



The Vedanta Kyokai

News, Updates and Miscellany from the Vedanta Society of Japan

FEBRUARY 2005

Volume 3 Number 2

Thus Spake ...

"One should feel a yearning for God like the yearning of a man who has lost his job and is wandering from one office to another in search of work."

... Sri Ramakrishna

"Rise from dreams and loiter not. Open to truth thy mind. Practice righteousness and thou eternal bliss wilt find."

... The Buddha



The Holy Mother – Sri Sri Sarada Devi

Flowers adorn this large photo of Holy Mother in a special alcove on the upstairs landing of the new Holy Mother's House - see more great photos at our website. The Opening Ceremony story is on page 2.

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Monthly Calendar

• Birthdays •

Sri Sri Swamiji
Tuesday, February 1

Swami Brahmananda
Thursday, February 10

Swami Trigunatitananda
Saturday, February 12

Swami Adbhutananda
Thursday, February 24

• Kyokai Events •

February Retreat

Swami Vivekananda Birthday
SUNDAY - February 20
at Zushi Centre 11 a.m.
All are welcome to attend.

New Holy Mother's House - Grand Opening Ceremony

by the editor

The Day Before

I arrived at the Centre the day before the big event. As I opened the front doors and stepped in from the chilling wind and rain, it was clear that dozens of others were there as well. An excited whirl of activity and voices from all directions funneled and collected where I stood. Children chasing one another with squeals and laughter and the thud-thudding of little feet; mothers scolding from the kitchen as the pots and pans clanked and knives chopped upon cutting boards; earnest, scurrying blurs calling out, "So-and-so-san have you seen So-and-so-san?" Others, not immediately engaged in some chore, were feigning quiet reading in spaces just out of the flow of traffic both purposeful and playful. On the white-board was a two-page duty roster defining the who and what of today and tomorrow. Yes, this was to be a very big event for the Vedanta Society of Japan; the concluding celebration of Sri Sri Sarada Devi - the Holy Mother's 150th Birth Anniversary - the grand-opening ceremony of the newly completed Holy Mother's House a few blocks away.

I checked the duty roster and soon realized that there were still others over at Holy Mother's House adding the final touches in preparation for the large crowd expected there the following day. These devotees had been involved in everything from researching and selecting and purchasing furnishings, window coverings, carpeting and guest-bedding, to hanging strings of holiday lighting on the outside of the building and decorating the many slit-type windows on the ground floor with individual, little bouquets. While the upstairs rooms would comfortably house visiting ladies or families, this large hall-like room would soon be the much needed controlled-environment-warehouse facility for the Society's ever growing catalog of publications and other items - but tomorrow it would serve as shrine, meeting hall, recital stage and dining room for nearly 100 members, friends and guests.

But all this would be tomorrow. For now, in

addition to all the preparing and stacking and setting aside going on for then; there were these many volunteers and family members that would need attention, or occupation, and feeding, today. I mostly kept my distance from the kitchen. It was organized chaos; a cosmic whirlwind; a mad, living organism unfathomable to me. I paid my respects in the shrine upstairs and went from room to room greeting and observing, but making every effort to keep from being underfoot. Soon tables were arranged, food served and the mealtime prayer chanted. While all were in one place, Swami Medhasanandaji went over the planning again and clarified assignments for the remainder of this day and the morrow. The rest of the afternoon passed much as I have tried to describe above, and soon it was time for evening vespers.

Our special guest speaker for the ceremony, Revered Swami Gokulanandaji of the Delhi Mission Centre, returned from his exhaustive, daylong excursion to Tokyo. The many of earlier hours had begun leaving in groups and pairs and soon the few gentlemen who would be spending the night at the Ashram/Centre began preparing for bed. I was berthed in the dining room next to the kitchen - thankfully a silent shell of its former self. The storm, however, had shifted outdoors and shutters of the building clattered and rattled with the great gusts of wind that howled throughout the night. Exhausted, I fell off to a fitful, often interrupted sleep.

The Big Day

At 6 a.m. morning meditation and prayer was well attended with overnight and local area members arriving to participate. After breakfast a steady stream of devotees began arriving and taking up their duties. Load by load, vehicles backed down the precarious narrow drive and shuttled tables and fragrant cauldrons and various other items to Holy Mother's House where guests had begun arriving.

The winds had died down and the steady

Holy Mother's House (from page 2)

drizzle abated somewhat as some 90 people waited under the cantilevered front of the new building for the arrival of Swami Gokulanandaji for a ribbon-cutting at the door to the hall at 11 a.m. Swami Medhasananda passed out copies of Vedic chants and asked the assembled to start at his signal. One miscue brought relaxed laughter, and as the rain stopped our honoured guest arrived, the chanting began, and to a chorus of continuously blowing conch shells, the ribbon was cut. The long line of guests left shoes and umbrellas behind and filed in to be greeted by a beautiful shrine, warmth, brightness and a festive atmosphere.



Inside, Swami Gokulanandaji paused to offer flowers and arati at the shrine. Swami Medhasananda then led Swamiji upstairs where he offered prayer and a bouquet at the Holy Mother's shrine in an alcove at the foot of the landing. From there Swamiji was given a tour of the facilities; the small kitchen, the library cabinet, the large bathing and shower room, and the four rooms designed to accommodate 12 guests, before returning downstairs.

When all were seated Swami Medhasananda conducted a worship at the shrine. Afterward he made a few announcements on the day's proceedings before breaking for lunch at 12:30. People went outdoors or upstairs as tables were jostled and prepared trays were set out. The menu included dal, fish curry, shrimp curry, eggplant tempura, cottage cheese-green pea curry, fruits, Indian sweets, and more, relished by one and all.

The Meeting

Swami Medhasananda began the session with
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chanting, a Vedic song by Mr. Gupta, and a welcome to all, acknowledging participants from as far as Hokkaido to the north and Okinawa to the south and even the Philippines. Mr. Ito again served as translator as Swami then gave a brief personal and historical introduction to Swami Gokulanandaji, including their past association during Swami Medhasananda's college days and voicing his relief that Swami Gokulananda's wish to see snow in Japan had not been granted this day - to much laughter. The swami then called for a silent prayer for the many tsunami victims of December 26.

In dedicating the new building the swami gave an historical account of the site and expressed that its many associations with the beginnings of the Society and the holy company that had blessed the old house had given pause to reconstruction, but that the needs of a growing mission were paramount and the decision was made to rebuild. Mr. Takeshi Satoh, who since passed away (see Sep-Oct 2004 Kyokai), was remembered as the member/consultant which led to the introduction of architect, Mr. Shinichi Yamaguchi, who along with his wife, were presented a commemorative gift by Swami Gokulanandaji. The head of the construction firm, Mr. Noboru Takemoto, could not be present. The swami then expressed his deep thanks for the generous donations from many quarters making it possible.

Two new Japanese titles, *The Life of the Holy Mother* by Swami Nikilanandaji, translated by Takako D'Amours of Sapporo, and *The Gospel of Holy Mother*, a collection of Her conversations by disciples, translated by Mr. Masaki of Kumamoto, were released. Swami commended and thanked all who had laboured to ready these books for this day, which Swami Gokulanandaji formally presented.

(cont on page 4)



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• Thought of the Month •

*The art of simplicity is simply to simplify.
Simplicity avoids the superficial, penetrates the complex, goes to the heart of the
problem and pinpoints the key factors. Simplicity does not beat around the bush.
It does not take winding detours. It follows a straight line to the objective.
Simplicity is the shortest distance between two points.*

Holy Mother's House (from page 4)

The Address

Swami Gokulanandaji's talk was on How to Practice Holy Mother's Teachings in Everyday Life (This and other talks will be posted, in their entirety, on our revised website later this year.) In his opening comments he commended the Society on the new building and noted the way everything was "neatly decorated" and referred to Swami Vivekanandaji's comment that the Japanese "are one of the cleanliest people on earth" and added his own observation that he had tried and failed to find a littered street - to laughter.

"Material prosperity and improvement in living conditions are desirable, but they are not enough," he said. "Happiness and mental peace cannot be bought in the market. Earning money cannot be the goal of human life." Swami Gokulanandaji said that the body one day becomes ashes, so there should be no attachment to it, "Mother said, 'Always remember, the goal of human life is spiritual attainment' and, 'through repetition of the Holy Name one gets realization.'"

The swami noted that Mother advised to keep the mind engaged in work and social service, but that they should be done in a spirit of detachment and in conjunction with sincere spiritual practice. He emphasized the Mother's compassion quoting, "I am the mother of the virtuous, I am the mother of the wicked. Whosoever addresses me as mother, I am his or her mother. I am the mother of all." He continued, "So if we love Mother, we should love all people. But the fact is, we are selective. We love this; we love that; but not all. We must expand. We must love all equally."

"Our coming here today will be successful," he

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said in closing, "if we can put into practice Her last message, 'Don't see the faults of others.' And this is my prayer to Holy Mother on behalf of you all. Next time whenever you pass through Delhi, please make it a point to visit our Ashrama. I have great liking for you all. You are our own. May the blessings of Thakur, Holy Mother and Swamiji be always on us. May we lead purposeful, meaningful lives. And may we realize our own divine nature. This is my prayer on behalf of you all. Arigato."

Cultural Programme

Following Swami Gokulanandaji's talk Swami Medhasananda introduced the cultural programme with Japanese devotional songs written and performed by Ms. Kaori Izumida (Shanti-san), accompanied by Ms. Keiko Suzuki, Ms. Fukuda, and Mrs. Toshimi Ito. Mr. Takashi Masaki introduced a Japanese translation of a poem by Rabindranath Tagore, with lead vocal and guitar by his wife, Chizuko. Mr. Samudra Gupta offered his services at the keyboard as he accompanied both Ms. Ananya Karmakar and Ms. Bhaswati Ghosh who both sang beautifully.

At about 4:30 the tables came out for a tea break, the set up and dismantling going much smoother with practice. People took this opportunity to meet and talk and make purchases, as crews began the task of cleaning up. The crowd began to dwindle as dusk fell and people began returning home. Swami Medhasananda was just beginning the evening vespers and bhajans as I took my leave.

Under the darkening sky and evening chill, I looked back at Holy Mother's House; the multi-coloured lights glittering from the facade, the draped expanses of the upstairs windows, the warm glows streaming from the tall, slit-windows along the ground floor, and I felt warm inside. •

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New Year's Day Kalpataru

With twelve strokes of the clock on the night of December 31st and the solemn tolling of temple bells across Japan a new year is born. Although this moment is celebrated differently around the globe, for most people New Year's Day eventually becomes a time of personal reflection. We confront the rapid, unyielding passage of time and our shifting place within it. We contemplate all those things we did and didn't do; the commitments we kept or didn't keep; the goals we achieved or cast aside or were replaced with other matters of such urgency, yet can't quite recall; all those things that we measure our personal successes and failures by. And whether it's the comical image of Old Father Time reverting to an infant again, or just seeing the new date in big bold print on a fresh calendar, New Year's Day offers the hope and promise of renewed purpose and of replenished strength, vigor and determination.

Although it had snowed rather heavily in Tokyo the day before, January 1st was a bright, sunny day, so my best excuse for not making the trek out to Zushi and the annual New Year's Day Gathering and Pilgrimage to Daibutsu (great Buddha statue) and Hachimangu Shrine (Shinto) in Kamakura had simply evaporated. As I made my way to the subway station along icy streets I worried again about road conditions in Zushi and Kamakura, then later as I sped out of Yokohama I noticed that it had snowed very little southwest of Tokyo and I felt ashamed at the laziness and lameness of excuse making. I was going to spend the first day of this New Year with devotees and holy company, how many even have such an opportunity? Where else should I be?

Arriving at the Zushi Centre, New Year greetings in English and Japanese were shared by members and friends as we met in the halls, library, kitchen and stairways. Before noon we began gathering upstairs in the main shrine room. Swami Medhasananda gave a brief introduction and led an invocation with Vedic chants. This was followed by readings in both Japanese and English from the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, the Gospel of the Holy Mother, Lord Buddha's Message and the Bible.

Swami Medhasananda then talked on the special significance of this date for devotees of Sri Ramakrishna; why it is referred to as Prema Kalpataru Day. He began by relating one story of the kalpataru, or wish-fulfilling tree, and the woodcutter. In this story a woodcutter is laboring in the forest when he rests under a particularly shady tree wishing he had some refreshment. Instantly, fresh water appears. He longs for something to eat and, again, fresh food is at his feet. As dusk approaches he fears that tigers may be out hunting and, instantly, one appears and attacks him. "The ordinary kalpataru makes no distinction between helpful or harmful desires," he said.

Swami then retold the circumstances leading to Sri

Ramakrishna being taken to the Cossipore Garden House where it was hoped a quieter and less polluted environment would be less aggravating to his throat cancer. There on January 1, 1886, Sri Ramakrishna, feeling a little better under some new treatments, came down to the garden for a walk in the afternoon. There the 30 or so surprised devotees that had gathered all received the personal blessings of the Master and a touch. 'I bless you all,' He said. 'Be illumined!' Amazingly, at this touch each of them experienced ineffable bliss. Some saw light, some saw their Chosen Ideals, some felt a rush of spiritual power. "On this day in 1886," said Swami, "Sri Ramakrishna became the Prema Kalpataru - prema meaning love of God. No ordinary kalpataru, but the Prema Kalpataru, granting the innermost spiritual desires of the devotees."

After a brief meditation on this theme, all retired to the dining room for lunch. There was much fun and laughter then and during the rest period that followed. At 2 o'clock everyone bundled up and Swami led us the few blocks away for a preview look at the new Holy Mother's House, then in its final stages of completion. From there most continued on the 40-minute walk to the town of Kamakura, long associated with Japan's Buddhist and Shinto history. There, fresh fruits, incense and prayers were offered to the Kamakura Daibutsu, pictures were taken and, as the temple grounds were their closing, we caught a bus for Kamakura Station.

While the others continued on to the famous Hachimangu Shrine led by Swami, I took my leave of the group, thankful for my blessings and good fortune, and hopeful for a Prema Kalpataru-year ahead.

... the editor



• A Story to Remember •

A Case of Mistaken Identity

A man found an eagle's egg and put it in the nest of a barnyard hen. The eaglet hatched with the brood of chicks and grew up with them.

All his life the eagle did what the backyard chickens did, thinking he was a backyard chicken. He scratched the earth for worms and insects. He clucked and cackled. And he would thrash his wings and fly a few feet into the air.

Years passed and the eagle grew old. One day he saw a magnificent bird far above him in the cloudless sky. It glided in graceful majesty among the powerful wind currents with scarcely a beat of its strong golden wings. The old eagle looked up in awe. "Who's that?" he asked.

"That's an eagle, the king of birds," said his neighbor. "He belongs to the sky. We belong to the earth - we're chickens."

So the eagle lived and died a chicken, for that's what he thought he was.

from Soul Food



Please be sure to visit our website for many great photos and videos related to the reconstruction of Holy Mother's House and the grand-opening celebration.

Issued by: The Vedanta Society of Japan (Nippon Vedanta Kyokai)
4-18-1 Hisagi, Zushi-shi, Kanagawa-ken 249-0001 JAPAN
Phone: 81-468-73-0428 Fax: 81-468-73-0592
website: <http://www.vedanta.jp> email: info@vedanta.jp