



SEPTEMBER 2016 - Volume 14 Number 09

The Vedanta Kyokai Newsletter

NEWS, UPDATES AND MISCELLANY FROM THE VEDANTA SOCIETY OF JAPAN

OCTOBER Calendar

Birthdays

According to the Vishuddha Siddhanta Almanac there are no birthdays of note in October of 2016

Kyokai Events

26th September~
26th October

Swami Medhasananda
visits India.

No embassy talks this October

2, 9, 18, 23, 30 (Sun)

Yoga Asana Sessions

At the Zushi Centre
(from 14:00-15:30)
Please Phone:
(046-873-0428)

29th (Sat)

Sri Sri Kali Puja

at the Zushi Annexe
19:00 Puja,
Pushpanjali (flower offering), Homa Fire
21:00 Prasad
All are Welcome!
Prior notification of
your participation will
be appreciated for
preparations.

(more info page 6)



✧ Thus Spake ✧

“One may gain political and social independence, but if he is a slave to his passions and desires, he cannot feel the pure joy of freedom.”

- Swami Vivekananda

“There is no ignorance outside the mind. The mind alone is Advidya (incorrect knowledge), the cause of bondage, of transmigration. When that (mind) is destroyed, all else is destroyed.”

- Sri Sankara

June Zushi Monthly Retreat 2016

Buddha Birth Celebration

AM Session Talk

“Lord Buddha”

by Swami Medhasananda

Today we celebrate Lord Buddha's birth. Buddhism originated in and spread slowly throughout India and is still prevalent in Tibet, from where it spread to China, Korea and Japan. The spread southward to Sri Lanka led to growth throughout the coastal lands of Southeast Asia. Not only was it a spread of Buddhism, but some Hindu and Indian cultural elements were mixed in as well.

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Lord Buddha (from page 1)

Gautama Buddha was born some 500 years before the birth of Christ and after his enlightenment wandered throughout India for his remaining 40 years teaching his message before passing away at the age of 80. What was it, we may ask, that prompted him to seek self-realisation?

Hinduism and Caste

The oldest religion in India is Hinduism in which there was much room for lots of ritualistic worshipping, including fire sacrifices to be performed by professional priests of the Brahmin caste. Why professional? Because such rituals had many intricacies requiring the setting of the altar, use of mantras and mudras along with the proper application and use of implements of worship, etc., which, if improperly performed, may even bring about the opposite of intended results. Because of this, the caste system bestowed certain inherited rights and prerogatives on members of the Brahmin caste, which eventually became the source of Brahminical tyranny and caste-oppression.

These rituals sometimes included animal sacrifices accruing merits to the sponsor. Though initially such animal sacrifice was not common, later it became rampant, killing many particular animals in the name of sacrifice in expectation of special gain (yajna) in this world or the hereafter.

Moreover, many of the texts of the Upanishads were rather abstract and not understandable by laymen, requiring interpretation by Brahmin scholars who were disciplined and trained in understanding the subtleties of the philosophical tenets presented.

And, finally, while there was support for attaining merits toward heaven by the priesthood, there was little attending to the human condition or to teachings addressing the common

problems facing us in life. So while there was much support for attaining merits in heaven, there was no effort to solve the problems of life, especially those of common folk.

Buddha is Born

It was under such social and religious circumstances that Buddha was born. Religion as taught by Buddha was and is very practical, and he was opposed to two of the then current ideas and practices. He said it was not really necessary for one to study high philosophy for a lifetime, for through such study the ordinary problems of people are not solved, nor do they disappear. Next, He opposed the slaughter of lots of animals in the name of religion for some material gain.



Another problem of the era was caste. Higher castes enjoyed more rights. For example, the punishment for a Brahmin committing a crime is very minor; while the punishment for a Kshatriya, or warrior caste, is harsher; the penalties for a Vaishya are harsher still; but the punishment for the Shudra

committing the same crime is heaviest. So here we have punishments meted out differently based on caste, showing the discriminating effect of the caste system. Buddha was against such social practices.

It is well-known that there was no singular founder of the Hindu religion. The religious experiences of the sages and saints are the foundation of the Hindu religion. However, for the first time in India, Buddha became the soul founder of a religion. Before Buddhism there was Jainism, derived of 24 saints, but not one alone. After that would come Jesus Christ as a singular teacher whose teachings would become Christianity; then Islam as founded by Prophet Muhammad; but historically, Buddha was the first to found a religious tradition.

A Practical Religion: Four Noble Truths

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Lord Buddha (from page 2)

The Buddha was concerned about the practical problems of life, the real sufferings of life, and not in any metaphysical discussion. Buddha addressed these practical problems with practical solutions based on His Four Noble Truths.

First of all there are sufferings. Secondly, there are reasons for sufferings. Thirdly, sufferings can be solved. Fourthly, there are ways to solve suffering. These are the Four Noble Truths; simple and practical. Buddha has also recommended an 'Eightfold Path' to solve the problems of sufferings.

Thus, Buddha's philosophy is quite systematic, too. Some of you may have heard that the Astanga Yoga or the Eight Limbs of Patanjali's Yoga Sutra, seems to be influenced by Buddha's Eightfold Path. This reflects that Vedanta, based on the Upanishads, became systematic in course of time. For example, according to Vedantasara, a treatise on the Vedanta, there are four practices necessary for the realisation of Truth. These are:

1) Six basic practices, (Sixfold Virtues) wherein the basic points of Buddha's Eightfold Path are also explained.

2) To give up the desire to enjoy the pleasures of this world and of heaven.

3) To discriminate between the real and unreal.

4) To desire liberation

The Six-fold Virtues noted above are; Sama, Dama, Uparati, Titiksha, Sraddha and Samadhana. Shama is the centre of control of the mind. Dama is control of the senses. Uparati is satiety. Titiksha is the power of endurance. Shradhdha is intense faith. Samadhana is peace of mind. These virtues require discrimination (viveka) between the real and the unreal; between what is eternal and what is tran-

sient. Such discrimination leads to the ceasing of desires. But there is another desire, the desire for liberation.

Though monasticism was practiced even before Buddhism, it was left for Buddha to make monastic life more systematic. Not only that, He founded the first dedicated monastery to practice a particular founder's teachings in the history of world religions. A large body of monasteries soon evolved here and there in India. Why was such an order of monasteries formed? So that His teachings would not be lost and be formally practiced for realising Truth.

Details of Buddha's first order of monks can be found in Buddhist scriptures, including daily schedules and many strict dos and don'ts for monks regarding their code of conduct, both as a monk and a member of the monastery, and their spiritual practices.

Buddha lived some forty years after his enlightenment and travelled extensively to preach his message and establish monasteries, and, consequently, a large following grew.

Buddha was also the first to establish the practice of proselytising or propagating and preaching. Though Hinduism preceded Buddhism, it was

not a proselytising religion. After Buddha's passing, Buddhist monks spread his message in different countries including Ceylon, Tibet, China and, later, Japan.

The renown Indian monk, Bodhisena, arrived in Nara, Japan in 736 at the invitation of Emperor Shōmu and established Kegon Buddhism. Later Japanese monks would found schools of Buddhism influenced by Chinese studies, such as Kūkai (Kōbō-Daishi), who founded Shingon Buddhism.

Buddha's teachings were in the Pali language, an ordinary folk language spoken by most of the people. At that time the scriptures of

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Lord Buddha (from page 3)

Hinduism, e.g. Vedas, were in Sanskrit, and not the language of common people. The Pali language had derived from Sanskrit, but with different pronunciations.

Regarding Buddha's compassion, although many great saints taught of compassion and mercy, this was a primary feature of Buddha's teachings. Derived from Hinduism, much of Buddha's message was not new, in fact, a serious student study of comparative religions would find lots of these teachings reflected in the Upanishads. But animal slaughtering in the name of performing yajna was rife in India at the time, and Buddha was adamantly opposed to it. So much so, that to save the life of a goat or a lamb, Buddha would even offer His own life in exchange. Buddha's message of compassion is unique in the history of world religions and Swamiji (Vivekananda) greatly appreciated this aspect of Buddha's teachings.

Buddhism's Decline in India

Believers in Buddhism and many Japanese ask why Buddhism, since it was born in India, did not survive in India. This can be explained from the Hindu perspective that not much new was presented in Buddha's teachings, as we have already discussed. Hindus respect and worship Buddha for His personality, realisation, compassion, and for bringing a lofty philosophy to the common man, but not as the founder of an absolutely original philosophy. Buddha is accepted and revered as an incarnation of God in India. It is interesting to observe that while he is revered by Hindus, his teachings are not revered by Hindus.

Later, there were some other factors that diminished the influence of Buddhism in India, such as some philosophical tussles between Hindu philosophers like Shankaracarya and Buddhist scholars. Finally, Buddhist institutions were devastated by Muslim invaders, who destroyed both many Hindu and Buddhist temples and monasteries alike.

The Middle Path & Eightfold Path

Buddha also taught the 'Middle Path,' which is not to practice too much austerity, nor to indulge in too much luxury or comfort. Here we find some remarkable similarities with Pantanjali's Ashtanga or Eight Limb Path and Buddha's Eightfold Path. What are these similarities? They both include control of one's

body; control of the senses; and control of the mind. However, the credit for systematising spiritual practices goes to Buddha.

Now let us explain what following Buddha's 'Eightfold Path' entails:

1) The Path starts with a 'Right View' or correct understanding of truth.

2) Next is 'Right Resolve.' For example, fulfilling one's vows, like the determination to practice or to control one's desires or negative emotions. The promise to love one another or to show mercy.

3) 'Right Speech' means to tell the truth and not lie. It is said that there are two kinds of lies, white lies and black lies. The white lie being more innocent, and the black lie more serious. A lie is a lie, however. I would suggest that in practice, we do not make such distinctions and give them both up. We run the risk of thinking white lies are of little significance and no problem. For example, If we send someone an email and after two or three weeks ask why that person why he had not replied, he may say, which is rather common, "Sorry, I've been busy." Was he so busy that he could not find even five minutes time to reply? In such cases it is better to practice truthfulness religiously. It is better to simply apologise, than to add a white lie as an excuse.

Another point in 'right speech' is we should not criticise people. Holy Mother disapproved of faultfinding in others, and on the contrary, urged us to rather see our own faults. If we chat about the flaws and shortcomings of others, it not only pollutes our tongue, but we also run the risk of being impacted by the shortcomings of other people. So practice right speech.

4) 'Right Conduct' is practiced in various ways. We should not steal. We should not injure or cause harm to another with violence. We should control our worldly pleasures as much as possible and remain pure in heart.

Some advocate and rigorously practice vegetarianism as a way of practicing non-violence. But if our heart is full of jealousy; full of hatred; full of anger, the practice of vegetarianism is reduced to ritualism. Vegetarianism means that we not only abstain from killing animals, we must also try to make our mind free from jealousy, anger and hatred.

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Lord Buddha (from page 4)

5) Next is 'Right Livelihood,' which means we must earn money in the right way. But if we do not control our need for more money to satisfy our greed, it can impel us to earn money in an unlawful manner. It is also an irony that people with plenty of money, being the victims of greed, often resort to unethical ways of earning even more money.

6) 'Right Effort' means a correct effort. What is this? It means to not allow impure thoughts to arise in the mind. Think positively, not negatively. If one follows negative or impure thoughts, 'right' actions cannot be taken because impure thoughts affect our actions. So we must control both our thoughts and our actions. We cannot stop thinking evil thoughts without practicing to think of good and higher thoughts; some noble thoughts and some spiritual thoughts.

7) 'Right Mindfulness' is always remembering that which is correct. Remember the distinction between the temporary and the eternal. We love our family members; mother and father, husband or wife, brother or sister, our children, and there is nothing wrong in it. But we must at the same time remain aware that our relationships, however deep and loving, are limited to this lifetime. Moreover, we should be introspective; that thing which gives me a lot of pleasure, becomes a great source of trouble in the end.

8) Finally, we have 'Right Samadhi.' This is deep concentration on Truth—a focused concentration on reality. Patanjali's Eight Limbs describes this as Dharana, Dhyana and Samadhi. Concentration, sustained concentration, and perfected concentration to reach Samadhi. In reaching Samadhi or Nirvana all of our impurities have been burned away. Thus, by following Buddha's teachings on spiritual practices, we finally experience Nirvana, the final goal of human life.

Contradictions

Although Buddha did not believe in the Vedas, for all practical purposes the teachings of Buddha have become the Vedas for Buddhists. Furthermore, although Buddha did not believe in a God, Buddha ascended to the position of God for many Buddhists.

Buddha did not believe in the Atman, which according to Hindu scriptures is eternal, but in his teachings we find 'Buddha Nature' or the

'Pure Mind,' which is eternal. In fact, without a concept of eternity in any religion, all its spiritual disciples and their practices become meaningless and purposeless.

As you know, like many other great teachers of religion, Buddha also used many examples, stories and anecdotes to explain or elucidate his teachings. I would like to share a short story as told by Buddha to illustrate the temporariness of this life and the necessity to remain in continuous awareness of this fact:

Once Yama, the Lord of Death, asked a man who had fallen into hell about his evil deeds and whether he had ever met the Three Heavenly Messengers in his life, as God sends these Messengers to warn us of wrong deeds. The man said that he had not met them. Yama told him that he had indeed met them, but that he had not recognised them.

Then the Lord of Death asked if the fellow had ever seen a sick man, an old man or a dead man. Because in seeing the sick man, he should have realised that he too may become sick one day. Yama then asked if he had seen an old man. The man answered that he had many times. Yama remarked that even after seeing old men, he had failed to realise that he too would become old, and that he had better change his ways. Finally, Yama asked if he had seen a dead person. The man answered that he had. Yama rebuked the man again saying that even upon seeing the dead, he had not realised that he too would die some day.

These are the Three Heavenly Messengers, the messengers from God. What about us? Do we not also encounter these messengers? Do we get the message and remember it? Let us ponder these questions, especially on occasions such as today's observance. •

• Thought of the Month •

"God's gifts put man's best dreams to shame."

- Elizabeth Barrett Browning

• Vedanta Society of Japan •

SCHEDULE of EVENTS
OCTOBER 2016

26th September~26th OCTOBER
Swami Medhasananda visits India.

No Indian Embassy talks this October

2, 9, 18, 23, 30th (Sun)
Yoga Asana Session

At the Zushi Centre
(from 14:00-15:30)
Please Phone: (046-873-0428)

28th (Fri)

Nara Narayan:
Service to the Homeless Narayan

Please Contact: Yoko Sato
(090-6544-9304)

29th (Sat)

Sri Sri Kali Puja

at the Zushi Annexe Building

19:00

Puja,

Pushpanjali (flower offering),
Homa Fire

21:00

Prasad

All are Welcome!

Prior notification of your participation
for preparations is appreciated.
Contact: <medhasananda@gmail.com>

30th (Sun)

Swami Medhasanandaji attends

Swami Chidananda

100th Birth Anniversary Celebration

Sponsored by Tomonaga Yoga Institute

Location:

Suginami Public Hall

1-18-13 Kamiogi

Suginami-ku, Tokyo167-0043

For more information and access:
<<https://www.tomonagayoga.org/chidananda>>

2016 Summer Retreat
Fukui and Eiheiiji
Summary of the report by Ms. Atsumi Honda



The Vedanta Society of Japan (Nippon Vedanta Kyokai) held its annual summer retreat at Mirakura-tei in Fukui City, Fukui Prefecture from Saturday 16 July through Monday 18 July, attended by 45 people, 11 men and 34 women.

On the first day, we met at our accommodation location, Mirakura-tei, the Fukui Miyama forest hot springs (onsen) inn, at 4 pm. During the vesper service, Maharaj led a guided meditation saying, "Meditation is important for controlling the mind. It is good to try to be focused and meditate on a spiritual subject at set times each day."

After dinner we gathered and introduced ourselves in turn and Maharaj stated, "At a retreat we do yoga for our body; meditate for our spirituality and mind; and learn for our intellect. I want you to continue to practice what we do here each day even after this retreat concludes."

At 4 a.m. the following morning we visited the nearby Eiheiiji Temple to join the morning service in the hatto or lecture hall. With the grounds of the temple echoing with the sutra chanted by the monks in perfect unison at dawn, I felt purified with the vibration running through me of the ringing bells and chanting. The sound of the rain made the service feel even more spiritual. We then moved to the Joyoden or founders' hall containing the ashes of the founder Dōgen and his successors where we meditated for five minutes.

After we returned to the Mirakura-tei and had breakfast, we chanted from the Bhagavad Gita in Sanskrit and read the Japanese translation in turn. As the topic of the discourses this time was 'Support for Life: Bhagavad Gita,' much importance was put on chanting the Gita. Maharaj gave the first part of his discourse followed by lunch and the second part in the afternoon. The programme went on to yoga asana practice guided by Ms. Ryoko Umeda, a certified yoga instructor. We then went on a walk and conducted evening vespers. After dinner, an evening gathering (satsanga) was held where Maharaj told a story about the Muslim sage and poet, Hafez, to teach us the importance of continuing to do something without stopping even for a day.

The third day began at 5 a.m. with meditation, chanting mantras and reading scripture. Then Maharaj told a story about Shuka and Duka (goddesses of fortune and poverty) saying, "Pleasure and pain are like the two sides of a coin and cannot be separated. If we want a real happiness, we should transcend both and never have attachment to anything." After yoga asana practice and breakfast, he continued his discourse. Followed by lunch, we had the last satsanga where a participant said, "I learnt something new, thanks to the discourse topic of Bhagavad Gita - it is an approach new to me."

At the end of the programme, Maharaj discussed what Swami Vivekananda said on the

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Summer Retreat (from page 7)

day he passed away: “I want to do something for Japan.” “Going forward, Sri Ramakrishna’s teachings are going to spread more deeply. Now is the beginning of the beginning. We are now sowing seeds.” I took this strong message from Maharaj seriously and decided to try to live a more meaningful life.

I thank Ms. Kaori Izumida and Mr. Atsushi Suzuki for taking care of everything from the preparation phase through the end of the discourse. I thank both Eiheiji and Mirakuru-tei. I thank Maharaj for providing an opportunity for us to partake in wonderful spiritual practice. Thanks to the grace of Mother and Thakur (Sri Ramakrishna) we had a harmonious and peaceful retreat.

(This report was translated by Ms Satsuki Yokota)



Vesper Service

Summer Retreat 2016



Bhajans



After Dinner Gathering



Introductions



Dinner



Eiheiji Temple Compound

• A Story to Remember •

The Messiah is Among You!

The Guru meditating in his Himalayan cave opened his eyes to discover an unexpected visitor sitting there before him—the abbot of a well-known monastery. “What is it you seek?” asked the Guru.

The abbot recounted a tale of woe. At one time his monastery had been famous throughout the western world. Its cells were filled with young aspirants and its church resounded to the chant of its monks. But hard times had come on the monastery. People no longer flocked there to nourish their spirit, the stream of young aspirants had dried up, and the church was silent. There was only a handful of monks left and these went about their duties with heavy hearts.

Now this is what the abbot wanted to know: “Is it because of some sin of ours that the monastery has been reduced to this state?”

“Yes,” said the Guru, “a sin of ignorance.”

“And what sin might that be?”

“One of your numbers is the Messiah in disguise and you are ignorant of this.”

Having said that the Guru closed his eyes and returned to his meditation.

Throughout the arduous journey back to his monastery the abbot’s heart beat fast at the thought that the Messiah—but the Messiah himself—had returned to earth and was right there in the monastery. How is it he had failed to recognize him? And who could it be? Brother Cook? Brother Sacristan? Brother Treasurer? Brother Prior? No, not he; he had too many defects alas. But then the Guru had said that the Messiah was in disguise. Could those defects be one of his disguises? Come to think of it, everyone in the monastery had defects. And one of them had to be the Messiah!

Back in the monastery he assembled the monks and told them what he had discovered. They looked at one another in disbelief. The Messiah? Here? Incredible! But he was supposed to be here in disguise. So, maybe. What if it were so-and-so? Or the other one over there? or...

One thing was certain: If the Messiah was there in disguise it was not likely that they would recognize him. So they took to treating everyone with respect and consideration. “You never know,” they said to themselves when they dealt with one another, “maybe this is the one.”

The result of this was that the atmosphere in the monastery became vibrant with joy. Soon dozens of aspirants were seeking admission to the Order—and once again the Church echoed with the holy and joyful chant of monks who were aglow with the spirit of Love.

- from ‘The Prayer of the Frog’ by Fr. Anthony de Mello

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

4-18-1 Hisagi, Zushi-shi, Kanagawa-ken 249-0001 JAPAN

Phone: 81-46-873-0428 Fax: 81-46-873-0592

Website: <http://www.vedanta.jp> / Email: info@vedanta.jp