



AUGUST 2020 - Volume 18 Number 08

The Vedanta Kyokai Newsletter

NEWS, UPDATES AND MISCELLANY FROM THE VEDANTA SOCIETY OF JAPAN

September 2020 Calendar



Birthdays

**Swami
Abhedananda**
Friday,
11 September

**Swami
Akhandananda**
Thursday,
17 September

Zushi Events

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

Details on page 02!



✧ Thus Spake ✧

"So long as you have faith in your Guru, nothing will be able to obstruct your way."

- Swami Vivekananda

"Whosoever wishes to see a king must first seek the company of one who is the favourite of the king. Whoever is aching to see the Lord, let him seek one who has become one with Him."

- Guru Nanak

Monthly Zushi Retreat

19 July 2020

Assimilation - Part 1 of 2

A talk by Swami Medhasananda

I believe it is an experience common to all spiritual seekers, both monks like us and devotees like you, that although we study and listen to a lot of spiritual texts and talks, how much of this is actually absorbed and is transforming our personality? If we reflect deeply, although we may read and hear much on spirituality, I wonder whether the effect of it on our personality is very profound. In his English translation of the Bengali text *Sri Sri Rāmakrishna Kathāmrita*, entitled, (con't page 3)

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Vedanta Society of Japan Calendar of Programmes SEPTEMBER 2020

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

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

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

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

Swami Medhasananda
President
Vedanta Society of Japan

• ZUSHI CENTRE PROGRAMMES for SEPTEMBER 2020 •

- September 5th (Sat) 2 pm–4 pm **(Live Streaming and Zoom)**
Discourse on the Bhagavad Gita (in Japanese Only)
With Swami Medhasanandaji
Please Note: The Bhagavad Gita study class at the Indian Embassy, Tokyo, suspended since March of this year, will be resumed through livestreaming from the Society until further notice. Also, please have a copy of the Gita at hand to follow the Live Stream.
If you plan to attend, please contact: <benkyo.nvk@gmail.com>
- September 13th (Sun) 2pm–4pm **(Live Streaming and Zoom)**
The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna Study Class
(in Japanese Only) <benkyo.nvk@gmail.com>
- September 20th (Sun) 2 pm–4:30 pm **(Live Steaming - No Zoom)**
Monthly Retreat
Topic: 'Assimilation in Spiritual Life' - Part 2 of 2
(in both English & Japanese)
If you plan to attend, please contact: <benkyo.nvk@gmail.com>
- September 27th (Sun) 2pm–4pm **(Live Steaming - No Zoom)**
Half Day Retreat at Zushi Centre
Text: 'Meditation in Spiritual Life' (in Japanese only)
Q&A available by email only - <benkyo.nvk@gmail.com>

Assimilation (from page 1)

The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Nikhilanandaji often quotes the use of the Bengali word 'dhāraṇa' as assimilation in English, and in one place alone he translated 'dhāraṇa' as comprehension. We checked our Society's Japanese translation of the Gospel and found three different translations in use to mean assimilation: rikai suru (理解する), to understand; waga mono to suru (我がものとする), to make something one's own; and konasu (こなす), to master something by practice. I understand that two more Japanese word combinations that would also apply here are minisukeru (見に通ける), to make something a part of oneself through practice or experience, and kyūshū suru (吸収する), meaning to absorb or assimilate knowledge. Nevertheless, in our talk today in Japanese, we shall use the word 'minisukeru' to mean 'dhāraṇa' or 'assimilation'.

Dhāraṇa means that which we listen to or study, we should make it a part of ourselves. Doing so has an effect on our mind and personality. Using the example of ingesting food or drink, we assimilate what we eat or drink. With good digestion, this improves our health by absorbing the essence of our food we nourish our flesh, blood and bones. If we cannot assimilate nourishment properly then our body becomes weak and emaciated, this is a symptom of our body's inability to assimilate.

In the Patanjali Yoga Sutras we find the mention of the practice of dhāraṇa, but here the word has been used in a technical sense in regard to the practice of meditation exclusively. The dhāraṇa we use today in our talk refers to the personality change brought about by the assimilation of the teachings of scripture. Let us not confuse the use of the same word in two different contexts. As an example, listening to spiritual talks during our Society's monthly retreat and other classes on scripture, we have been reminded repeatedly the central teaching of the scriptures that 'I am not the body, I am not the mind, I am Atman-pure consciousness'. However, should we start suffering from a critical disease, or we are in the midst of a natural calamity like an earthquake or tsunami, we are put to a hard test of how much of the truth of the above-mentioned teachings of scripture have we really assimilated. Would we think, 'I am the Atman, therefore I have nothing to fear', or would we run for our lives. If this building began shaking in an earthquake would we think 'I am not the body' or would we run away leaving the shrine and Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda at the altar to save our life.

The thought to run away comes because we identify ourselves with our body; consequently the fear of death overpowers us. In the second chapter of the '*Gita*' we have read many times about the soul, 'I am the Atman, the fire cannot burn it, the sword cannot

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cut it, even if the body dies the soul will live on,' and so forth, but how much have we been able to assimilate this idea? Big or small, calamities like diseases and earthquakes are the acid test of the degree of our assimilation.

Swami Tapasyanandaji was a disciple of Swami Shivanandaji, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. In my reading his reminiscences of his guru, Mahapurush Maharaj (Shivanandaji), Tapasyanandaji notes Shivanandaji as saying that when the body is healthy, it is easy to say that we are the Atman, but when disease comes and when old age comes, can we actually believe that we are the Atman? As Shivanandaji grew older he suffered from high blood pressure and such severe bouts of asthma that he could not sleep at night at all. As the second president of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, of course, in the morning other monks would come and offer pranam (reverential salutations) to him in his room at the Belur Math and ask about his physical condition. Normally, even before being asked, most critically ill people would share how they had suffered throughout the night. In Shivanandaji's case before the arriving monks could ask him of his condition, he would instead ask the monks how they were keeping, though they were really concerned about his condition. Despite a sleepless night, Shivanandaji's face would look rested and refreshed. Even when his doctor would visit to inquire about his condition, Shivanandaji would inquire about the doctor's condition first.

The doctor, being aware of Shivanandaji's high spiritual state and lack of body-consciousness, would reply, "I know your condition is fine, but how is your body?" In response Shivanandaji answered, "Oh, that, there is lots of trouble there." Shivanandaji was established in the Atman and able to sincerely say he was fine. We too, may just respond that we are fine or keeping well, while suffering many ailments and troubles, but it is not easy to say so sincerely. This was not the case with Shivanandaji, as he had completely dis-identified with the body and its troubles and sufferings. This is not mere imagination, this is the highest realisation. The best example of this was Sri Ramakrishna Himself, who suffered excruciating pain from throat cancer when taking food, blood oozing from the wound at times. Despite such a condition, Sri Ramakrishna was established in a blissful state of mind, charging the atmosphere with bliss so palpable that the devotees nearby would also feel and imbibe it.

All this is to point out what it means for one to be established in a firm conviction: "I am not the body. I am not the mind. I am the Atman. I am pure consciousness." Speaking to young Turiyanandaji, Sri Ramakrishna announced that He was suffering much pain from throat cancer, to which Turiyanandaji replied, "No, You are not suffering, You are blissful!"

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Sri Ramakrishna replied, "Can't you see how I suffer? How can you say such a thing?"

"No Sir, I am confident you remain blissful all the time!"

This exchange continued for a few times until Sri Ramakrishna confided, "This rascal has found me out."

One may ask how this is possible. It is only possible for those who are completely dis-identified with the body, and instead, identified with the pure Atman, which is ever-free. This pure Atman is Sat-Chit-Ananda, that is, Existence, Consciousness and Bliss Absolute, and Sri Ramakrishna was established in Bliss Absolute. In our case though, we have heard about the real nature of the Atman, read about it and talked about it, many, many times, we have not yet assimilated this truth, hence we cannot be established in that idea of the Atman.

In the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* we come across the teaching many times, that the purpose of life is God Realisation, and worldly pleasures are always limited and finally lead to sufferings, as is our reaction to them, but that spiritual bliss is infinite. In spite of this, do we really believe it, comprehend it, and pursue God realisation earnestly, knowing such realisation will give us infinite bliss?

Another example of this is that Sri Ramakrishna said the photograph of a person and the person are the same, just as the body's shadow and the body are of the same entity. Do we actually feel the presence of Sri Ramakrishna in His picture, or Sri Sarada Devi in Her picture? Do we really believe they are from the altar witnessing whatever we do and say? When Swami Ramakrishnanandaji and Premanandaji performed arati at the altar, onlookers could feel the former did so seeing the living presence of the Holy Trio before them.

To review the four examples given:

- The Atman is not the body.
- The purpose of life is God Realisation.
- Worldly pleasures are limited compared to spiritual bliss.
- The person and the photograph of the person are the same.

Despite having heard these teachings again and again, to what degree are our being and personality affected and transformed? If we reflect upon this, we will realise how little we have assimilated these teachings. I checked *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* searching for mention of the term 'assimilation (of spiritual teachings)', and found it

Assimilation (from page 5)

noted at least fourteen times. This research gave me the opportunity to read again the context wherein 'to assimilate' is prescribed. Sri Ramakrishna (Master) advises us repeatedly that it is not enough just to study or listen, one must assimilate the ideas contained in scripture. He also explains the reasons we cannot assimilate these teachings. Let me quote some of these comments from *The Gospel*:

• **Thought of the Month** •

"The fulfillment of every desire only reveals its inadequacy."

- Swami Prabhavanandaji

- A devotee: *"We read the scriptures. Why is it that we can't assimilate them?"*

Do we ask ourselves the same question? We may read or hear the same things many times, yet we find we have not assimilated them, just as this devotee said.

- On another occasion a devotee had come and was chanting from the Chandi, a scripture on the Divine Mother, and quoting: "You are the Creator of the World, You are Savitri, You are Eternal", and so forth. When Sri Ramakrishna heard this he observed, *"Yes, but you must assimilate this (idea)!"*

Sri Ramakrishna answers the question as to why we cannot assimilate spiritual teachings in the following quote:

- *"A man with 'green' bhakti cannot assimilate spiritual talk and instruction; but one with 'ripe' bhakti can. The image that falls on a photographic plate covered with black film (silver nitrate) is retained. On the other hand, thousands of images may be reflected on a bare piece of glass, but not one of them is retained. As the object moves away, the glass becomes the same as it was before. One cannot assimilate spiritual instruction unless one has already developed love of God."*

- There is a story that Sri Ramakrishna told of an evil fellow who had beaten a monk unconscious. Having heard of this, his brother monks located him and took their unconscious brother back to their ashram and attended to his wounds. As he gained consciousness with sips of water and milk, he was asked questions to determine whether he had regained consciousness. "Maharaj", he was asked, *"do you know who is giving you water and milk?"*

Assimilation (from page 6)

"Yes, I know," he answered. *"The same person who beat me is now feeding me."* Meaning he saw God behind all, the man who beat him, and the men who were nursing him.

Upon hearing this, 'M', the recorder of the Gospel, said, "Yes, I know that story."

To this Sri Ramakrishna remarked, *"It is not enough to know it! One must assimilate its meaning. It is the thought of worldly objects that prevents the mind from going into samadhi."*

One may hear a story from me once, then twice, but by the third time some may believe I am repeating the same story because I've run out of stock, and everyone already knows all these things. However, though our head remembers the words, the heart has not assimilated their meaning. If we had assimilated, then our personality and being would reflect a profound change. This is why Sri Ramakrishna said, *"It is not enough to know it! One must assimilate its meaning."*

- Some scholars who study the scriptures, love to show their scholarship by quoting extensively from the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, the Bhagavatam, the Chandi, the Bhagavad Gita, the Vedanta, and from Shankaracharya. Regarding this the Master said: *"What will one gain by merely quoting or hearing the scriptures? One must assimilate them. The almanac makes a forecast of the rainfall for the year, but you won't get a drop by squeezing its pages."*

- During the Master's (Sri Ramakrishna) lifetime, 'M' was the only one among His direct disciples to visit the village of Kamarpukur, the Master's birthplace. When 'M' arrived a worship was in progress in Sri Ramakrishna's ancestral home. The priest, a very elderly Brahmin of about 80 years of age, was a scholar of scripture. Later, 'M' was introduced to the priest as the headmaster of a school and a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. To this the scholarly priest was surprised and slightly commented how he, a headmaster who had studied and graduated from an institution of higher learning, would be a devotee of 'Gadai' (Ramakrishna's boyhood nickname), as Gadai was an illiterate fool who had not studied anything. To this 'M' reacted and silenced the priest by quoting an anecdote from Ramakrishna: *'A vulture soars high in the sky, but its eyes are fixed on the charnel-pits where the carcasses of animals are burned.'* 'M' continued, *'The same is true of pandits and scholars who seek name and fame, while the exact opposite is true in the Master's case. The Master had no formal education, he had God Realisation.'* Hearing these words the scholarly priest regretted his remarks and said that it was true, though he had studied the highest philosophies, he still lived a common worldly life.

● A Story to Remember ●

... it is not found in names ...

When it was time to name their firstborn, a husband and wife began to quarrel. She wanted to name him after her father; he wanted to name him after his. They finally had recourse to the rabbi to settle their dispute.

"What was the name of your father?" the rabbi asked the husband.

'Abijah."

'And what was your father's name?" he asked his wife.

'Abijah."

"Then what's the problem?" said the confused rabbi.

"You see, rabbi," said the woman, "my father was a scholar and his father was a horse-thief. How can I allow my son to be named after a man like that?"

The rabbi gave this very serious thought for the problem was indeed a delicate one. He did not want one party to feel it had won and the other that it had lost. So he finally said, "This is what I suggest you do. Call the boy Abijah. Then wait and see if he becomes a scholar or a horse-thief, and you will know after whom he was named.

... or in figures ...

"Prisoner at the bar," said the judge, "I find you guilty on twenty-three counts. I therefore sentence you to a total of one hundred and seventy-five years."

The prisoner was an old man. He burst into tears. The judge's facial expression softened. "I did not mean to be harsh," he said. "I know the sentence I have imposed is a very severe one. You don't really have to serve the whole of it."

The prisoner's eyes brightened with hope.

"That's right," said the judge. "Just do as much as you can!"

- from The Prayer of the Frog by Anthony de Mello

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[As time had run short, Swami Medhasananda decided to end his comments on 'Assimilation in Spiritual Life' here and continue the topic as part of the August Zushi Retreat.]