



The Vedanta Kyokai

News, Updates and Miscellany from the Vedanta Society of Japan

November - December 2004

Volume 2 Number 9

Thus Spake ...

"I tell you, he who wants Him finds Him. Go and verify it in your own life. Try it for three days, try with genuine zeal, and you are sure to succeed. He finds God quickest, whose concentration and yearning are strongest."

... Sri Ramakrishna

"Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you."

... Jesus the Christ

In This Issue:

- Thus Spake ...page 1
- Monthly Calendar ...page 1
- News Briefs ...page 1
- Q&A from Mitake-san Retreat ...page 2
- Thought of the Month ...page 4
- A Trip to Canada and USA ...page 5
- Swami Attends Commonwealth Remembrance Day Ceremony ...page 8
- A Story to Remember ...page 9
- November Zushi Retreat ...page 10

News Briefs:

- At the request of devotees, Swami Medhasananda visited the northernmost island of Hokkaido to give a talk. Swami arrived in Sapporo on 22 November and returned to Tokyo on the 24th.
- Monthly talks in Tokyo at Shimbashi have resumed on the first Saturday of each month. For more information please visit: www.vedanta.jp

Monthly Calendar

• Birthdays •

Swami Subodhananda
Tuesday, November 23

Swami Vijnanananda
Thursday, November 25

Swami Premananda
Monday, December 20

• Kyokai Events •

November

November Retreat

*See story on page

December

December Retreat

Sunday, December 19 - 11a.m.
All are invited to attend.

Christmas Eve

Friday, December 24 - 7 p.m.
A one hour worship and talk on
Jesus Christ and his message.
All are invited to attend.

Mount Mitake Retreat Q&A

An interesting account, filed by Ashish Gupta, on the Mount Mitake Retreat (Aug 6-9) was presented in the last issue of The Vedanta Kyokai. We continue with his detailed reportage on the question and answer sessions following Swami Medhasananda's talks on The Holy Mother's advice regarding 'Fault Finding' given during this Retreat.

Q. If people do wrong things, go to war, then how not to find fault?

A. We will discuss this in more detail in tomorrow's session, but let me point out that the meaning of 'fault finding' is negative, destructive criticism. This is to be avoided. Positive, constructive criticism is welcome. Generally we should not find faults, but exceptions will be there.

Q. How do we differentiate between negative and positive criticism? Everybody wants a better world.

A. This is not true. People act due to different impulses. Greed, profit, self interest are also motives for both actions and criticisms. What the motive is needs to be judged. What the effect on others is needs to be judged.

Q. Is it OK for us to become like the Holy Mother - not finding faults with others?

A. Yes. Holy Mother also disciplined others. Finding faults is negative, destructive. But finding others' mistakes and helping to rectify them is positive and constructive. This needs to be done with love and concern. If a mother corrects her child or a teacher corrects a student, it is OK. Because it is done with love and concern.

Q. These ideas are easy to understand in the context of a mother or a teacher. What about in the context of work and business?

A. Good human relationships should exist between an employer and an employee. For a teacher also, if he does not care for students, he should not be a teacher. Even if an employee does not care for his employer, still the employer should care for the employee. And this loving and caring may finally rectify the situation. There is no contradiction between good human relationships and profits. One example is the Tata's in India. They are a big industrial group. They took out lots of schemes for the welfare of their employees, even though there were no government regulations which required companies to do so. And they were profitable.

Q. You mentioned about caring for other people. We live in the world and by nature are selfish. How does one increase our caring for others?

A. For this question a big answer is required. There are different possible answers. First, we can care for others from the point of view of a Humanist. This point of view says that I am a human, others are humans and so I should care for them. But the best answer is from the point of view of a Spiritualist. I am the Atman. And the same Atman which is in me, pervades this whole universe. So this concept embraces not only humans, but animals too. Another advice is to do good, but do not expect anything in return. This I answered from the perspective of Jnana Yoga. Another approach is that of a devotee. He sees God in everyone. With that idea, he embraces the whole of humanity. In Jnani and Bhakta, both have to love all, embrace all. You said that it is natural for us to be selfish. I say that being selfish in one sense is natural, in another sense it is unnatural. Because if our real nature is infinite and eternal, then the appearance of being limited and finite beings is only a superimposition because of what is called maya. So by nature, we are unselfish. And it is unnatural, from the perspective of Jnana Yoga, for us to be selfish. The whole idea of spiritual life, the whole struggle is to be as we really are.

(cont on page 3)

Mitake Q&A (from page 2)

Q. Should we try to avoid reading news related to crimes?

A. It is very difficult for crime news to have positive results. Usually the effect on us of reading such news is negative. We should try to understand the motive of newspaper companies. It is mainly profit making. Ordinary people like these types of stories. That is why with great details again and again, such stories are printed. So I think if you want to purify your mind and have a positive mind, it is better to avoid such news. Just read the title, do not read the details.

Q. What to do if a manager in a company acts inappropriately? For example, the company is involved in a wrong activity, e.g., pollution.

A. Moral rules are there. For example, no lies, no stealing. If others are doing such things and we are sure that we are not doing such things, then we can surely point it out. But be sure that we are not committing the same mistake. We need to consider the effect on other people too. If a company is involved in some manufacturing activity and is polluting the environment, the government or neighbors should generally be involved in the control of this. But if some wrong actions are being performed by a company about which others are not aware, in such a case we should object. But we cannot be sure that others will pay attention to our objections. In such a case, we may have to leave the company. Just finding faults does not mean much. You should be prepared to leave the company and/or inform the government. Here your concern is for other people. So this would not be considered fault finding.

Q. Not finding faults is one thing. But if others use harsh words with us, how not to be affected?

A. There are different cases, for example, among friends, among family members, within a company. The situations are different and so a general answer is not possible. But we can of course discuss some general principles. For example with friends, one can say frankly that your words hurt me. But the problem comes when we get angry. This is another important subject - how to control anger. It is not so easy to control anger. The way we discussed fault finding at length, similarly, discussing methods of controlling anger needs a long discussion. But to be brief, the first way is to not react immediately. It is better to allow some time to pass. Automatically, naturally, anger subsides. Then you can settle the dispute. Instant reaction leads to quarrels and other problems.

Anger, sometimes, instead of subsiding, goes on and on in our minds and effects us. It may grow into hatred, violence, vengeance. It, of course, disturbs our peace of mind. How to prevent the mind from acting in this way? Discrimination according to the path of knowledge is very effective. To think that I am not the mind, I am different from the mind. Who became angry? I am not the mind. It is the nature of the mind to be happy when somebody praises us and to be angry when somebody criticizes us. But I am not the mind. I am always peaceful and blissful. If somebody practices this type of discrimination, then it will appear automatically soon after you get angry. If you do not usually practice this, it will not come automatically.

In the case of realized souls, they never really get angry. For example, the Buddha; one person abused him a lot, but Buddha did not react. Was this because he was a stone, or he was in some way retarded? No. He said that if somebody gives you a gift and you do not accept it, to whom does it belong? So discriminate. Who becomes pleased, agitated, angry? The mind. But we are not the mind. It is not suppression of anger in a mechanical way. The positive way is discrimination.

Q. How does one develop unshakeable faith?

A. Through constant spiritual practice and, of course, the grace of God. (cont on page 4)

Mitake Q&A (from page 3)

Q. There is Jnana and there is Bhakti. Bhakti is more practical because observing the mind is not easy. Faith and surrender to God is easier. So Bhakti is superior. Is this correct understanding?

A. Yes, Bhakti is easier. But we cannot talk in the sense of inferior and superior. Even while practicing Bhakti we can use some ideas from Jnana. For example, discrimination for controlling anger. Swami Vivekananda would say - Jnana Mishr Bhakti. That is, mainly Bhakti, but some ideas of Jnana. A base of Bhakti with some mixing of Jnana is very effective. How much Jnana, what percentage, less or more? It depends upon the capacity of each aspirant. So, a spiritual teacher is needed. He will give recommendations by studying the student's capacity.

Q. Is there any specific way of praying in the Ramakrishna Mission or is any method of praying ok?

A. We pray to Sri Ramakrishna and to Sri Sarada Devi., but when we visit a Buddhist temple, we pray to the Buddha and when we visit a Church, we pray to the Christ. To us there is no contradiction in Christ, Buddha and Sri Ramakrishna because they represent the same consciousness. But for daily practice, it is advised to take up one as a spiritual ideal and pray to him.

-end-

• Thought of the Month •

An Interview with God

I dreamt I had an interview with God...

I asked, "As a parent, what are some of life's lessons you want your children to learn?"

God replied:

"To learn they cannot make anyone love them. All they can do is let themselves be loved.

To learn that it is not good to compare themselves with others.

To learn to forgive by practising forgiveness.

To learn that it only takes a few seconds to open profound wounds in those they love, and it can take many years to heal them.

To learn that a rich person is not one who has the most, but one who needs the least.

To learn that there are people who love them dearly, but simply do not yet know how to express or show their feelings.

To learn that two people can look at the same thing, and see it differently.

To learn that it is not enough that they forgive one another, but they must also forgive themselves."

"Thank you for your time," I said humbly. "Is there anything else you would like your children to know?"

God smiled and said, "Just know that I am with them – always."

- Cyberspace

A Trip to Canada and the USA

By Brahmachari Sumit

From the end of September to the middle of October, Swami Medhasanandaji and Shanti-san (Ms. Kaori Izumida) spent a wonderful few weeks traveling through parts of Eastern Canada and USA.

Accompanied by the dashing devotee Dr. Dibyendu Goswami (who supplied the spacious vehicle, gas, food, songs and endless humour during the trip), and an able driver* (who, incidentally, loves Japan and is especially fond of the devotees of the Nippon Vedanta Kyokai, all of whom he just so happens to be quite familiar with).

As soon as Swami Medhasanandaji arrived at the Vedanta Society of Toronto, the devotees in the ashram could feel the air charge up with the holiness of a new spiritual presence in their midst. Arriving on a Sunday afternoon, during the Toronto Vedanta Vidya Mandir School children's programme (where children learn about all things Indian: History, Culture, Spirituality and Values), Maharaj and Shanti-san were surrounded by eager souls who wanted to catch a glimpse of the continent-hopping sadhu and his ardent Japanese devotee.

Toronto devotees were spellbound by Maharaj's beaming personality, and magnetic charm, as well as with Shanti-san's lively laughter, and soul-stirring voice. Being introduced by Swami Kripamayanda, head of the centre, Maharaj spoke to an audience of over 60 people on a Monday evening - a surprisingly large number of people considering how busy Monday is for most people. Even though Maharaj and Shanti-san were valiantly battling the heavy fatigue of jetlag, all enjoyed Maharaj's engaging and clear talk entitled "Vedanta in Japan", followed by the lilting melodies of Shanti-san's Japanese devotional songs. Many devotees surrounded Maharaj and Shanti-san after the service and asked many questions about Japan and spirituality, all the while enjoying a sumptuous dinner of delicious Bengali food. It was a joyous event.

Many long-time devotees, who were very close to the late Revered Swami Pramathanandaji Maharaj (founder and first

president of the Vedanta Society of Toronto), were wonderstruck by the uncanny similarity between the two Swamis. Maharaj's facial features, style of speech and calm, loving demeanor recalled sensitive emotions and warm memories of Swami Pramathanandaji. The devotees were indeed very glad, and blessed, to have the opportunity to meet and spend time with such a special monk of the holy Ramakrishna Order.

Another interesting note to add; during arati on the last evening of his stay in the Toronto Centre, Maharaj sang two songs. The first song was a Bengali song "Dehi Pada Tarani". As he was singing the song, devotees sat very still as if electrified by an onrushing spiritual current. One devotee was overwhelmed with tears in her eyes and had to remove herself from the shrine. The reason for this being, the late Swami Pramathanandaji had sang that very same song, just a couple short weeks before passing away last year. It was his last public performance. Maharaj had no prior knowledge of this. He had merely selected the song because he himself liked it very much. The devotees could still feel the living presence of Swami Pramathanandaji Maharaj as Maharaj sang with a lofty devotion. The atmosphere was very solemn, soulful and special.

After Toronto, Maharaj and Shanti-san spent a few days with the magnanimous and ever-gregarious Dr. Goswami (the "Swami-on-the-Go" as he lovingly refers to himself), at his equally lovely palatial estate (which is a mini White House near the Canadian side of Niagara Falls). From there they all had a chance to visit the world famous Falls, enjoy the grand scenery of the Great Canadian landscape and take in the open-hearted generosity of their host's hospitality.

From the jolly Doctor's house, the van was packed and ready for the long, exciting road trip through major US cities on the eastern seaboard, with stops at: Providence, Boston, New York and Washington. The weather was dark and rainy as Maharaj and his three travel mates prepared themselves for the 9.5 hour drive to Providence. Dr. Goswami sat behind the wheel and drove for a few hours, deftly handling the usually difficult US Customs

(cont on page 6)

Canada and USA (from page 5)

and Immigration Officers with his debonair and astute skills of gracious diplomacy.

After hours of many wonderful bhajans (both from pre-recorded and live sources), and uplifting spiritual conversations, the party landed in picturesque Providence, Rhode Island. With lush greenery and small-town historic charm, the Vedanta Society of Providence lovingly hosted Maharaj and his clan with excellent accommodations. Swami Yogatmanandaji's (Head of the Centre) blissful child-like nature and the kindness of many devotees made everyone feel welcome and at home in the sanctuary of the comfortable ashram.

Maharaj's speaking engagement in Providence turned out to be pleasantly more demanding than expected. Since Boston is only one hour away by car, Maharaj delivered the Sunday morning talk at 11 am, then again drove back to Providence for another talk at 5 pm. It was quite exhausting for Maharaj, but he gave spirited talks in both Centres to a combined audience of over 170 people. It was remarked by a devotee that it seemed the more tired Maharaj would get, the more spirited and emphatic Maharaj's lectures would be. In addition, everyone thoroughly enjoyed Shanti-san's equally inspired singing. Many devotees were charmed by her Japanese devotional singing.

So charmed in fact that, one afternoon, when Maharaj was spending time in Boston, Swami Yogatmanandaji and a few close devotees insisted Shanti-san to sing more songs from her large collection of original compositions. So an impromptu concert was held. Shanti-san played 5 or 6 songs in the chapel to closed eyes, opened hearts and tranquil minds.

While spending time in the state of Massachusetts, some very holy places connected with Swami Vivekananda were visited: Sara Bull's house where Swamiji stayed for sometime, the room at Harvard University where Swamiji lectured, Annisquam Church where Swamiji publicly spoke for the first time (before the Chicago addresses), and the guesthouse in Annisquam where Swamiji stayed during his time there. These visits were highly

inspirational as all thoughts turned intensely Godward, captivated by the great spiritual vibration of Swami Vivekananda's highly charged and animated talks on Vedanta in America. Having a special interest in academic institutions, Swami Medhasananda was able to get only a cursory view of such world famous institutions at MIT and Boston University due to time constraints.

The party, welcomed by Swami Tyagananda, the present head, also met Revered Swami Sarvagatanandaji, a disciple of the Revered Swami Akhandanandaji, at the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society of Boston. He was the former head of both Boston and Providence centres and is now leading a retired life.

After Boston, the 4 hour trip to the "Big Apple", New York City started on a nice sunny day. It was a steady diet of more bhajans, spiritual conversations and some especially clever witticisms and a continuous flow of words of wisdom from Dr. Goswami made the trip seem much, much shorter. Some of the wise Doc's statements included: "time is timeless", "poverty of affluence" and "think twice, act once". All were intrigued and in teasing the good doctor, Maharaj had asked the driver to play the role of M. (author of The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, who recorded many notes of the Great Master's words of eternal wisdom), so that his words could be recorded as another "Kathamrita", for many to derive joy from in the future.

The drive into magnificent New York was breathtaking. As dusk was setting, the clouds shone in brilliant pink hues, and the cool blueness of the rich Manhattan skyline was leaning against the giant, all-encompassing arms of the darkening, mothering sky. Straight into the Upper West Side of Manhattan was the historic Vedanta Society of New York – founded by Swami Vivekananda himself in 1894.

The head minister, the Revered Swami Tathagatanandaji, was overjoyed to see his old Belur Vidya Mandir pupil Swami Medhasanandaji – and the latter was equally, if not more overjoyed at this blessed meeting.

Every joyous night at the Centre was spent at the feet of Revered Swami Tathagatanandaji –

(cont on page 7)

Canada and USA (from page 6)

who was filling their hearts with spiritual fervour, loving inspiration and high-souled thoughts. Along with blessings and venerable holy company, the driver also received the greatest blessing from the senior Swami – a powerful right-handed blow to the shoulder which came during a blocked attempt to touch the feet of the great sadhu. The senior Swami exclaimed, “No more of this lowly feet-touching business! Stand up! Be like Swamiji! Be strong! Be like Swamiji!” The shoulder ache lasted for a few days. It was the blessing that kept on blessing. Swami Tathagatananandaji’s love knows no bounds. (Incidentally, this reporter’s father was a student of Tathagatanandaji at Belur Vidya Mandir.)

It was an emotional shift from the Vedanta Society of New York to the Ramakrishna – Vivekananda Centre of New York. Head minister, the Revered Swami Adiswaranandaji, was equally close to Maharaj as a teacher from their days of fond recollection at Belur Vidya Mandir.

With an impressive new building expansion just completed, the Centre was shining with the sparks of novel ideas and renewed spiritual vigour. Maharaj delivered another installment of “Vedanta in Japan” for his well-prepared (and well-practiced) talk, much to the enthusiastic response of New York’s East Side devotees. A few salient points in his speech were: context being with regards to Maharaj’s initial response to Headquarters posting him to head the Vedanta Society of Japan, “it should not always be taken for granted that the orders of Belur Math and the will of Sri Ramakrishna are one and the same” – to this the audience roared with appreciation and admiration to his frankness, boldness and honesty. The swami hastened to add that to know Sri Ramakrishna’s will we have to pray to him incessantly, finally getting His answer directly or indirectly. At another point, Maharaj was recalling the fear Swami Adiswaranandaji was known to arouse in his students, as a greatly respected and deeply venerated Belur Vidya Mandir teacher. His students were quite afraid of him. And Maharaj wondered aloud, if the same could be said now in the present

day, about the Revered Swami and his devotees – to this the crowd burst into hearty spontaneous laughter that could only be interpreted as an acknowledgement of the validity of Maharaj’s intuitive statement. Shanti-san also sang a wonderful Japanese song which both the senior Swami and devotees liked very much.

The party enjoyed a lot of sightseeing in New York City that included Central Park, the Metropolitan Museum, The Juilliard School, Lincoln Center, the Statue of Liberty, etc. After a few more days in New York, Maharaj and his trusty pack of devotees raced off to the nation’s capital, Washington D.C. The road was clear and the last leg of the trip was underway as the “van of bliss” was once again summoned to deliver one more smooth, comfortable ride.

While on the road, 6pm was fast approaching, and the destination was still a ways away. Maharaj began arati “on-the-road” – singing beautiful renditions of “Khandana Bhava Bandhana”, “Om Hrim Ritam” and “Sarva Mangala Mangalye”. All sang to their hearts content. Both figuratively and literally, it was a “moving” arati. The timing was perfect as they reached the Vedanta Society of Greater Washington D.C. just as evening meditation was winding down.

Just like the Toronto Centre, of Washington’s many devotees, most are Bengalis. The group was given a very warm response by the loved and respected Swami Atmajnananandaji, the resident swami, and his respected assistant Swami Brahmarupanandaji. Just after arriving, Maharaj was entreated to sit and speak to the devotees for a short time as dinner was being prepared. Maharaj lovingly agreed, even though he was feeling quite tired. Everyone enjoyed the spontaneous satsang, fueled by the effervescent charm and jovial, loving nature of Maharaj. Mr. Shivakumar, his wife and son, who had become close to the Japan Centre during his sojourn in Japan, also came all the way from Virginia, where they now live, to meet Maharaj.

Many songs were sung – by Maharaj, by Shanti-san, by Dr. Goswami with his rich baritone voice and also by the driver. The devotees thoroughly enjoyed them all with delight and praise.

(cont on page 8)
page 7

Canada and USA (from page 7)

And of course, the major sights of Washington D.C. were seen – Capitol Hill, the White House and the various monuments and memorials. One memorable memorial was that of Franklin D. Roosevelt (a past President of the United States). His many enlightened sayings were carved into large slabs of rock, and Swami Atmajnananandaji, who is quite fond of F.D.R., stressed their strong Vedantic undertones. They echoed Swamiji's prophetic calls for strength of character, self-confidence, compassion and cultivation of peace. What wonderful Presidential words! To think of that time when the voice of America and the voice of Reason were united in boldly "[singing] high the note" of Vedanta.

It was a beautiful, thrilling, glorious, blessed, and ultimately inspiring trip. Washington D.C. was the last stop for this party, as the group was soon to split off into three different directions. Maharaj was flying off to Chicago, Shanti-san was heading back to her home in Japan, and Dr. Goswami and driver were returning back to Canada via the historic Ridgley Manor in upstate New York (where Swamiji stayed for 3 months). The trip had been a blissful experience for all - especially for Maharaj's travel companions. To be able to have the uninterrupted holy company of Maharaj, in addition to the holy visitations with many revered senior monks of the Order, spanning over a period of almost two weeks was itself a tremendous blessing and high honour. By Mother's Grace, it will leave its indelible mark on each aspiring heart; yearning, striving, reaching, to one day secure its own immortal place in the Fullness of the One Real Soul, "[knowing] thou art that...[saying] Om Tat Sat Om!"

Jai Thakur.

Editor's Notes:

Brahmachari Sumit served as driver for the party and prepared this interesting and informative report. Born of a devoted Indian family and raised in Canada, he came to Japan to teach English to children and became close to the Vedanta Society of Japan and its devotees. He later joined the Vedanta Society of Toronto as a Brahmachari.

During the afternoon session of the Zushi November Retreat, Shanti-san narrated in Japanese her own recollections of this trip. Swami Medhasananda then elaborated on the events presented in this article and continued with a brief account of his journey after this party separated as summarized below:

After the brief stay in D.C., Swami flew on to Chicago where he was met by former Japan Society friend and current resident of the USA, Mohan Kumar.

Kumar-san drove Swami from Chicago to the Chicago Centre's Ganges Retreat and from there to St. Louis, where they enjoyed meeting with Swami Chetanananda, the long-time head of the St. Louis Centre. Mr. Kumar then returned to Chicago the following morning. Swami also visited the confluence of the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers and sprinkled the waters on himself, as in Indian tradition, such river confluences are considered holy.

From St. Louis the swami flew on to Seattle for his second visit. There he was delighted to spend some time with Revered Swami Bhaskaranandaji, head of the Vedanta Society of Western Washington and long-time friend of the Japan Society, who has visited Japan on numerous occasions. Swami Medhasananda also attended the centre's annual Durga Puja, which he noted drew quite a sizable attendance. •

Notices of Note :

Beginning with the Zushi November Retreat, CD-R audio copies of the morning session are available upon request for ¥500-ea. A great way to take home some Retreat spirit.

A sizable photo-album of the construction of the new Holy Mother's House in Zushi is available online at: <http://www.vedanta.jp/hm/photo/hm08/index.html> .

Also! Micho-san has added photos of Swami Medhasananda's trip to USA and Canada at: http://www.vedanta.jp/multimedia/photo/canada_usa/index.html

Swami Attends Commonwealth Remembrance Day Ceremony

A Remembrance Day Ceremony was held at 10:30 a.m. on Sunday, November 14, at the Cross of Sacrifice in the British Section of the Commonwealth War Cemetery in Hodogaya, Yokohama. The ceremony is held to honor the memory of Commonwealth servicemen and women who fell during the two World Wars and other conflicts.

The ceremony, hosted by Australia this year, included brief statements and chanting from representatives of Protestant, Roman Catholic, Hindu, Islamic, Buddhist and Jewish faiths. The Hindu faith was represented by Swami Medhasananda of the Vedanta Society of Japan. This was followed by a two-minute silence at 11 a.m. and wreath-laying by dignitaries, veterans and civilians of represented Commonwealth nations.

The cemetery grounds were provided by the Japanese government under the terms of the War Graves Agreement at the end of the Second World War and are divided into sections, each commemorating the dead from the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and India.

Originally celebrated as Armistice Day, November 11, 1918 is remembered as the day the guns of the Western Front fell silent, heralding the end of World War I - "The war to end all wars."

• A Story to Remember •

One Man's Heaven...

There is a story of a fellow who dies and finds himself in a shimmering realm. He thinks to himself, "I guess I was better than I thought I was." He is approached by a glistening being who ushers him into a regal banquet hall in which an immense table is laid out with unimaginable delicacies. He is seated at the banquet table with many others, and a choice selection of food is served to him. As he picks up his fork, someone approaches from behind and straps a thin board to the back of his arms so he cannot bend his elbows. Trying to pick up the food, he sees that he can't get it to his mouth because he cannot maneuver his stiff arms to feed himself.

Looking about, he notices that all the other people around the table have their arms bound straight so they cannot bend them. All are grunting and groaning as they attempt to stuff the food into their mouths but they cannot reach and there is great wailing and moaning at their predicament.

Going to the being who had shown him to this place, he says, "This must be hell. But then, what is heaven?"

The glistening being shows him through the archway into another huge banquet hall in which there sits another great table, filled with the same array of foods. "Ah, this is more like it," he thinks. And sitting down at the dinner table he is about to dig in when someone comes and ties a board to the back of his arms so, once again, he cannot bend his elbows to feed himself. Lamenting that this is the same unworkable situation as hell, he looks about in dismay to notice that, at this table, there is something different occurring. Instead of people trying to force the food into their mouths, straining against the rigidity of their arms, each being is holding his arm out straight to feed the person on either side of him. Each person is feeding the person next to him.

Japanese Traditional

The November Zushi Retreat

Following up on a previous talk on 'japa-yoga', discussing the mantra; how to chant; and the effect, the topic of the morning session talk given by Swami Medhasananda during the 19 November Retreat at the Zushi Centre was on the mantra, Aum or Om.

The swami began by stating that the sound, Aum, is very holy, consisting of three principal parts and letters. Aum, associated with Hinduism, is now quite well known the world over. When any Vedic mantras or hymns are chanted, or during any ritualistic worship, one often hears this Aum. When one receives initiation from a Hindu guru or spiritual teacher, the mantra includes this Aum.

Swami then asked, "What is the definition of mantra?" He explained that in Sanskrit mantra is defined as 'mananat trayate iti', or a holy word or words that by reflection upon one can get salvation or liberation. "What is this concept of liberation?" asked the swami. "It is liberation from repeated birth and death; the source of all our sufferings." It is only revealed through our deep analysis and understanding of the experiences of our lives that this birth and death is the source, the cause, of all our sufferings. "You see, if you explain to a young boy that birth and death is the cause of all suffering, he will simply not understand. Experience of life is necessary, only from repeated blows in life does this understanding come." So in longing for liberation from this cycle of birth and death, one seeks a teacher to find the way. From scriptures and the teacher then recommends a mantra, or holy words, to be repeated. Through this repetition one can attain liberation and be free.

There are two basic mantras; the Vedic mantra and the Tantric mantra. Vedic mantras were chanted in performing sacrifices to fulfill particular desires by pleasing particular deities. Later Hinduism evolved other forms, from Vedic to

Puranic; wherein gods and goddesses with form were worshipped, and, finally, to the Tantric; wherein God is seen as the Mother that creates this universe and by whose grace one can get liberation from birth in this universe. Mantras practiced today for spiritual enlightenment and liberation are of the Tantric type. These Tantric mantras are mystic formulae; like an equation; like a seed. "As an equation, or a formula, or a seed is very small, the mantra itself is very small." he said. "Very few letters, very few words are there. When one applies a formula wonderful results come. When one plants a small seed and takes care of it, one can get a huge tree with fruits and flowers. The seed of the gigantic banyan tree in India is so tiny, yet the potential of that great tree is hidden within that little seed. In the same way, if the mantra is chanted, one's life can be transformed. One can get purity; devotion; love for others; wisdom; and, finally, one can realize oneself and realize God."

The mantra is composed of a name of God or an incarnation of God and a 'seed' mantra. There are various types or combinations of seed mantra; Aum, Hrim, Krim, but the most important of these seed mantras is Aum. Aum was not discovered, it has no origin, it is eternal. In a particular cycle of the universe, Aum may be revealed to a seer, but Aum itself is eternal. "So it is not the creation of any sage, it is the revelation of one's search." It seems that in this cycle Aum was first revealed to the Hindu sages and traveled to other parts of the world and entered into other religions with minor changes. In Christianity prayers end with Amen. In Islam chanting from scripture ends with Amin. Both of these originate in Aum and it would appear that all major religions accept the holiness, the holy vibration, of this syllable.

The swami then asked how this Aum

(cont on page 11)

Zushi Retreat (from page 10)

is formed, and explained that it comprises three sounds or phonetic letters. In Sanskrit there is a short 'ah' and 'oo' and close-lipped 'ma' sound, the corresponding English alphabet letters are 'a', 'u' and 'ma'. 'Ah' represents origin of sound in the throat; 'oo' the passage or rolling of sound through the throat; and 'ma' the end, or the lips closing off of sound, the opposite extreme of 'ah'. This represents the matrix of all sounds and alphabets. Any sound made by humans or animals are created in this way as well. Therefore, Aum is the most universal origin of all alphabets or languages. There are many words in many languages to denote God. In Japanese it is Kamisama. In India it is Bhagavan. But if one used either of these terminologies in Europe, they wouldn't understand the meaning. "There is hardly any syllable or sound that is symbolically so rich, so diverse and so profound."

"These three different sounds or letters represent three different states of consciousness. In fact, we have four states of consciousness; waking, dreaming, dreamless sleep and transcendental. Knowledge is possible through all these four stages, but during the first three states the knowledge we have is relative knowledge. Only in the fourth state is absolute knowledge attained. These first three stages correspond to the three separate sounds of 'ah' 'oo' 'ma', the fourth, or transcendental, stage is represented in the completed sound of Aum.

"Then there are four different conditions of matter," he continued. "The gross state, subtle state, the causal and, finally, the absolute. The gross are perceived thru senses. The subtle cannot be directly perceived through the senses, but they are there. The causal are still more subtle. But beyond all these states is the absolute or transcendental. While the first three stages are finite, the fourth is eternal and infinite. Again,

'ah' is the symbol of the gross state; 'oo' is the symbol of the subtle state; 'ma' is the symbol of the causal state, and finally, pronounced together, 'Aum' is the symbol of the absolute state."

In another example, the swami explained that there are three worlds; earth, heaven, and in between heaven and earth, as noted in the scriptures. Here again, 'ah' symbolizes earth; 'oo' symbolizes between earth and heaven; and 'ma' symbolizes heaven.

In yet a further example, he said that three sounds of Aum also represent creation, preservation and destruction. In any particular cycle, the universe is created, maintained or preserved, and, finally, it is destroyed or dissolved.

"These three again, represent three aspects of God. 'Ah' is Brahma; God as the creator, 'oo' is Vishnu; God as the preserver, 'ma' is Shiva; God as the destroyer. When said together is the symbol of the absolute God or Brahman, the impersonal God. "Interestingly, pronounced separately they are the symbols of the personal God, but the moment they are said together they become the symbol of the impersonal God. Finally, Aum represents the three ancient Vedas; Rig, Sama and Yajur. "

The swami gave these many examples on the meanings of Aum to enrich our understanding and appreciation for the profoundness and diversity of that which is Aum. "It also has the potential to fulfill all desires such as the curing of physical illness, giving of mental peace, and the removal of spiritual obstacles is assured by chanting Aum. It is the storehouse of all energy and power and all desires, both secular and spiritual, may be fulfilled."

"Sri Ramakrishna said that Aum is 'anahata' meaning unstruck sound. All sound must be physically initiated or

(cont on page 12)

Zushi Retreat (from page 11)

struck and this 'anahata' means unstruck or an uninterrupted, continuous and natural sound of the sphere. It originates from Brahman. At the micro-level this sound emanates from one's navel. Sri Ramakrishna asked rhetorically, 'If this sound is always with us why is it we don't hear or listen to it? Sri Ramakrishna says that the yogi whose mind is very pure and who is very advanced in spiritual practice can hear this sound.'

Swami then related a story of meeting a direct disciple of the Holy Mother, the elderly Swami Shantanandaji, at Belur Math. Swami Shantanandaji heard the sound of Aum constantly and very childlike would frankly ask others if they heard it as well. "Of course, we would always answer, 'No, Maharaj, we don't hear it.' The swami would be genuinely surprised that we could not also hear it. Sri Ramakrishna said that it was not enough to listen to that sound, but to follow it to Brahman where it originates."

In summing up the importance of Aum the swami said, "God first created this universe with the help of this sound of Aum. According to Hindu scripture this universe consists of five elements; earth, water, air, fire and ether. The first element created by the Lord was akasha, or ether, with this sound. In Christianity we find that the Lord created this universe with logos, or the word. Next, we noted how Aum is the seed mantra holding the potentiality from which spirituality can be attained. Also all other bija mantras are derived from which spirituality can be attained. Also all

other bija mantras are derived from this Aum. Then again, it is the symbol of Brahman which makes all other words attached or connected to it purified. The mantra should begin and end with Aum; it should be enveloped in Aum. The Upanishads have many references to Aum and in Swami Vivekananda's favorite, the Katha Upanishad, we find that all the goal of all the Vedas that one should attain is Aum. It is indeed Brahman. This syllable is the highest. Whoever knows the real significance of Aum, all his desires will be fulfilled. Aum is the greatest support of a person. In the Mundaka Upanishad we find is beautiful imagery: Aum is the bow; Atman is the arrow; and the target is Brahman. Meaning that with a one pointed mind, this Brahman should be hit. All spiritual practice is explained in this imagery."

"What is the effect of chanting this mantra, Aum? We can cross the ocean of suffering and be free. Aum is also called 'prahnaba', prah meaning very good, and naba meaning boat. So it is a very good, a wonderful, boat by which we can cross to the other shore of liberation. While the chanting of Aum can bring about the fulfillment of all desires, both secular and spiritual, it is only in the realization of Self that one can have eternal peace, real joy, real strength and real wisdom."

Swami ended the session by leading the congregation in the chanting of Aum. After lunch, those remaining for the afternoon session were given a tour of the new Holy Mother's House, now in the final stages of construction, before the afternoon session began. •

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