

## NEWS COVERAGE

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BLOGS

### [Ananda Journal: The first two days in California](#)

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## Ananda Journal: The first two days in California



NARAYANI GANESH

### DAY ONE

March 10, 2014, Monday

Arrive in San Francisco, met by Santoshi Nancy Kendall, long time Raja Yoga teacher at Ananda Village who has also been realtor, who drives me and Sathya Saran to the Ananda Community at Palo Alto where we stay overnight with Asha and David Praver who lead the community here before heading out to Ananda Village, a community of brotherhood established by Swami Kriyananda near Nevada city in California, as per the vision of his guru Yogananda.

# FINDING Happiness



Sathya and I were going there to experience what the film, “Finding Happiness” documents – slated for release across India on April 11 -- of the life of some 300-odd members trying to live the teachings of their gurus Swami Kriyananda who passed away last year, a direct disciple of Yogananda, author of the acclaimed ‘Autobiography of a Yogi’.

The story is told through the eyes of fictional journalist Juliet, played by Elizabeth Rohm, who recently acted as the mayor’s wife in American Hustle. Only Juliet is introduced to tell the story; the rest of the film and the characters therein are all real life.

## DAY TWO

March 11, 2014, Tuesday

6:45 AM – I wake up and think, Oh my God, I was supposed to join Ananda Community members for meditation at 6.00 AM here at Asha and David Praver’s home! But everything seemed so dark and quiet. Maybe it was cancelled, after all. I quietly slide the guest room door open to see shadowy hoodie type figures seated in silence in the dark, facing the altar in the living room, with the framed pictures of Swami Kriyananda, his guru Yogananda, his guru Yuktेशwar Giri, his guru Lahiri Mahasaya and his guru Mahavatar Babaji as well as Jesus Christ gazing at the assembly in benign Grace. Some members are draped in shawls to keep out the early morning chill. There’s pin drop silence. A faint light from the altar outlines the figures that seem to be deep in meditation. I hastily but quietly retreat, slide the door back softly and run to the washroom to get ready. And I’m ready in flat ten minutes because only last night at 9:30 pm I’d had an elaborate bath and also washed my hair after that long flight from Delhi to San Francisco via Dubai.



# FINDING *Happiness*

7:00 AM : I quietly slip out of my room and pad over to the sofa where there is space for one more person and sit in lotus position, closing my eyes. It's not as dark now, I can see more. Some of them have headphones. Are they listening to music? I learn later that it was to shut out any noise to aid focus. Well, it's a good 30 minutes before the session concludes, as Tandava, the manager of the East West Store in Downtown Mountainview, draped in a yellow shawl, begins to chant Aum and signals the session over. After raising their hands a couple of times, everyone gets up. And by now sunlight floods the room.

I get introduced to all: Tandava, Chidambara, Steven, David and Karen, Sharmila, Ananda Prem, Vinny, Adam, Sai Ganesh, Annapurna, Saranya, Nirmoha, Jill, and a few others. Asha and David Praver, my hosts, lead the community at Palo Alto. Asha just returned a week back from India, where she'd met with The Speaking Tree team and had a kind of satsang, answering questions and sharing insights.

The members who've just been sombre in meditation are now pitching in to make breakfast. My eyes widen in disbelief as I watch Saranya shallow fry a whole lot of bacon – the aroma wafts down the breakfast table as everyone gathers around it. (Hey, aren't they supposed to be vegetarian?) I learn later that all of it is made of soya flour, a hundred per cent vegetarian! Except for the scrambled eggs, that is. The muffins are chewy and delicious, made of tapioca flour, a recipe from South America, and contributed by Annapurna. As her name suggests, she takes care of the Ananda community dining hall in Palo Alto, San Francisco and each day a volunteer cooks the dinner.

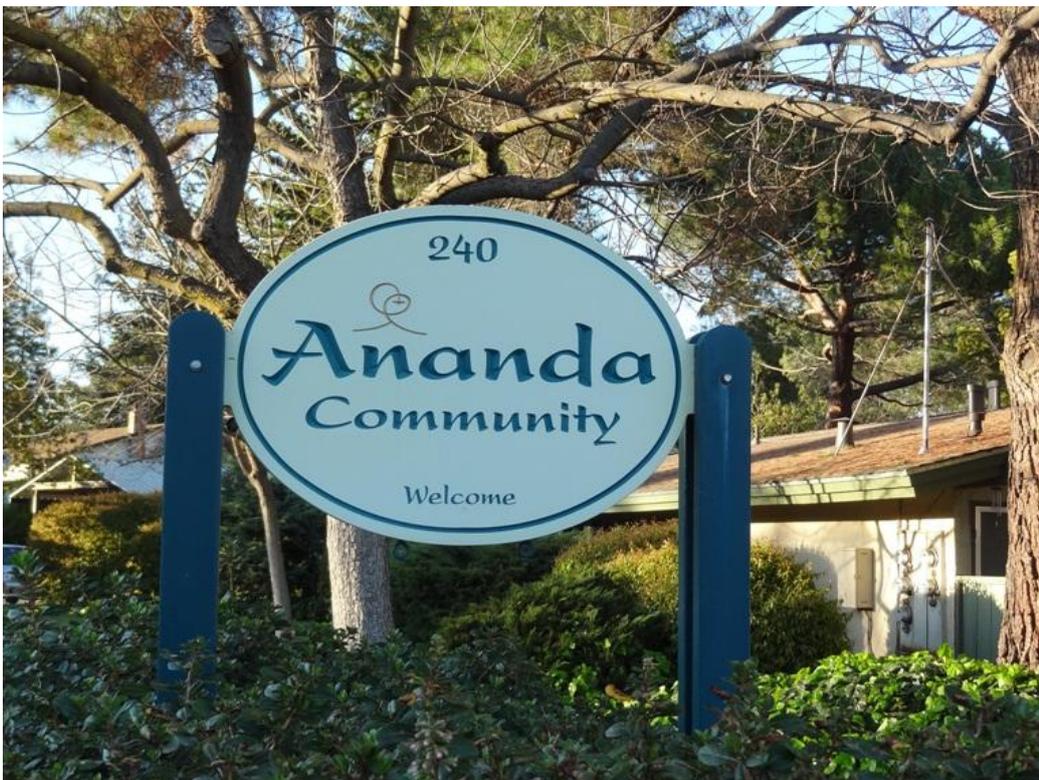


I remember the dinner we'd had the night before – a kind of vegetable chowder, soupy and nutritious, with green salad and interesting toppings and dressings including linseed, all put together by volunteer Todd. Or was it sunflower seed? There were some brownies as well.

That's where I met Suman Brar, the 'Jalandhar ki kudi' as I called her when she said her parents and she migrated to Halifax, Canada when she was still a child, as first generation emigrants from Jalandhar, Punjab. She now works in Silicon Valley and as member of the Ananda Community here at Palo Alto, lives in the community that houses residents in about five acres. She says she loves it here. As senior manager in a tech-company, she has a busy schedule and likes to de-stress with meditation and listen to sermons at the Ananda Church of Self-Realisation.

# FINDING Happiness

To return to the breakfast table today – the comfort levels are high as the dishes are cleared without a fuss, coffee handed around and there is soft chatter. Sai Ganesh, the Tamil techie from Chennai, says he read ‘Autobiography of a Yogi’ when he was 21 years old and got interested enough to do a correspondence course in Yogananda’s teachings. He came to the US and completed his graduation in 2012 from Indiana, and moved to the Bay Area in San Francisco where he enrolled for Asha Praver’s classes. “The concept of a Sunday service was new to me, for I was used to informal and irregular temple visits and pujas. The fire ceremony with Gayatri Mantra chants followed by meditation, chanting and then music; readings, talks or sermon – all this appealed to me,” says Sai Ganesh whose parents in Chennai, orthodox Iyers, were okay with it so long as he could integrate his interest in yoga, meditation and Yogananda’s teachings with the traditional wisdom and practices that was followed in their home. “As member of the Ananda community, I found I could practice spirituality in a more centred way,” explains Sai Ganesh whose brother in San Jose continues to follow the family tradition.



Says Sharmila, an American psychotherapist: “Living in a community has grounded and centred me – helps me deal with the pulls of the world, having a spiritual family with regular satsangs and support.”

Karen, 55 and David, 58, a couple that teaches meditation and stress management to corporations in the US, are also members of the Ananda community and Karen takes care of Ananda’s marketing. They apply the essence of the Bhagwad Gita in what they teach without talking about the Gita specifically for they explain to corporations and government agency employees how to change themselves rather than wait for their circumstances to change.

Among their clients are companies like IBM, the UN, US Navy and NASA. Their outfit, ‘Clarity Seminars’ is popular and normally the session they conduct is of three and a half hours duration. The stress is on scientific method of meditation as usually, scientists who participate, ask for proof. Karen points out that Yogananda would say, “Yogis should be able to stand unshaken amidst the crash of breaking worlds” – and that’s what we strive to impart to those seeking help, she says. Well, when I said, “This is the goal we’re striving at,” one participant exclaimed, “Now I don’t have to hate my mother-in-law!” says David.

I get to speak with Tandava. How did a white American get a name like that? “I found my name – I was to take brahmacharya vows and I got a book of Sanskrit names as I thought it would be a good idea to start by taking a new name. Swami Kriyananda was in India at that time and I thought I would send him a list of names to approve from. But Tandava was liked instantly and I do know it means Shiva’s dance. “ Having done a lot of dancing himself, he says he thought it would transmute that energy to his new life. Tandava

# FINDING *Happiness*

worked with Google for five years after graduating from Stanford University in symbolic systems – computer science and music, with a dash of linguistics, psychology and philosophy. His mother introduced him to the Ananda community more than four years ago and now, the 34 year-old manages the East West bookstore in Downtown Mountainview, in the Bay Area, a very popular store that sells books and accessories relating to all spiritual/ religious traditions.



On a visit to the store later in the day, I picked up a black Ganesha with well chiselled features (had never seen a black Ganesha before). Was I carrying as they say, ‘coals to Newcastle?’ No, because the idol might have been made to order for export and hence seemed carefully crafted. Nowadays one rarely gets to see fine features in idols available in India – perhaps the best ones are exported!

Says Asha Praver, who prefers to call the Church of Self-Realisation as a Temple, “Our temple is exclusively Yogananda’s teachings whereas at East West (run by Ananda) you get to see writings of all spiritual paths. Sthe store serves a lot more people.”

Vinny is just 25 and he got to know of Ananda through the Internet. He was in North Carolina and he participated in a few webinars and came here to Palo Alto in September 2012 and never left the community. Vinny was a professional baseball stadium administrator. Here, he chooses to work at the Temple.





# FINDING Happiness



Karen says of Adam, "He's called the Piped Piper of children! He has a way with them!" Adam says helping kids find happiness is very satisfying. "My earlier job in finance had become so monotonous and as Yogananda would've put it, it had become 'anguishing monotony'. So I just broke away from Corporate America but not before trying my hand at a recruitment company that seemed no different. "You have a boss, a computer, and make calls through the day," exclaims Adam who has now found a job as teacher in a private pre-school in the neighbourhood even as Marley takes up her teaching job at Living Wisdom.

Saranya is African American and she lives in Fremont, 20 miles from Palo Alto. After retirement she is now consultant, with a school for the hearing impaired where she was director earlier. As Ananda member she comes here five or six times a week, loves playing the harmonium and singing at Sunday school. Her daughter, a paediatrician, suggested she read 'Autobiography of a Yogi' and "I was drawn to Lahiri Mahasaya," says Saranya who likes the idea that you can be Self-realised and still raise a family. She found Ananda Church of Self-Realisation through the Yellow Pages, 17 years ago when Internet was not so widespread. When Saranya came to Palo Alto for the first time, Swami Kriyananda was here. "The music was so good and the people were just being themselves. I came one Sunday and then never stopped coming," says Saranya. "Well, Palo Alto is just a hop, skip an djump from where I live in Fremont," she says, winking at me.



And so the group dispersed, each heading toward their mission, only to meet again soon, sharing their lives and insights, finding and spreading happiness all around....  
Even as Sathya and I prepared to set out for Ananda Village...

<http://www.speakingtree.in/spiritual-blogs/seekers/pilgrimage/ananda-journal-the-first-two-days-in-california#>