



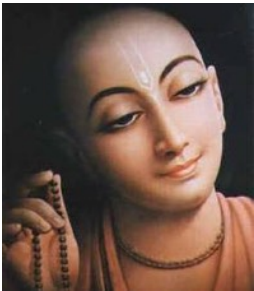
February 2020 - Volume 18 Number 02

The Vedanta Kyokai Newsletter

NEWS, UPDATES AND MISCELLANY FROM THE VEDANTA SOCIETY OF JAPAN

March 2020
Calendar

Birthdays



**Sri Gauranga
Mahaprabhu**

Monday, 09 March

**Swami
Yogananda**

Friday, 13 March

Zushi Events

1st (Sun) 14:00~16:30
Half Day Retreat at Zushi

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

Contact: benkyo.nvk(at
mark)gmail(dot)com

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

**Sri Sri Ramakrishna
Birth Celebration**

*** CANCELLED ***

We regret our celebration
has been cancelled as a
precaution against the
CORONAVIRUS,
as large indoor gatherings
appear to facilitate the
rapid spread of this virus.

More info on page 2



✧ Thus Spake ✧

"It is only in our scriptures that this adjective is given to the Lord-Abhiih, Abhiih. We have to become Abhiih, fearless, and our task will be done."

- Swami Vivekananda

"Let a man read some portion of the Bhagavad-Gita, or drink of the Ganges but a drop, or worship the Lord but once, he will set at rest forever all his fear of the King of Death."

- Sri Adi Shankara

January Zushi Retreat 2020 The Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi Birth Anniversary Celebration

On Sunday, 19 January the Vedanta Society of Japan's monthly Zushi Retreat celebrated the 167th birth anniversary of Holy Mother Sri Sri Sarada Devi. Mangala Arati (morning worship) began at 06:00am in the Main Zushi Ashram attended by volunteer devotees, most who had started preparations and spent the night at nearby Holy Mother's House or the Ashram.

Breakfast was served early in the Main Ashrama and volunteers attended to the many final preparations for the celebration afterwards, such as food dishes, bouquets and garlands for the altar. The platform was assembled in the nearby Annexe Building. Puja vessels and utensils were

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THE VEDANTA SOCIETY of JAPAN
CALENDAR of EVENTS

March 2020

1st (Sun) 14:00~16:30

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

7th (Sat) 10:00~12:00

Discourse on Bhagavad Gita - At the Embassy of India in Tokyo

(in Japanese only) Bring photo ID.

Please Contact: <https://www.gita-embassy.com/>

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

Gospel Class at the Zushi Centre

Contact: benkyo.nvk(at mark)gmail(dot)com

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

***** Sri Sri Ramakrishna Deva Birthday Celebration *****

*** CANCELLED ***

We regret to inform you this celebration has been cancelled as a precaution against the
CORONAVIRUS,

as large indoor gatherings appear to facilitate the rapid spread of this virus.

Instead, we will only hold the ritualistic puja - but there will be NO homa fire, NO flower offering (pushpanjali) NO lunch prasada, NO afternoon talk, and NO cultural programme.

Please visit our homepage for any updates!

17th (Fri) 16:00

Nara Narayan: Service to Homeless

Food Distribution in Yokohama

Contact: Yoko Sato

urara5599(at mark)gmail(dot)com

March 7th, 14th, 28th 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

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

Holy Mother Birth Anniversary (from page 1)

polished. Rows of seating were prepared for the congregation. The audio crew set up the audio/video equipment.

As 10:30am Swami Medhasanandaji (Maharaj) and Swami Divyanathanandaji (Anirvan Maharaj) then took up positions on the elevated platform and began puja (worship) with Maharaj at the microphone leading mantras, and Anirvan Maharaj performing the prescribed offering activities and gestures under Maharaj's tutelage.

The puja continued with arati and Maharaj again offering mantras to Mother and Anirvan Maharaj performing the symbolic offerings of the five elements to the continued tolling of a bell, as the congregation sang Khandana Bhava Bandhana / Breaker of World's Bondage composed by Swami Vivekanandaji, lead by Shanti-san on keyboard at the foot of the altar. This as Maharaj passed the flaming fire vessel around the congregation to receive blessings.

khaṇḍana bhava bandhana jaga vandana vandi tomāy |
nirañjana nara-rūpa-dhara nirguṇa guṇamay ||
mocana aghadūṣaṇa jagabhūṣaṇa cidghanakāy |
jñānāñjana-vimala-nayana vīkṣaṇe moha jāy ||
bhāsvara bhāva-sāgara cira-unmada prema-pāthār |
bhaktārjana-yugala caraṇa tāraṇa-bhava-pār ||
jṛmbhita-yuga-īśvara jagadīśvara yogasahāy |
nirodhana samāhitamana nirakhi tava kṛpāy ||
bhañjana-duḥkhagañjana karuṇāghana karma-kaṭhor |
prāṇārpaṇa jagata-tāraṇa kṛntana-kaliḍor ||
vañcana-kāmakāñcana atinindita-indriyarāg |
tyāgīśvara he naravara dehapade anurāg ||
nirbhaya gatasamśaya dṛṛhaniścaya-mānasavān |
niṣkāraṇa-bhakata-śaraṇa tyaji jāti-kula-māna||
sampada tava śrīpada bhava-goṣpada-vāri yathāy |
premārpaṇa samadaraśana jagajana-duḥkha jāy ||
namo namo prabhu vākya-manātīta manovacanaikādhār |
jyotira jyoti ujala-hṛdikandara tumi tamo-bhañjana hār ||
dhe dhe dhe laṅga raṅga bhaṅga bāje aṅga saṅga mṛdaṅga
gāhiche chanda bhakatavṛnda ārati tomār ||
jaya jaya ārati tomār hara hara ārati tomār
śiva śiva ārati tomār ||
khaṇḍana bhava bandhana jaga vandana vandi tomāy |

As the final arati element and final verse and salutation were offered Anirvan Maharaj prostrated to Mother before returning to the platform. Shanti then asked the congregation to again follow her in singing 'Sarva Mangala Mangalya', Litany to the Divine Mother from the Chandi-XI: 10-12

om sarvamaṅgalamāṅgalye śive sarvārthasādhike |
śaraṇye tryambake gauri nārāyaṇi namo'stu te ||
sr̥ṣṭīsthitivināśānām śaktibhūte sanātani |
guṇāśraye guṇamaye nārāyaṇi namo'stu te ||
śaraṇāgatadīnārtaparitrāṇaparāyaṇe |

Holy Mother Birth Anniversary (from page 3)

sarvasyārtihare devi nārāyaṇi namo'stu te ||
 jaya nārāyaṇi namo'stu te jaya nārāyaṇi namo'stu te |
 jaya nārāyaṇi namo'stu te jaya nārāyaṇi namo'stu te ||

(Translation)

Auspiciousness of all things auspicious!

O consort of Shiva, fulfiller of all our goals!

Our only refuge! O three-eyed Gauri!

O Narayani! Our salutations to you.

The power beyond all creation, preservation,
and destruction! O eternal one!

O ground of the gunas and embodiment of the gunas!

O Narayani! Our salutations to you.

Ever devoted to the salvation of the lowly and suffering who seek shelter with you!

O destroyer of all misery! O Divine Mother!

O Narayani! Our salutations to you.

All victory to you, O Narayani. Our salutations to you.

Victory and salutations to you again and again, O Narayani!

Jay Srī Guru Māhārāji ki jay

Jay Maha Maiki jay

Jay Srī Swamiji Ki jay

Jay Srī Buddha Devaki jay

Jay Srī Ganga Maiki jay

As the hymn came to a close, final prayers and offerings were made by the swamis. Then as they arose from the podium, a flurry of activity saw the area at the foot of the altar cleared and food offerings collected and taken to the nearby Main Ashrama kitchen, leaving but selected offerings on the upper tier with the photos of Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda, the lower tier now for trays of pushpanjali flower offerings.

Summoning all to rise as space was cleared and with flowers and leaves passed out for the pushpanjali (flower offering), Maharaj sprinkled a bit of Ganges water on all the attendees. He then led the congregation in Sanskrit pushpanjali and pranam mantras to the Holy Mother phrase by phrase or word by word before asking each to offer their prayers and flowers at the altar. Afterward everyone proceeded to the Main Ashrama for Prasad lunch.

The afternoon session began about 14:45 with chanting of Vedic Prayers and a reading. Maharaj then gave a talk on hymn, 'Prakṛtiṃ Paramām' (presented in this issue). A music brief programme followed featuring hymns to Holy Mother by Ms. Shanti and Swami Divyanathanandaji.

After a brief meditation, tea was then served in the Main Ashrama. About 40 people had attended the celebration. •

• **Thought of the Month** •

"A taste for truth at any cost is a passion which spares nothing."

Albert Camus



Holy Mother
Sri Sarada Devi
Puja
Zushi Japan
January 2020



January Zushi Retreat 2020
Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi Birth Anniversary

Afternoon Session Talk
'Prakṛtiṁ Paramām'
by Swami Medhasananda

[Prior to this talk Swami Divyanathanandaji (Anirvan Maharaj) joined Swami Medhasanandaji (Maharaj) on the Annexe meeting room platform with a harmonium and together they sang Swami Abhedanandaji's favoured hymn to Holy Mother, 'Prakṛtiṁ Paramām'.]

The hymn composed by Swami Abhedananda is quoted below:

prakṛtiṁ paramām abhayām varadām
naranūpadharām janatāpaharām |
śaraṇāgatasevakatoṣakarīm
praṇamāmi parām jananīm jagatām ||
guṇahīnasutān aparādhayutān
kṛpayādya samuddhara mohagatān |
taraṇīm bhavasāgarapārarakarīm
praṇamāmi parām jananīm jagatām ||
viṣayaṁ kusumaṁ parihṛtya sadā
caraṇāmburuhāmṛta-śāntisudhām |
piba bhṛṅgamano bhavarogaharām
praṇamāmi parām jananīm jagatām ||
kṛpām kuru mahādevi suteṣu praṇateṣu ca |
caraṇāśrayadānena kṛpāmayi namo'stu te ||
lajjāpaṭāvṛte nityaṁ sārade jñānadāyike |
pāpebhyo naḥ sadā rakṣa kṛpāmayi namo'stu te ||
rāmakṛṣṇagataprāṇām tannāmaśravaṇapriyām |
tadbhāvaraṇjītakārām praṇamāmi muhurmuḥuḥ ||
pavitraṁ caritaṁ yasyāḥ pavitraṁ jīvanaṁ tathā |
pavitratāsvarūpiṇyai tasyai kurmo namo namaḥ ||
devīm prasannām praṇatārtihantrīm
yogīndrapūjyām yugadharmapātrīm |
tām sārādām bhaktivijñānadātrīm
dayāsvarūpām praṇamāmi nityam ||
snehena badhnāsi mano'smadīyaṁ
doṣānaśeṣān saguṇīkaroṣi |
ahetunā no dayase sadoṣān
svānke grhītvā yadidaṁ vicitram ||
prasīda mātavinayena yāce
nityaṁ bhava snehavatī suteṣu |
premaikabinduṁ ciradagdhacitte
viṣiṅca cittaṁ kuru naḥ suśāntam ||
jananīm sārādām devīm rāmakṛṣṇaṁ jagadgurum |
pādapadme tayohi śritvā praṇamāmi muhurmuḥuḥ ||

(con't page 7)

'Prakṛtiṁ Paramām' (from page 6)

Translation

To the Divine Shakti embodied in human form, the giver of boons and dispeller of fear, who quenches the fire of misery and fills with joy the hearts of those who take refuge in Her; to Thee my salutations, O Supreme Being, O Mother of the worlds!

Redeem Thy children, bestowing Thy mercy, full of faults, deluded, and without merit as we are! A veritable ship ferrying us across the ocean of Samsara art Thou; To Thee my salutations, O Supreme Being, O Mother of the worlds!

Abandoning the flowers of worldly enjoyment, always drink, O honeybee of my mind, the nectar of eternal peace at the lotus of Mother's feet—the sure panacea for the disease of worldliness. To Thee my salutations, O Supreme Being, O Mother of the worlds!

Bestow Thy grace, O great Divinity, on us Thy children, bowing in prostration before Thee, and grant us shelter at Thy feet, O Compassionate One. To Thee our salutations!

Though ever covered with the veil of modesty, Thou, O Mother Sarada, art really the Power that bestows spiritual illumination on human beings. Protect us from sins evermore, O grace embodied! To Thee our salutations!

To Her whose life is fused into one with Ramakrishna's, whose delight consists in absorption in thought and talk of His glory, whose personality is soaked and suffused with His spirit; to Her our salutations!

To Her whose nature is sanctity, to Her whose life is sanctity, to Her who is the very embodiment of sanctity; to Her I bow down, again and again!

To the gracious Mother Sarada, the embodiment of mercy and the granter of devotion and knowledge, to Her who is worshipped by the chief of yogis, to Her who (with Sri Ramakrishna) has given a new revelation for the present age, and who assuages the miseries of devotees taking refuge at Her feet; to her do I ever bow down in worship.

Binding our mind to Thee with the bonds of Thy love, Thou does transmute our very vices into virtues. Compassionate as Thou art without any consideration of merit, Thou dost, lo! Take even unworthy ones onto Thy lap!

Mother, be propitious and grant what I in humility beseech. May Thou be ever affectionate to us, Thy children; and casting even a drop of Thy love on our long-parched heart, render it cool and peaceful.

Taking shelter at the lotus feet of the Mother, Sarada Devi, and Ramakrishna, the teacher of the world, I salute them again and again.

[This translation was posted by Vedanta Center of Greater Washington, D.C.]

Prakṛtiṁ Paramām by Swami Medhasananda

Our talk today will be based on Swami Abhedanandaji's hymn to Holy Mother, 'Prakritim Paramam'. In this hymn the real nature of Holy Mother Sarada Devi's divine personality is interpreted and described with salutations and prayers offered to Her as well.

Sri Ramakrishna also made many passing comments on Holy Mother's essence. Once while She was massaging the Master's feet in His room in Dakshineswar She asked how He regarded Her. Of course they were married, but theirs was not a common type of marriage, and so She put the question to Her husband. Sri Ramakrishna replied at once: "The Mother who is in the (Kali) temple here, the Mother who gave birth to this body, that same Mother is now massaging my feet." This point regarding their relationship is most important for us to keep in mind. On other occasions Sri Ramakrishna stated
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Prakṛtiṁ Paramām (from page7)

that Holy Mother was His power, His Shakti (primordial cosmic energy) with which He was imparting spirituality to the devotees. Other times He would say that Holy Mother was Saraswati, Giver of Knowledge, and born to give knowledge to men. Mother Saraswati gives two types of knowledge, worldly knowledge (Aparā Vidyā) and spiritual knowledge (Parā Vidyā), and the Holy Mother was the embodiment of both of these.

Holy Mother Revealed

From the outside the Holy Mother looks like nothing more than an ordinary country village woman. In contrast, Sri Ramakrishna would glow, especially in samadhi, and His spiritual aura was captivating. Swami Vivekananda, too, had great presence and charisma. Sri Sarada Devi exhibited none of this. However, one of Her long-time attendants, Swami Arupanandaji, when asked by another monk about Holy Mother's special qualities answered that She had no ego at all. When common people have small or limited talents, they want to show them off, that's the ego. Holy Mother was able to conceal Her profound spiritual powers very well too. When we hear that Sri Ramakrishna referred to Holy Mother as the Mother Saraswati, we cannot even visualise or realise what this means. We may read the books and meditate, but we cannot fully appreciate the significance of this testimony. Holy Mother was all-powerful, yet She hid these powers, indicating Her very special strength, without which one could not keep such powers hidden.

The first person Sri Ramakrishna told that Sarada Devi was so special was Swami Vivekananda (Swamiji), who explained this to his brother disciples. Once Swami Adbhutanandaji (Latu Maharaj) was meditating on Mother Kali, and at the same time Holy Mother was hard at work preparing dinner and chapatis in the Kali Temple nahabhat. Sri Ramakrishna approached Adbhutanandaji and said, "Latu! The Divine Mother you are meditating on is in the nahabhat working hard, so why don't you stop meditating and go help Her?" Sri Ramakrishna indicated here by this evocative statement that the Divine Mother had manifested Herself in physical form as Sarada Devi.

Among the monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna the level of understanding of the Holy Mother was certainly deep, yet whenever spiritual stalwarts like Swamiji, Brahmanandaji, Premanandaji, and few others would approach Her, they would clearly see Her as the Divine Mother. As such, they could not engage in conversation with Her freely, and would often be overwhelmed with spiritual emotion. For them it was as if Mother Kali Herself was sitting before them.

At other times Sarada Devi would say that She and Sri Ramakrishna were but of a single existence, like two sides of the same coin, like Brahman and Shakti. In India we address Sri Sarada Devi as the 'Divine Mother', and since Sri Ramakrishna is the other side of this coin, can we, their devotees, not also call Sri Ramakrishna, 'Divine Father'? Certainly we can use both, Divine Mother for Sri Sarada Devi, and Divine Father for Sri Ramakrishna. In Japanese Divine Mother is "Haha naru Kami" and Divine Father is "Chichi naru Kami" (*Today's translator, Leonardo then points out that although Catholics do not worship God as Mother, 'Chichi naru Kami' is the same term Japan's Catholics use to refer to God, the Father.*)

Primordial Energy

Although there are other hymns dedicated Holy Mother, 'Prakṛtiṁ Paramām' remains by far the most popular. When Swami Abhedanandaji was still a young monk, before going to the West at Swamiji's request to preach Vedanta, he visited Holy Mother who was then staying at Nilambar Babu's garden house on the western bank of the Ganga near the present day Belur Math. Abhedanandaji approached Holy Mother and said that he had composed a hymn dedicated to Her. Mother, the embodiment of humility was very surprised at this since such hymns are usually dedicated to gods and goddesses, and She humbly puzzled, "About me?" The swami then asked if he may recite it to Her. She consented, and as She listened to Abhedanandaji's verses, Holy Mother went into samadhi.

During the recital of the hymn as Abhedanandaji uttered the verse 'rāmākṣṇāgataprāṇām' the

(con't page 9)

Prakṛtiṁ Paramām (from page 8)

swami clearly saw that sitting before him was not Holy Mother, but Sri Ramakrishna Himself. Although it is not possible to verify this, the story of this event has been passed down by generations of brothers of the Order.

Fearless, Merciful, Giver of Boons

Let me illustrate some of the special features of the Holy Mother described in the hymn. First, the meaning of 'prakṛtiṁ paramām' is the primordial energy which creates, preserves and destroys the universe. Swami Saradanandaji (Sarat Maharaj) too would sing a Bengali hymn which conveyed the idea that in Holy Mother's play, She creates and at other times She destroys. She is also the giver of the consequences of actions, yet She can substantially reduce the resultant suffering of one's bad karma. The first line of the Abhedananda's hymn describes Holy Mother as 'abhayām' meaning fearless, and this fearlessness has two aspects, one of which means She is completely free from fear, and She can also remove the fears of such stricken people.

In this regard, we may mention here a funny incident from Holy Mother's life: Once while in Calcutta, Holy Mother was told that a doctor would have to come and give Her an injection, the prospect of which frightened Her. Later, when the doctor arrived at Her Udbodhan House, people searched for Her here and there, but She was nowhere to be found. Eventually, after the doctor had left, they found Her hiding under the bed. Saradanandaji said in fun that She is 'Abhaya', fearless and fearlessness itself, and if She is afraid, then nothing can be done!

Then the hymn praises Her as 'abhayām varadām'. Multi-armed image of Mother Kali with one of Her right arms raised with palm out depicts this abhayām or fearlessness, and another right arm facing down with palm open depicts 'varadām' or a bestower of boons to fulfil devotees prayers. She was the fulfiller of both worldly and spiritual prayers. If we ask for worldly things, of course She can provide them, but our desires finally lead to troubles that will befall us. On the other hand, if we ask for viveka, discrimination; vairāgya, renunciation; and bhakti, love of God, She can bestow these for our great benefit as well. Next 'naranārūpadharām' explains that She manifested Herself in human form and 'janatāpāharām' says further that She eliminates the sufferings of Her devotees' hearts.

Later the verse, 'kṛpām kuru mahādevi', praises the merciful Mother bestowing Her grace upon devotees. She is the refuge of the devotees, whenever we are in trouble we can take refuge in Her. She once assured a devotee to remember that if there was nobody or nowhere to find help, that She would always be there to turn to, and this gives all devotees much mental assurance and courage to face the trials and tribulations of life. These are not mere words, and if we pray sincerely to Holy Mother, She will help us. Many, including me, have had such experiences several times throughout their lives. Hence, these experiences were not borne of an active imagination, they were real outcomes.

We face two problems regarding Mother bestowing grace: First we listen to such things with disbelief, we do not believe it, and even if we do believe, have received Mother's grace, and have been helped in the past, we forget about it. Worse, thus we become both forgetful and ungrateful. One good remedy is to write down those occasions wherein we received Her grace to help us remember them, so that we can recall these occasions to deepen our faith. Otherwise, our faith in Her grace remains shallow, and this may lead us to believe we are not being helped and/or to forget when Her help did indeed come.

Mother of the Entire Universe

The hymn also refers to Sri Sarada Devi as 'jananim jagatam' meaning the Mother of the universe. This means She is Mother to all, all beings, birds and animals, and there are numerous incidents of Her repeating this fact. She is not only the Mother of Indians, but of foreigners as well. The English were ruling India when Mother was living in Her mortal frame and many Indians had a negative view of the English, for the obvious reason that they were being exploited and subjugated by the English Raj, but Mother would say the English were Her children too, an attitude which common people thought very unusual. India was still under cast restrictions as well. Upper-caste peoples would not deal

(con't page 10)

Prakṛtiṁ Paramām (from page 9)

with or mingle with those of lower-castes, or even touch them. More so was in the case of outcastes or people of other religions, such as Muslims. Mother would serve these equally with other devotees of higher caste status, and once said that Amzad, a Muslim labourer and professional thief, was as much Her son as Sarat, Swami Saradanandaji, a direct monastic disciple of Sri Ramakrishna and the General Secretary of the Ramakrishna Order, was.



She was the giver of jnana (knowledge of God), vijnana (absolute self-knowledge) and moksha (liberation.) One monastic, Krishnalal Maharaj (Swami Dhirananda), was trying to persuade a young man of north Calcutta to take initiation from Holy Mother. No matter how many times the swami urged the boy to take initiation, he remained reluctant. This boy also respected Swami Turiyanandaji (Hari Maharaj) greatly, as he was a direct monastic disciple of Sri Ramakrishna and a highly elevated soul, and said that if Turiyanandaji were to give the same advice, he would follow it. As Turiyanandaji was the at Balaram Bose's residence in the same locality, the two set off to ask Turiyanandaji for advice on the subject. Upon hearing that Krishnalal had been advising the fellow to take initiation from Holy Mother, Turiyanandaji became very excited and told him that Krishnalal was indeed his very best friend. He told the boy that Sarada Devi is indeed the Divine Mother ready to give liberation to all. "Though one gets liberation only after many lives of hard spiritual practices, presently, Holy Mother has made it so simple to get liberation, yet, why is it that thousands upon thousands do not come to Her for liberation?" On hearing these fiery words from Turiyanandaji, the boy was immediately convinced and went to Holy Mother and asked for initiation.

Embodiment of Purity

Usually we see the images of goddesses are adorned with many jewels and golden ornaments, but in Holy Mother's case her most prized ornament was Her modesty. 'Prakṛtiṁ Paramām' praises Holy Mother as the embodiment of purity. We often hear the word purity, but we do not really comprehend it unless and until we, ourselves, become pure. Even then, it would be difficult to perceive the measure of Mother's purity. To illustrate this, Swamiji and Swami Turiyanandaji were once ferrying from Belur to Calcutta on the Ganges in the rainy season, when the water of the river was quite unclean. Swamiji had a fever at the time and was drinking water from the Ganges now and then. This surprised Turiyanandaji who pointed out to Swamiji that the water was not clean and that he was already running a fever. Swamiji answered, "Brother Hari, I fear lest I have some impurity in me, and I am afraid to visit the Holy Mother." Now we all know how lofty Swamiji's spirituality was, yet here we see even he had some concern about his purity before meeting Holy Mother. This should give us an idea of Holy Mother's purity.

Holy Mother is also the best example of the embodiment of Ramakrishna Consciousness, as She was always conscious of Sri Ramakrishna. 'Kshama Rupini' means that Mother was the goddess of forgiveness and forbearance. She would forgive the mistakes and sins of those who would take refuge in Her, and She would make them clean and purify them. She also had the power to transform bad tendencies into good ones. For example, She could change someone's strong attachment to family into a strong attachment to God, thereby not only eliminating that which is negative, but transforming such things into the positive. Sri Ramakrishna shared this same trait.

Though Holy Mother was Herself the Divine Mother, she would often advise her attendants and others in regular contact with Her not to think of Her as the Divine Mother or Universal Mother, but rather to think of Her as their very own loving Mother, which would make their relationship natural and profound. We can also emulate such an attitude to Her by echoing the sentiment expressed in the final stanza of the hymn, may we also pray: "Mother, may Thou be ever affectionate to us, Thy children; and casting even a drop of Thy love on our long parched heart, render it cool and peaceful!" •

Talk on Lord Jesus
by Leonardo Alvarez

[This talk was prepared for the Vedanta Society's annual Christmas Eve celebrations, but was summarised due to time constraints. We present here a revised and more complete account of Mr. Alvarez's prepared remarks.]

This evening I will talk about Lord Jesus, but I will start by first presenting how Jesus' infancy is portrayed according to early sources and the Koran, all of which come from the Near East.

Extraordinary Parentage and Children

In the Koran it is stated that the Virgin Mary was visited by the Archangel Gabriel who told Her that She would become pregnant by the spirit of God and give birth to a child, in spite of not yet being married to Joseph. In the story of the Koran, Joseph was away, hence Mary had to go in hiding and give birth to Jesus in the desert, alone. When she came back with the newborn infant, people in her town gathered around her and accused her of giving birth to a child out of wedlock. At that time, the Spirit of Allah possessed baby Jesus, whereby He stood up and said: "I am a slave of Allah. He has given me the Scripture and made me a Prophet." (Holy Koran, Surat Maryam, 19:30). When the people heard this, they were amazed, and held both baby Jesus and Mary in highest esteem.

Mary herself was not an ordinary woman according to ancient and oral traditions. In fact, the Catholic Church has always thought the Virgin to be eternally so, and 'sine labia concepta est' meaning 'born without sin'. This story is found in several gospels which did not make it into the official cannon. One of these is the Gospel of James (also known as 'Thaddeus', a cousin of Jesus). It relates how Mary's mother also became pregnant by the Holy Spirit to later give birth to the future 'Mother of God'. This divine child used to spend most of Her time in the Temple of Jerusalem, attending the worships and hearing spiritual discussions among the learned.

Mary in turn would also give birth to Jesus by becoming pregnant by the Holy Spirit. In terms of 'miraculous conception', we see similar examples in the lives of other Avatars. Sri Ramakrishna's Mother, Chandramayi, saw an effulgent light entering her body from the Shiva Lingam at Kamarpukur, after which she became pregnant. Her husband at that time was on pilgrimage at Gaya and had a dream at that time with Lord Vishnu, who told him that He would be born as his son. Likewise, Lord Buddha's Mother, Queen Maya, saw a luminous white elephant entering in her womb in a vision, after which she became pregnant. So, extraordinary parents give birth to God incarnated through extraordinary means.

The same non-canonical Gospels tell us that Jesus was loved by all as a child and that he had an extraordinary intelligence and wisdom that far surpassed his young age. When some teachers were hired to teach Him the alphabet, it was He rather who taught the teachers the true meaning of the letters, and their relationship with God. Hence, the Teacher of teachers was well active early on. It is also recorded that as a boy Jesus also performed several miracles, including bringing back to life one of his friends. Altogether, he was very different from His peers because of His godlike qualities. In this sense, the childhood descriptions of Sri Krishna in the Srimad Bhagavatam resemble these narratives of Jesus as a child.

Putting Teachings into Practice

Now, if Jesus' background is important, it is all the more relevant is the message He gave to the world, through words and deeds. Lord Jesus Himself summarized all His teachings into two phrases, which are also found in the Jewish Old Testament:

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“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.” (Old Testament =Deuteronomy 6:5; New Testament=Matthew 22:37, Mark 12:30, Luke 10:27)

“Love thy neighbor as yourself” (Old Testament = Leviticus 19:18; New Testament= Matthew 22:39, Mark 12:31, Luke 10:27)

Saying so is easy, but accomplishing it is difficult. As Lord Jesus Himself said:

“It is not anyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ who will enter the kingdom of Heaven, but the person who does the will of my Father in heaven.” (Matthew 7:21).

However, Jesus gives concrete examples on how His words are to be put into practice, through parables as in this one:

“Then the King will say to those on his right hand, ‘Come, you whom my Father has blessed, take as your heritage the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you made me welcome, lacking clothes and you clothed me, sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to see me.’

“Then, the upright will say to him in reply, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and make you welcome, lacking clothes and clothe you? When did we find you sick or in prison and go to see you?’

“And the King will answer, ‘In truth I tell you, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me.’” (Matthew 25:34-40)

How to Grow Love of God

Hence, want to love God? Then love those who are in need, those who are next to you, by seeing God himself in them. This concept of ‘Nara Narayana’, that is seeing God (Narayana) in man (Nara) and worshipping Him through service, was also taught by Sri Ramakrishna and put into exemplary practice by Swami Vivekananda. Yet we know that loving those closest to us is the most difficult of things, because we cannot simply run away from them. We must learn tolerance, forbearance, self-sacrifice, patience and to subdue our egos in the midst of our closest relationships.

In the Sermon of the Mount, Lord Jesus urges us not to hold rancor in our hearts towards our brethren and to forgive and make peace with all, before we say our prayers and give our offerings to God (Matthew 5:23-24). Because if we hate our brethren, who are the living image of God, how can we love God?

This is important to bear in mind in our human relationships. When affronted, we must keep prayerful and analyze our own minds and emotions, to curb our instinctive reaction to retaliate. Even if we cannot control ourselves, by analyzing our minds afterwards, we may learn from our mistakes and prevent mishaps in future, similar situations.

In the Old Testament it was said: *“Love thy neighbor and hate thy enemy”* (Matthew 5:43). Similarly, the so called ‘Lex talionis’ prevailed: *“An eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth”* (Leviticus, 24:19). But Jesus turned this around and said something revolutionary:

“But I say this to you: offer no resistance to the wicked. On the contrary, if anyone hits you on the right cheek, offer him the other as well”; “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” (Matthew 5:39, 43); and *“Do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.”* (Matthew 7:12)

Teachings for Householders and for Monastics

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This, however, should not be misunderstood. Swami Vivekananda (Swamiji) said clearly in his Karma Yoga lectures, that it was a householder's duty to fight off evil. Hence, the *lex talionis* is applicable and necessary to keep the social order. Nevertheless, those who have gone a step further, and especially monastics, are those most fit to practice this teaching of Lord Jesus. Swamiji said:

"One man does not resist because he is weak, lazy, and cannot, not because he will not; the other man knows that he can strike an irresistible blow if he likes; yet he not only does not strike, but blesses his enemies. The one who from weakness resists not, commits a sin, and as such cannot receive any benefit from the non-resistance; while the other would commit a sin by offering resistance." (Karma Yoga, Ch. II "Each is great in his own place").

Let us remember that it was the same Lord Jesus who preached meekness and peace, when entering Jerusalem and seeing people selling animals and changing money, that *"He made a whip out of cords and drove them all out of the temple area, with the sheep and oxen, and spilled the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables, and to those who sold doves he said, 'Take these out of here, and stop making my Father's house a marketplace!'"* (John 2:15-16).

He showed both meekness and strength, according to the circumstances. Therefore, only those with great power and self-control can practice meekness and at the same time, stand up mightily against wickedness when needed. This means that Lord Jesus' teachings must be applied according to time and place, after due analysis and according to one's own capability and with sincerity.

In spite of standing against evil, He had no hatred for anyone and wished the welfare of all, even those who murdered Him, as He powerfully stated when He was crucified: *"Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing."* (Luke 23:34). Never did He preach vengeance or retaliation, but rather that one should forgive one's brother *"Up to seventy times seven."* (Matthew 18:22).

Other teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount include a code of ethical and spiritual conduct, as well as an ideal of forgiveness and renunciation. He says that it is not the mighty, but the merciful – for they are powerful enough to be merciful – that will inherit the Earth; that those pure in heart shall see God – for man was created in the image and likeness of God, hence he will see his own divinity; and that peacemakers will be called Sons of God.

He also warns us not to commit adultery with our thoughts and eyes, because a man looking at another's wife, or a woman looking at another's husband with lust, commits infidelity. Then, Lord Jesus proclaims that some make themselves eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven, meaning, they forsake marriage and physical relationships in favor of celibacy, in order to serve God with whole body and mind, with undivided attention.

Simple but Powerful Practices

Regardless of one's position in life, Lord Jesus does urge all to *"be perfect as your heavenly Father perfect"* (Matthew, 5:48). How are we to achieve this? Besides the above, there are other simpler but powerful practices that can help us to improve and become a more perfect version of ourselves.

One of these is truthfulness or keeping one's word. Jesus said: *"But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one."* (Matthew 5:37). If we say we shall do something, we must try to fulfil our words, even if we realize that it is much more difficult to do than we thought when we said we would do so. Hence, it is better to start with small and achievable things and then go on to greater ones. In this regard, Jesus said: *"Whoever is faithful with very little will also be faithful with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much."* (Luke 16:10-11).

Sri Ramakrishna also mentioned that in our present age one could realize God by adhering to Truth. If anyone has ever tried to do so, he or she will understand to what extreme this is difficult. Challenging as it may be, those who continually try to practice this will see slow positive changes within themselves, especially more harmony between thoughts, words and deeds.

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Another good practice is to wake up early in the morning to pray. Throughout the Bible, many of the greatest acts were preceded by waking up early in the morning. Abraham and Moses woke up before dawn and went to a mount and met God face to face. King David used to wake up before dawn and pray for hours. Lord Jesus did it as well, as it is attested: *“Now in the morning, having risen a long while before daylight, He went out and departed to a solitary place; and there He prayed.”* (Mark 1:35).

Religions throughout the world, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and so forth, state that the couple hours before sunrise are filled with intense spiritual energy, greatly helping in meditation and prayer. Also, waking up early helps the body to follow the natural rhythm of nature, thus being in greater harmony with its own inner system, as well as its outer one. Discipline is also required to carry out this routine day after day, which in turn, helps to discipline the mind.

Now besides waking up early and the other important thing is to do it privately. *“But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.”* (Mathew 6:6). If you do it outwardly, you will care more for the honor of others and your ego will try to show itself as holy and pure, but this will make you forget God and rather concentrate in your own ego of ‘godlike’ proportions. On the other hand, if you keep your prayers private, why will the Father reward you openly? Because if you are humble, pure and modest, these virtues will make you shine before others, even in spite of yourself.

The Benefit of Prayer

Prayer also helps against temptations. *“Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”* (Matthew 26:41) Regarding this, recent neuropsychological studies have some light to offer. It has been found that the amount of time spent in meditation correlates to significant grey matter (neural connectivity) changes in:

(1) The frontal lobe, the seat of conscious planning, rationalization and self-control, whereby people are able to stay focused and ignore stimuli coming both from outside and from within their own minds.

(2) The amygdala, which is the seat of emotional control and empathy, whereby people are able to better control their emotions and become more easily empathic to others.

(3) The hippocampus, the seat of memory, whereby people are able to become more aware of what they are doing – and that their minds have wandered - and also being able to concentrate for longer periods of time.

Hence, by higher self-control, emotional regulation, awareness and power of concentration, we can have greater capacity to master our lower passions and our minds to avoid the opposite, that is, being a slave to them. This is a struggle that all men and women must go through, the fire through which our virtue must be put to test.

There is another way to perfect oneself, which is also complementary and not exclusive of what was said before. That is, focusing on our relationship with God, by following the example of Christ. St. Paul in his letters (Romans 8:15) says that Jesus used to call God by the name ‘Abba’, which is ‘Father’, but in the way that children would call their fathers tenderly such as ‘Papa’. Hence, Jesus had a Father-Son relationship with God, which was very intimate and of complete reliance and surrender to Him. We see this also in Sri Ramakrishna, who would address His ideal deity, Mother Kali, as ‘Ma’, just as a child would call upon his mother, and He depended entirely on Her.

Divine by Birthright

On the other hand, Jesus also taught a type relationship that is understood as the position of Advaita Vedanta or monism, in which the devotee feels to be one with God. It is said that during

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winter, during the Feast of the Dedication of the Temple (called Hanukkah in Hebrew) of Jerusalem, while He was at the Portico of Solomon, He said to those present: "I and my Father are one" (John 10:30). Then, to those who protested, saying that He was blaspheming, the Lord replied: "*Is it not written in your law, 'I said, "You are gods"?"*" (John 10:34, quoting from Psalm 82:6), and He explained that "*He' (God) called them gods, to whom the word of God came.*" (John 10:35) Therefore, Jesus is plainly saying that those who come close to God take part of His divinity.

When the devotee becomes united with God in the highest form of prayer, he or she will not see any difference between his or her own self and God, as other great Christian saints have also attested. However, this is not achievable merely by saying "*I and my Father are one*" and then leading an immoral and impure life, as some self-deceiving folks would have it. If one can completely erase one's own ego and merge totally in God, as great Christian mystics such as Saint Francis and Saint John of the Cross did, then one is fit to chant in unison with them and Christ: "*I and my Father are one*". Until then, it will be more imagination than reality.

Nonetheless, Jesus is clearly pointing at something which has not been fully paid attention through the ages. We said before that He urged us to be "*Perfect as the Father is perfect.*" He never said: "You sinner, you can never overcome sin!". In fact, He said exactly the opposite. For instance, He commanded: "*Sin no more*", to the blind man He healed (John 5:14) and to the adulterous woman He saved (John 8:11). He gave them a straightforward order, which He was sure they could fulfil. Because He would not give an order which He would consider impossible to accomplish.

Also, by saying to those near him "*You are gods*", Jesus was reminding them that man was created "*in the likeness and image of God*" (Genesis 1:16), and divine by birthright. The Catholic saints have said that the image of God (imago Dei) is untouched, in spite of all sin, and only the likeness is temporarily lost, but can be regained through self-effort and grace. In fact, even the Jewish commentaries (e.g. The Jewish Study Bible by Berlin and Brettler) on the book of Genesis state that, Adam and Eve were not cast out of Paradise because of sin, but rather, because they needed to experience the world and gain knowledge and wisdom, to then re-enter, as fully conscious adults, aware of all things and of their own divinity.

Thank you and Merry Christmas to one and all.



● A Story to Remember ●

Both Answers Are True

Once a youth, curious about spiritual practice, came to a saint and asked him, “Maharaj, is it necessary to go to leave hearth and home and to go the jungle to attain Mukti (liberation from the bondage of birth and death)?”

The saint said, “Who says so? If that was so, then how did King Janak attain liberation despite living as a king and leading a prosperous life?” Hearing this, the curious youth went away satisfied.

Some time later another curious youth came and asked the same question of the saint. “In order to attain liberation is it necessary to abandon family life and do penance in the forest?”

The saint replied, “Of course! Otherwise why did the great seekers like Shuk-Sanak go into the forest to attain liberation, were they but fools?”

A disciple who had been in the company of the saint on both occasions was puzzled by the two different answers to the same question. When the second youth had gone away, the disciple asked the saint, “Gurudev, why did you give such contradictory answers to the same question by each youth? Which is the correct answer to that question?”

The saint replied, “My son, both of the answers are true. The first youth who came to me is capable of practicing the spiritual disciplines required for attaining Mukti even while leading a family life. For the other youth, however, it would be difficult to practice spirituality while living a worldly life. Therefore, I offered each one a relevant example with my answer.”

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