



SEPTEMBER 2023 -VOLUME 21 NUMBER 09

# The Vedanta Kyokai Newsletter

NEWS, UPDATES AND MISCELLANY FROM THE VEDANTA SOCIETY OF JAPAN



## Thus Spake

What right has a man to say he has a soul if he does not feel it, or that there is a God if he does not see Him? If there is a God, we must see Him, if there is a soul, we must perceive it; otherwise, it is better not to believe. It is better to be an outspoken atheist than a hypocrite.

- Swami Vivekananda

You need not feel junior or senior to anybody. Recognize the Atman in everyone and treat everyone with dignity.

- Swami Yatishwarananda

I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor. If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.

- Henry David Thoreau

## In this Issue:

- Thus Spake ... .. page 01
- Monthly Program Schedule ... .. page 02
- Unselfishness is God (Part 2) by Swami Medhasananda ... .. page 02
- Raja Yoga by Leonardo Alvarez ... .. page 07
- Bhakti Yoga by Venerable Jyoukei Sato ... .. page 11
- Some Photographs from the August Monthly Retreat ... .. page 16
- Story to Remember ... .. page 17

# Monthly Program Schedule

## for

### OCTOBER 2023

18th (Sun)

**Monthly Retreat at Zushi**

10:30 ~ 16:30, Zoom

Speaker: Swami Divyanathananda

22nd Sep ~ 7th Nov

**Swami Medhasananda visits India**

If you have any urgent matter, please contact the Vedanta Society of Japan

## Unselfishness is God (Part 2)

By Swami Medhasananda on 16<sup>th</sup> July 2023

In the pre-lunch session, we closed by asking a question: Who is a better devotee?

In connection with that I shall tell a story. In a certain village, consisting of mostly muslim residents, there lived a priest, who led the prayer of the mosque. This muslim priest was not a very good person. Among the muslims, there is a tradition of saying the namaz five times a day. There was one crazy man in the village, who would never attend the prayers. However, he would sit on the side of the road that passed through the village. If he would encounter a passer-by, he would enquire, 'Are you tired? are you hungry or thirsty?' Some would say, 'Yes', and he would invite that person to his house, request him to rest for a while and offer him food and drinks.

One day, an angel came from heaven with a note-book. The villagers were curious, about what the notebook was about. He said, this notebook contains two lists. One list contains the names of those persons who will go to heaven after death and another list about those who will go to hell. Everyone was interested to know about themselves, about where will he go after death. They were also interested to know about the priest and about that crazy person.

All the villagers were almost sure that the name of the priest would be on top of the list of those persons who will go to heaven. They looked for his name in the list of those who would go to heaven, but they couldn't find his name there, and to their surprise, his name was on the top of the list of people who would go to hell. And interestingly, crazy person's name was on top of the list of persons going to heaven. The moral of the story is, a person who has a generous and loving heart, even though he does not have faith in God, is much better than a person who believes in God, undertakes religious rituals but is selfish and self-centred.

Now, our discussion is, what are the different ways in which we can help other people, keeping in mind, we have our responsibilities towards our family and profession.

The first kind of support is financial support. Now the fact is, we have generally so many desires to fulfil. We want to buy this and buy that, our wants are endless. If we think, let us fulfil all our desires, and then if some money is left, then we can donate to others, then we shall never be able to donate. Whatever money we have, we should decide to earmark one portion of that for helping others. One thing we should bear in mind is that the amount of money which we give is not as important as the desire to give. Even if it is a small amount, it is important to give to help others.

The next type of help is physical. If we take our Vedanta Society as an example, in this place during celebrations, various devotees offer physical help like decoration, cooking, distributing prasada, preparing for the ritualistic worship, cleaning the campus, etc. Apart from the above, we have work for the vegetable and kitchen garden. Every season, a group of devotees plough the soil, apply manure and then plant the seeds. Following which, watering is necessary which helps for the growth of plants. These are all examples of physical help. They are neither financial nor intellectual.

In this connection I would like to share my past memory of a friend, who was blind and he used to learn vocal music from a very renowned singer, called Debabrata Biswas. We used to stay in a dormitory and my friend had to take a bus to reach the house of that music teacher. What he needed was for someone to guide him to the bus-stop after which he could manage on his own. Sometimes, I would also take him to the bus-stop. So this is one example of physical help.

Then there is verbal help also. We can help somebody verbally too. If somebody is going through a period of crisis, then we may reach out and comfort him. Mohammad said, "If someone is sick, critically ill, and may be there is very little chance of his survival, then also if you say, 'You will be alright' that may not cure the illness, but it will provide him great comfort." Those who suffer from mental anxiety and stress, we may go to them and let them share their problems with us, and we may say some positive words that will relieve them of their negative feelings.

There is one prefecture in north-west Japan, where there are a lot of people suffering from mental stress. Once, a Psychologist sent a team of doctors who would only listen to them, so that the mentally sick persons could share their problems. The rationale behind this was, there was nobody to whom these stressed out people could open themselves to. This is another illustration of verbal help.

Another help is intellectual help. For example, to teach someone. It may be computers or teaching school lessons to those students who cannot afford private tuitions. Yesterday, we had a monk who came from India to attend a global conference on Mathematics in Tokyo and he spent a couple of days in our Vedanta Society too. That monk is a very famous mathematician and he was awarded the Bhatnagar award for Junior scientists. At present he is posted in Mumbai and he shared with me that he teaches mathematics to school children who are from a poor locality. Many of them are talented but for want of funds they cannot afford to study in good schools. This is one example of intellectual help.

Then there is mental help. How? We may pray for the welfare of others. There is a famous prayer:

सर्वे भवन्तु सुखिनः।  
सर्वे सन्तु निरामयाः।  
सर्वे भद्राणि पश्यन्तु।  
मा कश्चित् दुःख भाग्भवेत्॥

oṃ sarve bhavantu sukhinaḥ  
sarve santu nirāmayāḥ  
sarve bhadrāṇi paśyantū  
mā kaścidduḥ khabhāgbhaveta

Let everybody be happy, let everybody be free from disease. May everybody's life be auspicious and let nobody have any trouble.

When we pray in such way for some afflicted person and when many people pray like this, it definitely generates a positive mental energy and affects others in a positive way because our mind is a part of the cosmic mind. So, if we pray in this way, then there is a response from the cosmic mind. This is how our prayers are answered. This is a general prayer done for the welfare of others. We can also pray specifically for one person whom we know is afflicted. That is focussed prayer.

We may also pray for those we are not related to in any way. For example, there was an earthquake in Turkey and so many people suffered. We may pray for them. And there is also a subjective benefit from such prayers. When we pray sincerely for others, we ourselves feel peace and joy.

Then, there is another kind of help which is spiritual help. For example, we may guide a person to a temple or to a place, where spiritual discourses take place. That is a religious help. But spiritual help is deeper than that. When it is done by a spiritually elevated person, he can bestow peace and blessedness to others. But unless one has risen himself enough, he really cannot do that.

So, these are the different kinds of helps.

Now, let us discuss what Lord Buddha said about help: If an offering is made only when it is convenient, because it is easier to give than not giving, then though it is an offering, but it is not a true offering. A true offering comes from a sympathetic heart before a request is made and a true offering is one, which is not given occasionally, but constantly. It is not a true offering, if after the act there is feeling of regret. A true offering is done, when it is done with pleasure, forgetting oneself as the giver, the one who receives is, is a gift for himself.

In the bible it is mentioned, the right hand should not know what the left hand has given. It should be done so secretly. A true offering springs from a compassionate heart with no thought of any return.

I remember a story about a miser, who was a devotee of Krishna, but did not want to spend any money for his worship. One day, he went to his teacher and sought his advice, as to how can he worship Sri Krishna without spending any money. The teacher said, 'Yes, just imagine that you are worshipping Sri Krishna mentally and offering him various articles for worship, and for that you don't have to spend money.' The devotee would offer boiled rice mentally to Sri Krishna. It went on for several days. One day Sri Krishna appeared before him and said, 'I am unable to take boiled rice. Please add some salt to it'. This is one interesting anecdote about mental offering.

Now, there are seven kinds of offerings which can be done even by those who are not wealthy.

1. Physical offering. This is done by offering one's labour as service. The highest type of such offering is to offer one's life as is given in the story we mentioned in the morning. We know that Buddha once offered his own life to save the life of a goat.
2. Offering of eyes or other organs after one's death.
3. Offer a warm glance, a tranquil look towards others.
4. Offering a soft countenance with smile to others. Whenever you talk, talk with a smile.
5. Oral offering. This is to offer kind words to others.
6. Seat offering. Suppose when you are travelling by train, you may offer seat to a old person or one who is disabled.
7. Offering of shelter, to offer one's room for others to spend the night.

In Bhagavad Gita, there are some relevant verses on this subject of helping others. There is some similarity between these verses and teachings of Buddha. In chapter 17 the following verses are there.

दातव्यमिति यद्दानं दीयतेऽनुपकारिणे |  
देशे काले च पात्रे च तद्दानं सात्त्विकं स्मृतम् || 20||

*dātavyam iti yad dānaṁ dīyate 'nupakāriṇe  
deśhe kāle cha pātre cha tad dānaṁ sāttvikaṁ smṛitam*

The gift which is made out of a sheer sense of duty, without expectation of any kind of return, at the proper time and place, to a fit recipient, is said to be of the nature of sattwa.

यत्तु प्रत्युपकारार्थं फलमुद्दिश्य वा पुनः |  
दीयते च परिक्लिष्टं तद्दानं राजसं स्मृतम् || 21||

*yat tu pratyupakārārthaṃ phalam uddiśhya vā punaḥ  
dīyate cha parikliṣṭaṃ tad dānaṃ rājasam smṛitam*

The gift which is given in consideration of some gift in return, or with some fruit to be reaped in future, or in a grudging mood—that is considered to be of the nature of Rajas.

अदेशकाले यद्दानमपात्रेभ्यश्च दीयते |  
असत्कृतमवज्ञातं तत्तामसमुदाहृतम् || 22||

*adeśha-kāle yad dānam apātrebhyāśh cha dīyate  
asat-krītam avajñātaṃ tat tāmasam udāhṛitam*

The gift that is made at an improper time and place, to a unworthy recipient, unceremoniously and in a slighting manner – that is said to be of the nature of tamas.

Now, how to practice unselfishness is given in Swamiji's Karma Yoga. Here is a summary of the points:

1. God is the Master of everything what I have, I am just a caretaker, even of my family. Nothing belongs to me.
2. The purpose of all my work is to please the Lord. Not a particular person.
3. I shall work with the power given to me by God.
4. For the result of my work I shall depend on the Lord.
5. I shall submit the results of my work to the Lord.

If we work with this attitude, the unripe self will be replaced by the ripe Self, the Mature Self, the Pure Self.

Now, so far, we have discussed various practical suggestions about how to practice unselfishness in our life. There are four types of things that we can practice in spite of several constraints. We have work, family, etc., In spite of those we can practice the following.

1. Everyday, spend some time for prayer. Not occasionally, but every day spend some time for prayer for the welfare of others. Irrespective of our religion or faith, we can do this prayer.
2. Every month, save some money for the purpose of donations. At the end of one year, we can collect that money and purchase something to be given to the needy. It is not very difficult. Doing such little acts are more worthy than just listening to discourses. And, as a by-product, it will give us great joy and peace, which we may not get from worldly enjoyments.
3. If we have many things in our possession, we can share them with others who are needy, like garments, toys for children, stationary, etc. So instead of only accumulating, it is better to give to those who need them. When we accumulate a lot, at the end it becomes just a burden for us and

when the Lord gives, we feel so light. We should always remember that when we shall give up the body, nothing will go with us.

4. To practice an attitude of a giver, and not a taker. Always think, how much we can give and not take. The more we have the attitude of giver, the more our heart will expand and we shall have peace. On the contrary, the more we have the attitude to take and accumulate, the smaller we become and our heart becomes contracted. The family, where there is an attitude of giving and sacrificing, there will be more peace. Human relationships will be better.

These are the four concrete suggestions which everybody can practice. As Swamiji said, 'Unselfishness is God' we shall be able to realize this truth. By becoming unselfish, our mind becomes clean and with a clean mind, we shall be able to realise God.

## Raja Yoga

By Leonardo Alvarez on 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2023

Since our topic is Raja Yoga, or meditation, let us begin with a 30 second meditation. Let us close our eyes, relax, and take a deep breath. Now, let us concentrate on the image of a lotus flower, a candle, or the infinite blue sky. We should only think of that image and nothing else. Let us begin.

Were you able to keep your minds perfectly concentrated for just 30 seconds? Those of you who could, very good! Keep on like this. For the rest of us, let us see why we could not keep our minds steady on the same subject.

The study of Raja Yoga, as explained by Swami Vivekananda will be of immense help for us in this case. Swamiji not only based his clear explanations of the Patañjali Yoga Sutras on ancient Vedic and Upanishadic knowledge, but also drew from his vast knowledge of Western science and most importantly, on his own experience of self-realization. Until his study on Raja Yoga was published, meditation in the West was mostly taken to be a sort of mystical, mystery mongering practice, a way to obtain occult powers. Swamiji does away with all these superstitions by laying before us the whole process of meditation and its culmination, in a systematic and scientific way, combining ancient philosophy from the Vedas, with modern physics, psychology, biology, cosmology and other fields of knowledge. When Swamiji's book on Raja Yoga was published in 1896, its impact spread wide across intellectual and influential circles, leaving a deep impression on the mind of people such as Leo Tolstoy.

Now I will try to explain, with my limited understanding on the subject, about Raja Yoga according to Swami Vivekananda, how it can help us concentrate our minds and achieve both happiness and mental peace.

According to Samkhya Psychology, humans have a Chitta or "mind stuff", which is comprised of Buddhi, the intellect, that discriminates between good and evil, right or wrong; the mind, or Manas, which perceives stimuli from the outer world, as well as Smriti, memory, that combined, form the individual Ahamkara, or sense ego. In this Chitta are stored our Samskaras, our acquired mental tendencies. Because of our Samskaras we cannot concentrate properly. Everything we do or say, leaves an impact on our minds. There is a saying: "*Sow a thought and you reap an action; sow an action and you reap a habit; sow a habit and you reap a character; sow a character and you reap a destiny.*" (Emerson).

Samskaras are the product of our thoughts. Thoughts again are manufactured by our minds, which again are made mostly of Rajas and Tamas, substances and qualities of restlessness and dullness, according to Samkhya Psychology. Yet, in essence, the mind is said to be Sattvic, pure and stable, only that the covering of Rajas and Tamas makes it go towards negativity and restlessness.

Now our whole universe is the interplay of Rajas, Tamas and Sattva, energies of activity, inactivity and equilibrium. Atoms have protons, electrons and neutrons, positive, negative and neutral charges. So, we see in the universe positive, negative and neutral events, things, living creatures, human beings and even our minds fluctuate constantly between these three states. But as we said, in the gross physical world, Tamas is predominant.

Neuroscience has also shown that when we are idle, our brain's "default mode network" is activated. This is a network of habitual neural connections that have been established over the years. When active, this network triggers mostly anxious and depressive thoughts (Raichle, 2001). Research has shown that most of us are at least 50% of the time absentminded, and in that state, we are most unhappy! (Killingsworth and Gilbert, 2010). There is a saying "*Idle hands are the devil's workshop,*" but we may as well say "*An idle brain is the devil's workshop!*". This is also why we are advised in the Scriptures and by Holy Men and Women, to be always active and prayerful, that is, to keep our minds and bodies as sattvic as possible. When we are actively engaged in a constructive task, the default mode network shuts down, and people report feeling most happy. This means that the brain has only two modes of operation: concentration, which leads to happiness or rumination, which leads to misery!

Now, Raja Yoga can help us concentrate, overcoming the effect of our Samskaras, rumination and restlessness, to reach a state of permanent peace and bliss.

The authority of Raja Yoga, Patañjali, in his Yoga Sutras, states that:

### ***Yogaś-citta-vrtti-nirodhaḥ***

Yoga is the quelling (nirodhaḥ) of the waves (vrtti) in the mind (citta).

Out of this Chitta the "Vrittis", whirlpools or mental waves, in other words, thoughts, arise. The aim of Yoga is to stop these waves. According to the nature of the waves, our minds can be Tamasic, Rajasic, Sattvic or a combination of these.

In his commentary, Vyasadev says that there are five states of mind: Kṣipta (Scattering), which is a Rajasic, that is restless and fluctuating mind, Mūḍa (Darkening), which is a Tamasic, or slothful, violent, hating mind, Vikṣipta (Gathering), which has both Rajas and Sattva, and is the mind that tries to center itself to meditate on God or the ultimate truth. Higher than this is Ekāgra (One-Pointed), mostly Sattvic, in which the mind can continuously concentrate on God or the Truth, and finally, Niruddha (Arrested), when the mind has merged with its object of concentration, meaning God or the Truth.

We want to reach the arrested state of Niruddha, but to do so we must gradually proceed from Tamas to Rajas, then to Sattva, and beyond.

Patañjali has laid forth an octuple path of Yoga, that will help prepare our mind to attain our goal. It comprises: Yama, Niyama, Asana, Prāṇāyāma, Pratyāhāra, Dhāraṇā, Dhyāna and Samādhi.

Yamas or practices of restraint are as follow:

• **Non-violence (Ahimsa):** Not killing or harming other creatures, by word, deed or even thought, and rather praying for their well-being.

• **Truthfulness (Satya):** Keeping our promises, being congruent in word, speech and deed. We should live in such a way that we have nothing to hide; if we have nothing to hide, there is nothing to lie about. We should also not magnify events to make us look better.

• **Non-stealing (Asteya):** Not stealing of property, money, time or ideas.

• **Contenance (Brahmacharya):** Means not following sexual impulses indiscriminately. Celibacy is very important for spiritual life. It gives us stamina and helps to control our emotions and achieve mental balance. For males it implies that they should see all women as their mothers, sisters or daughters and for females, they should see all men as their fathers, brothers or sons. But ultimately it implies that we should give up the sex idea altogether and perceive that we are the Atman, pure consciousness.

• **Non-receiving (Aparigraha):** Not accepting gifts from others. This helps us be free from the desires and conditions people punt into the gifts and create self-reliance and self-confidence in us.

Next Niyamas, or practices that should be promoted:

• **Internal and external cleanliness (Antar and Bahya Saucam):** *Internal:* In addition to the above, Swami Vivekananda recommends the following four practices: feeling friendly towards all creatures, rejoicing in the joy of others, being sympathetic with those who are suffering and being indifferent to those who do evil to us. If we do this, we can remain calm and peaceful.

*External:* cleanliness of body, clothes, dwelling place, and so forth.

Combined, these two, give rise to Sattva in the mind, whereby it becomes relieved, concentrated and cheerful.

• **Contentment (Santoṣa):** Distinguishing between greed and needs, and living according to one's needs alone. We should be ambitious, no doubt, but let us aspire for higher ideals and higher living, and not just amassing greater wealth.

• **Austerities (Tapasya):** Not pampering the body or mind. Eating moderately, easy to digest food, not for the palate. Waking up before sunrise and trying to reduce sleep to 5 or 6 hours. Worldwide studies have shown that people who sleep less than 5 hours or more than 9 hours are at higher risk of death, with those who sleep more at higher risk (Cappuccio, D'Elia, Strazzullo and Miller, 2010; Jin et al. 2022). practicing silence now and then (both physical and mental), fasting as needed. Punishing oneself for lapses. Avoid intoxicants, etc. Swamiji also said that "*Strength is life, weakness is death*" and "*We want nerves of steel and muscles of iron.*" To Swamiji, physical prostrations and exercising with dumbbells are also ways to do Tapasya, a way to kill the waves of impure thoughts. Exercise serves to discipline the body and mind, and to increase will power, which in turn will protect us against strong impulses. So next time we are feeling weak or tempted, let us go for a run or do some weightlifting!

• **Study of the Scriptures and Contemplation (Swadhyaya):** Studying scriptures that help us in the path to enlightenment, like Swamiji's works, the Bible, the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, Bhagavatam, Buddha's Teaching, the Koram and so forth. Also repetition of OM or the mantra of one's chosen deity. We must digest and assimilate what we read. Hence, meditating on the meaning of the scriptures is important. Swami Turiyananda, a brother disciple of Swami Vivekananda, would take a single verse of the Bhagavad Gita, and meditate on it for 1 week at a time, to imbibe its meaning.

• **Meditation on and Worship of God (Ishwarapranidana):** Meditating on God, doing all works for God's sake, offering the results of works to Him, praying to Him, worshiping Him, seeing Him in all beings and within ourselves too.

Now, when we are practicing, negative thoughts may arise, to fight them off, we need to raise and meditate on contrary thoughts. This is known as Pratipaksha Bhāvana. Like Saint Francis' prayer: "*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace: where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy.*"

Repeating the mantra of our chosen Deity will also block negative thoughts and make the mind concentrated with pure ones, and it is useful since we can repeat it at any time, at any place. Let us also counter our weaknesses, by thinking of strength. Swamiji said: *“Why weepst thou my friend? All the powers of the universe are within you!”* *“The remedy for weakness is not brooding over weakness, but thinking of strength.”*

Next comes Asana or posture. Any posture in which we can keep our backs straight, without moving the body for long periods of time, will do. Hatha Yoga can help us with this. Then comes Pranayama, control of Prana. Prana is the energy aspect of the Universe, and Akasha, is the matter aspect. Einstein showed that matter accelerated becomes energy, and that energy cannot be destroyed or created, only transformed. Hence this whole universe is the interplay of Prana and Akasha. Now with Pranayama we control over the gross form of Prana manifested as the movement of our lungs, which will allow us to control the subtler movement of the nerves, and at last, the subtle most, the waves of the mind.

Swami Vivekananda said: *“The Chitta has, by its own nature, all knowledge. It is made of Sattva particles, but is covered by Rajas and Tamas particles, and by Pranayama this covering is removed.”*

The safest way to practice Pranayama is by breathing rhythmically without holding the breath, without *Kumbhaka*. While you are breathing, you may imagine that you are inhaling purity and exhaling impurity. Of course, we must learn this from a competent Guru, and we must also practice continence, brahmacharya. Since Pranayama changes our body, nervous system and brain, and it also opens the channel of Sushumna inside the spine through which the kundalini will rise, we require tremendous amount of energy, stamina, resilience and a sturdy nervous system. That is why brahmacharya is essential. Otherwise, it is dangerous, and we may suffer from mental derangement. If we cannot observe brahmacharya, let us not practice Pranayama, but focus more on mantra repetition (Japam), selfless work (Karma Yoga) or devotion (Bhakti Yoga), etc.

Next is Pratyahara. Pratyahara means “Prati” or restraint, withdrawal, of “Ahāra” food. Now, what has food to do with any of this? Although food has some impact on the mind, the true meaning of “Ahāra” here, according to Shankaracharya, is any stimulus that enters through our senses and gets digested, assimilated by the mind. The mind takes the form of the object it gets attached to, whether it will be a book, a smartphone, negative news, you name it. Swami Vivekananda has likened our minds to that of a naturally restless monkey, who has not only become drunk with the wine of desire, but has been stung by the scorpion of jealousy and possessed by the demon of pride, and to make things worse, we may add, has been given a smartphone! You can imagine the pitiable condition of that monkey, which is no other than our own minds. So, we must be very careful with our feelings as well as with electronic gadgets that bombard us with negative food, or often times, with trash, for our minds. We must outsmart our smartphones and use them judiciously, rather than being used by them. By practicing withdrawing our minds from the senses we can achieve this.

If we are successful in Pratyahara, in withdrawing our minds from the senses, the mind becomes more stable, and we can proceed to Dharana. Here sometimes we can concentrate, but we lose that state of concentration, because there is still some restlessness in the mind. When restlessness subsides and Dharana is intensified and prolonged, our concentration becomes constant, like oil flowing from one container to another. Then it becomes Dhyana, or meditation proper. In psychology they there is a similar state of “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), which is an extremely high level of concentration on the task at hand, a task that is challenging but our abilities match the difficulty. In this state, people lose consciousness of body and time and gain remarkable insights or produce outstanding work. Geniuses like Einstein, Mozart, Beethoven and even Olympic athletes are said to experience it frequently. To cultivate this state is excellent, but with Raja Yoga the topic of concentration must necessarily be God or the Truth. So, we can just switch the subject, and hold this flow of concentration on Truth or God long enough. Eventually, Samadhi will ensue. With the highest Samadhi, that is Nirvikalpa, Nirbija or Asamprajñata Samadhi, all Samskaras, all the seeds of desire and ignorance will be destroyed forever. We will merge with Sat-Chit-Ananda, Existence, Consciousness, Bliss Absolute, and awaken to our real nature.

So how do we know we have made even a little bit of progress? Our minds will be calmer, steadier and we will have more control over our bodies and senses. We will be at peace with ourselves and the world. We shall be more independent, self-reliant and self-confident. We will be both humble and strong. We will be less affected by joys and sorrows, ups and downs of life. We shall doubt less and be more certain of what we do and think. We will be more cheerful and resilient. We will grumble less. Our knowledge of things and of ourselves will increase. We shall be able to see through appearances into the true nature of things. We will feel more focused, our capacity to work will increase and we will also have better rest. We will be able to withdraw our minds to a safe haven within whenever we want. We will feel more compassion and universal love for all beings. Our useless activities will be reduced, and we will use our time more efficiently and effectively. We will feel that our lives have meaning. We will grow physically, mentally, and spiritually. We shall not just be carried away by the rapid waters of life, but we shall steer ahead against the current, following the beacon light of our high ideals, aboard the powerful boat of our concentrated minds, that will take us to the source of the river of life, the spring of pure consciousness. Here we shall see glimpses our true nature, our birthright, the source of all Knowledge, Existence and Bliss. That we, children of immortal bliss, do not dependent on anything external. Our grief will bid farewell to us, and we will start becoming what we were meant to be all along.

It will do good to do a quick recap to fix the ideas in our minds.

- ✚ We cannot concentrate well due to our samskaras.
- ✚ These arise due to desire and ignorance, they have become unconscious, and we have become their slaves.
- ✚ Through the practice of Yama and Niyama we get power of discrimination, self-regulation, renunciation to overcome their effects and destroy their seeds.
- ✚ After being established in our postures (Asana) and withdrawn our minds from the senses (Pratyahara), our minds will have the power to concentrate (Dharana and Dhyana), and finally merge into their own nature (Samadhi), into Sat-Chit-Ananda, where we shall find true happiness and freedom, which are the true goal of life.

So let me finish with Swamiji's quote: *"Let us arise and awake and stop not till the goal is reached!"*

## **Bhakti Yoga**

By Venerable Jyoukei Sato on 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2023

Before I begin I wish you all a good day. I would like to introduce myself as Jyoukei Sato, a Buddhist Nun who has served for the past ten years at the Zentsuji, the 75<sup>th</sup> temple of the 88 pilgrimage sites of Shikoku and head temple of the Kagawa Prefecture.

The Zentsuji also happens to be the birthplace of Kūkai or Kobo Daishi, and numerous pilgrims visit the temple daily in order to pursue the path of his spiritual practices. In a climate wherein pilgrimage culture is deeply rooted, I have interacted with many who worship God or the Lord Buddha. The single-minded devotion of a pilgrim who yearns for the Buddha or Kūkai, and Bhakti Yoga as depicted

by Swami Vivekananda, wherein Bhakti commences with ordinary worship and ends with an intense and supreme love for God, are teeming with a multitude of shared elements.

My talk today may perhaps appear to be a little from the Buddhist perspective. Nevertheless however, by quoting the words of Swami Vivekananda who has always been a source of inspiration for me, I wish to speak about the concept of Bhakti Yoga that we ought to practice in these current times, as visualized by him.

Bhakti Yoga is also a path of “rejection” of egoism, a denial of one’s inferior pleasures and sense enjoyments. However it is not a path wherein one feels constricted or cramped. Rather, it is a path of joy, wherein one willingly discards all attachments to oneself. But how would that be possible? Let us consider a concrete case in point, by following an analogy provided by Swami Vivekananda.

When we ponder over the various joys of our lives, the delights and yearnings we have experienced in the past, they appear as though to sparkle and entice us like the stars. However, when our hearts are filled with a desire to experience God, the emotions we then feel get transformed as though into a colossal and spherical full-moon, that shimmers radiantly within the depths of our hearts. The more we attain an understanding of the purity of God and of his immense and infinite love, and the more we turn our hearts towards him and become absorbed in him, the more also will our desires, which until then had been obsessed with egoism, begin to fade away. When a heart that is stainless and uncontaminated by the senses becomes one with God everything dissolves within it, just as the moon, the stars, and everything else blend into the brightness of the sun, when it rises and shines.

Lights that are faint begin to steadily weaken and decline when they are in the presence of a light that is strong, and in course of time they totally disappear. In a similar way, in the presence of the love and happiness of God all thoughts of self-attachment become weakened, and the person concerned is immersed within a mood of security and trust, a feeling that overflows in fulfilment and bliss. Swami Vivekananda was of the view that Bhakti Yoga was the most effortless and most natural path to attain the great goal. Hence, I would now like to introduce a method of purifying the mind as taught by the Buddha, that is Gautama Siddhartha, and referred to as “Compassion Meditation,” since it resembles Bhakti Yoga.

It is an important teaching, which the Lord Buddha communicated to his son Rahula. “Compassion Meditation” (or “Loving Kindness Meditation”) is a form of meditation wherein a person’s compassionate heart is directed towards all living beings, and through the power of that positive prayer the negative thoughts that exist within the person’s mind vanish. It is performed by intensifying the four meditations of compassion, sorrow, joy, and abandonment.

The Lord Buddha spoke thus to his son Rahula.

- **Maitrī (Loving Kindness):** “Rahula, intensify your meditation on compassion. By developing a compassionate heart that desires the happiness of others, any self-centered anger in your own heart will disappear.”
- **Karunā (Compassion):** “Rahula, intensify your meditation on grief. By cultivating a heart of compassion that desires to relieve suffering, any cruelty you possess will disappear.”
- **Muditā (Empathetic Joy):** “Rahula, intensify your meditation on joy. If you are not envious of others and rejoice with them in their happiness, any dissatisfaction of your own will disappear.”

- **Upekṣā (Equanimity):** “Rahula, intensify your meditation on equanimity, because by rejecting self-seeking judgments and beliefs anger will disappear, and you will attain fairness and peace of mind.”

In this way, by merely praying for the happiness of all, the structure of hostility between oneself and others will disappear, and the anger and confusion that hinder a pure mind will naturally vanish. By repeatedly meditating on compassion we will get accustomed to it, and we will acquire compassionate minds, which in due course will become as pure as the minds of God and the Lord Buddha. This perhaps will be the appearance of a Bhakta, whose worship of God and the Buddha is a worship that issues forth from the heart.

We need to passionately absorb the teacher’s instructions, purify our hearts, and patiently control our minds and senses. If Bhaktas were to intensify their inner compassion with profound devotion, the radiance of our souls will move from the stars to the moon and from the moon to the sun, and they will eventually be encircled by the Great Divine Light of God.

So, let us offer our worship to that sun-like Divine Light. Let us do so with immense love, prayer, and non-attachment. Let us unite here and now to practice Bhakti Yoga, not just in form, but with inner purity.

The importance of purifying thoughts, words and deeds, that is, “body, words, and mind,” is of course a key teaching in Buddhism. Since our daily life comprises activities that are physical, mental, and those related to speech, ascetic training takes place in the course of our everyday lives. We need to persevere in tackling those aspects of ourselves that we dislike and those areas wherein we are immature, and we need to make a pledge to transform and grow. This is not something that is done just for a moment or for a day or two. We need to keep going on and on, and for that purpose it is essential to have great teachings that serve as a base, and teachers who support them. Hence, we need to locate a teacher who can evoke within us a resolve to follow him, a person whom we can rely upon and to whom we can entrust everything, and who possesses the determination never to give up on the severe training he imposes on inexperienced people like ourselves.

**The Qualities of the Teacher:** The essential quality of a teacher is not just to possess wisdom regarding the subject. It is not just to realize and grasp the spirit that imbues the sacred scriptures. It is crucial that the disciple is able to sense within the mentor, a passion for duty and love. Also, is the teacher a person of purity or not? It is essential that he be possessed of the right motives. That is to say, he should have an unshakable heart, based on pure love for all living beings. “A soul can receive an impact from another soul.” The teacher is one who evokes within us an inclination to do good. This emotion that awakens the nature of good within us is our driving force. This is something we are not aware of, and which we cannot understand from books. This is our true inner self. It has a divine nature, and it is something we cannot even believe. If we desire to become better people and begin trusting the world, a great teacher becomes essential.

**The Qualities of the Teacher:** The essential quality of a teacher is not just to possess wisdom regarding the subject. It is not just to realize and grasp the spirit that imbues the sacred scriptures. It is crucial that the disciple is able to sense within the mentor, a passion for duty and love. Also, is the teacher a person of purity or not? It is essential that he be possessed of the right motives. That is to say, he should have an unshakable heart, based on pure love for all living beings. “A soul can receive an impact from

another soul.” The teacher is one who evokes within us an inclination to do good. This emotion that awakens the nature of good within us is our driving force. This is something we are not aware of, and which we cannot understand from books. This is our true inner self. It has a divine nature, and it is something we cannot even believe. If we desire to become better people and begin trusting the world, a great teacher becomes essential.

Now please permit me tell you my own story. Ever since I was a child, I have pursued life with my spirit and body submerged in this material society and its values. When I received training to become a nun I think I still knew a little about spirituality, and yet I was skeptical.

However, I did come across a stern teacher of monks and nuns, a person who was in truth very harsh. Although I was terrified and was scolded a great deal every day, yet he was a person who was steadfast, thorough, and serious. The sincerity of his words truly conveyed to me the fact, that he never experienced any hatred, dislike, or annoyance towards the trainees.

In his uncompromising, dedicated, and resolute life of faith I perceived the Buddha that he believed in, and hence, I came to believe in him as well. That was the greatest gift I received during my training, and it was a lifelong treasure. The severity of the teacher was a critical act of compassion on his part. It was done in order to bring the trainees closer to the world of Buddhism, and to convey to them the spirit of the Gods and the Buddhas. The teacher enabled me to experience within my soul something that even my biological parents were unable to teach me, and so I was able to open my heart to him and learn a lot from him. This sort of an encounter with a teacher whom you can trust totally and give all of yourself to, is the commencement of Bhakti.

What does it mean to surrender and take refuge? What does it mean to revere with all one’s heart? Here I would like to share with you the words of an ācārya named Chögyam Trungpa, who contributed greatly to the spread of Tibetan Buddhism in the West.

“To reveal your true identity, is to surrender. Don’t be ashamed if your movements are awkward or if your hands are dirty when you shake hands. Just present yourself as you are. To surrender is to express yourself just as you are.”

“You should have a very direct and personal relationship with your teacher. Dedicating twenty million dollars to a spiritual friend whom you truly admire, is not enough. What you should dedicate is your ego. It is your juice, the fluid of life, that should be offered.”

The impact a teacher exerts is awesome, and it serves as a basis for everything. So, if you happen to suffer from the fact of your paltriness and vulnerability, and you feel a profound longing within your heart to set out on the path of spirituality in order to encounter the immense heart of God, please find a teacher who is pure of heart and serious. It does not matter whether it is the Lord Buddha or the Lord Jesus Christ.

So now, among the diversity of people who dwell in the same era as ourselves, let us discover a teacher whom we can meet, confirm, and resonate to with our souls, a person to whom we can surrender all that is precious to us, as well as our egoism. And on discovering the teacher, let us entrust everything to him and follow him with single-mindedness, with the determination that we ourselves possess the qualities of a disciple. As Swami Vivekananda stated, “When you find a teacher, follow him with the trust and simplicity of a child, open your heart to his influence, and see in him the manifestation of the Divine.”

**The Method and Means of Bhakti Yoga:** The method and means of Bhakti Yoga enable us to discern the influences that form us, control our senses, and purify ourselves. According to Shankaracharya's commentary on the "purification of food" in the Upanishads, food (āhāra) here refers to "anything that can be gathered and taken in," all sensations and emotions that constitute a person. The term "purification of food" refers here to acquiring sensory knowledge, which is untainted by the defects of attachment, aversion, delusion and so on. When this type of sense knowledge is purified, it means that the Sattva (harmony, stability, wisdom) nature of the inner organs becomes pure, and the person acquires the ability to keep his mind continuously turned towards God.

Hence, controlling the organs that make up one's body, speech and mind, and placing them under the guidance of a pure will, creates inner purity and spotlessness, and serves as the foundation on which the entire architecture of Bhakti can be erected.

Today, as a method of following the path of Bhakti Yoga with a pure heart, I proposed discovering a good teacher and becoming a good disciple. Also, we need to spread our faith and love in a positive manner, in a way large enough to diminish the extent of our selfishness. I also spoke of paying attention to discerning the food that constitutes us, the discerning of our senses, and the purification of the consciousness that gathers within us, without our being defiled.

There are still several profound aspects concerning the path of Bhakti Yoga that I have not spoken about. Today I decided to speak about the fundamentals. These I believe are especially vital, because they serve as the basis of a pure heart. Swami Vivekananda declared, "A great advantage of Bhakti is the fact that it is the easiest and most natural way to reach the great goal one aspires to," and he also declared, "Its great weakness is the fact that the lesser degrees of Bhakti often degenerate into terrible fanaticism." All the same however, even those of us who are still at an immature stage and who are prone to various realities, have already been taught how to avoid descending into frightening fanaticism and blind belief.

We need to passionately absorb the teacher's instructions, purify our hearts, and patiently control our minds and senses. If Bhaktas were to intensify their inner compassion with profound devotion, the radiance of our souls will move from the stars to the moon and from the moon to the sun, and they will eventually be encircled by the Great Divine Light of God.

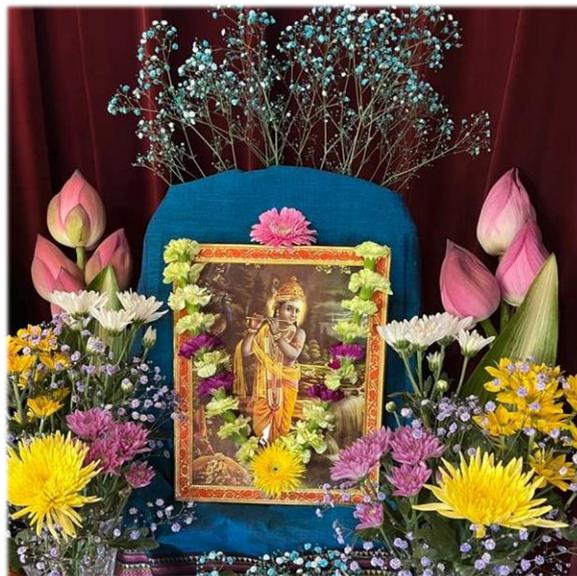
So, let us offer our worship to that sun-like Divine Light. Let us do so with immense love, prayer, and non-attachment. Let us unite here and now to practice Bhakti Yoga, not just in form, but with inner purity.

### • Thought of the Month •

Anyone can carry his burden, however hard, until nightfall. Anyone can do his work, however hard, for one day. Anyone can live sweetly, patiently, lovingly, purely, till the sun goes down. And this is all that life really means.

- Robert Louis Stevenson

# Some Photographs from the August Monthly Retreat



## Story from Mahabharata – Who is Responsible for Death?

In Anushashana Parva – the discourse between Yudhisthira and Bhishma, a beautiful story is narrated, on the inevitability of death. Bhishma chided Yudhisthira, who was feeling responsible for the death of so many human beings on the battle field, and told him the story of the conversation between a hunter, death, time or Kala, a serpent and a wise woman ascetic named Gautami.

The wise old lady Gautami possessed great wisdom and tranquility of mind. One day, she lost her only son who died of a snake bite. A hunter named Arjun, had witnessed the incident, and being greatly aggrieved by the death of the young boy, he caught the serpent and brought it to Gautami to ask her permission to kill it as a revenge. Gautami, on seeing the pitiable condition of the snake, told out of compassion to the hunter, to let it go, because by killing the snake, she said, her boy would not be restored to life.

Arjuna however said that he knew the difference between right and wrong and he did not find the advice of Gautami as palatable. Because the snake had killed the young boy, it deserved death. But Gautami said that she in her wisdom would never be afflicted by fortune or misfortune. The boy was supposed to die, so he was dead, there was no point grieving over it and she would not approve the destruction of the serpent. Compassion is the greatest quality and the snake should be allowed to go. The hunter did not agree. He said that if the snake was not killed it would bite many others, resulting in their destruction. But Gautami was unmoved.

The snake, which was tied to a rope, got emboldened and said that he was innocent. Death had sent him on this errand and he had bitten the boy at the bidding of death. The hunter replied that even if he did not decide on his own, he acted on somebody's behalf and was therefore an instrument, therefore he should be punished. The snake argued that the responsibility lied with one who had deputed him and incited him to kill the boy. The Serpent then called death or Mrityu to plead for his case. Mrityu or death said that guided by Kala or time he had sent the snake on this errand. All creatures are influenced by Kala, the all devouring time. It is Kala who creates and destroys. So Mrityu was also not the cause of death. The snake, thus addressed, told the hunter not to torment him anymore and release him. Arjun, the hunter, said that he held both the snake and the death responsible for the child's death and therefore both of them deserved punishment. Mrityu said that they were not free and acted under the influence of Kala. He then called Kala who appeared on the scene. Kala then explained that neither Mrityu, nor the snake, nor Kala were the causes of the child's death. It was the karma of the child that had caused his death. They were all mere instruments. The child had met its death owing to its own Karma in the past, called prarabdha.

Then Gautami spoke, saying that Kala was right, it was the child's Karma that had led to his untimely death. Men's actions are the determinants of their fate. Therefore the hunter should forego his anger and let the snake go. She was at peace with herself and so should be the hunter. At this Arjuna, the hunter, became satisfied, released the snake and went to his place. Mrityu, Kala and the snake too went to their respective places.

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](mailto:info@vedanta.jp)