



SEPTEMBER 2021 -VOLUME 19 NUMBER 09

The Vedanta Kyokai Newsletter

NEWS, UPDATES AND MISCELLANY FROM THE VEDANTA SOCIETY OF JAPAN

OCTOBER 2021
Calendar



Birthdays

**Swami
Akhandananda**
Wednesday, 6
October

Zushi Events

COVID restrictions have been partially lifted once again by the Japanese government as of 30 September 2021. However, most precautions remain in place. Our monthly programmes and classes will continue with advised precautions observed.

Details on page 02!



✧ Thus Spake ✧

“Only bless me that I may serve God with my body, mind, and tongue; that I may behold His devotees with these eyes, that I may meditate on Him with this mind, that I may chant his name and glories with this tongue.”

- Sri Ramakrishna

“Prayer is the heavenward soaring of the Soul on the wings of words.”

- Prophet Zarathushtra

September Zushi Monthly Retreat 2021
Afternoon Session Discourse

Bhaja Govindam by Sri Shankaracharya **Part Two** Swami Medhasananda

During our July 2021 Monthly Retreat we renewed our talk on the well-known hymn by Sri Shankaracharya entitled ‘Bhaja Govindam’. Today we continue with Part Two.

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Vedanta Society of Japan

Message Regarding Monthly Programmes for OCTOBER 2021

COVID restrictions have been partially lifted once again by the Japanese government as of 30 September 2021. However, most precautions remain in place. Our monthly programmes and classes will continue, but continue to observe social distancing, mask wearing, and avoiding crowded areas.

As such, the Vedanta Society of Japan will continue to provide live-stream, video, and Zoom participation as noted in the schedule below. Attendance to programmes remains limited, so please contact us if you wish to attend any of the programmes.

Swami Medhasananda, President
Vedanta Society of Japan

OCTOBER 2021 Calendar of Programmes

3rd (Sun) October - Live-streaming & Zoom
Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna Study Class
14:00 ~16:00 (in Japanese only)
* For Zoom contact: zoom.nvk@gmail.com

6th (Wed) October - Zoom
Weekly Upanishad Study Class
8:30 ~9:30 (in Japanese only)

9th (Sat) October
Bhagavad Gita Study Class at the Indian Embassy
* Video uploaded later
10:30 ~12:00 (In Japanese only)

13th (Wed) October - Zoom
Weekly Upanishad Study Class
8:30 ~9:15 (in Japanese only)

20th (Wed) October - Zoom
Weekly Upanishad Study Class
8:30 ~9:30 (in Japanese only)

**** NOTICE ****

There is NO - Monthly Zushi Retreat
17th (Sun) October

< **Live Streaming** >

[Click here](#) to go to YouTube.

< **Online Study Class on Zoom** >

[Click here](#) to go to the Japanese page 'Zoom'.



Swami Medhasanandaji

Bhaja Govindam Part II (from page 1)

We have already discussed the first three verses of the Bhaja Govindam, so let us begin with Verse Four:

*naliniidalagata jalamatitaralam
tadvajjivitamatishayachapalam
viddhi vyaadhyabhimaanagrastam
lokam shokahatam cha samastam*

*Uncertain is the life of a man as raindrops on a lotus leaf;
Know that the whole world remains prey to disease, ego and grief.*

[Swami Medhasananda (Maharaj) then gave a demonstration of the effect of raindrops by spooning droplets of water on a lotus leaf from the garden to the amusement of all.]

Shankaracharya gave us this example you have just witnessed. Note that the effect on other leaves is not quite as pronounced as that on a lotus leaf.

The Strangest Thing in the World

Life is that uncertain, meaning unstable and unsteady as a raindrop on a lotus leaf. The second part of the verse says that we are prey to disease, ego and grief. So two ideas are presented here; first, life is uncertain and, second, life is not smooth either; for as long as we live our lives are subject to disease, grief and ego, meaning we may not live very happily. In the Mahabharata there is a famous verse. Yudhishtira was the eldest of the Pandava brothers and a very virtuous, spiritual person, and a man of wisdom. Once he was asked what is the strangest thing in this world was. Before we get Yudhishtira's answer to this question we may refer to the
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Bhaja Govindam Part II (from page 3)

same question in a different context. The owner of a curio shop was asked by a customer what the strangest item in his shop was and he pointed to himself and said that he was the strangest thing in his shop. This can be one answer. Each one of us is strange in his own right. If we consider his conscious mind, his subconscious mind, his super-conscious mind, each man is unique. So we may answer the question before Yudhishthira in this way. But there is another more relevant answer in this connection and Yudhishthira answers:

*ahany ahani bhutani gacchanti yamamandiram
sheshaḥ sthavaram icchanti kim ashcaryam atah param*

*Every moment multitudes of people are going to the abode of the king of death,
But those who remain believe they will not die. This is the strangest thing in the world.*

We can put this in another way: Everyone knows that he will die. They witness death and realise they too will die, yet think, 'I shall die, but not now!' No one thinks he is eternal, and understands that even though he does not want to die, at some point, die he must. Why are such persons not fearful or full of tension? Because they think, 'Yes, I too, shall die, but not now, so let me continue on. But who knows when death will appear? Today? This moment itself? No one knows.

Natural Disasters, Epidemics, Diseases

There are some who will die very quickly due to natural disasters or war. Think of the Great Kantō earthquake of 1923 or during World War II the fire-bombings of Tokyo or the atomic bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, or the millions who perished worldwide. More recently, the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami. Within a few minutes of each event, how many people died? Of course world wars are not constant, but natural disasters like earthquakes, tsunamis, and volcanic eruptions are random and no one knows when they will occur. No one knows. Any time, any moment, and any where, such an event can occur to extinguish our life.

Think about the predictions of the large earthquake overdue in the Kanto area, mostly forgotten now due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic—which may be subdued—then fears and apprehension about the mass-scale death and destruction such an earthquake would bring will renew. As of 18 June 2021 the spread of the corona virus has taken over four-point-four million lives. This is a huge number, but it is not the first extensive epidemic in our history. There have been bubonic plague, typhoid, leprosy, influenza, smallpox, and malaria epidemics, and village after village, city after city were simply ruined and multitudes died in short order. Cancer is another very common disease and no one knows who or when they will be beset with cancer.

I'm reminded of visiting a foreigner in hospital here who was well known to me. He was in his fifties at the time, an artist and a very good singer, and he said he had lived quite happily. After some tests it was found he had cancer. When I visited him in hospital he said, "Swamiji, until now I was living a very happy life. Suddenly, everything has changed. The world has become completely changed for me." So silently and without warning cancer strikes. No one is aware of it. Like that raindrop on the lotus leaf. Still we think, 'Yes, I will die, but not now.' The point is this: Who says, not now? Who can be sure of this? Let's suppose it may at any moment, but are we prepared to face it? Can we face death with courage, with wisdom? Is the answer, yes or no? There are those who do recognise receipt of the notice. There are long notices and short notices.

Parikshit is Cursed

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Bhaja Govindam Part II (from page 4)

In the Bhagavatam, we have the story of Parikshit. He was a great king, yet cursed by the son of a sage. Parikshit was the grandson of Arjuna, the third Pandava prince, born to Abhimanyu, and full of wisdom. On one occasion a he had gone hunting with a group to a forest. While wandering in the forest he felt very thirsty and searched for water. He then came across a holy man who was meditating. It was quite common in those days to find holy men living in forests, some with families, doing spiritual practice. Parikshit asked the sage for water, but the sage was so deeply immersed in meditation that he did not hear Parikshit's request. The once, twice and three times more Parikshit politely and respectfully repeated his request. Still no answer.

• Thought of the Month •

“Let us not pray to be sheltered from dangers, but to be fearless when facing them.”

- Rabindranath Tagore

At this Parikshit became very angry, and we all know what happens when we are angered. One loses all sense of propriety. Enraged, Parikshit found a dead snake and wrapped it around the neck of the sage like a necklace. The sage, however, remained unaware of this. The sage had a young son, and he was playing with other boys nearby. Someone had noticed the state of the boy's father and reported that a king had come and asked his father for water. Meditating, the father did not respond many times, so the king put the dead snake around his neck. This boy, being the son of famous sage, studied scripture and practiced spiritual disciplines and also possessed spiritual power. He ran to his father and saw the dead snake around his father's neck. This humiliation of his father angered the boy so much so that he declared that the person who had committed this outrage would himself die of a snake bite within one week. A curse made by such a person has to come to pass.

Facing Death with Wisdom and Courage

When the sage came to learn of the events, he was deeply saddened and scolded his son. ‘What have you done? He is a great king who provides protection for sages like us and helps us when called upon. He simply wanted water and I didn't reply so he became angry with me. Why then did you take it upon yourself to curse him?’ But the words had been issued and there was nothing to be done to retract the curse.

Yet, when Parikshit found out about it and understanding that it had been improper for him to wrap the snake carcass around the sage's neck, he said, ‘I have been rightly served!’ Immediately, Parikshit renounced the throne in favour of his son and heir. He proceeded to the bank of the Ganga (Ganges) to devote his remaining time to spiritual practice. This is how the story of the Bhagavata, one of the most renowned Hindu scriptures starts. Parikshit knows he will be bitten by a poisonous snake and die on the seventh day after the incident with the sage. So here we see that Parikshit got a timeframe of seven days to prepare for his death.

Parikshit then invited sages to visit him along the Ganga and asked that they please talk about God to him for his remaining days. He acknowledged that all the things of his kingdom and results of his pursuits were non-permanent and he explained that he wanted to think more and more about the eternal, God, Brahman. Many sages arrived to give discourses, and to talk and discuss God. Then the greatest of Indian sages of the time, Paramahansa Shukadeva, wandering on his own like a free bird, happened upon the place. Everyone, including Parikshit recognised the great Shuka and stood up in honour and greeted him with the deepest respect. Then Parikshit requested Shuka to speak and he began to talk on Sri Krishna. This is the spiritual approach one can take when one knows death is near– how to face death with wisdom and courage.

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The Invincible Titanic

Let me present another picture, that is somewhat like the story of the Titanic. At one time the British boasted that 'The sun never sets on the British Empire.' Britain was once very proud of its power and the wealth it extracted from its colonies around the world like India. One example of this pride was the mammoth, modern, passenger cruiser, the Titanic, of the British shipping company, White Star Line. The British company claimed their new ship was so technically advanced, powerful and so well built that it could never sink. With much publicity the maiden voyage was promoted, and the price was set high to secure passage on the grand Titanic's voyage to New York City. High prices did not deter rich people, for the accommodations promised to be most comfortable and luxurious ever experienced, with elaborate arrangements for entertainments and sumptuous meals throughout the week-long voyage. The ship departed England and just four days after leaving Southampton the first officer at the bridge felt a jolt at the wheel. It had hit something large, but no one had seen anything nor had an inkling of what was to follow.

Finally the Captain came to understand that the Titanic had struck the submerged portion of a huge iceberg at full speed. The thick steel hull of the ship had been critically punctured and the ocean began pouring into the vessel. The Captain addressed the passengers with updates on the condition of the Titanic, but finally realised there was little chance of the ship's survival. The Captain then instructed the ships lifeboats to be lowered and filled with women and children first. Many passengers realised they would never be able get aboard the lifeboats amidst the ensuing chaos and would have no chance of survival at all. There were reports that many passengers remaining aboard the doomed ship decided to enjoy their final moments in song and dance, saying, 'If I have to die, let me go with music, fun and joy.'

A Hedonistic End

Now, we know that Parikshit, when confronted with his death, gave up everything and only wanted to think of God. Yet, there are many people, as evidenced by many passengers of the sinking Titanic, who, when faced with death, choose to meet their demise in revelry, even be it a few hours or minutes away. Their ideal is to enjoy life as much as possible for as long as possible. The Katha Upanishad says such people are born and die like crops in the field. They do not seek or get liberation, they are immersed the repeated cycle of birth and death for ages to come.

Sri Shankaracharya's recommendation for those facing death is the Bhaja Govindam. These are two completely different ideals confronting a person who realises he is about to die. Moreover, Shankara says those who are born are subject to the sufferings of ego, disease and grief. There may be some joy, but these sufferings will be repeated again and again. This is the fate of those who want to pass their lives in merriment and fun. This is called a hedonistic way of life.

God Notifies Everyone

Nevertheless, most of us receive notification of our impending death. Yes, God lets everyone know it is time to get prepared for this last journey. Do you know how? Slowly, our eyesight, hearing and physical powers are impaired. Our skin wrinkles and our hair greys. These are some of the advanced notices warning us to 'Get prepared!' 'Get prepared!' We may go to the dentist or an ophthalmologist for new glasses and feel all is well for a time. We go on changing the tires as it were. One by one we repair leakages or replace broken parts and don't consider that the engine must finally seize and stop at some point, and so too our journey in life will end abruptly. Eventually, changing the tires will not do. Modern medicine cannot save us from

death—it will come. So we should remain aware that we all must face our destiny, and that destiny is death. Let us be prepared accordingly.

Images of Death

What is the effect of having death on our mind? Generally speaking, the image of death is very painful and fearful. Why is the thought of death so painful for us? Should we suffer from some serious and painful disease, the image of the sustained pain of disease before death comes to us and that makes us fearful. This is one image of physical pain before death. There is also a mental image of pain on the occasion of death. It is that we love so many people and so many things of the world, and we are deeply attached to them, and now we have to give them all up and be separated from all these loves we hold so near and dear. This causes mental pain.

Why is death fearful? It is fear of the unknown. We are not sure of what to expect, what will follow death. We have no memory of the experience. Moreover the thought of our existence perishing brings us both pain and fear. These are the negative images of death, and the cause is attachment—attachment to our body and mind, attachment to our loved ones, friends and things of the world.

Why We Must Die

There remains the basic question: Why must we die? (laughter) The answer is that anything that is a compound must be decomposed. It's a law of nature. The five key elements are earth, water, fire, air and ether. Anything derived from or composed of these elements, like our bodies, must be decomposed in time. This is simple logic. The pyramids, the Taj Mahal, the Chinese Great Wall, even the Himalayas, Mount Everest, yes, our Sun and Moon, everything will crumble in course of time. Every moment our body cells grow and die, as we grow in our youth the percentage of new cell creation is greater, as we age fewer new cells are generated to replace the old ones. This is the reason we have tooth trouble, eye trouble, ear trouble, our skin shrinks and wrinkles, our hair turns grey, and our waning power to resist disease. These are all symptoms of our decomposition.

There is No Escape

Can we run away from death? There is an old story from a Central Asian country around present day Iraq. There was an Islamic emperor at the time, and he had a favourite servant whom he loved very much. While this servant was walking in the garden he saw a dark apparition standing before him and asked, 'Who are you?'

'I am the agent of death,' came the replay.

'So, what is your business here?' the servant demanded.

'I have come to take you with me!' explained the figure calmly.

Upon hearing this the servant darted from the garden and ran to his master, 'My Lord, my Lord,' he cried and told of the spectre in the garden and his demand that the servant go with him.

'Oh, no! Quickly,' said the emperor, 'go to the stable. Saddle the fastest horse and run away from here!' The servant did as told and sped away on a swift steed to another city a hundred or so kilometres away. Exhausted from his ride and fright, there he found shelter where he hoped to take some rest. Upon entering the room however, he found the same dark presence was waiting for him there. 'Oh, you are here!' gasped the servant. 'But I left you back in the garden.'

(concluded page 8)

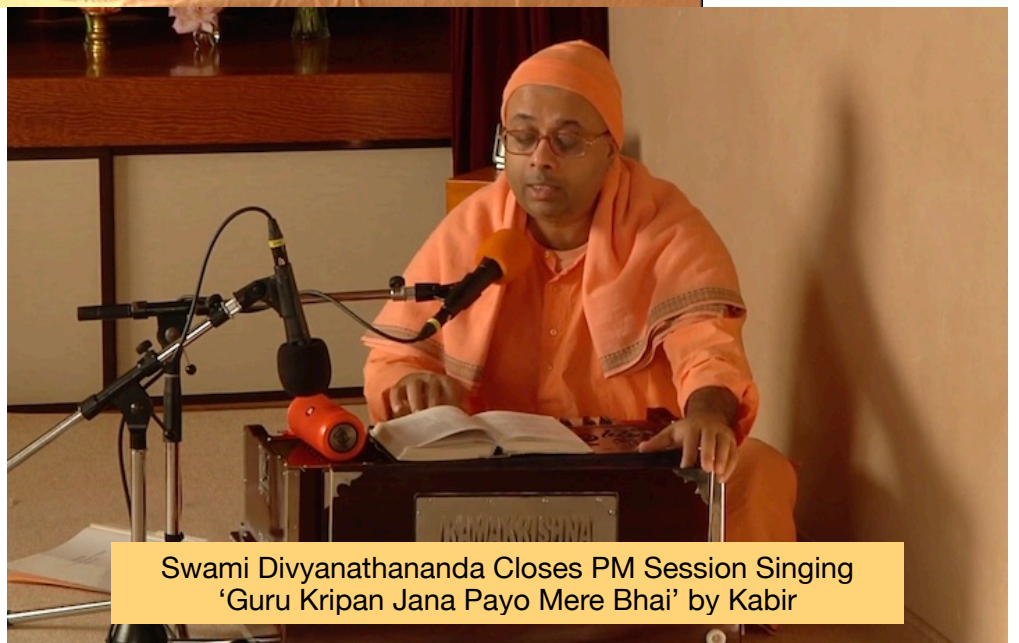
Bhaja Govindam Part II (from page 7)

'Yes, we were destined to meet here in this very room', he explained. 'I was quite surprised earlier to find that you still lingered in the Emperor's garden.'

So, no, we cannot run away from the Lord of Death. The servant simply raced to arrive at the right place and the right time to meet his end.

We shall take up further discussion on such points as disease, our ego, our sufferings and our preparations for the inevitable next time. ●





• Story to Remember •

Many Are His Forms

Two persons were hotly disputing as to the colour of a chameleon.

One said, 'The chameleon on that palm-tree is of a beautiful red colour.'

The other, contradicting him, said, 'You are mistaken, the chameleon is not red, but blue.'

Not being able to settle the matter by arguments, both went to a person who had always lived under that tree and had watched the chameleon in all its phases of colour.

One of them said, 'Sir, is not the chameleon on that tree of a red colour?'

The person replied, 'Yes, sir.'

The other disputant said, 'What do you say? How is it? It is not red, it is blue.'

That person again humbly replied, 'Yes, sir.'

The person knew that the chameleon is an animal that constantly changes its colour; thus it was that he said 'yes' to both these conflicting statements.

Sat-Chit-Ananda likewise has various forms. The devotee who has seen God in one aspect only, knows Him in that aspect alone. But he who has seen Him in His manifold aspects, is alone in a position to say, 'All these forms are of one God, for God is multiform.' He has forms and has no forms, and many are His forms which no one knows.

- Ramakrishna, His Life and Sayings - F. Max Müller

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