



December 2010 - Volume 08 Number 11

日本ヴェーダーンタ協会ニュースレター

The Vedanta Kyokai

NEWS, UPDATES AND MISCELLANY FROM THE VEDANTA SOCIETY OF JAPAN

Monthly Calendar



Birthdays

Swami Premananda

Wednesday, Dec 15

Jesus, the Christ

Saturday, Dec 25

Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi

Monday, Dec 27

Swami Shivananda

Friday, Dec 31

Kyokai Events

• December Zushi Retreat •

“Bondage and Liberation”

Sunday, December 19, 11AM

All are welcome to attend!

• Christmas Eve •

Annual Christmas Programme

Worship, Bible readings, carols and talk.

Starting at 7p.m. All are welcome!

• New Year Kalpataru •

New Years Day 2011

Zushi Centre - 12 Noon

Annual programme includes a talk, lunch, and a walk to the Kamakura Daibutsu and more! All are welcome!



✧ Thus Spake ✧

“ Everything, no doubt, happens by God's will, yet man must work because God expresses His will through man's action. Do not relax your spiritual practices.”

... Sri Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother

“The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks.”

... Jesus, the Christ

November Zushi Retreat “Mantra of the Hindu Tradition” A Talk by Swami Medhasananda

The Vedanta Society of Japan held its monthly Spiritual Retreat in Zushi on Sunday, November 21st. The program began at 6:30 a.m. with chanting and reading preceded by meditation. Again there was a meditation at 10:30 and chanting and reading starting from 11:00 followed by the discourse from Swami Medhasananda. After a prasad lunch the afternoon Q&A session began with a reading. Following an late afternoon tea, the retreat ended with evening vespers at 6:15 p.m.

Today's subject is Mantra in the Hindu Tradition. First we'll define mantra; then discuss the mantra in different spiritual traditions in the world. Next we'll discuss different aspects of mantra traditions in Hinduism, namely the different purposes of mantra chanting; types of mantras; the components of a mantra; the connection of the mantra with God; examples of mantras; an explanation

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Mantra [from page 1]

of om or aum; an explanation of the gayatri mantra; practice of chanting the mantra; selection of mantra; spiritual initiation; the necessity of repetition of mantra; how many times and when; different methods of mantra chanting; mantra and visualisation; the effects of mantra chanting; and a conclusion.

There are two types of spiritual seekers. One type are those who get spiritual initiation, but don't really know what is the purpose of it. Even if they know, they are sometimes confused. Sometimes their motivation gradually decreases as time passes after their initiation. The other type are those who do not get initiation, but are interested in mantra and wonder what it is. They are sometimes confused too. So I have decided to take up the subject of mantra for discussion this morning.

Definition

First, what's the definition of mantra? Here is the Sanskrit definition: "manonat trayate iti mantraha", which means if we repeat the mantra and contemplate on it, we can achieve liberation as a result. Liberation represents being free of bondage and attachment. We will not be reborn either. Moreover, the mantra protects us. It guides us across the ocean of secularity. Manonat means to chant and contemplate again and again the mantra, and trayate means saving. The mantra is a holy formula. Mantra is called 'shingon' in Japanese. You can even find 'mantra' in English dictionaries. It is a mystic formula, as well as a holy one.

At the same time mantra is something one cannot explain with words. It is beyond description. Words have their limits and spiritual stuff goes beyond the spoken word at some point. Mantra is also the abode of God. Our houses are made of materials like wood and stone, but God's abode is made of holy words.

Other Traditions

Mantras can be seen in different religious traditions in the world. In Buddhism, it is very common. For instance, 'namu' of Namu Amida Butsu comes from
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namo or bow. God resides in each person, so we bow down to them, just like you bow down in a temple before God as a sign of respect. In Sanskrit, it is called namaha. Next, Amida Butsu is composed of Amitabha and Buddha. 'Amitabha' means immeasurable light; 'amita' means limitless, and 'abha' means 'jyoti' or spiritual light. Amitabha is one of the names of Lord Buddha. The meaning of 'Buddha' is the Awakened One. We are spiritually asleep even when we are awake, as we are spiritually ignorant. Buddha, or the realised soul, is one who is spiritually awakened. This is what Namu Amida Butsu means. Let's chant Namu Amida Butsu together (this is repeated many times by the attendees).

In all religions, there is the concept of repeating God's name. In Christianity there are two mantras: 'Ave Maria' and 'Jesus have mercy on me.' Mercy means blessing, compassion, or oncho in Japanese. Let's chant

Jesus have mercy on me (repeated several times) Now repeat, Ave Maria (repeated several times).

In Islam they pray five times a day. They practice japam too. I went to Kyoto to join a small international religious conference, where there was a dialog between Buddhists and Sufis and Yogis. Sufism is one of the most liberal sects in Islam and has lots in common with Hinduism. They discussed

their own traditions with each other. Sufis from Pakistan said that the most important spiritual practice in the Sufi tradition is repeating God's name, which is the same as Hinduism. They repeat 'Allah'.

By the way, we had a meal together and I told the Sufis from Pakistan that every Sunday morning we not only read aloud from Hindu scriptures, but also Buddha's teachings, the Bible, Quran or Muhammad's teachings as well. This surprised them greatly, as it was quite unbelievable to them that chanting from the Quran would be held in Hindu temples. I explained to them that not only do we believe in religious harmony, but we practice it as well. They were obviously impressed and glad to hear about that.

Hindu Traditions

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Mantra [from page 2]

Next, the mantra in Hindu tradition. Chanting mantras is a very old tradition. There are long and short mantras. Long ones are Vedic mantras and the short ones are tantric mantras used for initiation. The Vedas contain lots of mantras. For instance, one chants a mantra at religious rituals as offerings to God. There are also mantras which are called Peace Mantras. There is also the Gayatri Mantra describing the nature of God. Moreover, there is a mantra which focuses on our real nature as in, 'Aham Brahmasmi' or I am Brahman.

There are many different mantra. Vedic mantras have one underlying principle such as Brahman, while tantric mantras have two, one of the Purusha and one of Prakriti, though finally merging into one. There is a mantra called bija mantra. Bija means seeds. The seeds of the banyan tree are very small, but they have the potentiality to become massive banyans. Each soul has tremendous potentiality behind it. For instance, one of Upanishads only discusses one theme; the mantra of 'Om'. What is Om? How should it be practised? What results can one get from practising it? Om is, in this case, an example of a seed mantra, or the shortest mantra. There is a bit longer mantra, comprising a bija mantra and God's name, like 'Gang Ganeshaya Namah'. 'Gang' is the seed mantra, Ganesha is the name of the deity.

No one knows who created this mantra. Actually nobody did. It exists forever. It does not disappear even at the time of destruction. Only its state changes from subtle to gross and from gross to subtle. Mantra is eternal. The mantra only appears in the heart of sages. They realised God and have achieved liberation by chanting such mantras, which they did not themselves create.

Some mantras have God's name in them. Why? Because names cannot be separated from their forms. They are part and parcel of the same phenomenon. If we think of someone's name their figure also appears in your mind. Likewise, God's name is inseparable

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from God. They are one and the same. There is a story of Sri Krishna's wives trying to weigh him. They put Sri Krishna on one side of a scale and added more and more gold to the other side, but the more gold they added the heavier Sri Krishna became. So they wrote His name on a 'Tulasi leaf' (considered holy) and replaced the gold with the leaf and the scale balanced. This story shows God's name is equal to God Himself. When we chant God's name He is listening. Even if He does not appear right away He keeps listening, as He can even hear the footsteps of an ant. We can just chant His name in a low voice or mentally and He will hear it. God and God's name is the same in terms of nature, power and quality. As God holy and pure, so also is His mantra. So one should chant the mantra with the faith that God is listening.

Words definitely have power. If I say you are clever, it makes you glad. Likewise, if I say you are crazy, it would upset you. Thus words are not mere sounds, they have inherent power. Especially the mantra, which has mystical power. All we have to do is believe and have faith in the mantra.

Types of Mantras

Mantras have different purposes. Some mantras can be used to realise secular, selfish wishes. For instance there is mantra to help become rich or get pleasurable things. Higher than these are the peace mantras, like 'Om Sahana Vavatu' which ends with 'shanti' repeated three times. The first shanti is for the peace of the presiding deities of nature, the second for ourselves and the last is for all living things. There are also ethical and spiritual mantras which help purify our mind and realise God. A mantra used for initiation has this sort of purpose.

Om is one form of mantra and is universal. In Christianity its equivalence is 'amen'. It has changed into amen. It is the source of all languages and sounds. It has three syllables: a, u and ma. 'A' is what one utters most naturally. This sound, while rolling back the tongue, becomes 'U'. We use our lips to pronounce 'Ma'. In any language these sounds are uttered in the

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Mantra [from page 3]

same way. 'A' denotes the God of creation, 'U' the God of preservation and 'Ma' the God of destruction. Also, 'A' symbolises the earth, 'U' heaven and 'Ma' the place in-between. Moreover, 'A' represents the state of being awake, 'U' of dreaming and 'Ma' of being asleep. When these three sounds make one sound Aum or Om, it represents absolute truth; turiya or transcendence. Om is holy and always used in Hindu rituals, study, prayer, etc. Different mantras start and end with Om, the holy sound.

An example of the spiritual mantra is the Gayatri Mantra, which is very famous too. It means: 'We meditate on the glorious effulgence of the Supreme Being, out of whom all this creation - the earth, heavens and beyond - has come into being. May He illumine our minds and hearts and guide our energies.'

Repeating the Mantra

Why do we have to repeat the mantra? Is it enough if you visit a shrine once a year on New Year's Day for prayer? We have a very secular mind with secular tendencies, which are mostly rajasic and tamasic with only a bit of the sattvic. We have to transform our mind and make it spiritual, which cannot be achieved overnight, but is possible if we are steadfast in our practice of repeating the mantra regularly. Thus we can imbibe spiritual vibrations and become ever more sattvic.

We are now secular minded people because we have thought of secular stuff for a long time in this life, as well as in previous lives and the whole responsibility for this is ours. If we want to change, we have to keep focusing on holy thoughts from now on. To that end, chanting mantras becomes highly effective. Chanting once in a while cannot make a deep enough impression on our secular mind. So we have to repeat mantra as much as we can. When we take initiation, our guru says one should repeat mantra at least 108 times each morning and night and we promise him to do so, and have been doing so willy nilly ever since. But that is not enough. Moreover, think about something else, like our schedule for the day or brooding on something irrelevant. This will not do. We should not only repeat during the prescribed hours but also at other times, for example, while commuting to work or cleaning our rooms. We need to repeat our mantra all the time and with focused attention.

Why is it advised to do japam 108 times? Because 108 is
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a holy number - a mystic number. 100 represents the whole, 5 the 5 elements of earth, water, fire, air and akasha. The remaining 3 are the Self, the sun and the moon. To count out 108, you can use a rosary. There are different styles of chanting. First, chant in a low voice. Second with your tongue. And finally, in your mind. The best one is chanting in our mind, as it is better not to show chanting to others. Also we can chant in that way anywhere, anytime. When we chant with our tongue, our mind might walk about thinking of different things. However, we can only concentrate and not wonder about other things when we chant in our mind. If we get distracted, we can come back soon. Group chanting is very good as it makes a holy atmosphere and we can feel it. Okay, let us chant all together. Close your eyes and chant Om ...

Japam

When should we do japam? Early in the morning, evening, at midnight, also around noon. You can do japam whenever is convenient for you. Also you can do so while walking, cleaning the room, cooking, having a bath, on the train, anytime. Doing so we can stop thinking about secular stuff and connect ourself to God. As I said, God is the same as God's name. We can make a close relationship with God and we shall feel His presence through japam.

It is often advised to japam when one is meditating. Doing japam while meditating can give greater effects. Sit with a straight back, close your eyes and chant the mantra slowly and clearly and with concentration. If we chant Ramakrishna's mantra we should visualise the image of Ramakrishna. You can do the same for Buddha, Shiva, etc. But if we meditate on God without form, we can just chant 'Om', the symbol of the Supreme Reality.

Next, we should decide on the mantra. There is a wide range of choice, like the mantra of Shiva, Vishnu, Krishna, etc. Which one should one choose? One can become easily confused. To overcome this confusion one should consult a spiritual teacher who may decide
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• Thought of the Month •

The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change.

- Carl Ransom Rogers

Mantra [from page 4]

a particular mantra for you. This mantra is generally imparted through a ceremony known as 'diksha' in the Hindu tradition and is called baptism in Christianity. If you have a guru who gives you initiation, the guru will also provide you with holy power, mystical power along with the mantra. We cannot get such power from books and CDs or by simply picking a mantra for ourselves. The mantra your guru gives to you is generally a 'siddha' mantra, which means by that by steadfast chanting one realised the Truth. Moreover, the mystic power of the mantra is devolved through a succession of gurus.

The Guru

Another benefit of receiving a mantra from the guru is that one does not have to be confused. Otherwise, one may wonder if a self-chosen mantra is the right one or even really beneficial for him. Because then if he feels he is not making any tangible progress after a couple of months he may feel like changing mantras. Then if he feels no effect after another period of time, he may change mantras yet again. However, if we get a mantra from a qualified guru, we can be free of such confusion and doubt.

Gurus are like guides. When you climb a mountain or walk in a big forest you need a guide who is familiar with the route and trekking himself. Likewise initiation from a guru who has intricate knowledge of the spiritual path is necessary. Once you get your mantra, you should never modify it by yourself. If you have any problem with your mantra, consult your guru. The real guru, however, is God. Human gurus are mediums, or conduits. Swami Ashokanandaji was the head of Ramakrishna Mission in San Francisco and gave illuminating spiritual talks. He was also a stern spiritual teacher. One day when he was angry with a disciple, the disciple, being upset about it, asked him if the guru is really angry with his disciple. Ashokanandaji said, "Human gurus are sometimes angry, but the real guru inside them, who is none other than God, is never angry. He is always loving His devotees."

Initiation

People have many hesitations or confusion about initiation. Some think they should postpone it until old age, as there is no urgency in it. Some misunderstand that they would have no freedom once they take initiation. First of all, youth is the best time. One is mentally and physically vigorous for starting any serious practice that yields great results but requires continuous practice for a long time.

Among those who take initiation, there are five types of devotee. The first type forgets about the mantra sooner or later after receiving it. Some even forget their gurus' names. One day I met someone in the countryside. When I told him I was from the Ramakrishna Mission, he said he was an initiated disciple of the Ramakrishna Mission. I asked him who his guru was and he replied, 'Bhutesha Babu', while the real name of his guru was Swami Bhuteshanandaji; but he had forgotten it! The second type of devotee takes initiation for some secular purpose, like curing a disease or for happiness in family life for example. They quit if such secular purposes are not fulfilled. The third type is not serious. They try to finish repeating the mantra as quickly as possible. The fourth type is serious but not patient. They want to practice, but cannot continue. The fifth type, the best one, is both serious and patient with faith in their heart.

Slow and Steady

It takes three years for peach and chestnut trees to bear fruit, eight years for persimmons and about fifteen for mangos. The mantra also takes a long time to produce results, but if we keep at it in a serious way, we will definitely get results. If we are steadfast in our practice we definitely get inner peace. Our heart will be purified. A better understanding of things and people will grow along with a deeper love for God. All these effects develop over time, and finally, we will proceed in the path of realisation.

By chanting the mantra, we can also stop negative and unnecessary thoughts, as well as harmful ones. When we have provocations or temptation, we may start chanting the mantra to make our mind quiet. In such cases the mantra will act like a thermostat. To be able to do japam during a crisis, we have to exercise japam all the time. Otherwise we cannot do japam when needed. Doing japam regularly makes our mind pure and helps us love God more and establish a closer relationship with Him.

One cannot suddenly achieve realisation and liberation, but needs to proceed gradually. We can get a supply of instant coffee provided we have some money, but not instant samadhi. We need to go slowly but steadily on the spiritual path and the mantra helps us tremendously in this regard. There is no high jump or long jump in spiritual life, we can only walk slowly, but steadily. That is the key to practicing our mantra or 'mantra-sadhana'. •

This talk was given in Japanese by the swami and translated into English for The Vedanta Kyokai newsletter by Ms. Satsuki Yokota.

• A Story to Remember •

One Minute Wisdom

"Is there such a thing as One Minute Wisdom?"

"There certainly is," said the Master.

"But surely one minute is too brief?"

"It is fifty-nine seconds too long."

To his puzzled disciples the Master later said, "How much time does it take to catch sight of the moon?"

"Then why all these years of spiritual endeavor?"

"Opening one's eyes may take a lifetime. Seeing is done in a flash."

The Master in these tales is not a single person. He is a Hindu Guru, a Zen Roshi, a Taoist Sage, a Jewish Rabbi, a Christian Monk, a Sufi Mystic. He is Lao-tzu, Socrates, Buddha, Jesus, Zarathustra and Mohammed. His teaching is found in the seventh century B.C. and the twentieth century A.D. His wisdom belongs to East and West alike. Do his historical antecedents really matter? History, after all, is the record of appearances, not Reality; of doctrines, not of Silence.

Story by Anthony De Mello S.J.

Pilgrimage to the Ise Grand Shrine

Story by Ms. Shanti Izumida

Translated by Ms. Satsuki Yokota





On the last weekend of November, several members of the Vedanta Society went on holiday to the Ise Grand Shrine the main seat of Amaterasu, the Sun-Goddess, the traditional presiding deity of Japan according to Shintoism. In arranging this trip, Professor Nara, Vice-President of the Society and himself a Shinto priest, kindly introduced us to Mr Atsumi of the Shrine Administration, who was thoughtful and kind in quickly answering our many questions. Mr. Atsumi introduced us to Mr Ono, a priest of the Shrine, who helped us make detailed arrangements for a total of 24 people from the Kanto area, Tajimi, Ishikawa and Mie Prefectures to visit to the Ise Grand Shrine, one of the most historical and holy places in Japan.

On November 27, one group left Zushi Centre in two van-type vehicles at 6 a.m. We had morning chanting and prayers then breakfast in the cars followed by chatting, singing, and enjoying the roadside scenery. At the Nagashima Service Area of the Ise Wangan Expressway in Mie Prefecture, we met with the friends from Tajimi in Gifu Prefecture and had lunch together. Luckily, as the traffic was not heavy, we reached Ise in Mie Prefecture and got to Geku, the outer shrine, at around 14:30 as planned. Mr Ono guided us around the shrine between 15:00 and 16:30.

After the visit, we went straight to the inn we had booked, where we had a brief meeting, read from scripture and

chanted. Actually, we had lots of difficulty booking accommodations, as the Oise Marathon took place the same weekend. However, this inn, the Kaiyohroh, managed to accommodate us all, and the staff was so helpful we could relax. We had to make detailed, special requests about food, but they provided many different sorts of delicious dishes. The inn was on Futamiura Bay so some of us enjoyed a walk along the beautiful serene beach up to the Meoto Iwa rocks early in the morning. When I saw the water reflecting with the bright light from the moon and stars against the dark blue sky, I remembered morning bathing in the Ganga at Varanasi.

The following morning, we started the day at 6:10 a.m. with chanting and reading from the Gita, as we expected heavy traffic jam and crowds due to the Oise Marathon. We visited Naiku, or the inner shrine, at 8:00 a.m. As it was quite early, the shrine in the holy morning mist and light felt like another world.

When we crossed the Uji Bridge and got to the bank of the Isuzu River running through the site, we were so impressed and excited at the amazingly beautiful maple leaves in red, orange and yellow. Swami Medhasananda took some water from the river with his hand and sprinkled it bit by bit on all of us as a blessing. We had a group picture taken here.

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Pilgrimage [from page 7]

At Kaguraden, or the hall for special prayer, we saw Kagura, or dance offered to God, for the first time. The superb music and quiet but sharp dance made a holy atmosphere and great impression on us.

At the Kotaijingu Shrine, we were allowed to go inside the fence and pray standing on the white stones, where the 14th Dalai Lama stood when he made a visit here. It is said God walks on the stones to enter the shrine. We prayed silently here for a while and outside the fence again. I felt a mystic power around the shrine. Maharaj seemed to be quietly enjoying the holy vibration throughout the visit.

For 80% of us this was our first visit to Ise Great Shrine. We listened to Mr Ono's explanation with great interest at each spot. We were also moved by the beauty of the surrounding nature. At the end of the shrine tour, we gave Mr Ono some of the books published by Nippon Vedanta Kyokai (Vedanta Society of Japan) as a token of our appreciation.

Since we made a formal visit on that day, it is also customary to be formally dressed. Although our shoes got a bit damaged due to the pebbles and some suits got a little dusty or even muddy, we were all very happy to have had

such a valuable experience. By the end of our visit, we were way behind schedule and rushed to the restaurant we had booked for lunch. As it specialised in prawns, we enjoyed massive deep-fried prawns and a delicious fisherman's soup. Afterward we walked along Okage Yokocho, a long avenue with lots of busy souvenir and snack shops, for a while and left Ise around 14:00.

On our way back home we faced in a horrible 60km-long traffic jam, but luckily it only turned out to be 25km. We passed the time chatting, dozing and, importantly, singing bhajan, especially evening bhajan and meditating. We had a short break, including dinner break, several times at service areas and finally got to Zushi Centre a bit past 23:00. I really thanked the devotee-drivers for driving all the way to and from Zushi.

We only had a short, one-night holiday, but we greatly appreciated the enjoyable and holy time we could spend with Swami. I believe I could join in this pilgrimage and enjoy it thoroughly thanks to Thakur's blessing. Also I felt that everything was at God's will, as we experienced both sudden cancellations and opportunities for participation from the first day. ●

Swami Medhasananda notes, "This report was prepared by Ms. Shanti Izumida, the organiser of the pilgrimage, who put much effort into making it smooth, fruitful and enjoyable."



Chicago to Honor Swami Vivekananda

The Telegraph, Calcutta, India
by *Basant Kumar Mohanty*

New Delhi, Nov. 20: The Indian government hopes to set up a Chair at the University of Chicago to spread the ideals of Swami Vivekananda, 117 years after the monk delivered his landmark address in the US city.

The consulate-general of India in Chicago is in touch with the university to set up the Chair, which would focus on inter-faith dialogues.

Vivekananda had delivered his speech at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago on September 11, 1893, where he introduced Hinduism as a faith that had taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance.

"Sisters and Brothers of America, it fills my heart with joy unspeakable to rise in response to the warm and cordial welcome which you have given us," Vivekananda had begun his speech. "I thank you in the name of the most ancient order of monks in the world; I thank you in the name of the mother of religions, and I thank you in the name of millions and millions of Hindu people of all classes and sects."

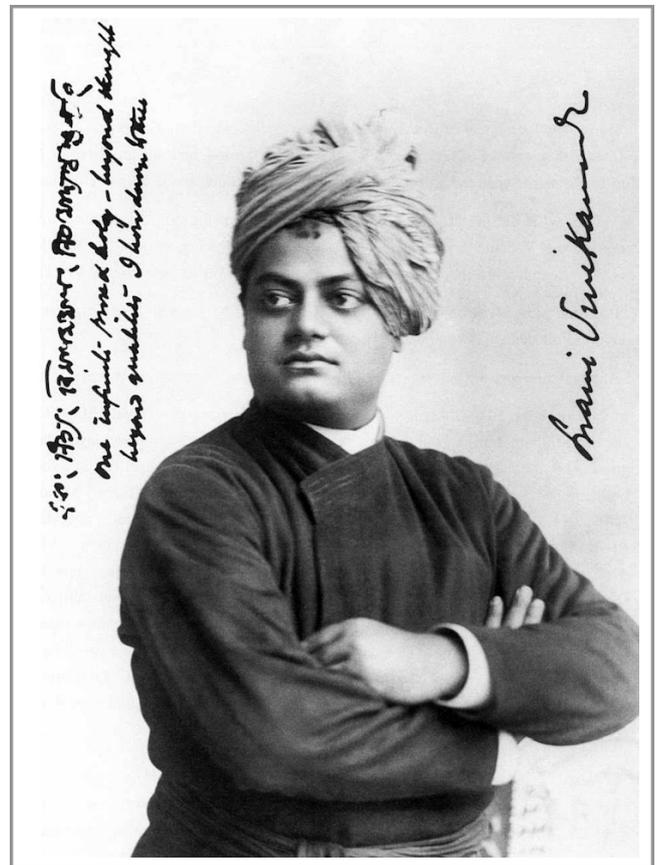
A senior official in the ministry of culture told *The Telegraph*: "Our consul-general is in dialogue with the University of Chicago on how to set up the Chair.... India may give funds through endowment for an annual Vivekananda lecture at the university also."

The proposed Chair is part of the government's plan to celebrate the 150th birth anniversary of Vivekananda.

Ministry sources said value education programmes across the country had been planned apart from a special film on the saint who was born in 1863 and died young in 1902 at the age of 39.

A national committee chaired by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and an implementation panel headed by finance minister Pranab Mukherjee will guide the execution of the programmes that would culminate in 2013-14.

The programmes, set to start within a few months, will be held across the country and abroad. Belur Math, the headquarters of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission on the banks of the Hooghly, will organise the value education programmes across the country, like seminars and youth conventions, the ministry official said.



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