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日本ヴェダンタ協会ニュースレター

# The Vedanta Kyokai Newsletter

NEWS, UPDATES AND MISCELLANY FROM THE VEDANTA SOCIETY OF JAPAN

## JULY Calendar



## Birthdays

### Guru Purnima

Tuesday  
03 July 2012

### Swami Ramakrishnananda

Tuesday  
17 July 2012

## Kyokai Events

### • Yoga-Asana •

Saturdays  
July 6, 13, 20, 27  
from 11am  
Contact the Zushi Center

### • July Zushi Retreat •

Sunday July 15  
Swami Medhasananda  
Talk from 11:00  
All are welcome to attend!

### • Osaka Satsanga •

Saturday  
21 July 13:00~17:00  
Osaka Education Center  
Swami Medhasananda  
Programme includes talk on  
Bhagavad Gita and  
Upanishads

### • Summer Outdoor Retreat •

Mt. Mitakesan  
July 29-31 / Reserve Soon  
Contact Shanti-san  
<shanti.k@r3.dion.ne.jp>



## ✧ Thus Spake ✧

*"Realisation is the only goal. When realisation comes into the heart, all arguments cease and divine knowledge shines forth."*

... Sri Ramakrishna

*"Greater is He that is in you, than he that is in the world."*

... Jesus the Christ

## Swami Vivekananda Birth Anniversary Public Celebration

Indian Embassy Tokyo May 27, 2012

The Vedanta Society of Japan (Nippon Vedanta Kyokai) held its annual public birth anniversary celebration of Swami Vivekananda with the cooperation of the Indian Embassy of Japan in Tokyo on 27 May from 2 p.m.

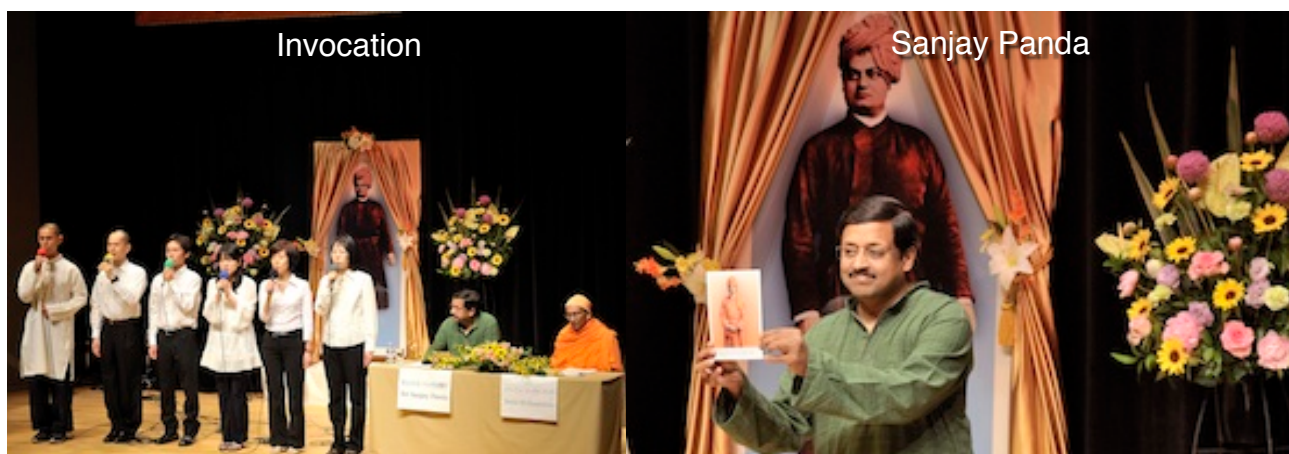
The Indian Embassy co-produced the event along with the Celebration Committee and the Nippon Vedanta Kyokai, offering the use of its new facilities for the third year. This year, with the 150th birth anniversary celebrations of Rabindranath Tagore having just ended in India and the 150th birth anniversary Swami Vivekananda set to kick off, the organisers thought the stories of these great men and their connections to Japan should be told. Thus, both the Society and the Embassy hoped this occasion, in the words of the Honourable Alok Prasad, Ambassador of India to Japan, "will foster greater understanding and people to people relations between India and Japan."

The programme began with an invocation of universal prayers in Sanskrit led by six Japanese devotees and friends. This was followed by a bouquet offering at the feet of a standing photographic image of Swami Vivekananda. Medhasananda then read a message from Revered Swami Atmasthanandaji, President, Ramakrishna Math and Mission, Belur Math, India.

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## Birth Anniversary (from page 1)

The Embassy's Deputy Chief of Mission, Mr. Sanjay Panda, then assisted in the release of the Special Issue of the Society's 'Universal Gospel' and gave a brief welcome and talk on the importance of the occasion.

The main speaker for the event was Swami Medhasananda on the theme 'Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore and Japan' (see Part I of this talk on page 3).

This was followed by a brief Q&A session with questions fielded by the swami and then a Vote of Thanks from Mr. Jagmohan Chandrani, Secretary of the Celebration Committee before the intermission.

There was a 30 minute recess with refreshments provided free by the kitchens of Spice Magic Calcutta of Nishi-Kasai, Tokyo, thanks to proprietors Mr. and Mrs. J. Chandrani.

At 4:30 the audience was summoned back into the auditorium for an extensive Cultural Programme. In order to save preparation delays between performances, the sound and stage crews made use of the entire stage area providing enough space and supplied enough microphones for 3 main collections of performances.

The first was rhythmical Vedic chanting from 4 young Indians centre-stage. This was followed by two original Japanese devotional songs—one by Mr. Matsukawa, head instructor of Yoga School Kailas of Yokohama, and the other by the Society's Shanti Izumida—sung a large Japanese choir. This group consisted of both Society members and a large contingent from Kailas, who gave a wonderful heart-felt performance. The stage was then cleared for a line-up of impressive Tagore songs and narrations from various ensembles, some of which were accented with traditional Indian dances performed by both Indian and Japanese artists.

As every year, each attendee was given a large envelope containing the Birth Anniversary 2012 Programme Guide, the Society's Bookstore catalogue, a brochure on Nippon Vedanta Kyokai and its activities, and questionnaire to provide impressions of this event and possible suggestions for the next event. This year two additional items were inserted; one a lyric sheet for Matsukawa's song in both English and Japanese, and the other, a 147-page soft-cover booklet in Japanese titled, 'Swami Vivekananda and Japan', detailing many little known facts about Vivekananda's visit to and subsequent contacts with Japan. •



**(Part 1 of 2)**  
**“Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore and Japan”**  
A talk by Swami Medhasananda

Honourable Sri Sanjay Panda, Deputy Chief of the Mission, Indian Embassy Tokyo, and Dear Friends,

Our Society, a branch of the Ramakrishna Mission of India, has been organising the public celebration of Swami Vivekananda's Birth Anniversary in Tokyo since 1995. With the help of an organising committee, we invite guest speakers from different fields to speak on a selected theme. This year's theme is 'Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore and Japan'. This year the organising committee decided on this topic because this is momentous year; firstly being the 60th year of diplomatic relations between Japan and India, secondly, yearlong celebrations of Tagore's 150th birth anniversary have just concluded, and finally, yearlong celebrations of Swami Vivekananda's 150th birth anniversary are set to commence next year. And as both of these personalities had also visited Japan, became connected to it and, thus, pioneered the Japan-India relationship in the Modern Age, the present topic was decided upon.

I present my thoughts to you without any expectation that you have to agree with my views, but I shall be happy indeed if this talk gives you some food for thought. I shall restrict my talk to examining the impact of Vivekananda and Rabindranath on Japan and Japan's impact on them, especially in view of their visits to Japan, as we see it today.

### **Vivekananda's Impact on Japan**

When regarding Vivekananda's impact on Japan we have to remember that Tagore's scope of appeal was greater than Vivekananda's, because Tagore's identity as a poet, and his cultural and artistic appeal, was more acceptable to common society than Swamiji's identity with religion. Secondly, Tagore was already a celebrity when he visited Japan in 1916, as he was already the first Asian recipient of a Nobel Prize in Literature. Vivekananda, on the other hand, was virtually unknown when he arrived in Japan in 1893, even though he would become a news item celebrity within a few months delivering his famous speech to the Parliament of Religions in September of the same year. This news was even published in a Japanese newspaper, a copy of which I had the opportunity to view. There were definitely invitations for Vivekananda to revisit Ja-

pan and speak, but whether in better health he would have done so, or even how he would have been received by his Japanese hosts and the general public, are matters of conjecture.

We can presume that during his visit as an unknown monk, Swamiji impressed those few who came in contact with him. This assumption is substantiated by a comment from Jamshedji Tata, the famous Indian Industrialist who had been living in Japan and departed Yokohama with co-passenger, Swamiji, on the long voyage to Vancouver. Tata later divulged to Sister Nivedita that he learned that the Japanese who had met Swamiji compared him with Lord Buddha, whom they worship.

However, Swamiji's greater impact on Japan began with the Japanese translation of the excellent biography on Vivekananda by French novelist and Nobel laureate, Romain Rolland in 1931. Much later, lecture tours of monks from the Ramakrishna Order in 1958 and 1964 on the occasion of the centenary of Swami Vivekananda created some awareness and interest in Swamiji, but in a rather limited circle. Even this led to two Vedanta Society groups coming together, one in the Osaka area and the other in Tokyo. The impact of Vivekananda had its real start as both of these groups began the publication of books on Swamiji. Later on the Vedanta Society of Tokyo became officially affiliated with the Ramakrishna Order in 1984 and began functioning as a full-fledged organisation under the leadership of a monk of the Order, thus fulfilling Swamiji's last wish of doing something for Japan. The Society has so far published 32 volumes of Ramakrishna / Vivekananda literature, seven of which are on or by Vivekananda, some of which are in constant demand and not only sold by the Society at its bookstore or via its homepage, but by the likes of renown national booksellers Marugen and Kinokuniya. There still remains, however, many volumes on Swamiji awaiting translation into Japanese.

At the annual celebration of the Swami's birth anniversary at the Society's Centre in Zushi and a public celebration, like the present one, in Tokyo since 1995, there are expansive talks on Vivekananda and allied topics by the resident swami for the Society in universities and

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## **Vivekananda, Tagore, Japan** (from page 3)

Japan's many different islands. Exhibitions on Swamiji have been organised and presented at various locations including the huge, annual Namaste India Festival in Yoyogi Park, Tokyo, the beautifully modern Indian Embassy gallery space, and a large public centre in Osaka. Also inspiring messages from great men such as Vivekananda are regularly dispatched through mailed magazines by our Society.

Moreover, the Yoga Therapy Association of Japan, which has a very big following, has incorporated Vivekananda's Yoga series of four books as part of their Yoga studies.

All these factors have been contributing to a growing familiarity with Vivekananda and its consequent impact. There are now several thousand people across all sectors of Japanese society who at least know something of Vivekananda, even if this knowledge varies widely. How much this knowledge has impacted them then becomes an important question.

Although Swamiji's Indian specific messages may not be that relevant for the Japanese people, his messages on spirituality, life building, harmony and universalism are found useful and very appropriate the world over. We know from our encounters with many Japanese who have read Swamiji and frankly say how greatly they admire and are inspired by him. You may recall the wonderful speech by Ms. Rie Ueno delivered here last year, wherein she narrated how Swamiji became the friend, philosopher and guide in her career as both housewife and small company director. This is not a solitary example.

Behind Swamiji's slow and steadily growing impact, in spite of the fact that people are generally losing interest in religion, there are two factors: One being the tremendous force and appeal of his message. Secondly, the presence of an organisation which is committed to and focused on propagating this message.

### **Japan's Impact on Swamiji**

He was very impressed with many of the qualities of the Japanese character. What impressed him most about this country was how unlike India, an Asian country subjected by British Imperialists, Japan had awakened from its age-old slumber and gave up policies of seclusion, modernised, and was pulsating

with new life and confidence as a nation. These were the conditions Swamiji wanted to create for India. Swamiji was also impressed by the fact that in striving to modernise the country, though imitating the West and introducing many of its ideas and institutions, Japan did not totally forsake its traditional practices and retained many of them. This was, again, an ideal he felt India should emulate.

This is why after returning from this first visit to the West, while discussing issues of the regeneration of India, both privately and in interviews covered by the press, he would often give examples not of the USA or any European country, but of Japan, another Asian country, which he felt should be considered as a model for Indian regeneration. He would often advise young Indians to visit Japan and China, but especially Japan, and learn how it has transformed itself into a great nation.

Though Swamiji was a keen observer and had a profound sense of history, his stay in Japan was exceptionally short and mostly devoted to sightseeing and he could not study all aspects of modernisation depth and their impact on the country, since much had not yet become evident at that time.

For example, how the hasty and abrupt process of following Western models of modernisation impaired the spiritual life of the people by a weakening Buddhism, causing conflict between Shinto and Buddhist establishments, which lived together for hundreds of years, and using Shintoism not for any moral and spiritual welfare of the people, but for strengthening the hand of state machinery in the political field. In this process, the country which originally desired to transform from a medieval, isolated nation, into a strong modern, anti-colonial power to resist the onslaught of Western Imperialism in Asia, soon pursued policies of aggression with its neighbours, to itself become a colonial power. This is indeed one of the great ironies of modern history.

Some of the aforementioned developments were becoming evident within the few years between Swamiji's visit in 1897 and Tagore's first visit in 1916, as noted earlier.

### **Impact of Tagore on Japan**

We know that even before his visit to Japan he was a well known figure as the first Asian to be awarded a Nobel Prize. This actually gave Japan a sense of pride as well as an Asian

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## **Vivekananda, Tagore, Japan** (from page 4)

nation hoping to focus and strengthen its identity as an Asiatic country juxtaposed to the prideful identities of Western nations. At least seven books on Tagore's life and works were published before the advent of his visit. These publications, which reveal the interest in Tagore among intellectuals, also created an awareness of him among common people.

Hence, his arrival in Japan was warmly received and he was given a hearty welcome as distinguished poet and Nobel laureate by people from all walks of life. Thus he could make many acquaintances, some of whom would become both great friends and admirers, like influential poet, Yonejirō Noguchi. But Tagore as a humanist and anti-imperialist became critical, not of the Japanese people, but of Japan's Imperialist policies in a speech entitled, 'The Message of India to Japan', at the University of Tokyo and another titled 'The Spirit of Japan', at Keio University. The Japanese Government and its adherents among the people were quite displeased. As a result, the so-called 'Tagore fever' or 'boom' of enthusiasm as it was sometimes referred to that had actually begun early in 1915 at the prospect of a visit, quickly cooled. So much so, that once instant admirers, like Noguchi, became either increasing indifferent or began to publicly criticise him.

This certainly prevented Tagore from having a greater, positive impact on Japan. This sentiment prevailed during Rabindranath's second visit as well, although he was a personal guest of some and invited by others to give talks. During these subsequent visits Tagore's impact was more personal than universal.

This changed dramatically when the militarist policies of the former government that led to the devastation of the country in World War II were given up and the new government declared itself pacific. Thus a new milieu was created in which ideas and people were viewed from a different, more positive, liberal angle. It was in this backdrop that the Tagore's centenary celebration took place and ushered in a new assessment of Tagore's views on Humanism, freedom and peace. Many programmes with the enthusiastic participation of a cross-section of society were organised. A chief feature of these celebrations were the many translated volumes of Tagore's works into Japanese, which initially were only from English translations. Later translations from both English and Bengali, and finally, Bengali

only, volumes creating a greater scope of appreciating Tagore's impact on the people.

The velocity of that impact can now be studied from two aspects. Firstly, we can see the impact the style and content of Tagore's writing had on other writers, and secondly, we can see the impact his message had on the people.

As regards the first, Japanese scholars are mostly of the opinion that Tagore's impact on Japanese writings is of no significance. However, there is a different opinion according to which Yasunari Kawabata, Japan's first Nobel Laureate in Literature, who was deeply impressed by the sage-like appearance of Tagore, having seen him during his middle school days, and made considerable use of Tagore's ideas in his own works.

Now just what the impact of Tagore's work on Japanese readers and their lives was is difficult to assess unless it has been properly surveyed and documented. There is, however, one prominent case is that of Saburo Mashino who was the first translator of Tagore's works into Japanese as early as 1913. This was a re-translation or second-generation translation from an English translation of Tagore's Gitanjali. Mashino himself later confided that the very day he came to learn he had contacted tuberculosis, an incurable disease in that day, was when he first became acquainted with Tagore's works. And it was Tagore's work, perhaps the poems of Gitanjali, that sustained him during his protracted illness and helped him to forget about his terminal disease. Tagore's work also induced him to study Indian Philosophy.

Though we may not know specifically, I am sure in addition to having the joy of reading Tagore's works, there were many who drew courage, faith and inspiration from his works that sustained them in their days of trouble and suffering. A similar impact is observed, though to a more limited scale, with Tagore songs being appreciated by Japanese for their lyrics and melodies. The general awareness of Tagore again died down gradually after his birth centenary celebrations only to again revive somewhat last year with celebration of his 150<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary. The response to this recent celebration, however, was greeted with much less enthusiasm than witnessed during centenary observances.

## **Impact of Japan on Tagore**

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## **Vivekananda, Tagore, Japan** (from page 5)

Just like Vivekananda, Tagore was very much impressed by some of the qualities of the Japanese character and wanted them to be imbibed by Indians. And in spite of language constraints, Tagore, himself an accomplished poet, deeply appreciated the Japanese short-verse compositions known as 'haiku' for their simplicity, depth, imagery and economy of words. He himself translated some of the more famous haiku into Bengali. For Example, Matsuo Bashō's famous haiku, 'Furuike/ Kawazu/Tobikomu/Mizu Oto' that is: 'Old pond / Frog jumps / Water's sound'. In Tagore's Bengali rendering becomes: 'Purono pukur / Banger laph / Jaler shavda' This short haiku composition inspired Tagore to write a few short-verse poems in Bengali.

Tagore was especially drawn by the beauty of Japanese painting which was distinct from both Western and Indian painting and he came in touch with some celebrated Japanese artists, namely, Taikan Yokoyama, a close associate of Okakura Tenshin, and Kampo Arai. He even arranged for Arai's stay at his Calcutta residence to teach Japanese painting to Indian artists and to study Indian painting himself. Thus the cultural exchange between India and Japan initiated by Tagore culminated in the foundation of 'Nippon Bhavan', a centre of Japanese language, literature and culture in Tagore's Visva-Bharati University. There is a sizeable number of Japanese who have studied and now study language, literature, philosophy, art, music and dance at this and other Indian universities and institutes.

So far we have discussed the mutual impacts historically. Now the final part of our submission asks: Is there any scope or way of enhancing the above-mentioned impact that should be given serious consideration?

First of all, the question of furthering the impact of Japan on India which both Swamiji and Tagore envisioned should be discussed. Both of these men felt that Indians should imbibe some of the rare character traits of the Japanese, for example, their hard labour, discipline, humility, love of country, which in spite of about one hundred years of many ups and downs since the visits of Swamiji and Tagore, the people of Japan have for the most part retained, and this is still very relevant today for Indians.

Secondly, Swamiji felt that the material prosperity of India with Japan's help will be useful and he advised Indians to learn technology from Japan which is still relevant. Help is coming in economic and infrastructural development from Japan, and in sub-structure development too, the latest example being the steadily growing New Delhi Metro Railway, which is too well-known to discuss further here.

Thirdly, Tagore's vision to popularise some wonderful aspects of Japanese culture, like painting and flower arranging, has materialised to some extent, but there remains a greater scope to pursue this line. Awareness and study of Indian culture in Japan is far greater than the awareness of Japanese culture in India. This was revealed to us in our research in organising an exhibit on the Japan-India Relationship in 2009. We observed that while books on Indian cooking, our traditional system of treatment, Ayurveda, yoga exercise, Indian classical dance, like Bharatanatyam, are plentiful, books on Japanese cultural pursuits like tea ceremony, ikebana or origami, available in Indian languages are lamentably rare.

There are, however, some exceptions. Karate has become popular in India and some schools are teaching it. Moreover, I have learnt from the internet that there are some 300 haiku clubs in India which delight in contemporary haiku and it is considered an enjoyable pastime. Nevertheless, the Nippon Bhavan (Japan Centre) of Tagore's university in Bengal and the Rabindranath Okakura Bhavan in Kolkata and Japanese establishments can definitely do more in this field, as just recently some festivals introducing Japanese culture were organised by the Japan Foundation in a few important cities in India.

*End Part 1 - We conclude with Part 2 'Promoting and Implementing Vivekananda's and Tagore's Messages' in the July Issue of The Vedanta Kyokai*

### **• Thought of the Month •**

"I put all my genius into my life;  
I put only my talent into my works."

Oscar Wilde







### • Story to Remember •

#### Mere Words

Mark Twain put it very nicely when he said, "It was so cold that if the thermometer had been an inch longer, we would have frozen to death". We do freeze to death on words. It's not the cold outside that matters, but the thermometer. It's not reality that matters, but what you're saying to yourself about it. I was told a lovely story about a farmer in Finland. When they were drawing up the Russian-Finnish border, the farmer had to decide whether he wanted to be in Russia or Finland. After a long time he said he wanted to be in Finland, but he didn't want to offend the Russian officials.. These came to him and wanted to know why he wanted to be in Finland. The farmer replied, "It has always been my desire to live in Mother Russia, but at my age I wouldn't be able to survive another Russian winter".

Russia and Finland are only words, concepts, but not for human beings, not for crazy human beings. We're almost never looking at reality. A guru was once attempting to explain to a crowd how human beings react to words, feed on words, live on words, rather than on reality. One of the men stood up and protested; he said, "I don't agree that words have all that much effect on us". The guru said, "Sit down, you son of a bitch". The man went livid with rage and said, "You call yourself an enlightened person, a guru, a master, but you ought to be ashamed of yourself". The guru then said, "Pardon me, sir, I was carried away. I really beg your pardon; that was a lapse; I'm sorry". The man finally calmed down. Then the guru said, "It took just a few words to get a whole tempest going within you; and it took just a few words to calm you down, didn't it"? Words, words, words, words, how imprisoning they are if they're not used properly.

Anthony de Mello

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