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The Vedanta Kyokai Newsletter

NEWS, UPDATES, AND MISCELLANY FROM THE VEDANTA SOCIETY OF JAPAN



MAY Calendar

Birthdays / Pujas

Sri Shankaracharya

Wednesday, May 15

Sri Buddhadev

Saturday, May 25

Kyokai Events

• May Zushi Retreat •

Sunday, May 19

11:00 Zushi Ashrama

Discourse / Lunch

Afternoon Session / Tea

All are welcome to attend!!

• Annual Summer • Outdoor Retreat

3 days and 2 nights

26 ~ 28 July 2013

This year in Yugawara,

Ashigarashima-gun,

Kanagawa Prefecture

at the Taikan-so Spa and Inn.

Check in early June
for more details and early
reservation information.



✧ Thus Spake ✧

"You cannot believe in God until you believe in yourself."

... Swami Vivekananda

*"Wherever my mind is, let there be thy form;
wherever my head is, let there be thy feet."*

... Sri Shankaracharya

Vedanta Society of Japan Celebrates Sri Sri Ramakrishna Deva's 176th Birth Anniversary

On Sunday, March 17, 2013, the Vedanta Society of Japan celebrated the 176th birth anniversary of Sri Sri Ramakrishna Deva for their day-long Zushi Monthly Retreat programme. Volunteers began the day before with preparation chores, some female devotees being accommodated at Holy Mother House and gentlemen at the main ashrama.

The programme began at 06:00 with mangalarati, chanting, bhajans and meditation. At 10:30 Swami Medhasananda then conducted the puja and arati worship, ending with fresh flower buds being passed out to the entire congregation, who, with these in hand, were led in prayers of offering (pushpanjali). Visiting Embassy of India, Deputy Chief of Mission, Mr. Sanjay Panda, was then recruited to officially release the Society's newest publication, 'Eternal Stories,' a collection of short, inspiring stories in English and Japanese, many of which have been featured in the Society's bi-monthly 'The Universal Gospel'.

(con't page 2)

In this Issue:

• Thus Spake ... page 1

• Monthly Calendar ... page 1

• Vedanta Society of Japan Celebrates
Sri Sri Ramakrishna Deva's 176th Birth
Anniversary ... page 1

• The Attraction of Sri Ramakrishna
A Talk by Swami Medhasananda

... page 3

• Thought of the Month ... page 6

• Religion and Non-Religion - Mt.
Mitakesan Talk Part 2 of 2 ... page 6

• A Story to Remember ... page 9



Book Release



Homa Fire

Ramakrishna Celebration (from page 1)

This was followed by a ritual homa-fire worship, also observed by Japanese Buddhist sects as 'goma'. With smoke rising to the rafters and out the open upper-level windows, and the scents of burning wood, ghee, leaf and flower offerings filling the room, the congregation solemnly observed the sights and sounds of mudras and mantras between brief bellows of conch shells and ringing of bells. They also joined in the sacred 108 repetitions of a mantra dedicated to Sri Ramakrishna.

After the crackling crescendo of the flames being doused, everyone reverently queued up for Swami Medhasananda to dab bhasma (holy ash) on their foreheads.

The congregation all enjoyed a prasad lunch from 13:30, and at 14:45 the afternoon session was called to order and Swami Medhasananda led all in Vedic peace chants.

He then gave a brief talk on Sri Ramakrishna with Ms. Yoko Sasaki interpreting. (See 'The Attraction of Sri Ramakrishna' in this issue.)

This was followed by a cultural programme featuring original devotional songs in Japanese with Ms. Shanti Izumida leading the congregation of around 20 in a sing-along. Lonnie also contributed a couple of songs in English. Attendees were then treated to a performance by the distinguished sitarist Kenji Inoue, accompanied by Sri Dinesh Dyoundi on tabla.

After closing with a meditation, the remaining attendees were served tea and cookies.

At 17:30 evening arati service was also conducted in the new Annexe building bringing the day's Monthly Retreat programme to a close. •



Holy Ash



Cultural Programme

The Attraction of Sri Ramakrishna

A talk by Swami Medhasananda

After the afternoon session of the Society's Retreat celebrating the 176th birth anniversary of Sri Sri Ramakrishna was called to order, Swami Medhasananda led attendees in verses of Vedic peace prayers. He then gave the following talk:

What attracts us to Sri Ramakrishna?

Sometimes I ask myself, 'Why do we feel attracted to Sri Ramakrishna?' Not only we Indians, but non-Indians as well; Japanese, Europeans, Americans, also feel attracted; not only Hindus, but Christians, and Buddhists, too. Outwardly Sri Ramakrishna doesn't appear to be charismatic nor he is a scholar. How could such an uneducated village priest attract so many people? In fact, not so many people were attracted to him during his lifetime. Yet, after his passing, see how his message is spreading throughout the world in such a short time. We don't even have information on how many people follow or have even heard of him the world over.

This morning one couple arrived here for the first time from Chigasaki, here in Kanagawa Prefecture. The wife is a medical doctor, she is present here now, but I won't embarrass her by pointing her out. She told me that two or three years earlier she had read the early Japanese version of Kathamrita, and had been very impressed by that. This is what I mean when I say we have no idea how many people have been positively influenced by Sri Ramakrishna.

Our attraction to Sri Ramakrishna is the attraction of a soul to a Super Soul; like a piece of iron attracted to a huge magnet. What are the characteristics of a Super Soul like Sri Ramakrishna. Today I'll discuss three of his main characteristics. These are:

1. Infinite Joy
2. Infinite Power
3. Infinite Knowledge

Infinite Joy

We all want joy, power and knowledge as well. A disciple asked Swami Adbhutananda (Latu Maharaj) 'I have never seen Sri Ramakrishna, you have seen him. What was Sri Ramakrishna like?' We, the devotees and admirers, have the same curiosity: 'What was Sri Ramakrishna like?' Latu Maharaj then answered in an indirect way. 'You have not seen Sri Ramakrishna, but you have seen Swami Vivekananda, haven't you? Let me ask you, how was Swami Vivekananda?' At this the disciples face was full of joy. 'Whenever I was near Swami Vivekananda,' he said, 'I felt such an inner joy gushing from inside.' Swami Adbhutanandaji agreed that anyone in his presence would feel joy.

When Swami Vivekananda (Swamiji) had gone to the West to preach Vedanta, he was always found full of joy and making fun. There is a perception in the West that men of the cloth should be very serious, grey, not laugh, not smile and talk very little. So Swamiji's attitude, which was a departure from this idea, surprised many Christian devotees, if not shocked them. However, he did little to suppress his joyousness and was sometimes asked with a note of disapproval, 'Swami, are you ever serious?' Immediately Swamiji's demeanor became very serious. 'Yes,' he said in a very grave voice, 'I become serious when I have stomach pains.'

So back to the disciple's question, Latu Maharaj said, 'Yes, Swamiji was very joyful, but Sri Ramakrishna was a hundred times more so.'

It is difficult to imagine what it was really
(con't page 4)

Sri Ramakrishna (from page 3)

like, but it's true. Why? Because Sri Ramakrishna, himself was infinite joy concretised. Anyone near him would feel that joy which he would radiate, always impacting everyone around him.

Regarding the same question, Holy Mother, who lived long after the Master had passed away, would often say Sri Ramakrishna was always full of joy; no matter with the young or with the old, with everyone he was full of joy. Swami Turiyanandaji (Hari Maharaj), a young disciple of the Master, would in later years say that whenever he would visit Sri Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar the joy he would experience in his company would continue for 10 to 15 days even upon his return to Calcutta. It was not just momentary joy. How qualitatively different is this joy than ordinary secular joy. We see a beautiful film; we watch a beautiful drama or hear a beautiful song; how long does this joy continue? Surely not for long. But even a short visit in Sri Ramakrishna's company would be as if ushering in an unending intoxication.

Infinite Power

From our own experience we know, if afflicted with some evil propensity, like anger, greed, pride, or jealousy, how difficult it can be to work on changing ourselves to be rid of them. Maybe after a long period of practice 'tapasya', that is, by prayer, meditation and discrimination we can overcome these inclinations, but it can be tremendously difficult no doubt. Now witness the power of Sri Ramakrishna – by power don't misunderstand, I don't mean

physical power like a sumo wrestler. No, it is essentially a spiritual power. By his power the Master could transform a person's mind. He could purify a devotee's mind just by a mere touch; by a mere wish. Not only that, he could induce spiritual experiences as well. Those who have tried spiritual practice know how difficult it is just to exercise some control over the mind, let alone attain some spiritual experience. A person who has not really tried it, cannot fully appreciate this point.

This illustrates Sri Ramakrishna's extraordinary, super-human power. By a touch, a glance, or a mere wish he could make a sinner and saint. Swami Shivanandaji, was meditating one day under the Panchavati



tree in Dakshineswar. Suddenly, he found Sri Ramakrishna standing before him and stared at him. Immediately Shivanandaji felt a tremendous spiritual upsurge and was lost in deep meditation. He would later comment that

just by Sri Ramakrishna's mere wish one could experience samadhi.

Swamiji said that Sri Ramakrishna was like a potter. As the potter gives the shape he wishes to the lump of clay he is working, Sri Ramakrishna could shape a mind as he wanted. While Sri Ramakrishna was at least literate and knew how to read and write, Swami Adbhutanandaji was formerly just an ordinary servant and absolutely illiterate. By Sri Ramakrishna's grace the servant Latu became Adbhutanandaji, an extraordinary a saint.

One day Adbhutanandaji (Latu Maharaj), whose chosen deity was Lord Rama, was massaging the Master's feet. Suddenly the
(con't page 5)

Sri Ramakrishna (from page 4)

Master asked, 'Latu, do you know what your Lord Rama is doing at this moment?'

'How can I know what Lord Rama is doing?' was his puzzled reply.

Then Sri Ramakrishna quietly said, 'Your Ram is now making an elephant pass through the eye of a needle!'

In later years Adbhutanandaji said what Sri Ramakrishna meant by this comment was that as a spiritual aspirant his level was very low and the Master was pouring spiritual power into him, while he was massaging His feet.

Girish Chandra Ghosh was a great dramatist, actor, song composer, and very intelligent, but at the same time, he led a Bohemian lifestyle indulging in secular joys. He would say that wherever he sat, not only would that spot become impure, but that deep layers of the earth below would also become impure. Later on, by Sri Ramakrishna's grace, Girish became a saintly man. He became so pure that it is said one day after the death of Sri Ramakrishna he went to take a bath in the Ganga, something he rarely did. As you know Hindus believe that bathing in the Ganga cleanses the impurities of the bather. Well, Girish, a well known figure, was seen muttering something as he stood in the water and a curious bystander approached to listen. Girish was saying, 'Now, Mother Ganga, don't think I have come to you to bathe away any impurities, because by Sri Ramakrishna's grace I am already pure. Rather, I am bathing to purify you.'

These few illustrations, and there are many more like them, help give us but a glimpse of the infinite power that Sri Ramakrishna possessed.

Infinite Knowledge

Though the Master had little formal education and never formally took up the study

of scripture, remarkably, many religious scholars of the day would come to him to clear their doubts. How rare is such a thing! Does the scholar seek an audience with a nearly illiterate man to learn something? The difference here is that Sri Ramakrishna was not a scholar, but a realized soul. It is said in scripture: 'When a man realises Truth, all the knots of his heart are cut asunder, all his doubts vanish.'

As Sri Ramakrishna would say, the realized soul gets his supply of knowledge from the Goddess of Learning. He is never want of any knowledge. One may feel the supply has been exhausted, then supply comes. For example, there was the problem of how the concepts of a personal God and an impersonal God could be harmonized. In India there was a lot of arguing between scholars and religious groups on this issue over hundreds of years, but no satisfactory solution could be found.

Sri Ramakrishna solved this theological question by his rare spiritual insight with the simplest of examples; water in its different states. One cannot really see water in its primary state, that is H₂O. As enough molecules accumulate it becomes formless water, yet we can see it; cooled to ice, again we can see it with form, but again, as vapor we cannot see it. In the Gospel there is the example of many coming to the same pond for water; the Hindu fetching jal; the Muslim fetching pani; the Englishman fetching water; a Roman fetching acqua; a Japanese fetching mizu. Yet it's all the same water. Sri Ramakrishna did not learn this from scripture. He had the power of observation based on realisation and of knowledge that came from the Divine Mother.

May Sri Ramakrishna Bite Us All

As I said at the outset, we are soul, Sri Ramakrishna is a Super Soul; he is a magnet and we are iron, that is why we feel irresistibly attracted to him. I will close with an apt simile Sri Ramakrishna said about

(con't page 6)

Sri Ramakrishna (from page 3)

himself. He said he was like a cobra, a very poisonous snake. When such a snake bites a frog, the frog is sure to die sooner or later. What is the difference between a snakebite and being bitten by Sri Ramakrishna? When a snake bites, the person dies. When Sri Ramakrishna bites us we become 'amrita' immortal. Do not be afraid, the difference is life and death.

• Thought of the Month •

"Knowing others is wisdom;
Knowing the Self is enlightenment."

... Tao Te Ching

It is my sincere prayer on this auspicious occasion, Sri Ramakrishna's birth celebration, that Sri Ramakrishna may bite us all, so we become 'amrita' - immortal. •

Religion and Non-Religion

Discourse at Mitakesan Summer Retreat

This is Part 2 of a 2-Part report on a discourse Swami Medhasananda gave at the Summer Retreat of 2012. (Part 1 appeared in the March issue.)

Part 2

4. Advice to those who cannot believe in God

Some who cannot believe in God are in doubt wondering why horrible natural disasters occur if God is there, because God is expected to always take care of His children and not create problems for them. They get grumpy and complain about God, without taking into account the whole picture of God; that God creates, preserves, as well as destroys.

Moreover, death is not total annihilation. In the Bhagavad Gita there is a verse that says death means the soul is taking a new body, just as people take off old clothes and put on new ones. An individual soul changes its body until it becomes realised. In other words, we keep developing ourselves by putting on a body of new clothes and gaining strength and motivation for reaching our goal of realisation.

If there is any message from God conveyed to us through happenings like earthquakes and tsunamis, I think probably it is that we have to change your current way of life. If you live focused only on that which is temporary, you will be afraid of earthquakes

and tsunamis and be stressed out with fear. God's support is said to be eternal, strong and omnipresent. God looks after us even after we die; though in a different way. So let us not be afraid of death, but just leave it to God and be peaceful.

You may complain, 'Why does God give me trouble?' But had there been no troubles, you would not have worked really hard to solve them. You would have remained at the same level from birth to death. Just look back and think about yourself. Didn't you work harder when you had a problem? Didn't you pray more deeply when in trouble? God has the purpose of making us wiser and stronger. In fact we learn from our mistakes and troubles. By doing so, we will grow stronger and wiser. We understand later on that a problem was actually a blessing from God. Moreover, when we have trouble, it can expiate the effects of bad Karma.

5. Various aspects of God

What aspects does God have? One of His aspects is Pure Consciousness. What is this consciousness? We have consciousness otherwise we could do nothing. Our body, senses, mind and intelligence are all mat-

(con't page 7)

Religion and Non-Religion (from page 6)

ter, and that which activates them is consciousness, known as soul at the micro-level and God at the macro-level

The second aspect of God is that which is consciousness and has qualities like omniscience, omnipotency, omnipresence, kindness and love. This is the idea of God according to Christianity and Islam.

A third aspect of God is consciousness that has both qualities and form. For example in Shintoism, there are Amateras-omikami, or the Goddess of the sun, and Benzaiten, or the Goddess of knowledge, art and beauty. In Hinduism, there are also many Gods and Goddesses, like Shiva, Vishnu, and Durga. But in Judaism, Christianity and Islam there is no concept of God with form.

The forth aspect of God is a human incarnation who appears in the time of disruption to guide people in the path of peace, joy and spiritual realisation. Examples of this are Krishna, Buddha, Muhammad, Jesus Christ and, in the modern age, Ramakrishna. Moreover, Krishna appeared in the two aspects of himself and Radha, and Ramakrishna of himself and Holy Mother - the same existence but two different aspects. This concept is about the Son of God referring to Jesus in Christianity; the Prophet to Muhammad in Islam; and 'Avatars' in Hinduism.

According to some religious traditions followers are to believe in one and only one of these various aspects of God and none other. But Hinduism believes in all these aspects of God and accepts them as true. Though as an individual you are one, you have several aspects of your existence, such as a child to your parents, a father to your children, a spouse, a customer and an office worker. All of them are you. Likewise, Hinduism has a comprehensive idea that God appears in different aspects, all of which should be believed in as God. This gives you choices as a devotee to believe in

one aspect of God or more than one aspect according to one's own capacity and preference.

6. How to realise God

Then what practice should we specifically do to process milk into butter, that is, to realise God with the three tools of verification: scriptures and experiences of saints, logic, and one's own experience? The first step towards being spiritual is being moralistic. That is, to become pure both in body and mind. Through this process, Atman, or the Pure Consciousness hidden inside us, starts revealing itself and shining forth.

There are various kinds of yoga and it will be good to practise one or a combination of them. What matters is purification of the mind and concentration on God; the practise of which is the core of all yogas.

Now let us briefly describe each yoga:

Bhakti yoga: The path of love or faith and devotion to turn all of our love and feelings from secular things and towards God, and to realise Him.

Raja yoga: Yoga of meditation. Through control of mind and senses and focusing on our inner self through deep meditation and to realise Him.

Jnana yoga: Path of knowledge or discrimination. It discriminates between what is eternal, infinite and absolute, and what is not. It rejects temporary and finite things through the process of negation or *neti neti*, (not this - not that) until mind is totally focused and becomes one with the Absolute.

Sahaja yoga: A simple yoga that does not require long meditation or performing complicated rituals. It is continuous repetition of God's name (japam). Whether you are working, eating or taking a bath, one part of your mind is engaged in Japam. Thus, you will eventually keep repeating

(con't page 8)

Religion and Non-Religion (from page 7)

His name twenty-four hours a day, even when you are sleeping. That is the supreme state of Japam.

Here at this retreat, we spend each day according to a fixed daily schedule: getting up in the morning, meditating, singing devotional songs, doing yoga asana, studying spiritual books, making offerings to God, singing devotional songs and doing meditation again. Thus, we are practising a bit of various yogas every day. This is what is called 'Harmony of Yoga' and this is how we practise at our Kyokai (Society). By putting into practice a variety of yogas at the physical, sensory, mental, intellectual and spiritual level, the whole "I" is being purified. Thus, we can practise yoga in a balanced and less stressful manner. Moreover, we should do work as well as possible without being worried about results, and to finally offer the results to God. By doing so our work itself becomes spiritual.

Our problem is we do not change even though we read spiritual books and hear spiritual discourses. This is because our mind does not like change. Intellectually we understand the need for change, but our minds do not want to change our current way of life, since such changes would curb its freedom. So one needs a lot of effort to motivate one's mind. For example, we must persuade our mind that among all investments meditation is most profitable, as it yields the greatest results. It helps control our mind, make it peaceful, better our human relationships, and enables us to perform our duties better.

7. God's Help

It is true that if we sincerely seek God's help with our troubles, God sends help though it may not be in a way of our liking. Here is another story. One day there was a flood and water rushed into a town. A man, who is a devotee of God, climbed to the roof of a building waiting for rescue. A rowboat came to help him, but he declined

saying "I am a devotee of God. I believe He will come and save me." Next, as the floodwaters rose higher a motorboat came to rescue him, but again he refused saying, "God will come and save me." The water level kept rising up higher and higher. Finally, as he was about to drown a helicopter came, but still he declined saying, "God will come." The man later drowned.

After death the devotee went to heaven and was brought before God. Upon seeing God for the very first time the devotee said, 'Lord, I am piqued with you. You are supposed to come and help your devotees when they are in trouble. Although I have such a deep faith in you and wanted you to come, you did not come to help me.' God replied, 'My son! I sent people to help you three times. Firstly by boat, secondly by motorboat, and finally even by helicopter, but you did not realise it and refused my help each time. What more should I do?'

How God helps us we sometimes do not know. He helps us in different ways and sometimes even in strange ways. The famous playwright and actor, Girish Chandra Ghosh, was one of Sri Ramakrishna's foremost householder devotees. He once remarked significantly, "There's grace of God when God fulfils our prayer, but there's the greater grace of God when sometimes God does not fulfil our prayers." This is a profound statement which we must ponder in the light of our past experiences to understand its import. Nevertheless, generally speaking God sends His help when we are in deep trouble and pray.

Let me tell you another story to illustrate this: A man was swimming in the sea when he was carried way offshore by a strong current. He did not believe in God at all. However, being tossed about by high seas he prayed from his heart. 'I am going to die. Is there anyone who can save me in this situation?' Strangely enough a dolphin appeared and started pushing him back to shore. When he was out of danger, the dol-

(con't page 9)

Religion and Non-Religion (from page 8)

phin disappeared again into the water.

8. Whether God is Necessary or Not

For most people God is necessary because they need some supernatural being to help them in times of trouble or danger. Thus, they need consolation, support and shelter in their tumultuous journey through life which they find in God. He is also looked upon as a great source of peace and comfort in those hours of tremendous agony. These are not, however, the only reasons we need God. There is a greater purpose in our need of God. We need God because the purpose of life is to know Truth, without which our lives cannot be fulfilled. God is

that Truth which is also Existence, Knowledge, and bliss Absolute.

Finally, you may like the word 'God' or not; you may believe in God or not; you may visit a temple and worship a God or not; you may read scripture or not, it matters not much. What really matters is that one not focus on transient things alone, because one really needs to focus on that which is eternal as well. This 'eternal' is what God stands for, and this is the only way to the abiding peace and joy which everyone craves.

(Nobori, Mitakesan, 28 July to 29 July 2012)

This talk was translated from the original Japanese report by Ms. Miwako Tanabe by Ms. Satsuki Yokota.

• A Story to Remember •

Life and a Mayonnaise Jar

A professor stood before his philosophy class and had some items in front of him. When the class began, wordlessly, he picked up a very large and empty mayonnaise jar and proceeded to fill it with golf balls. He then asked the students if the jar was full. They agreed that it was. So the professor picked up a box of pebbles and poured them into the jar. He shook the jar lightly. He then asked the students again if the jar was full. They agreed it was.

The professor next picked up a box of sand and poured it into the jar. Of course, the sand filled up everything else. He asked once more if the jar was full. The students responded with a unanimous "yes". The professor then produced two cups of coffee and poured the entire contents into the jar, effectively filling the empty space between the sand. The students laughed.

"Now" said the professor, as the laughter subsided, "I want you to recognize that this jar represents your life. The golf balls are the important things ... your faith, compassion, truthfulness, morality; things that if everything else was lost and only they remained, your life would still be full. The pebbles build upon these, they are the other things that matter, like your family and relationships, and health. The sand is everything else ... all the small stuff, your position, possessions, and fleeting desires."

"If you put the sand into the jar first," he continued, "there is no room for the golf balls or the pebbles. The same goes for life. If you spend all your time and energy on the temporal and fleeting things of the world and your life, you'll never have room for the things that are important. Pay attention to the things that are critical to your true happiness and well-being. Take care of the golf balls first, the things that really matter. The pebbles come of their own. Set your priorities, the rest is just sand."

One of the students raised her hand and inquired what the coffee represented. The professor smiled. "I'm glad you asked. It just goes to show you that no matter how full your life may seem, there's always room for a couple cups of coffee with a friend."

(author unknown)

More photos from Sri Ramakrishna Birth Celebration Sunday, March 17, 2013



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