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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

DECEMBER Calendar



Birthdays / Pujas

Swami Premananda

Friday 21 Dec

Christmas Eve

Monday 24 Dec

Kyokai Events

• Satsanga in Sapporo •

Sunday 02 December

• Ryukoku University •

Discourse

Tuesday 04 December

Time : 15:00~ Open to all

Ryukoku University Kyoto

Theme :

Swami Vivekananda,

Tagore and Japan

Please Contact: 075-343-3813

<http://rindas.ryukoku.ac.jp/access/>

• December Zushi Retreat •

Sunday 16 December

All are welcome!

• Christmas Eve Programme •

Monday 24 December

19:00-21:00

Worship/Reading/Talk/Carols

Light Prasad Dinner

All are welcome!

✧ Thus Spake ✧

"God is in all men, but all men are not in God; that is why we suffer."

... Sri Ramakrishna

"And know that I am with you always; yes, to the end of time."

... Jesus Christ

June Zushi Retreat Lord Buddha Birth Celebration

On Sunday June 17, 2012, Buddha's Birth Anniversary was celebrated during the monthly Zushi Retreat in the Annexe building, starting with a worship and offering conducted by Swami Medhasananda. Each year a Buddhist priest is invited to address the congregation on a special topic. This year, the Society invited Mr. Eiichi Shinohara, the 33rd head priest at Chojuin, a Soto Zen sect Buddhism temple in Narita, Chiba Prefecture, to talk on the 'Practice of Buddha's Teachings on Service.'

Swami Medhasananda Introduced Mr. Shinohara saying, "Hinduism respects Buddha very much and regards him as an incarnation of God. At the Belur Math, the HQ of our Order, they celebrate the birth anniversary of Buddha. The Ramakrishna Order believes in and teaches the harmony of religions and hence celebrates the birth anniversary of Jesus Christ as well as of Buddha. God is one, but as many faiths, so many paths. Not only do we believe our scriptures are correct, but we also respect each and every religion."

"We have invited Mr. Shinohara to give a discourse today. In addition to being the head priest at Chojuin, he is currently the representative of the volunteers group called 'Volunteering from What We Can Do,' and the Director of a non-political organisation, Jisatsu Boshi Network Kaze

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Head Priest of Chojuin Buddhist Temple
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Buddha's Teachings (from page 1)

(Winds of Suicide Prevention Network). He also provides education support for other countries and promotes suicide prevention activities as his lifework. In 1979, he carried out refugee relief work in Cambodia. Since 1995 his organisation has been offering free telephone counselling service 24/7 for those contemplating suicide. Through personal and lecture meetings and other activities, they have prevented over six thousand potential suicides. Moreover, he has written many books, too. Mr. Hoken Suzuki kindly made all the arrangements so we may hear his discourse today. Now let us learn from and practice Lord Buddha's teachings on service to others, as Mr. Shinohara himself carries out."

The Practice of Buddha's Teachings on Service

By Eiichi Shinohara

Today two big things are not working here in Japan. One is the economy, and the other is human kindness. Since last year the word 'kizuna' or bond has often been used mainly in the media, which we are not sure really exists. We would have to revitalise it by carrying out various activities.

Our country did not incorporate religion in its post-war education system. Education with religion does not mean imposing a religion. There are many different religions that serve as a compass for life. Although the Constitution sets out liberty of religion, according to which we can choose any one of them, other articles such as, we should live a righteous, peaceful life with right religion were removed from it. Consequently, today's situation has been caused.

Buddha's Teachings and Japan

Basically, no religion is for the dead. They are all preached for those who are living, using words specific to each sect, in as much detail and as specifically as possi-



ble, so that they may live a happy life in this world. I have a book called 'Genshi Bukkyo' or Original Buddhism translated into Japanese. It compiles what Buddha taught while he was alive and was originally the Pali Canon written in Sanskrit. Reading this through, we find no teachings in it for the dead. People gathering, sharing rituals and learning like we are today is a very normal way of observing religion. Although people tend to think that rituals are not necessary these days, they are expressions of feelings. It is not enough to just feel inside. By chanting 'Sankiemon' or Three Refuges, we can experience right now that our minds are looking to Buddha.

Japanese Buddhism is now quite far away from the original Buddhism. As you know, Buddhism split mainly into two schools, Mahayana Buddhism and Theravada Buddhism. The former school spread into China then crossed the Korean Peninsula, mixing with secular religions along the way. When it finally came here to Japan, it was a unique Buddhism. An example of this is our being dressed in black at funerals, which completely originated in Confucianism in China and never happened at the time of Buddha in India. Moreover, Buddhist monks did not labour in the beginning, but they started to live self-sufficient lives in Zen temples where the robes of monks were simplified so as not to hinder physical labour. As you can see, I am wearing one of those simplified robes today. This design represents rice paddies

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Buddha's Teachings (from page 2)

and pathways. When Buddha was still alive and walking around villages begging, a farmer pointed out that he did not work, but only collected food to eat which the farmer found questionable. Then Buddha said, 'You plough rice paddies while I cultivate your hearts. You help make people happy by growing rice and vegetables, while I try to do the same by cultivating your hearts.' This robe is the symbol of that.

Buddha preached his teachings by talking to people, mostly one on one, about how we as human beings should live in this world to be happy, which I think is his greatness. Also, even in his days there were quite a few questions as to whether the afterlife exists, which he did not answer. That means we do not know if it does exist while alive, but we will know when and if we get there. In his opinion, it does not matter whether or not there is an afterlife. The first priority is to become happy in this world, isn't it? To that end, he suggested practising the teachings he preached using many metaphors. Buddha sometimes used harsh words like this, 'Suppose a good doctor examined your body, found a disease and said you should take some medication to cure it. If you do not take it however, and are just worried that your disease is not cured, that is not the doctor's fault. Likewise, if you do not practise my teachings and are just sorry about your unhappiness, that is not my fault.'

Suicides and Deaths of the Neglected

I have been working on the issue of suicide for twenty years. Sorry to say, here in Japan nearly 33,000 people kill themselves each year. In large number of deaths of another sort, it was said on an NHK TV programme several years ago that there were 32,000 people each year who died alone without being known in the Japanese 'muen shakai' (literally, no connection to society) people with no rela-



tives or social connections or bonds with each other. The combined number of both cases arrives at about 70,000.

Last year, ten staff members of the Middle Eastern TV News station Al Jazeera came to my temple to cover this situation here. I asked the producer why this many staffers came all this way. He answered that Japan was a very unique, incomprehensible country, since as many as 70,000 lives end in 'muen shi' (no connection death) and suicide each year, which may not happen even in war. He continued that there might be a massive hole somewhere in this country, into which the Japanese are sucked to death. He wanted to film this hole and broadcast it across Europe and the Middle East. I think he is right. The hole he mentioned is the Japanese society.

Killing oneself is not new and has been seen both in the east and west. Yukio Mishima, a famous novelist, committed hara-kiri, which was a well calculated and arranged end of life and can be called a real suicide. From what I have experienced, however, none of the cases counted as suicide happens because the person really wants to kill him/herself. Today's Japanese social structure forces them into doing so by loading a single person with many sufferings, which I call multiple sufferings.

Multiple Sufferings

A father does not commit suicide right af-
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Buddha's Teachings (from page 3)

ter he is made redundant. Redundancy leads to economic hardships; then the breakdown of his family; then his children being unable to go to school; then their having difficulty with job hunting. A chain reaction of agony not caused by his fault finally makes him feel the denial of his own existence. The word 'redundancy' does not sound very harsh, but actually means that the person is not necessary. There is a word 'jiko-yuyokan' or feeling oneself needed. For a married couple, for instance, a wife or husband is happy because they have their spouse needing them. If we are told we are no longer necessary, we would feel loneliness as our very existence has been denied. Anyone can sometimes feel some sort of loneliness, but this can be relieved. It can be mitigated if someone else is with them.

On the other hand, if all connections and relationships to others are cut off, loneliness turns into isolation. There are those aged from 15 to 80 who cannot communicate openly and have trustful bonds with others. Even high-school students come to me and say they want to disappear. They are isolated. Isolation makes people feel like dying, killing ourselves and going somewhere. That is the point. That is how they become suicidal. At such times if they are given kind words such as, "What is the problem?"; "If you want to talk, I am here"; "Is there anything I can help you with?", they feel they have someone with them and start being slowly relieved from their isolation. So, I try to answer the phone and meet those in need of counseling day and night. When relieved of their isolation, they are slowly getting motivated to live and get back on their feet. If no one speaks to them when they start to feel like dying, they will finally commit suicide.

One day, a 77-year-old lady whose husband had died six years before gave me a ring. She said that she had failed to hang herself as the rope was not strong enough, and asked me to send her a

• Thought of the Month •

"We are here to awaken from the illusion of our separateness."

... Thich Nhat Hanh

stronger one. I said, "I cannot do so, as that would be helping you to commit suicide. But if by any chance you want to continue living, I will come and meet you right now." Then I rushed to Hanamaki, in Aomori Prefecture from Narita. She had raised five children, all of whom have their own families and live in Sendai, quite close. None of them, however, had visited her for the last five years. She sends them letters, but receives no replies. When she gives them a phone call, they want to hang up very soon. She said that she would rather go her grave, as she was deserted. I suggested we should become friends and talk about anything. She now calls me once a week. This is just one example of a myriad of callers.

Our Society; Our Problem

If we regard this as a mere relationship problem specific to the mother and her children, it may be deemed as none of our business and a problem that should be solved privately. But then we would miss the essence of societal condition. As early as 50-60 years ago it was known that Japan would become an aged society, but no action was taken. Who was to blame? We were. It was we who did nothing, but let it happen. So this is our problem. Recently an elderly lady living in temporary housing after the Great East Japan Earthquake died there. In her notes she said that because the old like her should not bother others any more, she would rather take refuge in a grave. How painful. Who created such a social structure as makes the elderly feel this way? We did. The Japanese. Our culture. I would hence like to tell you that this is our problem, not others'.

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Buddha's Teachings (from page 4)

We sometimes receive calls saying we should stop our activities to prevent suicide and just let them die. Many of these callers are female. They say it would be kinder to let them die. Then I ask questions such as, "Do you have grandchildren? If you do, and they are seriously bullied, have dog droppings put in their mouth on their way back from school and would rather die than live such a life, would you say they should die as they want?" They answer, "Of course not. How could I say that to my loving grandchildren?" This shows that people think in a different way when it comes to their problems. If the problem is not theirs, they say 'just let them die.' That is our problem. The Japanese now have no interest in anything.

Mother Teresa said the following famous quote, 'The opposite of love is indifference.' Japan is now full of those who are indifferent. In the beginning of this talk I said that the economy is not working here in this country, but I say now is the time to let kindness work. Otherwise everyone will be isolated. So I would like to ask you not to leave those around you isolated. If they are relieved from isolation, presumably the suicide rate could be more than halved.

"Newspapers have recently reported that the youth are sad and worried about the world and do not mind if they die at any moment. It is us who created this society. I believe that if pastors like me are determined to make a difference themselves and instruct our followers on taking action towards various problems, the issue of suicide will dramatically change.

"A 37-year-old mother had a nervous breakdown and stressed out from parenting called me saying she would follow her husband, who died a sudden death from overwork at the age of 42. Although she had both a 3- and a 1-year old child, she could not think about them and just wanted to go to his place. By his place



she meant the afterlife, which she believed in. I asked her, "If there is an afterlife and he is there, what would he say when you see him?" She said, "He would be glad and hold me shedding tears." I disagreed, "I would not say so, but ask what you did with the two children of yours. It would be better to bring up your children now, and if there is the afterlife, go there afterward so you can tell him proudly how you raised your children." She eventually attempted suicide by jumping into the sea leaving her children behind. While in the water, however, when she heard them crying and realised how much they needed her, and she struggled swimming until a passer-by helped her out.

Whether or not there is an afterlife, this question was unsolved during Buddha's era as it is even to this day. The point is to become happy in this life. To that end, we will raise children and retire from life proudly, that is, complete the life we were given and die.

Seizing the Now

"'Yosei', the remainder of life or literally, leftover of life, sounds interesting. Seeing the later part of life as old age years or as the leftover of life dwarfs people. Kin-san and Gin-san, the Japanese twin sisters celebrated for their longevity were Buddhists. When they turned 100, their temple priest told them they did not visit the temple very often. Then they said, "Because we are busy." He asked, "You must both

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• A Story to Remember •

The Patient Old Man

When passing through a mountain pass, a bedouin (villager) once came across an old man who was blind and who seemed to be afflicted with various ailments all over his body. It was clear that he was wasting away. He was even paralysed and was constantly forced to remain in a seated position. The Bedouin could clearly hear him say, "All praise is for Allah, Who has kept me safe from ailments with which He has tested many among His creation; and He has indeed preferred me over many among those that He created."

"My brother!" exclaimed the bedouin. "What have you been saved from? By Allah, I think that you have been afflicted with every single kind of ailment!"

"Go away from me," said the old man, as he raised his head. "Do I not still have a tongue with which I can pronounce His Oneness, and with which I can remember Him every single moment? And do I not still have a heart with which I can know Him?"

These words of the old man were enough for the bedouin to repent to Allah for his sins and ask Him for forgiveness.

Remember, there is always someone else who is in more problem than you.

(IslamCan.com)

Buddha's Teachings (from page 4)

have earned lots of money working so much. What do you spend it on?" They said in unison, "We will save it for our old-age years." That is amazing, isn't it? It did not seem that they thought they were in their old age years or the leftover of life. Every morning they woke up, they thought they were at the height of life. They seized the day each day. Seize the day today, not tomorrow or the day after. You can have the past as memories, but the past is over.

"I am here with you as we spend each moment of 'now' one after another. This moment keeps going and changing. In Buddhism, it is called 'ever-changing'. If you know someone in trouble, just let them know this. Things do not last forever. Happiness and pain change. So, just wait a while.

Engaged Buddhism

"If you have someone in trouble and in pain around you, just stand by them, take the time to listen to them and share their suffering by accepting them. Just agree once and totally with them that you might want to die if you were in their shoes. Then they will start to trust you thinking you can understand them, and come to you again, then again. When coming for the fourth or fifth time, they will start talking honestly. Just keep listening until then and ask them when they can come next. It is important that if they say they can come the following Wednesday at 3 pm, then you make sure to arrange an appointment at that time. Knowing someone is waiting for them gives them reason to live.

"There is the term 'Engaged Buddhism'

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Buddha's Teachings (from page 4)

meaning Buddhism that acts. It is a practise of Buddhism where one actively and deeply concerns oneself with the situations of the modern world as well as retreat for one's own enlightenment; and one is aware of all the connections to oneself and live seeing them as one's life. To paraphrase a quote from the Zen Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, "Learning Buddhism in theory is not wrong, but it should involve action. That is real Buddhism." One cannot practise theory without action, it makes no sense. There is a Zen term 'gyogaku ichinyo' or taking action to complement learning.

"Please bear in mind that basically it is taught in Buddhism that you must not kill yourself, others and all living things. According to Buddhism, we have eight sufferings: The four inevitable of human life; birth, ageing, illness and death; the pain of meeting people one dislikes; the anguish of parting from one's loved ones; the pain of not getting what one seeks; and the pain brought on by the five skandha - the five aggregate components comprising the individual. I would add one more, the pain of being in a society. The world we are in is full of sufferings, and as we were born here, we should take for granted that we suffer such social problems. It is the teachings of Buddha that serves as a compass to help solve those problems which we cannot avoid.

"There is a word 'jihi' or mercy. 'Ji' and 'hi' have different meanings. 'Ji' refers to compassion and giving joy, while 'hi' relieving others of sufferings. So, 'jihi' means compassion giving joy, standing by those in pain and trouble and relieving sufferings. One of the actions to take is not to leave anyone isolated whether they are near or far from you. Also, I would like you to live with compassion in full. We can never live alone. It is human connections that make us live.

'Ningen,' or human beings, is written in Chinese characters as 'between persons'. What would you use to fill in the space between

you and others? Something to make people happy or unhappy? This is the life we cannot have again, so it would be better to fill the space of others with happy things, live a happy life and, when the time of retirement from life comes, die without regret. I believe that this is exactly the basic concept of Buddhism. • <<http://www.choujuin.com>>

Zushi Retreat and Buddha's Teachings on Service compiled and translated by Ms. Satsuki Yokota

NEWS BRIEFS

- Great Tohoku Kanto Earthquake Relief Supplies Sent to Iwate 27 September 2012

The Vedanta Society of Japan sent the items listed below to 'SAVE IWATE' as we did last time. SAVE IWATE currently distributes relief supplies preferentially to "those in greatest need" (the elderly and handicapped), on an individual basis who presumably account for at least 20% of those who have taken refuge in Morioka and vicinity.

1. Finest Grade 1 rice "Koshihikari" harvested in Niigata Prefecture in 2011: 300 kg (60 x 5 kg bags)
2. Scottie tissues: 500 boxes
3. Toilet paper: 540 rolls

Our Society will continue to support those in need by providing basic necessities as we can on a regular basis. • A Satsanga was held in Hamamatsu on 8 October attended by some 26 persons.

- Swami Medhasananda returned from an extended stay in India on 11 November. Starting out with the swami were devotees who returned to Japan at earlier dates. We will present accounts of their experiences as they become available in the English language.

- Swami Medhasananda gave a discourse in Osaka on 24 November.

- A Satsanga was held in Shikoku on 25 and 26 November. Swami talked on the themes of, Meditation, What is God? and Positive Living

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