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日本ヴェダント協会ニュースレター

The Vedanta Kyokai Newsletter

NEWS, UPDATES AND MISCELLANY FROM THE VEDANTA SOCIETY OF JAPAN

August Calendar



Birthday

Swami Niranjanananda

Thursday
02 Aug 2012

Krishna Janmashtami

Thursday
09 August 2012

Swami Advaitananda

Thursday
16 Aug 2012

Kyokai Events

• Yoga-Asana •

Saturdays
July 4, 11, 18, 25, from 11am
Contact the Zushi Center

• August Zushi Retreat •

Sri Krishna Birth Celebration
Sunday August 19 / 11:00
Swami Medhasananda Talk

"Sri Krishna's Teachings on Surrender"

All are welcome to attend!



✧ Thus Spake ✧

"One who makes a habit of prayer will easily overcome all difficulties."

... Sri Sarada Devi

"A noble thought is a prayer. An earnest desire is a prayer. A pious longing is a prayer. The sincere sighing of a penitent heart is a prayer."

... Zarathushtra

Part 2 of 2

(Part 1 featured in June Issue)

"Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore, and Japan"

Theme Talk by Swami Medhasananda
Swami Vivekananda Public Birth Anniversary Celebration
Indian Embassy, Tokyo, May 27, 2012

Promoting and Implementing Vivekananda and Tagore's Messages

Now, is there any further scope of studying, promoting and implementing the profound messages on various subjects which Swami Vivekananda and Tagore spoke of for the benefit of the people of this country? Let us discuss this briefly and then we shall conclude.

These are broadly related in six areas, namely, 1) spirituality, 2) regeneration of Buddhism, 3) harmony, 4) work, 5) motivational, and finally, 6) each side of the India-Japan Relationship.

(1) Spirituality

To discuss this we must explore the present Japanese scenario. It seems from the study of the history of Modern Japan that in utilising a 'Shikata System' and acting as a group, the nation could accomplish miracles, if there was a goal that the people were convinced was im-

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Vivekananda and Tagore (from page 1)

portant and that captured their imagination. Thus, the first goal was modernisation; the next goal in the 1930s was to become a military superpower; then the goal of becoming an economic superpower supplanted defeat in the 2nd World War, and this worked quite well for some decades. But since the 1980s with an economic downturn and little hope of regaining its former heights, there seems no goal before the nation to inspire the people to collectively strive and attain. Thus, Japan as a nation is now at a crossroads.

Not only that; various problems have plagued the nation on different fronts roughly as follows:

- On the Political front - There is no stability in the government; especially in its leadership, and this prevents Japan from solving its chronic problems or cherishing and materializing a vision with bold and major steps.
- On the Social front - Cases of broken homes are increasing, with instances of psychological problems and suicides rising at alarming rates.
- On the Economic front - Unemployment and entrenchment are on the increase and GDP is steadily decreasing.
- On the Religious front - People's faith in God and religion have eroded substantially. Buddhist establishments are failing to give spiritual guidance to the people and are strife ridden.
- On the Cultural front - Traditional culture is losing its charm and fascination and being overwhelmed by the cheaper elements of Western culture.
- On the Law and Order front - All types of crime are on the increase, including juvenile delinquency.

In addition to all these problems there is the constant threat of natural disasters and environmental hazards created by the recently damaged nuclear power plants in eastern Japan.

While some of these problems originated with the process of modernisation, others took hold with the end of the 2nd World War, and some in more recent years.

It should be admitted, however, that even in the present grim scenario, that especially with regard to law and order and social ethics, Japan is in far better condition than many other countries of the world. But being complacent about it is not desirable and the country should work to resolve problematic issues before they become more insurmountable and in doing so become a model nation.

Now what is role of spirituality as highlighted by Tagore and Swamiji in solving some of the aforementioned problems? In discussing this we should consider two points:

Firstly, what is Japan's greatest asset?
Secondly, what is Japan's greatest lacuna?

To me the greatest asset the country has is its people. Except for a very few traits, for example a disregard for individualism and an insular mentality, both of which, however, are slowly fading away, most of the character traits of the people are wonderful and can take the nation to any heights it may want. There are qualities which may be identified and even appreciated by the casual visitor. Examples of these are their devotion to work, sincerity of purpose, restraint and humility of behaviour, forbearance and patience, unity, consideration for public morality, love of country, sense of aesthetics, cleanliness habits and pragmatism. Some of these qualities, also observed by both Swamiji and Tagore, became evident during the onslaught of last year's the earthquake and consequent tsunami in Northeast Japan. As media coverage broadcast images of the tsunami damage, people the world over were impressed with the patience and discipline of the victims.

Now what is the greatest lacuna? Again, it is the people, who in spite of wonderful character traits suffer from an identity crisis - not at the physical level, but at a psychological level. This identity crisis has three aspects, namely, a lack of anchor, a lack of direction and a lack of the cognisance of the eternal. Thus, the people in general are as if floating upon the current of life and focusing only on the fleeting things of the world, without anchor, any proper direction or higher goal to reach. In the absence of an anchor in life, which is fraught with troubles, where one can feel safe, one feels utterly helpless and become unnerved during times of trouble. With no cognisance of the eternal and focusing only on the fleeting and temporary one becomes tremendously restless, fearful and up

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Vivekananda and Tagore (from page 2)

set by any kind of loss or separation. Finally, in the absence of any direction, people become confused and lose self-confidence. This situation is not an imaginary one, but very much revealed by various surveys.

According to Vivekananda the ideal goal of human life is to become aware of and take care of all aspects of individual lives; that is, body, mind, intelligence and spirit and thereby enjoy a state of steady joy and wisdom. Taking care of one's spirit is cognisance of the eternal. And once there is cognisance of the eternal, this will act as the anchor of life. This cognisance of the eternal is the crux of spirituality according to both Tagore and Vivekananda. Without this life is always vulnerable to suffering or the feeling of helplessness in spite of hundreds of other achievements. On the other hand, cognisance of the eternal makes life fulfilled, joyful and peaceful, and full of wisdom even without much of what most consider worldly achievements.

Is it then necessary to follow a religion or visit a temple or church, or become a member of a religious organisation, in order to cognise this eternal? In other words, is it impossible for one to become spiritual without being 'religious'?

In reply Vivekananda would say, "Not at all! You can very well cognise that eternal and thereby become spiritual without being religious, or without visiting any temple, or being a member of any religious group or even by believing in any personal God. Just find out what your real "I" is, or in other words, explore the eternal which is inside you in the form of pure consciousness. If you can do that and connect yourself to that Pure Consciousness which is the perennial storehouse of power, joy and wisdom, that which is already in you, either by selfless work, or by meditation, or by focusing on Reality, or devotion, or by any combination of these. Thus, you also find your much needed anchor in life and become self-confident and great.

However, if it is too difficult for you, then you have to receive that support from the Pure Consciousness at the macro level which pervades the universe, whom the devotees call God; or seek support from the prophets like Buddha, or Jesus, or Ramakrishna, who have established contact with Pure Consciousness, that is, the Eternal.

There have been many studies, both by Japanese and foreign scholars, to ascertain if the Japanese are a religious people or not and they arrive at different conclusions. But to me the more important question is whether they are spiritual or not, because spirituality, as explained before, is more vital for their lives, as it is for the peoples of other countries, than is becoming so called 'religious.' I believe this would be the advice of both Swamiji and Tagore as well.



(2) Regeneration of Buddhism

Mr. Hideki Kato, President of the Tokyo Foundation, deeply concerned about the present condition of Buddhism in Japan, suggested in his speech at a conference on Dialogue among Civilisations between Japan and the Islamic World in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

in 2008, that as far as Buddhism in Japan is concerned, he believes it needs to quickly catch up with modern civilisation - if it is to remain viable to contemporary society. In fact, how the former spiritual atmospheres of Japan's Buddhist temples and how interest in visiting them in greater numbers for getting mental peace and deriving spiritual benefit can be revived, needs to be addressed by Buddhist religious leaders. How the image of Buddhist priests can be improved in the public's eyes; and more than providing mere funeral rites, but how priests can re-engage in giving much needed spiritual guidance with the teachings of Lord Buddha in ways acceptable to modern man, yet without diluting his teachings.

In this regard, I feel the study of Vivekananda and his mentor, Ramakrishna, would definitely

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Vivekananda and Tagore (from page 3)

be helpful, as both, being born in the present age, were aware of its milieu, its problems and its requirements, and presented age-old spiritual truths in a way proven both acceptable to modern man and highly effective to many seekers. The value of their teachings and their presentations in the backdrop of the modern age in characteristic way have been found beneficial not only by Hindus, but also by non-Hindu devotees and priests and appreciated by scholars of religious studies like Professor Clooney of Harvard University's School of Divinity.

Some of the characteristics of Ramakrishna / Vivekananda teachings and methods of presentation are, for example, the innovative concept of sect without sectarianism, universality, liberalism, rationality, lucidity, yet deep and relative to the day to day life of a modern man. Moreover, Vivekananda connected, explained and interpreted his teachings, whenever possible, in the light of the latest concepts in science, social science and philosophy, which modern men could appreciate and feel more convincing. This same approach to presenting religion can be followed by Buddhist religious leaders of Japan.

(3) Harmony

Messages of harmony and universality are two of the most important and eloquently advanced aspects of the work of Tagore and Swamiji. For example, motto of the Institution founded by Tagore is 'Yatra Viswa Bhavati Ekanidam', meaning a place where the whole world meets.

Vivekananda, being inspired by his master, Sri Ramakrishna, who is regarded as the prophet of harmony in the Modern Age and originator of the quotable quote, 'As many faiths, so many paths', preached the message of harmony both in India and in the West. His historic speech on harmony at the first Parliament of Religions in Chicago is so relevant today that even many decades after it was delivered, world leaders like Japan's former Prime Minister Abe, and current U. S. President Obama have quoted from it in their speeches.

The concept of harmony cannot be restricted to a religious level, but extends to family, society and inter-country dealings as well. However, in the case of religious harmony, the crying need of the day, there is the prerequisite

study of other religions and acceptance of other faiths - not cults - also as genuine paths of spiritual illumination and even drawing inspiration from scriptures and prophets of other faiths. On both of these fronts there is a long way to go in Japan, as we can see the want of good will between the many various sects of Buddhism. There is also a lack of basic knowledge of other religious faiths, even Hinduism from which Buddhism emerged.

In cultivating this idea of harmony at the religious level, the founding of an interfaith forum would play a great role. Such forums are common in many countries, especially the U.S.A., South Africa and Australia, providing a platform where leaders of different religions can meet regularly, become more familiar with other faiths through study and deliberation and even discuss common problems. Such meetings send the message of good will to their respective followers which also substantially helps in establishing religious harmony. Though in my limited capacity I have tried and been unsuccessful so far in creating such an interfaith forum here, I fervently hope and pray that one will materialise in Japan in the near future.

(4) Work

The dedication of the Japanese to work and their striving for perfection is proverbial, making matchless products and capturing world markets. However, the closer observation of a people focused on work reveals that tremendous stress and strain due to relentless work pressures tells upon their physical and mental health, as well as personal relationships.

Hence everyone wants to know how, while performing all these duties, we not just give up, how we can become free from stress and enjoy good health and mental peace, and if so inclined, even become spiritual. In this Swami Vivekananda's 'Karma Yoga', the new gospel of work, can be of substantial help. Thus, this book is widely read even in Japan and people get new insights on the goals and methods of work from this wonderful book.

It has been reported that Bill Gates, the famous Microsoft co-founder, during his visit to Kolkata in recent years divulged before the media that he had read Swami Vivekananda's books and had been deeply impressed by them. He then became interested in the Calcutta of which the great Swami belonged. This reveals how one who is deeply engaged in

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Vivekananda and Tagore (from page 4)

worldwide business and hyper-active lifestyle gets light from Vivekananda's book to lead a meaningful and value-based life, as evidenced by instituting the charitable Bill Gates Foundation.

(5) Motivational

In a recent US survey, student graduates and new company employees were asked if they had received any education or training at home or at school on how to face the vicissitudes or crises of life encountered as failures, frustration, separation, loss, disease or death. Most of these young people replied that they had either received absolutely no such training or very little of such training.

This is also true in Japan. We feel disturbed when young boys and girls, or even adults, suffer so tremendously and feel utterly helpless in the face of serious troubles, especially when there is no faith in God or prophets and they run here and there for support, mostly unsuccessfully, and finally think of ending their lives. Should parents and the leaders of society helplessly watch this condition and not think of equipping the young to boldly face life's adversities by providing them positive ideas and inspiring messages beforehand?

I am aware that there are quite a few books of 'inspiration' in Japanese, but I do not know the extent to which these books are utilised. However, in addition to those messages, memorising and following some of the inspirational messages of Tagore, and especially, Vivekananda would really be helpful. Vivekananda's messages are like elixirs to the soul and energy tonics to the negative and weak mind. We may recall here that one of the chief reasons that prompted the Indian Government to proclaim Swamiji's birthday as 'Youth Day' in Indian is that the government felt Swamiji's message has the tremendous power to inspire all, especially the young, to lead an ideal life. Here we provide a few of Swamiji's quotes to give you a better idea of them:

- "All power is within you; manifest it!"
- "Strength is life, weakness is death."
- "The remedy for weakness is not brooding over weakness, but thinking of strength."
- "Unselfishness is God."

(6) India-Japan Relationship

In recent years we have also seen the India-Japan Relationship grow especially in economic sectors, with India's opening of markets to foreign countries and with the rise of India's IT industry. Other technological transfers and production has further boosted this relationship. Today this relationship, either at the diplomatic level or economic level, can be sustained by the cultural relationship in spite of occasional set-backs, such seen in the diplomatic relationship in recent years when India first tested a nuclear weapon in 1974. To appreciate Indian culture and understand it more deeply one has to have some knowledge of India's spiritual traditions, which is the substratum, the very foundation, of its culture. And it is in understanding this culture that both Tagore and Vivekananda can be of substantial help.



If I may be so bold, in closing may I provide some tips to those business executives and bureaucrats who need to build continuing relationships with their Indian counterparts to fulfill their missions. That advice would be to read some about Indian religion and philosophy and of India's great countrymen, especially Gandhiji, Vivekananda and Tagore, and mention them in chats with your Indian counterparts. You will marvel at the effect yourselves. This is because Indians in general, with few exceptions, including top executives, love to talk about religion and philosophy, and especially about their great countrymen.

Conclusion

After some discussion on the utility of a study on Vivekananda and Tagore to address some of the serious problems facing this country,

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we conclude that it would be the height of folly to discard Vivekananda because he is a man of religion and therefore irrelevant, or to reject Tagore because he is a mystic poet and therefore difficult to understand. Both of these men had profound messages both for individuals and for nations. This is not only true with respect to Indians, but for people of other countries as well, including Japan. A concrete example substantiating this is America's famous Smithsonian Institute which organised an exhibit highlighting thirty-one non-Americans who had greatly contributed to the culture and growth of America, and Swami Vivekananda was among them.

Another special character trait of the Japanese is that if they realise that a certain idea is good and beneficial, no matter where it comes from, they will no longer simply discuss or dream about it, they will adopt and adapt it. Now when once convinced that Tagore's and Swamiji's ideas will be greatly beneficial for the Japanese individual and nation, the next thought will be in implementation which requires greater awareness of them.

Regarding this I have the following definite suggestions to offer:

- Firstly, in addition to holding regular programmes of speeches, cultural items, etc., there should also be joint or separate exhibits on Tagore and Vivekananda across Japan, especially at educational institutions, to create greater awareness of them. I am not aware of any full-fledged exhibition on Tagore, except for some art work shows, but our Vedanta Society organised a modest exhibit on Swamiji that was well-received in a few locations as mentioned earlier.

- Secondly, manga-type books are a very common and popular way of imparting knowledge and ideas in Japan, and there are already several on Gandhiji. A manga series on Tagore and Vivekananda should be published, too.

- Thirdly, there should be a mid-sized book

with a brief account of India's and culture, also featuring biographies and selected messages of the three great Indians, Swamiji, Tagore and Gandhiji, the spiritual voice, the cultural voice, and the political voice of India respectively in the Modern Age. Further, these books should be made available in public libraries and educational institution libraries. An even better proposition would be if any of these books or portions thereof could be included in school syllabi facilitating some knowledge of Indian culture that can also nourish students in other ways already mentioned.

The Japan Foundation, Japan Cultural and Educational Ministry, and the Indian Embassy may jointly work in regard publishing these works. Even at the risk of calling this proposal ambitious, if not unrealistic by some, I am confident that introducing such books to students, and the public in general, will not only go a long way in further strengthening the Japan-India Relationship, but contribute to filling-in the serious lacuna Japan has, about which we have already discussed.

Likewise, by imbibing some laudable Japanese character traits, Indians, on the other hand, will fare better in their commitment to duty, discipline, unity, social ethics, etc. Thus, we, the people of two countries, by cooperation with each other in all sectors, can fulfill the cherished dreams of Swamiji, Tagore

and Okakura Tenshin in creating a better bond between our two countries, and that would be a most fitting tribute to the hallowed memories of these three great men, the three great pioneers of the Japan-India Relationship.

I thank you so much for your kind and patient attention to this rather long talk. •



• Thought of the Month •

“Preach the Gospel at all times and when necessary use words.”

... St. Francis of Assisi

News Briefs - June 2012

- The Bhagavad Gita lecture series continues at the Indian Embassy on the 1st Saturday of each month starting at 2pm. On June 2, Swami Medhasananda discussed Chapter 2 wherein Sri Krishna explains the Atman employing very simple logic. About 30 people attended the session.

- Later on June 2, Swami Medhasananda visited the Tokyo Yoga Centre in Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo. There he gave a talk on Karma and the results of Karma. About 25 people attended with the Centre's Secretariat, Ms. Chiaki Hanari, declaring in an email sent later, "We were all happy to spend such quality time together on that day."

- Swami Medhasananda visited Mitaka City in Tokyo on June 16. Some 15 people attended the talk, "What is God?" held in the city's Sarasya Hall.

- The June Zushi Retreat celebrated Gautama Buddha's birth on Sunday, June 17, in the new Annexe building. For the occasion Mr. Eiichi Shinohara, a Priest of the Sotoshu sect's Chojuin Buddhist Temple in Narita City, Chiba Prefecture was invited to give a talk on the theme "Practicing Lord Buddha's Teachings of Service." He also serves as chairman and councilor of the suicide prevention NPO, 'Network Kaze,' a 24-hr telephone counseling service. He also spoke on his experiences with this NPO in practicing Buddha's teachings of service with great enthusiasm.

In the afternoon, Society Secretary Kenichi Mitamura gave a slide presentation of his recent pilgrimage to India. Mitamura was among a party of eight devotees from the Society who visited India in April this year, staying at Mission Headquarters in Belur Math near Kolkata and the Ramakrishna Mission Centre in Benares. A number of beautiful pictures taken during the trip were shown with along with captions. The forty attendees wore constant smiles and erupted into bursts of laughter at the running commentary from fellow travelers.

- On June 22 six Society members took part in the ongoing Narayana Service to the

Homeless activities at Kotobuki-cho Park in Yokohama. Fortunately, the rain stopped briefly on this wet morning and food preparation and distribution could continue unhampered, nor were umbrellas required while queuing or eating. About 700 meals were provided. We also delivered to Sanagino House the approximately 750 safety razors that had been collected at the Society's Zushi Centre.

Some members noted that through the activity they became acquainted with the homeless, some of whom look forward to seeing them again. It is a great opportunity to meet, support, and serve those less fortunate. One member remarked, "I think communication with these folks is providing a service that is as important as the provision of goods."

- On June 22 Swami Medhasananda was on the island of Kyushu for a 3-day-2-night visit. On Saturday the 23rd swami conducted a guided meditation from 8am and talked on the theme, 'A Positive Life' for the Fukuoka City leg of the visit. This Satsanga was sponsored by yoga instructor, Mr. Sari Miyagi, and about 25 people participated.

- On the morning of June 24 Swami was in Iizuka City in Fukuoka Prefecture and talked on "The Secret to Longevity in Good Health" and in the afternoon he talked on the theme, "Inner Peace." This Iizuka Satsanga was sponsored by yoga instructor, Mr. Kobayashi, and Mr. Ide, and attended by 25 people.

Mr. Ide commented that he grinned as his ears burned at the swami's words asking, "Why can't you devote twenty minutes a day to meditation?" He also said although he understood people should not worry about the past or future, but live in the present moment, but this was, however, difficult to practise. Hearing Maharaj's talk he reaffirmed he had to try to live in the now. The audience were collectively relieved at Maharaj's comment that 90% of the things we spend time worrying about never even occur.

- On June 30 Swami Medhasananda gave a talk on "Inner Peace" at the Shivananda Yoga Centre of Tokyo in Sugunami-ku. About 80 people attended.

• A Story to Remember •

The Tale of the Tail

There is a story about a princess who had a small eye problem that she felt was really bad. Being the king's daughter, she was rather spoiled and kept crying all the time. When the doctors wanted to apply medicine, she would invariably refuse any medical treatment and kept touching the sore spot on her eye. In this way it became worse and worse, until finally the king proclaimed a large reward for whoever could cure his daughter. After some time, a man arrived who claimed to be a famous physician, but actually was not even a doctor.

He declared that he could definitely cure the princess and was admitted to her chamber. After he had examined her, he exclaimed, "Oh, I'm so sorry!" "What is it?" the princess inquired. The faux-doctor said, "There is nothing much wrong with your eye, but there is something else that is really serious." The princess was alarmed and asked, "What on earth is so serious?" He hesitated and said, "It is really bad. I shouldn't tell you about it." No matter how much she insisted, he refused to tell her, saying that he could not speak of it without the king's permission.

When the king arrived, the doctor was still reluctant to reveal his findings. Finally the king commanded, "Tell us what is wrong. Whatever it is, you have to tell us!"

At last the doctor said, "Well, the eye will get better within a few days - that is no problem. The big problem is that the princess will grow a tail, which will become at least nine fathoms long. It may start growing very soon. If she can detect the first moment it appears, I might be able to prevent it from growing."

At this news everyone was deeply concerned. And the princess, what did she do? She stayed in bed, day and night, directing all her attention to detecting when the tail might appear. Thus, after a few days, her eye got well.

This shows how we usually react. We focus on our little problem and it becomes the center around which everything else revolves. So far, we have done this repeatedly, life after life. We think, "My wishes, my interests, my likes and dislikes come first!" As long as we function on this basis, we will remain unchanged. Driven by impulses of desire and rejection, we will travel the roads of samsara without finding a way out. As long as attachment and aversion are our sources of living and drive us onward, we cannot rest.

From Daring Steps toward Fearlessness:
The Three Vehicles of Buddhism, by Ringu Tulku Rinpoche

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