



Provisions

One who is on the Quest needs provisions for the journey; such are these. We hope some are also visions-forward.

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Goodbye. . .

*On January 11, 2009, the Vedanta Center of Atlanta held its Annual Meeting of the membership – the last Annual Meeting officiated by our beloved Resident Minister, **Swami Yogeshananda**, who is retiring after more than 19 years of service to the Atlanta community. Below, you will find an adaptation of his “State of the Center” address, followed by remarks by our new Resident Minister, **Swami Brahmavidyananda**.*

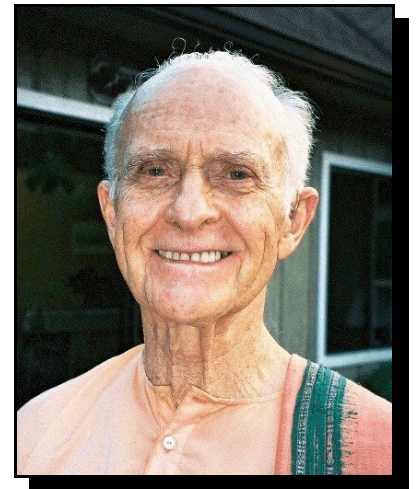
Good morning, and welcome to the Annual General Meeting of the Vedanta Center of Atlanta. All are welcome to this meeting be they members or not. We are happy to see you and to hear the input of any of you who have our ideals at heart.

As most of you know, we were pretty much orphans when we first came to Atlanta. There are people here this morning who know that story very well, and we do not have time this morning to go over it again. But we were orphans looking for officialdom, and each time the swamis were pulled away from Atlanta, we thought that the fires of Vedanta would go out here in this city. Dedicated devotees, however, kept the embers alight during those extended periods, doing their best to keep Vedanta alive in Atlanta.

Three of our swamis have worked here and done their best to see that Vedanta would find a place in the religious landscape of this city. I firmly believe that this has now been accomplished. We have made our mark. We are members of several interfaith organizations. We are called upon to give talks at colleges, universities and other institutions. We have appeared on television on the interfaith broadcasting station. People have seen us; they know who we are

and have admired our new chapel.

Today, I am making my formal farewell to you all. It has been a long nineteen years altogether that I have spent in Atlanta, and I am just about worn out! *[laughter]* When implements wear out, we dispose of them, or rather we dispense with them. That’s more kind! *[laughter]* So, not to worry. The swamis are mere tools in the hands of the Lord. We know the identity of the Operator of these tools. If you don’t, you should! *[laughter]*



Swami Yogeshananda

Giving thanks to you for all your service and support is just not possible for me. All of that was service in support of the Center, for the movement. The only things I can individually be grateful for are the many little kindnesses, deferences, and special considerations you have shown an old man. These are very personal things which I will never forget and for which I am so grateful. Indeed, I think I have had enough affection showered on me to last the rest of my life! If I never get anymore, I’ve had enough. *[laughter]*

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Goodbye. . .

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At one of our retreats a few years ago, I made a point of telling those who were there that I was not a guru in the traditional or Indian sense. I could be called a spiritual guide, someone to put you on the *sadhana* track, so to speak, to facilitate the art and science of spiritual practice. In spite of that, some have gone on speaking of me as guru and calling me that. I disclaim responsibility, and I would remind them of what my teacher, Swami Yatiswarananda, taught everywhere he went, which was all around the world, for he had students in almost every country. He taught about the dangers of what is called the “guru cult” – putting the guru in a position he does not belong in by making too much of the time-bound personality of the teacher, the temporal nature of the instructor, and ignoring the principles that are taught by him and the institution he represents. You will find a discussion of this idea in the first chapter of my book, *Six Lighted Windows*, which goes into it in much detail.

Swami Ashokananda also put it very well in one of his lectures in San Francisco that I remember. He posited this scenario: “You are in a jungle, a thick jungle, and you have no way through and no way out,” which is also our predicament in this life. He said, “Which would you rather have? A guide to take you forward with a flashlight for two days and then disappear and leave you, or a map of the trails through the jungle?” I can think of no better analogy, simile or metaphor. Gurus are here temporarily – all of them are – and with some, we find comfort in believing them to be eternal. But after all, the map of spiritual life – of *sadhana* – is the guide you have to go by when you are alone. The teacher cannot always be with you. At the very end of *Six Lighted Windows* I comment on the fact that when our London swami, Swami Ghanananda, passed away – he died while I was there – of all the community that he had gathered, only one family went away and failed to come back. All the rest stayed with the London center, keeping their membership and their support. We expect the same from you here

Do you know the sign of a mature devotee? A mature devotee is one who understands that his or her service

and dedication and devotion are to the ideals, the principles, and the institution which embodies them more than they are to the individual leader at any time. That is a mature devotee of Vedanta.

Now you have a new leader. I have known Swami Brahmavidyananda even before he entered our order, and I know him now as a mature and highly intelligent monk who lives the life – even within ten days I know that he lives the life [*laughter*] – and he loves the lives of our great ones. He has a vision for the future of Vedanta, and I share his vision and encourage him in it. The southern California center’s loss is certainly our gain. You will find him, as I have, to be a fine teacher, a wise adviser, and good companion. I know you will show him the same love and support that you have shown me over the years. Thank you.

– Swami Yogeshananda

. . . and Hello!

I would like to open with a prayer from the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (1.3.28), one that one of my teachers, Swami Ashokananda, used to do very often.

*Om. Asato Ma Sat Gamaya
Tamaso Ma Jyotir Gamaya
Mrityor Ma Amritam Gamaya.*

Om Shanti Shanti Shanti.

Lead us from the Unreal to the Real.
Lead us from Darkness unto Light.
Lead us from Death to Immortality.

Om, peace, peace, peace. Peace be unto us all.

So, here I am, and it is a big broach for me as well as for all of you, I understand. It is a transitional period we’re all going through together. It seems that I was the last man standing when it came to doing this job. [*laughter*] But I am proud and happy to be here and impressed with you as loving, wise, and strong people, which is what every institution needs in order to progress.

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John Schindler says, “The first and necessary step of grief is discovering what you have lost. The next step is discovering what is left, what is possible.”

This happens all of the time in life as we go through transitions: We struggle and move out of the past into a new future, and ultimately, that movement is creative and healthy. We may be reluctant, but as we all go through any period of grieving and changing, we grow.

I have been going through my own grieving because I lived a very comfortable life in Hollywood, romping and playing freely and doing as I pleased. *[laughter]* You can do that in Hollywood, because the center is large. So there is always something going on. But I have always felt this need for promoting the ideas of Vedanta in the West.

I have always seen this possibility of Vedanta reaching out into America.

It’s really an interactive relationship between America and India. Indian metaphysics and psychology has so much to offer the world, more than even it is aware of at this point. Swami Yogeshananda alluded to the fact that we are all products of Vedanta. I am especially a product of Vivekananda’s ideas, and what you hear from me is generally Swami Vivekananda translated into my own words.

Swami Yogeshananda and I have become accustomed to each other over these past few days, and I am impressed. He is very unusual in that I can share my ideas to him, and he understands. That is fairly rare. I am sometimes viewed as a rebel – but as a healthy rebel nonetheless, because my rebellion exists within the purview of Ramakrishna, the Holy Mother, and Swami Vivekananda.

I know that Swami Yogeshananda has been blessed by being here, and of course you’ve been blessed by being with the Swami. The exchange has obviously been wonderful, and I can see the rapport that you have with the Swami –very important and powerful down the road. For if we maintain the vision that Swami has set, we can continue to build; there are no limits.



Example of Mandala:
Vedanta Center of St. Louis Seal
Copy hangs in Vedanta Center of Atlanta Library
Reproduced by permission

In 1894, after Vivekananda was here for some time, looking around and seeing the terrain, a significant point comes when he has the boldness to say, “I have a message for the West, as the Buddha had for the East.” That is titanic. Looking back on history, we see how Buddhism has radically transformed the world. Yet Vivekananda took the liberty to say he had such a message for the West.

Many would view this as presumptuous and even arrogant, but as you study Vivekananda’s teachings, you come to realize that he

was correct. I have spent a great deal of time studying the man, and I hope to share – with the community – the bigness of Vivekananda and the transforming vision he has for the West.

Every age goes through a period in which it changes in a profound way, and everything is currently going through such a change. Science, society, even astrologers are all telling us that a major shift is going on everywhere. We sense it. We know it. We all feel something important taking place. Now, this legacy is really at the heart of what Vivekananda taught in terms of spirituality. Vedanta is an open and liberal system that has profound depth.

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... and Hello!

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Currently you will find a focus on universality and the interfaith idea in the world. And it's growing. Swami Yogeshananda has taken me to two interfaith events, and we will go to a third one today. We have also gone to a Buddhist center. I consistently find a similar theme rising up again and again in the interfaith world. I find it here in Atlanta, I saw it in Hollywood, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, and I am sure we would find it in New York as well as everywhere in the United States, and even in the world at large. This theme is captured in a very archetypal symbol, a *mandala* with a center that often suggests light, with all the world's religions revolving around that primal center. I picked up a brochure at one of the interfaith events here in Atlanta, and there it was again. This same theme is emerging everywhere and it is a direction in which the whole world is moving.

The world, and America especially, is looking for a way to integrate diversity. This is an American passion. You may contradict me by pointing to fundamentalism in the world at large, which certainly exists. But as Vedantins our aim is not to focus on the conflict. That is always there. We need only look at our message and then act out of that message and let it grow. In time, the whole so-called "conservative" world will melt under the force of these grand, universal truths.

Vivekananda said another curious thing: in 150 to 200 years from the time he gave his message, the West will have completely adopted his message. This is bold, yet the more you read and study him the more you realize that he is correct. Vivekananda's message contains no hidden agenda, and curiously enough, he never pushed Ramakrishna in the West. You may then ask, "Well, do we need Ramakrishna?" Yes, absolutely! But Ramakrishna in his universal form, which has not yet appeared in the world.

Buddha and Christ were each defined within the first two or three centuries after they came into the world. Christianity gained momentum as Christians found

their stride in relationship to Jesus as the Christ. The same is true with the Buddha, and the same will be with Ramakrishna.

What is Ramakrishna's unique role? He is universal. What does that mean? When Chinese Buddhism went to Japan, it was called "Chen". For one or two generations, it was taught to the Japanese by Chinese masters, but it did not grow in Japan. But once it took root in Japan and the Japanese themselves took the work over, it exploded into Japanese consciousness and became a dominant religion of Japan. All it takes is a sense of packaging. This Vedantic system is brilliant, but it has to be packaged properly. That may sound crass, but it is really is not. All religions package their messages. The Catholics, Jews, and Muslims are good at it. The Catholics are especially sensitive with their different saints: you can wander around and kneel in front of one image or another, and you have diversity.

This is what the Vedanta and Ramakrishna's message is: Diversity. But what distinguishes Vedanta and Ramakrishna – and in turn each one of you – is a heartfelt openness towards the whole spectrum of human consciousness. This is not the norm among the other groups; they are not really open to the rest of the world.

Swami Yogeshananda was telling me about a book in which some of these religious leaders say, "Ramakrishna didn't practice our religion. He doesn't know our religion. So why do Vedantins say that Ramakrishna is a universal incarnation?" Precisely because he did not have to practice these religions but rather drew inspiration from them without giving up his center. For instance, he embraced Christ, opened his heart, and within three short days fell into an ecstasy, and had a vision in which Christ entered into his consciousness. He approached Islam by opening himself to its rituals and liturgies and had a vision of Mohammed and went into an ecstatic state and opened into the Absolute. The point is that Ramakrishna valued all the teachings and drew inspiration from all traditions without getting caught up in dogmas and doctrines.

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The Dragonfly

As I was revving through my head --
Mud on the floor of the Honda
Dead light bulb on the porch
All out of aluminum foil and cat food
Car wash, Publix, Home Depot --

A dragonfly zig zagged across the windshield
Brown and fast
Wings like an angel

And I watched it, in the moment

Back in my office
Cursing the pen that leaks
The downed DSL
The deadlines on my to-do list
I want to write about the dragonfly
Its colors, its luminous flight



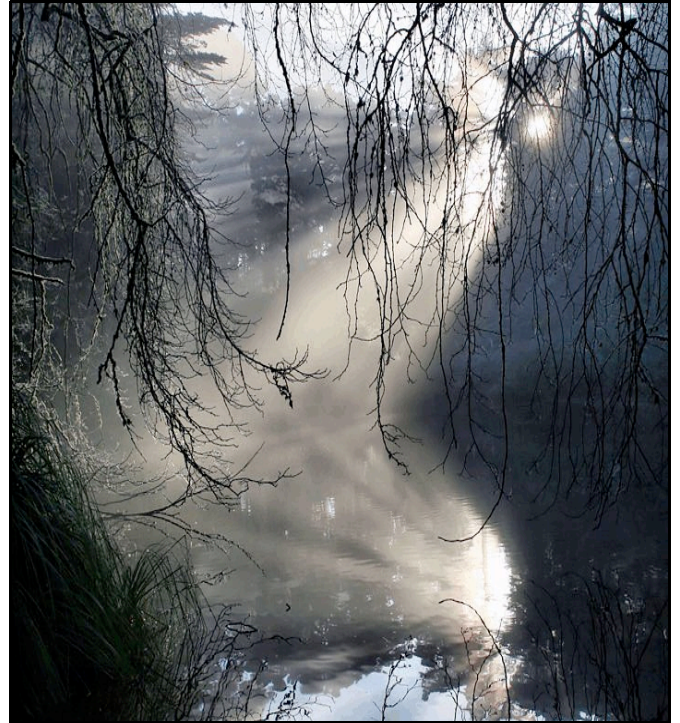
But there's no time, this moment is
So full of dull and urgent things.

Yet
What's here
Must be where I find God
In the unanswered emails
In the useless pen
In the empty box of foil
In the dark on the porch
In the ordinariness of Tuesday

This is the Now the saints speak of

This moment
This wondrous breath

This Now without the dragonfly.



Crepuscular rays created by tree shadows over fog, Golden Gate Park, San Francisco at Mallard Lake.

The Fog Of Maya

We live in foolish ignorance
Thinking that we've won --
That the race for more and better
Is a worthy race to run.

We long for peace and solitude
When the day's hard work is done
Yet we let our stresses manifest,
Lash out at lover, son.

We fight, fling words, forgetting
Even rubber bullets stun
We judge, incite and violate,
Our higher selves we shun.

We need the light of wisdom
Like shadows need the sun
We need the joy of *bhakti*
Like wool needs to be spun.

So when the cushion beckons
Come sit, your fears undone.
And as the fog of Maya's lifted
See God and Self as One.

– Poetry by Gillian Renault

REGULARLY SCHEDULED EVENTS

Sunday	10:30 AM 11:00 AM	Chant Service. Discourse.
Thursday	8 PM	We will begin reading a new version of <i>Raja-Yoga</i> by Swami Vivekananda. A half-hour's meditation in the Chapel follows the one hour class.
3rd Fridays	7:30 PM	RAM NAM will be held on March 20 th , 993 Walker Ave., Atlanta, GA.
Daily**	6 PM	Vespers/Arati – A short period of prayer is followed by silent meditation. ** <i>Except Sundays.</i>

MARCH 2009 DISCOURSE TOPICS & SPECIAL EVENTS

1	10:30 AM	BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION FOR SRI RAMAKRISHNA. †
8	11 AM	New Beginnings: Vedic Spirituality – Fresh Views of Transformation. Talk followed by discussion.
15	11 AM	New Beginnings: Vedic Spirituality – Its Presence in the World. Talk followed by discussion.
22	11 AM	New Beginnings: Vedic Spirituality – Its Vitalizing Power Part I. Talk followed by discussion.
29	11 AM	New Beginnings: Vedic Spirituality – Its Vitalizing Power Part II. Talk followed by discussion.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

† All are welcome at the *Puja* celebrating the birth of **Sri Ramakrishna** on **Sunday, March 1**. This will be the last time **Swami Yogeshananda** will serve as *pujari* here at the Vedanta Center of Atlanta. Pot luck prasad lunch follows the formal worship.

Swami Yogeshananda will leave for California for his retirement the week of March 2.

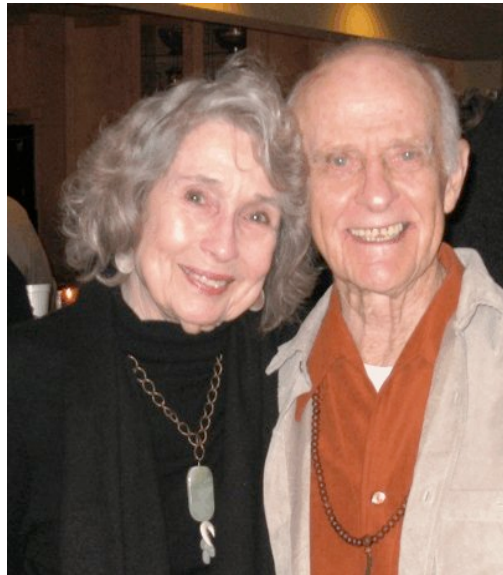
Swami Brahmavidyananda, our new Resident Minister here at the Vedanta Center of Atlanta, will begin a discourse series on March 8 entitled “**New Beginnings – Vedic Spirituality**”. The series will continue through the month of March.

Bon Voyage!

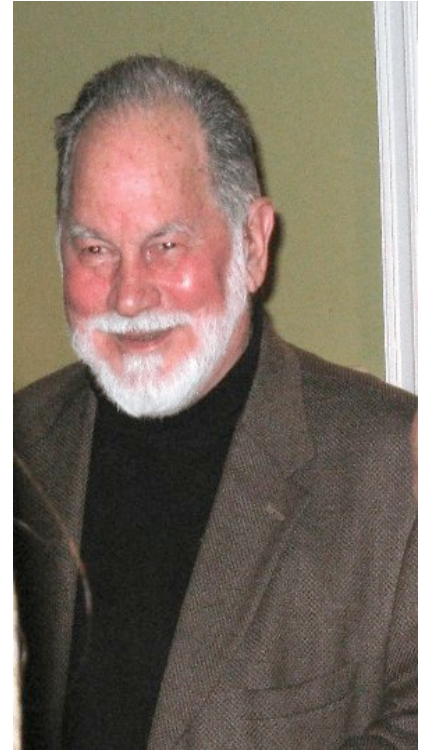
Manjeet and Piara Singh, devotees of the Vedanta Center of Atlanta, graciously hosted a farewell dinner party at their home on Saturday, February 21, to honor Swami Yogeshananda and to help raise funds to support the ongoing work of the Center. Over 50 devotees and friends attended the event to express their gratitude to the Swami for his years of devoted service to the community and to wish him well as he retires to the Trabuco Canyon Monastery.



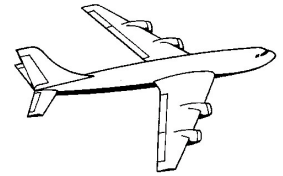
New Resident Minister Swami Brahmaavidyananda looks on the festivities



Swami Yogeshananda with Past-President Mary McKenzie



Tom Couch, President of the Vedanta Center of Atlanta, enjoys a story.



Katherine Durant, Secretary of the Vedanta Center and Board Member Revathi Venkataramani with the Swami



Sons and Daughters of Vedanta Devotees

notes and quotes

We are responsible for what we are, and whatever we wish ourselves to be, we have the power to make ourselves. If what we are now has been the result of our own past actions, it certainly follows that whatever we wish to be in future can be produced by our present actions; so we have to know how to act.

– **Swami Vivekananda**

A human being is part of the whole called by us *universe*, a part limited in time and space. We experience ourselves, our thoughts and feelings as something separate from the rest. A kind of optical delusion of consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from the prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. The true value of a human being is determined by the measure and the sense in which they have obtained liberation from the self. We shall require a substantially new manner of thinking if humanity is to survive.

– **Albert Einstein**

Suppose a man were wounded by an arrow, and when the surgeon arrived, he said to him, “Don’t pull out this arrow until I know who shot it, what tree it comes from, who made it, and what kind of bow was used.” Certainly the man would die before he discovered the answers. In the same way, if you say you will not be a monk unless you solve all the questions of the world, you are likely to die unsatisfied.

– **Majjhima Nikaya**

Never say there is nothing beautiful in the world anymore. There is always something to make you wonder in the shape of a tree, the trembling of a leaf.

– **Albert Schweitzer**

. . . and Hello!

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Likewise, what distinguishes all of us is that we can walk into any other sanctuaries, open our hearts, become inspired, and walk away with that inspiration, as Swami Yogeshananda and I did at the Buddhist Temple. Yet, we keep our center. Sri Ramakrishna reminded us to keep centered within our own *sadhana*, but remain open to everything that inspires us. This is a wonderful quality that we as Vedantins have. The important thing to note is that it is not a superficial openness, but an openness that encourages depth.

Ramakrishna is central to this movement because he is an incarnation for the modern world – a presence for all of humanity. Everybody that came into the company of Ramakrishna found that they were loved for who they were. He never tried to change their lives. He inspired them in and through their own inner resources and inspirations. He is the Door Keeper to the modern world. This is what we all need to do. It is called “individuation”. We are all individuals and we are all distinct, yet we honor everyone else.

If we were capable of looking into each other’s minds, we would see that the techniques by which we get inspired are quite distinct. What gives us our commonality? It’s the non-dual philosophy of the Vedanta. Ramakrishna, Holy Mother, and Swami Vivekananda were themselves non-dualists, and from that inner perspective you can open every door of your heart and consciousness without reservation.

I will close with a quote from *A Spiritual Warrior*:

“We are all in a process of growth, a continual evolution – some very quickly and pronounced, others more slowly and steady. But all are changing, growing, and evolving. We are here to share the blossoming of consciousness.”

– **Swami Brahmavidyananda**