

## 16 Things to Know about The Sambodh Society

### The Sambodh Society

Q: What is The Sambodh Society?

A: It is a non-profit religious organization registered in the State of Michigan in 1998 and tax exempt in the United States. The trustees are Swami Bodhananda (President), Dr. Uma Deperalta (Vice President and Treasurer), and Ruth Haring, Ph.D. (Vice President and Chief Executive). Sambodh Society has its headquarters in Kalamazoo, Michigan and a presence in many states and major cities, including New York, Washington, New Jersey, Columbus (OH), Atlanta, Houston, San Antonio, St. Louis, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Seattle. In India, Sambodh has organizations in Bangalore, Ahmedabad, Trivandrum, Kochi, Kozhikode, Palakkad, and Nagarcoil with its headquarters in New Delhi.

Q: What are the Sambodh Society's objectives?

A: There are three objectives: 1) to communicate the vision of Universal Oneness, or *Advaita Vedanta*, through the teaching of the *Bhagavad Gita*, the ten principal *Upanishads* and the *Brahma Sutras* as well as other associated texts as interpreted by *Jagad Guru, Sri Adi Shankaracharya*; 2) to organize, encourage, and inspire people to understand the place of ritual and to simplify its form, to pray, and to meditate; 3) to activate the inner spiritual power of individuals via instruction in meditation, and channel that meditative energy into humanitarian and charitable activities.

Q: How does Sambodh propose to realize these objectives?

A: By establishing teaching and retreat centers (ashrams); training and instituting an order of dedicated teachers; publishing aural, written and electronic media; and organizing retreats, seminars, dialogues (including interfaith dialogues), workshops, mass rituals, prayer and meditation.

### Advaita Vedanta

Q: What is Advaita Vedanta?

A: *Advaita* means “non-dual.” *Vedanta* means “ultimate knowledge.” “*Advaita Vedanta* is the teaching that all forms of existence are one, integral web and a manifestation of underlying Consciousness, which can be realized in a pure, meditative mind. This is expressed in such *Upanishadic* statements as “All that is, is *Brahman*” or “That *Brahman* is none other than the individual Self”.

Q: How does this knowledge help me in my daily life?

A: Our daily life is full of strife and struggle; we often get confused as to what is right and wrong. In lonely moments we wonder about the world, our place in the world and our destiny. “Who am I?” is a puzzling question that assails our minds as we contemplate our inevitable mortality. Like a dry leaf in a storm, we shake

in fear, uncertain about the future. The study of *Vedanta* gives the spiritual seeker clarity about duty and moral choices as well as about the true nature of his or her personhood.

Q: How does the study and knowledge of *Advaita Vedanta* give me clarity?

A: *Vedanta* teaches that one has to live in this world by doing honest, hard work—not by exploiting others for one's own sake, but by drawing energy, purpose, motivation and happiness from one's own self. The purpose of life is to realize one's potential through a balanced mind while interacting with an ever-changing world.

### Practice

Q: What is Sambodh's view of idol worship (*murti puja*) found in traditional Hindu practice?

A: A Hindu believes that there is only one Supreme Truth but there are many manifestations of divinity and paths to God. So the correct notion is “ideal worship” rather than idol worship—worshipping the *ideal* represented by the *murti* or idol. There are six primary deities that Hindus worship in the form of idols. They are: *Surya, Ganesha, Skanda, Vishnu, Shiva*, and *Shakti*. Hindus also worship different conceptions or manifestations of these deities, for example *Rama, Krishna, Hanuman, Durga* and *Kali*. All these deities are manifestations or representations of that same Supreme Power, which we call *Brahman*. Every Sambodh center in India has installed a *Ganesha murti*, while the Michigan headquarters of Sambodh in America has installed a *Shiva-Shakti murti*.

Q: What is a cult, and how does Sambodh Society differ from this type of organization?

A: According to Webster's dictionary, the word “cult” is derived from two Latin roots, *cultus* (meaning “care” or “cultivation”) and *colere* (meaning “to till” or “to cultivate”). From these, the idea of a system of religious worship or ritual has derived. The word “cult” can mean worship, religious rituals, or devoted attachment to a person or to a principle and is often associated with faddism. The Sambodh Society is a fellowship of worshippers who cultivate certain ideals embedded in deeply-rooted, ancient spiritual principles, significantly distinguishing it from faddism or cultism. In its commitment to the vision of Universal Oneness implicit to *Vedantic* philosophy, the organization is inclusive, incorporating rituals derived from many traditions. Under the spiritual guidance of Swami Bodhananda Saraswati, his precursors and successors, the Society respects the tradition of scriptures and *gurus* interpreted and symbolized in India's monastic *Advaita Vedantic* tradition. It is not a cult because it does not blindly accept spiritual



leadership without a tradition of scriptural or moral discipline. A basic tenet of the Society encompasses respect for universal human values, the law of the land, and the value of individual human dignity.

**Q:** What about other religions and sects in India and elsewhere?

**A:** *Vedanta* teaches that all religions are capable of leading humanity on the path of righteousness and truth. Major religions have sects and subsects that reflect the differences in human tastes and inclinations. *Vedanta* also teaches that dialogue, debate, interaction and sharing among different religious followers and sects are to be encouraged in a spirit of mutual respect for difference.

**Q:** What is Sambodh's view of interfaith dialogue?

**A:** The purpose of dialogue ought to be to create a new level of spiritual awareness in the global eco-context. Therefore, we encourage intellectual, theological and philosophical input in such dialogues along with an intellectual and spiritual honesty, without clinging or becoming entrenched.

## Background

**Q:** Who are the foremost teachers or prophets of Hindu culture and religion?

**A:** They are Veda Vyasa (3000 BCE) and Sri Adi Shankaracharya (8<sup>th</sup> century A.D.).

**Q:** Briefly tell me about Sri Shankaracharya.

**A:** He is the foremost proponent of *Advaita Vedanta*. He was born in Kerala, in a village called Kalady, in 788 A.D. He passed away in the Himalayas at the young age of 32 in 820 A.D. He was a master of the four *Vedas*, the ten principal *Upanishads*, the *Brahma Sutras* (aphorisms written by Badarayana harmonizing the *Upanishads*), *Puranas* (collection of ancient myths containing ethical and religious principles), *itihasa* (legends or stories) and the *darshanis* (six systems of orthodox Hindu philosophy). In the 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D., Shankaracharya restored Hinduism in India and brought diverse Hindu faiths under one umbrella. He reformed and simplified Hindu rituals, determined the basic Hindu canons, writing commentaries on each canonical scripture, established an order of monks to practice and teach Hindu scriptures, and fought against all evil practices perpetrated in the name of religion. Shankara was his given name, and "acharya" is an honorific title bestowed upon him meaning "one who lives what he teaches."

**Q:** What are the *Vedas*?

**A:** The *Vedas* are revealed wisdom of the Hindu people. Bound in four volumes, the *Rig Veda*, *Yajurveda*, *Sama Veda* and *Atharvana Veda* are hymns

addressed to many gods, chief among them being *Indra*. The oldest, *Rig Veda*, contains more than a thousand hymns, the most famous being the *Gayatri mantra*, *Purusha-sukta* and *Nasadiya-sukta*. Even today, students chant the *Gayatri mantra* to develop the powers of the mind. *Purusha-sukta* is a hymn addressed to God, envisaging Him as the transcendental, manifest Reality. *Nasadiya-sukta* casts doubt upon human ability to "know" God. The *Yajurveda* mainly contains instructions for ritual purposes. *Sama Veda* is a set of *Rig Vedic* hymns for the purpose of singing. *Atharvana Veda* contains incantations, chants and rituals to ward off evil spirits as well as information on music, architecture, archery, medicine, politics and other aspects of social life. Hindus accept the four *Vedas* as the foundational wisdom of their religious traditions

**Q:** Explain *mantra*.

**A:** *Mantra* is a *Vedic* sound formulation or "vibration" which a *guru* may prescribe to disciples for chanting. Typically, the student meditates upon a specific deity while chanting the *mantra*. Chanting a *mantra* strengthens a student's devotion to a deity, their *guru*, and study and pursuit of Truth (*Brahman*).

**Q:** What are the *Upanishads*?

**A:** There are ten principal *Upanishads* studied in *Vedanta*, consisting of those having written commentary by Shankaracharya. They are: *Isa*, *Kena*, *Katha*, *Prasna*, *Mundaka*, *Mandukya*, *Taittiriya*, *Aitareya*, *Chandogya* and *Brhadaranyaka*. The *Upanishads* are the final teachings of the *Vedas* and are found at the end of each scripture. They contain incisive, in-depth analyses and reflections upon fundamental human preoccupations: 1) the individual self; 2) the phenomenal world; and; 3) the transcendental God. Their "realized" conclusion is that these three verities are three expressions of the same Truth. The Sanskrit word for "ultimate truth" is *Brahman*, or *Sat*; and for the "individual self" is "Atman" or "Chit." The four celebrated *Upanishadic* proclamations to be realized may be stated, in order, as follows:

- That thou art.
- Truth is pure Consciousness.
- The individual self is the Truth.
- I, indeed, am Truth (pure Consciousness).

**Q:** What are the *Brahma Sutras*?

**A:** They are a set of 537 pithy formulations about *Brahman*, the Ultimate Truth, composed by sage Veda Vyasa and commented upon by Sri Shankaracharya. The *sutras* consist of a set of logical expositions upon the mystical *Upanishadic* statements.

