

I. The Early Years (1899-1927)*



Swami Vivekananda in South Pasadena

The original Chapter I in this book dealt with Swamis Vivekananda, Turiyananda, Abhedananda, and Trigunatitananda in Southern California. The earlier version of this Chapter, and the early years in Washington, DC (1893-1917) and Ridgely (1893-1909) now in Chapter IX were all edited by Linda Prugh (Author of [Josephine MacLeod and Vivekananda's Mission](#), 1999). Since that time material was transferred over to the book [Western Admirers of Ramakrishna and His Disciples](#)[†] written by Gopal Stavig and edited by Swami Shuddhidananda. This historical material can now be found on the following pages in that book: 1. Swami Vivekananda in South Pasadena (in Southern California, 1899-1900), pp. 266-72, 275-76, 330-31, 488-89, 526-28 in *Western Admirers*. 2. Swami Turiyananda in Northern California (in Southern California, 1900-1902), pp. 851-52, 856-58. 3. Swami Abhedananda in New York (in Southern California, 1901, 1905, 1914-1921), pp. 721, 734, 766-72. 4. Swami Trigunatitananda in Northern California (in Southern California 1903-1904, 1911), pp. 872-74, 876, 887-89.

Swamis Vivekananda, Turiyananda, Abhedananda, and Trigunatita each lived for a time at the Vivekananda House in South Pasadena up until 1903 when the Mead family moved out.



Swami Turiyananda



Swami Abhedananda



Swami Trigunatitananda

* Assistance provided by Chapter Editor Linda Prugh

† See [Google Books](#) to read parts of the *Western Admirers* book.

1. Swami Sachchidananda II (1904-1913), [Baba Premananda Bharati](#) (1905-1913), and [Swami Bodhananda](#) (1912, 1925-1927)

Due to his success in Los Angeles, Swami Trigunatita wanted to establish a permanent Vedanta Society in the city, but it was four hundred miles from San Francisco and he found it difficult to carry on the work there. Gertrude Topham explained:

This is the account of the way in which the coming of Swami Sachchidananda II to America came about. As told by Mrs. Hansbrough while Swami Trigunatita was living in a small bungalow with Mrs. Hansbrough and Mrs. Wyckoff. A certain person by the name of [Dr. John] Schmitz was made the president of the Society. He had read an article written by Swami Sachchidananda II on the "Advaita," in which he warmly agreed. When the Society under the urging of Swami Trigunatita, on his second visit in 1904 to Los Angeles was collecting money to send to India for this purpose, Dr. Schmitz offered \$100 with the proviso that Swami Sachchidananda be selected. 'No' said Swami Trigunatita. Dr. Schmitz then withdrew his offering. It had to be Sachchidananda if he gave any money. The L.A. Society was unbelievably poor. Dr. Schmitz was the only man member. Elderly women, widows, or divorced formed the membership and there weren't many of them. Swami Trigunatita gave in.¹

Belur Math sent Sachchidananda II to San Francisco in December of 1904. He continued on to Los Angeles arriving on December 31. Before coming to America, he had attended the University of Calcutta, joined the monastery in 1899, and become a disciple of Swami Vivekananda. In India he worked for the *Udbodhan* magazine in Calcutta and at the Advaita Ashrama in Mayavati, where for three years he served as joint editor of the *Prabuddha Bharata*.²

During the summer of 1905, Swami Abhedananda and Herschel Parker (b. 1867), President of the Vedanta Society of New York, made an extended tour of the West Coast. They traveled from Sitka, Alaska down to Mexico City. According to Abhedananda's biographer, Sister Shivani (Mary LePage):

On his way south he [Swami Abhedananda] stopped in San Francisco and Los Angeles to visit the Swamis in charge of the Societies there. In Los Angeles S. Sachchidananda arranged a reception for Swami Abhedananda who delivered a short address to the members. He [Swami Abhedananda] was impressed with their earnestness and general spirit of enthusiasm in the Society.

The 1906 Bureau of the Census reported forty members of the Vedanta Society in Los Angeles. In the latter part of December 1906, Swami Prakashananda visited Sachchidananda in Los Angeles.³

According to the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Los Angeles City Directory*, Swami Sachchidananda presented lectures, meditation classes, and interviews at Vedanta Society, where he also lived: a rented house located at 1947 Estrella Avenue (1905-1906), the Vedanta Society Headquarters, 1124 Quincy Street (1906-1907), the Vedanta School, 527 East 33D Street over the period 1907-1911, and at the Vedanta Home, the residence of Drusie Steele at 1624 Hyperion in January-February 1912. In 1906 the swami gave free Sunday lectures at Brent Hall, Harriman Hall, and at the Music Hall, Blanchard Building. Seven women and two children lived with the swami at the 1947 Estrella Avenue boarding house.⁴ Gertrude Topham described Sachchidananda II as "gentle, mild, and harmonious."

The three Mead sisters and Alice Hansbrough's daughter were active members of the Vedanta Society. But after being in charge of the Vedanta Headquarters and Home in Los Angeles for five years – from January 1905 until January 1910 – Sachchidananda was asked to return to India. Word had gotten to Trigunatita that things were not going well at the Los Angeles Vedanta Society. Sachchidananda II continued to advertise in the *Los Angeles Times* (up to February 1912) as a religious teacher living at the Vedanta Home. His Vedanta organization operated independently of the Vedanta Society formed by Trigunatita. Sachchidananda II returned to India in 1912 or 1913 and separated himself from the Ramakrishna Order.⁵

Baba Premananda Bharati

Afirmative reports of Swami Vivekananda's activities in the West resulted in the belief among Indian religious leaders that



Baba Premananda Bharati

Americans were interested in Hindu spirituality. These positive reports induced other religious teachers to start work in the West. In October 1902, two years after Vivekananda left the West, Baba Premananda Bharati (1858-1914), a Bengali Vaishnava monastic and religious teacher, arrived in America. Many years after becoming a monastic, he received "a command from Sri Chaitanya in a dream to proceed to America to help Swami Abhayananda [Marie Louise] in her mission to spread Vaishnavism in the world." In New York City during 1902 and 1903, he had some contact with Swami Abhedananda. He later claimed to have over five thousand followers in the U.S., and some of Vivekananda's admirers became his faithful supporters. Ella Wheeler Wilcox, a stellar devotee of Swamiji since January 1895, was one of Bharati's students in New York City, where he founded the Krishna Samaj in 1902. Baba Bharati sent his work on *Sree Krishna* to Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910, who was an admirer of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. Tolstoy liked Bharati's book. He even showed interest in translating part of it into Russian. He accepted the metaphysical ideas of Krishna, but did not care at all for the mythology and miracles. Bharati's Los

Angeles-based journal *The Light of India* (1906-1908, renamed *East and West* 1910-11) was a favorite of Tolstoy's and has been preserved in the Yasnaya Polyana Russian library.

In August 1905 the Unitarian Minister Benjamin Fay Mills, who had known Swami Vivekananda, brought Baba Bharati from Boston to Los Angeles. The Reverend supported Bharati's ministry in Los Angeles and Venice, California for two years. There, Baba Bharati established the "Krishna Home" at 730 West 16th Street 1906-1907. Charles Neilson who had taken photos of Vivekananda in Northern California was a leading member of Bharati's congregation. In July 1907 Bharati's group visited Swamis Trigunatita and Prakashananda in San Francisco, and Baba Bharati described Trigunatita as "amiability itself." He said, "His old-world goodwill, the merry twinkle of his eye, are still twinkling in our memory." He also alluded to the "ascetic heart and soul" of Prakashananda. Baba Bharati left for India with six American disciples, five of whom were women. The *Prabuddha Bharata* in 1907 mentioned, "The party has been enthusiastically welcomed along their route from Colombo to Calcutta."

When Bharati returned to Los Angeles, the "Krishna Home" was moved to 1430 Dana Street between 1910 and 1913. One of his supporters, who established a school for young girls in India, was Miss Christina Albers, who wrote a glowing tribute to Swami Vivekananda in the *Prabuddha Bharata* in 1938. She had heard him speak when he was in San Francisco. She also wrote a poem entitled, "A Tribute to Vivekananda," which appeared in *The Indian Mirror* (July 10, 1902) and the *Brahmavadin*.

Another follower of Bharati was the actress Rose Reinhardt Anthon, who was probably the Miss Anthon who sang during Swami Vivekananda's lecture on February 28, 1895 at the home of the wealthy Amzi L. Barber in New York. Due to a lack of competent successors, Baba Bharati's organization died out after his passing in 1914.⁶

Swami Bodhananda

In July, August and September of 1912, and under the auspices of the students of Vedanta in Los Angeles, Swami Bodhananda from New York delivered lectures every alternate Sunday. A course of lectures on the *Bhagavad Gita* was also given on every Tuesday evening, and every Thursday evening was devoted to a short lecture followed by meditation.⁷

Swami Bodhananda (1871-1950) took initiation from Holy Mother and later received sannyas from Swami Vivekananda in 1898. He eventually took charge of the Bangalore Math. While in Benares with Vivekananda, Swamiji told him, "I ask you to lead the life and work in your own natural way. Do not imitate others. Work in your own sincere way and success will be



Swami Bodhananda

surely yours.”⁸ At Swami Brahmananda’s request, he came to the United States in June 1906 as Swami Abhedananda’s temporary replacement while the latter visited India. He then worked in Pittsburgh for five years, from 1907 to 1912. The *San Francisco Chronicle* mentions his being in San Francisco on August 30, 1909. In October 1912 Bodhananda was named head of the Vedanta Society of New York (Westside Center) and remained there until his passing in 1950.⁹

Swami Bodhananda visited Southern California during the winter months of 1925-1926 and 1926-1927. In Los Angeles, he addressed the public at the Metaphysical Library Auditorium and at the Theosophical Hall. His contemporaries described him as a pure, simple, and sincere old-type Indian monk. After leaving Los Angeles, Bodhananda traveled north, being the guest of Prakashananda in San Francisco in April and the following month with Prabhavananda in Portland. Dorothy Mercer heard him speak in San Francisco and later wrote:

I do not know to this day why Swami Bodhananda made an impression on me. He was not as fatherly as Swami Trigunatita had been, nor had he the commanding presence of Swami Abhedananda.... But I was uplifted for quite a period.

The following winter Bodhananda returned to California. He left Riverside, California to attend Prakashananda’s memorial at the San Francisco Temple in February 1927. Interestingly, in 1932 Bodhananda retired from all active service while remaining at the New York Society. Nikhilananda was placed in charge of the center. At the reception for Nikhilananda, Dhan Gopal Mukherjee (1890-1936), author of *The Face of Silence* (1926), a book about Sri Ramakrishna, “spoke of Swami Bodhananda as a man of spiritual realization, in great contrast to the merely intellectual guidance usually found in this country.”¹⁰ But as fortune would have it, after nearly a year of relaxation, Nikhilananda founded a center on the East Side, and Bodhananda was forced to come out of retirement for the remainder of his life—from 1933 to 1950. After spending a record-breaking forty-four years in the West, and upon his passing, the *Vedanta Kesari* (July 1950) wrote, “He was an exemplary sadhu who lived a very austere life and was venerated by all who came in intimate contact with him.” The *Prabuddha Bharata* (June 1950) described him:

Swami Bodhananda was a cherubic soul, gentle in spirit, and full of the warmth of human kindness.... His deep spiritual personality, his learning and intellectual attainments, and his rich inheritance of religious experience gained through the years of Sadhana.... Eminently fitted him for the role of the great pioneer and spiritual teacher that he was.¹¹

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The word meanings for the abbreviations used in the endnotes can be found at the end of the eBook in the “[Bibliography Alphabetized by Abbreviation](#)” Section.

¹ “Memoirs of Gertrude Topham,” VSSC Archives.

² Gargi, pp. 107, 183-84; Gambhirananda, pp. 117, 181; *VMB* (April 1905), p. 12; *PB* (Feb-March 1907), p. 48.

³ Shivani, pp. 123-24; *VMB* (Jan. 1907), p. 18.

⁴ *Directory* (1905-12); *Times* (Jan. 29, 1905), p. IV1; (Feb. 12, 1905), p. IV1; (Oct. 8, 1905), p. IV1; (March 11, 1906), p. IV1; (June 11, 1906), p. 17; (Aug. 12, 1906) p. IV1; (Sept. 1, 1907), p. IV1; (Feb. 9, 1908); (Nov. 29, 1927), p. A1.

⁵ Gargi, p. 107; Levinsky, p. 201; Topham; *PB* (Dec. 1907), p. 235; *Times* (Feb. 5, 1911); (Feb. 4, 1912), p. IV1; Thomas, p. 104.

⁶ Gopal Stavig, “Baba Premananda Bharati (1858-1914) and the Vedanta Society,” *VK* (Feb-March 2016), pp. 72-74, 104-07.

⁷ *PB* (Oct. 1912) p. 200.

⁸ *VK* (May 1924) p. 31.

⁹ *PB* (June 1950) p. 264; *VK* (July 1950) p. 120.

¹⁰ *Vedanta Darpana* (Dec. 1932), p. 15.

¹¹ Tathagatananda, pp. 191, 195-98, 201-02, 207; *PB* (June 1950); *Times* (Dec. 5, 1925), p. A2; (Dec. 19, 1925), p. A2; (Jan. 2, 1926), p. 6; (Jan. 30, 1926), p. A2.