



NOVEMBER 2019 - Volume 17 Number 11
The Vedanta Kyokai Newsletter

NEWS, UPDATES AND MISCELLANY FROM THE VEDANTA SOCIETY OF JAPAN

DECEMBER 2019
Calendar

Birthdays

**Swami
Premananda**

Thursday, 05 December

**Sri Sri Ma
Sarada Devi**

Wednesday, 18 December

**Swami
Shivananda**

Sunday, 22 December

**Jesus Christ
Christmas Eve**

Tuesday, 24 December

Zushi Events

15th (Sun) 10:30~16:30

**December
Zushi Retreat**

AM Session Speaker:
Swami Medhasanda
Chanting, Reading,
Lunch Prasad
PM Session
Chanting, Reading,
Discourse Q&A

24th (19:00pm-21:00pm)

**Christmas Eve
Celebration**

At Zushi Center
Please Contact: Zushi
Centre 046-873-0428
Worship / Reading /
Discourse / Carols
Light Prasad dinner!
All are welcome!

**More Detailed
Schedule on page 2.**

✠ Thus Spake ✠

"Ye are the children of God, the sharers of immortal bliss, holy and perfect beings. Ye divinities on earth - sinners! It is a sin to call man so; it is a standing libel on human nature. Come up, lions! and shake off the delusion that you are sheep; you are souls immortal, spirits free, blest and eternal."

- Swami Vivekananda

"Blessed is human birth, even the dwellers in heaven desire this birth, for true knowledge and pure Love may be attained only by a human being."

- Sri Krishna

September Zushi Retreat 2019 PM Session
Talk by Special Guest Visitor Swami Divyanandaji,
Secretary of Ramakrishna Mission Saradapitha, Belur

'Rendering Service to Prisoners'

Swami Somananda, a disciple of Swami Vivekananda (Swamiji), and some time back, the late Swami Prabuddhanandaji, Minister of the San Francisco Center Minister, and Swami Ranganathanandaji, the late President of our Order, all worked inside India's prisons, mainly in South India. In West Bengal I was invited to work with the prison inmates by the district authorities.

(con't page 3)

In this Issue:

- Thus Spake ... page 01
- September Zushi Retreat PM Session 'Rendering Service to Prisoners' Talk by Special Guest Swami Divyanandaji ... page 01
- December Event Calendar ... page 02
- Thought of the Month ... page 06
- Japan Vedanta Society Celebrates Sri Sri Kali Puja ... page 06
- Story to Remember ... page 09

THE VEDANTA SOCIETY of JAPAN
CALENDAR of EVENTS

DECEMBER 2019

1st (Sun) 14:00~16:00

Half Day Retreat at Zushi

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

Please bring your Japanese copy of:
'Meditation And Spiritual Life' by Swami Yatiswarananda
Contact: <benkyo.nvk(at mark)gmail(dot)com>

10th (Tue) 14:00~16:30

Gospel Class

Zushi Centre

Contact:

<benkyo.nvk(at mark)gmail(dot)com>

15th (Sun) (10:30~16:30)

December Zushi Retreat

AM Session - Speaker Swami Medhasananda

Chanting, Reading, Discourse

Lunch Prasad

PM Session

Chanting, Reading, Discourse Q&A

All, with family and friends, are welcome to attend!

24th (Tues Evening - 19:00pm-21:00pm)

Christmas Eve Celebration

At the Zushi Centre (from 19:00pm-21:00pm)

Please Contact: Zushi Centre 046-873-0428

Worship / Reading / Discourse / Carols

Light Prasad dinner!

All are welcome!

CANCELLED FOR DECEMBER

Nara Narayan - Service to Homeless

Food Distribution in Yokohama

Contact: Yoko Sato

<urara5599(at mark)gmail(dot)com>

Every Saturday

Yoga Asana Class

* Trial lessons are also available.

Zushi Annexe (10:30~12:00)

Contact: 080-6702-2308 (Hiroto Arai)

Email : <ochanomizuyoga(at mark)gmail(dot)com>

Info at: <http://zushi-hatayoga.jimdo.com>



On the 3rd of February 2003 we, the monks of the Sri Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama at Malda, West Bengal began this work. The work included some 50 prisons, and starting from Malda included the North, South, East and West of Bengal. We started with literacy, as inmates of the prison from local areas cannot read or write. These people are cheated by the lawyers' clerks and others resulting in convictions and prison terms only suffered due to their illiteracy. So we started with a literacy programme.

Actually, all the prisoners are not criminals, they are not thieves or dacoits (armed robbers). In the under developed and uneducated rural areas some 60% to 70% of the prison population are

innocent of the crimes they are serving sentences for, as proved by reversals of convictions upon appeal to the court. Some are released after serving as much as 10-to 20-years of sentences, and found innocent of having committed any crime.

However, even thieves and dacoits are raised in poor families, with no opportunity for a proper education or guidance from parents, teachers, and others in their youth and eventually they go astray. So we launched various programmes of vocational training. These programmes include training in carpentry, tailoring, weaving, two-and three-wheel vehicle repairing, so when they are released, they will have truly received some rehabilitation. We, of the Ramakrishna Mission (RKM), can also provide some types of equipment to help them establish small businesses and shops. To some we can even provide some needed seed money to start their own business. This is done, so that they can rid themselves of old habits.

We had observed that many prisoners were bright boys and girls, who had to discontinue their studies to serve jail sentences. So inside the prisons we created a positive environment and provided good teachers. We enrolled them in open university and schools with distance education programmes. They are studying regularly and appearing for various exams from class 10 and class 12 standards, graduation and post-graduation, bachelors and masters of social works, even MCA or master of computer applications. When they successfully complete these courses and leave custody, they can earn livelihoods. This is a great help to them and to the society as well.

Additionally, we established good libraries inside the prisons offering two to three thousand titles, also featuring books on Ramakrishna, Holy Mother, Vivekananda, the Puranas, the

(con't page 4)

Rendering Service to Prisoners (from page 3)

Bible, the Qu'ran, and Lord Buddha's life. We have provided these books to engage their minds and themselves in good thoughts. Some 200 of our friends, devotees and teachers are all cooperating with us. The Ramakrishna Mission Saradapitha in Belur, where I am posted now, is also working in different areas of Bengal.

After reading holy texts some of the prisoners become interested in taking Mantra Diksha (initiation mantra). They get permission from the government and prison director to visit Ramakrishna Missions near their jails to take mantra diksha. With permission granted they are then escorted to and from a nearby RKM by police. Thereafter, I have observed many of them practicing meditation and japam (repetition of mantra) in their cells. Some earn money as daily prison wages, and subscribe to the RKM's monthly Bengali magazine, Udbodhan. In doing so they are invited to attend the feasts arranged on the occasions of birthday festivals of the Great Master, Holy Mother and Swamiji. Many of these inmates even pray for paroles to enable them to attend these ceremonies.

We also offer yoga training and send yoga teachers and other specialists to teach them music, drama and other cultural programmes. The classes are regular and opportunities for their performances are also offered. Though still incarcerated, some receive permission to perform at public halls to demonstrate what they have learned inside jail. RKM devotees who are physicians visit jails and conduct health awareness programmes and even organise health check-up camp with eye surgeons, dental surgeons, gynaecologists, to examine inmates and provide treatment with follow-up treatments. This, of course, is a great service rendered to the prisons.

A few of the children of these inmates, as well, are being accommodated at the boarding houses of our educational institutions and are receiving educations at our schools. Presently there are ten to twelve such boys staying with us at the Saradapitha (an educational complex) campus now and they are pursuing graduation and post-graduation, or bachelors of education degrees. Some children who remain at a home with one parent, while the main income earner of the family is incarcerated, also receive some financial assistance, study materials, school uniforms, and whatever is needed for the continuance of their education.

Normally a pickpocket will suffer a one to three month stay in jail, or after paying a penalty and submitting a guarantor they are released. One boy, a pickpocket, was a frequent visitor twice to four times yearly. On one Indian Independence Day, 15th August, he came as we were discussing freedom on this occasion. He said to me, "Sir, I would like to speak!" to which I gave my permission. He continued, "I promise today that I will never return to this prison after my release tomorrow. You will not see me here again!"

For the next four years that I was at RKM Malda (in the northern part of West Bengal), indeed, I did not see him return to the prison. Then one day I saw him guarding a large mango orchard, and seeing my car, he came running and pulled from a pocket a book. "See," he said, "I have purchased a book, 'Call to the Nation' by Swami Vivekananda and I spend my leisure time reading this book. This book has inspired me and I learned that man is the maker of his destiny. If

(con't page 5)

Rendering Service to Prisoners (from page 4)

I work, I will be able to earn my livelihood.”

There was a Tamil prisoner boy, whose parents were both in prison and his brother was also serving a life sentence. The boy was determined to commit suicide, yet his restlessness prompted him to read a book on the Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi. Upon thoroughly reading Holy Mother's teachings, he changed his mind. Upon the 150th birth anniversary of Holy Mother in 2003, our RKM branch in Tamil Nadu announced an essay competition on 'Compassionate Holy Mother.' This boy entered the competition, and it was not mentioned to examiners that he was inside prison as it may have evoked their sympathy, yet he received first place in the competition. He was invited by Swami Gautamanandaji Maharaj, the President of the Ramakrishna Math Chennai in Tamil Nadu, to receive his prize, and he was permitted, but he sent a letter to Gautamananda instead, saying, 'Maharaj, we are 500 prisoners here, you are to provide 500 books so that I may read to them, and they may learn about Holy Mother.

Gautamananda Maharaj then sent a package of 500 books to the boy, who would eventually become a religious teacher. In each prison in India there is a religious teacher and he became one of those. This was a great blessing of the Holy Mother in the year 2003. Ultimately, his prison sentence was reduced by the Tamil Nadu governor in recognition of his transformation, and he also arranged for early release of all 500 who had received the book and lessons.

Let me share a funny story here. One swami, quite senior to me at the Udbodhan, our Bengali Publication Centre, repeatedly requested me to take him with me to Dum Dum Central Correction Home (prison) in Calcutta, but there had been no opportunity to do so. One day it happened that I did take him there, and he was very pleased to see the various facilities we visited. And as I had not asked him prior to our prison visit, upon our departure I asked him why he had been so keen to visit this prison. He answered that while he was a student, he was travelling without a renewal of his monthly railway ticket. He said he was caught red-handed and put in that jail by the magistrate for three days. At that time inmates had only received meals of water and rice there, and upon this visit he was relieved to see the jail was performing better.

One swami of our Hollywood Centre in California also told me a similar story when we had visited another small prison, saying he too had been caught without a railway ticket. Two brahmacharis, as well, upon hearing the train whistle, had run to board the train for a short trip without tickets, and being caught, the magistrate had put them in jail. The two reported their plight to a merchant known to the Mission who happened to be visiting the jail, he then sped on his two-wheeler to inform the ashram's secretary. The secretary then informed a former student, who was a justice of the Patma High Court, and he arranged a special court session to have the two immediately released. We are all now very careful, and I tell my devotees as well, never travel on a train without a ticket. Often there are no ticket checkers, but should there be one, we do not want to visit you in jail.

Sometimes male devotees in Calcutta would call me to complain that while I am working for the prisoners (in Malda), they, as householders, were also prisoners of their families (mainly a

(con't page 6)

Rendering Service to Prisoners (from page 5)

husband's complaint), so they would ask me to please do something for them. Since such calls came when I was at Malda, I advised them to meet the swamis of the Calcutta Centres and ask them how to get relief from their family prisons.

I joke here, but actually our body is also a prison. The soul is inside, in a cage as it were, and we also want freedom from this wretched condition. Real freedom comes only after realising God, for which all of us should strive.

Thank you. •

• Thought of the Month •

"Proverbs are always platitudes until you have personally experienced the truth of them."

- Aldous Huxley

Zushi Centre Annexe November 2019 Japan Vedanta Society Celebrates Sri Sri Kali Puja

The Vedanta Society of Japan (Nippon Vedanta Kyokai) observed Sri Sri Kali Puja in the Annexe adjacent to its main Zushi Centre again this year on Tuesday evening, 6 November, at 7 p.m. As the venue is rather far from Tokyo and on a weekday night, every effort is made to ensure the puja is conducted with few delays, leaving time for a prasad dinner for those able to attend.

Before the puja began, Swami Medhasanandaji (Maharaj) oversaw the final details of the altar preparations and worship utensils on the platform in front of the altar as usual. This year, however, the Kali Puja was mainly conducted by newly arrived assistant minister, Swami Divyanathanandaji, under the assistance and guidance of Maharaj.

After several minutes of prescribed mantras, mudras, and ritual offerings, Maharaj asked the congregation to silently imagine Ma Kali partaking of the tiers of food, fruits and sweets offerings arranged on the altar. A few minutes and further ritual chants later, Maharaj rose from the platform and offered a prepared flower to Kali Ma, returning to more offerings and prayers the swamis recited together. The swamis remained in silent prayer for a few minutes thereafter.

The swamis offered more mantras as Swami Divyanathananda then prepared the items for the five symbolic elements of fire, water, ether, earth, and air. The congregation blew conch and rang bells as Divyanathananda performed this ritual, prostrating before the altar at its conclusion.

Song books were then passed out and Ms. Shanti led the congregation in singing 'Om Sarva Maṅgala Māṅgalye.' The pushpanjali (flower offering) followed in two groups, first floor and second floor, with Maharaj sprinkling holy water (Ganga) on all, as each selected a flower and leaf. Maharaj then lead the congregation verse by verse in the pranam mantra to Kali Ma. To save time, these flowers were collected with the first group making room in front of the altar for the next group to offer prayers at Maharaj's lead again with flower in hand.

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Sri Sri Kali Puja (from page 6)

The entire congregation was then asked to return to their places, as the platform was then arranged for the Homa (fire ritual). Maharaj conducted the Homa with Divyanathanandaji assisting. As Maharaj added more items to the flames, the entire congregation echoed prescribed chants. Afterward the Vibhuti (sacred ash) was prepared and everyone received a dab on the forehead and offered salutations to Kali Ma.

The prasad dinner was served at about 9:30 p.m. in the main Ashram building, with attendees finding seating available in both the Ashram and the Annexe. About 140 people attended again this year. •





● A Story to Remember ●

The Spider's Thread

Lord Buddha is walking through Paradise one morning, when he stops at a lotus-filled pond. Between the lilies he can see, through the crystal-clear waters, all the way to the depths of Hell. His eyes come to rest upon one fallen man by the name of Kandata. This Kandata had been a cold-hearted criminal, but had one good deed to his name: That was while walking through the forest one day, he decided not to kill a spider he was about to crush with his foot. Moved by this single act of compassion, Lord Buddha takes the silvery thread of a spider in Paradise and lowers it down into Hell.

Down in the well of sufferings the array of evil doers are struggling in darkness and the sighs of the damned. Kandata, looking up by chance sees the tiny point of skylight above the pool, and spots the gleaming spider's thread descending towards him and grabs hold with all the might of a seasoned criminal.

The climb from Hell to Paradise is not a short or easy one, however, and Kandata quickly tires. Dangling from the sticky thread, he glances downward, and sees how far he has come. Realizing that he may actually escape from Hell, he is overcome by joy, but his elation is short-lived, however, as he realizes that others have started climbing the thread behind him. Fearing that the thread will break from the weight of the others before his escape, he shouts to the others that the spider's thread is his and his alone. It is at this very moment that the thread breaks, and he and all the others are cast back down into Hell.

The all knowing Buddha witnesses Kandata deny himself salvation by denying that possibility for others. Mahāmāyā smiles as the Buddha rises and leaves the pond.

Adapted from 蜘蛛の糸, Kumo no Ito, a 1918 short story by Ryūnosuke Akutagawa

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