



December 2012 - Volume 10 Number 12

Happy New Year

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

JANUARY Calendar



Birthdays / Pujas

**The Holy Mother
Sri Sri Sarada Devi**
Friday, January 4

Swami Shivananda
Tuesday, January 8

Swami Saradananda
Thursday, January 17

Swami Turiyananda
Saturday, January 26

Kyokai Events

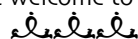
- **New Year Kalpataru** •
New Years Day 2013
Zushi Centre - 12 Noon

Annual programme includes a talk, lunch, walk to Kamakura Daibutsu to offer prayers there and Kinoshita Catholic Church and the Hachiman Shrine.

- **January Zushi Retreat** •
The Holy Mother
Sri Sri Sarada Devi
Birth Celebration

Sunday, January 20
Puja, Food Offering, Flower Offering, Reading from 11 AM

Lunch / Afternoon Session
Reading, Stories about Mother, Devotional Songs
All, are welcome to attend!



✧ Thus Spake ✧

"As wind removes a cloud, so does the name of God disperse the cloud of worldliness."

The Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi

"Whoever loves to meet God, God loves to meet him."

... Prophet Muhammad

Zushi Retreat December 2012

Holy Company

A Talk by Swami Medhasananda

First we need to understand what we mean by 'holy company.' Actually, it is the company of a holy man, called a 'sadhu' in India, who may be a monk or a family man, provided his is a completely God-centred life.

However the broader meaning of 'holy company' includes the company of devotees as well. When the devotees gather and do not simply chatter about the food, fashions, business, and family matters, but talk of God and meditate and read holy books together, this, too, is regarded as mutual holy company. However, even talking with a holy man about politics and other secular or trivial matters cannot be considered being in holy company. The importance is on the theme of the discussion, if the theme is spiritual, then alone it becomes holy company. The word 'satsanga' is common in India. A visit to an ashram or monastery it is called satsanga. This 'retreat' we are now having is satsanga, because the theme of the programme is spiritual.

We should have a clear idea of what is secular and what is spiritual. For example, if we look upon work, just as work, then the work becomes secular, but if you look upon work as worship, then the same

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Holy Company (from page 1)

work becomes spiritual. Thus the difference lies in attitude and point of view and this applies to everything. If you look upon family members just as family members, related because of marriage or blood, it is a secular relationship. But if you see God in them and serve them accordingly, then it becomes a spiritual relationship. Thus, the theme does not change; the person does not change; the works do not change; the change is in attitude.

Spirituality is focused on spirit which is an eternal, absolute, and infinite entity. If we see the Presence of this entity in our relationships and works, then all these becomes spiritual. On the other hand, if we do not see that Presence, then even spiritual matters become secular. If the temple is used as a place of business, then even the temple is reduced to being a place of secular activities. Thus, to some priests the temple becomes just a place of business. If we see the Presence of Infinity, the Eternal, the Absolute, and get connected with that in every work and relationship, then we are constantly dwelling in a spiritual atmosphere.

Who is a holy man whose company is sought after? In the highest meaning, he is a person who is a realised soul. In the common meaning it is anyone who is sincerely striving to realise God by giving up interest in other things and has fairly advanced in that pursuit. He is one whose main focus in life is God and God-realisation. Such a person, even if he has not yet realised God, is a holy person. Otherwise, having holy company is mostly impossible. This is because in every country, in every age or era, the number of realised souls is very few.

In every scripture, especially in Hinduism, there is a lot of emphasis on holy company. If you read the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, or teachings of Swami Brahmanandaji and others, you will see a lot of emphasis on holy company. First of all, this is because by holy company we acquire a taste for God that then develops. Generally our focus is on that which is temporary and finite. It is through association with a holy man that one slowly understands that by focusing only on temporary and secular things one cannot really get peace, and joy, and knowledge, but to get these one needs to shift that focus to God.

How does this happen? As we know, life influences life. If we want to light a lamp, we can

most easily light it from another burning lamp. Life is like that. The holy man is like the lit lamp, and we can light the lamp of our lives from the holy flame of the holy man, which is not possible by only reading holy books, or listening to or watching recorded messages. Most important is life, how we live our lives. The life of a sadhu, or holy man, is a demonstration of spiritual teachings. We must also bear in mind that even a sadhu may have what seems to us to be some draw-backs, but we should give no importance to these and only give importance to the brighter side, the holy side, of the sadhu's life. Then we can really profit from holy company. Not immediately, and not through a single visit, but as we continue this association, slowly there is a transformation in our lives.

It has been rightly said that for the transformation of one's life holy company is most important. For example, we have read about meditation, but when we come to a holy man we see him meditating and we are motivated. Sri Ramakrishna's disciple 'M' or Mahendranath Gupta, the recorder of the Gospel, had a group of disciples who would meet at M's house regularly. He would encourage these devotees to visit Belur Math often, especially at the hours when the sadhus are meditating. This is because devotees are inspired by this sight and motivated to meditate themselves. Just seeing the monks socialising, engaged in work, taking tea, or having a meal is no different than visiting ordinary men who also gossip, work, eat, and drink. What is the difference? It is important to see the sadhu when he is doing spiritual practice.

Attending the type of discourse we are having now, known as satsanga, is also helpful. Because ideas we may hold may be cleared up by listening to these discussions. Sometimes sadhus are just talking, but even this has an impact. Swami Brahmanandaji would often meet the householder devotees and talk on ordinary matters, and unless someone would specifically ask a spiritual question, Brahmanandaji would not introduce any spiritual topic during such discussions. Generally these sessions were full of fun and laughter.

By observing this, one young brahmachari, who had recently joined, became a little confused, as it is generally expected that the devotees should come to a monk for spiritual discussions and to get answers to their spiritual questions,. So he approached one of these senior householder devotees and said

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Holy Company (from page 2)

he wondered why Brahmanandaji only talked of everyday things and they all laughed so much. 'He is a holy man and you are a devotee,' he said. 'Yet, no spiritual subject is discussed. Why do you take the trouble to come to Belur Math from Calcutta to meet him?'

The devotee answered that as such a young man he couldn't possibly know how hard the life of a householder is. 'We have experienced many sufferings in life' he said. 'Even if Brahmanandaji doesn't speak of God, just by laughing, and talking, and just being in his company, we all forget our sufferings. Our minds are full of peace and joy when we take our leave.' There is also this type of impact.

As we just mentioned, there are holy men whom unless asked a spiritual question, will not speak at all. So it is better to ask a spiritual question of a holy man. Such questions can be asked with others or privately. Here our afternoon session includes Q&A. I think this is a good tradition. It helps us all. When I travel to give talks in other areas of Japan, invariably there is a question and answer session. These are generally so interesting and lively. I remember visiting Yamagata this year and meeting some children at a combined nursery school, kindergarten, and elementary school, where I spoke a little on Indian culture. I then asked them to ask me some questions. One child asked how Indian curry was prepared and what type of spices were used. But, interestingly, one child asked me why I became a monk. Still, more interestingly, another asked if I enjoyed my monastic life. (laughing) I was so surprised to hear such questions from kids.

You may not have had a particular question in mind, but when you hear the holy man's answer to another's question, your doubts are also cleared. Not only that, but hearing a holy man in general spiritual discussion can have the same effect.

One day Sri Ramakrishna was discussing the role of grace and self-effort in spiritual life. The question was whether it was possible to realise God with self-effort alone or if grace was necessary. There is a belief that realisation is possible through one's efforts alone; by practising a certain way, by meditating for long periods, etc. For example in Patanjali's Yoga Sutra techniques of meditation are given in detail. So if one just meditates accordingly for a long time, he will realise God. A young man, who would later become the great Swami

Turiyanandaji, was known to hold such beliefs, was present during this discussion. He was practising Vedanta at the time. He believed that by just meditating on Brahman and discriminating, he would realise Brahman. In other words, self-effort is enough, provided one is very serious and sincere.

Sri Ramakrishna then sang a song with references to the Ramayana, the great epic of India, where it is said that unless there is grace of God, however one strives, one cannot realise God. Ramakrishna sang this with such emotion that Turiyanandaji felt the message of this song was for him alone. That realisation cannot come from self-effort alone - that while self-effort is important, grace is also important. The reason I mention this is because that while a holy man may be discussing in general, some of your doubts may be cleared up as well. From this we can see how important holy company is.

There is a story of a Zen monk and a samurai. The samurai was very proud of his power, proud of his courage, training, and skills. He went to a Zen monk for some spiritual advice. He went in and sat quietly. Then he saw the Zen Master pick up a cup and begin to pour some tea into the cup from a teapot, he continued pouring overflowing the cup and spilling out onto the grass mat floor. The samurai thought to himself, 'What kind of master is this? He doesn't even have the simplest of common sense.' Suddenly, it flashed in his mind, maybe the message is that my heart is too full of pride, and in such a state no message can enter into my heart. If I cannot empty my heart, such teachings are useless to me.

On another occasion, another samurai had asked the zen monk the difference between heaven and hell. Suddenly the monk became furious. 'You are a foul fellow! You are a coward!' he cried and more, using particularly unsavoury words. The samurai became so incensed that he drew his katana (sword) and was about to strike down the monk. The monk suddenly sat and quietly said, 'This is hell!' It immediately flashed in the samurai's mind that the monk had feigned his anger to teach him and he returned the weapon to its saya (sheath) full of repentance. 'And this is heaven,' said the monk.

In one place Turiyanandaji explains holy company saying, "What do you understand about holy association! You have to watch their lives.

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Holy Company (from page 3)

See their purity, their devotion, love, and compassion, and emit these in your own lives. By emitting the holy, devotion increases, and the heart becomes purified." So the important point here is that we have to want to change and improve ourselves. Without this attitude it matters not how many visits one pays to a holy man, because without a real hankering or yearning, one cannot benefit from holy company.

In India there are wondering monks who sometimes smoke hemp. There are many reasons for this, including insufficient clothing in the cold and such smoking warms the body somewhat. Some people come to the holy man for the sole purpose of receiving some hemp prasad from him. (laughter) This type of holy company does not benefit one in spiritual life either.

When we think of Dakshineswar; there were many temple staffers who met Sri Ramakrishna so many times. They met, observed, and talked with him on many occasions. None of these temple personnel became significant devotees. Why? Because their interests were elsewhere, they never desired any spiritual impact from what they had observed so often. So if one comes to a holy man with the idea that he or she wants to develop a taste for spiritual life – and wants to change himself or herself by imitating the monk – the effect of holy company starts working. For example, his motivation for living a spiritual life grows.

It is also important to remember that this association should be carried with us when we return home. The memory of the holy company, the memory of the holy discussion, should be carried with us when we return home. Sri Ramakrishna often said like pigeons that store food in their crop prior to digestion, some people come to visit storing all their secular thoughts in their crop, only to release them upon returning home. For such people, holy company makes little sense. So it is important that we feel, 'I want to transform my life. I want to achieve some self-development.'

Otherwise, like many in India, we will suffer from the illusion and errant belief that spiritual merit is derived by merely touching the feet of the holy or from visiting temples and places of pilgrimage, unless there is motivation to lead a spiritual life. This is why a real desire to change is important. If such motivation is pre-

• Thought of the Month •

"It is not enough to be busy;
so are the ants.
The question is:
what are we busy about?"

Henry David Thoreau

sent holy company is really beneficial. I am not saying there is no effect of visiting a holy man, but that that effect is greatly increased by one's own desire to become more spiritual and purer.

Swami Shankaranandaji, a disciple and attendant of Swami Brahmanandaji, who would later become the 7th President of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, was a very serious and grave monk, though spiritually highly elevated. One devotee summoned the courage to ask him for some advice. Shankaranandaji replied that the devotee had read so many things and heard so many examples of spiritual advice he said, 'What more advice do you need?' So the advice here is to follow the advice we have already heard. Indiscriminate visits to a variety of holy men may beget another problem. Some devotees go here and there and meet many different holy men to ask spiritual questions. Yet there is no spiritual development in such devotees. Why? Because they may become confused by so many variations in spiritual advice. This can also be an effect of reading too many spiritual books. Hence, we must become selective in such matters.

In my own experience I have been approached for spiritual advice by some visitors. When I ask whether they had experienced training with some other religious group, they may reply they tried TM, then on to Sai Baba, then on to Yogananda. I reply that since they have gone everywhere and read everything, 'What do you expect from me?' Most such visitors are just in the habit of visiting many religious societies without any serious intention to stick to something and see it through to the end.

Another aspect of holy company is that through it we understand what is meant by 'love for all.' What is meant by 'selfless service.' Swami Vivekananda emphasised the following when he was discussing the effect of holy company. He said that sadhu-sanga (holy
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Holy Company (from page 4)

company) provides the scope to hear the words of God, about God Incarnate, His life and lila (play), and His teachings. It is holy company that brings us all these things. From sadhu-sanga we also learn about compassion, love and consideration for all. When we think of Lord Buddha or of Jesus, the Christ, how much compassion they had for others! Think also of Swami Vivekananda and how much compassion he had for others.

What is the importance of love and compassion for others? The greatest cause of our many sufferings is our selfishness, our self-centredness, and focus on me and my family. This has become one great source of bondage, ignorance, suffering and frustration. Unless we think of others who are not related to us; unless we serve others in whatever way possible; unless we grow out of our limited circles, our hearts cannot broaden and we cannot really get peace. Identifying with others unrelated to me – this is demonstrated in the life of a holy man. He is not a holy man if he does not cherish love for others. The single greatest symptom of a holy man is that he must have a universal love for all. This love must not be confined to his congregation alone, but be beyond that. And this is what we see from the lives of Buddha, Jesus and Vivekananda and also what should inspire one to become unselfish and render unselfish service. The idea is to go from selfishness to unselfishness by identifying oneself with others; by thinking that the same God that is in me is also in others; this will not only help us in spiritual life, but it brings us joy and mental peace.

Swamiji also say that from holy company comes the feeling of humility; that God is so great and we so little. The source of all these qualities is sadhu-sanga. It is also from sadhu-sanga that the first spiritual awakening takes place, as well as our understanding of genuine spirituality. One disciple of Sri Ramakrishna by the name of Adhar Sen was a high government official. When he first came to Ramakrishna, he had compared him to another spiritual personage whom he had met before and whose face held a very painful grimace when he was in a sort of trance. Then he witnessed Ramakrishna in samadhi and his face was full of bliss. His confusion had been that if God is full of bliss, how in communion with God can one's face be full of pain? Upon seeing Sri Ramakrishna's blissful face he realised that this must be real samadhi.

In worldly life people are all absorbed in enjoyments and finally come to grief and suffer from enjoyment. How will this desire be burnt? Some heat is first needed to dry up the mind soaked with thoughts of enjoyment. The sadhu gives you that heat, the motivation, and we don't see this demonstrated in any other station of life except in that of monastics. There is a difference between a priest and a monk. Priests conduct rituals, but they have their own family life. Though their profession is God-oriented or God-centred, most of them lead the ordinary human life of a householder. But to lead a life which is God-centred, which is just lived for realising God, for loving God, was demonstrated for so many years in so many countries mostly by the monks, exemplified by Catholic, Buddhist, and Hindu orders of monks.

This institution of monasticism served a great purpose for society, and it was society's responsibility to serve and maintain those monks. These monks serve a spiritual purpose so important for dispensing mental peace, joy, and wisdom to householders which is not available anywhere else. In India householders still look to monks for this spiritual service and inspiration. Nowadays there are professional counsellors and counselling services, but for a long, long time it was the monks who were to provide this type of counselling.

I remember at Belur Math, our Ramakrishna Mission headquarters, there was a very senior monk and direct disciple of Holy Mother, Swami Avayanandaji, who was looking after the our headquarter's affairs, programmes for devotees and such. What we used to observe was that, along with common people, many distinguished persons from business, government and aristocratic families would come from Calcutta and elsewhere and talk with him for long periods of time. Interestingly, they would go on talking about their family and other affairs and he would just listen, occasionally saying only responding with nods or 'yes,' but the effect on these people was tremendous. They didn't really expect this monk to solve any of their problems, but they could feel that they could unburden their hearts. By speaking frankly to the swami they could feel freed of their troubles and worries. After talking and getting some mental peace, they would depart. As a small child Prime Minister Indira Gandhi would occasionally be looked after by Avayanandaji. Her mother, Kamala Nehru, wife of Jawaharlal Nehru, took initiation

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Holy Company (from page 5)

from Swami Shivananda. Indira developed a great love for Avayanandaji during her youth and would come and visit him after she had become Prime Minister and sometimes confide her family matters to him.

Why is it that householders prefer to discuss with a monk about private matters? Because sometimes they fear that they cannot really trust another householder, perhaps a friend, with such details of private affairs. Also, as householders, almost everyone has similar problems, so what practicality is there in attempting to unburden oneself in that way? This is why people choose to speak to monks of such things. At least they feel, a monk can be trusted with private information. If you have no one to tell your troubles to, come to a monk. Unburden your heart to a holy man and get some relief. This is another aspect of holy company.

Nevertheless, it is generally difficult to find such holy company, as mentioned earlier, so is there any means to supplement holy company? Yes. Firstly, carry a small photo of a holy personage or image everywhere. Secondly, holy books should be looked upon as holy company. In fact, especially works on reminiscences of holy men can be recommended for this purpose. If you can develop a taste for these, you will find it really beneficial and enjoyable. You will begin to feel that you are in the company of these holy personages when you read them with real interest. If you read a lot of ghost stories you will be in the company of ghosts! If you read a lot of books on crime, you will be in the company of criminals! Likewise, if you read a lot of holy books, you will be in the company of holy men. You are where your mind is!

Our Order has published many books on Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother, and Vivekananda and their reminiscences. We have also translated several of these into Japanese as well. With regard to myself, I am the only monk in residence here, yet when I read these books, I really feel that I am in the company of these holy ones. Those who have traveled to India and seen Belur Math, Dakshineswar, and other places noted in these books, the written words become more alive as one visualises these locations.

When you read the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, read with the idea that you are in

the company of Sri Ramakrishna. You are one of the devotees sitting in his room in Dakshineswar and listening to him. Read with this visualisation, then this too will be holy company. Your love will grow as will your taste for such company. Not only will you pass your time profitably, you will get a joy unobtainable from reading secular books. You will slowly be transformed, even without your being aware of it.

In India, in addition to this, devotees form groups. They meet once or twice month, do some reading, some offering, and some meditation. This too is holy company because the theme of the deliberations is spiritual. In Kumamoto, Kyushu devotees have formed such a group and sit regularly. I wish such a group would emerge in Tokyo as well. Another way is that holy company may be created at one's home, and for this at least two members of the family need to have an interest in this. Of course, it is best if the husband and wife have such an interest. Even if the family meets once a week to read and discuss, that will be very great. Otherwise the relationship among family members simply remains secular. With such practice, a whole new dimension of the relationship starts. This is a spiritual relationship, and it will really help to remove some of the stress in your relationship and transcend it.

We have given many aspects of holy company and some alternatives of holy company. First is visiting an ashram or temple. Then we discussed individual study. Next, was forming groups to study holy books. Finally, regular meetings with family members. With this holy company we will experience a slow transformation, we will develop a taste for God – for that eternal and infinite entity which will, in the long run, elevate us from a life of suffering to that of bliss; from a life of ignorance to that of wisdom; from a life of bondage to that of freedom. We then get established in a state of mind where we feel the continued presence of our 'chosen ideal,' for example, Sri Ramakrishna, always both within and without us wherever we are; feeling that He always protects me; that He always guides me; that He is my 'Eternal Companion'.

We may experience a glimpse of such an elevated state by always carrying a photo of Sri Ramakrishna, for example, and looking at it now and then initially. •

Ehime Retreat November 2012

Contributed by Ms. Noriko Shioji

On November 25 and 26, Swami Medhasananda held a retreat in Matsuyama City, Ehime Prefecture on the island of Shikoku.

Shikoku literally means four countries, and the island now consists of four ancient countries (modern day prefectures) arranged by the four compass points. Here are 88 places of pilgrimage known as the Hachijūhakkasho, the retreat was held at the 58th location, Sen'yū-ji (Senyu Temple), of this pilgrimage course. It is a beautiful, quiet temple, and in this season, set amidst the autumn foliage, it is a place where pilgrims still come to visit.

The theme of the Retreat was “What is Meditation?” and about 30 people participated. Ten people stayed with the swami for both days at the Senyu Shukubo or living quarters. As there were overlapping regional cultural festivals, some of us were able to take advantage of the opportunity to participate.

In the first session the necessity and effectiveness of meditation was demonstrated in concrete terms that we could understand. Under the swami's guidance everyone experienced silence. When we say we “have no time” for meditation, it is not true. We find the time to watch TV. We make time to eat, to bathe, and many mundane things, we make time for all these. It was painful

to hear and realise that it is we who make no time for meditation. The goal is to meditate daily.

After a vegetarian lunch, for Session 2 the swami spoke about God. God is pure consciousness. God's is formless. Then again, God may appear with form, such as Shiva, Krishna, Sarasvati, and the like. God may also take a human form such as Buddha or Christ, etc. I had wondered about this and was guided to the answer.

Satsanga continued after dinner with the ten people who stayed, exchanging introductions and telling the swami about themselves. We had planned to go for a walk the following morning, but it was cancelled due to rain, so swami taught us Shiva mantras and prayers and we spent the evening chanting together.

The 3rd session was a talk on “Positive Living” in which the nature of the three gunas was explained and the moral precepts by which we can experience positive living. There were many good ideas given, and it is good to write down one or two for safe keeping. We were told that daily practice of these ideas will naturally lead to positive living.

Swami Medhasananda we hope you can promise to visit us again next year and witness our progress as we practice little by little until then.

Arigatogozaimashita, thank you very much.



• A Story to Remember •

All Other Problems Arise Out of Desiring

Once upon a time, there was a beautiful young girl taking a stroll through the woods. All at once, she saw an extremely ugly bullfrog seated on a log. And to her amazement, the bullfrog spoke to her.

'Maiden,' croaked the frog, 'would you do me a big favour? This will be hard for you to believe, but I was once a handsome, charming prince; and then a mean, ugly old witch cast a spell over me and turned me into a frog.'

'Oh, what a pity!' exclaimed the pretty girl. 'I'll do anything I can to help you break such a spell.'

'Well, Miss,' replied the frog, 'the only way that this spell can be taken off and I can be returned to a handsome young man again is for some lovely and pretty young girl to take me home and let me spend the night under her pillow.'

The young girl took the ugly frog home and placed him beneath her pillow that night when she retired. When she awoke the next morning, sure enough, there beside her in the bed was a very young, handsome man, and plainly of royal blood. And so they lived happily ever after, except that to this day her father and mother still do not believe her story.

And all your life is nothing but such stories, because all desiring creates only fantasies. All desiring is fabulous, all desiring creates illusions. You go on changing – you change one illusion to another, you go from one illusion to another, but you go on changing illusions. Always from one illusion to another illusion is your movement. When you understand the very mechanism of illusions as such, there is a break, a breakthrough.

An insight dawns on you. In that moment, not only this world becomes meaningless, ALL worlds become meaningless. In that moment, there is nothing to be desired. You don't desire even desireless-ness; there is nothing to be desired. Suddenly desire is not there, that smoke is not there, and the flame burns bright.

Remember not to change problems, from one illusion to another. It does not help much.

Source: " Zen: The Path of Paradox, Vol 2 " - Osho

Issued by: The Vedanta Society of Japan (Nippon Vedanta Kyokai)
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