



JANUARY 2019 - Volume 17 Number 01

The Vedanta Kyokai Newsletter

NEWS, UPDATES AND MISCELLANY FROM THE VEDANTA SOCIETY OF JAPAN

February 2019
Calendar

Birthdays

**Swami
Brahmanandaji**
Wednesday, 6 Feb

**Swami
Trigunatitanandaji**
Wednesday, 9 Feb

**Swami
Adbhutanandaji**
Tuesday, 19 Feb

Zushi Events

10th (Sun) 14:00~16:00

Half Day

Retreat at Zushi

Chanting, Readings on
Spiritual Life,
Discussion, Meditation,
Tea and Snacks

Please Contact:
benkyo.nvk@gmail.com

17th (Sun) 11:00~16:30

* Zushi Retreat *

Swami

Vivekananda Birth Celebration

Mangala, Arati
Puja, Pushpanjali
Lunch Prasad
Discourse/Music
All are Welcome!

See Page 2 for details of
these and other events!

✧ Thus Spake ✧

"A pure mind sees everything pure."

- Sri Sarada Devi

"That which is most needed is a loving heart."

- The Buddha

November Zushi Retreat

The Hymns of Shankaracharya

Part One - The Hymn 'Bhaja Govindam'

A talk by Swami Medhasananda

Before discussing the hymn, Bhaja Govindam, I would like to give some introduction to the composer, Adi Shankaracharya. There are three very famous philosophers of Indian philosophy, one is Shankaracharya, the other two are Ramanujacharya and Madhvacharya. Any teacher, as a matter of fact, is known as 'acharya' and, thus, Shankara becomes Shankaracharya. However, in a special sense, these three are great teachers or 'acharyas'.

(con't page 3)

In this Issue

- | | |
|------------------------------------|---|
| • Thus Spake ... page 01 | • Schedule of Events January 2019 ... page 02 |
| • Monthly Calendar ... page 01 | • Thought of the Month ... page 04 |
| • November Zushi Retreat Talk | • Christmas Eve Celebration ... page 09 |
| The Hymns of Shankaracharya Part 1 | • Commemorating Jesus' Birth |
| The Hymn 'Bhaja Govindam' | A talk by Leonardo Alvarez ... page 11 |
| by Swami Medhasananda ... page 01 | • New Year's Kalpataru ... page 14 |
| | • Story to Remember ... page 16 |

VEDANTA SOCIETY of JAPAN SCHEDULE of EVENTS
February 2019

9th (Sat) 10:00~12:00

Discourse on Bhagavad Gita
At the Embassy of India in Tokyo

(in Japanese only)

Please Contact: <https://www.gita-embassy.com/>

10th (Sun) 14:00~16:00

Half Day Retreat at Zushi

Chanting, Readings on Spiritual Life,
Discussion, Meditation, Tea and Snacks

Please Contact: [benkyo\(dot\)nvk\(at-mark\)gmail\(dot\)com](mailto:benkyo(dot)nvk(at-mark)gmail(dot)com)

17th (Sun) 11:00~16:30

Swami Vivekananda Birthday Celebration

At the Zushi Annexe

06:30 Mangala Arati

11:30 Puja, Arati, Pushpanjali (flower offering)

12:30 Lunch Prasad

14:45 Reading, Discourse

Music program

Special guest: Flute player

16:30 Tea

18:00 Arati

19th (Tue) 14:00~15:30

Gospel Class

At Zushi Centre

22nd (Fri)

Nara Narayan:
Service to homeless Narayan

Contact Sato: [urara5599\(at mark\)gmail\(dot\)com](mailto:urara5599(at mark)gmail(dot)com)

Every Saturday (10:15~11:45)

Yoga Asana Class
At the Zushi Annexe

Acharya

The three great teachers or 'Acharyas' are propounders of three schools of philosophy. The first is 'non-dualism' as propounded by Shankaracharya; then 'qualified monism' as propounded by Ramanujacharya; and the propounder of 'dualism' was Madhvacharya. Very simply explained the differences or themes in these three philosophies are related to the relation between the 'jiva' and



'Brahman', or the embodied Self, jiva, and Brahman or the Ultimate Reality. According to dualistic philosophy the jiva and Brahman are completely separate, like the difference between bamboo and a banyan tree. According to qualified-non dualism or qualified monism the jiva is a part of Brahman, like a wave is part of the ocean or a branch is part of a tree. Then according to non-dualism, jiva and Brahman are the same, an apple tree, a mango tree and a banyan tree are all trees—from the point of trees, all are trees. So from the point of consciousness, the jiva's real nature is consciousness as Brahman is consciousness.

Shankara is the propounder of this non-dualism philosophy, and of all these above mentioned three philosophers, the most famous and celebrated is Shankaracharya. Though he was born in the 8th century, still many devotees, scholars and those with interest in Indian philosophy, know of and study in varying degrees the works of Shankaracharya. There are some twenty to thirty biographies written on Shankara's life and it is difficult to ascertain which of these is the most authoritative. Most of these books are full of miracles related to his life, making it difficult differentiate the actual from imagined incidences. Some scholars have studied all of these biographies to provide some basic descriptions of his life. Shankara was born in 788AD in southern India in the little village of Kaladi in present day Kochi, Kerala. Both of his parents were devout devotees of Shiva.

Unique Traits

Let us share some of the incidences of Shankara's life which may seem to us incredible, but we must remember that in history there are those gifted persons who from birth possess extraordinary and unique traits. Shankara was one such person. At the age of two he had mastered the alphabet and began to show interest in scriptures. He not only studied, but memorised, many verses of the Veda, Vedanta and Upanishad. At the age of three his father passed away, leaving his mother to take care of him. A member of the brahmin caste, he was invested with the sacred thread, a traditional rite of passage of Hinduism, but Shankara was still only five years old. He studied different scriptures under a scholar and himself became a great scholar. There are six major philosophies in India and Shankara mastered them all.

(con't page 4)

Bhaja Govindam (from page 3)

Shankara's mother was fond of bathing in the Purna River and returning with drinking water from the same river. One day as she went to fetch water from the Purna, she became dizzy and fainted. Shankara became very concerned about his mother toiling to fetch water and prayed to Shiva to redress his mother's predicament. Later, the river's course changed bringing its waters closer to Shankara's house by Shiva's grace. Hence his mother no longer had to travel far to either bathe or fetch water. At the age of eight a proposal of marriage came for Shankara. At this he told his mother that he would only live to be sixteen-years old and that he was a born monk, and asked her to allow him to pursue the life of a sannyasi. His mother could not agree, however, out of tremendous affection for her child.

Thought of the Month

"The time is always right
to do what is right."

- Martin Luther King, Jr.

One day as they were both began to bathe in the Purna, a big crocodile suddenly attacked Shankara. As he tried to fight off the attack he was dragged to the deeper water. The mother began shouting in fear and desperation and Shankara shouted back that if she would give her permission for him to become a sannyasi, the crocodile would let him go. Naturally, a son's life is very important to a mother, and she quickly gave him permission. Interestingly, immediately thereafter the crocodile let Shankara go and disappeared into the depths. With the permission of his mother and knowing he would only live to the age of sixteen, he decided to leave home at the age of eight. His mother declared that she had given her permission under the proviso that he must return to her when she was on her deathbed—though according to orthodox monasticism, once vows of renunciation are taken, contacts with hearth and home and parents are not to be maintained. Shankara, however, agreed to her terms as he left.

Guru Govinda

There was a great teacher of Vedanta scriptures named Govinda Pada. He was a staunch non-dualist and an erudite scholar. Shankara went to him and prayed that he impart to him the knowledge of Brahman and make him a sannyasin. Looking at the boy, Govinda asked young Shankara who he was. According to another theory, Govinda already knew that Shankara was to become his disciple. Whatever the case, Shankara gave a very significant answer saying, 'O great teacher; I am not earth; I am not water; I am not ether; I am not fire; I am not wind; I am not senses; nor am I a body; I am beyond all these things; I am Shiva; I am Paramatman.' Govinda Pada was highly impressed with this answer from an eight-year-old and agreed to teach him Vedanta and made him a sannyasi. Upon becoming a sannyasi Shankara began his practices in earnest.

Irrespective of the climate or the weather Shankara would be immersed in meditation and samadhi for days. Being immensely pleased with this deep spiritual practice, Govinda said, 'My son, you have achieved your goal. You have attained realisation and truth, and now must begin the life of an itinerant monk. First, you go to Varanasi.' Let me say here that the official seat of Hinduism is Varanasi—a great place of pilgrimage where many monks, spiritual speakers, scholars of scriptures and devotees lived. These philosophers belonged to many schools of philosophy, and Shankara's guru, Govinda asked him to go and teach the non-dualism philosophy and to write a commentary on the Brahma Sutras there.

(con't page 5)

Teachings and Compositions

The Brahma Sutra is an aphorism wherein the non-dualism of Vedanta has been propounded by the great and scholarly sage Vyasa, like Pantanjali's Yoga Sutra. As the Yoga Sutra is the aphorism of the philosophy of Yoga; as Narada's Bhakti Sutra is the aphorism of the philosophy of devotion; similarly, the Brahma Sutra is the aphorism of the Vedanta philosophy. All these aphorisms are so very precise and abstruse, that unless the verses are accompanied by a commentary, an ordinary reader cannot understand them at all. After the Sutra, the next form of writing is the commentary or Bhasya, for example the bhasya on Pantanjali's Yoga Sutra was written by Vyasa. In the same way, the Brahma Sutra commentary, the 'Brahmasutrabhasya', was written by Shankaracharya.

According to the instruction of the guru, Shankara went to Varanasi and there started preaching the non-dualistic philosophy. Many scholars of other schools of philosophy being impressed by his scholasticism and his light became Shankara's disciples. He then began visiting many other places throughout India, finally going to the Himalayas. There are many famous places of pilgrimage in the Himalayas such as Kedarnath and Badrinath. Sage Vyasa, who composed the Mahabharata, also once lived in Badrinath. There in the calm and serene atmosphere of the Badrikashram, Shankara began to compose his commentaries of scriptures. Knowing he would not live long he devoted all his time and energy in undertaking this task.

Shankara composed three types of scripture. One type were commentaries (bhasya) such as the Brahmasutrabhasya we discussed earlier. First he composed the Brahmasutrabhasya; then he wrote a commentary on the Bhagavad Gita. He also wrote a commentary on twelve of the most important Upanishads, such as the Kathopanishad. When we read these commentaries of a thirteen-to fifteen-year-old, we are in wonder and awe how one so young could produce such wonderfully profound philosophical ideas and such deeply penetrating arguments, while at the same time being so rationalistic.

Along with these commentary (bhasya) scriptures, Shankara also wrote auxiliaries to Vedanta philosophy—texts to guide us to an understanding of Vedanta. These treatises help us through the depths of Vedanta philosophy—the most famous of which is 'Vivekachudamani' (The Crest Jewel of Discrimination) a guide through Advaita Vedanta. Another is 'Upadesasahasri' (A Thousand Teachings) and Sarva Vedanta Siddhanta the conclusion or quintessence of all the Vedanta.

Hymns

The third type of scripture attributed to Shankara are hymns, which are so beautiful, not only profound, but so sweet and mellifluous that one wants to recite them again and again and feel elated and elevated. Most of these are very famous and many people still love to recite them yet today! Examples of these are, 'Nirvana Shatakam':

mano buddhi ahankara chittani naaham
na cha shrotravijhve na cha ghraana netre
na cha vyoma bhumir na tejo na vaayuhu
chidananda rupah shivo"ham shivo"ham

(con't page 6)

Bhaja Govindam (from page 5)

I am not the Mind, nor the Intelligence nor Ego,
Neither am I the senses of Hearing, Tasting , Smelling or Seeing,
Neither am I the Sky, nor the Earth, nor Fire nor Air,
I am Ever Pure Blissful Consciousness; I am Shiva, I am Shiva,
Ever Pure Blissful Consciousness.

Another hymn is 'Kaupeena Panchakam', a hymn dedicated to monastics, saying that one who becomes a monk is so very fortunate begins with the verse:

Vedantha Vakhyeshu Sada ramantho,
Bhikshannamathrena trishtimantha,
Vishokamantha karane charantha,
Kaupeenavantha Khalu bhaghyavantha

Monks, always happy to study Vedanta,
Content with food he gets by begging,
Joyously moving about without any sadness of heart,
Clad in loincloths they are very fortunate.

Another hymn is 'Annapurna Stotram'; every morning at the Annapurna Temple in Varanasi Shankara's hymn on Annapurna is played. It begins thus:

Nityanandakari varabhayakari saundaryaratnakari
Nirdhutakhilaghorapavanakari pratyaxamaheshvari
Praleyachalavanshapavanakari kashipuradhashvari
Bhiksham dehi kripavalambanakari matanapurneshvari

Oh! Mother Annapurna! Support of compassion,
Bestower of eternal happiness, the donor of gifts and protection,
Ocean of beauty, Destroyer of sins and Purifier,
Great goddess, grant us alms.

At one time Shankara would not believe in Primordial Energy. He believed only in Brahman and would not agree to the Shakti, the primordial cosmic energy of Brahman. At that time, according to him Brahman was the only reality and all other phenomenon was nothing but illusion. Then in Varanasi he once became very sick and was sitting on a ghat of the Ganga when he suddenly felt very thirsty and requested some drinking water from a lady nearby. This lady answered that he should go fetch some water himself, to which Shankara replied that he was sick and had no power to move. The lady then commented; 'Why? But don't you believe in the Energy (Shakti).' This lady was actually the Divine Mother, teaching Shankara what Shakti is, and that Shakti is not different from Brahman, but one aspect of Brahman. Apparently there was some lacuna in Shankara's understanding and Mother in her kindness taught him this lesson. From that moment though still an Advaita Vedantist, he believed in the Divine Mother and made room for the worship of and devotion to gods and goddesses in his philosophy. One example of this is the hymn 'Bhaja Govindam'.

Lifetime Doubled

Bhaja Govindam (from page 6)

Knowing he would only live for sixteen years Shankara was in a hurry to compose all he wanted to. It is said that the sage and author Vyasa, appeared before Shankara interested to hear what he wrote in his commentary 'Brahma Sutra'. Being so very pleased with Shankara's commentary he granted Shankara another sixteen years of life to fulfil more of his mission to teach Vedanta.

Travelling again throughout India he encountered many scholars of different schools including Buddhism, and entered into philosophical debates with them. His only condition was that if he was defeated by someone in a debate, he would be obligated become their disciple, but should defeat an opponent, that opponent would become Shankara's disciple.

In the social and religious backdrop of the era that Adi Shankara lived, the genuine ideas of Hinduism had nearly been lost. At that time Buddhism had spread all over India and held great influence upon society and religious thought, but this Buddhism was not pure Buddhism. It had become very abstruse and people could not understand what philosophers meant by Buddhism, by Nirvana and other such ideas. Some horrible and unethical practices of Tantra had developed in the guise of Buddhism. Jainism, too, had become abstruse and few were clear about what was meant by Reality in this philosophy. Also in the name of Hinduism either more ritualism or some abstruse and unethical practices came about. So the mission of Shankara was to revive genuine Hinduism based upon the Vedas and Upanishads. This could not be accomplished unless he defeated the philosophers of the other schools, Buddhism, Jainism, and others prevalent at the time.

As instructed by Vyasa, Shankara continued his mission with full fervour by going to various places and inviting scholars of other than Advaita Vedanta and established the profoundness of Advaita. Shankara also had monastic disciples and together they visited many places preaching Vedanta. Shankara also requested the local kings, chiefs and rich to establish inns to provide shelter for pilgrims, along with alms houses, hospitals and other such philanthropic works.

Other Works

While engaged in his mission Shankara suddenly felt that his mother was near her deathbed and he quickly returned home to care for her and reveal to her her chosen deity, Govinda. When she passed away a traditional ritual for the departed soul and cremation was to be held, requesting the local villagers for their help. The villagers did not cooperate, however, saying that as a monk and outcaste he should not take part in such ritualism. The result being that Shankara himself attended to it all.

To provide a stronger foundation to Hinduism and monasticism he performed additional works. To this end he established four major Mathas (ashrama) where monks could stay and worship in four corners of India, one in the north (Badrinath), south (Sringeri), east (Puri), and west (Dwaraka). In Mysore (South India) there is a river called the Tungabhadra. On the bank of this river he established Sringeri Matha. In Puri in the east on the coast of the Bay of Bengal he established the Govardhana Matha. In the west he established the Sarada Matha in present day Gujarat. In the north in Uttarakhand at Badrinath he established Jyotirmath on the bank of the Alakananda River. These were established for

(con't page 8)

Bhaja Govindam (from page 6)

the study of Vedanta philosophy and spiritual practice, and to guide the followers of Hinduism of all four corners of India. To this day these four established Matha continue in this purpose.

Shankara also organised and started ten sects of Hindu monks known as the Dashanami Sect of monks. These are known Tirtha, Bana, Aranya, Giri, Puri, Bharati, Parvata, Sagara, Saraswati and Aashram. The Ramakrishna Mission monks for example belong to the Puri Sect, because Sri Ramakrishna's guru was Totapuri of the Puri Sect.

Finally, Shankara went to Kedarnath where, according to one theory, he entered a cave and never came out. At any rate, at thirty-two years old, Shankaracharya passed away as predicted, bequeathing a treasure house of scriptures and an organised Hinduism.

Shankara's Philosophy

What is the essence of Shankara's philosophy? We already mentioned that there are three schools of Vedanta, Advaita (non-dualism), Vishishtadvaita (qualified non-dualism or qualified monism) and Dvaita, dualism. Shankara was a propounder of the Advaita school of Vedanta accordingly to which the jiva and Brahman are one. But though the jiva is one with Brahman, under the influence of Maya he forgets his identity with Brahman and wrongly identifies himself with his body-mind complex causing all his suffering and ignorance. He does not realise that whatever he perceives through his senses is all but illusion. On the other hand, what he perceives by his senses he believes to be reality, but in reality it is just an illusion. One, out of egotistical ignorance then superimposes the world on Brahman and considers the world as the only reality. For example, because of darkness, one mistakes the rope for a snake and superimposes the snake onto the rope. The reality is the rope, the snake is but illusion. In the same way people mistake the world as Brahman and think it is the reality. Actually the reality is the world is illusion.

Shankara's Advice

Shankara's advice is to not take all that one perceives, sees, touches, etc., as reality. It is all illusion and Brahman is the only reality. Believing the illusion to be reality brings no end to suffering. If we but realise Brahman, who is the source of eternal peace, joy, knowledge and freedom, as reality, all our sufferings cease and we attain absolute peace, joy, knowledge and freedom. How do we realise this truth? For this one must purify one's heart. One has to remove his body-consciousness, for as long as one maintains tremendous attachment to one's body—both gross and subtle—, we cannot get the idea of the Atman which is pure consciousness. We must remove our body-consciousness so that we can realise our Atman consciousness. By disciplining our mind, body and senses, we can get rid of our body-consciousness. At the same time we have to focus on the Truth or the Reality. That is done by continuous reading and studying of Vedanta; by continuously hearing, studying and meditating upon reality, and by trying to discriminate on what is real and what is unreal—what is temporary and what is permanent—what is relative and what is absolute. The three practices necessary to realise the Truth are to remove body-consciousness; to continuously study and meditate on the Reality; the finally, to discriminate between the Real and the Unreal.

In his Bhaja Govindam, which we will study further, Shankara stresses two spiritual practices, namely, discrimination and focusing on Reality. There are many important aspects of this discrimination in the hymns we will take up, one by one, as we elaborate on this discussion further. •

Vedanta Society of Japan
Christmas Eve 2016

On 24 December 2018, the Vedanta Society of Japan held its annual Christmas Eve celebration once again in the Annexe Building of its Zushi Centre.

The entire altar was framed in green and tinselled garlands with coloured lights and the occasional hibiscus. The items for worship were laid out in front of the altar adorned with flowers, bouquets, leis, candles, cakes, biscuits and fruits with a photo image of Jesus Christ arranged between those of Sri Ramakrishna on the right and Sri Sarada Devi on the left. Centred on the bottom tier was a copy of the depiction of Madonna and Child that upon seeing Sri Ramakrishna had gone into samadhi. At about 7PM the candles on the altar were lit and Swami Medhasananda (Maharaj) commenced a special worship of Jesus Christ.

When the worship came to an end Maharaj asked that 'Joy to the World' be sung. Ms. Shanti Izumida and three other devotees rang in the first chorus of 'Joy to the World' with handbells. Then with a brief keyboard intro the first two English verses were sung by a few followed by Japanese verses sung by all.

Maharaj then read from Matthew 18:1~15 in the 'Holy Bible' in English and called upon an attendee to read the same verses in Japanese. Maharaj then called on the congregation to sing 'Come All Ye Faithful'. Mr. Leonardo Alvarez first led with Latin verses, and the entire congregation joining in English then Japanese verses.

Maharaj then introduced Mr. Alvarez, a Sophia University doctoral candidate, to give a brief talk "Commemorating Jesus's Birthday" in both English and Japanese. (His prepared talk is also presented in this issue of 'The Vedanta Kyokai'.)

When Mr. Alvarez completed his comments Maharaj thanked him for a wonderful talk and pointed out how universal the teachings of Jesus are, if not necessarily the teachings of any particular church. "The same is true with the messages of the Upanisads or Bhagavad Gita," Maharaj continued, "and not the particular views of various Hindu sects. Truth is One, there cannot be many separate truths. There is only one Truth, but it has many manifestations. Sri Ramakrishna coined the phrase, 'As many faiths, so many paths' meaning we should devote ourselves to following a path to find God that we like, and then let us follow it and practice it. We should not nitpick over the details of various scriptures, for in this distraction is where arguments erupt. If we don't practice, then there will be fighting. If we practice then there will be no problem in embracing the devotees of other religions as brothers and sisters. This is why the Vedanta Societies and Ramakrishna Mission celebrate Christmas Eve.

He then asked that the next carol, 'The First Noel', be sung before the congregation spent a few minutes in silent prayer. The celebration programme concluded with the congregation singing English and Japanese verses of 'Silent Night'. Maharaj then thanked all for attending and volunteers for decorating the buildings and altar and preparing the food which was then served in the main building where everyone was invited to enjoy a delicious Christmas prasada dinner with many desserts.

Approximately forty people attended the programme.

Ritual Worship



Bible Reading



Carols



Leonardo Alvarez



Commemorating Jesus's Birthday

A Christmas Eve talk by Leonardo Alvarez

More than two millennia ago in ancient Israel there was a very special couple, Mary and Joseph, who were engaged, but had not yet married. One day, Mary got a visitation by Archangel Gabriel, who told her that she would give birth to a son by immaculate conception, and that she should name Him Jesus, which means, God Saves.

After a few months it was evident that Mary was pregnant. Joseph had not yet been told what Angel Gabriel had told Mary or about the immaculate conception. He decided he would leave her in secret. However, that very night Angel Gabriel appeared to him and told him about the special child Mary was carrying in her womb, and that he should embrace Mary as his wife, which he then gladly did.

At that time, Israel was part of the Roman Empire. Emperor Augustus had ordered a census of all the inhabitants of all the lands of his empire. Where was Jesus born? He is called Jesus of Nazareth, however ...

Joseph was a descendant of King David, and since his ancestry was registered in the temples of Jerusalem, as the head of the family, he had to go along with his wife to register. Since Mary was fairly advanced in Her pregnancy, they had stayed at a midway town for some time, and before they could reach Jerusalem, Mary's water broke. They tried to stay the night at an inn, but it was full. Having been rejected, the only place they could find nearby was an empty stable, wherein Jesus was born, wrapped in a cloth and put into a manger. Then, according to the Gospel of Luke, a group of shepherds, and according to other Gospels, the Magi from the East, were directed by a light in the Heavens to the stable where Jesus lay and rendered him due worship.

What is the name of the town Jesus was born? Bethlehem

In what year was Lord Jesus born? Jesus' year of birth has been set as the year 0 of the "Common Era", or otherwise referred as "A.D.", which means "Anno Domini" or "The year of the Lord".

Summary of His Life Afterwards

King Herod had heard news of a "New King" had been born, and he wanted to kill this new king because he thought only he (Herod) should be king. Joseph was warned by an Angel in a dream to take refuge in Egypt until Herod died. After Herod's death, Joseph was again told by an Angel in a dream to go back to Israel, and the family settled in Nazareth.

There is no record or knowledge of where Jesus was from the of age 12 to 30. The only hint is given in the Gospel of Luke (2:52): "And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and with people". Some modern theories say he was in Arabia and India bringing the Gospel to the Jewish diaspora there. But in truth, only God knows! What is true is that He returned to Jerusalem at the age of 30 and started His ministry thereafter. He taught that the Kingdom of God had come and preached the necessity for repentance, the forgiving of sins, and the need to lead a holy life. He healed countless people, physically, mentally and spiritually, while he was on Earth and afterwards too. His teachings were in stark contrast of that of many of the Jewish priests at that time, who condemned Him to die upon the Cross. Jesus himself stated that His Crucifixion was an act of sacrifice for all of humanity's sins, and that He knew before hand that all these things had to happen.

Commemorating Jesus (from page 11)

Teachings on Prayer

I would say that Jesus' teachings on prayer can be summarised into this: That his teachings are a method to make us return to that state of original purity, in the Image and Likeness of God. The following statements can be linked to this conclusion:

1. "The kingdom of God cometh not with observation: Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you." (Luke 17:20)
2. What he spoke at the Feast of the Dedication in the Temple of Jerusalem: "I and my Father are one", to which He added: "Is it not written in your law, I said, Ye are gods? If he called them gods, unto whom the word of God came, and the scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:30, 34-35), quoting a Psalm (82).

Jesus' teachings on prayer which are summarised in the Sermon of the Mount, show the way for people to realise the above statements. He starts by saying:

1. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

(Commentary) "Poor in spirit" does not mean one is to have a weak will and be feeble. All the contrary, with leonine courage, to give up the self-will, and do God's will. That is the kingdom of heaven.

2. "Blessed are the pure of heart, for they will see God."

(Commentary) In the book of Genesis it is said that man was created in the image and likeness of God. The Jewish word for image "Basalmenu" means "essence". This is called "Imago Dei" in Latin. Hence our essence is really God. However, this 'likeness' has been lost. To see God here means to look at the image of God within us, by removing that which separates us from Him. St. Augustine says that the origin of sin is spiritual, in the sense that man becomes disconnected from God due to his selfishness. As a result, man's spirit goes more towards material things, and this craving engenders lust and greed in man's heart. Jesus teaches that to obtain purity of heart we must free ourselves from lust, and must not be attached to money either. For instance, he says to his disciples "He who looks at a woman with lustful eyes, has already committed adultery" and "You cannot serve God and money".

Concerning Anger

"So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift." (Luke 5:23-24)

(Commentary)

If we interpret the light of what was said in the book of Genesis, that we were all created in the likeness and image of God, if we are angry with our brothers, friends and acquaintances, or if they are angry with us, it really means that God in them or the God in us is angry. Hence we cannot have a free conscience to pray or make offerings to God.

About Making Offerings

"Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven."; "...So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others."; "... your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." (Luke 6:1-4)

(con't page 13)

Commemorating Jesus (from page 12)

(Commentary)

This does not only apply to the hypocrites in the synagogues in ancient times, but it is very relevant for us today. When we do something for others, we should not publicise it. Let us not make it public in Facebook, Instagram, or whatever social media you use. Otherwise the purity of the act will be lost and will be contaminated by the desire of name and fame. If we do it secretly, then God will reward us, with peace of mind and love from Him, from others and for others.

Concerning Prayer

“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others.”... “But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you”... “your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” (Luke 6:5-8)

(Commentary)

Again, we should not make a public display of our prayers, whenever possible. Since otherwise we are expecting to be held in high regard before others, and that is another way of seeking name and fame. Here Jesus tells us to go into our rooms and shut the door, so nobody except God knows we are praying. Then He adds that God already knows what we need before we ask Him for it. If that is so, what is the need to pray? Because we need to be connected with His will, to walk on the path He is laying before us, to receive whatever we need for our lives. If we do not have this faith and self-surrender, we cannot do that.

Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our super-substantial bread.

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And deliver us not into temptation, but rescue us from the evil one. (Luke 6:9-13)

(Commentary)

- This is a very complete prayer. The Father in Heaven, is a symbol used for the masses to understand God. Heaven can also mean, one's innermost self and highest level of consciousness.

- “Hallowed be Thy name” means that we should consider God's name as holy, so that it can actually invoke Him when we call after Him. In fact, in ancient Israel to avoid the vain usage of God's name, they would call God as “Adonai” which means “The name”. If we call upon somebody we know of without showing proper respect, that person may not listen to us.

- “Thy Kingdom come”, is also a metaphor. It means “Thy Kingdom be manifested within me and others”.

- “Thy Will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven.” Earth means the body and mind still living in ignorance, Heaven means the state of perfect union with God. Hence with this prayer, we are asking for God to close in the gap between His will, His state of perfection, and our will and state of imperfection.

(con't page 14)

Commemorating Jesus (from page 12)

- Then “Give us today our daily bread”, which in Latin and Greek reads as “Super-substantial bread”. This signifies that we should ask truly for the bread of Spiritual life. Jesus said “I am the bread of life, who has descended from Heaven. Whoever eats from this bread will have Eternal life”.
- “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us”, points to the fact that in order for us to receive mercy, we first have to be merciful.
- “Lead us not into temptation”, this is an enigmatic phrase, because it is somewhat hinting that God himself can lead us into temptation! But if we interpret it in another way, it means “Let our heart not be apart from Yours, so that we may not fall into temptation”.
- “But deliver us from evil”, God is omnipotent, so if He wants, He can reduce the evil in our hearts to ashes, and make us return to that original state, not of the original sin, but of original purity, when we had both the Image and the Likeness of Him.

Thank you and Merry Christmas.

Vedanta Society of Japan Observes New Year's Kalpataru

On Tuesday, January 1st, the Vedanta Society of Japan observed its annual New Year's Day Kalpataru at its Zushi Centre Ashrama. A few participants who had spent New Year's Eve at the Ashrama and at nearby Holy Mother House gathered in the shrine room from 5AM for meditation and the morning worship. At about 6:50 some watched the sunrise from a large 2nd floor window offering their prayers.

After breakfast Swami Medhasananda (Maharaj) led us on a walk through the quiet neighbourhood streets up to the plateau of a popular excavated hilltop. From there we could see the Shonan Sea to the south/southeast, and this morning to the west a snowcapped Mt. Fuji was in clear view.

New Year's Day this year was also Swami Shivanandaji's (a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna) birthday according to the Vishuddha Siddhanta Almanac. After returning to the Ashrama from our walk, gradually about 30 people had arrived by 11:30 to join a New Year's worship and readings from scripture. Maharaj also gave a short talk touching upon the importance of time before a lunch prasada was served.

At around 2 o'clock Maharaj led the group on a walk to Kamakura where we worshipped at the Great Buddha Statue (Kotokuin), then continued on to pay our respects at the Catholic Church Yukinoshita, and then our final Kalpataru visit to the very crowded Tsuruoka Hachimangu Shrine (Shinto). The participants dispersing thereafter at about 7PM.



Mount Fuji



To Kamakura ->



The Great Buddha

• A Story to Remember •

The Woodcutter's Axe

Long ago, there lived a woodcutter in a small village. He was sincere and honest in his work and daily affairs. Every day, he set out into the nearby forest to cut firewood. He then brought the wood back to a merchant in the village to earn his money. He earned just about enough to make a living, but he was satisfied with his simple life.

One day, while cutting a tree near a river, his axe slipped out of his hand and fell into the river. The river was so deep, he could not even think to retrieve it on his own. He only owned that single axe which was now in the river, and he became worried thinking of how he would be able to earn a living now! He was very sad and prayed so sincerely that the Goddess of the forest appeared in front of him and asked, "What is the problem, my son?" The woodcutter explained the problem and requested her to get his axe back.

She put her hand deep into the river and took out a silver axe and asked, "Is this your axe?" The Woodcutter looked at the axe and said "No, Mother". So she again reached deep into the water and pulled up a golden axe and asked, "Is this your axe?" The woodcutter looked at the axe and said "No, it isn't". She said, "Take another look, my Son, this is a very valuable golden axe, are you sure this is not yours?" The woodcutter said, "No, It's not mine. I cannot work with a golden axe. It's not useful for me".

The Goddess smiled and finally put her hand into the water again and took out his iron axe and asked, "Is this your axe?" To this, the woodcutter said, "Yes! That one is mine! Thank you very much!" The Goddess was very impressed with his honesty, so along with his axe of iron, she bid him to keep the other two axes as well.

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