



JUNE 2006 - VOLUME 4 NUMBER 5

# the VEDANTA *Kyokai*

NEWS, UPDATES AND MISCELLANY FROM THE VEDANTA SOCIETY OF JAPAN



## Monthly Calendar

- Kyokai Events •
- NO JUNE RETREAT
- Public Event •

**Swami Vivekananda 144th Birth Anniversary Celebration**

**Sunday, June 11, 2 p.m.**

**Toshima-Kokaido  
1-19-1 Higashi Ikebukuro,  
Toshima-ku, Tokyo**

**All, with family and friends are cordially invited.**



## ✘ Thus Spake ✘

*"Good motives, sincerity, and infinite love can conquer the world. One single soul possessed of these virtues can destroy the dark designs of millions of hypocrites and brutes." ... Swami Vivekananda*

*"Beware! Verily there is a piece of flesh in the body of man, which when good, the whole body is good; and when bad, the whole body is bad, and that is the heart."*

*... Prophet Muhammad*

## MAY RETREAT

### *Some Thoughts on the Buddha* *A talk by Swami Medhasananda*

According to the Indian lunar calendar, Buddha's birthday falls on 13 May this year, the full moon of the first month of the Indian calendar year. It is also a remarkable coincidence that Buddha both experienced nirvana and passed away on the first full moon days of those respective years as well. Not only is Gautama Buddha loved and respected by Buddhists, but Hindus, too, regard Buddha as an incarnation of God, as is Rama and Krishna, and his birthday is a national holiday in India.

Some people throughout history become famous by conquering

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### **Thoughts on the Buddha** (from page 1)

kingdoms or in leading armies in the slaying of many people. Such figures in the pages of history, however, rarely command any love or respect, nor are they sources of inspiration for future generations. Another, much rarer, kind of person becomes famous not by conquering kingdoms, but by conquering the hearts of people, by becoming sources of inspiration for mankind. This rare type of individual is not only loved and respected during his lifetime, but continues to be honored by posterity. They are the saviors of humanity. Lord Buddha was one such person.

Although he was born more than 2,500 years ago, we see how much Lord Buddha is loved, respected and worshipped even today, and the appeal of Buddha and Buddhism is still growing. This is because the lives and teachings of such great souls are universal. Therefore, not only Buddhists, but non-Buddhists as well, get inspiration from his life and teachings.

Since we more or less know the life story of Buddha and we don't have much time at our disposal, I won't go into any great detail. But it is recorded that Buddha's mother had a dream of a white elephant and a lotus entering her womb, and when she conceived Prince Siddhartha was born. He was an exceptional child of great intelligence and proficient in many subjects. What was very remarkable is that he was very meditative, thoughtful, analytical and rational even as a child as well. At the same time he had tremendous love and sympathy for others, not only for humanity, but for animal beings as well.

Later, Siddhartha was given in marriage to the beautiful Princess Gopa (also known as Princess Yasodhara). His father, King Suddhodan, arranged to make his life comfortable, luxurious and sheltered from the world outside. But when the prince witnessed death and persons of old age and others suffering from disease; when he

became familiar with the sufferings of humanity, he sought ways to overcome this suffering. He was not only thinking in terms of himself, his wife or their new-born child, but how humanity as a whole could overcome the inevitable sufferings of old age, disease and death. He understood that to find these answers he would have to renounce family, hearth and home and become a monk.

After long, hard and deep spiritual practices he finally experienced spiritual truth and realized how one could overcome these inevitable sufferings of life. Upon attaining this realization he became known as Buddha, the Awakened. Only one who has realized spiritual truth is awakened. Others, though apparently awake, are sleeping. Lord Buddha began teaching this truth, and to accomplish this he travelled a lot and made many his disciples. He founded the first monastic organization in the world. Then after a long, eventful, missionary life he passed away at eighty years of age.

Now what are the character traits of Lord Buddha? First of all, love for others, sacrifice for others, and not only for human beings, but for animal beings as well. There is the story of when Buddha offered himself to a king in exchange for the life of a goat that was about to be sacrificed in a ritual. The king was so impressed that he stopped the practice of animal sacrifices.

In India I have seen veterinary surgeons who treat animals, especially cows, but I don't believe I have come across any animal hospitals. After coming to Japan I find many animal clinics here and there, and I don't see many cows, so these are obviously for dogs and cats and other pets. I was so surprised at this arrangement for animals, which is very admirable, but of course, such services are expensive. But, back to our story, in India Buddha was so influential with kings like Ashoka in his time, that free clinics were started for the treatment of animals.

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### Thoughts on the Buddha (from page 2)

Buddha had this idea that he didn't want the final nirvana, so that he may be born again and again on this earth to remove the sufferings of humanity, this is the concept of Bodhisattwa. Though he knew very well that by taking a birth one embraces the eventual sufferings of old age and disease and death, still he chose this. Although he showed others how to escape the sufferings of rebirths, he, himself, chose to be reborn with an altruistic mission. In this we can feel the great heart of Buddha. In this connection we can remember the words of Swami Vivekananda who said: I would like to be reborn again and again, so that I can remove the sufferings of the people.

Another important feature of Buddha's teachings is that although he was influenced by the Hindu scriptures he had to study in his youth, he had his own originality. His teachings were not a carbon copy of Vedic teachings. His teachings were very rational, analytical and reflective. There is no place for ritualistic devotion in his teachings. He would say, "Do not depend on me. Do not depend on others. Be your own light."

As Swami Vivekananda would also tell others to never imitate him, but to be original. Without depending on others one should be a light unto himself. Swami Vivekananda takes the position in his teachings on Jnana Yoga that one should know that whatever replies you receive to your prayers actually come from within. If we understand the unity of the soul then what is the difference between the devotee and God, because we are all united in spirit.

As we know, Buddha was silent about the existence of God. He asked why should we bother about whether or not there is a God when we are suffering from the problems of life, and we can solve those problems irrespective of God. His approach was very pragmatic, saying that we should, instead, put our effort into

resolving these problems. Find out the reasons for your sufferings and solve them.

As we see in later days the followers of Buddha began worshipping Buddha himself as God. For most people, without such an idea of divinity, without ideas of God or an incarnation of God or a teacher whom they consider as God, it is very difficult for ordinary people to face the crises of life. So for practical purposes, Buddha became God for people. How do we reconcile Buddha's teaching to be one's own light with the later followers of Buddha? Well, there is no contradiction. One can believe in God and incarnations of God, but at the same time there is a tremendous scope for self-initiative, to create one's role in spiritual life. There is a saying in English; God helps him who helps himself. As Sri Ramakrishna said, "The wind is blowing, you must unfurl your sail." So self effort is very important in spiritual life.

Another great contribution of Buddha is that he started the first monastic organization in the world, "For the good of many people, for the happiness of many people." When Swami Vivekananda founded the Ramakrishna Mission, some would claim that Swamiji got this idea of monastic organization from the West, but this is not true. It was Buddha who first established a monastic organization. One may even say that Buddhist monasteries were the inspiration for the Catholic monastic orders that were to come later. Thus it was Buddha who was a great pioneer in the establishment of monastic organizations as well. •

### Thought of the Month

*"We do not see things as they are;  
we see things as we are."*

... Talmud

# April Retreat - Afternoon Session

## WHAT IS VEDANTA? - Q & A

*The afternoon session began with a Vedic peace prayer and reading (English and Japanese) from an excerpt by Swami Arupananda dated 5 January 1910 from 'In the Company of the Holy Mother,' a compilation of conversations with Sri Sarada Devi.*

*The assembly was rather large for an afternoon Retreat session, as many were interested to hear Swami Medhasananda's report on his trip to Greece and Italy (see The Vedanta Kyokai May Issue). Swami began by reminding everyone of the morning session topic, What is Vedanta?, and by asking whether the points he had made earlier were understood by all. A brief silence followed ...*

**Question:** Is Purusha of the Sankhya pure consciousness? How is it different from Brahman of the Vedanta?

**Swami:** Yes, Purusha is pure consciousness, free from any qualities like sattva, rajas or tamas, but it is not the same as we understand Brahman, the Supreme Reality, in Vedanta. According to the Sankhya there are two eternal principles, Parusha and Prakriti, and, again, there are many Purushas.

Vedanta, in fact, does not believe in two eternal, infinite principles, but only one, Brahman. Maya is just the power of Brahman, when Brahman, the only Reality, creates, sustains and destroys this universe. Basically, they are not two, they are one. This is the primary difference between Sankhya and Vedanta. And while Yoga, largely influenced by Sankhya, believes in God, Sankhya does not. Yoga places a lot of emphasis on discrimination and meditation as, of course, Vedanta does.

The followers of Sankhya don't believe in any God that controls; creates, sustains and dissolves the universe. In their concept there are many Purushas, souls that have been liberated, and one Purusha, is in charge for a particular cycle. When that cycle is over another Purusha steps in to take charge of the next cycle. This is how that philosophy solves the problem; with many Purusha. But Yoga believes it is Ishvara, or God, that controls every cycle and gives embodied souls the results of their Karma.

According to Vedanta, creation, preservation and destruction are all illusion, because this universe itself is illusion. Relatively speaking there is a God; relatively speaking He creates a universe; relatively speaking He maintains and destroys that universe. But from the point of absolute truth there is no universe, no creation, no maintenance, no destruction, no God as commonly believed. Hence, Vedanta accepts only Brahman as the Absolute Truth.

In Hinduism and Shintoism, there are many gods and goddesses. But when the Hindus speak of God that is in charge of creation, they mean the Supreme God. All these others are subsidiary gods and goddesses. In Vedanta there is a special term to denote that God in charge of all these cycles; creation, sustainment and destruction, it is called Hiranyagarba. So the devotees of Vishnu believe Vishnu is Hiranyagarba; the devotees of Shiva believe that Shiva is that Hiranyagarba; the devotees of Mother Kali believe that Mother Kali

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is Hiranyagarba. This Hiranyagarba would be that God believed in by the Christians and Muslims as well, God the Creator with qualities. But the idea of the Supreme Reality, or Brahman, is still higher than this concept of Hiranyagarba.

Brahman is the Absolute Reality. Even a single step lower than that, Hiranyagarba, is in the plane of Maya, it is a creation of illusion. Hiranyagarba is also relative, not eternal. In Pure Consciousness there is no quality, no creation, no cycle, nothing. That is the very special feature of Hindu philosophy, this idea of the Supreme Reality.

**Question:** Are all these ideas contained in the Vedas?

**Swami:** All these ideas are there in the Vedas, though not always in the clear terms we see in later day Vedanta Philosophy.

**Question:** I find the story of the rope and the snake very interesting. In this story is the rope Brahman?

**Swami:** Yes. The rope would represent Brahman.

**Question** (continuing): Well, Totapuri taught Vedanta to Sri Ramakrishna, correct? Sri Ramakrishna followed the schools of Vedanta, of non-dualism and dualism and soon reached the samadhi according to each school. Why would all these paths be necessary if Sri Ramakrishna had already attained to the ultimate, that highest state, when he had the vision of Mother Kali?

**Swami:** That is a very interesting question. If I understood the question correctly, Sri Ramakrishna had both experiences of Vedanta in its non-dual and dual aspects. Totapuri taught

non-dualism, or advaita, and Sri Ramakrishna attained the highest realization, or Nirvakalpa Samadhi, in that. On the other hand, Ramakrishna had already had the realization of dualism by thinking of Mother Kali as Brahman. Totapuri did not accept this dualism, this relative aspect of Brahman, as Mahamaya, or the Divine Mother who controls this universe.

The story is that Totapuri, suffering from extreme stomach pains, attempted to drown himself in the Ganga and failed. This event gave Totapuri the realization that one cannot even die unless the Mother of the Universe wills it. This is the dualism or relative aspect of Brahman, Mahamaya or Divine Mother, who controls this universe. Prior to this episode, Totapuri had only accepted the Absolute aspect of Brahman, which is non-dualism.

So the question of whether or not it is necessary to experience both aspects of Brahman is a very good one. Or said another way, isn't it enough to only experience the Absolute aspect of Brahman? Well, one's realization of Vedanta would be perfect if one were to experience all it's aspects, as Vedanta teaches three aspects of Brahman; Brahman as the only Principle, in another Brahman has a special relationship with the embodied soul, with the universe and human beings, and the third aspect is total duality, where Brahman and embodied souls are totally different.

To get the fullest idea of Vedanta, one should understand and experience all three of these aspects of one's (the embodied self) relationship with Brahman. These three schools of Vedanta originated with the need to understand and

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explain the relationship between the embodied self and the Supreme Reality.

One is Dualism; the relationship that although the jiva, the embodied self, and Brahman are consciousness, they are totally different and the jiva can never become Brahman. The embodied soul can never become the Supreme Reality, there is an eternal difference between the two. They are the devotee and God, the devotee never becoming God. Another is Qualified-non-dualism; the relationship that although the jiva can never become God, it is still a part of God. This devotee thinks he is a part of God. Non-dualism, the third aspect, and not really a relationship, is when the devotee identifies himself totally with God, there is no difference between God and himself. These are the three aspects of our relationship with God, based upon which the three philosophies have originated.

To understand Vedanta, to understand one's relationship with God, one has to realize all three of these aspects. Then one's idea of Vedanta is complete. That is why Sri Ramakrishna said it was necessary for Totapuri to understand the fullest idea of Brahman, not in the plane of consciousness only, not in the plane of Absolute only, but in the plane of the relative as well. When one comes down or returns from samadhi in the plane of the Absolute, one is in the plane of the relative, though the connection is Absolute, is never lost. Here the question of one's relationship to God arises.

When we are in the relative plane, the idea of our body is there. In the relative plane we also have physical ailments, so one has to think how he can be free from such ailments. Swami Vivekananda made a wonderful statement in a humorous way saying, "When everything is fine, I think of

Brahman, but when my stomach is in pain I pray, 'O Mother, O Mother, please help.'" When there is the feeling of suffering, there is also prayer for relief of the suffering.

Think of a forest wherein all the trees are different; one is a banyan, one is a mango, etc. From the point of view of a particular tree, one is different from all the others. In one tree there are branches and stems. Although the stem is part of the branch and the branch is part of the tree, the branches and stems are not the tree. All these together make the tree, they are parts of the tree. If we think in terms of a species, the forest is made of trees. The banyan and the mango are trees, all these are trees. They all belong to a particular class called tree.

In the same way, when we look upon ourselves as just body, then we are entirely different from God. But when we look upon ourselves as a soul in a body, then we become a part of God, because God is also spirit, just as the branch is part of the tree. When we look upon ourselves as pure consciousness, with no thought of the body at all, then we totally identify ourselves with God. This is where all the trouble begins. But these apparent contradictory positions have been beautifully reconciled in Hindu scripture.

Sri Ramakrishna gives an apt example of this reconciliation from the scriptures. When Rama, representing the Supreme Reality, asked Hanuman, his great devotee, how he looked upon him, Hanuman replied that when he looked upon him as one with a body, he sees that Rama is Lord and he is servant; Rama as God and Hanuman as devotee. He added that when he looked upon himself as Self within a body, then he sees himself as a part of Rama. When he looks upon himself as pure consciousness, with no idea of body, then he does not find any difference between Rama and himself. Another example is of water, ice and

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vapor. One cannot see water vapor, one can see but cannot grip water, but one can take hold of ice, so these are just differences in the state of water.

Sri Ramakrishna wanted all to understand the three aspects of the relationship between the spiritual aspirant and God, or the Supreme Reality. Then one's idea of Vedanta becomes complete. Totapuri was first Sri Ramakrishna's teacher and then Sri Ramakrishna became Totapuri's teacher so that Totapuri would realize the other aspects he had not, as yet, accepted or understood. •

### **A Story to Remember**

#### **That Thou Art**

When Svetaketu, at his father's bidding, had brought a ripe fruit from the banyan tree, his father said to him, "Split the fruit in two, dear son."

"Here you are. I have split it in two," he replied.

"What do you find there?"

"Innumerable tiny seeds."

"Then take one of the seeds and split it."

"I have split the seed."

"And what do you find there?"

"Why, nothing, nothing at all."

"Ah, dear son, but this great tree cannot possibly come from nothing. Even if you cannot see with your eyes that subtle something in the seed which produces this mighty form, it is present nonetheless. That is the power, that is the spirit unseen, which pervades everywhere and is all things. Have faith! That is the spirit which lies at the root of all existence, and that also art thou. 0 Svetaketu.

... Chandogya Upanishad

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