



OCTOBER 2020 -VOLUME 18 NUMBER 10

The Vedanta Kyokai Newsletter

NEWS, UPDATES AND MISCELLANY FROM THE VEDANTA SOCIETY OF JAPAN

November 2020 Calendar



Birthdays

**Swami
Subodhananda**
Thursday, 26 Nov

**Swami
Vijnanananda**
Sunday, 29 Nov

Zushi Events

We are pleased to invite you to participate in a few monthly Zushi programmes again. Some classes both Streaming and Zoom!

Details on page 02!



✧ Thus Spake ✧

"He who has really prayed to the Lord even once, has nothing to fear. By praying to Him constantly one gets ecstatic love through His grace. This love, my child, is the innermost thing of spiritual life."

- Sri Sarada Devi

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

- Prophet Muhammad

Zushi Monthly Retreat
September 2020 - Afternoon Talk

'Importance of Assimilation in Spiritual Life'

Part 2 of 3

A talk by Swami Medhasananda

[Swami Medhasanandaji launched this topic during the Zushi Centre's July Monthly Retreat and Part 1 was published in our August issue of The Vedanta Kyokai newsletter. Part 2 of this topic was resumed again during the September Monthly discourse, since Krishna Janmashtami was celebrated in August and that talk by the Zushi Centre's assistant minister, Swami Divyanathanandaji, was published in the September issue. Part 2 starts on page 3.]

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Vedanta Society of Japan Calendar of Programmes NOVEMBER 2020

The Vedanta Society of Japan had discontinued general participation of its programmes since March of this year because of the state of emergency declared by the Government of Japan, and also to avoid any risks of contamination in view of the corona virus pandemic.

Since travel restrictions around Tokyo have been lifted, we are glad to announce that we have decided to re-open our monthly programmes for participation to all from July. In addition to our LIVE-STREAMING we will now offer some classes on ZOOM as well, to better facilitate Q&A. Contact us about Zoom at: zoom.nvk@gmail.com

However, whether attendees arrive by public transportation or private vehicle, the following precautionary measures need to be followed strictly by attendees:

1. If you plan to attend scheduled events, please contact: <benkyo.nvk@gmail.com>
2. Wear masks at all times in the Centre
3. Use the hand sanitiser provided at the entrance upon arrival
4. Carefully wash hands with soap and water and gargle with tap water (washrooms)

Swami Medhasananda
President
Vedanta Society of Japan

• ZUSHI CENTRE PROGRAMMES for NOVEMBER 2020 •

- November 7th (Sat) 14:00 pm–16:00pm (Live Streaming and Zoom)
DISCOURSE ON THE BHAGAVAD GITA (in Japanese Only) with Swami Medhasanandaji
Please Note: *The Bhagavad Gita* study class at the Indian Embassy, Tokyo, suspended since March of this year, will be resumed through live-streaming from the Society until further notice.

Also, please have a copy of *The Gita* at hand to follow the Live Stream.
If you plan to attend, please contact: <benkyo.nvk@gmail.com>

- November 14th (Sat) 18:30~20:00 (Livestreaming)
*** KALI PUJA ***
* ATTENDANCE RESTRICTED

- November 15th (Sun)
NO MONTHLY RETREAT AT ZUSHI

- November 22nd (Sun) 14:00pm–16:00pm (Live Streaming and Zoom)
The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna Study Class
(in Japanese Only) <benkyo.nvk@gmail.com>

- November 23rd (Mon) 05:00~20:00
*** AKHANDA JAPAM ***
* ATTENDANCE RESTRICTED
Please Contact 046-873-0428

- November 29th (Sun) 2pm–4pm (Live Steaming - No Zoom)
*** HALF-DAY RETREAT - Zushi Centre (Japanese only)**
<benkyo.nvk@gmail.com>

Assimilation Part 2 (from page 1)

Last time we observed that no matter how often we hear spiritual truths, very few of us absorb these truths in a transformative way. We discussed dhāraṇa, meaning that which we listen to and study we should make part of ourselves. We have heard so many times: *'I am not the body, I am not the mind, I am Atman-pure consciousness.'* Yet, when faced with a dire emergency such as an earthquake, we become overpowered with fear of death or injury and it becomes clear that we have not yet assimilated these teachings on the true nature of our 'Self'.



We also discussed a few instances of those who were living examples of having assimilated the teachings of scripture, such as Swami Shivanandaji. More teachings and observations regarding spiritual assimilation were quoted from *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna (The Gospel)*. Sri Ramakrishna stated that scholars of scripture who fail to assimilate the teachings they propound are not wanting. They may talk on lofty things, but their mind is focused on lust and lucre, name and fame. Then He gives the apt example: *"A vulture soars high in the sky, but its eyes are fixed on the charnel-pits where carcasses of animals are burned."*

Again let me remind you that this idea of spiritual assimilation is noted quite frequently in *The Gospel*, where we are instructed again and again to assimilate spiritual instructions. Failing to assimilate is like eating without digestion, resulting in malnutrition. We may quote from well-known scriptures like the *Gīta*, *Upanishad*, *Chandi*, and so forth, but actually imbibing the essence of these scriptures is quite different. The 'tāla' is a rhythm pattern played on tabla (hand drums) of between six to sixteen beats. These may be quite easy to verbalise, but to actually play these patterns keeping time is challenging. Here again, diligent, sincere and long-term practice is needed. Scholars may quote from the many scriptures they have studied, but many such scholars are not spiritual practitioners. We should not become mere preachers, but practitioners as well. The spiritual aspirant needs to understand and assimilate the teachings to derive real benefit from the study of scriptures.

"Labour a Little"

As a spiritual mentor Sri Ramakrishna always insisted that one should practice, however little it might be at the initial stage. He would often encourage devotees by saying, *"But one must labour a little at first. If we step on the thorn of a bush and it punctures our foot, merely saying 'let that thorny bush be burnt' will not do! We have to set it afire to burn it."* We must do something about it. If we feel hungry and simply repeat, 'I am eating. I am eating,' will that fill our stomachs? No, think about the whole process; one must have money, go to the store, purchase the food, bring it home and prepare it. Then, of course, one must eat it and digest it. Only then do we get the nourishment and strength from the food.

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• Thought of the Month •

"There are only two tragedies in life: one is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it."

-- Oscar Wilde

Assimilation Part 2 (from page 3)

Hence, Sri Ramakrishna wanted us to make at least a little effort, and he did not advise strenuous practices from the beginning. He knew that a moderate approach would encourage listeners to start practice. Nevertheless, such a practitioner soon realises on his own that a little practice is not enough, and that he has to practice further. We cannot urge the person who loves to sleep and is sleeping to get up and run, because he will never do it. Hence, first we must encourage such a person to sit up, then stand and walk, step by step, and if need be, finally, to run to reach the goal. The doctor who tells the critically ill patient that his disease is so serious that he may die soon, may indeed prompt the patient to lose all hope that will accelerate his death. Such psychology has a deep impact on the mind. A good doctor will be honest with the patient about his condition, yet encourage him to take treatments to cure or improve the malady. The patient is then encouraged and mentally strengthened, which is vital for an effective treatment.

Both are Maya's Domains

Sri Ramakrishna also said that in God there are both Vidya Maya and Avidya Maya, and gave as an example: Suppose one is in his room and all the windows and doors are closed—only darkness will be in the room. From the point of spirituality such darkness may be compared with a state of ignorance-maya or Avidya Maya. But if we let sunlight in, that state of ignorance will be transformed to wisdom or Vidya Maya. Sri Ramakrishna said that Avidya Maya is composed of rajas and tamas, and Vidya Maya is composed of sattva. Rajas and tamas lead one to spiritual ignorance, while sattva leads one to spiritual knowledge. While both belong to the domain of maya, they bring about completely different results. For instance, desires, attachments, bondage, anger, pride, envy, violence, disharmony, lies and ignorance are the result of rajasic and tamasic qualities. While harmony, purity, truth, compassion and wisdom are the result of sattvic qualities.

We Do Not Really Want to be Led to the Light

Sri Ramakrishna said, “One must labour a little while at the stage of sadhana (spiritual disciplines).” In the example of being inside a dark room, when Sri Ramakrishna says ‘we have to labour a little’, it implies we must make the effort to get up and open a window or go outside. However, it is more than the simple physical effort of getting up and opening a window. At the beginning of our session we chanted, ‘lead us from darkness to light’ in the prayer Om Asato Ma Sadgamaya, but this darkness and light are not physical darkness and light, but the spiritual.

In fact, the problem is that we do not want to be led to the light, this is our actual problem. We like sleeping and do not like to be awakened. Two relevant quotations in this regard are:

“You can lead a man to a lamp-post, but you cannot make him see the light.”

“You can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make it drink.”

So unless we choose to open our eyes and see the light or drink the water ourselves, being near the light or water becomes meaningless. Then what does exiting the room or opening the windows that Sri Ramakrishna referred to mean? It means ridding ourselves of desires and attachments, learning to become purer, and increasing our love of God. Another example in *The Gospel* is that the sun may be in the sky, but we cannot see it because of clouds, when winds blow the clouds away we can see the sun. The clouds that block our vision of God or Truth are Avidya Maya, rajas and tamas, attachments, desires and so forth, and when we eliminate them by our arduous practice we can see the sun of knowledge. This is the meaning of ‘one must labour a little.’

Keep Practice Private

One way of assimilating the instructions of the scriptures is constant remembrance of God by continuous repetition of the Lord's name. Nevertheless, Sri Ramakrishna instructed that such practice should be done in solitude, away from distractions, and hidden from public gaze. Jesus also gave similar advice when he said 'to anoint your head with oil while fasting so that your fasting will not be obvious to men.'



The showing off of one's spiritual practices is a symptom of the rajasic devotee, while secret practicing is the symptom of a sattvic devotee. Some devotees with a rajasic nature like the wearing of rudraksha beads and other religious symbols to show how spiritually advanced they are for attention. Should they make a donation, they call reporters and pose for photographs so that announcements are published in the newspaper. The sattvic man, however, will meditate out of view of others. Sri Ramakrishna also said that a sattvic devotee may be awake the whole night performing spiritual practices, then sleep in late morning hours. This may make people think that the poor fellow could not sleep during the night and so he is sleeping late, while exactly the opposite is true. Among Sri Ramakrishna's disciples, Swami Adbhutanandaji would often meditate the whole night and nap during the day. He was a living, literal example of a verse in *The Bhagavad Gita* regarding the vast difference between a yogi and ordinary people. Chapter 2, Verse 69 is quoted below:

*yā niśhā sarva-bhūtānām tasyām jāgarti sanyamī
yasyām jāgrati bhūtāni sā niśhā paśhyato muneḥ*

*That which is night for all beings, the balanced individual is awake in that.
And that in which all beings are awake, the person of contemplation views as night.*

Woman and Gold

Sri Ramakrishna often warned of attachment to 'woman and gold' to His male disciples, but He would change this to 'man and gold' when addressing members of the opposite sex. Some casual readers of *The Gospel* have postulated from his frequent use of 'woman and gold' that Sri Ramakrishna had scant regard for women and essentially abhorred them. This premise has no basis in fact, because Sri Ramakrishna respected all women as manifestations of the Divine Mother. He even worshipped His own wife, Sri Sarada Devi, as the Divine Mother. His tantric guru was a woman, Bhairavi Brahmani, and His chosen ideal was Mother Kali, a goddess. However, He would often tell his devotees that one must take special care in early spiritual practice to avoid the company of the opposite sex, as it is natural to be attracted to persons of the opposite sex, and to get attached to them, bringing about the fall of both from the spiritual path. But once one realises God, he sees all people as veritable manifestations of God, irrespective of their sex. He compared the goal of spiritual life to reaching the rooftop. If we want to reach the rooftop we must use the stairway carefully one step at a time, we cannot dance our way to the roof. But after reaching the rooftop patio we may even dance if we so like, without any risk or danger.

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Assimilation Part 2 (from page 5)

Holy Company

Sri Ramakrishna also recommends the holy company of a sadhu or a sincere spiritual practitioner, which will help one to assimilate spiritual truths. When devotees witness the lives of holy ones who lead exemplary lives of spirituality, they become inspired to practice too.

They get a concrete example of spiritual life in the lives of holy men. Scholars, on the other hand, who can quote chapter and verse with poignant commentaries on

scripture, lack the authority of practice. They are like the Ayurvedic practitioner who keeps pots of jaggery (condensed cane juice candy) in his clinic from which he regularly nibbles, but who then instructs his diabetic patient not to eat sweets. The patient, however, thinks that since the doctor is storing jaggery in his room for consumption, it cannot be so bad for his own health after all. The patient does not follow the doctor's advice causing harm to himself. The same thing happens when a spiritual teacher, without practicing renunciation himself, gives advice on renunciation, his listeners will not give much importance to such instructions and will not be influenced at all.



Obstacles to Assimilation

We understand there are obstacles to our assimilation of spiritual truths. According to the *Yoga Aphorisms of Patanjali* there are eight such obstacles, these are vyadhi, (physical illness), styana (mental lethargy) ; samsaya (doubt); pramada (negligence); alasya (lack of vigour); avirati (not abstaining from indulgences in sense pleasures); bhrantidarsana (false perceptions); and, finally, alabdhabhumikatva (inability to hold on even after tangible progress in spiritual life had been made). In recognising these obstacles we can counteract them.

(1) The first is vyadhi, or disease. We cannot practice if our body is suffering from some acute or chronic disease. In this connection, a commentator stated that the cure and prevention of many diseases is possible by regulating one's digest. Good nutrition is also insured by the selection of healthy foods, prepared and consumed in amounts suited to the individual, as everyone's system is different. Eat only after having digested your previous meal. Most diseases originate from either the brain or the stomach, hence we should take special care of these two vital body organs, which are most important for maintaining good health.

(2) The next is styana, or mental laziness or dullness. While many people are not physically lazy, they are mentally lazy. Though we may hear many pieces of beneficial and inspiring advice, the mind does not want to change from its comfortable patterns and way of life with which it has become accustomed to over a long period of time. This is a most dangerous and subtle obstacle of which we should keep special cognizance.

There is a profound saying in Bengali which says: "*We may have the grace of Krishna (God), the grace of the Guru, and the grace of the devotees of God, but without the grace of one, our spiritual life is doomed!*" The grace of that 'one' is the grace of our own mind. That is, unless we induce our mind to transform our life by exercising our will-power and undertaking the necessary spiritual practices, only reading or hearing talks on spiritual ideals is of little value. Hence, Swami Vijnananandaji suggested that we pray to the mind:

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Assimilation Part 2 (from page 6)

'O mind, please be gracious to me, and please cooperate with me so that we may do the practices necessary to progress spiritually.'

(3) Our next obstacle is samsaya or doubt. This doubt has many aspects. We may doubt whether God exists or not. We may doubt whether what we are learning is truthful or not. If I practice as instructed, will I get the results or not? Do the scriptures reveal the truth or not? We may have questions for our spiritual teacher for which we need clarification, and that is fine, but some people are just sceptical and ask questions and doubt for doubt's sake alone.

(4) Pramada means a lack of enthusiasm, and without enthusiasm we cannot proceed.

(5) Alasya means physical laziness. It is the state of tamas, wherein people like to sleep for long periods and do not really exert themselves sufficiently to accomplish much of anything. For those who suffer both alasya and styana there is little hope for them as a spiritual aspirant.

(6) Avirati is non-abstention from indulgences and attachment to sense pleasures. With the eyes, one such attachment is always sightseeing or seeking entertaining movies. With the ears, it is someone who always must listen to music. With taste, they exhibit excessive love of certain foods and their lives are centred on their palate. With smell, some love to use fragrances, perfumes and colognes, to excess. For comfort some require a very soft bed to sleep. There are also people who love talking and gossiping to excess. Some have to keep themselves continuously busy even without any real business to attend to. Others have to continually move here and there and cannot sit quietly. After taking up a spiritual life, unless one is able to break such attachments to the senses and abstain from them, it will be impossible to progress in spiritual life and assimilate spiritual instructions.

(7) Bhrantidarsana means wrong perceptions. This obstacle causes one to mistake the temporary for the eternal, finite for the infinite, relative for the absolute, and attachment for love, mistaking things like close friendships to be eternal, and that the people and things that surround our lives last forever. We may even mistake an incorrect spiritual practice that apparently just arises as attractive, not knowing that it is not proper for us, as we don't have the necessary preparation to undertake it.

(8) Finally, there is alabdhahumikatva, wherein we may make substantial spiritual progress, but fall again because of the rise of ego in us, or self-complacency or laxity in guarding oneself against the pitfalls of spiritual life.

[The discourse ended here to continue with Part 3 during the next month's retreat.]



● A Story to Remember ●

The Warrior's Question

A noble warrior went to the Zen temple seeking peace. Upon finding the master in calm meditation, the warrior was overcome with sadness. Though he knew he had fought bravely and justly his entire life, he feared that he would never possess the grace of the man before him.

"Why do I feel so inferior?" asked the warrior. "I know I have fought with honor, defended the weak, and I have nothing to be ashamed of. Yet seeing you just now, I felt my life had no significance whatsoever.

"Wait a while," said the master, smiling. "I will speak with you after I attend to the other visitors."

The warrior sat beneath a garden tree as visitors streamed through the temple, each one leaving the gentle master with expressions of warmth in their faces. The warrior grew ever sadder.

As night fell and the crush of visitors dwindled, the warrior became distressed and asked the master, "Can you teach me now?"

The master nodded and they walked to the rear study, where the moon shone through a giant window, washing everything in pale white light. "Do you see the moon, how beautiful it is?" said the master. "It will cross the sky, and make way for the sun. The sun is much brighter, and stronger, and can illuminate clouds and mountains and trees in ways that the moon cannot. Yet ... I have never heard the moon complain 'Why don't I shine like the sun, is it because I am inferior?'"

"Of course not," said the warrior. "The sun and the moon are different, each has its own beauty. You cannot compare the two."

"So you know your answer. We are two different people, each fighting in his own way for that which he believes, and making it possible to make the world a better place; the rest are mere appearances."

- Posted by Buddha Groove

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