



MARCH 2019 - Volume 17 Number 03

The Vedanta Kyokai Newsletter

NEWS, UPDATES AND MISCELLANY FROM THE VEDANTA SOCIETY OF JAPAN

April 2019
Calendar



Birthdays

Sri Rama Navami

Sunday, 14 Apr

Zushi Events

21st (Sun) 10:30~16:30

April Zushi Retreat

AM Session

Guest Speaker:

Ms. Kuniko Hirano

Chanting, Reading and
discourse

Lunch Prasad

PM Session

Chanting, Reading and
Q&A

All are welcome!

29th April (Holiday)

Akhanda Japam

from 05:00~20:00

Venue:

Zushi Main Shrine

Note: Meal to be served.

See Page 2 for details of
these and other events!

✧ Thus Spake ✧

"I have seen that the knowledge derived from reasoning is of quite a different kind from the knowledge derived through meditation; and quite different from this again is the Knowledge that dawns by His revelation"

- Sri Sri Ramakrishna

"With knowledge man rises to the heights of goodness and to a noble position, associated with sovereigns in this world, and attains the perfection of happiness in the next."

- Prophet Muhammad

February Zushi Retreat 2019

Celebrates Swami Vivekananda's 157th Birth Anniversary

On Sunday the 17th of February the Vedanta Society of Japan's held a daylong programme in for its Monthly Retreat to celebrate the 157th birth anniversary of Swami Vivekananda (Swamiji).

In the main ashrama at 06:00 mangalarati, chanting and bhajans were conducted. Time was allotted for meditation followed by breakfast at 07:45. At breakfast Swami Medhasananda (Maharaj) reviewed some final preparation assignments from the duty list.

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VEDANTA SOCIETY of JAPAN SCHEDULE of EVENTS

April 2019

April 21st (Sun)

Zushi Monthly Retreat

(10:30~16:30)

AM Session

Guest Speaker:

Ms. Kuniko Hirano

Chanting, Reading and Discourse

Lunch Prasad

PM Session

Chanting, Reading and Q&A

All are welcome!

26th Friday

Nara Narayan

Service to Homeless Narayan

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

29th April (Monday-National Holiday)

Akhanda Japam (Japam and Meditation Day)

Date: April 29th (National holiday) from 05:00~20:00

Venue: Zushi Main Shrine

Note: Meal to be served.

We hold Akanda Japam (continuous spiritual practice of silent mantra chanting, meditation and prayer) in our main Zushi shrine twice a year. Participants meditate continuously hour by hour in a quiet, spiritual atmosphere. Participants are only required to practice for one hour, but you may participate for longer periods or stagger your time slots if you wish. You are encouraged to join at a time convenient to you. This practice is easy for beginners.

Please inform us of the hours you wish to participate by 20 April. Single hourly units are fine, but more than one hour is preferable. Contact: Shanti <vedanta.karmayoga@gmail.com>

Every Saturday

Yoga Asana Class - At the Annexe (10:15~11:45)

Please Contact: <http://zushi-hatayoga.jimdo.com/>

Swami Vivekananda's 157th (from page 1)

From 10:30 devotees began arriving at the Annexe Building as the last details of preparations were concluding with the altar decorated with flowers and food offerings displayed. At 11am a conch was blown and the congregation came to order and Maharaj conducted a nearly hour-long worship (puja).

Thought of the Month

"Life is really simple, but we insist on making it complicated."

- Confucius

Some adjustments of microphones and instruments then ensued as Maharaj again sat at the platform and began to conduct the arati service. The congregation then sang Khandana Bhava Bandhana led by Ms. Shanti Izumida on synthesiser as Maharaj proceeded with the symbolic offerings of the five elements with the conch shells bellowing. When arati came to an end, Maharaj asked Izumida to lead the congregation in singing Sarvamangala Mangalye.

The food offerings were then whisked to the Main Ashrama kitchen as Maharaj walked among the congregation anointing all with sprinkles of Ganges water. Flower buds and leaves were passed and Maharaj 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 served in the Main Ashrama. About 45 persons attended the programme.

The afternoon session began at 14:30 with the congregation assembling in the Annexe Building again. Maharaj then asked all to join in chanting.

Chant:

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

Translation:

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)

Chant:

Om! Śaṃ no mitraḥ śaṃ varuṇaḥ
śaṃ no bhavatvaryamā

(con't page 4)

Swami Vivekananda's 157th (from page 3)

śaṃ na indro brihaspatiḥ
śaṃ no viṣṇururukramaḥ
namo brahmaṇe
namaste vāyo
tvameva pratyakṣaṃ bhrahmāsi
tvāmeva pratyakṣam brahma vadiṣyāmi
taṃ vadiṣyāmi
satyaṃ vadiṣyāmi
tanmāmavatu
tadvaktāramavatu
avatu mām
avatu vaktāram
om śāntiḥ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ

Translation:

Om, may Mitra be propitious to us. May Varuna bless us.
May the blessings of Aryama be with us.
May the Grace of Indra and Brihaspati be upon us.
May Vishnu, the All-pervading be propitious to us.
Salutations to Brahman. Salutations to Thee, O Vayu!
Thou art the visible Brahman.
Thee alone shall I consider as the visible Brahman.
I shall declare: - Thou art the "righteous."
Thou art the "good."
May That protect me; May That protect the speaker.
Please protect me.
Please protect the speaker.
Om Peace Peace Peace.

Chant:

Om! pūrṇamadaḥ pūrṇamidam pūrṇāt pūrṇamudacyate
pūrṇasya pūrṇamādāya pūrṇamevāvaśiṣyate
om śāntiḥ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ

Translation:

Om! That (Brahman) is infinite, and this (universe) is infinite.
The infinite proceeds from the infinite.
(Then) taking the infinitude of the infinite (universe), it remains as the infinite
(Brahman) alone.

With visiting Swami Shamananda and Leonardo Alvarez seated on the platform, Maharaj began his comments in English signalling Leonardo to translate for him the simplest phrases such as 'Good afternoon' initiating laughter from the audience. He playfully continued:

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Swami Vivekananda's 157th (from page 4)

"As you know, in India has produced many very famous yogis and many others that are not known to us at all. They live and have lived in the Himalayas. We are very fortunate that we have one Himalayan yogi with us today. (more laughter) He is also very dear to us. His name is Swami Shamanandaji. Shama means control of mind and ananda meaning 'bliss of' this is his name. We call him Akira-Maharaj. He is Japanese but maybe he may appear to be an Indian after thirty-five years in India. When I return to India some say I look Japanese now after all these years here (more laughter). I do not understand, but they say so. Akira Maharaj, the would-be-monk, lived some time where our Main Ashrama now stands."

Maharaj then asked Akira Maharaj, "How long did you stay in the Ashrama Building after it was inaugurated"

"About five years," answered Shamananda.

"Oh, five years? No wonder the building was so spiritually charged early on."(laughter)

"Anyway, Akira Maharaj joined the Yogodyan branch of Ramakrishna Math in Kankurgachhi, Kolkata in 1983. He was initiated by Revered Swami Bhuteshanandaji who had visited our Japan Centre nine times and as President of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission once more for a total of ten visits here. Swami Shamananda moved to the Mayavati Centre in 1989 and was initiated into sannyasi in 1993. So he has been at the Mayavati Ashrama for thirty years."

"Mayavati is a very special branch of the Ramakrishna Mission. Swami Vivekananda wanted to start a Centre where non-dualism or Advaita Vedanta could be practiced. All of our centres, temples or shrines worldwide have an altar where photos of Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother and Swami Vivekananda are displayed and decorated and where some ritualistic worship is practiced. At the Mayavati Centre there is a shrine or prayer hall, but no altar with photos. Strict non-dualists want to go straight to the highest realisation, Brahman."

"The Centre was started in 1899 by a British couple, James Sevier and his wife, Charlotte, according to Swamiji's wishes and Swamiji also visited this ashram. The ashram is located quite far from any settlement and supplies must be procured at some distance. It is a large forested area with wild animals and quite inclement winters, so we can imagine the conditions under which one continues spiritual practices. The Centre supports itself with publishing works and other things."

"There is a special season when visitors are allowed at the ashram, but at other times some ten or so monks live by themselves. It used to be that in the morning they see the same faces and each night see the same faces and go to bed. The next morning they see the same faces again and retire to bed again each night after seeing the same faces. (laughter) But at least now-a-days visitors are allowed during certain seasons. Akira Maharaj's main job is taking care of the gardens there, and visitors to Mayavati are always very impressed by the beauty of the gardens, not knowing whose efforts are behind it. He also earns a lot of money for the ashrama selling roses from the gardens."

"Swami Shamananda is also very reluctant to give any talks and is fond of working rather
(con't page 6)



Swami Vivekananda's 157th (from page 5)

than talking. I asked him to just relax and address us today in Japanese, and said that any topic he chose, such as Mayavati, would be fine. He is free to choose. With this long introduction he is free to give a speech."

Medhasananda then turned the attention to Swami Shamananda and Leonardo Alvarez who acted as translator. The swami's talk is also presented in this issue of 'The Vedanta Kyokai.'

At the conclusion of the talk, Maharaj expressed his gratitude for the depth of Akira Maharaj's presentation. Commenting on how small the writing of his notes were, at which the swami admitted that he had started formulating this comments at Belur Math prior to coming to Japan, evoking more audience laughter.

After more comments regarding the study and practice of Vedanta, Maharaj thanked all the volunteers and asked that the music programme to begin. Mrs. Sato offered a Japanese rendition of 'You Lift Me Up' a Christian favourite and choir groups offered more songs. At the completion the performances all joined in a few minutes of silent meditation. ●

February Zushi Retreat 2019
Celebrating Swami Vivekananda's 157th Birth Anniversary

Afternoon Session Talk By Swami Shamananda

[Swami Shamananda (Akira Maharaj) is a visiting Japanese monk from the Ramakrishna Mission's Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati, Uttarkhand, India where he has served for about three decades. A more elaborate introduction is given in the Celebration story in this issue. Swami Shamananda gave his talk in Japanese and Leonardo Alvarez provided an English translation.]

I have considered what the thoughts and actions of the people of the future should be for

(con't page 7)

Afternoon Session Talk (from page 6)

a better world, reflecting on some of Swami Vivekananda's messages to the youth of India. Let me share these with some general observations and anecdotes.

Here in Zushi, Holy Mother's House was reconstructed and inaugurated in 2005, and Swami Gokulanandaji, then Head of the Ramakrishna Mission Delhi Centre, attended that function. I had lived in the older house there in Zushi for several years before becoming a brahmachari with the Ramakrishna Order in India. Before becoming Head of the Delhi Centre, Gokulananda had done tribal work in the Khasi Hills in northern state of Meghalaya, India, through the Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Cherrapunji there. The current population of the state is about 14 million, about half of which comprise the Khasi people. There are about about 70 students at the Cherrapunji Centre educational facilities established there today, but including the number of graduates since its inception, that number rises to about ten thousand.

Force Behind Nature

When Gokulananda was teaching there, new students were asked to fill out a form giving some information regarding their personal history. In the section requesting information on their family's religious preference, many noted that they had none. Gokulananda thought this was very unusual and did some research on the religion of the Khasi people. He was surprised to learn that the traditional beliefs of the Khasi were very similar to the teachings of Sri Sankara—just as the idea of pure consciousness of Vedanta philosophy—as the Kashi believe that God is all pervading and resides in every being. They also believe that because God resides inside everyone, there is no need to build temples of worship to Him. They believe that by serving men, they serve God. They are a simple people that respect hard work and believe in serving people with true intentions. They are also said to be very courteous.

When I think about it, this is also very similar to the Japanese Shinto belief in an all pervading God. These animistic religious ideas are seen all over the world. This shows that all people around the world feel there is some presence behind all of creation. In the Rig Veda of India's tradition we find there are many gods and psalms written to praise them. In Shintoism countless gods are also accepted. This shows recognition of the forces behind all of nature is not an unusual thing.

I have an anecdote I want to share with you about when I was living in Uttarkashi. Each morning in order to get food, we would go to a place where they would serve the monks. They would give us five chapatis, dal, rice and some vegetable. On the way there I passed a school and I could hear children singing from the compounds. The lyric says, 'You are indeed my mother, my father, my family and my friend, You are indeed knowledge, You are indeed the true treasure, you are the God of everything, indeed the God of all gods.' Upon hearing this I thought to myself, 'Why are the children of this school singing this song?'

I found that it is very common in India for religious songs to be chanted at school. Though this song is hundreds of years old, it still creates a holy vibration. On the other hand, I thought to sing such songs in a Japanese school would be seriously out of place. In India even today singers continue to record and sell CDs of traditional religious songs.

Spirit Resides in All

Since we are talking about Uttarkashi, I would like to continue by mentioning two incidents. The women of Uttarkashi on the dozens of Ekadashi dates, days of fasting for

(con't page 8)

Afternoon Session Talk (from page 7)

Lord Shiva, throughout the year, they get together, go to a temple and sing religious songs. On the following Ekadashi days they gather at different temples to offer songs. As one walks along in this area he may happen to come across some ladies carrying baskets with serious expressions on their faces. They are headed down to the River Ganga to worship, and the baskets are full of incense, flowers, and a vase which they fill with Ganga water and pour it back into the river as the most sacred item to offer Mother Ganga.

Back to the import of the song - If the position is that the pre-eminent spirit is in all things and all beings, then the conclusion that spirit dwells in all beings is also correct. If so, then what is this spirit? Can this spirit be divided among the many beings or is it the same that dwells in each? If said spirit is different or separate in each, then such a belief system would be polytheism. When this question is put to Japanese, they arrive at the conclusion that many different spirits reside in everything. We Japanese look for very practical solutions and want results in this very life, but today there doesn't seem to be much spiritual inquiry. This is not that unusual, for the world over, we see a lack of spiritual inquiry. There is however, one country I see that stands out as an exception to this, and that is India.

When we inquire of India's beginnings, we find that religious inquiry had begun even before India's recorded history. The peculiar fact is that these early pursuers of Truth made no hard-fast rules or seats of authenticity thereby allowing the continued freedom of serious pursuit of Reality, of Truth. Many devoted their lives in the quest for Truth. Of the many who searched and are, yet searching, a few have had direct experience of this Spirit and became Self-realised. In ancient times these people were known as rishis and their knowledge has been left to us in the form of the Upanishads. This tradition continues in modern times with the advents of Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda and the Maharishi, all of whom realised God.

So what do the rishis have to say about the spirit? In the Śvetāśvatara Upanishad it is written that the Vedas are divine knowledge that dwell in every single being. So the Rishis say that it is not that different spirits dwell in different beings, but that it is the same Spirit that dwells in all beings. In order for the Spirit to reside in every being, the Spirit must be omnipresent. Were that not so, the Spirit would only enter some beings and not others. If different spirits also would present a confusion of thoughts and ideals—our language would be incomprehensible to each other. Therefore the same luminous Spirit resides not only in us, but in animals and plants as well.

The next question that arises is that if it is the same Spirit in all, why do we only see the many varying manifestations? The differences between one person and another are the differences in mental capacity and physical constitution. The Spirit inside does not change or differentiate, but is constant and permanent. The Spirit is not active, but by its existence the body is able to perform actions. Again, the differences are in the recipient or vessel in which the Spirit resides, the differences in the body and the mind. Generally, people are not aware of this at all.

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Afternoon Session Talk (from page 8)

Knowing Our True Nature

So what is the source of this ignorance or unawareness? This ignorance can be defined as not knowing one's own real nature or essence, and living as one is not, rather than as what one is. Because people believe they are that which they are not is the reason for the many differences between everyone. To the degree to which people know their essence we call spiritually advanced.

In the Chāndogya Upanishad we find a story. The story tells of the Asura demon King Virochana and King Indra of the Devas who went to Prajapati Brahman (Creator of the Universe) to learn of the Atman, the Self, the Absolute. This is because if one gets to know the Atman, one becomes immortal and all desires are fulfilled. Prajapati told the pair that they must first do ascetic practices for thirty-two years as brahmacharis (celibate novices), and after thirty-two years of practicing spiritual disciplines they were to return to Prajapati.

After this period had past the two returned and Prajapati who told them to look into a pan of water and tell him what they saw. Seeing his own reflection in the water Virochana said that he was indeed the body, and therefore the Atman is the body and took his leave. Returning to his domain he told the other demons that the Atman is the body so they should make themselves strong and give the body as much pleasure as possible. This, he said, would make them realise the Atman.

In the 16th Chapter of the Bhagavad Gita there is a description of the lifestyle and characteristics of the Asuras. So those of you who want to know more of the Asuras, please read the Gita. (laughter)

At first, Indra, too, was convinced that the Atman was the body. As he was returning to his domain, he had thoughts that this idea was a mistake. He reasoned that if the Atman is immortal, the body cannot be the Atman because it will perish one day. Indra returned to Prajapati and told him of this realisation. Prajapati said that being the case, he would need to practice for thirty-two more years. Again, after the prescribed years of spiritual practice Indra returned to Prajapati who this time said that the mental activities and visions of his dreams were the Atman. Again satisfied, Indra set out to his domain only to have doubts along the way. He thought that although dreams would have no effect on the body, but there are many changes within dreams and this cannot be the unchangeable, immortal Atman. Indra returned to Prajapati and reported what he had realised, whereupon he was told to continue spiritual practices for another thirty-two years. Again, after thirty-two years Indra returned to Prajapati who said that that which is experienced in deep-sleep is the Atman, because neither the body nor the sleep body is affected. At this Indra then thought, 'In deep sleep there is no consciousness whatsoever, neither of the world, nor of the Atman. This cannot be correct.' Indra returned to Prajapati again, who this time prescribed five years of spiritual practices. So Indra would have to practice spiritual disciplines for one hundred and one years. If you want to know what Prajapati then told Indra, you'll have to find out for yourself in the many books available here at the Vedanta Society in Zushi. (laughter)

What I want to say by this story is that we need to practice brahmacharya and seek holy company in order to realise the Atman.

Practice a Relationship with God

As Swami Vivekananda (Swamiji) said, 'Each soul is divine and the purpose of our life is to

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Afternoon Session Talk (from page 9)

manifest that divinity through either internal or external control.’ The practice of bramacharya is the control of the body and the mind. In Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras we find discussions on Yamas and Niyamas. Yamas is control of the body and with practice comes control of the mind. Another requirement is to keep holy company. Sri Ramakrishna said that if one wishes to learn to correctly feel the pulse one must keep the company of a physician. A Japanese proverb also says, ‘He who stays near vermilion gets stained red.’

I would like us to think about the impact a holy environment has upon us. I am reminded of the story of a child abandoned in the forest and brought up by wolves. She had never learned to communicate with speech and she walked on all fours, In psychology this is a critical period wherein influences and stimuli are need to develop properly. Even after being found and reintegrated with humans, she never could learn to speak or walk with a proper posture. She continued to relate to her environment as an animal for her entire life. This is an example of the influence of our environment during our development.

For me this poses an interesting question: If a human being were to be raised among the gods, what would become of him? Would such a person rise above human nature and be like the gods? In reality we have no opportunity to meet with gods or interact with them. We can say, however, that by thinking of God, we can have interaction with God himself. Most people see the physical world and our thoughts as different realities, they are not. One example of this is in the field of sports, where it has been shown that if one practices mentally, one can bring forth results in the physical reality. In the field of cancer research bioscientists consider the role of mental disposition over pathogens. In the same way, people who earnestly think of God for 10 to 20 years, their expressions and behaviours change dramatically. Sri Ramakrishna said that those who think of God will acquire the qualities of God.

Before coming to Japan this time, I stayed at Belur Math, where we offer our respects (pranams) to the President Maharaj of the Order each morning. One morning on my way to offer my salutations to President Maharaj there were some youngsters waiting outside and I came to understand they had arrived to receive their Initiation (Diksha) mantra from him. On the mornings that President Maharaj is giving Initiation, we are not to enter and give our pranams so I returned to my room and thought about the significance of this morning for those young people. From that very day onwards after receiving Initiation they would begin regular spiritual practices of prayer and japa (repetition of mantra) and turn their thoughts to God. Through these practices the mind is quieted and bring stability to their lifestyles, and I thought of these and the other merits Initiation will bring to these young people. They not only get a guru, but they will deepen their relationships with Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, Swami Vivekananda (Swamiji), their direct disciples and all of the monastic community. With initiation our interaction with God begins.

Conclusion

To summarise my three points, 1) many peoples and cultures believe there is a spirit that works behind the forces of nature and that dwells or abides in all beings; 2) according to the rishis of old this Spirit is Omnipresent; 3) to the degree to which one has realised this Spirit, we can say such a person is a realised soul; and 4) in order for us to know this spirit we need control over both the mind and body and holy company.

Among the youth of today those who declare themselves to be non-religious is on the increase. Some may think they are advanced in this line of thought, but in reality they simply give no thought to spirit God. Dogs and cats, too, give no thought to God, but we

(con’t page 11)

Afternoon Session Talk (from page 10)

cannot say they are advanced beings. These kinds of people are only devoted to a materialistic way of life. Swami Vivekananda said that if we removed religion from society, only a forest of beasts would remain. It is not such an important matter what religion one believes, but to rather understand our existence and true nature. Of course no one doubts his own existence, but non-believers never consider what their true nature is.

Can people actually live without knowing who they are? To live such a life seems a very strange existence. Who then is living? Our intuition should tell us there is something more. When we make the effort to look inside, we find God dwells within us and in all other beings as well. When this realisation comes our souls are purified. The God we should seek is not up in the sky, but dwells within us. Swami Vivekananda said that it is not that we are born to follow a certain religion, but that religion already exists within us, and that real religion comes from the awakening of our soul.

At the beginning of this talk I had noted that I have thought about the advancement of the people of the future. That would be a society in which people could worship and respect one another to realise God within. This idea of a society is not so much the idea of a future society, but of one that did exist long ago. When the rishis of old realised the Truth about the Self, they surrounded themselves with such a society. In olden times when people realised Truth, they uplifted their society. This means that today, too, we can all serve in uplifting of our society. The creation of such societies will depend upon the peoples' ability to realise God within and see that same God everywhere and within everyone.

I chose this topic on the occasion of Swamiji's birth celebration today because Swamiji's messages were not intended for a particular people or religion, but for everyone. They are universal teachings. The gist of his messages are to teach of the essence of God. So let us take the opportunity to reflect on what our true Self is, and based on this make a better society. With my wish that each of you makes an effort to realise this goal I bring my talk to a close. Thank you. ●

Swami Vivekananda's 157th Birth Anniversary





Puja



Arati



Pushpanjali





Lunch Prasad



PM Session Contributors



• **A Story to Remember** •

Arresting the Stone Buddha

A merchant bearing fifty rolls of cotton goods on his shoulders stopped to rest from the heat of the day beneath a shelter where a large stone Buddha was standing. There he fell asleep, and when he awoke his goods had disappeared. He immediately reported the matter to the police.

A judge named Ohka opened court to investigate. "That stone Buddha must have stolen the goods," concluded the judge. "He is supposed to care for the welfare of the people, but he has failed to perform his holy duty. Arrest him."

The police arrested the stone Buddha and carried it into the court. A noisy crowd followed the statue, curious to learn what kind of sentence the judge was about to impose.

When Ohka appeared on the bench he rebuked the boisterous audience. "What right have you people to appear before the court laughing and joking in this manner? You are in contempt of court and subject to a fine and imprisonment."

The people hastened to apologize. "I shall have to impose a fine on you," said the judge, "but I will remit it provided each one of you brings one roll of cotton goods to the court within three days. Anyone failing to do this will be arrested."

One of the rolls of cloth which the people brought was quickly recognized by the merchant as his own, and thus the thief was easily discovered. The merchant recovered his goods, and the other cotton rolls were returned to the people.

from 101 Zen Stories

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