



DECEMBER 2021 -VOLUME 19 NUMBER 12

# The Vedanta Kyokai Newsletter

## Happy New Year 2022

NEWS, UPDATES AND MISCELLANY FROM THE VEDANTA SOCIETY OF JAPAN

### JANUARY 2022 Calendar



**Sri Sri Sarada**  
**Birth Celebration**  
Zushi 19 January

### Birthdays

**Swami Saradananda**  
Saturday, 8 January

**Swami**  
**Turiyananda**  
Sunday, 16 January

**Sri Sri Swamiji**  
Tuesday, 25 January

### Zushi Events

While COVID restrictions had been lifted by the Japanese government in September 2021, new variants require we continue to observe stringent precautions.

**See page 02 for more  
event details!**



## ✧ Thus Spake ✧

*"Be not a traitor in your thoughts. Be sincere; act according to your thoughts; and you shall surely succeed. Pray with a sincere and simple heart, and your prayers will be heard."*

*Sri Ramakrishna*

*"Pray to God morning and evening, and employ the day in your avocations."*

*Prophet Muhammad*

*[With apologies, Part 2 of Bhaja Govindam was published in error in our September Issue. Part One and Part Three flow together quite well, so it was decided to present Parts One and Three in this issue.]*

July Zushi Monthly Retreat 2021  
Afternoon Session Discourse

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

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# **Vedanta Society of Japan**

## **Message Regarding Monthly Programmes for JANUARY 2022**

*Happy New Year! The Vedanta Society of Japan continues to observe social distancing, mask wearing, and avoiding the crowding of programme areas. As attendance to programmes remains space-limited, please contact us if you wish to attend any of the programmes.*

Swami Medhasananda, President  
Vedanta Society of Japan

### **JANUARY 2022 Calendar of Programmes**

1st (Sat) January - Live Streaming 11:30

#### **NEW YEAR KALPATARU**

11:30 - Chanting, Readings

New Year Greeting: Swami Medhasananda

Devotional Song: Swami Divyanathananda

13:45 - Pilgrimage to Kamakura Great Buddha,  
Yukinoshita Catholic Church, and Tsurugaoka Hachimangu Shinto Shrine

3rd (Mon) January

#### **Service to the Homeless Narayana**

Contact: <urara5599(at mark) gmail.com> to participate

8th (Sat) January

#### **Bhagavad Gita Study Class at the Indian Embassy**

\* Video uploaded later

10:30 ~12:00 (In Japanese only)

12th (Wed) January - Zoom

#### **Weekly Upanishad Study Class**

8:30 ~9:30 (in Japanese only)

16th (Sun) January

#### **Monthly Zushi Retreat**

#### **HOLY MOTHER SRI SRI SARADA DEVI BIRTH CELEBRATION**

Live Streaming and Zoom 11:00~16:30

AM and PM Sessions

RESERVATIONS REQUIRED PRIOR TO 11 JAN - 046-873-0428

19th (Wed) January - Zoom

#### **Weekly Upanishad Study Class**

8:30 ~9:30 (in Japanese only)

23rd (Sun) January

#### **Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna Study Class**

Live Streaming and Zoom

14:00 ~16:00 (in Japanese only)

\* For Zoom contact: zoom.nvk@gmail.com

26th (Wed) January - Zoom

#### **Weekly Upanishad Study Class**

8:30 ~9:30 (in Japanese only)

<Live Streaming>

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

<Online Study Class on Zoom>

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

We took up the well-known hymn by Shankaracharya entitled 'Bhaja Govindam' in our November Monthly Retreat of 2018 for discussion, but for various reasons it was discontinued. We restart our discussion today, and it may require three or four more sessions to complete our explanation of this hymn.

### **A Brief Review**

Since our first discussion was some time ago, I would like to recapitulate certain points to help us understand the theme. Sri Shankaracharya was one of the greatest saints and philosophers of India. There are many diverse opinions about his date of birth and lifespan, but it is more or less accepted that he was born in 788 AD and only lived some thirty-two years before leaving his body. Actually, it was found that he was originally only destined to live for sixteen years, but as it was evident that his mission in life had not been fulfilled, Lord Shiva blessed him that he may live another sixteen years to complete his mission.

We all want to live as long as possible, whereas great saints have no such attachment to life and they just cast off their bodies once their job is done. We see this in Swamiji (Swami Vivekananda) as well, who attained mahasamadhi at the young age of thirty-nine.

### **Wondrous Occurrences**

It may sound incredible, even miraculous, in recounting some of the many wondrous occurrences in his life. But if we compare with the lives of other great God-men such as Jesus, there are many things that are difficult to believe, but they did, indeed, happen in most of the cases.

In the case of Shankara, for example, when just seven years of age he became convinced that he must renounce his family to become a monk. He had already lost his father and though he loved his mother, he had decided to renounce family-life. But he knew his mother would not agree, as she was very attached to him as her only child.

As it happened, he had gone to the river to bathe when suddenly a crocodile caught him. His mother was on the riverbank crying and watching helplessly as her son struggled to break free from the crocodile's grasp. "Mother, mother," he cried, "please allow me to mentally take the vow of monasticism now, so that I may die in peace." Seeing no other way as her son was in the jaws of the crocodile, she quickly agreed and instantly, the crocodile freed young Shankara and swam away. Together they returned home, but the promise had been given. His mother was very sad, but as she was truthful, she kept her word requesting only that Shankara return to her on her deathbed. Shankara promised to do so and left home as a monk at seven or eight years old.

He then found his guru from whom he took his vows of monasticism, and began his deep spiritual practices obtaining the high state of nirvikalpa samadhi. Sixteen years soon passed, but he had yet to fulfil his goals of authoring texts on philosophy, the propagation of the Vedanta, and the establishment of monasteries as the basis of Hinduism in the four corners of India. All these remained undone, so Shankara was granted another sixteen years of life to complete these. Shankara soon began writing scripture, commentaries on scriptures, composed hymns, and travelled extensively across India.

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### **The Debate Tradition**

At that time, apart from Hinduism, there were a variety of philosophies from Buddhists, Jains, Kapalikas (practicing Tantras), and Charvaks (practicing materialism). In this backdrop, the people of the day knew little of genuine Hinduism. There was also a tradition for scholars of various schools of philosophy and thought to debate each other, and the defeated scholar would then be obliged to accept the views of his opponent.

Proponents of those schools of philosophy which had opposed Hinduism were vanquished in debates with Shankara and converted to Hinduism. He also established monasteries in the four corners of India –the north, south, east and west of India. Many biographies of Shankara have been written under the same title, Shankaracharya's Digvijaya, meaning 'the debate victories of Shankara going to many places and conquering in debates on scripture'.

The Buddhists of that time were mostly nihilists, professing a void or nothingness. Most people of that time were confused by this idea of nothingness, and this confusion continues even today in some ways. In Jainism there were many ideas explained in so many different ways, that what was actually meant sometimes created confusion. The Kapalikas were practicing tantra, but was actually indulging in sense pleasures in the name of religion. While the Charvakas did not believe in any reality beyond the mind and senses. Shankara invited proponents of such philosophies to debate him. At such debates there would be two options offered: The loser could either, 1) refuse the views of the victor and choose to self-immolate, or 2) he could accept and adopt the views of the victor. There were those Buddhists who actually opted to burn themselves rather than accept the views of Shankara, while among others some became his very staunch and dedicated followers.

In this way Shankara conquered many opposing philosophers and their followers, and reestablished and revived genuine Hinduism by his preaching of Vedanta. To further propagate his views on Vedanta, he wrote some important commentaries on the Brahma Sutras, a treatise on Vedanta composed by Vedavyasa. He also wrote commentaries on twelve Upanishads, and composed some auxiliary Vedantic literature, such as the Vivekachudamani, the Crest Jewel of Discrimination. In addition to expounding Vedanta philosophy, Shankara also composed many hymns.

### **The Pragmatic Philosopher**

In one sense all this from Shankaracharya was quite paradoxical, because Vedanta establishes that there is only the Supreme Reality and that all other manifestations we see are but illusions. There is only one Truth, and that is Brahman or Pure Consciousness—it alone exists—only It is. All other things are merely apparent. Brahman, or Pure Consciousness, is real. Those who believe like this, consider that worship of any deity, or gods or goddesses, is a symptom of spiritual ignorance.

So pure Advaitins, or non-dualists, dislike the worship of gods and goddesses, and contend that those who are spiritually ignorant of the Supreme Reality. Shankara's uniqueness was that on one hand he was a believer in pure non-dualism, the entity of the Supreme Reality,

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while on the other hand he composed many beautiful hymns paying respect to various deities. Not only that, he initiated the worship of some deities in the monasteries he founded. He propounded Pure Non-Dualism, while at the same time allowing a scope for being a Dualist. This because it is difficult for spiritual aspirants to comprehend the Supreme Reality right from the beginning. There should be some graded steps to realise this. That is why ordinary people should start their spiritual practice by worshipping deities, and finally, as they progress in spiritual life through various spiritual practices, they will be able to comprehend and understand Brahman, the Supreme Reality. In this sense Shankara was a practical and pragmatic Advaitic philosopher.

In India many profound philosophers have been born, but the one who is still widely studied, who is the most well-known not only in India but throughout the world, is Shankaracharya. The uniqueness of his philosophy is this: He displayed such a depth of intellectual knowledge—so sharp, deep and profound—that it remains incomparable. If you study his commentaries, this will be evident to you.

Two things will become clear to you as well. First, to arrive at a spiritual Truth, he often refutes an opponent's philosophy. For example, in stating a spiritual Truth of Vedanta, he would put forth the Buddhist objection to it and give his reply to this objection. If another Buddhist argument is raised, then he would supply another reply. In presenting his philosophy in this way, he finally arrives at an irrefutable conclusion. Second, such an intellect in both the Eastern and Western world of philosophy, is not only rare, I would say that Shankara is quite unique in this sense.

I am reminded of the words of a Christian missionary, possibly an intellectual as well. He said that Indians could not be converted to Christianity because of Shankara's Advaita philosophy, which cannot be refuted.

### **Shankara's Hymns Appeal to All**

Of course, Shankara is read extensively in India among scholars, but he is known to the common people not for his commentary—as it is difficult to understand without some background and deep intellectual penetration—but for his hymns. He composed so many wonderful hymns addressed to various deities. Still today they are chanted and sung. If you visit India you can hear innumerable people chanting Shankara hymns as they bathe along the Ganga and other rivers. There are so many of his hymns that are loved, recited and enjoyed, and one of these is today's topic, Bhaja Govindam.



On the one hand, the features of his hymns composed with simple, but beautiful sensitivity, are showing great respect to the deities, while on the other hand, he emphasises the necessity of non-attachment, renunciation of desires, control of mind, control of senses, the realisation of Truth as the ultimate goal of life, and at the same time, a place for the grace of God. These are the three features of  
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hymns composed by Shankara. At the same time there are hymns composed exclusively for spiritual life and renunciation.

One such verse which I like to recite daily while bathing is Kaupeena Panchakam:

*Vedantha Vakyeshu sada ramantoh,  
Bhikshannamatrena tcha tushtimantah  
Asokamantahkarare charantah,  
Kaupeenavantah Khalu bhaghyavantah*

*Blessed and fortunate are those who wear the loincloth.  
Who always enjoy the words and teachings of Vedanta.  
Who are satisfied by what food they get by begging.  
Without any anxiety or pain of mind they roam freely.  
Such persons are the lucky ones.*

This is a hymn for those who embrace the monastic life, but Bhaja Govindam is addressed mainly to householders. In most cases the householder's life is being engrossed in enjoyments, with attachments and hankerings, sense enjoyments, desires for name, fame, power and position. What should be their ideal goal of life? That is the theme of this particular hymn, Bhaja Govindam. What is the consequence of living a householder's life? Such a life leads to lots of suffering; loss of peace, anxieties, stresses, frustrations, delusions and bondage. So in this hymn Shankara says that if one wants to change one's present way of life, and get real peace, joy and freedom, he offers many examples as to what one is doing now, and suggestions as to what one should do instead. This is the contention of the Bhaja Govindam hymn.

### **No Transformative Change**

In Japan there is very little of devotional songs in the tradition of Buddhist temples of some sutras. In the Shinto tradition we find a little bit of religious singing and some dancing. But in India there is a long and rich tradition of religious songs, dance, and the chanting of hymns. For example, can hear people singing the verses of Shankara in daily life. Popular singers chant and record Shankara's verses in their musical styles and people love to listen to them, too.

Here in Japan many of you have grown to appreciate and enjoy Indian devotional songs, and of course, in India multitudes love to listen and sing them, too. Why then, is there so little spiritual impact of these songs on devotees? The answer is that such people don't really cogitate on the meaning and message of the verses of the hymns or the lyrics of devotional songs. The lyric is fine; the musical accompaniment and arrangement is fine, the professional singer is expert in his or her performance, and the production is excellent. Yes, it has an impact, but this impact is so short-lived that it does not bring about any transformative change in either the singer or the listener. The problem is not with the song or the hymn, it is with us, those who love to sing or listen to these chants, hymns and songs.

Because of this, I would like to point out from the beginning, that as we discuss the verses and meanings of the Bhaja Govindam or listen to it, more important is the message the Bhaja Govindam conveys. We should first understand the message and then try to imbibe the message. Sri Ramakrishna gives a practical example: "The worldly man's devotion to God is momentary — like a drop of water on a red-hot frying-pan." The impact of these songs on our mind is like that. So absorb the message of such pieces through Manana (reflection). In Vedanta, Sravana (hearing), Manana (reflecting) and Nididhyasana (profound and repeated contemplation)

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## Bhaja Govindam - Part One (from page 6)

are stages of spiritual practice, so as we listen to such songs, the same principle also applies. This point should be seriously considered and taken cognisance of.

### Understanding the Words Bhaja and Govindam

Now let us take the two words and title of our hymn, Bhaja Govindam. The root verb of 'bhaja' is 'bhaj'. The meaning of bhaj is comprehensive, meaning to worship, to meditate and to respect, inclusively, or even more definitively, spiritual practice. Who is the focus of such spiritual practices or bhaja? Govinda is the focus of spiritual practices. Krishna, the Lord, has many names and one of these is Govinda. But here Govinda does not only mean Krishna, we should take it as a symbol of the Supreme Reality, God.

Here again, if we examine the root word of Govinda we find two words. One is 'go' and one is 'vid'. 'Go' is a noun and 'vid' is a verb, and these two words form the word Govinda. The noun 'go' has several meanings including cow, a deeper meaning is earth, another meaning is heaven, and another meaning is knowledge. The verb 'vid' means to attain something, to get something, and to know something. When we combine these two concepts, Govinda is that one entity which helps us to attain heaven, also, by knowing whom, one attains heaven. Govinda is the one who is omniscient. Still another meaning is the one who is omnipresent. An additional meaning is the one who manifests the objects of senses. Hence, Govinda really means the Supreme Reality which might take various forms. The beauty of Sanskrit is we get so many meanings from a single word, and some are quite deep.

### Understanding mūḍha-mate

Then Shankaracharya says, "mūḍha-mate". Here mūḍha means a deluded person and "mate" means intelligence. One whose intelligence is deluded is mūḍha-mate. Because of the rules of grammar when addressing someone, it is pronounced "mūḍha-mate". Those who are foolish, and foolish not in the sense of intelligence, as they may be great scholars, but from the spiritual point of view they are foolish people, because they are deluded by Maya's powers of delusion. So Shankara says that all people who are deluded in several ways—delineated in the verses of the hymn—should worship and meditate on Govinda, God, the Supreme Reality. This is how the hymn begins and is repeated. So repeat after me:

*bhaja govindam bhaja govindam (bhaja govindam)  
govindam bhaja mūḍha-mate*

I repeated 'bhaja govindam' three times to inspire you to speak up and follow along. (laughter) I am trying to create some motivation in you to focus on the message of this great hymn! Of course, it is hard to recognise, 'I am a deluded person' or spiritually speaking, 'I am ignorant.' So when Shankara addresses us as "mūḍha-mate" we may not like to be addressed thus, but the more we become aware of spiritual truth, spiritual life and the criterion of a spiritual life, we come to realise the state of delusion we are in, and also understand the justification for Shankara's use of "mūḍha-mate" with regard to us. However, there is no malice or ill feelings from Shankara, rather his real and genuine wish that we become aware of our delusion, the result of which we suffer a great deal and become victims of the agonies of repeated births and deaths. He shows us the path to rid ourselves of our delusion and enjoy eternal peace.

Sometimes we find Sri Ramakrishna scolding M. (Mahendranath Gupta-author of Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita), Swamiji (Swami Vivekananda), and other disciples in the harshest language! Later Swamiji, too, would scold his brother disciples, but those who were scolded all knew that behind the scoldings there was great concern and great love. So here in the Bhaja Govindam Shankara is proclaiming we are all fools, but no one minds because Shankara, a saint, is helping us to realise our present deplorable condition and to change ourselves for the better.

What is the criteria for becoming a wise person? That person is a wise person who can distinguish between the unreal and the real, the temporary and the eternal, the finite and the

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infinite. The wise one gives-up the unreal, the non-eternal, and the finite, and focuses on the Real, on the eternal, and on the infinite. One who can do this is really a wise person. Those who cannot do this, who lose sight of this and cannot distinguish the aforesaid differences, and remain engrossed in transient and finite things, such people are called the foolish people, *mūḍha*. As a result of this foolishness they suffer, they can never be rid of fear and anxiety, like the fear of death for example. In the next verse Shankara specifically addresses this fear of death.

The last two lines in this first stanza are:

*saṁprāpte sannihite kāle  
nahi nahi rakṣati ḍukṛñ-karaṇe*

This means that when the time of death comes, one's intellectual knowledge, such as one's scholarship of grammar and such matters, will not help one at all. This *ḍukṛñ-karaṇe* is an aphorism of Sanskrit grammar. Hence, one can memorise all the most abstruse laws of grammar, or any such secular subject, or even the intricacies of the philosophy of Vedānta, yet if such persons are mere scholars but not practitioners, this knowledge would not help one to solve the problems of life, such as fear, tension, frustration and peaceless-ness.

For example, who has the fear of death? One who identifies himself with his body. That person has the fear of death, because they imagine and believe that when the body dies, they also die and become extinct. No one wants to be extinct, everyone wants to live eternally. So when he presumes his body will be burnt to ashes or be buried after death, he too, will be burnt or buried and thus perish. That person, who is attached to his body, is not only attached to his own body, but to other bodies as well, that is, he is attached to his family and friends too. Not only that, he is also attached to everything related to body, mind, and the senses. Such a person who has attachments may be a great scholar, even a scholar of scripture, but if attached to his body, senses, and everything and everybody connected to his body and senses—because all these things are temporary—when they change, are lost, or cease to be, he becomes a victim of severe agonies and pains. Such a person is overpowered by the fear of death.

So Shankara says one's intellectual knowledge will not help to remove the fear of death unless one meditates on the Supreme Reality, God the Eternal, God the Infinite. If one wants to face death with courage, with knowledge, with peace of mind, then one should follow Shankara's advice:

*bhaja govindaṁ bhaja govindaṁ  
govindaṁ bhaja mūḍha-mate*

We see in the life of Sri Ramakrishna that He was uneducated from one point of view, in that He had no academic qualifications. But did Sri Ramakrishna ever depend upon an academic education? Absolutely not. Because right from the beginning He was convinced that intellectual knowledge does not really help to solve the real problems of life. It does not help to fulfil the real purposes of human life, which are peace, joy, knowledge and freedom. So He focused, from the very beginning, on how to obtain to this purpose of life. When visitors would come to visit Him, He wasn't impressed even by scholars or their scholarship, because more important to Him was to have that Real Knowledge, and focus on that Reality and Truth.

Let us end here today and take up other verses of Bhaja Govindam as scheduling permits. •



**Bhaja Govindam - Part Three**  
Swami Medhasananda

**A Brief Review**

Perhaps you remember this stanza from our last talk:

*nalinīdala-gatajalamatitaralaṃ  
tadvajjīvitamatisāya-chapalam.  
viddhi vyādhyabhimānagrastaṃ  
lōkaṃ śōkahataṃ cha samastam*

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

At that time we offered a simple demonstration of how water drops cannot find purchase upon a lotus leaf to illustrate Shankaracharya's fitting characterisation of life's uncertainties. We discussed at some length that we all must die, and that no one knows when death will come. Everyone accepts they will surely die, but not today, not tomorrow, not next month, and probably not next year. We accept our death as inevitable, but consider it as something occurring in some future and we go on with our usual lives. If, however, we knew our end would come upon awaking from our next sleep, we would resist sleep itself for as long as possible. So we discussed, first, that death is absolutely certain, and second, therefore no one can escape death.

The belief that death will come at some later date does not account for the onset of a terminal disease, sudden pandemics like the deadly Corona Virus, nor does this conviction take into account the advent of natural disasters like earthquakes and tsunamis—we cannot know. If someone outside our circle of friends and relatives dies, it is not of great concern for us. However, when a friend, relative or associate suddenly dies, we feel the pinch of death, it becomes fearful to us. We hear about many deaths on mass media or the Internet and it is just information. When death enters our fold, however, we are not mere witnesses, we are a party to it.

We also told a story about the king's minister who saw Death coming for him and ran to the king for his fastest horse so that he may escape. When the minister rode and rode and finally stopped running a hundred kilometres away from the palace to rest, where he found the Grim Reaper dressed in his black robes was waiting for him. Death explained to the minister that he was destined to be at this place and had wondered why he was still at the palace, "Finally, you are here at the right time and the right place."

We cannot run away from death, so what are we to do? Shankaracharya says 'Bhaja Govindam' is the only way for us to face death with courage, with wisdom, and with peace. Even a slow witted person may take refuge in Govinda (Vishnu), worship Govinda, and meditate on Govinda, as he is the only way.

**Uncomfortable Truths**

Today we shall continue explaining verses of the Bhaja Govindam. Sometimes it is difficult to digest the reality of the content of the Bhaja Govindam. In Japanese we say, "mimi ga itai" or 'it hurts my ears,' because we are not ready to listen to such hard realities. We don't want to face

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or accept these truths, and we feel compelled to avoid or leave the place where such a discussion is going on. It is quite common for people to live in an imaginary world of their own creation, afraid to face reality. We imagine a world with our expectations, dreams and thoughts, and we love to live in this world, where we remain afraid to face reality.

Shankara is a great benefactor and a real friend, and as a teacher and a father, he wants to make us aware of our actual situation, so that we can prepare for our reality. Otherwise, if we are not prepared to face reality, when it comes we will be completely upset. He is attempting to make us aware, “Here is the situation—this the reality! So now you should be prepared to face it.” A real well-wisher and friend would do this. A father or mother or teacher or guru will instruct, “Be careful—this is the situation you are going to face.” He does his duty as our true well-wisher and makes us aware of reality. What is his purpose? It is to make us aware. He is not sadistic, he does not enjoy to frighten us. As a true well-wisher he does not veil or cover-up the truth, he bares the truth to us. This is the fact of life—this is the truth of life.

For example, children, young boys and girls, are often nurture a very rosy and romantic picture of the future. But conscientious parents or Gurus do their duty when they caution their children or disciples that, ‘Life is not a bed of roses.’ Yes, the rose is there, but the thorn is also there! If you want to pluck the rose, be careful of the thorn you cannot see.

When I read out Shankara’s verses and discuss the meanings, some of you who are present here or who watch from elsewhere via our livestream think they are an exception to what Shankara warns us of in these verses. But beware that this may not be the case. It may not be your case at the moment, but at some time in the future it most probably will.

With this introduction let me continue with Shankara’s next verse:

*yāvad vittōpārjanasaktaḥ  
tāvannijaparivārō raktaḥ |  
paśchājīṣvati jarjaradēhē  
vārtāṃ kō'pi na pṛchhati gēhē*

*When one is alive, family members inquire kindly about his welfare,  
So long as a man is fit and able to support his family, see the affection all around him show.  
But no one at home will care to have a word with him,  
when his body totters due to old age.*

So, as long as the cow gives milk. we take care of it; as long as the bullock plows the field, we take care of it. The moment the cow stops giving milk or the bullock ceases to pull the plow, the master loses interest in how the animal is faring. So as long as the master of the house earns money, the household cares for him. But when that same person becomes older and earns ever less money, equally his care slowly diminishes. Of course, this was the family pattern of ages, but today this pattern has changed somewhat. Before the joint family of father, mother, son, his wife, grandchildren all lived together. There is a story:

*A young husband and wife lived with their child of eight or ten years of age and the husband’s father. The father became quite old. During lunches and dinners, the husband, wife and son sat at one table to dine, while a smaller table elsewhere was arranged for the father to sit and take his food. Grandfather was served on a wooden plate, while porcelain ware was reserved for diners at the other table. While husband and wife engaged in family conversations*  
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*at the other table, no one cared to talk to the grandfather at his table. He ate alone. The wife cared not whether he had enough food or if he had eaten at all. This was a daily occurrence and the boy, being compassionate and sensitive to his surroundings, took note of his grandfather sitting in a corner eating from the wooden plate, and that no one ever seemed to speak to him or inquire of his condition.*

*One day the father saw his son playing with some small pieces of wood. The father enquired, "What are you doing my child?"*

*"Father, I am trying to make two wooden plates."*

*"Why are you doing that?"*

*"Father, when you and mother become old, I hope to serve you with these two wooden plates."*

We see here that by the example these parents are setting, they too will become victims of their example. This story illustrates this possibility.

### **The Nuclear Family**

Things have changed in the age of the nuclear family. Now the household consists of the father, mother and children, and with considerable care grandparents have been relegated to the old-age home or nursing home to be taken care of. Some practical reasons exist that don't allow for children to keep their parents at home. One of these is economic pressure, wherein both adults are working and their commutes to work take considerable time. Hence, no one is at home to care of their elderly parents.

The next consideration is whether they are putting into a senior care home or just dumping them there. I chose this two words, 'putting' and 'dumping', as I am not sure of a more appropriate English or Japanese word than to 'dump'. Putting one's parents into an old age home has one connotation, while just to 'dump' them into a home has a different connotation. People who 'dump' their parents into an old age home are not so concerned with the quality of care and do not frequently inquire as to their aged parents living conditions. To dump them is to just pack them up, drop them off, wave goodbye, and be rid of them to enjoy their own lives.

Once during lunch prasad, I asked some devotees about the condition of Japanese old age homes and the communication between the retirees and their children. The impression I got from them, which included some news media reportage, resulted in various examples. Some people take good care of their parents visiting and communicating with them regularly—this was one example. Another example was that the children did not visit their parents very regularly—perhaps once every few months. Other examples were noted of visits limited to once or twice a year. Still there were some examples  
(con't page 12)



where the children never visit their aged parents at all. Unfortunately, the number of cases where children regularly visit their parents, inquire as to their needs, and maintain regular communication is slowly decreasing. This is the novel situation. We should not think that such an unfortunate development occurs only in Japan. In the West, for example, I have heard many visit their elderly parent living in a home only once or twice a year for maybe a Christmas or birthday visit. However, it must be said that exceptions to this condition are also innumerable.

### **Expect It - Do Not Be Deluded**

I bring up this point to verify what Shankara says, *“But no one at home will care to have a word with him. when his body totters due to old age.”* Our regular translator here, Leonardo, had the opportunity to visit some occupants of Japanese retirement homes involved with his studies. He said the common comment from these elders was, “Sabishi, sabishi” (lonely). There is no want of food in these homes, medical care and treatment is taken care of, but is this enough? What people need is sympathy, compassion, feelings of love. But Shankara means the same thing, and speaks to the loneliness of such elders in this verse. Even if an elder remains in their home with the family, no one speaks to the grandparent. There are even cases where the grandchildren are not allowed to keep company with their infirmed grandmother or grandfather.

So Shankara’s advice is, “Bhaja Govindam, Bhaja Govindam, Govindam, Bhajamudhamate.” You are still young and vital! You are earning money and everyone takes care of you! They know if you become ill, the earning will stop. They will be in big trouble. Yes, some genuine affection is there, but it has to be tested—and when that time of tests comes one will see what the reality is. Shankara cautions us to face this reality.

Not only that! This is also true. If the master of the house should die without leaving sufficient financial resources to care for one’s family, those left behind may grumble about his failure to provide for their continued support. They’ll complain about how he did not live up to his responsibilities. Where is the grief over his passing away? No, this is a very, very hard fact throughout the world. Lots of love and affection are ours while we are a provider, but should we pass away without financial planning for the family, those same relatives will complain and criticise us. “He is gone now, but what about us? Just look at the condition he has left us in,” they will moan. A large lump sum on deposit will make them happy, but only emergency cash on deposit will turn their grief to grievance. This, too, is a harsh reality. It is a fact. “Bhaja Govindam, Bhaja Govindam, Govindam Bhaja Mudhamate. Oh deluded person, think of Govinda.” Don’t live an imaginary life in an imaginary world, get prepared to face the reality of hard facts from now on!

### **Die with a Smile on Your Face**

There is a very famous couplet composed by the poet and saint, Tulsidas, that says:

*When you were born you were crying,  
and everyone around you was smiling at your birth.  
Now live your life in such a way that when you die,  
you die smiling and everyone around you will cry for you.*

In order to accomplish this “Bhaja Govindam, Bhaja Govindam, Govindam Bhaja Mudhamate”—that is worship of Govinda, the Lord, will help. What is the connection between ‘Bhaja Govindam’, worshipping the Lord, and passing away with a smile on our face?

Well, our connection with everything is temporary, short lived, and only our connection with Govinda, the Lord, is eternal. He is our eternal friend; He is our eternal companion; He is our

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### Bhaja Govindam - Part Three (from page 12)

eternal refuge; and He is our eternal parent. If we build up a relationship with the Lord and always remember that the Lord is always with us as we live. When we are in trouble, Govinda is also with us. When we are lonely, Govinda is with us. When we are sick Govinda is with us. 'M', the biographer of the 'Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna', noted that should we suffer a serious and prolonged illness many well-wishers may come to visit us at first, but as the illness progresses the number of visitors will slowly dwindle until, finally, very, very few will come. But let us remember, when we fall ill and when we die, if none else at heart, the Lord is with us. After death, Govinda is with us. If we have that firm faith and conviction, we can die with courage, peace, and a smile on our face.

What does Bhaja Govindam imply? Worship Govinda! Pray to Govinda! Chant the name of Govinda! Then we may build a relationship with Govinda, and have the firm conviction that we are always, always with Govinda. We are never alone. You are never helpless! You are always protected! Govinda is always with you. If everyone else should leave you, Govinda will be with you. When we sleep, how can we sleep peacefully? We can sleep peacefully because Govinda keeps His eye on us. He is awake! The whole world may be sleeping, but Govinda is ever awake, watching over us, and taking care of us.

I would like to briefly share a beautiful recording of a song by Rabindranath Tagore. The lyrics tells us the Lord is our eternal companion, so we should pray to Him:

*O Lord! Eternal Friend! Please don't leave me, don't leave me, be always with me.  
This world is like a deep forest, to become fearless I depend on Thee,  
When no one is with me, Thou will be with me,  
O Lord, never leave me, never leave me.*

While the hymn by Shankaracharya is devoted to Govinda, that is, Sri Krishna, it applies to us devotees of Sri Ramakrishna as well. Hence, let us pray to Sri Ramakrishna, "O Ramakrishna! Eternal Friend! You are our Eternal refuge. You are our Eternal support. Always be with me. •





## Osaka Satsanga Resumes

After a COVID-19 imposed two-year hiatus on travel, Swami Medhasananda (Maharaj) visited Osaka again on the 11th of December at the request of the Osaka Study Group and gave a talk on “Assimilating Spiritual Teachings in Life”. Six devotees of the Kyokai accompanied Maharaj during this trip and the total number of attendees of the discourse was about thirty-six.

Everyone was mutually delighted to attend Satsanga once again. •



## Christmas Eve at Zushi Ashrama

At 7PM on 24 December, the Vedanta Society of Japan held it's annual Christmas Eve Celebration following the tight schedule that follows:

### 7:00 PM

- Offering and Arati by Swami Divyanathanandaji
- Carol: 'Joy to the World'  
Ms. Shanti Izumida, Mr. Steven Morgan, Mr. Lonnie Hirsch
- Readings from the Bible:  
English: Swami Medhasanandaji  
Japanese: Mr. Toshihisa Ishizuka
- Carol: 'The First Noel'
- Release of new Japanese publication: 'Ramakrishna As We Saw Him'
- Discourse: Mr. Leonardo Alvarez 'Teachings of Jesus Christ'
- Carol: 'O, Come All Ye Faithful'
- Silent Prayer
- Carol: 'Silent Night'

### 8:45 PM

- Dinner Prasad







Divyanathananda



Carols



Medhasananda



Toshihisa Ishizuka





Araki Kojiro



Celebrators



Leonardo Alvarez



Chorus and Audio/Visual



Prasad



## • Story to Remember •

### "The Laws of Life and Death"

Swami Vivekananda

How to get rid of this birth and death — not how to go to heaven, but how one can stop going to heaven — this is the object of the search of the Hindu.

Nothing stands isolated — everything is a part of the never-ending procession of cause and effect. If there are higher beings than man, they also must obey the laws. Life can only spring from life, thought from thought, matter from matter. A universe cannot be created out of matter. It has existed for ever. If human beings came into the world fresh from the hands of nature, they would come without impressions; but we do not come in that way, which shows that we are not created afresh. If human souls are created out of nothing, what is to prevent them from going back into nothing? If we are to live all the time in the future, we must have lived all the time in the past.

It is the belief of the Hindu that the soul is neither mind nor body. What is it which remains stable — which can say, "I am I"? Not the body, for it is always changing; and not the mind, which changes more rapidly than the body, which never has the same thoughts for even a few minutes. There must be an identity which does not change — something which is to man what the banks are to the river — the banks which do not change and without whose immobility we would not be conscious of the constantly moving stream. Behind the body, behind the mind, there must be something, viz the soul, which unifies the man. Mind is merely the fine instrument through which the soul — the master — acts on the body. In India we say a man has given up his body, while you say, a man gives up his ghost. The Hindus believe that a man is a soul and has a body, while Western people believe he is a body and possesses a soul.

Death overtakes everything which is complex. The soul is a single element, not composed of anything else, and therefore it cannot die. By its very nature the soul must be immortal. Body, mind, and soul turn upon the wheel of law — none can escape. No more can we transcend the law than can the stars, than can the sun — it is all a universe of law. The law of Karma is that every action must be followed sooner or later by an effect. The Egyptian seed which was taken from the hand of a mummy after 5000 years and sprang into life when planted is the type of the never-ending influence of human acts. Action can never die without producing action. Now, if our acts can only produce their appropriate effects on this plane of existence, it follows that we must all come back to round out the circle of causes and effects. This is the doctrine of reincarnation. We are the slaves of law, the slaves of conduct, the slaves of thirst, the slaves of desire, the slaves of a thousand things. Only by escaping from life can we escape from slavery to freedom. God is the only one who is free. God and freedom are one and the same.

(ADVAITA ASHRAMA - From a report of a lecture delivered by Swami Vivekananda in Oakland, California on March 7, 1900, by the Oakland Tribune)

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