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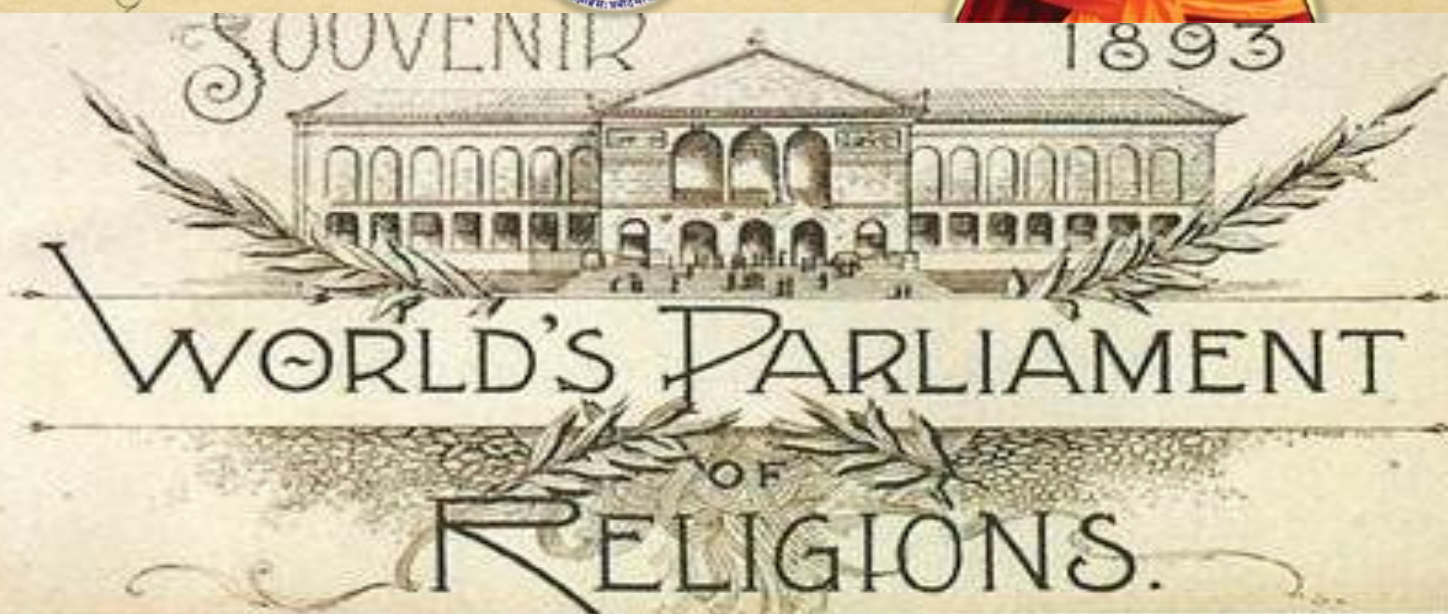
CHICAGO CALLING



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It has shown that every religion can make a stand in the world of thought and has set people to thinking that the Lord is working everywhere.

Ramani Vivekananda

HINDU PHILOSOPHER.

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Is religion one or many? The answer would be “Yes” and also “No”.

“Yes” when the word “religion” means goal.

“No” when the word “religion” means path.

Truth is one people call it by various names.

In the words of Swami Vivekananda, “Religion is realization.” So, it is the goal. Again, he said that religion is a process that makes a brute into a man and a man into god. So, religion is also a path.

The relation between religion and humanity is like water and the fish. The fish cannot survive without water; similarly, humans cannot remain human without religion.

But if the water becomes stagnant, it may kill the fish. Similarly, if religion loses its real purpose and becomes an institution of superstition and dogmatism, it brings death to humanity.

Like the flow of fresh water, exchange and dialogue among different religions is necessary.

Along with the growth of human society in different parts of the world, different religions also grew. Afterwards, they were categorized as Eastern Religions and Western Religions.

For political and economic reasons, the West

reached the East, and, along with diplomats and businessmen, religious missionaries also spread throughout the East. In 1784 the first American merchant ship, “United States”, reached the coast of India. The first American missionaries were dispatched to India in 1812. Eastern religious practices eventually attracted much attention. The missionary reports about the Asian religious practices were more critical than the accounts of the early merchants.

However, later missionary accounts embodied a more sympathetic attitude—that each of the world’s religions contained some good points.

While the West was trying to find good points in other religions, Sri Ramakrishna, the God in human form, declared, after practicing severe spiritual austerities in various religions, that all religions can lead to God if practiced with sincerity. He declared, “As many faiths, so many paths.”

The truth that was discovered by the Vedic Rishis in ancient times and realized anew by Sri Ramakrishna was put on the world stage for the first time in Chicago in 1893.

In 1893 the city of Chicago hosted the World Columbian Exposition. A number of congresses were held, including Anthropology, Labor, Medicine, Temperance, Commerce, Finance, Literature, History, Art, Philosophy and Science.

One of these was the World’s Parliament of Religions. Rev. John Henry Barrows was the chairman of the Parliament. The Parliament ran from Sept. 11 to 27, 1893 at the World’s Congress Auxiliary Building, which is now known as the Art Institute of Chicago.

This was the first formal gathering of representatives of the Eastern and Western spiritual traditions.

Swami Vivekananda, the illustrious disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, represented Hinduism and India at the Parliament. He is best known for his inspiring speech, beginning with “Sisters and Brothers of America”, through which he introduced the broad perspective of Hinduism at the opening session of the Parliament on Sept. 11. In his concluding speech on Sept. 27, he gave a call for universal harmony, “Help and not Fight”, “Assimilation and not Destruction”, “Harmony and Peace and not Dissension”.

After the Parliament, he conducted hundreds of public and private lectures and classes, disseminating the tenets of the Hindu philosophy in America, England and Europe. In America Vivekananda became India’s spiritual ambassador. His mission there was the interpretation of India’s spiritual culture and heritage. He also tried to enrich the religious consciousness of Americans through the teachings of the Vedanta philosophy. He established Vedanta societies in America and England. He was a key figure in the introduction of the Indian philosophies of Vedanta and Yoga to the Western world and was credited with raising interfaith awareness, and bringing Hinduism to the status of a major world religion in the late 19th century.

After a comprehensive tour of four years in the West, he returned to India in 1897 and established a unique monastic organization, the Ramakrishna Mission, on May 1st. Later, he became a major force in the revival of Hinduism in India and contributed to the notion of nationalism in colonial India. Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore’s suggestion (to Nobel Laureate Romain Rolland) was, “If you want to know India, study Vivekananda. In him everything is positive and nothing is negative.”

What they said of Swamiji and his speeches

“Swami Vivekananda exercised a wonderful influence over his audience.”

—Dr. J. H. Barrows

Chairman of the General Committee of the
Parliament of Religions, Chicago

“He is undoubtedly the greatest figure in the Parliament of Religions. After hearing him we feel how foolish it is to send missionaries to this learned nation.”

—The New York Herald



SWAMI VIVEKANANDA: THE EMBODIMENT OF CONCENTRATION

SWAMI ISHTANANDA

Minister, Vedanta Society of St. Petersburg, Fl

This lecture was delivered on
Nov. 9th, 2013 at “Chicago Calling”.



Revered General Secretary Maharaj, revered Swami Chetananandaji Maharaj, all other respected Swamis, brother monks, sisters and devotees, I am very thankful to Swami Ishatmanandaji Maharaj for including me in this wonderful occasion of celebrating 150th Birthday anniversary of Swami Vivekananda.

Swami Vivekananda must be a wonderful person, a great hero, and a role model to all of you because you have joined this celebration with so much enthusiasm and joy. I am sure that there are thousands of people all over the world, who could not join us but would be thrilled to read the passage of those sayings and writings of the great Swami, though they were delivered more than one hundred years back. Also there are thousands of people who cannot but be moved emotionally to think about the great Swami who changed the world in many different ways for the betterment of the mankind everywhere in the West as well as in the East. He is the harbinger of the freedom of many different types as has already been expounded by the fine speakers here on this stage today.

I believe that I belong to that group of people who are very emotionally connected with Swamiji. Therefore, to be included in this great occasion of celebrating Swamiji's 150th Birth anniversary at this very historic place. I remain very thankful to my brother Swami Ishatmanandaji. Thank you, brother!

Swamiji was marvelous and very special and very unique for many different reasons as you have already listened to those talks, and there will come more topics afterwards. His humanity, his universality, the message of strength, and in many different ways Swamiji was unique. Unique in that sense, yes it was reminded by Swami Yogatmanandaji, he did not give a new message. He was giving the same age old message of Vedanta, just given in our language. And therefore it became so very understandable. So, we are able to apply some of them into our own lives, and mold and change ourselves accordingly.

So very different kind of topics that could have been chosen! But one topic that was given to me was 'manifestation of concentration that was Swami Vivekananda'. I consider that to be a wonderful topic because this is what Swami Vivekananda thought about it himself. He preached very strongly about the value of man, and about the most powerful aspect of that man which is the mind of that man. And then he preached that if you can handle your mind, if you can pay attention to your own mind, if you can win over and control your own mind then you are actually the controller of everything in this world. All power resides there. The key to the success of all different kinds of strength and power lies in the concentration of mind - in the management and the handling your own mind. You do not have to manage everybody else in the outside -- that was Swamiji's message.

We find so many different instances of Swamiji's life where this message actually was applied. In fact Swamiji's whole life was about that. He never gave a single idea, or a lesson, or a teaching which he himself did not practice and he himself did not find to be real and true.

We already heard how Swamiji was transformed from Narendranath to Vivekananda. He was totally a changed man then, according to Swami Chetananandaji Maharaj's wonderful speech. Unless he had actually himself believed anything to be true one hundred percent, he didn't accept that. So, when he said something so, he actually not only believed that, he had found out and had applied that on his own life. When Swamiji was in America, one very interesting incident happened. He was watching once, standing over a bridge, a bunch of boys were trying to aim at some egg-shells floating on the river flowing underneath. Those egg-shells bobbed up and down moving forward into the flow of the river. Swamiji was amused to see that those boys were shooting again and again and missing all of them. One of the boys saw that there was one gentleman who was laughing at them. So he invited him and said, 'Sir, do you think that this is a very simple job? Would you mind to try yourself and find out how difficult it is to aim the moving egg-shells which are not moving in one simple straight line, but they are also going up and down through the waves?' Swamiji said that 'I can give it a try'. He came forward, took the air gun from the boy's hand and stood still for a minute. Then he aimed at those shells and shot for the first time in his life. And, then he continued shooting. It is mentioned in his biography that twelve times he shot those egg-shells and each time he was successful. (Unfortunately there was no Olympic games those days; otherwise he could represent India and bring some gold medals for his country)! Surely all the boys were very amused and they told him, 'Sir, it is really surprising, and we could

not believe that you could do that. Yours must be a well-trained hand'. Swamiji said that that was the first time he was trying to shoot with a rifle, and he explained the secret to those boys. He told them that everything lies in your ability to concentrate your mind. The concentration of mind is the key to be successful in life.

Swamiji is wonderful to many people for different reasons, not only because he is our spiritual hero. Our religious life has been tremendously shaped, not only influenced, by who Swamiji was and what Swamiji has given to us in way of interpreting religion in many different ways. But we find that there are people all over the world, even those who do not care for religion or spirituality. Even they would consider Swamiji to be a hero in their lives. They care to go through his life and his teachings, because Swamiji had provided clue to success even in their materialistic or secular lives. Swamiji told those boys that this is what our boys back in India were doing: they have been traditionally taught that 'pay attention to concentration of mind. If you can do that, then everything will be revealed to you. The treasure chest of knowledge will be opened, and the secret that is hidden anywhere in the world will all become an open book to you'. So, Swamiji at one point said that if I have been given another chance to start all over from my childhood days, I would not pay any attention just to cram or memorize so many books, subjects and literatures. I would pay attention to only one thing - that is how to control the mind, how to concentrate the mind.

He said so but we find that it was already there from his childhood days. Just think of how many different ways he has shown his ability to memories everything what he listened even once. When he was a very small boy and was listening Ramayana and Mahabharata from the lips of his mother sitting on her lap, he memorized entire Ramayana and Mahabharata that he could recite very easily later on.

Afterwards we find that he had very strange ways of learning the lessons. When he was a young boy, he used to close his eyes and keep quiet either in a sitting or lying posture and just listen. He had a private tutor who used to come and give him many different lessons that we learn from his biography. And this boy Narendra, he would be just lying down with closed eyes. So once it so happened that his private tutor lost his patience at this sleepiness of the boy whom he was teaching. So, he held this boy with his two hands and shook him vigorously and said to pay attention to him. He said that 'I am teaching to you and you are sleeping'? Then Naren got up with total amazement, and replied, "No Sir, I have been listening to everything that you were telling for last one hour". Naren said, "Let me repeat what you said" and he recited exactly what the teacher had said, uttering each and everything in detail without missing a single point or word.

We find that Swami Vivekananda, as he was growing up as a college going boy, did not pay much attention to his academic studies. He was more interested in extra academic subjects, the music and going to the gym for body building and many other different kinds of activities. But when it would be absolutely unavoidable then he used to hide himself in the roof top room of his grandmother for a couple of days. There he would go through those academic lessons, master them and then pass the college examination successfully.

Later on we find him as a wandering monk when he was going through the length and breadth of India. He was once in the city of Meerut. We find this story that he was staying at that time with couple of his brother monks. On his request, Swami Akhandanandaji was bringing one book on Sir John Lubbock every day from a nearby library and returning that back the next day. The librarian thought that Swami Akhandanandaji was not reading the books, but was trying to impress him and others by borrowing books and returning them back on next day. So as he mentioned about

his doubts to Akhandanandaji, he conveyed that to Swamiji. Swamiji came to the library on next day and proved to the Librarian that not only he had read those books thoroughly but he actually quoted from those books in an amazing manner that was almost impossible for any ordinary man.

We find that many of the biographers called that to be Swamiji's extraordinary super human memory power. Swamiji on the other hand said that it was not memory power, but it was the power of concentration of mind. This is in Swamiji's own word: It is so happen that once in Khetri, his own disciple Raja Ajit Singhji had observed Swamiji this way - he picked up some books and hurriedly turned all the pages and then left the books there. So the Raja of Khetri, not having any doubt that Swamiji was reading everything, and that he was also quoting from those books now and then, asked his Guru with his amazement about how he could do that; and how was that possible at all? He knew that it was not a human power. Swamiji said that three things were necessary for this special power. One was the continence, or Brahmacharya. The next was practice and he explained many different ways about how to practice to read fast. And the third was concentration of mind.

The concentration of mind is another way of showing the Yogi inside.

I was wondering why this subject was called the "Manifestation of Concentration". Then I remembered that Thakur Sri Ramakrishna once talked about Sukadeva and he said that Sukadeva was not merely a Jnani. The Jnani is one who puts lots of efforts and struggle to actually realized the Jnana. But he was manifestation of Jnana himself. Then I realized why the topic was given as 'Swami Vivekananda - the manifestation of concentration'. Swami Vivekananda did not struggle to find concentration of mind. He was born with that power, a super human power of Yogi. The concentration of mind was born with him.

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA: A BRIDGE BETWEEN THE EAST AND THE WEST

SWAMI YUKTATMANANDA

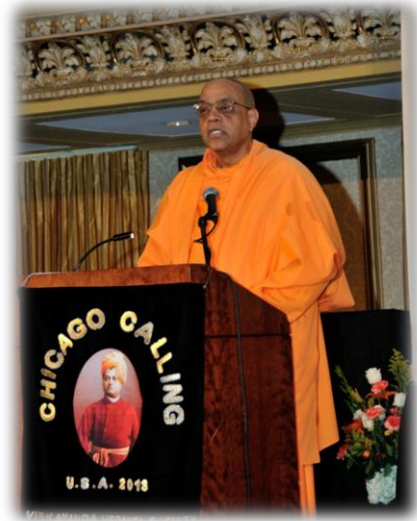
Minister Ramakrishna - Vivekananda Center, New York
This lecture was delivered on Nov. 9th, 2013 at “Chicago Calling”

It is a great privilege and blessing to be here as part of Swami Vivekananda's 150th birthday celebrations organized by Vivekananda Vedanta Society, Chicago. As a bridge between the East and the West, what did Swamiji bring to the west? He brought the timeless wisdom of Vedanta. His exposition of Vedanta in this country serves as a great source book for the Indian people who want to know more about their ancient religion.

He was in this country from 1893 to 1896, which could be considered the most productive years of his life. Most of his teachings in his *Complete Works* were given here: the lectures he gave, the papers he presented, the interviews he gave, and the voluminous correspondence he maintained with his disciples and devotees in India. It is from here that he organized the fledgling Ramakrishna order in India.

The uniqueness of Swamiji's teachings

What Swamiji preached was nothing but the Upanishads, but the way he preached was unique. Sister Nivedita puts it beautifully in her introduction to the *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*: “The truths he preaches would have been as true, had he never been born. Nay more, they would have been equally authentic. The difference would have lain in their difficulty of access, in their want of modern clearness and incisiveness of statement, and in their loss of mutual coherence and unity. Had he not lived, texts that today will carry the bread of life to thousands might have remained the obscure disputes of scholars. He taught with authority, and not as one of the Pundits. For he himself had



plunged to the depths of the realization which he preached.” Sister Nivedita says, “The difference would have lain in √ their difficulty of access.” These teachings would have remained the exclusive privilege of some elite few. Swamiji has made them understandable to all. He writes in one of his letters: “To put the Hindu ideas into English and then make out of dry philosophy and intricate mythology and queer, startling psychology, a religion which shall be easy, simple, popular, and at the same time meet the requirements of the highest minds, is a task which only those can understand who have attempted it. The abstract Advaita must become living—poetic—in everyday life; and out of bewildering yogism must come the most scientific and practical psychology—and all this must be put into such a form that a child may grasp it. That is my life's work. The Lord only knows how far I shall succeed.”

When we study Swamiji's complete works, we can appreciate how admirably Swamiji lived up to his own mission in life. Swamiji gives us a clear idea of the essentials and non-essentials of religion. “Non-essentials” does not mean that which is not necessary but that which does not form the essence of religion. When we study religion as taught by Swamiji, there will no more cobwebs in our mind; there will be no more superstitions in our mind. Swamiji teaches that the manifestation of our hidden divinity is the primary aim of religion.

What people usually take for religion is what Swamiji calls the “secondary details”: doctrines, dogmas, rituals, books, temples, and forms. These secondary details should be judged by the way they further the primary aim of religion.

His central teaching

Is there a central idea that runs as a connecting thread through Swamiji’s lectures, interviews, the “Paper on Hinduism” he presented in this very city at the World’s Parliament of Religions, and the huge volume of correspondence he maintained while here? In a letter to Sister Nivedita Swamiji writes: “My ideal indeed can be put into a few words and that is: to preach unto mankind their divinity, and how to make it manifest in every movement of life.” We are all divine—that is his central message. He was never tired of rousing the divinity hidden in every one of us. In his “Paper on Hinduism” he quotes from the Shvetashvatara Upanishad: “Hear, ye children of immortal bliss!” and says, “ ‘Children of immortal bliss’—what a sweet, what a hopeful name! Allow me to call you, brethren, by that sweet name—heirs of immortal bliss—yea, the Hindu refuses to call you sinners. Ye are the Children of God, the sharers of immortal bliss, holy and perfect beings. Ye divinities on earth—sinners! It is a sin to call a man so; it is a standing libel on human nature.”

Swamiji could say this boldly in this city back in 1893. We are all divine, and to harp on sin, to harp on weakness, is not going to help us in any way. Dwelling on the negative sides of our character is not going to make us better in anyway. He says, “I have been criticized, from one end of the world to the other, as one who preaches the diabolical idea that there is no sin! Very good. The descendants of these very men will bless me as the preacher of virtue, and not of sin. I am the teacher of virtue, not of sin. I glory in being the preacher of light, and not of darkness.” Swamiji preaches light, the divine light that is inherent in us. Swamiji preaches strength.

His teachings on religion

Realization: He says, “Religion is realization; not talk, nor doctrine, nor theories, however beautiful they may be. It is being and becoming, not hearing or acknowledging; it is the whole soul becoming changed into what it believes. That is religion.”

Character transformation: Swamiji sees in everyone the Spirit caught in the bond of body and mind. He sets for himself this task of freeing everyone from this bondage. He says that religion is the idea that transforms a brute unto a man and a man unto a God. Religion is expected to accomplish this character transformation: animal nature to human nature to divine nature. If we are religious in the truer sense of the term, there will be less of animal nature, and more of human nature. This human nature should get transformed to divine nature. What is meant by divine nature? Unselfishness. Swamiji says, “There is one thing which is the world and another which is God; and this distinction is very true. What they mean by world is selfishness. Unselfishness is God.” The more unselfish we are the more is the manifestation of our inherent divinity.

Harmony of religions: Another important teaching that Swamiji gave here was the harmony of the religions. He said at the close of the parliament of world religions: “If the Parliament of Religions has shown anything to the world it is this: It has proved to the world that holiness, purity and charity are not the exclusive possessions of any church in the world, and that every system has produced men and women of the most exalted character.” Harmony of religions is an important message we get from his Master’s life. Swamiji proclaimed it to the world from this very city.

True civilization: Swamiji considers the goal of civilization and the goal of religion to be one and the same. He says, “Civilization, true civilization, should mean the power of taking the animal-man out of his sense-life—by giving him visions and tastes of planes much higher—and not external comforts.”

And he says, "The more advanced a society or nation is in spirituality, the more is that society or nation civilized. No nation can be said to have become civilized only because it has succeeded in increasing the comforts of material life by bringing into use lots of machinery and things of that sort."

What did Vivekananda take back from the West?

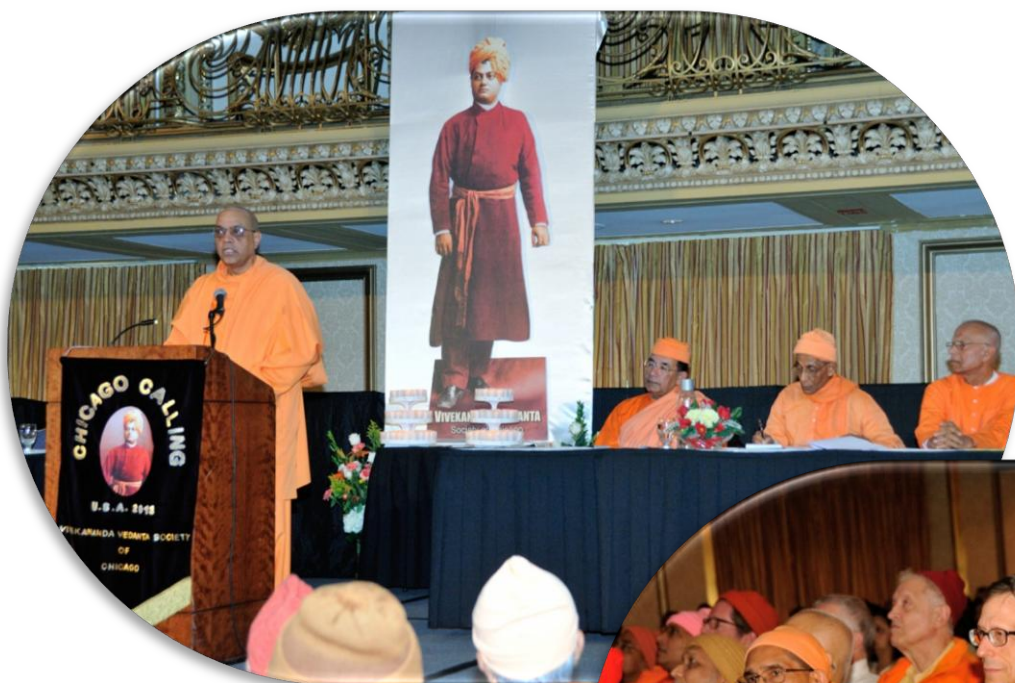
Swamiji was not a one-way bridge to the West, but a two-way bridge. We saw that he gave to the west the timeless message of Vedanta, but what did he take back from the West? It was the power of organization. Says Cornelia Conger in her reminiscences of Swamiji: "Once he said to my grandmother that he had had the greatest temptation of his life in America. She liked to tease him a bit and said, 'Who is she, Swami?' He burst

out laughing and said, 'Oh, it is not a lady, it is Organization!'" "

Swamiji wanted western science and eastern spirituality to blend together. That would make for the most effective civilization: India has to learn from the West how to conquer external nature and the West has to learn from India how to conquer internal nature.

Swamiji continues to be the bridge between the East and the West. Even in these days when the distinction between the two is fast fading because of globalization, the Internet, and so on, Swamiji continues to be a perennial inspiration, because his message is eternal: "You are divine. Manifest that divinity in your thoughts and actions."

Thank you.



ARISE, AWAKE, AND STOP NOT



Narayanan
Krishnan



Krishnan was an award-winning chef with Taj Hotels, Bangalore and was short-listed for an elite job in Switzerland. After witnessing a distressing incident in 2002, he quit his job and began feeding the homeless and mentally disabled in his hometown. He said, "I saw a very old man, literally eating his own human waste out of hunger. I went to the nearby hotel and asked them what was available. They had idli, which I bought and gave to the old man. Believe me, I had never seen a person eating so fast, ever. As he ate the food, his eyes were filled with tears. Those were the tears of happiness." Later to an interviewer he said, "It really hurt me so much. I was literally shocked for a second. After that, I ... decided this is what I should do the rest of my lifetime."

Every day, he wakes up at 4 am, cooks a simple hot meal and then, along with his team, loads it in

a van and travels about 200 km feeding the homeless in Madurai, Tamil Nadu. He also provides haircuts and shaves to give dignity to those he serves.

Krishnan founded the Akshaya Trust organization in 2003, which helps to feed the homeless and mentally-disabled in Madurai, Tamil Nadu. He serves breakfast, lunch and dinner to 425 indigent and elderly people in Madurai. The organization is running on totally public support and no government funding. The cost per day to feed his community is around \$500. His donations don't completely cover the cost, so the remaining cost is covered from the rent he receives from a small house his grandfather gave him. He sleeps in the nonprofit's kitchen with his coworkers.

He was selected as one of the Top 10 in "CNN heroes 2010" list.

You must give your body, mind, and speech to "the welfare of the world". You have read — "मातृदेवो भव, पितृदेवो भव — Look upon your mother as God, look upon your father as God" — but I say "दरिद्रदेवो भव, मूर्खदेवो भव — The poor, the illiterate, the ignorant, the afflicted — let these be your God." Know that service to these alone is the highest religion.

-- Swami Vivekananda

CW 6: Epistles – 2nd Series/LV Akhandananda

Swami Akhandananda (1864–1937) was a direct disciple of Ramakrishna Paramahansa. He was the third president of the Ramakrishna Math & Mission. He was a pioneer in terms of establishing Ramakrishna Mission as a philanthropic organization working for the welfare of poor and orphans and also for providing relief to the affected and needy.

HOW TO BE A BETTER STUDENT

Welcome to the Youth Corner. This column will feature inspirational messages for the youth, addressing issues such as success in studies, development of will-power and memory, concentration, competition, and other challenges that are faced inside and outside the classroom. You are invited to write in to ezine@chicagovedanta.org with questions that we will attempt to address.

Q Even though I decide to study, I find that there are many distractions and I postpone studying. Please advise on how to focus on studying.

A person expresses himself through three modes: thought, words, and action. When the expressions in the three modes are in unison, the person is said to be focused. When the person expresses himself differently in the three modes, the person is said to be of scattered disposition. You must have also heard sayings such as, “A person is as good as his word,” and “Even at the expense of one’s life breath going away, one should fulfill one’s word.” When you make a commitment to study, you are giving the word to yourself that you will study. Then no matter what distractions crop up, you need to keep the word given to yourself and study. This can be achieved with will-power. We shall discuss what will-power is, and how it can be developed.

Will-power is the secret to success in all spheres of life. How to develop the will-power is thus a very important challenge in everyone’s life, and should be a part of one’s education. In fact, Swami Vivekananda has defined education as “the training by which the current and expression of will are brought under control and become fruitful.” It is never too late to develop will-power because self-improvement is almost impossible without the voluntary or involuntary exercise of will-power. Given strong will-power, we can turn hopeless situations around and bring about tremendous changes in our individual and also collective lives, for the better.

Consider, for example, the lives of three heroes of modern history. Abraham Lincoln, in the dark days of the Civil War; Winston Churchill, during

the 2nd World War; and Mahatma Gandhi, in the freedom movement for India’s independence. Despite great adversities and problems, it was their indomitable will-power that enabled these individuals to bring about spectacular transformations in the societies. Given will-power, man can make everything out of nothing, as it were. In the absence of will-power, all one’s talents, qualities, and endowments come to nothing.

Behind all creative efforts in all spheres of life is an act of the will. In Vedic cosmogony, it is said: This universe, in truth, in the beginning, was nothing at all. There was no heaven, no earth, no atmosphere. This being, that was solely non-being, conceived a wish: ‘May I be.’

Thus, the universe came about as an act of the Supreme Being’s will. Swami Vivekananda has defined will as “a compound of the self (or Atman, or soul of man) and of the mind.” The Self is undifferentiated consciousness and beyond causation; in that consciousness, there is no will because will presupposes a reaction to something external or other. Though Atman is free in its pure, essential nature, when identified with the manifested mind and body, it is in a state of bondage. The will is the first manifestation of the real Self caught in web of phenomena or maya. It is a compound of the Atman and mind which is subtle matter.

In the ultimate analysis, this compound is bound to be unreal for it is based on the unreality of maya. But as long as we are in the realm of maya (i.e., remain spiritually unillumined), it is real for all practical purposes. Given its practical reality, it is a very powerful force and it moves things in a way as strongly as the powerful forces of nature.

All the actions we see in the world, all the movements and achievements of man, are manifestations of that will-power.

Swami Vivekananda has said, "This will is caused by character and character is manufactured by Karma or work. As is the Karma, so is the manifestation of the will." So, one needs to build up one's character in order to manifest strong will-power. To build character, one needs to keep a grip on life and be a master of one's circumstances. The way to do so is by right thinking and deep thinking. Without cultivating the habit of introspection, it is not possible to keep track of all the forces that operate within us, and without knowing the nature of these forces, we cannot be their masters. Thus, introspection is the key to building character and will-power.

Introspection reveals that there is a basic anomaly in the lives of most people. We know what is dharma, what is righteousness, what is

good, but do not have the inclination to do it. We know what is adharma, what is unrighteousness, what is sin, but cannot desist from doing it. Now, why is this so? Hinduism asserts that there is no 'original sin' or 'original wickedness' in use. There is no essential inalienable wickedness in us. The inescapable conclusion is that this is due to the failure of our will. There is actually a lot of goodness, strength, and greatness within us that cry out for self-manifestation. It is a basic tragedy of our daily life that prevents a real encounter with our true self and these true qualities. Therefore, it is important for every person to know how to avoid the failure of the will. The only way to do so is to cultivate will-power. In the next issue, we will see how this will-power can be cultivated.

Abridged from: "Will-Power and its Development" by Swami Budhananda; Advaita Ashrama; 48 pages, 22nd impression; 2004.



After the family bought the cubs from the Gaza zoo, hit during last summer's Israel-Hamas war, they would take them to parks or the beach and children — those brave enough — would come up to pet them.

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True love can be regarded as a triangle. The first angle is, love knows no bargain. ... The second angle is, love knows no fear. ... The third angle, the apex, is, love is always the highest ideal. When we have reached the point where we can worship the ideal as the ideal, all arguments and doubts have vanished forever. The ideal can never escape, because it is part of our own nature.

*-- Swami Vivekananda
CW 9: Newspaper Reports
(Part I)*

CHICAGO CALLING - A UNIQUELY INSPIRATIONAL EXPERIENCE

WRITTEN BY RITA DUTTA

TRANSLATED FROM BRNGALI BY MADHUSANDHYA DAS

When we received an invitation from the head of the Vedanta Society of Chicago, Swami Ishatmananda Maharaj, it had 'Chicago Calling' inscribed over it in bold letters.

The Vedanta Society of Chicago would be celebrating the 150th Birth Centenary of Swami Vivekananda from 7th to 11th November 2013. We had been invited to participate in this historic celebration. Even though I was very keen to attend, I started having doubts immediately about whether we would be able to travel to Chicago as I was faced with a multitude of responsibilities and familial commitments in the United Arab Emirates (where we had lived for 31 years) and in India. In my heart though there was only one thought, dream and aspiration - Chicago is calling!

Just seven days before the scheduled program, at the unlikely hour of midnight, my husband's leave was finally granted by his office. The news left both of us ecstatic and in turn we called Maharaj at the Chicago centre enquiring if our last minute registration for the event would be entertained. As soon as we got the affirmation, we started making our travel plans. 120 years after Swami Vivekananda's journey to Chicago, we made preparations to travel to there too. Swami Vivekananda was propelled on this journey by Shri Ramakrishna Paramahansa in order to serve mankind. He had had to undertake immense hardships to travel to America. We were far more fortunate; in our time it took us just thirty minutes to plan our entire itinerary and book our flights and hotels.

The cold weather conditions of the city of Chicago near Lake Michigan are well known. Swamiji and his disciple's had little information about the severity of the cold and the adverse weather conditions of Chicago. He had carried

with him only a silk robe, his silk headgear (pagri), a few books and a water jug (kamandalu).

In contrast to Swamiji's humble travel accessories, ours were excessively elaborate! We carried suitcases full of shawls, sweaters, overcoats, hats and mufflers. To attend the convention I also packed a variety of exotic sarees and accessories to gracefully adorn myself with for the various occasions. Pondering over the nitty-gritty details of our trip, it suddenly struck me, 'What about the birthday present?'



It was but a natural choice that since we were residing in the desert country of the UAE, the best gift would be succulent dates. Since I knew that about fifty Monks and Pravrajikas from around the world would be attending the event, I packed 20 kgs of luscious dates. In addition to this, I packed 3kg Mihidana Laddu (a traditional Indian sweet), 1 litre of Gangajal given to me by the Pravrajikas of Sarada Math, an ochre dhoti and shawl bought from Chennai and a few books about the history of the UAE as gifts too. With 6 suitcases stuffed into our car and a heart full of excitement, we departed Abu Dhabi on 6th of November 2013 precisely at 10 am and started our long journey to Chicago.

After a non-stop flight of fifteen hours, we landed on the shores of the Windy City in the land of the American Dream.

In front of us though stood our final obstacle before we could enter the so called land of milk and honey – the immigrations counter. In the customs declaration form we had to declare that we were not carrying fruits, vegetables, meat/fish or milk products. In addition to that, we also had to declare that we were not carrying any firearms and ammunition! I had no hesitation ticking no to the firearms and only a slight hesitation before ticking no to perishable items. My husband, though, glared at my form and mildly rebuked me, 'I'm not willing to serve jail time with you in this foreign land!'

I noticed the incredibly long immigration line meandering like a snake through the entire arrivals hall. A little perturbed by my husband's rebuke and the often repeated immigration announcements, I started having second thoughts about my declaration form. Suddenly a massive, tough-looking woman with a small sniffer dog appeared. The dog was trained to sniff out bags carrying illegal items. In the long immigration line, sandwiches, milk bottles and various other food items started getting confiscated. The owners of the harmless sandwiches stood mute with the look of a convicted criminal on their faces!

As I watched all of this, I prayed that we would somehow pass through with all our gifts intact, and I put my fate into the hands of Sri Ramakrishna. As I stood there thinking this, I spotted in a parallel line, the General Secretary of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, the Revered Swami Suhitananda, along with and Swami Subhakarnanda from the Belur Math and also Swami Baneshananda from Germany. Finally we got to the front of our line. Before us was a huge, stern-faced customs officer. He asked, 'Are you coming from the UAE?' in what sounded like a harsher tone than usual (we noticed that our departure country was circled in 'Red' on the immigrations form that meant a red-flag for the customs officer). We answered in the affirmative.

Next question, 'How many days do you intend to stay in America?' I answered instantaneously 'Only seven days.' The officer looked surprised and asked, 'All these big suitcases only for seven days? What do you have in here? Only clothes?' Again I responded with an affirmation and quickly uttered what came to my mind, 'We are travelling from a warm desert country to such a cold, snowy one. So naturally we had to carry all of this!'



Soon after we left the airport, and I realized why the process had gone so smoothly for us. Sri Ramakrishna had removed all obstacles from our path as not one thing I had declared on the immigrations form was actually a lie. The dates were dried fruits not fresh ones and the sweets were made out of gram flour and not milk! Walking towards the taxi stand, we met Swami Medhasanandaji from Japan. Even though we had come from different corners of the world, our destination was a common one - to reach the city of Chicago on Swami Vivekananda's birth centenary.

Chicago was dotted with historical events throughout its formative years. The Great Chicago Fire of 1871 was a raging inferno that killed almost 300 people and left more than 1 lakh people homeless (which was a third of the city's population). 17,500 houses and 73 miles of road were also destroyed. But, like a phoenix rising from its ashes, the indomitable spirit of the people of Chicago made the city blossom again.

Exactly 22 years after this, in 1893, a huge exhibition was held in the city to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the discovery of the new continent of America by Christopher Columbus. People from around the globe were invited to participate in the 'Chicago Columbian Exposition'. These invitees came in their traditional attire and gave lectures on various aspects of human knowledge ranging from Economics and the Arts to Nautical Sciences, Cuisines of the World and the latest inventions.

New houses were constructed to accommodate the visiting delegates and these imitated the architecture of ancient Rome and Greece. To commemorate this unique exhibition, a giant wheel was installed that could accommodate 2000 people together for a ride. As a part of this Expo, a 'Parliament of Religions' was held with the aim of fostering harmony amongst all religions in order to further the progress of mankind through spiritual development and unity. This was the Chicago that Swami Vivekananda came to.

As we were departing the airport, we called Swami Ishatmanandaji Maharaj and he insisted that we reach the ashram and participate in the evening vesper (arati) service to be held at 6.00 pm. We stood in the taxi queue with our collection of small, medium and large suitcases. The locals, in spite of their Amazonian appearance, had very little luggage in comparison. Many approaching taxi drivers fled, viewing our collection of bags! On top of this, our destination, the Chicago Ashram, was far out of the city. At around 4pm, as darkness fell outside and after trying for an hour and upon much negotiation, one taxi driver agreed to take us to our destination once we agreed to pay one-and-a-half-times the fare, plus his usual tips. Now we came to understand why the pain of our impoverished nation always held a special place in Swamiji's heart!

It was pitch dark by the time we reached the 'Ashram', but then we found Swami Suhitanandaji

Maharaj with 30 other monks and other delegates from the foreign countries seated at the vesper service. I experienced the same spiritual environment and reverence as I did at the Belur Math.

Soon after the arati finished, the Monks, Brahmacharis and Matajis gathered in the ground floor hall and they were felicitated by the Chicago Vedanta society. The Chief Guest of this program was none other than Revered Swami Suhitananda. Swami Ishatmananda Maharaj (being the host) and a devotee couple presented him with a beautiful overcoat and felicitated him. All other Swamis and Pravrajikas were also felicitated with a jacket containing the picture of Swami Vivekananda and a bag that had twelve items of regular use. These Monks and Matajis had left the material world to lead the lives of ascetics. They have always been my role models and spiritual guides but they expressed child-like innocence and humility and were happy to receive the gifts on Swami Vivekananda's birth centenary.

Swami Suhitanandaji would be staying at the ashram; the other Monks and Matajis however were to be housed in the homes of about thirty dedicated disciples of the Vedanta Society. People like us, who had travelled from around the world to attend the events, would be staying at various hotels, but the local disciples/volunteers took the responsibility of our transport, food and other necessities. The dedication of these volunteers over the course of the next days was exemplary; they were all professionals working in and around Chicago, but they left no stone unturned to serve the cause of the Vedanta Society.

On the first night itself at the ashram, we met ten disciples from Japan who were all disciples of Bhuteshanandaji Maharaj. Since we were his disciples too, we talked with them non-stop about his travels, his teachings and also talked of other Monks like Suprabhat Maharaj and Ganesh Maharaj.

By 10 pm that night, most people left the ashram as the next morning at 7am we would all have to assemble once again at the Homer Glen Ashram to leave for the 'Ganges Retreat' in Michigan. At this time, Swami Ishatmanandaji Maharaj greeted us and embraced my husband. His embrace spoke volumes about his affection for us; it reminded me of the two lines from Hanuman Chalisa:

Tum momo priya bharat hi somo bhai
As kahi shreepati kanta lagaye'

We were honored and blessed to receive his love and affection. At around 11pm we finally reached our hotel almost 24 hours after we had left home.

The next morning we were waiting in the hotel lobby after breakfast when we met ten more disciples from Argentina who we had met the previous year during our trip to the Mission there. We greeted each other with much excitement and heart-felt enthusiasm. While boarding the bus we met five more disciples from South Africa who we knew from their previous visit to the UAE. This confirmed the fact that Gadadhar Chattopadhyay's family ties ran deep and followers from all parts of the world were answering his call!

We boarded two large buses – one with around 45 Monks and Pravrajikas and the other with all the disciples – and set out to the Ganges Retreat in Michigan. In the bus there were devotees and disciples from Argentina, Brazil, Canada, India, Japan, UAE, South Africa and other parts of North and South America. We all sang songs and shared our experiences about Sri Ramakrishna's movement while travelling to our destination.

Let me tell you something about the historical significance of the Ganges Retreat. In 1847, the then Governor of Michigan, Dr. Joseph Coats, named this place after the holy river Ganges. In the 1960s, the President of the Vedanta Society, Swami Bhashyananda, wanted to build an ashram here and keep the memory of the Ganges alive in the hearts of Americans. In 1971, the ashram was built upon 100 acres of land. The monks and

brahmacharis painstakingly took care to supervise the building of this ashram.

Upon our arrival, the Monks, Pravrajikas, disciples and devotees from around the world including India, Japan, Fiji, Russia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Switzerland, Germany, Brazil, Argentina, Canada and America were greeted by the Chicago Vedanta Society with the reverberating sound of conch-shells, welcome songs and dances in Gujarati, Marathi, Bengali and from other regions of India. The welcome experience was an exhilarating one, and I especially remember the Bengali dance presented by an American girl called Amy. How gracefully she translated the Bengali song through the grace of her movements!



The mid-day lunch arrangement was elaborate and sumptuous. Post-lunch, our itinerary included a tour of the museum inside the ashram. There were various items used by Swami Vivekananda on display there. One item that caught my attention was a cup and saucer made of bone-china that had a golden motif and a golden rim. It brought to mind a story narrated to me by my paternal Grandmother, Radharani Basu, who was the eldest granddaughter of Balaram Basu. When she was about five or six years old, she was playing in one of the front porches of Belur Math and Swami Vivekananda was sitting and sipping green tea from a cup. Seeing her he asked her if she wanted to try some green tea too. When she said yes, Swami Vivekananda poured the tea in the saucer and offered it to little Radharani.

We attended the evening 'Aarti' conducted by 3 Monks - Swami Kripamayana from the Toronto ashram, Swami Mahayogananda from the Hollywood Centre and Swami Tyagananda from the Boston Centre. During the arati, the popular prayer hymn by Swami Vivekananda, 'Khandana Bhava Bandhana', was sung by fifty Monks and disciples. The atmosphere was a mesmerizing one. Before this moment, I had never witnessed so many swamis, disciples and devotees singing together in coordination with so much harmony apart from in Belur Math. I listened in a state of bliss. The program of the day ended with colorful fireworks lighting up the quiet sky of the Ganges Retreat.

Next morning we started very early with a special puja and havan for Sri Sri Ramakrishna. We were wonderstruck by the American Swami Mahayogananda's flawless Sanskrit pronunciations and his method of puja and devotion. Each of the flower offerings to Shri Ramakrishna were personally rearranged and pruned by him before the final offering. Only a dedicated disciple could achieve this degree of committed devotion. Throughout this puja ceremony, various Indian, Brazilian, Japanese, Argentinean, South African and American Monks and Matajis were singing devotional songs in their own style; there were even opera songs floating and filling the space with a harmonic ambience.

Around 9am that morning, the convention of 50 Monks and Pravrajikas officially commenced in the basement hall of the Ganges Retreat with the Reverend Suhitananadaji Maharaj. Later we came to know this was the first time in the history of the Ramakrishna Mission, that the General Secretary Maharaj held such a convention outside of India with the attending sannyasis. Many times I had heard from our seniors that the Chicago Centre is revered as the Belur Math of the West. Is that the reason why such an international convention was held here by the blessings of Sri Ramakrishna?

The next program was a unique one; the monks and disciples attending the Convention would follow a "Shrine Trail" and trek through a mile-long forest path where they would encounter the symbolic representations of the seven foremost religions of the world. The fundamental beliefs of these religions along with information about the founders of these faiths, their methods of practice and aims were all documented on boards throughout this trail. One had to trek and acquire this important information and only then could one reach the 'Panchavati' where the closing ceremony of this convention would take place. The closing ceremony was marked by the release of 150 balloons into the sky. Thus we had a peaceful and symbolic end to a spiritual convention. Right after lunch, we again boarded the buses to reach the Hindu Temple of Greater Chicago in Lemont where the Monks and Pravrajikas would be honored by the members of the local community.



Lemont Temple was built in an expansive green area in 1986 and it has a fair representation of major Gods and Goddesses of the Hindu religion. In 1998, a 10-foot tall statue of Swami Vivekananda was erected in the central courtyard of the temple grounds. Upon arrival, all the Monks and Matajis were seated in the Vivekananda Meditation Hall while we were taken to an adjacent auditorium.

After some time, when the curtain were raised, the spectators were elated to witness about 50 Monks and Pravrajikas seated upon a stage with a big symbolic 'OM' in the background. This was a surreal scene and the audience burst forth with applause.

The ambience reminded me of the vedic mantra:
 Om poornamadah poornamidam poornaat
 poornamudachyate
 Poornasya poornamaadaaya poornam eva
 avashishsyate

Then, I had a spiritual realization – that the Sanyasis were self-reliant beings but a part of Sri Sri Ramakrishna’s spirit resided in them. And yet Thakur’s own glory was also vibrantly resounding amongst us all and had not diminished one bit since his physical death.



Before I could come out of this reverie, I heard a call as if from far away that the disciples from distant countries including Argentina, Brazil, South Africa, India, UAE etc. should come on to the stage. I was hesitant to go myself as I wasn’t sure that I deserved all the love, joy and benevolence that was being showered on me due to the grace of Sri Ramakrishna. I prayed to him to always grant me the capability to revere the Monks and Pravrajikas as his representation and help in whatever way I can to forward his message. As I made my way to the stage, my eye welled up with tears.

For the next two days, Swami Vivekananda’s 150th Birth Centenary Celebration was to take place in a hotel in downtown Chicago. It was to be held at the Hilton Downtown which is located at 720 South Michigan Avenue (which was previously 262 Michigan Avenue). This address has a historical significance to all the disciples of Swami Vivekananda, as in 1893 this was the location of the house of Mr and Mrs Lyon. Throughout the 16-day duration of the ‘Parliament

of Religions’, it was in this house that Swamiji stayed.



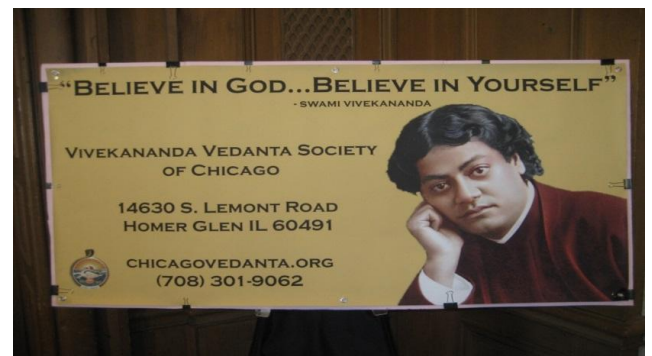


On the first day of the Birth Centenary celebration, there were about 750 delegates who participated, out of which 600 were Indians. We know from historical records that in the Chicago 'Parliament of Religions' back in 1893, there were only 5 Indian speakers, of which Swami Vivekananda was one, and there were hardly any Indians in the audience. In contrast, today, Indians who travel are given our due respect for the hard work, intelligence and spirituality that we contribute. Most of us who were at the convention as attendees had achieved some economic prosperity and were socially recognized. Only 120 years ago (I say 'only' as my mother is 84 years of age and I remember my grandmothers even as an adult and many of them were personally blessed by Sri Sri Sarada Ma) we lacked self-respect, courage and self-reliance and were in the bonds of a colonial power. Back then India was an impoverished nation, infested with superstition and captive to rituals. At only 30 years of age, a brave young man took it upon his shoulders to show the path of enlightenment to his fellow countrymen and to serve mankind following the instructions of his Guru Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa. As I looked around, I noticed that all of us were conversing in English and we had all had the benefit of a good education. Yet this path of enlightenment was first shown by Swamiji, and in my heart, I touched his feet and paid him my respects to him as our debt was immeasurable.

The Centenary celebrations consisted of back-to-back events for 2 days. We were fortunate enough

to listen to many excellent lectures and saw different cultural events. During one such talk, Swami Ishatmanandaji Maharaj began his speech saying, 'We are a tad bit late; if only we could have come here 120 years ago, we would have met Swamiji himself.' The entire room resonated with cheers and applause and I thought to myself, alas, we could have done that, if we were born in those times!

During these two days, respected Suhitananda Maharaj, Chetanananda Maharaj and 20 other Monks and Pravrajikas talked about the teachings, philosophy and principles followed by Swami Vivekananda. Swami Gourangananda and Swami Shubhakarananda presented songs commemorating the occasion, Swami Pareshanandaji from Argentina presented a poem written in English, a Spanish song and a Hindi bhajan. I particularly remember a funny incident that Swami Medhsanandaji from Japan told us about in his speech. Once he was asked by a foreigner whether he belonged to the 'Hare Krishna' group. He smiled and replied to him that he belonged to the 'Ramakrishna' group. 'What is the difference between the two?', the foreigner asked. Swamiji replied, 'they believe in 'only Krishna' while we believe in Ramakrishna but also Ram also Krishna also Buddha also Jesus and everyone else! We believe in inclusion.'



Many youngsters from across America had also come to this convention and though they had different backgrounds, they all had one thing in common - they were all sincere, open-minded and full of warmth.

They presented their songs, dances and recitations for the occasion with great feeling and sincerity. I specially remember the group of kirtan (devotional song) singers from Indiana called "Sacred Waters". Even singers from India would have bowed to their melody and musical prowess.

The first day of the Centenary Program ended with the singing of 'Ramakrishna Sharanam'. Swami Ishatmananda Maharaj led the chorus and behind him the lyrics appeared on a screen on stage. About 750 disciples joined in; it seemed as though it was not only the devotees who were singing but that the entire ambience was resonating and chanting 'Ramakrishna Sharanam'. Swami Vivekananda had once said, "Religion is realisation". Swamiji was questioned repeatedly after his return from America as to why he did not mention his Guru's name anywhere during that trip. Now I understood why he had not. He left some possibility for us to chant "Ramakrishna Sharanam" in Chicago 120 years later and create history in our own capacity.

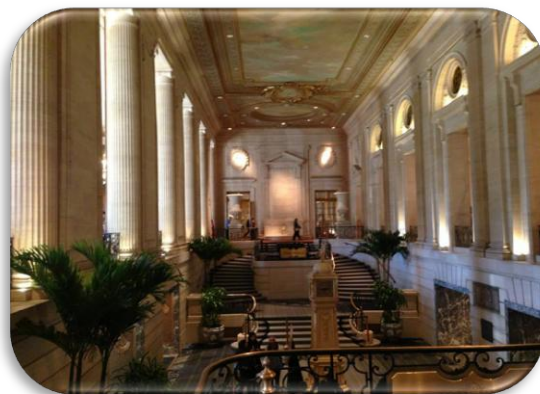
On the second day of this ceremony, speakers

from different faiths including Christians, Jews, Muslims, Jains, Parsis and others presented their point of view on the unity of mankind and Swami Vivekananda's contribution for the greater good.

The Master of the Ceremonies for the second day was an American lady, Ms. Octavia Harriston, who came to know Swami Bhashyananda and became a disciple of Ramakrishna Mission. Swami Ishatmananda revealed in his second day's lecture that on 27th September 1893, Swami Vivekananda had addressed the world and provided 3 tenets which still hold good today:

- Help and not Fight
- Assimilation and not Destruction
- Harmony and Peace and not Dissension

Even today, the Mission wants to spread the same message among its global citizens and this is why the convention was befittingly titled 'Chicago Calling'. The convention came to an end with a song composed and written by Swami Ishatmananda 'Get up O Brethren, see Swamiji by your side.'





When it was time for us to leave the venue, all the delegates seemed to do so with a heavy hearts. Many phrases and ideas from the lectures of the past few days resonated in my heart. With Ma Saraswati's blessing it was in Chicago that Swamiji had won the hearts of people 120 years ago. The same mood was reflected in the 'Vote of Thanks' when Maharaj asked the audience to pay their respects to Sri Sarada Devi, as without her blessings, her favourite son Naren could not have achieved his purpose and fulfilled his service to mankind. At these words, the entire hall vibrated with sound of applause for more than a minute!

I thought to myself, of course our ties with our mother always runs a little deeper than that with our father.

As my husband had only a limited few days of leave, we had to depart the following day but we heard from other disciples that program 'Remembering Swami Vivekananda' on 11th November 2013 was also very successful. During this event, Monks, Pravrajikas and disciples who

came from around the world were divided into small groups and they visited all the places where Swami Vivekananda had been during his stay in Chicago

The tour started at the Dearborn Railway station where Swamiji had arrived and it covered spots like the church in front of the Hale family home where Swamiji had sat in a state of exhaustion, and Lincoln Park near Lake Michigan where he used to meditate, and finally ended at the Fullerton Hall of the Art Institute of Chicago. Swami Ishatmananda reminded the disciples that this was the spot where Swami Vivekananda fulfilled the prophecy of Sri Sri Ramakrishna Dev: 'Naren will teach'.

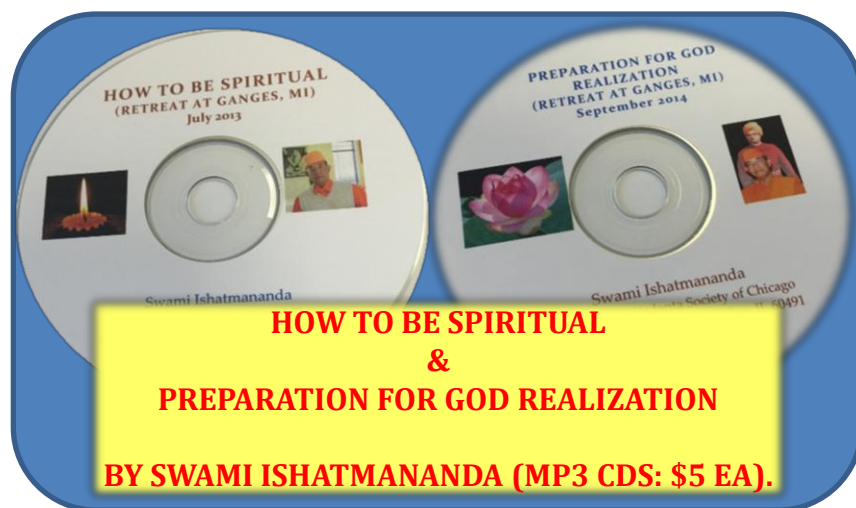
Swamiji had mentored mankind, he had worked hard at uplifting Indians and giving people in the East and West a new way of thinking about spirituality. A new episode in Indian history had been initiated by Swami Vivekananda here. I only prayed that we now have the moral strength and fortitude to answer his call.

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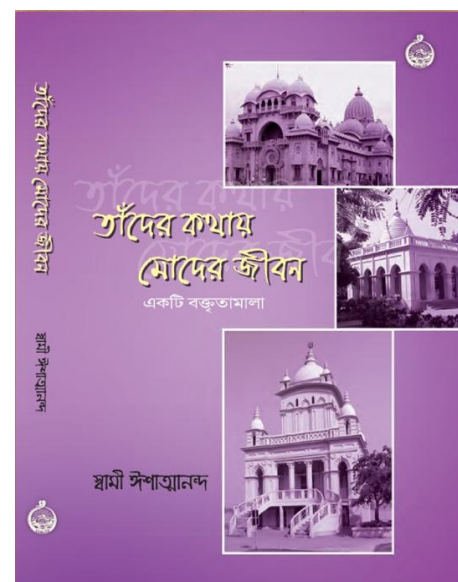
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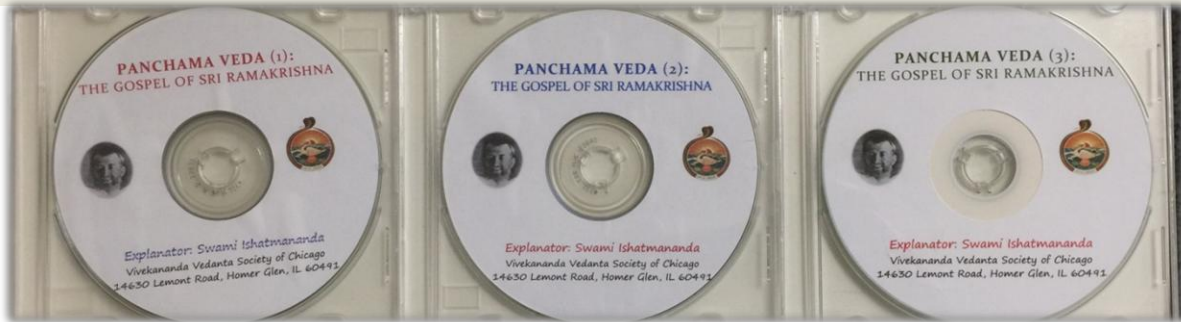
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