



In the 1950s, a religious order rooted in ancient Indian philosophies established a center in the hills of Montecito. Half a century later, the
VEDANTA SOCIETY OF SANTA BARBARA
remains a serene retreat that embraces all faiths.

shangri-la



by ann louise bardach

GOD WAS NOT ESPECIALLY WELCOME in our New Jersey home. On the contrary, my father offered the occasional and animated tutorial on the nonexistence of God-sort of a catechism in atheism. While the house was full of books—from Charles Dickens to Karl Marx – woe be it to him or her who thought we might want a Bible on our shelves. With a tight, chilly smile, my mother once dispatched a drably – dressed twosome from the Seventh-day Adventist, who thought otherwise. But in the moment before she closed the door to the front porch, one of the visiting pilgrims, slipped a Bible into her reluctant hands. Though I searched for days, that black-bound volume was never again seen in our home. What my mother did with the Good Book remains, well, a mystery.

My illumination would have to wait until our back-door neighbor, eight-year-old Barbara O'Brien, shared her catechism book from St. Joe's, as we called the Catholic church on the other side of town. Forever seared in memory will be the moment Barbara turned a page and pointed out an illustration of God. There He was, emerging from a flock of pastel-pale cumulus clouds—a light-skinned, toga-clad, bearded man of stern benevolence. Gushing with wonder and relief,

I told Barbara I was ever so grateful because now I would recognize Him should we ever meet.

Such revelations are not guaranteed at the Vedanta Temple at the top of Ladera Lane in Montecito – though they should not be ruled out altogether. One is certain to find, however, a respite from life lived on the information highway and a sanctuary where *being* trumps *doing*. With its wraparound, panoramic vistas of the Pacific and the Santa Ynez mountains, it happens to be one of the loveliest haunts in California.

While the Central Coast is a veritable mecca of the New Age – with dozens of spiritual teachers, quacks, kooks, and all manner of self-improvement classes, Vedanta speaks in a voice from another age – the Old Age, as it were. Its teachings are rooted in the *Vedas*, the most ancient of all spiritual scriptures, going back more than 6,000 years, which are the cornerstones of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Vedanta. They include the *Upanishads* and express the core belief that God is within and without and that the divine is everywhere—but most manifest in the human heart. Among Vedanta's appeals is its generous embrace of other faiths and their prophets.



Photos: Nancy Neil, nancynel.com

Vedanta's most famous modern-day prophet was the remarkable Indian monk Vivekananda, a disciple of Bengali-born saint Ramakrishna. It was Vivekananda who brought the message of Vedanta to the West. He first visited London, then Chicago, where, on September 11, 1893, the thirty-year-old missionary delivered an electrifying lecture at the World's Parliament of Religions to 4,000 stunned and cheering attendees.

Well-born, handsome and fabulously rich, Spencer Kellogg had it all. In 1940, the sixty-four-year-old Santa Barbara linseed-oil millionaire divorced his longtime wife and married a younger woman. Yet, having bested all his material goals, Kellogg still fumbled through anxious, dark nights – wondering what it all meant.

So profound was his yearning that he began a transformation from tycoon to spiritual seeker. In 1942, Kellogg stumbled upon *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, the extraordinary firsthand account of the Indian saint born in 1836 that had just been translated into English. *The Gospel* chronicled the life and mission of Ramakrishna, whose followers believed him to be an avatar, a divine incarnation. Aldous Huxley, who contributed the book's forward, tended to agree. He de-

scribed the recorded conversations of Ramakrishna as “the most profound and subtle utterances about the nature of Ultimate Reality.”

Transfixed by *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, Kellogg insisted on meeting its translator and editor, a monk named Nikhilananda. As luck would have it, the Indian monk often visited the Vedanta Center in the Hollywood Hills. Through this young, erudite monk, Kellogg would meet Swami Prabhavananda, the charismatic head of that center. It was Prabhavananda's talks and ministry that had attracted Huxley, Christopher Isherwood, Igor Stravinsky, and the philosopher Gerald Heard. Another acquaintance of Swami P, as he was called, was Somerset Maugham, whose friendship with Isherwood moved him to write his novel (and screenplay) *The Razor's Edge*, a phrase taken from the *Upanishads*.

Luminaries and occasional seekers such as Greta Garbo, Vivien Leigh, and Laurence Olivier also found their way to the Vedanta Center in the Hollywood Hills. For a period Isherwood contemplated forsaking his fame, name, and shining career to become a monk, and lived for several years off and on as a monastic at the center. In-

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spired by Isherwood, Garbo asked if she too might live there. As the story goes, a flummoxed Prabhavananda pointed out that the monastery accepted only men, adding apologetically “and you are a girl.” But Garbo wasn’t having any of it. “Doesn’t matter,” she responded. “I’ll put on trousers.” Isherwood, who was initiated in 1940, remained devoted to Prabhavananda throughout his life and became his collaborator in translating the *Bhagavad Gita* (song of God), Pantanjali’s *Yoga Aphorisms*, and Shankara’s *Crest Jewel of Discrimination*, among other texts.

Like Isherwood, Kellogg had found his path and teacher. In 1942, he bought thirty acres of soft rolling hills of chaparral on Ladera Lane in Montecito to create a spiritual retreat for himself. At the time, Ladera was not a paved road, and had just a few homes, and was inhabited mostly by coyotes, mountain lions and rattlesnakes. But it had magnificent ocean and mountain views and, yes, an otherworldly feeling.

Kellogg began by building a house, an art room, and a shrine room for worship on the sprawling Montecito property. Although Kellogg thought he had found heaven, his new wife, Cosetta Kupp, was less than enchanted. She yearned to be back in a proper neighborhood – one closer to downtown Santa Barbara – and other proper people. Kupp was delighted when her husband deeded the site to the Vedanta society in 1944.

Initially, Kellogg’s paradise was used as a retreat for visiting monastics and devotees. Slowly it expanded, with four bedrooms added to the art room. By 1947, it had become a convent and residence for several nuns who moved up from the center in Los Angeles. Within a decade, Sunday lectures were initiated and held in the original main house, which today is the living area for its seven resident nuns. Fifty years ago, in 1959, it became the first center in the world for women to receive *sannyas* (final monastic vows) by the Ramakrishna Order of India. The nuns all have names that end in *prana* (loosely meaning “life force”) cheerfully call themselves the “Prana Sisters.”

One of the original nuns, Varadaprana, a composer and musician, is still there at age eighty-seven, having spent sixty-six years of her life as a monastic. “The first fifty were the hardest,” she quipped after her golden anniversary. She can be heard every evening at vespers, playing the *tabla* (the double Indian drum), and on Sundays, playing the organ.

In response to the surprising number of visitors, devotees, and students who flocked to the new retreat, a temple was built. The gifted, innovative architect Lutah Maria Riggs was entrusted with the commission. She did not disappoint. Riggs’ exquisite rendering, completed in 1956, was informed by the ancient wooden temples of Southern India. Its peaked structure is supported by processions of golden-hue wood columns that were formerly telephone poles made from Oregon pine trees. They are complemented by graceful laminated arches, Indonesian carvings, brass lamps, and a broad Egyptian screen near the entry. Frank Lloyd Wright, who had met Prabhavananda, was an early visitor and great admirer of the temple’s interior design.

Surrounding the structure are native plants and rock gardens, landscaped by Riggs herself with direction from Frank Lloyd Wright. Between the temple and the bookstore is a massive twelfth-century bell, cast in Japan, which had once been rigged to a Chinese military ship.

While there are twenty-five Vedanta societies or Ramakrishna Order centers in the United States, some 200 centers and branches around the world, and more than 1,000 in India, the Montecito convent is among the loveliest. But Santa Barbara’s Shangri-la almost wasn’t to be. Like Ramakrishna, Prabhavananda was wary of gifts, lest there be strings attached of impropriety and unforeseen financial obligations. Twice when Kellogg offered his estate to him, the monk said no. But having overheard Kellogg speaking to himself about his grand plan while he swept the path near the shrine – along with an endowment of a lemon orchard – the monk decided it was indeed divinely given. “Okay,” said Prabhavananda, “we’ll take it.”

Visitors should be forewarned that although Yoga in the West owes its existence to Vivekananda, Vedanta is not a body cult. Those seeking enhanced physical exertion or flexibility are best directed toward a Yoga or Pilates class. If Vivekananda had but one message, most especially for Americans, it might have been, “you are not your body.” Yoga, in its original meaning of “union” or “to yoke oneself to God,” is the sole practice at Vedanta.

That said, there are rich and transformative rewards to be had for the curious, devotees, and restless seekers alike. The grounds and temple are open daily to visitors. Every evening, arati, or vespers, are held with the nuns singing mesmerizing ancient chants, followed by



Photos: courtesy of the Vedanta Center

silent meditation. There is also a lecture every Sunday, and classes for serious students are offered on Saturday afternoons twice each month with one of Vedanta's visiting eminences. Most popular are those with Swami Swahananda, the eighty-eight-year-old titan who heads the Vedanta society of Southern California and, when not traveling to other centers, is based at the Hollywood Hills center. "God created the world for his fun," he says, "and yours." Although Swahananda is partial to shaggy dog stories and irreverent jokes, and is an avid student of politics, his own teacher was a direct disciple of Ramakrishna. "I can take you to the door," one of the visiting monks from Calcutta told devotees after a class last September, "but Swami can take you through the door."

Sometimes the Sunday lecture is given by an esteemed scholar such as Nandini Iyer, who might speak on Hindu Mysticism. (She is also the mother of writer Pico Iyer.) Occasionally, it may be the convent's resident historian, Vrajaprana, who joined the society in 1977. She has written and edited seven books on her magnum opus-scholarly interpretations on Ramakrishna and his teaching-will be published next year. When she is not writing, Vrajaprana, a concert hall-quality soprano, is singing – either at the temple or at various classical recitals at the Arlington or the Granada.

The convent's oldest nun, at eighty-eight is the petite and always snappily dressed Anandaprana, a German-born Jewish refugee who fled the Nazis with her parents. She joined the Hollywood Hills order in 1952 and lived in Los Angeles for thirty years before moving to the Montecito center. A woman of keen intellect and erudition, she is warmly acknowledged by Isherwood in his Vedanta work and is the author of a chronicle of the remarkable life of her teacher Prabhavananda.

The youngest nun is thirty-three-year-old Sitaprana, an attractive UC Santa Barbara graduate in religious studies who joined the convent in 2000. A self-described "Type A nun," she keeps the place running on clock time. She also attends Swahandanda's visits and care, and purchases the eclectic, one-of-a-kind gift items sold in the Vedanta Bookstore. A well-trod stop for seekers and shoppers alike, the store offers all manner of spiritual texts and religious books. Its shelves also boast unusual statuary-arguably the best selection of Ganeshas (the half-elephant, half-man deity) to be found in the country – as well as

a diverse collection of pashmina shawls and jewelry. Proceeds support Vedanta's nonprofit ministerial and charitable work.

Another bookstore habitué, Bhavaprana is a tall, graceful woman whom offers tips and serenity to perusers. She is also the webmistress for Vedanta at *Vedanta.org*, which receives up to one million hits a day. Others nuns include Deviprana, who devotes herself to worship rituals in the temple and the making of *Prasad* (blessed offerings). And there is an indomitable Krishnaprana, the convent's general manager of sorts. K.P., as she is called, coordinates the society's efforts for the homeless through Transition House.

The presence of the center has achieved a salutary symbiosis with its neighborhood, fostering a small spiritual community. A number of homes on Ladera Lane were bought in the 1950's and '60s by devotees who then bequeathed them to Vedanta.

I first encountered Vedanta when I was a teenager enduring a protracted "lost weekend" while living in the Hollywood Hills. Hearing about a Vedanta temple located at the elbow of two streets just north of Franklin Avenue near Argyle, I ventured toward the property. While I circled the grounds, I never dared enter the temple-daunted by the exotic foreignness of its name and my own adolescent sense of unworthiness.

Would that I had. Twenty years later, I stopped by the Ladera Lane temple. I was only planning to circle the grounds – yet again. But Swahananda, leaving the temple after a Sunday lecture, turned around quite unexpectedly and leveled his eyes with mine. "Is there something you wanted to ask me?" he said.

And so began a longer walk than I had anticipated.

LAYOGA

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