

THE SACRED ARCHIVES OF ADIDAM

Digital Preservation Magazine

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An Interview with Elliott Mehrbach

General Manager of the Digital Preservation Project

By Claire Murdoch



To keep you, the friends and supporters of the Sacred Archives, in touch with the very important Digital Preservation Project going on here right now, we hope you'll enjoy this interview with a very key player who is leading this project on a daily basis.

Elliott Mehrbach is the creative initiator and General Manager of the Digital Preservation Project. Not only does he oversee all the departments, he is the designer and programmer of the database that enables access to all these Sacred Treasures. He also works hands-on with every aspect of the digitizing process and is constantly researching and updating the technology, while making sure that the project is funded. In other words, this project would not be happening without him!

So it is my great pleasure to introduce you to Elliott Mehrbach and the absolutely essential work that he does at the Sacred Archives of Adidam:

Q: When did you first become a devotee Elliott, and what brought you to Bhagavan Adi Da?

Elliott: In 1974 I was in New Mexico, and I was staying at a friend's house. He had a copy of *The Knee Of Listening*. It was in the middle of winter so I had plenty of time to read it. When I had finished reading Bhagavan's autobiography, I knew this was It! So I sent a letter to Franklin Jones at the address that was printed inside the back cover of the book on Melrose Avenue in Los Angeles. In the letter I wrote something like: "I read your book, I thought it was great, you are obviously the Buddha" or however I expressed it at the time. And then I didn't hear anything back for a long time. Eventually I heard back from the community, and what really moved me was I got a brochure of full-color photographs that you could buy of Adi Da (Bubba Free John at that time). And I just looked at them and I knew I had to go to California. So I went to San Francisco and got a job and got involved with the community there. And the first day I arrived at the Mountain Of Attention Sanctuary (in Northern California) was the day after Christmas in 1975 where I first saw Adi Da in person. He walked into our beginning devotee study-course, "No Remedy", in Huge Helper (the education, editorial, and library building on the sanctuary at that time). Wow! I had already been to the Dawn Horse Bookstore on Polk Street in San Francisco many times and had seen videos of Adi Da. The first video I ever saw, which is why I know how powerful these archival videos really are, had footage of a Darshan occasion with Adi Da at the Mountain Of Attention. He was wearing an orange kaftan. As soon I saw him, I had a spontaneous response. He literally took my breath away. He took over my breathing and filled me with love and a great bliss. I really didn't know what was going on and wondered how this could happen. But it was clear that there was so much power in just seeing that video at the Polk Street Bookstore. That was a kind of proof of what I had read in *The Knee of Listening*.

Q: That's wonderful. So, when did you begin to consider doing this Digital

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Preservation Project and what inspired you to get involved?

Elliott: Well, I spent more than eleven years in Fiji doing different things, including helping to manage Bhagavan's Circumstance. And so I knew how important the Archives has always been to Bhagavan. I'd heard Him speak about it, and seen many of His communications about it. He was very intentionally creating the Sacred Archives, and He was also always very concerned about the safety of it. He was insistent that it last in perpetuity, and that all the materials that are the record of His Life were to be duplicated and stored in a number of geographically separate places. Some of the things in the Archives, of course, can't be duplicated, like a piece of furniture, but there are a lot of things that can be duplicated, especially the audio, video, and photographic materials, and Bhagavan's Yellow Pages, His Handwritten manuscript pages. I had not been directly involved with the Archives until after Bhagavan's Maha Samadhi. Shortly after His Maha Samadhi I visited the Sacred Archives to see what was going on there. I spoke with Scott Campbell. It was clear that they really needed some technical help in terms of preserving everything digitally, because the computer systems there in Archives were old and inadequate to the task. Also, there was only a very minimal amount of digital storage capacity. The materials that had already been digitized, mostly audio tapes and Adi Da's Handwritten Manuscript Pages, were not easily available for research. They were kept on multiple back-up data tapes, as we do now, but it was older technology, and so access was slow and very cumbersome. Also, with many of those first data storage tapes, the digitized audio recordings and Yellow Pages had been placed on them 2 to 7 years earlier. So those earliest storage tapes were aging and needed to be refreshed, by moving the digital files they contained to new higher capacity tapes, to ensure that nothing was lost. So it seemed to me that we really needed a more sophisticated system to not only store the things that had already been digitized, but to digitize everything else that could be digitized. And for some reason it was an interest of mine and I kind of have an aptitude for those kinds of things, and I'd done things like that professionally, so I went and I talked to some people about getting some money together to put together a much-improved digital storage system. Crane Kirkbride, who as we all know is extraordinarily generous, funded the initial purchase of digital storage equipment. Crane has been a major patron of the Sacred Archives digital preservation process at every step of the way. So, with Crane's support, we were able to put together a bank of hard drives and a server, and put into place a more robust and sophisticated, state-of-the-art data tape back-up system.

Q: Did you have a sense of the scope of how big this project was going to be when you first started it?

Elliott: Not exactly, but it didn't take long to realize that if I was going to start it, I was going to have to finish it. And it was more than just refreshing the files already on data storage tape. There were also thousands more audio tapes and Yellow Pages that hadn't been digitized yet, hundreds of thousands photographs yet to do, and

thousands of hours of video that hadn't been digitized. And especially with the videos and audios, the original magnetic recordings really could not be accessed safely. You couldn't just start playing these old tapes--because of their delicacy and the risk of damaging them. As James Steinberg has reminded us, the few actual recordings made of Swami Vivekananda's voice had been played by his devotees so many times over the years that they just wore them out. So the sound of his voice is now gone forever.

I worked with Scott to calculate how many hours of video, of audio, and how many photographs and Manuscript pages there were still to be done, beyond what had already been digitized. And then I looked at the manpower we had, and the equipment we had to do it. My first estimate for how long it would take to actually digitize everything with the set of variables that we had then, was that it would take about 30 years to finish. But we had no choice, we had to get started. Luckily, since then, there are more devotees serving, the technology has advanced, and we've been able to get money together so we could buy more equipment.

The biggest consumer of time in our process is the digitizing of video tape. At first, we had only one video digitizing machine, and so could only transfer one tape at a time. And video has to be transferred at real-time speed. So, an hour-long video takes an hour to transfer. But now we have two machines and we've found new ways to increase our efficiency.

We've been working on this revamped digitizing process since 2009, 4 years, but we probably have another 4 years to go. So instead of being 30 years, if everything goes at the same speed we are now, maybe it'll take 8 years in total. But it's still a significant amount of time.

Q: You've also created the database to make these materials more available.

Elliott: Yes, when we started this digitizing process we realized that we were going to have all this material - digital files. For example, there were at least 250,000 photographs to be digitized, about 10,000 hours of video tape, maybe 20,000 hours of audio tapes, 250,000 Manuscript Yellow Pages, thousands of pages of Bhagavan's Verbal Instructions or Notes, and so on. Each one of these items represented an individual file on a hard drive. So, finding materials for a presentation or a book or a video among the hundreds of thousands or even millions of digital files would still be quite cumbersome. You still would need to go through a lot to find what you need. So, we needed a searchable database. There are archival database systems out there, and we took a look at a number of them, but none of them seemed to work for us for various reasons - they were either really amateurish or they were really expensive and proprietary, so you had to marry a company that would keep charging you to use their system every time they updated it. And we didn't know what our finances would look like into the future. So we had to bite the bullet and make our own system, which is not easy. We do have very specific needs, so it was

better we did it that way, because otherwise, we'd have to be constantly trying to work around the limitations of some off-the-shelf system or hiring companies to modify it continuously, because it's their proprietary system. So that's when we decided to make a database and put everything in it, so over time, all of the materials in the Sacred Archives could be searchable and accessible.

Q: So you not only have the digitized audio, video, manuscript pages, and photographic materials in there, but you also have photographs of all the artifacts that are in the Archives as well.

Elliott: Yes, the idea of the database is that it should hold information about all of the items in the Archives, not just the digitized items. Bhagavan put a lot of things in the Archives that are physical artifacts, like furniture, clothing,

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Sacred objects, one of a kind pieces that He had some kind of interaction with. He asked to have them put into the Archives. And over time, it would be good if we could use the database to document every item that is in the Archives. But it's a tremendous amount of work. Someone will have to go through each item, photograph it and explain its meaning, its historical significance. And you might want to link a particular physical artifact with the historic videos and audios that show it or mention it, so someone can get the feeling of the whole tapestry, you might say, of the Life and Work of Bhagavan through the articles He left in the Archives. And so the database is a way to bring it all together. I kept thinking: So a hundred years from now, someone's going to walk into the Archives and see an article, like the shirt that Bhagavan wore on the Day of the Heart in 1979, and what are they going to know about it, unless we record something now, and not just a little label that says “Day of the Heart 1979”, but something about that occasion. There are so many things like that, that are lesser known, so many things in Bhagavan's Life, that He asked to be put in the Archives, that have a tremendous amount of meaning and significance and Siddhi. But unless we document them, it could very well be lost when this first generation of devotees is gone.

Q: Yes, when I hear you talk, I also feel the sense of urgency relative to getting this project done on time.

Elliott: Well to get the digitizing project done on time is important, because the original materials are deteriorating in every moment. So every day that we don't digitize a video tape, it becomes a little bit less than it was the day before. It doesn't mean that everything is going to dissolve tomorrow, but if we don't do it in the next few years, it's quite possible that some of this material will be lost. And so we feel very urgent about it, because we don't want to lose anything. And so the fragility and aging of the original material is a big part of this sense of urgency.

The second part is the aging of the people that are doing the archiving work. We're all getting older, and I don't know how much longer the people who are working on this will be around to do it. There's the physical aspect of doing the actual digitizing process, which we do need more help doing, and it would be really nice if especially younger people would come and join us and then they could continue on when we are no longer able. But there is also this issue of documenting, which is not something that will be able to happen beyond our lifetimes really. So if, for example, we don't document a video where we are all sitting in white clothing at Seventh Gate at The Mountain Of Attention in Darshan with Bhagavan, people may look at that and want to know why everyone is wearing white, or what was the context for that moment. There is something important about the Sacred History of Bhagavan's Work, and that it's all recorded. He was very meticulous about allowing us to record Him throughout His Life. So it wasn't a casual thing from Him. And it would be really good if it was documented as much as possible.

Q: How is all this funded? It's not like you have government grants or one patron. It seems like it's funded by many people to make it happen.

Elliott: Any devotee you ever talk to about the Sacred Archives understands it. It's not like you have to convince them that it's important. Everybody already understands that it has to happen and that it is a principal responsibility of those of us who were fortunate enough to be here in Bhagavan's Lifetime, to make sure that the record of His Life is preserved for all future time. It's one of the basic responsibilities of each devotee to make sure that this record of His Life is preserved, so that it is accessible to everyone into the future. It is an expensive project with so much technology involved. We always need more hard drives and back-up tapes and video decks and maintenance on everything. It costs a lot of money, and people understand that. So we've been able to communicate to devotees what and why we're doing this, and that we need to have everyone's help with it, and they respond quite readily to that. Sometimes I get to the point where I don't know if this is going to work, because it's so expensive, but it has been working out! And we still have a few years to go. It is going to be a challenge for everyone to support it for another 4 or 5 years and into the future. It's not as if, just because you've digitized everything, it's static. It will always have to be maintained. It may not be as big a project as getting it digitized to begin with, but there is always going to be

costs and energy involved in preserving this material through all future time.

Q: How has this project served your relationship to Bhagavan?

Elliott: Well I've felt this as a continuation of my relationship to Bhagavan that has always been there. A lot of the time that I was in His company and serving Him for some reason I took on fairly big projects, either managing (the island of) Naitauba or the Mountain Of Attention or helping to establish community centers in Seattle and Los Angeles, or helping with the art team on Naitauba and with Bhagavan's Art installation at the Biennale in Venice, Italy. And I always worked with many other devotees and my role was usually in a managing capacity. And so after Bhagavan's Maha Samadhi, it was clear to me that the work of the Sacred Archives needed to be done, and that I could play a part in that work. I see it as service to Bhagavan, because it has to do with his ongoing Work. I am very grateful for the chance to serve Bhagavan in the Sacred Archives. Without a service connection to Him and His Work I would be lost. So being able to grab on to something like that... well the connection to Bhagavan I feel much more strongly when I am involved in a project that takes a lot of energy. So in that way it serves my relationship to Bhagavan.

Q: Thank you Elliott, we all really appreciate your service very much!

If you are inspired by the work that Elliott Mehrbach and others are doing at the Sacred Archives of Adidam, please consider making a monthly donation. Every dollar you donate will go directly to fund this all-important Digital Preservation Project.

Even \$5 or \$10 a month will help

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