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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

SEPTEMBER Calendar

Birthdays

Swami

Advaitananda

Wednesday,
4 September

Swami

Abhedananda

Saturday,
28 September

Kyokai Events

• Satsanga in Sapporo •

Date: 1 September
Place: See www.vedanta.jp

• Satsanga in Tajimi •

Date: 8 September
Place: See www.vedanta.jp

• September Zushi Retreat •

Talk by
Swami Medhasananda
Sunday 15 September 11am
All are welcome to attend!

• Satsanga in Kumamoto •

Date: 23 September
Place: See www.vedanta.jp

• Namaste India •

Dates: 28~29 September
Place: Yoyogi Park Tokyo

A special exhibition on the Japan - India Relationship and Okakura Tenshin and Swami Vivekananda on the occasion of Swami Vivekananda's 150th Birth Anniversary.

Don't forget to visit the

Ganga Bookshop!



✧ Thus Spake ✧

"Bondage and Liberation are of the mind alone."

— Sri Ramakrishna

"Strive to still your thoughts. Make your mind one-pointed in meditation."

— Sri Krishna

Swami Vivekananda 150th Birth Anniversary
Opening Celebration June 9, 2013 Indian Embassy, Tokyo
Guest Speaker

A PLEA FOR INTER-RELIGIOUS HARMONY

By Dr. Yasuaki Nara

Former Chancellor of Komazawa University
Director of the Society for the Promotion of Buddhist Studies
"Seido" (Educational Advisor) of Sotoshu Main-temple Eiheiji

My first encounter with Ramakrishna and Vivekananda occurred in 1956, when I had gone to India to study at Calcutta University. Many of my close friends were followers of theirs, and besides, I myself was drawn to their movement and I learned a great deal from them. They had, so to say, instilled fresh vitality into the ancient tradition of Hinduism, a tradition that is now synonymous with India. In 1983, I published a book on the life and teachings of Ramakrishna.

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Inter-Religious Harmony (from page 1)

The truths I learned from these two religious celebrities are many, but perhaps the most vital of all would be the fact that the various religious traditions of the world basically have the same root. The metaphor where the water from a reservoir may be referred to as 'jala' or 'pani' or 'water', but whose substance is still the same, is today employed as a guiding principle for inter-religious harmony, and also for those who are involved in inter-religious dialogue. Yet, at that time it was an amazing statement to make, and a truly bold concept, for in those days the general tendency among people was to regard their own religious faith as absolute. Other religious faiths were not merely ignored but were rather viewed as evil or harmful, as something fit to be proscribed or expelled.

Ramakrishna, by means of his religious experiences, firmly believed that the root of all religions was the same and that such belief had been a core of Indian spiritual tradition. We are aware of the following passage taken from the oldest work of literature in the world, namely the Rig Veda: "Truth is one, the wise refer to it in different ways (as Indra, Mitra, Varuna, Agni, and so on)." (1:164.46). It is clear that since then, religious people and thinkers have realised by means of their own experiences, that the source of all religious truth is one.

This is a belief that the Lord Buddha also assents to, when he says:

"Truth is one and there is no second. Therefore a person who realised it would never argue about it with anyone else. However, as religious teachers promote their own personal truths, their explanation about Truth become diversified. That is why they cannot teach the one and the same thing." (Sutta Nipata 884)

What I now say concerns a personal experience of mine. When I was in India from 1956 to 1957, Buddha Jayanti, the 2500th

anniversary of the birth of the Lord Buddha was celebrated on a massive scale, over much of India and Southeast Asia. On that occasion, when I happened to watch a shadow play organised by a student of Patna University, I recall receiving a great shock, for in the play, the Buddha offered a branch of the Bodhi tree to a tall person, and that person was none other than Jesus Christ. Later, he offered the same branch to the Prophet Mohammed, and finally also to Mahatma Gandhi. Of course, we know perfectly well that these four people neither belonged to the same religion, nor did they arise from the same religious tradition. Yet, regardless of the fact that each followed a path specific to his own thought and activity, I realised here that a common truth that was mutually shared lay latent within their hearts, and I recall having been deeply impressed by this revelation.

"Truth is one and the Wise refer to it in various ways." This axiom endorses historically the benevolence and openness to mutual co-existence that exemplify the religions of India. If all religions could be traced to a single source, then conflicts among religious sects become meaningless. In 1893, at the World's Parliament of Religions held in Chicago, Vivekananda stated that no religion has ever been suppressed in India. On the contrary, they have all co-existed in a mood of tranquility. Indeed, a unique feature of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and other religions that have arisen from the soil of India, is their sense of magnanimity.

In our age when discord and conflict among dissimilar social and religious blocs is habitually at the forefront, mutual empathy and concord among followers of divergent religious groups has become a vital necessity, and this is now being pursued in a variety of ways. In this context, the idea that all religions are blessed with a common source, has acquired the great significance.

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Inter-Religious Harmony (from page 2)

A line of thought that is analogous to the notion that 'truth is one', but which takes a new form arising from a different line of reasoning, is today being stressed among the philosophies and religious studies of Western Europe. This is the so-called 'Religious Pluralism', which was mainly promoted by scholars such as John Hick, David Tracey, John B. Cobb Jr., and others. Of these, John Hick, who is an English scholar of religion, has published the book with title such as "God has many Names" (1982). Here we see that in a situation like that of Western Europe, where having a Christian view of the world was believed to be a matter of common sense, the idea that God had many names was not only a radical way of thinking, it also differed widely from traditional Christian teaching. However, in fact, we may even say that it shows a startling similarity to the above-quoted passage from the Rig Veda, that a Single Truth is referred to by the names of several Gods.

There are a variety of causes that led to this emphasis on Religious Pluralism. One of the present-day causes is the fact that the world has now grown smaller, and hence individuals of dissimilar religious beliefs have no choice now but to live together within the same society. Accordingly, if the people of Europe had insisted upon the absolutism of Christianity as they had done in the past, they would definitely have found it difficult to create a society that possessed a system of human relationships that was suitable to our modern

times, or even to live together with people having a religious belief that differed from their own. Besides, today we see that 'Spirituality', which is a religious factor that Christians revere very highly, is available in abundance within the teachings of non-Christian religions. This in turn has inspired the Christian people to evaluate the non-Christian religions much more favourably.

Also, for the purpose of measuring the harmony among the world's religions, we need to reflect on the affinity that exists between Christianity and the non-Christian religions, namely, those religions, which in the past Christians used to refer to as 'heresies'.



Hick is of the view that the attitude of self-complacency that exemplified the Christianity of the past, used to be revealed in statements such as the Catholic utterance that 'outside the Church there was no salvation,' or the Protestant

claim that 'outside Christianity there was no salvation.' According to him, such attitudes revealed a mood of "Exclusivism" on the part of the Christians, and hence they needed to be transcended.

Nevertheless, after the Second Vatican Council that was conducted during the years extending from 1962-1965, and chiefly after the progress of the so-called Ecumenical movement, this adverse mindset of Christians underwent a transformation. While responding to the situation in the world, Christians simultaneously pursued the path towards inter-reli-

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Inter-Religious Harmony (from page 3)

religious harmony and peaceful coexistence. It was in response to this that the trend known as "Inclusivism" arose. In Inclusivism, the spirituality and paths to salvation that are offered by other religions are certainly approved and accepted, yet they are discerned and interpreted within one's own religious tradition. In other words, it is the type of attitude that causes people to make statements such as: 'God loves heretics just as much as he loves us,' or 'a person of deep faith in another religion is a true Christian,' and so on.

In this situation, Hick stressed "Religious Pluralism." This Religious Pluralism does not mean that we should merely accept the existence of other religions and learn to live with them. We may be sure that in the case of religions of a higher existential level religious experience of Reality developed a system of faith and later this faith was conveyed to people of succeeding generations by way of culture. More than the dissimilarities that set apart the world's religions, these people focus on the base that each religion is founded upon. That is to say, it is a transformation of human existence from "self-centeredness to individual faith," to "self-centeredness to Reality," and by so doing we come to realise that the differences we see among the religions of the world, are no more than differences of culture. When viewed from this angle, we see that acts such as mutually blaming one another, or engaging in disputes as to whose religion is superior, lose all meaning.

Dr. Hick adopted as a working hypothesis the premise that there exists just One Ultimate Reality, and those Religions of higher existential levels are based upon it. He believed that the many tribes and nations of the world responded to this Reality in their own unique ways, they developed its concept in accordance with their respective cultural milieus, and finally passed on these concepts to future gen-

erations. That is to say, the 'God' of Christianity, 'Yahweh' of Judaism, 'Allah' of Islam, the 'Brahman' of Hinduism, the 'Dharma' of Buddhism, the 'Tao' of Taoism, and others, are all ultimately this same single Reality that has been experienced in different ways by the diverse tribes and nations. He insists that the way in which we understand this Reality may differ. For instance, we understand it in a personal or impersonal way. Yet, the fact remains, that the Reality we grasp is the same.

In other words, this Ultimate Reality is certainly the One Universal Truth. However, the various other truths that the many religious groups of the world profess are all different forms of this One Truth, and they have been created by their respective cultures. They are truths that each religious group has understood and made its own. Dr. Hick explains this relationship using the following metaphor. Emmy's lover believes that she is the most charming woman in the world. Although this may not be a historical fact that everyone in the world would accept, yet, for the lover, it is certainly a definite truth. It is something he will never deny. In a similar way, although for Christian people the truths of Christianity may be vital elements for the establishment of their faith, yet for people in general, the situation may be different.

Hence, Religious Pluralism is not to be seen as something naïve. It does not mean that we merely accept other religions that are considered as having a higher level of spirituality. Rather, it means that we accept the fact that all religions have grown from that same One Reality, the One Truth that India speaks about. This way of thinking closely approaches the Indian teaching that 'Truth is one, and that the Wise refer to it in various ways.'

Nevertheless however, although Religious Pluralism is just one theory, it has given rise to many dissenting opinions. For in-

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Inter-Religious Harmony (from page 4)

stance, there are some who assert that if indeed there exists only one Absolute Truth, would that not amount to saying that all religions are basically one? Or, would we not be speaking merely of the uniform nature of all religions? Or, are we not adopting a position of Agnosticism? Some even say that the existence of one Absolute Reality should be the result of inter-religious dialogue, and not be something we take for granted before engaging in such dialogue.

This problem reveals the chasm that lies between what people like Ramakrishna and Vivekananda have described as a result of their mystical experiences, and what a theoretical study like philosophy has insisted upon. Certainly, the question as to whether the diverse religions of the world have the same origin or not, or whether the truth on which all religious faith rests is the same or not, is not a question we can easily answer. Yet, I believe that religious dialogue today is moving towards proving a conviction that has long been held by Indian tradition, namely that Truth is essentially one.

I now wish to present as an example a rather lengthy experiment of mine, pertaining to Inter-religious dialogue in Japan:

Since 1967, for a period of 46 years, I have been associated with a dialogue group entitled 'Zen-Christian Colloquia'. This group is related to the earlier mentioned Ecumenical Movement, and its members comprise Buddhists, Shintoists, Christians, and people belonging to diverse other sects. They organise four-day seminar, and also conduct a few times annually smaller gatherings that last for a day, at which about 20 people gather. At these gatherings a few members present their views, concerning a theme that has been decided upon earlier. Some of the themes that have been chosen so far are the following.

- (1) My Inward Journey
- (2) What Real Existence means to me
- (3) Religious Vows and Activity
- (4) Prayer
- (5) Karma and Original Sin
- (6) Love and Mercy with reference to Self and Others
- (7) Beyond Death
- (8) Prayer within Life
- (9) God and Buddha seen from the standpoint of other Religions
- (10) That which is one in diversity
- (11) Religious dialogue and Self-transformation
- (12) Penitence, Pardon, and Reconciliation.

After the talks there arise questions and comments, followed by a free discussion. Very frequently doctrinal issues were debated and at times the discourses even turned academic, but they mainly centred upon the type of religious life that religious people should lead. Here, an attitude of wanting to learn from others prevails among the members, and so no one assumes an attitude of superiority or tries to impose his views on others. Buddhists try their utmost to be good Buddhists, and Christians devote themselves to being sincere Christians. Since the religious beliefs of others are respected, the compassion that the members have for each other too increases. During our excursions, since we had sufficient time, a free exchange of views was permitted. A mood of intimacy prevailed and any topic was considered suitable for discussion, and so we debated over the thinking and lifestyle of modern religious people. In fact, there often spontaneously arose reactions of agreement such as: "Oh, is that what you think? Well, I think the same too!" Here, our concern for others became intensified, and often, on seeing the life that other members led, we were urged us to review our own lives.

Through such experiences we came to

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Inter-Religious Harmony (from page 4)

realise that inter-religious dialogue was 'mutual understanding and self-reform.' At the base of our different thoughts and activities lies an Absolute. This Absolute is common to us all, and it fortifies religious life in each of us. This is something we have no choice but to accept. The words used by Vivekananda during his final address at the World's Parliament of Religions on September 27, 1893, express vividly the form that inter-religious dialogue should take:

The Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, nor a Hindu or a Buddhist to become a Christian. But each must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his own law of growth.

The teachings of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda on inter-religious harmony may vary in part with regard to their line of reasoning. Yet, they have unexpectedly been proved true in far-away Japan, and in other meetings on religious dialogue too such instances and proofs have been witnessed. This is a target all dialogue on religion is bound to reach. In this sense, therefore, those two great men ought to be extolled by their conviction and insight that One Reality can be realised through voluntary learning through mutual dialogue among the believers of different faiths. •

• Thought of the Month •

"Compassion will cure more sins than condemnation."

- Henry Ward Beecher

NEWS BRIEFS

Discourse in Izuka, Fukuoka Prefecture: On Saturday 22 June, Maharaj gave a discourse on "Good and Bad Hopes" at Tateiwa Community Centre in Izuka. The event was organised by Ms. Kobayashi and Ms. Ide, both yoga teachers, and attended by thirty-two people.

Discourse in Fukuoka City, Fukuoka Prefecture: On Sunday 23 June, Maharaj gave a discourse on "Bliss" based on the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita at Kokoro Yoga Space in Fukuoka City. The satsanga was organised by Ms. Sari Miyagi, yoga teacher, and attended by thirty-seven people. It was reported that some comments noted they agreed that 10 per cent of life is sugar and 90 per cent is sand. They were impressed to hear that we need to practice each day to find that 10 per cent of sugar. One noted, "I had never thought about that in day-to-day life. Thank you for helping me realise this." Another said, "I was able to get focused in meditation at the end of the satsanga. It really made sense to me when Swami said that our heart always wants freedom. I will try making it a habit to meditate each day, if even for a short time."

Discourse in Hayama: On Friday 28 June, Maharaj gave a discourse on Indian Culture and Spirituality in Hayama. The event was held at the Isshiki Community Centre in Hayama Town, Kanagawa and attended by about forty people. In the report given by Ms. Kasahara, the organiser, she notes that Maharaj said it was a shame that in recent generations the Japanese do not practice Zen meditation, a Japanese style of meditation, and that meditation is a mental bath which refreshes the mind. Said that some of the audience listened solemnly, while the children looked quiet and relaxed when they heard this.

Discourse at Tokyo Yoga Centre in Shinjuku: On Saturday 29 June, Maharaj gave a discourse on "How to Calm the Mind in a Day-to-Day Life." Twenty-two people participated.



Discourse in Iizuka



Discourse in Fukuoka



Discourse at Tokyo Yoga Center

• A Story to Remember •

Take A Needle To Heaven

There lived a wealthy sheth, but he was a scrooge, mean and miserly. He never spent a rupee, never donated a paise. One day he fell seriously ill and became bedridden. During his whole life, it was said, he had only one friend, his tailor. But unfortunately, he had died a few months earlier. Everyone knew the sheth's days were numbered. One by one his family and neighbours came to pay their formal respects. When the tailor's son arrived, the sheth said, "It seems that I will not last long here. My moment to rise to heaven has come."

The young boy, though only fifteen years old, was very wise. He knew of the sheth's craving for wealth and miserliness. He replied, "O Sheth, my father is already in heaven. He often told me that he wished to sew rich garments for the Lord. But he forgot to take his needle with him. Will you please take this needle with you and give it to him."

"Oh, alright, I'll be happy to do that," he agreed.

The sheth was happy to do anything as long as it did not involve any giving. He took the needle and gave the boy permission to leave. Alone, in his bed, he began wondering "Where shall I place the needle? Pin it in my shirt? No, that won't do. All my clothes will burn away in my funeral pyre. In my mouth. Yes, I'll place the needle in the bulge of my cheek." Then again, he had second thoughts, "But my whole body will be burnt to ashes. How am I to carry this small needle to heaven?"

The more he thought about it the more confused he became. Finally, he called for the tailor's boy. When he arrived the sheth said, "Son, here, take your needle back. I won't be able to take it to heaven."

"But," the boy looked amused, "If you are going to carry all your millions of rupees to heaven, then why can't you carry one little needle?" The sheth's inner eyes were opened. He realised that none of his wealth or property would accompany him after death. He prayed to God to forgive him for all his past wickedness and promised to profusely donate his wealth in charity should he survive the illness. God cured him and he kept his word. He built a grand mandir, fed thousands and comforted many less fortunate people.

Remember that only wealth which is spent in the service of God, His Sadhus, one's Guru and the needy is worthwhile. Our good deeds alone accompany us after death and nothing else will join us.

Tales told by Yogiji Maharaj at www.baps.org

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