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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

NOVEMBER Calendar



Birthdays / Pujas

Kali Puja

Tuesday 13 November

Swami Subodhananda

Sunday 25 November

Swami Vijnanananda

Tuesday 27 November

Kyokai Events

• NO Embassy Discourse • Talks will resume in Dec.

• Kali Puja •

Tuesday 13 November
19:00 Puja, Homa, Pushpanji
21:30 Prasad
All are welcome to attend!

• November Retreat •

Sunday 18 November
Lunch Prasad 1pm
All are welcome to attend!

• Akhanda Japam •

(Continuous Spiritual Practise)
05:00 ~ 20:00 23 November
Contact Kyokai to schedule
your hours of participation.



✧ Thus Spake ✧

"When one realizes God, He grants knowledge and illumination from within; one knows it oneself. In the fullness of one's spiritual realisation one will find that He who resides in one's heart, resides in the hearts of others as well - the oppressed, the persecuted, the untouchable, and the outcast. ."

... Sri Sarada Devi

"He who sees the Self in all beings and at the same time feels that he has enemies, surely desires to make fire cold."

... Sri Shankara

The Ramakrishna Mission of New Delhi held a "World Meet for Peace and Harmony" on September 11~12, 2012, as part of its series of events heralding the 150th birth anniversary of Swami Vivekananda. The Meet explored the basis for peace and harmony from several perspectives such as religion, science, arts, and even sports. His Holiness the Dalai Lama inaugurated the Meet and acclaimed speakers from Christianity, Sufism, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and Sikhism addressed audiences in eight special sessions over both days.

We present here the talk given by Swami Medhasananda of the Vedanta Society of Japan during Wednesday morning's Session 4 presenting Ramakrishna Mission monks from the USA, Switzerland, South Africa, Singapore and India addressing the "Contribution of the Ramakrishna Movement towards World Peace and Harmony," chaired by Srimat Swami Gautamanandaji Maharaj.

Swami Vivekananda and Japan

by Swami Medhasananda

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Vivekananda and Japan (from page 1)

Swami Vivekananda, whose 150th birth anniversary we have been celebrating, has a special association with Japan.

Japan was sanctified by the visit of Swamiji on his way to Chicago in 1893. Swamiji praised Japan, her people and their unique character traits in his letter of 10 July from Japan to Sri Alasinga of Bengal, and on many other occasions in private conversations as well. Swamiji had a firm belief that it would do good for Indians if they imbibed the positive qualities of the Japanese without abandoning their own national characteristics.

Some of you may know that Okakura Ten-shin, the famous exponent of traditional Japanese culture, had gone to India to invite Swamiji to re-visit Japan and deliver his soul stirring message. There were also invitations for Swamiji even from the highest Japanese authority, the celebrated Meiji Emperor Mutsuhito.

Though Swamiji was initially enthusiastic about a revisit to Japan, he finally declined mainly because of his failing health. It is also worth mentioning that Swamiji made a significant remark related to Japan on July 4, 1902, the last day of his mortal existence. The context of this comment is still unknown to us. Swamiji said, "I want to do something for Japan." In the least this shows that Japan occupied his thoughts even to the end of his life.

The Vedanta Society of Japan started in 1959 and 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. We would like to believe that, thus, Swamiji's last wish of doing something for Japan was materialised.

Over the years the Society has undertaken various activities, for example; publication of books and magazines in Japanese; regularly scheduled discourses at our Centre and across the different islands of Japan by the resident monk; creating a bi-lingual website. There was also a programme of a one-hour interview on 'Sri Ramakrishna and the Harmony of Religions' with Ph.D. Tsuyoshi Nara, a distinguished Japanese professor, that was telecast on the nation's public broadcast network, NHK. As a result of all this, thousands of Japanese have at least become acquainted with the names of Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. Some of them have also studied some of the literature and have thus been impacted by their message of peace, harmony, and spiritual wisdom.



Generally speaking, nowadays, the Japanese do not show much interest in religion even though many of them visit temples once in a while and perform religious rites on traditional occasions. They are liberal in the sense that they

perform rites and visit places of worship of both Shinto, their native religion, and Buddhism, which came from India via China and Korea. For example, marriages are held according to Shinto rites, while funerals are conducted according to Buddhist rites.

The Japanese have experienced both the bitter and sweet fruits of a modern, materialistic civilization over the past 100 years. Having realized its positive and negative sides, an increasing number of them, including the youth, are now searching for something spiritual to get mental peace and spiritual wisdom which many of them lack.

Never the less, this void could not be filled by present-day Japanese Buddhism due to historical and some other reasons, as today

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Vivekananda and Japan (from page 2)

the people of Japan have some negative image of Buddhism, and they refer to Buddhism as 'soshiki Bukkyo,' that is, 'a religion of funeral rites.'

Vedanta, the ancient philosophy of India proclaims, "Ekam sat vipraha, vahu," that is, "Truth is one; though sages call it by various names." Sri Ramakrishna expressed this truth as, "Yato mat, tato path", that is, "As many faiths, so many paths." This Vedanta as practised by Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda in modern times, is gradually being recognized as a modern, scientific, universal and harmonistic religion, as perfectly suited to the needs of the Japanese people as it is to any national of the modern world.

We also know from encounters with many Japanese who frankly say how they greatly admire and are inspired by Swami Vivekananda's message of strength, wisdom, and universalism. In one of our recent public celebrations on



Swamiji, one speaker, a Japanese lady, narrated vividly how Swamiji became the source of tremendous inspiration in her personal and professional life as both a housewife and a company director. And this is not a solitary example.

On August 22, 2007, before the Joint Session of the Indian Parliament during his visit to India, then Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, made the following respectful and appreciative references to Swamiji, as also did U.S. President Barack Obama during his recent visit to India. Quoting from Prime Minister Abe's speech:

"I would argue that among the many contributions that India can make to world history, there is first of all its spirit of tolerance. I

would like to quote part of the conclusion of the deeply meaningful remarks Swami Vivekananda delivered in Chicago in 1893. He said, 'help and not fight,' 'assimilation and not destruction,' harmony and peace and not dissension.'"

However, to quote or discuss a concept is one thing, and to practised it is something entirely different. As while practicing these concepts, we face various challenges which we must resolve. For example, the greatest challenge in practicing the harmony of religions is how to reconcile the two opposing ideas of identity and identification, both at the individual level and the organizational level. That is, how to maintain the identity of a distinct religious sect, and yet identify with other religious groups at the level of a religious organization, while at the same time

maintaining one's identity as an individual who is also able to identify with others of other groups on an Individual level.

Swamiji after a great deliberation found the solution to this problem at the religious organization level by inventing the

concept of 'sect without sectarianism'. This is a totally new concept, a new paradigm in the history of world religions. The idea of a sect without sectarianism if practised sincerely and properly, Swamiji reiterated, would allow a sect to take advantage of all the positive aspects of a sect and maintain its identity, yet could avoid sectarianism, which gives birth to self-centeredness, intolerance, and strife, causing disharmony and peacelessness.

The idea of sect without sectarianism encourages the members of a sect to study other faiths as well, and to draw inspiration from the scriptures and teachings of the saints of other faiths also. This will help not only to spiritually develop oneself further,

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but also to cherish goodwill toward the followers of other sects.

Let me narrate here my own experience which is interesting and also has some relevance to the present discussion:

In Japan and in some other foreign countries I sometimes encounter some people, who having seen my saffron colored robes become curious and ask, "Are you a Hare Krishna?" Actually they want to know if I am a follower of ISKCON, so I reply, "No, I am not Hare Krishna, I am Ramakrishna." They get confused as these two words, Ramakrishna and Hare Krishna, sound similar to them. So they ask, "What's the difference between Hare Krishna and Ramakrishna?" As you know, most people's curiosity is momentary and casual, so you cannot afford to give a long discourse on the topic, you have to be brief. So I say, "the difference between Hare Krishna and Ramakrishna is of 'only' and 'also'." They are then interested to know



what it is this 'only' and 'also'. Then I explain that the Hare Krishna group believes that Krishna is the 'only' great manifestation of God, but that we, the Ramakrishna-ites believe that Krishna is 'also' a great manifestation of God, as is Buddha and Jesus.

Friends, 'only' and 'also' are not only two different words. The difference in their connotations is huge. 'Only' and 'also' signify the two opposing concepts of exclusiveness and inclusiveness, as well as the consequences of their practice with regard to social and religious harmony. While exclusiveness in the form of sectarianism and chauvinism leads to disharmony and peacelessness, inclusiveness in the form of non-sectarianism and pluralism leads to harmony and peace. This point was also emphasised by the great poet and philosopher

• Thought of the Month •

There is, in fact, no teaching without learning. One requires the other.

... Paulo Freire

Rabindranath Tagore, who's 150th birth anniversary celebration has just been concluded.

However, practising harmony should start first at the individual level. As the Charter of the United Nations Organisation has rightly observed, "That since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed." Similarly, disharmony, fundamentalism and exclusiveness originate in the

human mind and when the mind becomes self-centered and thinks only of self-preservation by totally disregarding the welfare and well-being of others. So harmony and inclusiveness should be cultivated by individuals

by giving up self-centeredness and striving to identify with others as much as possible through the practice of compassion (karuna), friendliness (maitri), and service (seiva).

This is how we can realize the wonderful harmonistic concept of the Indian tradition, 'Vasudaiva kutubbakam' (Sanskrit) or 'Sare duniya ekhi parivar hai' (Hindi), 'the world is but one family.' Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi advised the same saying, 'Keu tomar par nay. Jagat tomār āpnār' meaning, 'My child, no one is a stranger. The whole world is your own.'

Now, can our struggle for harmony and peace at the individual level be harmonized? Yes, we can. That is with identification with

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others. Swami Vivekananda said the best way to get mental peace is to forget about oneself. The way to practise it is to identify with others, to think of others, to serve others, thus we can attain both harmony and mental peace at the individual level, which will finally lead to social harmony and peace.

Today the world has become so small and we have been brought into such close proximity to each other, that we have no choice but to become 'inclusive' if we really want peace and a congenial atmosphere for growth both at the micro level and the macro level.

Swamiji not only preached the ideal of harmony, he also provided the philosophical basis for harmony and its rationale, through his lectures on Jnana and Bhakti Yoga. Understanding them will strengthen our motivation for the movement of harmony and peace. This may be explained thus:



We find in the Upanishad the concept of 'Sarvam Khalvidam Brahma', that is, 'Everything of this universe is indeed Brahman, the Supreme Reality,' and in the Puranas the concept of 'Sarvam Vishnumayam jagat', that is, 'The whole universe is pervaded by the Lord Vishnu, the Great God. The corollary of these two concepts is that from the point of Jnana, or Knowledge, and also from the point of Bhakti, or Devotion, which are ultimately the same, we are interconnected with every animate and inanimate object of the universe through the Supreme Reality in the plane of consciousness or God, through the plane of divinity, which is already in us.

So it is not that we have to establish unity and harmony by launching some movement, because we are already united, but about which we are not just aware. Hence, one of the main purposes of the movement for peace and harmony is actually to bring awareness of this unity of existence in people. It is in this context one of the cardinal teachings of Jesus, that is, 'Love thy neighbor as thyself' may be better understood and practised.

Though Swamiji invented this concept of sect without sectarianism to be practiced by his newly founded organisation, the Ramakrishna Order, this is a legacy left by him which may be practiced by other religious organizations to bring about greater inter-religious harmony and understanding.

I would now like to talk to you about how our Society is practicing this concept of harmony of religions in Japan. Most of our practices are very similar to those of the other branches of our Order.

1. In addition to celebrating the birthdays of our Holy Trio, we also celebrate the birthdays of Lord Buddha and Jesus Christ.
2. Buddhist and Christian priests are also invited to give talks before our congregation.
3. In our organizing committee of the annual public celebration of Swami Vivekananda's birthday, there are members who are Buddhists, Hindus, a Christian priest, and Shinto.
4. In the same public celebration, we often invite Buddhist and Christian priests to give speeches. Incidentally, although we have wanted to, we have not been able to invite any Muslim speakers as such speakers are hard to find in Japan.

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• A Story to Remember •

Crossing the Water

A farmer's daughter duty was to carry fresh milk to customers in various villages had, one of whom was a priest. To reach his house, the milkmaid had to cross a good-sized stream. People crossed it by a sort of ferry raft, for a small fee.

One day the priest, who performed worship daily with the offering to God of fresh milk, finding it arrived very late, scolded the poor woman. "What can I do?" she said, "I start out early from my house, but I have to wait a long time for the boatman to come."

Then the priest said (pretending to be serious), "What! People have even walked across the ocean by repeating the name of God, and you can't cross this little river?" This milkmaid took him very seriously. From then on she brought the priest's milk punctually every morning. He became curious about it and asked her how it was that she was never late anymore.

"I cross the river repeating the name of the Lord," she replied, "just as you told me to do, without waiting for the ferry." The priest didn't believe her, and asked, "Can you show me this, how you cross the river on foot?" So they went together to the water and the milkmaid began to walk over it. Looking back, the woman saw that the priest had started to follow her and was floundering in the water.

"Sir!" she cried, "You are uttering the name of God, yet all the while you are holding up your clothe from getting wet. That is not trusting in God!"

... Sri Ramakrishna

Vivekananda and Japan (from page 5)

5. On Sunday mornings we organize special chanting programmes and read out the messages of Lord Buddha, Jesus Christ and Prophet Mohammad as well. And it is our tradition, after such chanting, we say, 'Jay Jesus Christ ki jay, Jay Hazrat Muhammad ki jay!'

6. On New Year's day millions of Japanese throng either to a famous Buddhist temple or to a Shinto shrine for prayer. On that day, after praying in our shrine, myself and a group of our devotees visit a Buddhist place of pilgrimage, then go on to a Christian church, and, finally, we visit a Shinto shrine for prayers. There is no Muslim mosque there, had there been, definitely we would have gone.

So what we are actually trying to do, is that in addition to practicing harmony of religions

in various other ways, we are organising occasions when different religious leaders can meet, and also when religious leaders can talk of their own faiths before our devotees. I am sorry to say that this type of gesture and initiative on our part has hardly been reciprocated so far in Japan, with only a few exceptions. And I wonder, if this is not also the case in India as well. Hence we are looking forward to that day when this type of initiative by the Ramakrishna Mission will be reciprocated by other religious groups, which will go a long way in establishing religious harmony. Otherwise mere speeches and the passing of resolutions on religious harmony may not be very effective.

In addition to the above practices of religious harmony, we would also like to create an inter-faith forum in Japan, as we believe such forums provide a platform for leaders

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of different religions to meet regularly and become more familiar with other faiths through study and deliberation. In such forums more emphasis should be given on where they agree than where they disagree, such as ritualism. Such forums send the message of goodwill to the followers of the respective faiths participating in this forum, and on the other, such ongoing dialogue is more effective than inter-faith meets on special occasions only. It is noteworthy that such forums are, however, common in the USA, where mutual visits of different religious leaders to other religious groups are also not uncommon.

We understand Swami Shantatmanandaji, present secretary of the Delhi Ramakrishna Mission Delhi, like his immediate predecessor, Revered Swami Gokulanandaji, is dynamic and has ambitions, hence, may we request Shantatmanandaji explore if such an interfaith forum can be set up in Delhi on the occasion of Swamiji's 150th birth celebration. That would be a really great and pioneering work, and a fitting tribute to Swamiji as well.

Now let me conclude with my final comment.

So far, except for India, concentrated efforts have been made in spreading the universal message of Vedanta and Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda to Europe and America to date by our Order. The time has now come to take special initiative in carrying this message to various parts of Asia as well, espe-

cially to countries like Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Indonesia and Taiwan, as you know these countries have had a historical relationship with the cultural and religious traditions of India.

The spread of such messages in Asian countries, we hope, will be highly beneficial to the respective peoples, and will also contribute in consolidating and strengthening the peace movement in the world.



Considering that it would be most appropriate for the Vedanta Society of Japan to take the initiative in spreading such a message to its neighboring countries, I have begun visiting South Korea and the Philippines in recent years, to give discourses to interested groups.

I am indeed happy to inform you that a private Vedanta Society has already been established in 2008 in the Philippines, which is awaiting affiliation to the Ramakrishna Order. Additionally, just last month, another Vedanta Society has had a modest beginning in South Korea.

Our Society in Japan and the Societies in the Philippines and South Korea have already planned to celebrate the 150th birth anniversary of Swami Vivekananda to spread his elevating message of harmony and peace among the people, especially to the youth of these countries, in collaboration with the local Indian embassies. We firmly and honestly seek your good wishes for the success of these programmes.

Thank you so much, Om shanti, shanti, shanti, hari Om.

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