever fault you see in another, that fault is somewhere in you.”

I: “Yes, swami, so I have read.”

There were more questions. In sum, he told me that they did not know me well enough yet. Generally, before giving admission to the monastery a candidate was asked to come around to lectures and classes, etc., for at least a year. However, through the Lord’s grace, in less than a year I had joined. Once the swami called me to him and said, “Many holy men have lived in



this temple and have added their part to its sacred atmosphere; we all must recognize the great debt we owe to Swami Trigunatita.”

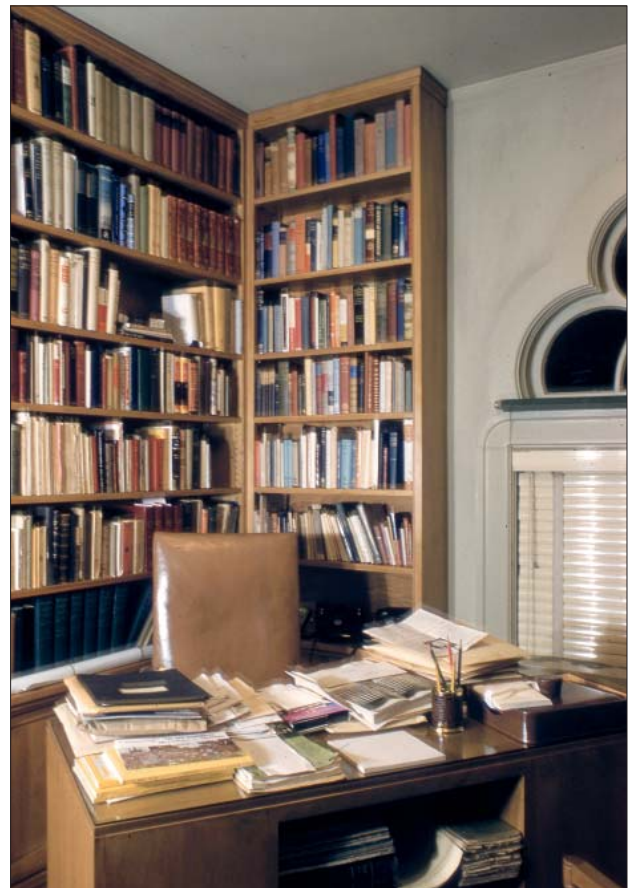
The life of the novices was closely regulated. Once we had decided on monastic life, we did not go out except for walks or on business. Shopping money was taken from a common pool. Phone calls or visits to one’s family were rare. Swami ran a tight ship. Rising daily before five and showering at once was mandatory. We had clothes set aside for the shrine room only; it was a question of getting into them and to one’s place on time. After forty-five minutes of group meditation we dispersed to our rooms, changed clothes, and began individual reading. One was not permitted to go back to bed. Breakfast was at seven-thirty and was ample, and if a scripture class was being held, it took place then. All the remainder of the morning was devoted to study. Swami told us, “Maharaj (Swami Brahmananda) told Swami Yatiswarananda that when for some reason the mind cannot meditate or make *japa*, study is the thing to fall back on.” He asked me to begin with the Upanishads and one day inquired what I was reading. When I told him, he said, “Yes. Don’t just read, study.” And we knew what he meant: to take ideas apart the way he did.

The swami held scriptural classes in the temple for the monastery, including the Vedantic text *Vedantasara*. He presented a copy to each of us, asking us to read the verses in advance each day and to memorize the English as we went along. At the same time we were expected to take notes on what was said. If anyone neglected to do so, he was gently advised that such notes would be useful to him later. Swami would tell us not to ask questions that he would ask us questions! He would take up a phrase and then question us one by one. If the reply did not satisfy him, he would gaze expectantly with his large eyes on the next man in line to hear his answer. This continued until he got the whole answer with all the connotations he wanted. Only if it was still necessary would he add anything to the picture himself. It was his firm conviction that each of us had the divine knowledge within, requiring only the right stimuli and moment to bring it forth.

I found the interior of the temple to be quite fascinating. Starting from the building’s main entrance at the east end, on the first floor there was the reception room lined with shelves of books, holding a large part of the library. There Mrs. Ediben Soulé, longtime Society secretary, answered the door with her charming manner and announced the visitor to

the swami in his office which was next door. Beyond swami’s office down the corridor was a large office for the Society’s business and publications and a very small kitchen. At the end a door opened onto the auditorium platform and podium.

The second floor contained a number of rooms: Mr. Brown’s (Mr. Brown was a colorful figure who had been at one time a member of Swami Trigunatita’s original monastery), and a larger one for two novices; beyond that, another bedroom for two, and down the corridor was the shrine room. We loved our little three-part shrine, built in India to Swami Ashokananda’s specifications. The young men gathered for meditation for half an hour in the early morning and for the same in the early evening. We were to change completely into “shrine clothes” before entering. A five-item worship was performed there every morning, either by “Al” (later known as Swami Chidrupananda) or by Swami Ashokananda himself. As one moved on down the passage, there was a sitting room on the right, across from the dining room on the left. Next to the kitchen one came to the laundry and to dozens of flower pots.



*Swami Ashokananda’s office, 1950s*



*Swami Ashokananda in the late 1950s,  
relaxing after a Sunday service*

The third floor and the towers had been added in 1908. The swamis lived on the third floor and when there were visiting swamis the laughter and conversation in Bengali echoed down the stairs. There were two bedrooms, one larger and one smaller. The larger one was Swami Ashokananda's. The large kitchen served also as a dining space. On the roof the five towers served various purposes at different times. There were occasions when candidates for *brahmacharya* (novitiate) lived in one or another; sometimes they served for storage—especially for Mr. Brown's innumerable clay pots. Every deck and porch was utilized for gardening in pots. It was the daily duty of the young men to keep them watered. And, finally, the unfinished basement housed the utilities and a workshop area.

After living an intense life of study, meditation, and other practices, under the watchful eye of Swami Ashokananda, I spent time in the monastery of the southern California Vedanta center. When I came back to northern California in 1958, after difficult years, it was to the familiar premises of the Old Temple. Looking out from the aerie of its roof I felt disarmed, pinned and held like a kitten by its mother's paw. And so thankfully! For those few moments all difficulties seemed to be blown away in the Marina breeze. I was "home."

New men, some very well-educated, had joined. Swami had sent most of the older ones out to Olema and to Sacramento, the latest addition to the Society. But there was old Mr. Brown and Al, now openly known by his Sanskrit name. So life at the Old Temple was much the same, except that there was this irrepressible energy of youth in the new recruits. Some found the way to weave their ebullience and love of fun right into the fabric of their spiritual and monastic adventure.

My various experiences while living in the sacred atmosphere of the Old Temple have been the foundation of my forty-five years as a monk of the Ramakrishna Order. Starting with the day Swami Ashokananda permitted me to stay in the Old Temple, I felt that I would never want to step out of the blessed atmosphere in which I found myself. I'm deeply grateful and indebted to all the swamis who encouraged me and have sustained me throughout my long spiritual journey, including Swami Trigunatita. As Swami Ashokananda had told me decades before, "We all must recognize the great debt we owe to Swami Trigunatita." ∞



*From the Archives . . .*

## “An Actual Knower of God Lived Here”

**I**t was Swami Trigunatita who built this temple. That I am standing on this platform, and, that you are sitting in this auditorium, is due to his grace. It is he who built this.

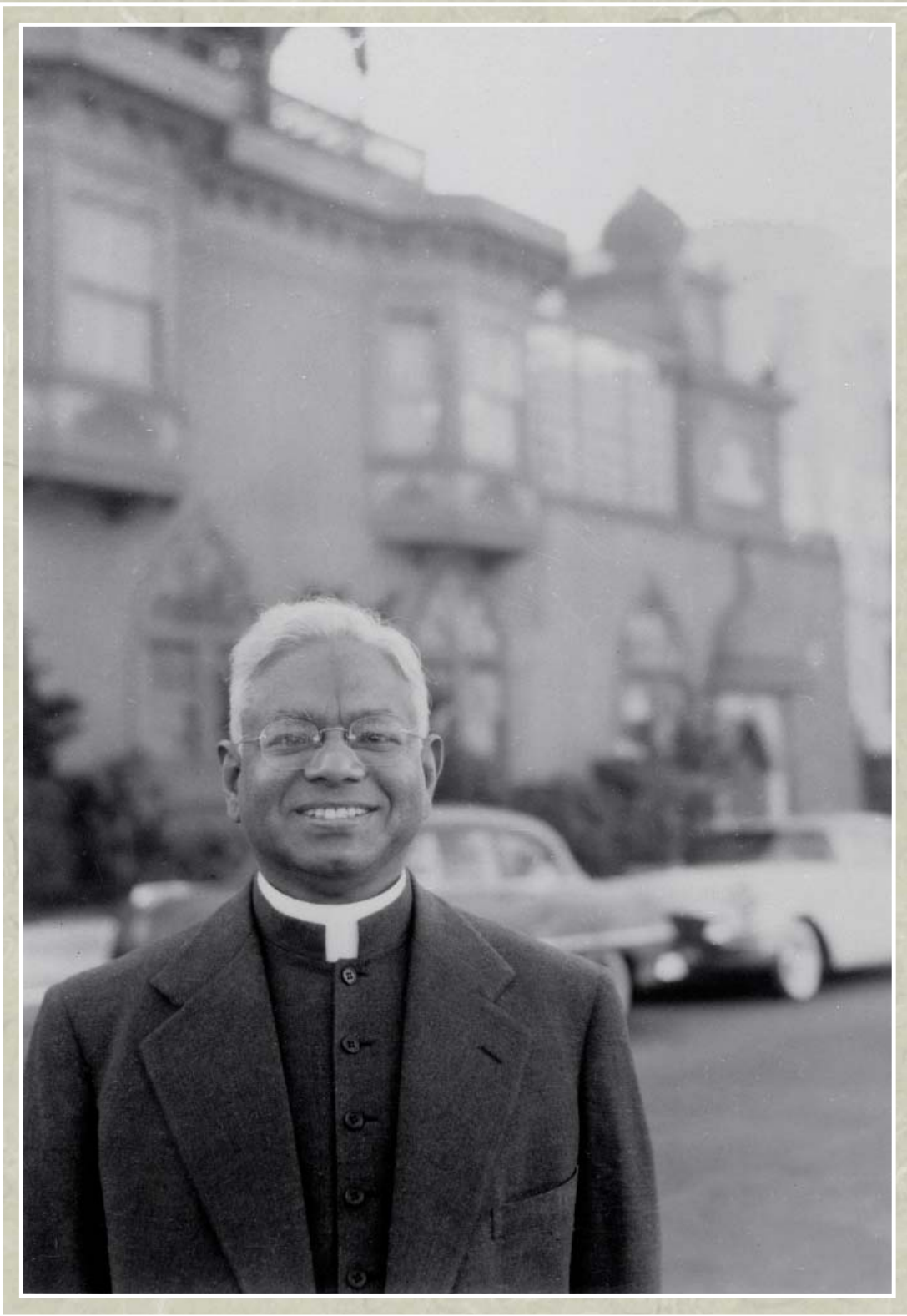
The one thing that strikes and impresses me most, and you may not see it in the same light as I do, but an actual knower of God lived and taught here—you probably do not appreciate what that means. How many knowers of God can you know in your lifetime? Go, travel, and seek such people and see how many you can come in contact with. If you find one real knower of God, you can say your years and years of searching have certainly been blessed. It is not easy to find such a person. We believe where a knower of God lived that place is forever holy, and people coming there through the ages will feel the upward movement of the soul.

It is not a common thing to find a knower of God in a place. The swami built this temple, but how many times he had visions of God here we do not know. That he did have them many times we have not the least doubt about it. How many times he saw God here in this auditorium! You can say this platform has become holy since here he saw and spoke of God. So, you see, that is the most important thing about him that comes to me: That in this city there came a man who directly lived his life in the life of God and it was not only sentimentality and devotional emotion, it was a matter of direct perception. He was a very unusual person. ∞

*-Swami Ashokananda  
“Swami Trigunatita:  
An Apostle of an Incarnation”  
February 7, 1954, Old Temple*



*Swami Trigunatita in 1903, soon after he arrived in San Francisco*



*Swami Ashokananda in front of the Old Temple, 1950s*



# A Magic Moment

*Br. Vimukta Chaitanya*

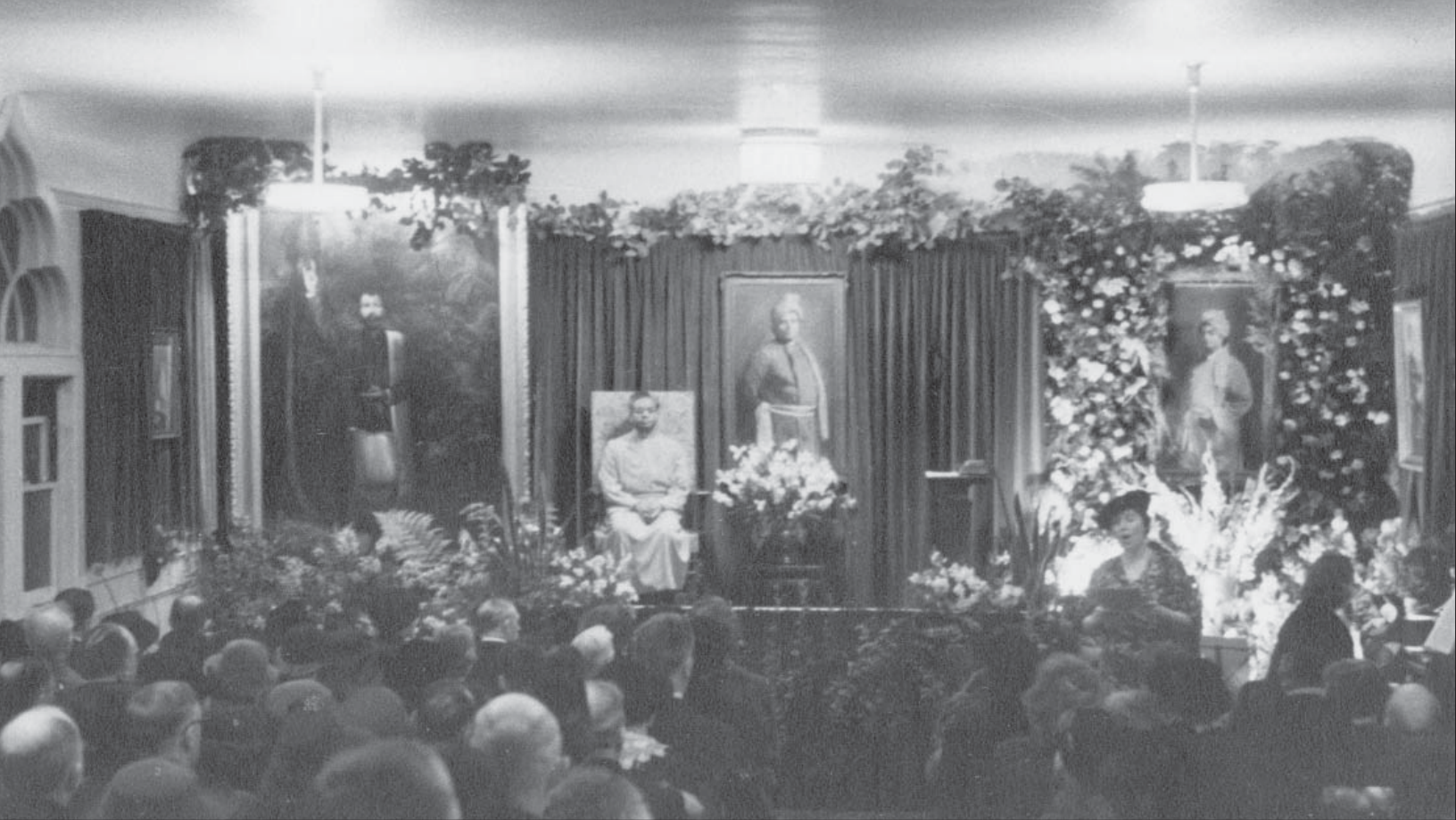
**I**N THE SPRING OF 1960 THE GODDESS OF FORTUNE CAST A BENIGN GLANCE ON ME. She had cast many benign glances on me over a period of many years, but this one was noteworthy in particular in that there came with it, in the train of events that followed, a magic moment—one that has remained in my memory in as pristine a condition as it was on the day it occurred, years ago; even now, it is redolent of Shakespeare’s “morning roses newly washed with dew.”

I was a novice in the monastery of the Vedanta Society of Northern California, starry-eyed and hopeful, back in those halcyon days, and was in residence with a few other monks in the Society’s Old Temple in San Francisco. The abbot of the monastery was the distinguished Swami Ashokananda, who was a disciple of Swami Vivekananda, a tower of moral, spiritual, and intellectual integrity, the like of whom comes along once in an age, and, in 1900, the founder of the Vedanta Society. Swami Ashokananda was thoroughly imbued with the great swami’s spirit, and was as stouthearted a trooper as ever there was among his followers. He was determined to die with his boots on, doing what he called “Swamiji’s work”; in 1969, in his 76th year, die with his boots on he did. He would sometimes quote Swami Vivekananda as having said that a largehearted man can’t stop short of universal love, and he himself had not stopped short.

Once, after one of his lectures, I overheard one woman say to another one as they were leaving the auditorium, “Can’t you just feel the love coming out of him?” The other woman agreed that she could. When he scolded—and, when it was warranted, this fiery swami was well able to scold—you never felt belittled and abashed; on the contrary, you always felt renewed and uplifted because, even as he took you

to task, “you could feel the love coming out of him.” Love found expression in his vibrations, his look, his speech, his deeds. On occasion it came out of him quietly and unobtrusively in song.

One of the hymns sometimes sung at the services Swami Ashokananda presided over was the old Christian hymn “Love Never Faileth.” The title of the hymn was taken from 1 Corinthians 13:8, in which the apostle Paul was writing, not of romantic love, a fragile thing, but of divine love, a substantial thing—deep, vast, and impersonal. A moving hymn when beautifully sung (as it always was), it was even more moving when sung in the presence of Swami Ashokananda, sitting in a chair on the platform, his eyes closed, an air about him of immense dignity, himself a living embodiment of the spirit and the sense of this lovely hymn. Fledgling spiritual aspirants who sought his guidance found that his love, divinely inspired, grounded in Truth, was fail-safe: it was built to last, was utterly trustworthy as a spiritual resource, and never let anyone down. To learn to live a godly life in an ungodly world is a trek through the valley of the shadow of death, fraught with pitfalls; in this regard, to be in touch with a spiritual preceptor, in whose heart divine love reigns supreme, is a blessing beyond calculation—a sturdy staff, that love, backed up



*Swami Ashokananda during the singing of a hymn on Swami Vivekananda's birthday*

with words of wisdom, enables you to make the trek without taking a nasty spill, all the while heartening you, and sustaining you, with a vision of the sunlit uplands of the mind.

If you had spiritual aspirations, and your sights were set high, it was indeed a pleasure and a privilege to be of service to Swami Ashokananda, this “nugget of gold in Swami Vivekananda’s heart,” to characterize Swami Ashokananda as did Swami Shivananda, privately and unbeknownst to Swami Ashokananda himself, when the latter was still a young man; Swami Shivananda, at whose behest Swami Ashokananda took up the work in San Francisco, in 1931, was the president of the Ramakrishna Order of monks, and was fully aware of Swami Ashokananda’s talents and capabilities, his innate worth.

Understandably, then, I counted it a rare blessing when one day Swami Ashokananda revised his routine in a way that significantly involved me: he decided that instead of spending the entire week at the Old Temple, he would spend roughly three days a week at the Society’s retreat at Olema, in the coastal wilderness of the Point Reyes Peninsula, not far from the ocean, and only about thirty-five miles northwest of San Francisco.

I was to be the swami’s “charioteer.” (The chariot was his personal car, a long, dark green Cadillac, vintage 1936.) Before this proposed change in his routine he had seldom found an opportunity to visit the retreat; a man of sound mind, and eminently so, he was nevertheless in none too sound a state of health, and he felt that the rest and relaxation that the retreat would afford him would do him good. Certainly it did the two brothers who staffed the retreat good. (The rest of the brothers in the monastery were in the outskirts of Sacramento, on 8½ acres of land that the swami had acquired, building a temple.) With a tip of the hat to the Goddess of Fortune, for I figured that once again she had cast on me a benign glance, I welcomed the opportunity to enact a key role in the working out of the swami’s modified regimen—to drive him to the retreat on Sunday afternoon, to be there with him until Wednesday morning, and then to drive him back.

This new routine lasted only a few months; there were too many demands on the swami’s time for him to keep it up. For me, however, those few months were a godsend, a kind of spiritual bonus. I loved the retreat, all 2200 acres of it, which the swami himself had founded in 1946, and regarded it as the promised land; and I loved basking in the warmth of the swami’s



holy presence. Now and again he gave a lecture called “There Is a World of Infinite Light and Joy,” and although the lectures were never the same, for he spoke extemporaneously, they left you with the feeling that he was a bona fide inhabitant of that world, and his holy presence confirmed it. It quickened in you the lofty ambition to be where he was, to stake out a claim in “the world of infinite light and joy.”

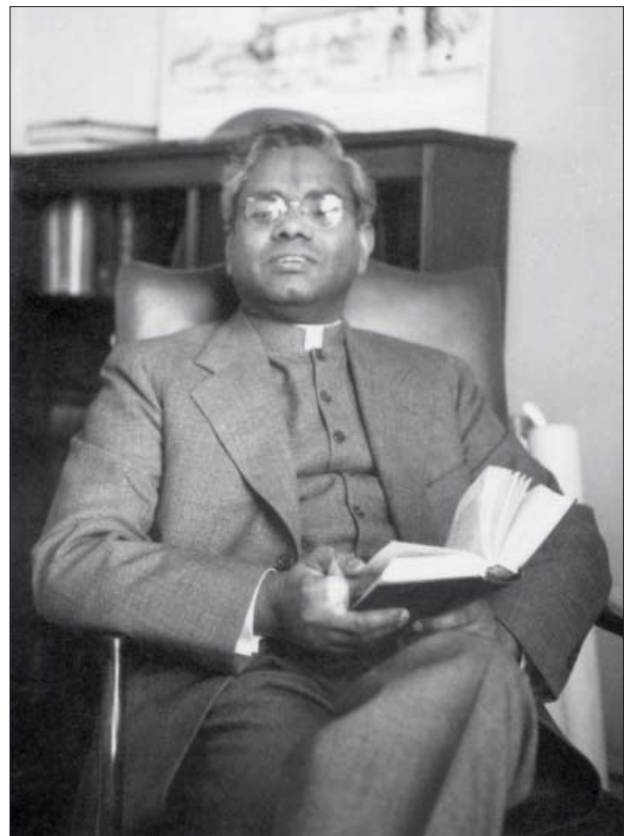
After the swami had had ample time to have lunch, and to rest up, following the long lecture he gave Sunday morning at the Society’s New Temple—a grand edifice, whose construction he had presided over—we would leave for Olema at about 4:30 in the afternoon. As soon as we would leave the Golden Gate Bridge, driving north, a curious phenomenon would occur: the swami, who loved music, and who had a good ear for music, would begin to sing devotional songs in Bengali, his native tongue—not aloud, but softly, almost under his breath, out of what sounded like the fullness of his heart. The singing, now and again briefly alternated with a kind of jazzy whistling, would go on and on and on until the car stopped at a red light or a stop sign. The singing would then stop and would resume as soon as the car started up again. We would drive a little more than ten miles up Highway 101, drive through San Anselmo, then through Fairfax, then up the long, slow grade of White’s Hill and down the other side, then through a golf course, then through Samuel P. Taylor State Park, then over Tocaloma Ridge and down the other side to Olema, the swami singing almost the whole way.

We would pass, en route to the retreat, two Catholic churches, and at each one he would salute in the manner characteristic of spiritual India, his head bowed slightly, his palms joined at the level of the heart; we would pass the campsite in Samuel P. Taylor State Park where, in May 1900, Swami Vivekananda had camped for sixteen days, and without fail, Swami Ashokananda, one of the most reverent of men, would salute at the campsite. He would salute, moreover, without missing a beat. The singing would go on, uninterrupted.

For me, this well-tempered mode of singing of his, this muted upwelling of song, was nothing new. I became familiar with it at the Old Temple. I occupied a room on the second floor, well toward the end of a long hall; the swami occupied a room on the third floor. To get to it from his office on the first floor, he had to climb a staircase well toward the front of the hall. Many a night he would stay downstairs on the first floor in the company of devotees and not come upstairs to his

room until 12 or 12:30—and many a night, lying in bed, I would wake up out of a sound sleep, aroused by the sound of the door closing at the foot of the stairs on the first floor, and then by the faint sound of the swami’s singing as he started up the stairs to the third floor. The cares of a long day were behind him, the constraints on his mind were eased.

In the dark, in the dead of night, in the stillness of that hour, the singing would become quite audible by the time he reached the second floor. It would then stop for a few minutes. I knew what that meant: he was standing at the door to the shrine, saluting, as was his wont, whether he was going upstairs or coming downstairs. The singing would then resume as he came down the hall, past my room, to the dining room, to get a token amount of sacramental food. A brief pause, and the singing would resume again, soulful, seemingly well-nigh irrepressible, deeply expressive of devotion to God, proceeding out of the heart of a man whose life was in God. Back up the hall came the singing. It faded as the swami mounted the stairs to his room, and then it faded out completely. What can I say of this singing to which I awakened out of a sound sleep many, many nights, this singing by a true-blue denizen of “the world of infinite light and joy,” except that it was wonderful to hear?



*Swami Ashokananda in his Old Temple office, 1940s*

Once in a great while, during the day, when I was sitting in my room at my desk, my nose in a book, he would come into the room, quietly singing, and, although I stood up to receive him, he wouldn't say anything to me, wouldn't even look at me, he would

inspiring, a kind of "free gift," or a little something extra, that made the time pass quickly. On Wednesday mornings, when we drove back to the city with its honking of horns, its hubbub, and its restless energy, the numerous cares of his ministry weighing more and more on his mind, the singing would never occur. On Sunday afternoons, when we drove out to the retreat, with its bracing onshore fresh air, its picturesque landscape, and its peaceful atmosphere, the numerous cares of his ministry weighing less and less on his mind, the singing, as far as I remember, would always occur.

On one of these Sunday afternoons there took place a minor variation in the pattern of events that I've never told anyone about. Yet it deserves to be mentioned. As we crossed Tocaloma Ridge into a sunset veiled in clouds shot through with various shades of purple tinged with pink, and we began the lengthy descent into the Olema Valley—or Olema-loke, as the coastal Miwok Indians called it, "Coyote Valley"—the Swami abruptly stopped singing. There followed a pregnant pause. Was he about to say something of philosophical import, as he so often did? I sensed that he was, nor was I disappointed. "There is a profound security at the heart of reality," he said, presently, speaking as one with authority. And then he added: "And a buoyancy."

A buoyancy! I seized on the word at once. It perfectly expressed the special quality in his singing. There was a buoyancy about it, a kind of effervescence, suggestive of sparkling water. The song, purely spiritual, refreshing and lovely, bubbled up naturally in the wellsprings of his heart. You sensed in him the "profound security at the heart of reality"; he himself was steeped in it, it was charged with a pure and holy love, there was healing in it, a balm unlike any other; on these trips to the retreat, it found a subdued heartfelt expression in song at once spontaneous and inspired. "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks," Jesus said. Out of the abundance of the heart it also sings.

Put all these ingredients together and you have, in that brief interlude that ensued when Swami Ashokananda stopped singing, the very stuff of which a magic moment is made. ∞

-Vimukta Chaitanya, "A Magic Moment," *Global Vedanta*, Fall 2007, 8-9, 16. (Reprinted with permission.)



*Old Temple sign in the 1940s*

simply stand in the center of the room, singing, and I would simply listen. I knew intuitively, in my heart of hearts, that in spite of his air of abstraction he was tuning in to my vibrations, to see how I was. After a moment or two, he would leave the room, still singing.

Although I was used to his singing at the temple, almost exclusively at the dead of night, it was nevertheless another sort of experience to hear it on the way to Olema, in the daytime, behind the wheel of a car. I never found it an annoyance or a distraction that took my mind off the road. Rather I found it



# Remembering Some American Monastics

*Swami Yogeshananda*

The Old Temple was one of the earliest places where American monastics were trained to learn to live an intense spiritual life dedicated to the service of the divine in all. A few of these American monastics, who came in the 1930s and '40s, and who, over the years, were associated with the Old Temple, are outstanding examples of the monastic tradition established by the Ramakrishna Order. Some of them remained at the Old Temple, while others were sent to Berkeley, the Olema retreat, or Sacramento. Regardless of their assignments, they all began their monastic lives at the Old Temple.

Swami Chidrupananda was initiated into spiritual life and given his first monastic vows (*brahmacharya*) in India in 1935 from Swami Akhandananda, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, and was given the name Bhrigu Chaitanya. His premonastic name was Alfred Clifton, but everyone knew him as Al. As an assistant, he easily fit into being in charge, and yet he was an incomparable servant. He did all the legwork, phone work, business interviewing, purchasing, banking, and much, much more, for Swami Ashokananda. In charge of all the construction details, he could be said to have supervised almost everything that was built between 1935 and 1969, including the Tahoe cabins, Berkeley center, Sacramento center, San Francisco New Temple, and the Olema retreat. Later, he was instrumental in lobbying Congress to add an amendment to the Point Reyes National Seashore bill that allowed the Vedanta Retreat in Olema to continue to operate independently.

One of Swami Chidrupananda's contemporaries, Swami Tarakananda, arrived at the San Francisco Vedanta Society in the 1930s, before Swami Ashokananda. He had been initiated by Swami Vividishananda when he was the head of the San Francisco center. Quiet and retiring, Swami Tarakananda always remained in the background, serving the Society. He became the caretaker of the

Berkeley temple, as soon as it was completed, and remained there until work began on the Sacramento center, to which he was then transferred.



*Bhrigu Chaitanya in India, 1935  
(Swami Chidrupananda)*



*The 1959 Dedication of the New Temple was also the occasion for brahmacharya vows for eight monks.*

*Left to right: Vimukta Chaitanya, Vishwa Chaitanya (Swami Sahajananda), Vishuddha Chaitanya, Bhakti Chaitanya (Swami Bhaktimayananda), Ananda Chaitanya, Shanta Chaitanya (Swami Asitananda), Prajna Chaitanya (Swami Tarakananda), and Brahma Chaitanya*

The Vedanta Retreat at Olema in Marin County is primarily associated with three monks, all disciples of Swami Ashokananda: Brahmachari Vimukta Chaitanya, Swami Asitananda, and Swami Sahajananda.

Vimukta Chaitanya spent most of his monastic life at the retreat, but he originally joined the Order at the Old Temple, and his formative years were spent there, with some of his fondest memories belonging to that period. His great devotion to his teacher, Swami Ashokananda, developed during his years at the Old Temple, filled his life and inspired all who knew him. Later, while residing at Olema, he was really the heart of the retreat for many visitors and the reason for their visits there. He regularly greeted them and showed them around the retreat. When people phoned the retreat, he was the one who answered in a most kind and helpful way. He was also an excellent and creative cook. He attracted and encouraged all struggling aspirants in their spiritual lives and had a deep interest in the welfare of everyone, and he could

offer beneficial advice that would bring healing to body and mind. In short, the role of “mother of the retreat” was his.

One day Swami Asitananda came to the Old Temple to speak with Swami Ashokananda regarding monastic life. The next day he came back to the Old Temple with his entire luggage, ready to stay permanently, and the swami accepted him immediately. After a short stay at the Old Temple, he was sent to the newly purchased ranchland at Olema where he immediately put his engineering talent to work. An extremely methodical and systematic worker, he was an efficient organizer and much of the work that was done at the Olema retreat, as well as at the Sacramento center, can be attributed to his superb skills and management, including the designing of the electrical systems for Sacramento and Olema. Also, from the beginning he was in charge of the audio system at the Memorial Day programs. Whatever he turned his hand to was done in an excellent manner.



Swami Sahajananda arrived at the Old Temple in 1949. Already austere and reticent of speech, he seemed to be a monk at heart. He was strong and willing, and Swami Ashokananda sent him to Olema to a life filled with challenges, austerities, and sacrifices. Swami Sahajananda was a worker par excellence. His early years at Olema were filled with construction projects, property management, and the endless details of maintenance of the retreat. He had a heart of gold which manifested in many ways. As the retreat grew and became better known, he often acted as host and took many visitors on fascinating tours of the property to display its features and explain the spiritual purpose behind its founding. He was also known for his charitable work in collecting medical equipment to be sent to India.

The Sacramento center is indebted to two monks. The first monk was Brahmachari Ananda Chaitanya, who was mainly responsible for what we find today at our center in Sacramento. The story of the fifteen years of its construction, of the austerities and difficulties, of the strict demands made on the

monks building the center, is an amazing story. Ananda (or Del, as he preferred to be called) was chief of the crew, and it was on his head that most of the blows fell. He struggled for years with all the details required for the building of the new center. Swami Ashokananda supervised every detail of the work; every step had to be done perfectly, whether in the searing summer heat or the freezing winter cold. Of all the original builders, Del alone stayed in Sacramento until the very end. He was modest beyond belief. Even in retirement, in his nineties, he remained active and helpful, always cheerful. Likewise, Swami Bhaktimayananda, Bhaktiji, as he used to be called, was another stalwart of the Sacramento center. He initially stayed at the Old Temple on weekends, thus getting an introduction to monastic life. When he was in Olema or in Sacramento, he became the monastery's official painter. He painted everything that was to be painted from then on, and it can well be imagined how much that was. This tall, genial man was a poet at heart, ever cheerful, and devoted to the monastic ideal. ☺



*Monastery members, 75th Anniversary Observance, Old Temple, 1975*  
*Front row, left to right: Swamis Chidrupananda, Prabuddhananda, Swahananda, and Shradddhananda*  
*Second row, left to right: Swami Asitananda, Jeff Kingsley, David Kalins, and Richard Kaplan*  
*Third row: Michael Healey*



*Old Temple, April 2015*



# Old Temple Seismic Retrofit and Renovation: 2014-2016

*Swami Vedananda*

**T**HE STRUCTURE OF THE ORIGINAL TEMPLE of the Vedanta Society of Northern California in San Francisco has received several extensive renovations. The first renovation occurred in 1908, only two years after its initial dedication, when a third floor and additional towers were added to the building by Swami Trigunatitananda, its original designer. Another major renovation occurred in the 1970s because of two structural defects evident at that time: The increasing apprehension that the first renovation had not sufficiently tied the third floor and towers to the original lower floors of the building; and the very visible sagging of the ceiling in the auditorium due to the long span and insufficient size of the supporting timbers.

At that time, the auditorium ceiling joists were completely exposed and the number of joists was doubled to counteract the sagging. Walls on the third floor were opened and additional wood studs were added to strengthen the often insufficient supporting structure. Truss structures made of steel rods and spacers with threaded tightening rods to create trusses under the uppermost floor were added. All this was done to strengthen the sagging floors and to tie the structure together.

In the intervening years, three additional factors came to light which made a further major renovation essential. First of all, in the 1990s, water seepage into the basement area became a persistent problem that left standing water that could not be alleviated through simple caulking and sealing measures. A subfloor drainage system was dug, with outflow into the sewers to catch and redirect the seepage water. In that process it was necessary to drill through the foundation wall that was assumed to exist under the building walls. However, no significant foundation was found in this area. The drills encountered only soil, no rock or concrete.

Another factor that proved intractable was the inability to stop roof leaks because of the highly complex nature of the roof and towers; a problem that only a thorough reconstruction could adequately address.

However, the most urgent necessity that made a reconstruction necessary was the building's earthquake vulnerability. Although some attempt had been made in the 1970s' renovation to provide shear wall construction in a number of places, the major vulnerability was in the extensive open space of the auditorium, with very little strengthening against shear forces. This situation fitted the definition of a "soft story," making it highly vulnerable to forces generated in an earthquake. It was this factor that was the impetus for the present extensive renovation. It is true that the building was able to survive the 1906 quake unscathed, but at that time it only had two floors. The additional floor and towers installed in 1908 changed the weight distribution significantly. In addition, in the intervening years, earthquake codes have evolved greatly.



*Old Temple temporary steel beam supports, November 2014*

Two major structural enhancements made during this latest renovation were: The construction of a significant reinforced concrete foundation and the installation of a welded steel moment frame system, consisting of four interconnected welded steel frames inside the walls and ceilings of the lower floors, plus installation of consolidated laminated wood beams for the upper floors. Afterwards steel posts were bolted into the new reinforced concrete foundation that underlies the whole building.

In order to begin the operation, the whole building had to be supported on steel beams to allow the digging of trenches for the new foundation under the whole building. To make this temporary support of the whole building feasible, the first step was to



*Closeup of steel beam support and cribbing*



remove all the plaster from inside of all the rooms so that the building became significantly lighter and more readily supported. This plaster removal had the additional advantage of exposing all construction details for later remediation.

The temporary supporting beams were slid in lengthwise along the whole length of the building through holes cut into the walls. This was a magnificent feat of planning and execution. A few supporting beams were also slid crosswise under the others for intermediate support. All these beams were supported on temporary cribbing which consisted of short crossed timbers all tied together into very effective and very solid support structures. At that point the digging for the foundation could begin.

There then occurred one of those wonderful opportunities that sometimes appears unsolicitedly. In order to dig a foundation of sufficient depth to support the building—digging by hand would have been unfeasible and time consuming—and to allow even small machines under the existing building for digging, it was necessary to do significant excavation. Therefore, with a little increase in the required depth, it proved possible to actually create sufficient depth for an additional usable floor under the whole building; and, as a result, our available facilities have been increased considerably.



*Excavation of basement, April 2015*

Although the basement is below street level, we are able to have windows in part of it. The new basement allows for expanded storage facilities, additional Sunday school usage, and overflow attendance with audiovisual facilities. Furthermore, there are also



*Steel beam support in the temple auditorium, December 2014*



*Protected by construction shrink wrap, May 2015*

additional restroom facilities and the provision for the future installation of a full kitchen.

**D**ue to the ancient nature of the building, the city's permitting agency did not allow us to make any significant changes to the windows, although, where permitted, we installed double-paned, easily cleanable

windows. New insulation and energy-efficient lighting were installed throughout. Also, the electrical and plumbing systems were fully revised.

A major decision involved the heating system, which had consisted of a steam boiler and radiators throughout the building in one zone for each floor. This system has been replaced by radiant heating from warm water coursing through a system of plastic lines under all the floors and in pipes buried in the cement of the ground floor. There are eight zones that enable more detailed control of the temperatures in each section. We visited houses where this system is employed and discussed its operation with users, becoming convinced of its desirability. The key to its applicability for a wooden building, where heat normally does not transfer through wood effectively, is that the network of plastic pipes is fitted into aluminum plates, and these plates, with their much greater surface area and efficient heat transfer, enable this system to operate very efficiently.



*Basement floor, August 2015*

One serious problem with the reconstruction was to decide what to do to control rain



leakage into the towers, which are the major symbols of the interfaith harmony and universal spirituality that the designer, the visionary Swami Trigunatita, dedicated his life to establish and foster. The towers were visibly deteriorating, having been built out of sheet metal and recoated and repainted many times. Sheet metal workers capable of replicating their complicated design are no longer available. When the

The exterior of the building is unchanged, except for details, such as a railing on the roof, which is partially required by city codes, partially to prevent damage to the roof coating, and partly to restore some of the original types of embellishments. A significant addition is the handicap-accessible elevator between the ground floor, auditorium floor, and the handicap-accessible facilities in the basement. There is also a



*Shiva Tower, December 2015*

contractor, Christopher Hesson, started to look for suitable alternatives, it was suggested that—all things considered—it would be worthwhile to consider copper as a suitable material for the complicated roof structures of the towers. It would be very expensive, but to repaint sheet metal towers every decade or so, putting up scaffolds each time to do it, would also be a significant long-term expenditure, whereas copper has an indefinite life expectancy and never needs coating. Two coppersmiths were asked to submit examples of their work, and, because of his excellence and experience, a traditional German craftsman was chosen, and all the towers, as well as all the sheet metal details of the arcades and other trim, were made of copper. As regards the persistent roof leaks, a new system of roofing application is being used that is more easily maintainable.

new stairway access to the basement from the Webster Street side of the building.

Another new addition is the audiovisual room, as the central facility to coordinate audiovisual functions and facilities, including Internet in the auditorium, as well as in the new basement rooms. Wi-Fi is available throughout the building. Audiovisual surveillance and security facilities are also built into all entrances and pathways around the building.

The flower room, where vases for the altars and offerings for worship are prepared, is in a new larger room closer to the altars. The worship pictures, as well as the whole front of the auditorium, had to be redesigned because of the necessity to install the massive steel beam and post support system that changed the space layout. Some of the pictures had to be changed and



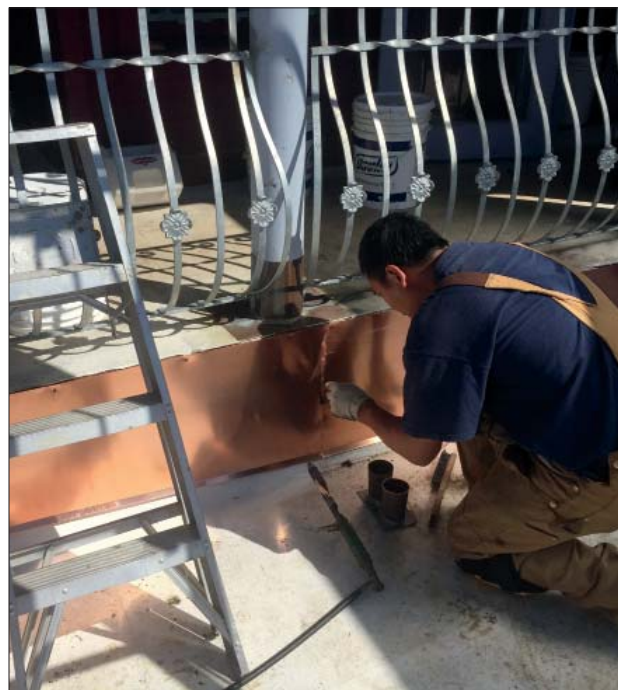
*Cutting metal studs*



*Sheetrock finishing*

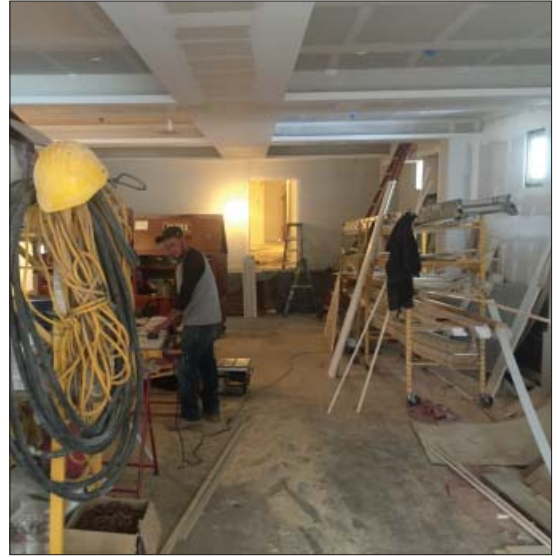
new altars had to be designed. This is, however, not the first time that the appearance of the worship area of the auditorium has been altered. One significant advantage of this present alteration is that it gave us the opportunity to improve an important aspect of the altar; namely, it became possible to install a picture of the Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi, in a more suitable and central location on the altar. Under Swami Tattwamayananda's direction, the arrangement of the pictures for worship, along with new and appropriate altars, were devised to accomplish this. The final result effectively accommodates all the changes made necessary by the reconstruction while meeting the requirements of the worship environment.

All in all, this renovated Old Temple, our original temple, is now ready for increased service in the cause of universal spiritual humanism as envisioned by its original builder, Swami Trigunatita. In a practical sense also, with excellent parking in a city garage only two blocks away, this temple may indeed again play a significant role in the spiritual landscape of San Francisco. ☺



*Installing copper flashing*





*Top left:  
Reinstalling the auditorium platform*

*Top right:  
Auditorium refinishing*

*Middle left:  
Auditorium electrical work*

*Middle right:  
Painting*

*Bottom left:  
Basement Sunday school area*





*Castle Tower*



*Shiva Tower*

## The Five Towers

It is very challenging to find craftsmen nowadays, such as coppersmiths, who have the expertise and experience to take on such a job as covering the five towers atop the Old Temple. Fortunately, a German craftsman was found to do the work. It was deemed

that there was really no other viable solution to stop the perpetual leaks from the towers other than by using copper. Used since ancient times, often for roofing, copper is durable, corrosion resistant, and a weatherproof architectural material. ∞

*Second Tower*







*Scaffolding installation for tower work*

*First Tower*



*Auditorium Entrance Tower*





## The Temple's Artistry

Swami Trigunatita, along with the architect, Joseph A. Leonard, incorporated some beautiful architectural ornamentation into the Hindu Temple. Except for the arched windows and the overhanging bay windows, most of the building is typical of turn-of-the-century architecture. However, the temple has some unexpected eclectic touches. For instance, the arcaded balcony, on the third floor, is formed by Mogul arches supported by Moorish columns on a Doric base.

In addition to the unusual towers, another interesting feature is an eagle with outstretched wings over the main entrance canopy. There is also a beautiful cornice, pictured above, from when the temple had only two stories. ☺

*Top: Cornice*

*Left: Eagle over the entrance canopy*





*Top left:  
Base of the auditorium  
entrance tower*

*Top right:  
Atop the second tower is a crescent,  
surmounted by a symbol of the  
sun, and then a trident.*

*Above:  
Arched window*

*Right:  
Mogul arch*



# Old Temple “Cornerstones”: Then and Now

On Friday, November 7, 2014, in the course of excavating the basement, the crew of Christopher’s Construction extracted the 1905 cornerstone of the Hindu Temple. The original cornerstone was visible in old photographs, but it became obscured later when planter boxes were installed. Fortunately, one of the excavators noticed an embedded copper box at the bottom of the cornerstone, which contained the items that Swami Trigunatita had placed there. The contents, basically looking like a very wet lump, were carefully removed. Christopher Hesson, the contractor, phoned the New Temple and Swamis Tattwamayananda and Vedananda went to the Old Temple to look at what had been found and brought the contents up to the New Temple. After the contents were allowed to dry, they were identified and photographed for the record. Some of the contents had deteriorated and some were surprisingly intact. The items were:

Item 1: A typewritten text of Swami Trigunatita’s history of the Vedanta Society up to 1905. Most of the paper had disintegrated, but, because Swami Trigunatita had carefully preserved a notarized copy in the Vedanta Society files, the original was easily identified.

Item 2: A book, *Sayings of Sri Ramakrishna*, published in 1903 by Swami Abhedananda in New York. The cover and spine had badly deteriorated, but most of the interior pages, being rag paper, were intact.

Item 3: A copy of Swami Trigunatita’s pamphlet *Mental Healing*. This pamphlet had greatly deteriorated and was unidentifiable. Fortunately, a copy of the pamphlet was located among Cara French’s books, and, therefore, it was possible to pinpoint its identity by comparing a few of the intact interior pages.

Item 4: A copy of Swami Trigunatita’s pamphlet *Is There Any Difference Between a Christian and a Hindu?* This was also very fragile and had deteriorated, but the cover title was intact.

Item 5: A folded copy of a bulletin of the San Francisco Vedanta Society with Swami Trigunatita’s photo on the front and the 40 Steiner Street address. This was printed on coated paper, so moisture had effectively glued the pages together. However, the cover was still readable.

All of the these items had been crammed into the small copper box. Along with the contents, the detached copper lid was taken to the New Temple. The box was left in the cornerstone. Photographs of the cornerstone, as well as of the copper box and its contents, were taken.



*Original cornerstone*

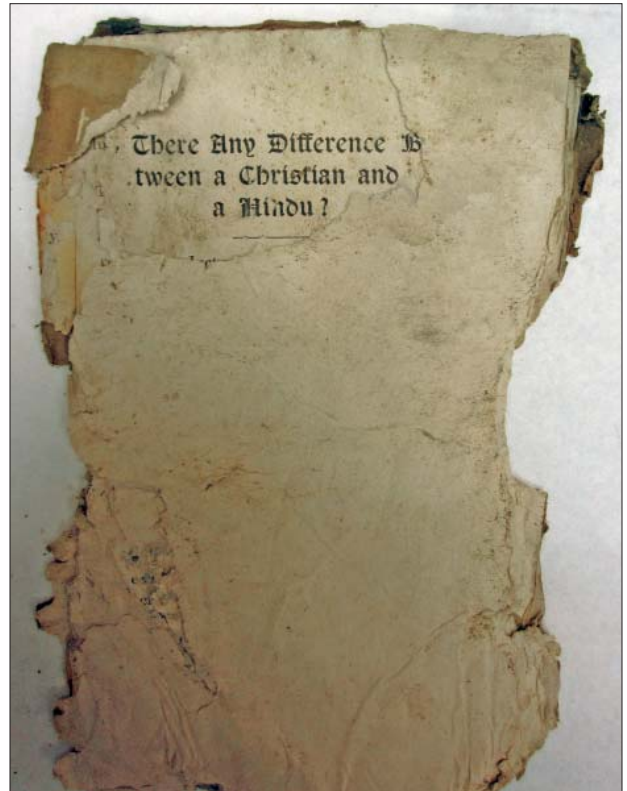
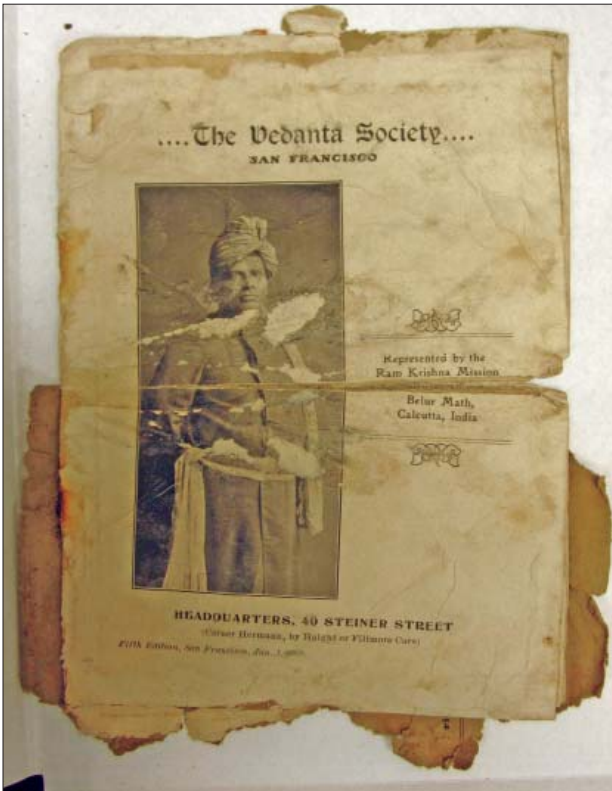
The original items, with archival-quality facsimiles, have been included in the new “cornerstone” box and embedded into the foundation of the renovated Old Temple. Additional materials, recording the history of the Vedanta Society of Northern California through March 2015, were included in the new archival records box which was installed on Guru Purnima, July 31, 2015. ∞

*Next page, top: Contents with their identification sources*

*Next page, bottom left: Bulletin (Item 5)*

*Next page, bottom right: Pamphlet (Item 4)*









*Swami Tattwamayananda locking the archival records box*



*Archival records box*



*July 31, 2015: Swami Vedananda's offering*



*Marianne Quinn, Swamis Tattwamayananda & Vedananda*



*Stainless steel archival box in Pelican case*



*Case before sealing*

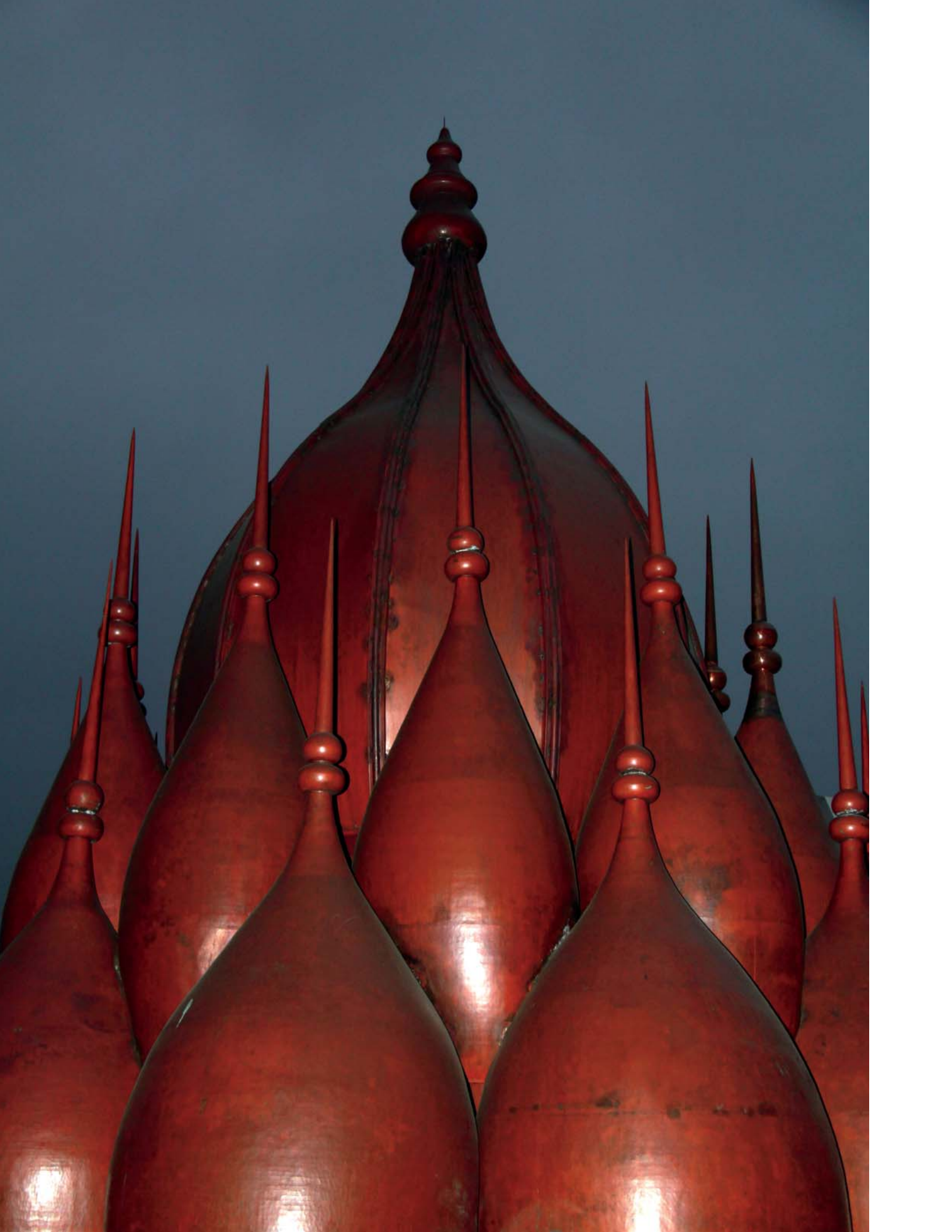




*After the ceremony the box was buried.*

The additional items included in the new archival records box were:

1. Letters of blessing from Belur Math by Revered President Swami Atmasthananda and Revered Swamis Smaranananda, Prabhananda, and Suhitananda.
2. Message from Swami Chetanananda.
3. Message from Swami Tattwamayananda, the swami in charge of the Vedanta Society.
4. History of the Vedanta Society of Northern California, 1900-2015, with photos.
5. Copy of the Hindu Temple pamphlet, issued in 1909, when the towers and the third floor were dedicated.
6. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, Part 1*, published by Swami Trigunatita in 1912.
7. Photo of Holy Mother that Swami Trigunatita had made available to devotees.
8. Original postcards of the Old Temple issued by Swami Trigunatita in 1909-1910.
9. *Swami Trigunatita: His Life and Work* by Sister Gargi (Marie Louise Burke), published by the Vedanta Society of Northern California in 1997.
10. *A Heart Poured Out: A Story of Swami Ashokananda* by Sister Gargi (Marie Louise Burke), published by Kalpa Tree Press in 2004.
11. *Swami Vivekananda in San Francisco*, 2nd edition, by Swami Ashokananda, and published by the Vedanta Society of Northern California in 1990.
12. Digital copies of *The Voice of India*, the journal published in 1945-1946 by the Vedanta Society of Northern California.
13. Souvenir crystal paperweight commemorating the dedication of Swami Vivekananda Centenary Hall in 1996.
14. Copy of the video “*One Hundred Years in America: Vedanta Society of Northern California.*”
15. Memorabilia relating to the Smithsonian Institution’s 2013-14 traveling exhibit, “*Yoga: The Art of Transformation.*”
16. Items relating to the VSNC celebration of Swami Vivekananda’s 150th birthday:
  - Booklet entitled *Swami Vivekananda and His Universal Call*
  - Poster advertising the VSNC February 23, 2013, event, “*Yoga and the American Quest for Freedom,*” at the Palace of Fine Arts in San Francisco
  - Bookmark produced by the bookshop
17. Booklet, *Swami Prabuddhananda: A Remembrance*, that had been handed out at the memorial service for Swami Prabuddhananda.
18. DVD copy of the video presentation, “*Forty-four Years of a Dedicated Life,*” about Swami Prabuddhananda’s forty years of service in San Francisco.
19. Brochure: “*What is Vedanta?*”
20. Brochure: “*Vedanta Retreat, Olema, California.*”
21. January 2015 bulletin.
22. Copies of construction documents relating to the 2014-2016 renovation of the Old Temple.
23. A copy of the July 2015 issue of *Udbodhan*, which focused on Swami Trigunatitananda and the Hindu Temple.





# Notes on the Contributors

**Professor Michael Nagler** is professor emeritus of Classics and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Berkeley. The author of several books, he received the Jambhaji International Award for “Promoting Gandhian Values Outside of India” in 2007.

**Swami Prabhananda** is a senior monk of the Ramakrishna Order. Presently, he is a vice president of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, Belur Math, India.

**Swami Chetananda** is a senior monk of the Ramakrishna Order. Since 1980 he has been the Swami in charge of the Vedanta Society of St. Louis as well as of the Vedanta Society of Kansas City.

**Swami Bhajananda** is a senior monk of the Ramakrishna Order. He is a scholar and is one of four assistant secretaries of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, Belur Math, India.

**Swami Yogeshananda** is a senior monk of the Ramakrishna Order. He is affiliated with the Vedanta Society of Southern California and currently resides at the Ramakrishna Monastery, Trabuco Canyon. He is the author of *Six Lighted Windows: Memories of Swamis in the West* and other works.

**Swami Tattwamayananda** is a senior monk of the Ramakrishna Order. Since July 2014 he is the Swami in charge of the Vedanta Society of Northern California.

**Swami Vedananda** is a senior monk of the Ramakrishna Order. He is affiliated with the Vedanta Society of Northern California and resides in San Francisco.

**Pravrajika Madhavaprana** is a senior nun of the Ramakrishna Order. She is affiliated with the Vedanta Society of Northern California and resides at the Vedanta Convent in San Francisco.

**Swami Atulananda** (1870-1966), originally from the Netherlands, was a monk of the Ramakrishna Order who came in close contact with many of the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna.

**Brahmachari Vimukta Chaitanya** (1925-2011) was a monk of the Ramakrishna Order. He joined the Order in 1953 at the San Francisco Vedanta Society and, for health reasons, he was not able to travel to India for *sannyasa*. From 1960 until 2011 he lived at the Vedanta Retreat Monastery in Olema.

**E. C. Brown** (1871-1965), originally from England, was one of the earliest members of Swami Trigunatita’s monastery at the Hindu Temple. He left the monastery after Swami Trigunatita’s passing away and later was readmitted by Swami Ashokananda. We are grateful to him for his “Monastery Notes” and for his reminiscences of life with the swamis at the Hindu Temple.

**Sister Gargi** (Marie Louise Burke, 1912-2004), a longtime member of the Vedanta Society of Northern California, was the author of the monumental six-volume work *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries*. She has authored several other works, including *Swami Trigunatita: His Life and Work*.

*From the Archives . . .*

## “A Holy City”

San Francisco surely was fortunate to have had the presence of such a man as Swami Trigunatita for so many years. I know very few people in this city, and it will be presumptuous and certainly wrong and dogmatic on my part to say that there are not mystics and there have not been other mystics in this city. But certainly Swami Trigunatita was a person of no mean stature, even in the knowledge of God, and this city is certainly blessed in having had him here.

A place in which a knower of God has lived, that place becomes blessed. It is in such places that the presence of God becomes specially manifest. Such are the places which become holy places and places of

pilgrimage to which souls, seeking the knowledge of God, come, and, although the original knower of God may have long passed this life, they feel the vibration of his presence and they are benefited thereby. And because of the presence of this swami, I have no doubt about it, that San Francisco has become a holy city. Time will show it. ∞

*- Swami Ashokananda  
“The Story of a San Francisco Mystic”  
January 18, 1953, Old Temple*



*San Francisco and the Golden Gate Bridge*