

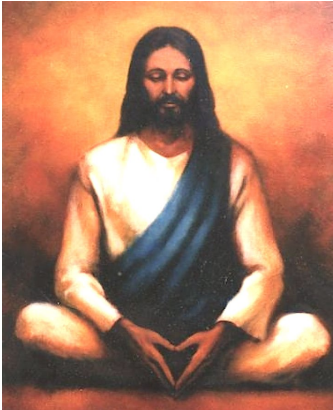


NOVEMBER 2021 -VOLUME 19 NUMBER 11

The Vedanta Kyokai Newsletter

NEWS, UPDATES AND MISCELLANY FROM THE VEDANTA SOCIETY OF JAPAN

DECEMBER 2021 Calendar



Christmas Eve
Friday, 24 December

Birthdays

Swami Premananda
Sunday, 12 December

Christmas Eve
Friday, 24 December

**Sri Sri Ma
Sarada Devi**
Sunday, 26 December

Zushi Events

COVID restrictions have been lifted once again by the Japanese government as of 30 September 2021.

See page 02 for details!



✧ Thus Spake ✧

“Get up, and set your shoulder to the wheel - How long is this life for? As you have come into this world, leave some mark behind. Otherwise, where is the difference between you and the trees and stones? They too come into existence, decay and die.”

Swami Vivekananda

“Every good tree brings forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree brings forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a bad tree bring about good fruit. Every tree that brings not forth good fruit is cut down, and cast into the fire. Therefore, by their fruits, you shall know them.

Jesus, The Christ

November Zushi Retreat 2021
Afternoon Session Talk

The Significance of Hindu Rituals by Swami Divyanathananda

When a guest comes to our house we say, ‘Welcome! Please have a seat’. Then we offer him some water, tea, and refreshments. He feels happy by our gestures. Whenever we want to please somebody,

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Vedanta Society of Japan

Message Regarding Monthly Programmes for DECEMBER 2021

Vedanta Society of Japan will continue 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

DECEMBER 2021 Calendar of Programmes

1st (Wed) December - Zoom
Weekly Upanishad Study Class
8:30 ~9:15 (in Japanese only)

4th (Sat) December
Bhagavad Gita Study Class at the Indian Embassy
* Video uploaded later
10:30 ~12:00 (In Japanese only)

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

11th (Sat) December
*** Satsanga in Osaka**
※ For more information [click here](#).

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

19th (Sun) December
Bi-lingual Live Streaming and Zoom
*** Monthly Zushi Retreat**
Speaker Swami Medhasananda
Devotional song: Swami Divyanathananda

24th (Fri) December
*** Christmas Eve Worship**
Bi-lingual Live Streaming
19:00~21:00
Please make reservations by Dec 19th
Tel: 046-873-0428

26th (Sun) December
Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna Study Class
Live Streaming and Zoom
14:00 ~16:00 (in Japanese only)
* For Zoom contact: zoom.nvk@gmail.com

< **Live Streaming** >

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

< **Online Study Class on Zoom** >

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

Rituals (from page1)

we use gestures and particular verbal expressions to convey our feelings. In the same way, when we want to please God, we offer Him flowers, incense, fruits and other things, while chanting some mantras. All these acts combined, is what can be termed as a ritual. God, by nature is omnipresent, yet we need temples and churches where we can vividly feel His presence. Therefore, for most of us, symbols and rituals are necessary to progress in our spiritual life.

According to the English dictionary, a ritual is a religious or solemn ceremony consisting of a series of actions performed according to a prescribed order. Every religion prescribes certain rituals for its members. Rituals are observed in the public places of worship, like churches, temples, mosques, Shinto Shrines, etc. It can be done at home too.

While delivering a lecture on Karma Yoga, Swami Vivekananda has highlighted the need for and importance of rituals. To quote Him:

“In every religion there are three parts: philosophy, mythology, and ritual. Philosophy of course is the essence of every religion; mythology explains and illustrates it by means of the more or less legendary lives of great men, stories and fables of wonderful things, and so on; ritual gives to that philosophy a still more concrete form, so that everyone may grasp it — ritual is in-fact concretised philosophy. It is necessary in every religion, because most of us cannot understand abstract spiritual things until we grow much spiritually. It is easy for men to think that they can understand anything; but when it comes to practical experience, they find that abstract ideas are often very hard to comprehend. Therefore, symbols are of great help, and we cannot dispense with the symbolical method of putting things before us.”

In the Vedanta Society of Japan, we perform ritualistic worship (puja) four times a year. The birthday celebrations of Sri Ramakrishna, Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda and a Kali Puja. I shall explain in brief the steps involved in the ritualistic worship that we perform.

The Ritual Purification

First, the place of worship should be cleaned. In India, the shrine is wiped with water every day. The utensils to be used for the worship are also cleaned and kept ready. The worshipper purifies himself by bathing and sits for worship in clean clothes.

Before the worship begins, generally the worshipper lights a lamp and burns a few incense sticks and flower offerings are placed in front of the deity. The placing of the offering of flowers is called *Arghya*. It consists of a bel leaf, some sandal paste, a few rice grains, a blade of grass, and a flower. When bel leaves are not available, we use a special leaf found in Japan used during such rituals.

Then the worshipper performs some purificatory acts called *Achamana*. This is done by sipping Ganga water and chanting the name of Vishnu three times: ‘Om Vishnu, Om Vishnu, Om Vishnu.’ In India, we believe that Ganga water and the name of God purifies everything.

Generally, every act performed in our day-to-day life is performed with some purpose behind it. We make the resolve, ‘I will do such and such with such and such purpose’. It is called *sankalpa* in Sanskrit. Before commencing a ritualistic worship, it is customary to do a *sankalpa*. We express in words the purpose for doing the worship. For this the worshipper kneels on his right knee upon which he places his palms together, right upon left, and utters the *sankalpa* mantra. In our Vedanta Society, we do the worship for the purpose of obtaining devotion and for

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Rituals (from page 3)

the welfare of all.

After *Sankalpa* begins purification exercises of the various articles of worship. Now, the question is, what is the purpose of this purification exercise? The puja articles have already been cleaned, is there any impurity left? The reason is that everything we see around us is in essence Brahman, and the names and forms are unreal. By purifying, we acknowledge that Brahman alone is behind everything, and this is purification.

The worshipper sprinkles a few drops of holy water in a circle around him and imagines a ball of fire surrounding him which protects the worshipper and the articles of worship from all evils. It is said that when Sri Ramakrishna would perform worship of Mother *Bhavatarini* at Dakshineswar, He could vividly see a wall of fire all around Him.

Then comes *pranayama*, or the purification of prana. Prana, the vital energy, guides our actions, and if our prana is irregular, we feel restless. Therefore, performing pranayama both calms and purifies our mind. The worshipper first covers his left nostril and takes four breaths, then covers both nostrils for a count of sixteen, and then through the right nostril exhales with a count of eight. Then these steps are done again, starting from the right nostril.

Following this the worshipper purifies his limbs with various mudras (posture) and mantras. Remember, what we mean by purification is acknowledging that all these items of worship and the worshipper too, are all in essence, Brahman.

The next step is to offer worship to the Guru and to five Gods: Ganesha, Shiva, Sun God, Narayana, and Jay Durga. It is customary to offer worship to these five Gods and Goddess before every worship using sandalwood paste and a particular colour of flower for each God, which is pleasing to the deity. For example, in India it is believed that Jay Durga is fond of red flowers and red sandalwood paste, whereas Lord Shiva likes white flowers and white sandalwood paste, and so on.

Now the worshipper meditates on the form and qualities of the deity in his heart. He closes his eyes and imagines the deity seated in his heart and meditates on the deity's form. He holds a flower in his hand in a particular mudra while a mantra is chanted. This *dhyana mantra* describes the physical features of the deity. Mother Kali's dhyana describes the colour of Her dress and the ornaments that adorns Her ears, nose, waist. All these details are mentioned in order to help the worshipper imagine the deity in his heart.

Following the meditation, the worshipper mentally offers various articles; flowers, sandalwood paste, incense, and food. This is called mental worship or *manasa puja*. The worshipper also offers his own deeds, body, six senses, mind, and their various ramifications, in fact, everything. All that we think and do, the good thoughts, negative emotions, good deeds, wrong deeds, everything of ourselves is offered to the deity so that we can slowly purify ourselves and free ourselves from our attachment to them. After mental worship, we transfer the deity from our heart to the picture.

Two kinds of conch shells are used during worship—one large conch is used for blowing and making sound, and another, smaller one, contains water. We fill the small conch with water and mentally imagine this water originates from all the places of pilgrimages into one. Then with special mudras, we request the deity to come, to remain there and to accept our worship. This is called *Vishesh Arghya*.

The Ritual Offerings

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Rituals (from page 4)

Now the actual offerings start. The number of offerings can be five, ten or sixteen. Sometimes the list can go to as long as one hundred and eight. Many articles are offered to the deity. This group of articles used in worship is called *upachara*. When five, it is called *pancha upachara*, if ten, it is called *dasha upachara*, and so on.

First, water is offered to wash the feet of the deity. This is called *padya*. In olden times when guests would come to a house in India, the host would wash the feet of the guest and then wipe them with a cloth. Water is offered to rinse the mouth, called *achamaniya*. Then scented water and special oil is offered for bathing and a particular mantra is chanted as we bathe the deity with holy water. This is called *snaniya*. We also offer perfume and sandal paste, called *gandha*; flowers, called *pushpa*; then incense, called *dhupa*; then fire (lamp), called *dipa*.

It will not be out of place to mention here that we offer all these worships to the Shiva Linga, this is an emblem of Lord Shiva, which is placed in front of the worshipper. He is called *Baneshvara Shiva*. All the *upacharas*, like water for washing the feet, washing the hands, rinsing the mouth, and bathing, we perform and offer to Lord Shiva.

After this, food offerings are made to the deity consisting of prepared dishes, fruits, sweets, rice, porridge, etc. In our Japan Society Centre, food offerings are already placed in front of the deity before the start of the worship. Now they are formally offered, and this act is called *naivedya*. The worshipper uses some mudras and utters appropriate mantras for each offering. Then he does japa (meditative repetition) of the mantra with closed eyes and visualises the deity partaking of the food offerings.

Finally, taking various flowers of different colours, daubing them with sandal-paste, and chanting mantras, the worshipper offers them to the deity. This is called *pushpanjali*. At our Centre, devotees are also given a small flower and a leaf, and with chanting of the *pushpanjali* mantra, everybody offers these to the Lord. This concludes our *pushpanjali*.

The Arati Ritual

At our Ashramas in India, *arati* (vespers) is conducted every evening after dusk. Here in Japan, during the birthday celebrations of Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, and Swami Vivekananda we perform *arati* after the puja (worship). There are five items used in *arati* that symbolise the five elements that comprise the entire universe. These elements are earth, water, air, fire, and ether. First is a lamp of five cotton wicks fuelled by oil/melted ghee, symbolising the fire element; then a small conch containing consecrated water representing the water element; It is followed by a cloth, symbolising akasha (ether); then a flower, symbolising earth; and finally a fan, called chamara, which represents air.

The conch containing water symbolises water because it is born out of water and while performing the arati, water is contained inside the conch shell. The cloth consists of tightly woven threads, we don't see the threads separately. In the same way, space also is without gaps, is continuous and envelops all of creation. Therefore, cloth is a symbol of space. Flowers have scents and the earth itself gives out scents, so flowers represent the earth element. Also, according to one school, the five fire wicks of the lamp combined, represent the five primary elements.

(con't page 6)

• Thought of the Month •

"Faith is to believe what you do not see;
the reward of this faith is to see
what you believe."

Saint Augustine

Rituals (from page 5)

So, when we do arati, we offer the entire universe to God, because the entire universe is composed of these five elements. This is the significance of performing arati. Following the arati, a devotional song is sung, befitting the worship. At Belur Math, devotional songs are sung in solo or chorus for long hours, which creates a beautiful ambiance during the worship.

Homa Ritual

Our next discussion is of *homa* (fire) a votive immolation of offerings to God. In our headquarters at Belur Math *homa* is observed during Durga Puja, Kali Puja, Shivaratri, and on the birth anniversaries of all the direct monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. At our Japan Centre we perform *homa* on Sri Ramakrishna's birthday and Kali Puja. For the Homa ceremony, special pieces of wood are arranged in a particular way in a container.

The symbolism of *homa* is that the fire is considered to be the mouth of God. Various oblations are poured into the fire, such as ghee, flowers, leaves, fruits, sweets, etc. As we add these items to the fire, they lose their own form and become one with the fire. The name and form of all these is thus negated, and they become one with Brahman. This is the significance of *homa*.

As we noted in the beginning of our talk, Vivekananda pointed out that every religion consists of three parts, philosophy, mythology, and ritual. The *homa* ritual also has a philosophical aspect. In the Bhagavad Gita Sri Krishna asks us to light the fire of discrimination in our hearts, and to pour into that fire, with the knowledge of discrimination, whatever comes into our minds; all our mental propensities, the good, the bad, whatever is done with our sensory organs. *Homa* signifies this philosophy. In the Gita we also find the phrase: '*jnan agnih sarva-karmani bhasma-sat kurute tatha*' or 'this fire of discrimination burns all one's good deeds and bad deeds'. Just as the *homa* fire burns the wood, fruits and sweets offered, the fire of discrimination that we light in our heart will consume all our bad and good aspects and make us one with Brahman. This, too, is the significance of *homa*.

We have discussed the rituals practiced here in Japan. At Belur Math, as I mentioned earlier, we also conduct Durga Puja for four consecutive days in the autumn. Kali Puja, Saraswati Puja, the birthdays of Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Krishna, *Shiva ratri*, as well as the birthdays of all the monastic devotees of Sri Ramakrishna are also observed with proper rituals befitting the occasion. The purpose of all these rituals, needless to say, is to develop devotion and the purification of our body and to obtain the blessings of the various deities.

Besides these, there are other rituals prescribed for Hindus which they follow during various phases of their lives from birth to death:

Annaprāsana is a ceremony conducted six months after the birth of a child when the child starts taking rice and other solid food.

There is also a ceremony where the child begins a formal education with the writing of the alphabet. At Belur Math, during Saraswati Puja every year, often devotees bring their small children who begin lettering in chalk on small blackboards. This ritual is also observed at home.

There is also the *Upanayana*, a ceremony wherein the child begins to recite the Gayatri Mantra daily. Long ago this ritual used to be observed by Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaishya castes, but not Sudras. But now this ceremony is restricted to only Brahmins.

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Rituals (from page 6)

There are marriage rituals for Hindus, and a priest does this worship. In the marriage ceremony there is also a *homa* wherein the bride and groom put oblations into the flames and make their vows to sustain married life and get united in the plane of hearts.

When a Hindu gives up the body, funeral rites are observed. This is observed eleven or thirteen days later, depending upon caste, with various elaborate rites. For example, the deceased's male children shave their heads, followed by a feast with relatives and friends of the deceased invited to partake.

Thank you.

[Maharaj then took the floor and complimented Swami Divyanathananda for his successful effort in approaching a very complicated and difficult topic in such a brief discourse. He then elaborated on certain points regarding rituals.]

Mudra is important and has two parts, the mudra and mantra invoked together as one. This is very important and each deity has a mantra. So, we should be careful to use the proper mantra for each. For example, if we chant Saraswati's mantra during the Kali Puja by mistake, obviously neither Mother Kali nor Mother Saraswati would be pleased. Also, correct pronunciation of mantras is important. The purpose of rituals is to please God. But if we chant the wrong mantra or chant with the wrong pronunciation, it may be counter productive. So, we need to study mantras well and chant them as perfectly as possible.

There is the Hindu adage, 'devo bhutva devam yajet', meaning that one should worship the divine by first becoming divine oneself. This means that God dwells within and to invoke that God from within and into the image, and then offer worship to it. From that moment, we do not refer that statue or image as merely a statue or image, because that statue has been transformed into the god or goddess of worship. So we offer flowers or food to the God in the image, and finally after the worship, bring the deity in the image back into our heart.

To bring back God into worshipper, there is a special posture called the Sanhara Mudra. [Maharaj demonstrates this posture to the congregation.] With this posture, the worshipper picks a flower up from the hot gee of the homa fire. He then smells the flower, with which the deity returns into the worshipper's heart. With this the image becomes a mere image again and next it is immersed into a river or a lake.

Interestingly, most of the mudras imitate the shape of an object. For example, Matsya Mudra imitates the shape of swimming fish. Kurma Mudra imitates a tortoise. Ankusha Mudra imitates the shape of an *aṅkuśa* or sharp-hooked tool used by the elephant driver to control the elephant with sharp taps about the head. Mrigi Mudra imitates a deer's head antlers.

Then Maharaj demonstrated the Jnana Mudra. This is also known as the Knowledge Mudra. Lord Buddha is often depicted with the Jnana Mudra. There is one opinion that all worship can be done with the Jnana Mudra alone and that all other mudras are not needed.

Every ritual is to supplicate God from birth to death and even after death. It is one of the very important purposes of rituals. Rituals are done to create the condition that the whole of our life is connected with God and to remember God on these occasions.

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Rituals (from page 7)

'There is nothing which is ours. Everything belongs to God.' We dedicate God's belongings to God during ritualistic worship. God, in fact, is fond of our feelings of intense love and respect for Him expressed on the occasion of ritualistic worship. If there are no love or respect for God, the ritual will be meaningless. The ritual will become just a physical act lacking in spirit. A sincere feeling of love and respect is the most important criterion of rituals.

Rituals are very much appreciated at all our Ramakrishna Mission Centres by devotees in attendance who are uplifted by them, as they are performed meticulously and with faith, devotion and love. Thakur (Sri Ramakrishna) said that the three following conditions are needed to secure a living and benign presence of God in an image:

1. A beautiful image of the deity
2. The worshipper's feelings of faith, of love and respect for it
3. The host's faith, love and respect for the deity.

Nevertheless, we need to perform the ritual meticulously and perfectly. •



Swami Divyanathananda discusses the significance of rituals





Swami Divyanathananda concludes his comments



Swami Medhasananda elaborates on rituals and offers bhajan



• **Story to Remember** •

The Four Classes of Men

MEN may be divided into four classes: those bound by the fetters of the world, the seekers after liberation, the liberated and the ever-free.

Among the ever-free we may count sages like Narada. They live in the world for the good of others, to teach men spiritual truths.

Those in bondage are sunk in worldliness and are forgetful of God. Not even by mistake do they think of God.

The seekers after liberation want to free themselves from attachment to the world. Some of them succeed and others do not.

The liberated souls, such as the Sadhus and Mahatmas, are not entangled in the world, in 'woman and gold.' Their minds are free from worldliness. Besides they always meditate on the Lotus Feet of God.

Suppose a net has been cast into a lake to catch fish. Some fish are so clever that they are never caught in the net. They are like the ever-free. But most of the fish are entangled in the net. Some of them try to free themselves from it, and they are like those who seek liberation. But not all the fish that struggle succeed.

A very few do jump out of the net, making a big splash in the water. Then the fishermen shout, 'Look! There goes a big one!' But most of the fish caught in the net cannot escape, nor do they make any effort to get out.

On the contrary, they burrow into the mud with the net in their mouths and lie there quietly, thinking, 'We need not fear any more; we are quite safe here.' But the poor things do not know that the fishermen will drag them out with the net. These are like the men bound to the world.

Tales and Parables of Sri Ramakrishna

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