



February 2015 - Volume 13 Number 02

The Vedanta Kyokai Newsletter

NEWS, UPDATES AND MISCELLANY FROM THE VEDANTA SOCIETY OF JAPAN

March Calendar

Birthdays

Sri Gouranga Mahaprabhu

Thursday, 5 Mar

Swami Yoganandaji

Tuesday, 10 Mar

Ramanavami

Saturday, 28 Mar

Japan Society Events

7th Saturday

14:00 to 16:00

Tokyo Embassy of India

Bhagavad-Gita Study

Bring photo ID please!

Sundays Zushi Annexe

1st~29th / 14:00 ~ 15:30

Hatha Yoga Classes

1st & 3rd Tuesday

Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna

Main Zushi Centre

10:00~12:30

Sri Ramakrishna Deva Birth Celebration

Zushi Annexe Building

15th Sunday / 10:30~14:30

(More details on page 3)

21st Saturday

Upanishad Study

14:00~16:00

Tokyo Embassy of India

Bring photo ID please!

27th Friday

Homeless Narayana

Contact Sato-san

090-6544-9304



✧ Thus Spake ✧

"Common men talk bagfuls of religion but do not practise even a grain of it. The wise man speaks a little, even though his whole life is religion expressed in action."

- Sri Ramakrishna

"Loud speech, profusion of words, and possessing skilfulness in expounding scriptures are merely for the enjoyment of the learned. They do not lead to liberation."

- Sri Shankaracharya

January Zushi Retreat 2015

Celebrates Swami Vivekananda's 153rd Birth Anniversary

On Sunday, January 18, the Vedanta Society of Japan's monthly Zushi Retreat was the venue for a daylong programme in celebration of the 153rd birth anniversary of Swami Vivekananda (Swamiji).

The programme began at 06:00 with the daily mangalarati, chanting and bhajans in the permanent shrine in the main ashrama attended by local residents and volunteers who had stayed overnight. An hour was allotted for meditation followed by breakfast at 07:45.

As usual the volunteers thereafter set about the chores in preparation for the day's activities. An altar was erected in the Annexe Building along with the worship platform and rows of chairs. Garlands for the framed images of the Ramakrishna Mission's Holy Trinity (Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother Sarada Devi and Swamiji) were strung; bouquets were lovingly arranged; leaves and young flower buds selected and set aside for

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January Zushi Retreat (from page 1)

later offering, food dishes were arranged in the Ashrama and brought to be offered at the altar.

Swami Medhasananda (Maharaj) put the finishing touches to all the arrangements and offerings on the altar and reverently applied sandal-paste to the foreheads of the photos of Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda. He then took his seat on the platform and conducted the hour-long Puja. This included the call of shankha (conch shells), bells and cymbals following Maharaj's lead with bell and mantras.

At the conclusion of this segment file folders with verses of frequently invoked Vedic peace prayers, chants and songs and were passed out as Maharaj prepared to conduct Arati. Soon a crescendo of shankha and bells pealed as the congregation sang Khandana Bhava Bandhana accompanying each symbolic offering of the five



elements. After prostrating before the altar once again Maharaj took to the harmonium to lead the congregation in singing Sarvamangala Mangalye. The congregation rose and flower buds and leaves were passed out for each to offer as Maharaj walked among them anointed all with splashes of Ganges water. He then asked all to follow him, phrase by phrase, in repeating a Pushpanjali (flower offering) mantra dedicated to Swami Vivekananda, and a mantra invoking

prana (primordial energy) before all made their offerings and a brief prayer at the altar.

The morning worship was followed by lunch prasada cooked by Ms. Sophia Hazra and her team. About 50 persons attended the programme.

The afternoon session began at 14:30 with the chanting of Om Sahana Vavatu:



Om Saha nāu avatu
Saha nau bhunaktu
Saha vīryam karavāvahai
Tejasvi nāu adhītam astu
Mā vidviṣāvahai
Om Shāntiḥ, Shāntiḥ, Shāntiḥ

Om, May God protect us both
(teacher and student),
May God nourish us both,
May we work together with energy and vigour,
May our study be enlightening
and not give rise to hostility,
Om, peace (within), peace (with all),
peace (universe)

Then followed shared reading by several attendees from 'Arise Awake - Messages of Swami Vivekananda,' a collection of Swamiji's teachings in a Japanese and English language publication by the Nippon Vedanta Kyokai (Vedanta Society of Japan).

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January Zushi Retreat (from page 2)

After some comments on the morning's worship and Swami Vivekananda's unfavourable view of ritualistic worship compared to spiritual practice, Maharaj then asked the congregation which of Swamiji's words impacted them the most and went on to discuss Swamiji's message of 'Faith in Oneself and Faith in God' (*The complete talk is presented in this issue of The Vedanta Kyokai*).

Finishing his comments Maharaj called upon a

group of three Japanese devotees to lead the congregation in singing Japanese devotionals, 'Vivekananda, Arigato' and 'Kokoro ni Saku Hana' (Heart Blossoms Bloom) written by Ms. Shanti Izumida. Maharaj then returned to the dias and translated the lyrics to Vivekananda Vandana (Murta Maheshwara) into English and Japanese, then led all in singing same on the harmonium.

After a tea break the evening vesper service was held in the main shrine. •



• A N N O U N C E M E N T S •

Vedanta Society of Japan to Hold 180th Birth Celebration of Sri Ramakrishna

Date: Sunday, 15 March / 10:30 to 19:30

Location: New Zushi Annexe Building

6:00: Mangala Arati (Main Ashrama)

10:30: Worship (Puja), Arati, Pushpanjali

13:00: Lunch (Prasad)

14:45: Discourse

15:45: Special Music Programme

16:30: Tea

18:00: Evening Vespers

All with family and friends are welcome to attend!



Upanishads Classes Begin

Classes on the Upanishads were launched in Tokyo at the Indian Embassy (03-3262-2391) on January 17, 2015. Complementing the regular classes on the Bhagavad Gita on the first Saturday of each month, the Indian Embassy now also hosts bi-monthly classes on the Upanishads on the third Saturday of odd months (1, 3, 5, etc.) from 14:00 to 16:00 with Swami Medhasananda of the Vedanta Society of Japan.

Swami conducts the classes in Japanese and some 45 to 50 people attended the first meeting. All interested persons are welcome to attend. The next class is on March 21st. Do not forget your photo identification, Embassy Security requires photo ID for entry. •

January Zushi Retreat 2015
Celebrates Swami Vivekananda's 153rd Birth Anniversary

"Faith in Oneself and Faith in God as Taught by Swami Vivekananda"

A talk by Swami Medhasananda

As you may know, Swami Vivekananda (Swamiji) was not much in favour of ritualistic worship. He wanted each of us to transform our character, as it is much more important for us to transform our character than to become ritualistic. After the passing of Sri Ramakrishna some disciples, especially Swami Ramakrishnandaji, began regular ritualistic worship of Sri Ramakrishna. Swamiji did not like this much. He would say that it is more important to practice the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna than to worship him in a ritualistic way. Once Swamiji jokingly said to one of his monastic disciples, that should he wave incense at Swamiji's photo after his passing, he would haunt the disciple like a ghost. Meaning that the disciple should not make some ritualistic show, or he would haunt him.

This shows Swamiji's dislike of ritualism. Instead, he preferred his and his Master's teachings should be followed, thereby transforming one's nature. On this point the Ramakrishna Math and Mission has compromised and keeps ritualistic worship to a minimum, while giving greater importance to the practice and preaching of the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. So though I believe with our worship today Swamiji will not haunt us like a ghost. I, personally however, would welcome even that! (laughter) After all, this would be no ordinary ghost!

Earlier we read from our booklet, 'Arise Awake' some teachings from Swamiji. I'd like to ask some of you (congregation) which is the most impressive teaching from your point of view.

Although not from the reading, one attendee responded that his favourite Vivekananda quote was, "All the powers in the universe are already ours. It is we who have put our hands before our eyes and cry that it is dark."

"Strength is the remedy of weakness!" answered another.

"Never mind these failures, these little backslidings; hold to the ideal a thousand times; and if you fail a thousand times, make the attempt once more."

"Arise and awake! Stop not till the goal is reached!"

"Let us not think we are sheep, but be lions."

"Love conquers in the long run."

"Throw away all weakness."

(Bringing comments to a close and thanking the attendees for their answers, Swami Medhasananda continued.)

The impact of Swamiji's teachings are really very great. I read an article in the Udbodhan, a monthly Bengali magazine of the Ramakrishna Mission. This very interesting article was written by an Indian who had climbed Mount Everest. As you know climbing Everest is not easily accomplished and one's life is constantly at risk. The climb is accompanied by rough weather, tiredness, fear of death, disappointment and lack of provisions and oxygen. One has to pass through all these. Not only is it a physical ordeal, one has to conquer many mental states in reaching the summit of Everest. In the article the climber noted he had turned to the messages of Vivekananda for courage and strength many times during this very tough trek. One example was 'Stop not till the goal is reached!' There were many dangerous, difficult and risky occasions when he considered giving up the trek, but this one single message from Swamiji gave him the inspiration to continue. In that connection, 'Strength is life, fear is death,' is also appropriate, as is, 'Have faith, faith, faith in yourself.' Think you can, because if you think you can, you can. In other words, have confidence in yourself. This is essential to accomplish such tasks.

Once an old man was climbing a mountain to reach a holy place in the Himalayas. After much climbing he felt so tired, he wanted to give it up. Swamiji happened to encounter him along the path and listening to his situation said to him, 'It is you who have walked up from the plains to this point, so you, too, can continue to climb along the same path to the goal.' These words gave the old man strength to resume his journey.

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Faith (from page 4)

Thinking with respect to our own lives, sometimes our path is smooth and easy, and then at other times life becomes so difficult. In these difficult times many people lose hope and become so disappointed and weakened that they do not know what to do. Some give up all hope, accept defeat and want to escape life itself. But as we hear from Swamiji's message we need but two things, faith in ourselves and faith in God, when such crises arise in our lives.

Some people expect that life should be free from all difficulties and stress. We may hope so, but is it possible for life to be free of all obstacles, difficulties, stresses and strains? Would such a life be desirable? For our development we need such situations, such stress. Think about our own lives. No one likes school examinations, but the pressure of upcoming examinations helps us to learn a lot. How many self-schooled Shakespeares or Rabindranath Tagores are there? Most of us need some kind of pressure to learn. When we are put in difficult situations we exert ourselves, and when we exert ourselves we develop ourselves. Without difficult situations we neither exert nor develop ourselves.

There are also those situations where you face only two options; either you sink or you swim. There is no other option. What would you do? Sink? Of course, we have to swim. When I came to Japan I faced this kind of situation; meaning one alternative was to give up and return to India, (laughter) or I have to continue and face the task. Let me share with you from my own example.

Before coming to Japan I was a college administrator, where I just gave orders. When I arrived here at the Zushi Centre to whom shall I give orders? Very few people were even around to give orders to. Then there were meals. Who was to cook for me? Yes, gratefully, devotees would often cook for me, but situations also arose when no one would be available to prepare a meal. Hence, I determined that if I did not learn to cook for myself, I may well starve. (laughter) So I learned to cook.

Also, at Belur Math I was used to barbers visiting and shaving the monks' heads. But here, what shall I do? Who will come and perform this service here? (laughter) I could not imagine walking into a local barber shop and asking for a monk's haircut. So I learned to cut my own hair.

• Thought of the Month •

Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'

- Martin Luther King, Jr.

Then there was the climate. In Kolkata it can get a little cool, but there is never a severe winter as we have here in Japan, where for me it feels cold for 5 to 6 months of the year.

Also, there are so many monks in India. We can talk, chat, joke and laugh together, but here I am alone except when looking in a mirror and then there are two. (laughter)

Another important factor was that in India the field of my work was an educational institution, but in Japan the nature of my job is entirely different, that is, attending to devotees.

Then, too, I had almost no knowledge of the Japanese language. Before coming to Japan I also knew none of the local devotees, so there was no communication at all. So I believe you understand my position. I had two alternatives; I could give up and go back to India or I could continue.

As you see I have been continuing for almost 21 years now in Japan, accepting the challenge with faith in God, in the form of Sri Ramakrishna, who helped me to survive. Again, I return to Swamiji who tells us to not run away, but to face the problem, face the situation. Now do I regret having spent 21 years in Japan? Do I feel this has been a waste of time? No! Rather, I feel it helped me to develop myself. Now I feel I have more confidence to carry on in a foreign land in spite of unfavourable circumstances that arise. This was my personal experience, but with everyone it is the same. If a difficult situation is there, face it, because that will help us to develop and to progress.

As Swamiji said, 'Our final goal is the realisation of the Self.' Do you think a little bit of prayer; a little bit of chanting the name of God; a little bit of meditation is enough to realise the Self? Is Self-realisation so easy? There must be a transformation of our own mind. There must be a transformation of our nature. We have so much selfishness in us; so much narrowness in us; so much fear in us; so much doubt in us; and by just praying, chanting and repeating the mantra a little we cannot have

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Faith (from page 5)

much of transformation. These are no doubt the challenges of a spiritual life, which Swamiji advised us, we must face.

Just think of Swamiji. How much difficulty he had to face his whole life. Analyse every great one's life and see how many difficulties they had to face. Swamiji wanted to attend the Parliament of Religions. He did not have much money. He had no letter of introduction. Then after getting such a letter, he lost the address of the Parliament official concerned. Since there was no money, there were times he had no food. He wanted to beg for some money, as in India it is common for monks to beg for alms, but in America few entertain begging. When it looked as though all hope was about to be lost, help came from the Lord.

This, too, is another example of what Swamiji taught. We must first try in every way we can to remedy the situation, but when all else fails, help will come from the Lord. Here two things are necessary; confidence in oneself or self-effort and faith in God. This, finally, brings success.

For another example, as you know, we just completed the year-long calendar of events celebrating the 150th birth anniversary of Swami Vivekananda. In 2013, when the Celebration Committee discussed what ways we could celebrate this event in Japan, the biggest problem was money. As such, at first I thought we would celebrate in a very modest way, with little fanfare. But as the date for finalising proposals neared we realised that some programmes were essential or the event wouldn't be significant or special in Japan. There must be some opening and closing ceremony, for example. An exhibition on Swamiji and special issue of our magazine was needed. We also decided some books for free distribution would help spread the name of Swami Vivekananda. We also felt there should be some celebrations in other parts of Japan; Kumamoto and Kansai. But where would the money come from?

At that time the Indian government sent us a circular regarding celebration efforts in India and those countries where Swamiji had visited and have a special connection with him, but

coming just short of guaranteeing financial support for our celebration efforts in Japan. Finally, no such grant was available. Our choice was to either cutback some plans and drop others or make some special effort in raising funds; and this just after having appealed to devotees for monies to cover costs related to this new Annexe building. So I was hesitant to make a special appeal for this 150th year celebration. Finally, we approached a few selected individuals and were fortunate to raise some ¥8 million (US\$70 thousand) including donations received from various other sources.

Finally, all our plans were executed and we were even left with a slight surplus. What was the secret of this success? We did not drop our plans or ideas, we exerted self-efforts. But self-effort alone cannot bring such results unless the Lord helps us. A man may have money, but unless God gives him the urge to donate, he will not donate. There is a Hindi saying that if God does not create any motive in the mind, the rich will not donate.



We often experience this in our lives. There are many NGOs like the Ramakrishna Mission that depend entirely on donations for sustenance, development and construction works. We have to de-

pend on donations and donations are not assured. We, the Mission, have developed from scratch to a huge organisation because we practice and believe in these two things; self-effort and the grace of God.

Can you tell me the difference between self-confidence and pride? *An attendee answers:* 'One is: Yes, I can do it!' And the other is; 'Only I can do it' or 'I can do it better than you!' Can you also tell me the source of this self-confidence? Firstly you may say, 'I have the experience of doing something, so I have confidence;' or 'I have studied this subject so I can do it;' or even, 'I have observed it being done, so I can do it.' No, this is not what I am asking.

From what level of our personality does the idea 'I can do' arise? Generally, it comes from our mind, intelligence, memory, and ego-

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Faith (from page 6)

consciousness, or briefly, the 'body-mind complex.' But when Swamiji refers to self-confidence, does he mean 'self-confidence' as that which only arises from the body-mind complex or ego-mind-intelligence-memory complex?

I will relate a description of a pond. In Japan there used to be so many nice ponds. In India we still see so many. As we know, most pond-water collects directly from rain. After a long, hot summer, however, most of these ponds dry up. The source of some ponds, however, are artesian springs and they are never dry. Sometimes there are attempts to pump out and clean-up ponds and we can clearly see fresh spring water gushing in. So if our self-confidence comes only from the ego-consciousness, intelligence, mind and memory complex, it is like the rainfall dependent pond, subject so drying out. Why? Because the ego, intelligence, mind and memory are all finite.

When Swamiji speaks of self-confidence, he refers to the Atman. The confidence arising from the Atman is something great and can never be exhausted, because the Atman itself is infinite. The Atman is infinite strength; infinite knowledge; infinite bliss. So if we can connect

ourselves with that source of the Atman, then the supply of strength, power and knowledge becomes infinite. When Swamiji said 'self-confidence' he meant that we must connect our individual self with that confidence which is produced and generated by the Atman.

Swami Turiyanandaji said that there are only two genuine or right types of 'i-ness.' One is 'I am the Atman': the other is 'I am a devotee of God.' All other self-confidence is vulnerable. So we need self-confidence only in the fact that 'I am Atman' or with reference to 'I am the devotee of God.' Are these finally two separate things? I am the Atman and I am the devotee of God. No, finally, they are one. We must understand that God lives inside us in the form of the Atman, or that my Atman at the macro level is God. Until we attain this level of understanding, we tell it in two ways; faith in me and faith in God.

So in understanding the teachings of Swamiji, we have examined 'Faith in ourselves and faith in God.' Swamiji said that if we can do these two things, then we can do great things in our life. So first, as the old Japanese motto says, "jinji wo tsukushite, tenmei wo matsu," or in other words, let us do our best, then God will do His best, too. •

• A Story to Remember •

Perugini's Confession

It is the custom among Catholics to confess their sins to a priest and receive absolution from him as a sign of God's forgiveness. Now all too often there is the danger that penitents will use this as a sort of guarantee, a certificate that will protect them from divine retribution, thereby placing more trust in the absolution of the priest than in the mercy of God.

This is what Perugini, an Italian painter of the Middle Ages, was tempted to do when he was dying. He decided that he would not go to confession if, in his fear, he was seeking to save his skin. That would be a sacrilege and an insult to God.

His wife, who knew nothing of the man's inner disposition, once asked him if he did not fear to die unconfessed. Perugini replied: "Look at it this way, my dear: My profession is to paint and I have excelled as a painter. God's profession is to forgive and if he is good at his profession as I have been at mine, I see no reason to be afraid."

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

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