



JANUARY 2021 - VOLUME 19 NUMBER 01

The Vedanta Kyokai Newsletter

NEWS, UPDATES AND MISCELLANY FROM THE VEDANTA SOCIETY OF JAPAN

FEBRUARY 2021 Calendar



Birthdays

**Swami
Vivekananda**

Thursday, 4 February

**Swami
Brahmananda**

Saturday, 13 February

**Swami
Trigunatitananda**

Monday, 15 February

**Swami
Adbhutananda**

Saturday, 27 February

Zushi Events

We regret that our weekly programmes and classes need to be livestreamed again, due to reimposed COVID19 restrictions.

Details on page 02!



✧ Thus Spake ✧

"Spiritual practice means to keep the mind steady at His lotus feet and to be absorbed in His thoughts."

- The Holy Mother

"I, the Atman, dear to the devotees, am attainable by love and devotion. Devotion to me purifies even the lowliest of the low."

- Sri Krishna

Zushi Centre

1 January 2021 -11am

A Brief Sri Ramakrishna Kalpataru Day Message

by Swami Medhasananda

Welcome everyone, today is a special day. This New Year Holiday is a little different from other years. Traditionally, Japanese trains run all night long on New Year's Eve, so that people can visit various temples and shrines, but this year that practice was suspended due to renewed COVID-19 restrictions.

On this day, we reflect on the past year in various ways. It is also the time to make a new oath, to make a special vow.

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Vedanta Society of Japan
Calendar of Programmes
FEBRUARY 2021

The Japanese government has announced that as the number of coronavirus (COVID-19) cases continues to rise, everyone should more seriously adopt masking and social distancing measures, and stay at home in order to prevent an explosion of infections and hospitalisations. Under these circumstances, all our programmes will be livestreamed so you can watch them at home on the computer or on your mobile phone.

Swami Medhasananda, President
Vedanta Society of Japan

• ZUSHI CENTRE PROGRAMMES for FEBRUARY 2021 •

- **February 3rd (Wed) 08:30 to 09:15**

Weekly Upanishads Class *ZOOM*

- **February 6th (Sat) 14:00 to 16:00**

Baghavad Gita Study Class * No Live Streaming - video uploaded to homepage afterward*

Please Note: The Bhagavad Gita class at the Indian Embassy, Tokyo, is resumed with very restricted attendance as per COVID-19 protocols. <benkyo.nvk@gmail.com> However, video of the class will be uploaded to the Society's website later

- **February 10th (Wed) 08:30 to 09:15**

Weekly Upanishads Class *ZOOM* *Contact about Zoom: zoom.nvk@gmail.com

- **February 14th (Sun) 14:00pm–16:00pm (Live Streaming and Zoom)**

The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna Study Class (in Japanese Only)

- **February 17th (Wed) 08:30 to 09:15**

Weekly Upanishads Class *ZOOM* *Contact about Zoom: zoom.nvk@gmail.com

- **February 21st (Sun)**

Monthly Zushi Retreat

Swami Vivekananda Birth Celebration

11:00 to 16:30- Livestreaming of chanting, bi-lingual discourse, etc., only from 2:45 pm.

- **February 24th (Wed) 08:30 to 09:15**

Weekly Upanishads Class *ZOOM* *Contact about Zoom: zoom.nvk@gmail.com

- **February 28th (Sun) 14:00 to 16:00**

Half-day Retreat (Live Steaming and ZOOM)

Zushi Centre (Japanese only) <benkyo.nvk@gmail.com>

Ramakrishna Kalpataru Day (from page 1)

This is also the time to offer prayers. That is how we celebrate the New Year. New Year's day is not only a special day for us here, but at our monasteries worldwide we also observe this day as Ramakrishna Kalpataru Day, kalpataru is known as the wish-fulfilling tree. Why Kalpataru Day? Because on this day, Sri Ramakrishna manifested His special spiritual powers becoming 'the wish fulfilling tree' and fulfilling the dearest spiritual desires of the devotees visiting him at the Cossipore Garden House on January 1, 1886.



The Japanese New Year Day is a day for visiting shrines and temples primarily as a cultural exercise and/or in pursuit of worldly or secular desires—to benefit the family's health, wealth, education, marriage projects, etc. But Sri Ramakrishna's Kalpataru Day is the day when spiritual desires come true. What will you pray for? Our mundane wishes can be satisfied rather easily. But if we cherish a spiritual desire from Sri Ramakrishna, we have to go further, we have to be a little better, a little purer, and more spiritual. We have to have faith that such wishes still come true on Kalpataru Day.

Just hearing talks on the spiritual advice from Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, Swami Vivekananda, and scriptures is not very helpful in this effort. We can read scripture and even grasp the literal meaning, in fact, most people can do this. But it is more difficult to assimilate these spiritual teachings into our day to day life. We just completed a Four-Part talk on 'The Importance of Assimilation in Spiritual Life' in our Monthly Zushi Retreat Talks, with advice on assimilating spiritual teachings into our lives. Assimilation of spiritual teachings is the only way we can progress and purify our hearts. Our newsletters carry this series and are always available for download on our homepage.

The Japanese government has announced that as the number of coronavirus (COVID-19) cases continues to rise, and everyone should more seriously adopt masking and social distancing measures, and stay at home in order to prevent an explosion of infections and hospitalisations.

Under these circumstances, it is not appropriate to go out, even for spiritual programmes here at our Zushi Centre, as your health and safety must be our priority. In light of this, we have revised monthly schedules on our website to continue to provide mental and spiritual support to our devotees. All our programmes will be livestreamed so you can watch them at home on the computer or on your mobile phone. Our monthly schedules with live streaming information are posted on our website and in our monthly newsletter.

In closing, I want to note that the devotees have been very supportive of our programmes this past year and I really appreciate all you do for the Vedanta Society of Japan. I pray by the grace of Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother that this virus situation ends soon, and I pray for your health and safety in the new year. May it be an easier, more normal year for us all. •

• Thought of the Month •

"All differences in this world are of degree,
and not of kind,
because oneness is the secret of everything."

- Swami Vivekananda

[Edited from the Japanese transcription by Ms. Megumi Fukuda]



January Zushi Retreat 2021
Celebrating Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi's Birth Anniversary

On Sunday, 17 January, the Vedanta Society of Japan celebrated the 168th birth anniversary of Sri Sri Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother. This year's celebration was held in the Main Shrine of the Ashram Centre as attendance was restricted due to reimposed COVID-19 restrictions.

The altar had been decorated with flower arrangements and offerings of fresh fruits and sweets. The pictures of Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda had been adorned in garlands, and Sri Sarada Devi's picture was wrapped in a festive dark pink cloth complementing Her garland.

At 11am Swamis Medhasananda and Divyanathananda began the puja together, with Swami Medhasananda assisting and reciting mantras, and Swami Divyanathananda performing the prescribed ritual oblations and the arati offerings of five elements.

Swami Medhasananda later gave a discourse titled 'How Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi Protects Her Devotees' in English and Mr. Leonardo Alvarez translated the talk into Japanese. This talk was livestreamed, the text of which the follows. (Page 5)



January Zushi Retreat 2021
Zushi Celebrating Sri Sarada Devi's 168th Birth Anniversary
How Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi Protects Her Devotees
A talk by Swami Medhasananda

The Power of Holy Mother

Today I would like to discuss how the Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi protects Her devotees. In fact, Holy Mother's life is very mysterious. Why mysterious? That which we see, but cannot explain, is mysterious. As Swami Premanandaji put it, though Sri Ramakrishna lived a simple life, the fact that He was extraordinary would become evident when He entered samadhi. At such times it would be evident to the visitors observing that He was, indeed, very, very extraordinary, as entering genuine samadhi is the rarest of rare phenomenon. Premanandaji also said that although Holy Mother also had many such spiritual experiences and moods, rarely would these be witnessed or understood by other people.

For many centuries in India women have practiced 'purdah', veiling their faces so that others can not observe them. Holy Mother would also veil Herself with sari when stepping out into mixed company. In one sense to this was in keeping with norms and customs, but in another sense purdah also served to keep Mother's samadhi and other spiritual experiences from the view of others. Because of this practice it was very difficult to understand Holy Mother's spiritual depth by observing Her from the outside. As just mentioned, witnessing that Sri Ramakrishna was extraordinary spiritually, on the other hand, was not so difficult. In Holy Mother's case, there were virtually no external signs of Her spiritual extraordinariness. Yet, She was very extraordinary indeed, and Her spirituality was fathomless.

One biographer gives us another example in another context, saying in essence we may see utility poles along streets with signs warning of the high voltage, indicating that high voltage electricity surges through the cables. At some junctions such cables are exposed and not even covered with insulation. These bare wires do not convey the tremendous electric voltage passing through them from simple observation in the least. If one should touch such a harmless looking cable however, instantly he may be turned to ashes.

A Monastic Reminisce

I was just reading a book containing many reminisces from the monks of our early history published in Bengali and collected by Swami Chetananandaji of the Vedanta Society of St. Louis, Missouri in the USA. It is published in two volumes and I find it very interesting, and inspiring too. This has become one of my favourite substitutes for holy company. The cover of this book [Swami holds up Volume 2] shows photos of the monks who's reminisces are included in this volume. I would like to share some of these with you today.

There was monk named Swami Shantananda, meaning calm and quiet, and the root word of shanti or peace. He was a highly elevated soul who continuously heard to the celestial sound of Om. So his name was a combination of Shanta+Ananda 'the bliss of calm and quiet', Shantananda. He was indeed a very calm and quiet monk who served as one of Holy Mother's devoted attendants, and he had also been initiated by Holy Mother.

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Holy Mother Protects (from page 5)

He was very serious in his spiritual practices in the many Ramakrishna Mission locations he stayed, especially at Benares (Varanasi). I saw him during his last days when he was brought to Belur Math, there he was quartered in the small two-storey house just opposite the Swami Vivekananda Temple. There he stayed in a small room on the first floor, where he could often be found listening to readings from *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. When monks stop by to visit him he would often ask if they too could hear the celestial sound of Om he was experiencing.

As Shantanandaji grew older he was assigned an attendant and Swami Sridharananda, whose pre-monastic name was Salil, was given this honour. Salil Maharaj later served the Mission in several locations and was the Head of the Lucknow Centre for many years before being assigned to the Vedanta Centre of Sydney, Australia in 2000. Still young at that time in Belur, Sridharananda had grown close to Shantanandaji, and he would not hesitate to ask him questions and discuss spiritual matters. Since Shantanandaji had been an attendant of the Holy Mother, one day Sridharananda asked “Have you ever seen Mother in Samadhi? But the senior swami sat quietly as if he had not heard this question. Thrice he asked the same question growing a little impatient and asking more loudly as if his senior had not heard the question. As I said, Swami Shantanandaji was true to his name and kept calm and quiet, but upon the young swami becoming ever insistent in his questioning, Shantanandaji finally became very excited and exclaimed:

“What do you think of my Mother? She is the very giver of this experience of Samadhi and you ask whether She ever had any experience of Samadhi! To this very day, how many spiritual aspirants and devotees pray to Her to grant the experience of Samadhi and you are asking me this question?”

It then took some time for Salil Maharaj to calm Swami Shantanandaji down, saying how sorry and how wrong he was to have asked such a question.

From this exchange we can get an idea, just an inkling, of the Holy Mother’s spiritual heights. In fact, would you find it strange if I state that all Sri Ramakrishna said and did was made possible by the power of the Holy Mother? Sri Ramakrishna himself said that when God incarnates He performs works by the power of the Primordial Energy. What is the proof? We all worship Sri Ramakrishna—and who was the person whom Sri Ramakrishna himself worshipped? She was the Holy Mother. So logically speaking Holy Mother is greater than Sri Ramakrishna. Otherwise why would he have worshipped Holy Mother? Additionally, Holy Mother accepted it without being embarrassed in the least. So we can imagine how great the power She had to have to accept worship from such a Godman as Sri Ramakrishna.

There was a lady devotee of Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother known as Gourdasi. She was very dear to both as well, and she would often visit Dakshineswar and stay with Holy Mother for some time. Playing with a child, one may ask whom it loves best, the mother or the father. In the presence of both parents, what will the intelligent child answer? Of course, ‘I love them both.’ But I have heard the occasional answer, ‘My mother scolds me so much!’ In my days as a child I would say we were more afraid of our fathers. These days it would seem fathers are more lenient and indulgent with children, while mothers are in charge of disciplining them.

Well, one day at Dakshineswar with Holy Mother present, Sri Ramakrishna lightheartedly asked Gourdasi whom she loved more. “Do you love me more?” he asked. “Or (pointing to Holy Mother) do you love Her more?” Gourdasi’s answer was quite interesting. She answered allegorically in song, ‘When devotees are in trouble they call Krishna, Krishna, Krishna, please
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Holy Mother Protects (from page 6)

save me. Please protect me. But when Krishna Himself is in trouble, He calls on Radha! It is clear by this response that indeed, Gourdasi was more drawn to Holy Mother.

I would like to continue my talk with a few more anecdotes demonstrating how much Holy Mother protects us. As you know Holy Mother always said, "Never fear. Whenever you are in distress, just say to yourself, 'I have a mother'." This statement means that Mother is there to help us, Mother is there to protect us, and Mother is there to save us! Is this just a hollow assurance? Even though we not be aware of it, Mother is always there to protect us and to save us. This is one-hundred percent true.

Anecdote One

One example is from the life of Swami Parameshwaranandaji, Kishori Maharaj, he too was an attendant of Holy Mother. He lived in Mother's birthplace, the small village of Jayrambati while She was alive, and after Her passing he remained as the Head of the Mission Centre that had been established there. I had the great privilege to see him during his last days.

Anyway, one day a famous astrologer from Odisha visited the area and meet the monks. In the course of conversation and with an idea to verify the accuracy of the astrologer someone presented Parameshwaranandaji's life horoscope to that astrologer not informing him as to whose horoscope it was and was asked for an opinion about it. After a brief read the astrologer remarked, "Are you making fun of me? This person is long dead! He passed some thirty years ago! Why do you present me with the horoscope of a dead person?" The swami, however, was still alive, but his passing had been predicted at the age of 25~26 years old by his birth horoscope.

Kishori Maharaj had joined the Ramakrishna Order of monks as a Brahmachari, and was not yet due to take his final (sannyasin) vows according to the established rules and regulations of eight to nine years as a Brahmachari of the Order. At 24-years of age Kishori Maharaj suddenly became overpowered by a fear that his death was approaching. He could not identify the particular reason or source of this fear, but inwardly he became quite anxious about it. And although it troubled his thoughts, Kishori Maharaj did not share his concerns with anyone and continued on with his duties as usual. One day he fell into a drainage ditch and injured himself, which worried him ever more. Holy Mother, learning of this from him instructed him to immediately go to Belur Math and contact Rakhal Maharaj (Swami Brahmanandaji - the first President of the Order) at Belur Math and in Her name request immediate sannyasa initiation. Kishori, though surprised at the Mother's request and Her bending of the rules, proceeded to Belur Math to visit Swami Brahmanandaji and complete Her request.

There is another rule at Belur Math that on either Sri Ramakrishna's or Swami Vivekanandaji's (Swamiji) birth celebration that sannyasa initiation ceremonies are also to be arranged. Sannyasa initiations were not to take place haphazardly during the year. Swami Shuddhanandaji, a disciple of Swamiji and a senior monk, was also in the room when Kishori Maharaj met with Brahmanandaji. Shuddhanandaji objected to Kishori's request saying that the Order had rules and systems and why should they make special arrangements for him. Kishori Maharaj answered that it was not by his wish or desire that the request is made, but that he was acting as instructed by Holy Mother to convey this request to Brahmanandaji. Hearing this, Brahmanandaji said that Kishori should go to Swami Saradanandaji (Sarat Maharaj - the Order's 1st Secretary and the Mother's 'doorkeeper') then living in Calcutta for initiation. Kishori Maharaj resisted this idea saying that Holy Mother had said that Brahmanandaji should initiate him, and if he declined he would not mind, but since She had instructed him to petition Brahmanandaji, he

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Holy Mother Protects (from page 7)

could not take Mother's request to Saradanandaji. At this Brahmanandaji asked Suddhanandaji to set a date and to request Sarat Maharaj to attend the sannyasa ceremony. So finally, a sannyasa ceremony was convened for Kishori Maharaj alone, where he became known as Swami Parameshwarananda.

Incidentally, from that moment on all the fears and thoughts of death that had overwhelmed him previously, just as suddenly disappeared. Some time later, Kishori Maharaj asked Holy Mother why She had been so insistent on the immediacy of his sannyasa initiation, to which Mother answered, "My son, at that time you were destined to die." It is said that when one gets sannyasa initiation, his very destiny is changed. So Holy Mother knew of and changed his destiny, and the astrologer's comment was true in that the fate to befall Kishori Brahmachari was no longer Swami Parameshwarananda's destiny.

Anecdote Two

Next is another incident involving Salil Maharaj (Sridharananda), who we previously introduced, when he was an attendant living in the same room as Shantanandaji in Benares (Varanasi). At that time Shantanandaji began losing weight little by little. The swami was not aware or concerned of his condition and out of love would leave portions of his meals and drink for Salil Maharaj. Slowly it became known that Shantanandaji had contracted tuberculosis. At that time no medicines had yet been developed for TB and the only relief was in maybe taking some calcium and protein diet and lots of rest. Shantanandaji was not informed of his condition, but arrangements were made for him to move to the quiet natural surroundings of an early TB convalescent hospital in the Himalayas. Belur Math headquarters made the arrangements and instructed Salil Maharaj that he was to stay with Shantanandaji, but he wasn't to inform him of his condition.

When the day came to move, Shantanandaji asked, "Salil, why does headquarters want me to move from Benares to this other place?" Salil Maharaj did not reveal the reason and gave an evasive answer. In general, monks prefer to stay in Benares for its strong spiritual atmosphere and long traditions. Finally, they reached the convalescent hospital and staff bearing a stretcher came to greet them. The sight of a stretcher meant for him surprised Shantanandaji, and as he was carried toward the entrance he could clearly see the name of the hospital over the doors. The swami then understood and said to Shalil, "Ah, I have TB, don't I?" Shalil Maharaj remained quiet.

The natural surroundings and accommodations were very nice, with a capable staff and private rooms with toilets. After being admitted, however, Shantanandaji became very grave and would not speak at all. Salil Maharaj thought that this may just be the shock of learning of his condition, and continued serving him as usual. As the days passed Shantanandaji, however, had still not shared a single word with him. For three days Salil Maharaj wondered of the effect of the shock on Shantanandaji, for surely such a senior monk would not be afraid of death in the least. So what other reason could there be for his sudden and continued silence? After three days suddenly, smiling, Shantanandaji asked, "Salil, how are you?"

Salil answered, "Maharaj what happened these last few days? You haven't said a word to me since we arrived here?"

"Will you believe what I am about to tell you?" said Shantanandaji. "When I realised I had TB – such an infectious disease with no cures available, I became concerned that anyone who was in close proximity to me would also become infected. I remembered that I had shared with you portions of my food and drink, but then I realised there was a great risk that in doing so you

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Holy Mother Protects (from page 8)

had contacted TB too! I am old, but you are young and should you die from TB I would never rest in peace, even in death. So these three days I have been praying to Holy Mother day and night. I prayed and prayed and prayed to Holy Mother.”

“Last night around midnight Holy Mother appeared to me and said, ‘My son, is there anything you need to ask of me? You already have everything, what else is there that you pray to me for?’ So I said to Mother that this boy is taking care of me and that I fed him out of love from my plates and I am very afraid he may have contacted TB from me! Should he therefore die of this disease I shall have no peace even in death! So, Mother, this boon I want from you, that when Salil must die, may he die from any cause other than TB. Mother, this is the boon that I ask of you. Mother then said, ‘Let it be so!’ and disappeared. So since Mother has assured me that you will not contact TB from me, I am at peace.”

As it happened headquarters then sent Salil Maharaj a message to leave the hospital as he too had been losing weight and some infection was found after a medical examination. The worst was feared briefly, but Salil soon recovered with proper treatment and diet. Some thirty years later, Salil Maharaj told of this experience with Swami Shantanandaji to monks during a visit to Udbodhan (Mother’s House) in Calcutta. He said to these monks, “See, I am in my 80s and no such disease has affected me yet.” In fact, he is in Sydney, Australia now and about 93 years of age, and has been keeping fairly well.

Anecdote Three

The third anecdote I would like to share is a modern day instance regarding the Corona Virus. There is a printing house called Trio Process that the Ramakrishna Mission’s English publishing house, Advaita Ashrama, uses to print books. The owners of Trio Process are three or four brothers. One of these brothers had been suffering from a number of ailments for some years, including a kidney transplant, so he was weak and his immunity system had been greatly compromised. So he had to be very careful about his work, his movements, and his lifestyle in general, as any irregularity of routine would affect him very much.

(con’t page10)

Holy Mother Protects (from page 9)

In June of 2020 he came down with a fever and was admitted to hospital. There he was tested and he learned that he was positive for COVID-19. Rapidly his condition deteriorated, with 75% of his lung capacity blocked and causing him great pain to breathe. The doctor gave little hope to the family for his recovery and the prognosis was they should expect his imminent death.

This gentleman knew monks of the Advaita Ashrama, as well as nuns from the Sarada Math situated in Dakshineswar. He asked his wife to contact the nuns at Sarada Math, and some of the monks as well, to pray for him. He too was praying piteously to Holy Mother, “Mother, Mother, Mother, please save me.”

On the night of June 8th he noticed that an elderly woman was standing near his hospital bed. He thought that she was a nurse, but asked why she was not wearing a mask. She did not reply and he turned his face to the other side, but there too she stood. Following this his condition rapidly improved and two days later when he was tested, he was negative for coronavirus. The doctors were perplexed, but the patient was a devotee and knew that the night visitor was the Holy Mother Herself and that he had been saved by Her grace.

These incidents demonstrate that Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi’s assurances of help and protection to Her devotees are not hollow words. “Never fear. Whenever you are in distress, just say to yourself, ‘I have a mother’.” These words are very true. We have to believe this and depend upon Her, whether we are in good days or in bad days. This is the message today for our Holy Mother Birth Celebration. •

Vedanta Society Zushi Centre
Christmas Eve Talk
by Leonardo Alvarez

Lord Jesus’ message is not that of ‘comfortable religion’. He said “*Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man’s foes shall be they of his own household.*” (Matthew 10:34-36; KJV)

This can be interpreted in two senses; first, when you try to lead a truly spiritual life you will find resistance especially from those who are your so called ‘near and dear’. I think many of you might have also experienced hard resistance from parents, husband, wives or even children. The second meaning is that we need to give up our old self and become a new self. This means fighting against our old tendencies which are like our cherished family members from whom we do not want to cut off from our life, because we have become so identified with them. We dare not separate ourselves from our anger or emotions such as lust and so forth. We feel there will be no “I” left without these.

This is where Lord Jesus’ message is radical. He does not say, to just stay as you are, a slave of sin, a slave of this menagerie of emotions. No, He rather says: “*And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two*”
(con’t page 11)

eyes to be cast into hell fire.” (Matthew 18:9)

That is why Lord Jesus said to Nicodemus: “*Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God (...) That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.*” (John 3:3,6). And in other occasions He said: “*My kingdom is not of this world*” (John 18:36), as well as “*If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me*” (...) “*For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?*” (Matthew 10:24-26).

Saint Paul said “*They that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit*” (Galatians 5:24-25). Jesus and His Apostles are basically urging us to transcend our human weaknesses and embrace our divine nature. To make things clear, Jesus proclaimed at the synagogue of Capernaum to the crowd standing before him: “*I and my father are one*” (John 10:30). When the crowd of so-called pundits wanted to stone him to death alleging that He was blaspheming, Jesus quoted from the psalms of David: “*Is it not written in your law, I said, Ye are gods?*” (John 10:34).

This inner divinity which is our birthright as it is stated in the Old Testament: “*So God created man in his own image and likeness*” (Genesis 1:26-27). That image is still there only that our likeness has been obscured by sin and negative emotions, greed and ego. But if we let go of these, we will become what the early Christians would call: “*New men*” (*Homo novus*). And for that the old man must give way to the new man, the spiritual man, the so-called new Adam. The old Adam, representative of the corrupted mankind, was replaced by the new Adam, the perfect spiritual man who is Jesus, and has become our new prototype of humanity. He did not say “*Oh you sinner! you'll stay all your life as a sinner!*”. He said “*You are divine, wake up to your own divinity!*”. That is what He really meant when He said to Lazarus with a loud voice: “***Come forth!***” (John 11:43). Thus He calls Lazarus and us, from our sleep of ignorance and death.

Hence, Lord Jesus is the prototype of our real being, “*The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner: this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes*” (Matthew 21:42)

In the Old Testament the highest prototype of man was represented by Moses. Moses was a leader of the Jewish people and spiritually highly advanced, who practiced celibacy most of his life, had the direct vision of God in Mount Sinai, received the Ten Commandments, and guided his people to the promised land. But Moses was not without fault, for it is said he killed in a Egyptian man for torturing his Jewish brothers. He also refused in the beginning to follow God's command to preach to the Pharaoh, igniting God's rage, to such an extent that God even tried killing Moses (Exodus 4:10-17 and 24).

Moreover, after the Jewish people had been freed from Egyptian rule and were staying in the desert, Moses ordered the Levites to kill those who had worshipped the golden calf, resulting in over 3000 casualties (Exodus 32:28). Likewise, the anthropomorphic image of

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Christmas Eve (from page 11)

God depicted in the Old Testament, is that of vengeful and jealous God, who would bless you if He was pleased, but would not fail to punish you if He were displeased.

This represents a vision of morality and vision of the world in accordance with that of the ancient Semitic and Middle Eastern civilizations. Those religious ideas, though they had some universal outlook and value, were mostly restricted to local traditions and local beliefs, in which their god was more powerful than all the gods of all other tribes. Hence, their god would bless them so that they could conquer others and protect them from their enemies who were also seen as lower beings.



But in Jesus we find a new prototype beyond sectarianism is the image of God himself incarnated as a man, both perfect God and perfect human. This is well represented in what He said: “*Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for He maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.*” And even so boldly challenging every one of us: “***Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.***” (Matthew 48:43-45, 48)

I cannot go much into detail on how to bring about this internal transformation, but from what Lord Jesus said, I can summarize it as follows:

- First, love God above everything else, and love people seeing God in them.
- Second, be always prayerful. “*Pray unceasingly*” (1 Thessalonians 5:17), as Saint Paul said. But for this you need to create specific spaces within the day to dedicate your time and mind and body to God, by having a set routine of prayer. Only then you can pray at other times outside of the chapel, the temple, or your own room. A good practice for this is to imagine that God is always accompanying you, wherever you are. If you go out for a walk, then imagine that God is walking with you, and you can also talk to him with your mind. Then whatever you do, try to feel His presence and ask yourself: “Does God want me to do this or not?” This will help against deviations.

There is one story I heard about a French priest of saintly character, who used to walk in the streets of Paris. One day he got onto a bus to go somewhere and he had to pay for the ticket, so the driver asked him how many persons? And he said without hesitation: “***Two***”. But only the priest was there, at least physically, meaning that he was so absorbed in the

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thought of Jesus as his companion, that he actually felt Him to be with him, thereby he very naturally said “*two*”. But we must also remember that God is not only a boon giver. You see, God crucified His own son for the well-being of humanity. Do you think He will also spare us? But the crucifixion is not really the killing of the body, but *the total submission of the ego to God's will*.

- Third, be always on your guard, because you are engaging a fierce spiritual battle against your old self and old tendencies which are very difficult to approach and behave like demons including your own mind. As St. Paul said: “*For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.*” (Ephesians 6:12)

- Fourth, try to do some charity. Beginners try to let go of attachments to money, or even to your own possessions, to your own food and try to share whenever you can. You do not need to give large amounts of money or large amounts of food, you just need to share every time you are sure it will be a small sacrifice. This will purify your mind and body from their sense of ego and attachment. This also helps to see God in others.

- Fifth, try to practice a little bit of austerities every day. One sort of austerity can be trying to lead a spiritual life, keeping, for instance, a strict routine of meditation and prayer

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without wavering from it. Another practice could be skipping one meal or eating less of one meal to help curb some undesirable tendency of the mind. For instance, the Catholic definition of fasting for laypeople is that they should eat one full meal at lunch and then about 1/4 of a meal during breakfast and dinner. Clearly, the purpose is not to get thinner, but to become more prayerful, more inward and aware of God.

Swami Vivekananda also gave an interesting new idea of austerities. He said before people were going to the mountains to practice austerities, but now, austerities should be keeping the body and mind strong with physical exercise, even with dumbbells or by going to the gym. The reason, he explained, is because the source of all sin is weakness, and the source of all life is strength. So, he encouraged us “We want muscles of iron and nerves of steel!”

In this regard, and as a way of conclusion, I strongly advise anybody wanting to truly understand the message of Jesus Christ to study the gospel of Sri Ramakrishna and the complete works of Swami Vivekananda. In there, the mysteries of theology are explained in very clear down to earth and modern language fitted for our modern needs. •

● A Story to Remember ●

The Butterfly's Cocoon

A man found a butterfly cocoon. Curious, he took it home with him to observe. One day a small opening appeared. He sat and watched the butterfly for several hours as it struggled to force its body through that little hole. Then it seemed to stop making any progress. It appeared as if it had gotten as far as it could and it could go no farther.

Then the man decided to help the butterfly, so he took a pair of scissors and snipped off the remaining bit of the cocoon. The butterfly then emerged easily. But it had a swollen body and small, shriveled wings.

The man continued to watch the butterfly because he expected that, at any moment, the wings would enlarge and expand to be able to support the body which would contract in time.

Neither happened! In fact, the butterfly spent the rest of its life crawling around with a swollen body and shriveled wings. It never was able to fly.

What this man in his kindness and haste did not understand was that the restricting cocoon and the struggle required for the butterfly to get through the tiny opening were nature's way of forcing fluid from the body of the butterfly into its wings so that it would be ready for flight once it achieved its freedom from the cocoon.

Sometimes struggles are exactly what we need in our life. If nature allowed us to go through our life without any obstacles, it would cripple us. We would not be as strong as what we could have been. And we would never fly ...

- From English for Students

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