



the VEDANTA *Kyokai*

NEWS, UPDATES AND MISCELLANY FROM THE VEDANTA SOCIETY OF JAPAN



Monthly Calendar

• Birthdays •

Sri Sri Ramakrishna
Wednesday - March 1

Sri Chaitanya
Tuesday - March 14

Swami Yogananda
Sunday - March 19

• Kyokai Events •

March Retreat at Zushi
Sri Sri Ramakrishna
Birth Celebration
CD Release - Songs of the
Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna
Sunday, Mar 19th, 10:30 a.m.
All are welcome.



✧ Thus Spake ✧

"Pray to the Divine Mother, begging Her to give you unswerving love and adamant faith." ... Sri Ramakrishna

"All things, whatsoever you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive." ... The Christ

FEBRUARY RETREAT:

Swami Vivekananda - 144th Birth Anniversary

Japanese Gita Edition Released

The monthly retreat held at the Vedanta Society of Japan's Zushi Centre on February 19, celebrated both the 144th birth anniversary of Swami Vivekananda and the release of an all new publication of the Srimad Bhagavad Gita. The scheduled topic for discussion was Swami Vivekananda, the Champion of Freedom and the morning session began with vedic prayers and readings in both Japanese and English from the teachings of Swamiji.

Swami Medhasananda then formally announced the Society's release of Srimad Bhagavad Gita or Song of God. Swami noted that this important Hindu scripture comprises part of the Hindu epic, Mahabharata, and possibly follows only the Bible in the number of foreign language versions. He also discussed the significance of its message for the modern age and clarified some of the misconceptions about the Gita that have been noted by casual observers.

The swami then said that while there are at least four or five Japanese versions of the Gita in print, most were reported to be somewhat difficult to follow for various reasons.

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Champion of Freedom
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February Retreat (from page 1)

One out-of-print version, translated by Mrs. Kangyoku Tanaka, was reported to be more easily understood by modern readers and was selected as the basis from which a new translation would be made. Many Japanese had also expressed the desire to chant along with audio CD version of the Bhagavad Gita released by the Society a couple of years ago. And while there are several roman-script versions of the Gita available, a more satisfactory approach would be to employ katakana, the Japanese phonetic script. One very good version had been authored by Mr. Keishin Kimura of Yoga Niketan who graciously granted the Society permission to use this version, again, as the basic transliteration.

To pull these elements together a highly-qualified Japanese professional, a linguist well-versed in Sanskrit and Indian culture, was then needed to provide a thorough revision of the translation and the transliteration. For this task the Society's long-time friend and well-wisher, Professor Tsuyoshi Nara, was recruited.



Swami amusingly noted that since his retirement, Professor Nara has received requests for his expertise from numerous parties and although nothing, even water, is free in Japan, these requests are usually sought as favors rather than remunerated services, as was this project. Revisions took two years with the volunteer help of the professors former students and other proofreaders. With the release date scheduled for Swami Vivekananda's birth celebration at the February Zushi Retreat, some worked through the night to meet printing deadlines, including the good professor and Centre resident and layout designer, Mr. Michio Suzuki.

Professor Nara Comments

Citing the Will of the Lord and thanking Professor Nara once again for graciously accepting the task and to all those involved for performing this selfless service, Swami asked Professor Nara to offer his comments.

Addressing the congregation in both Japanese and English Prof. Nara said, "Even though human beings try very hard to accomplish something, without the blessings and grace of the Almighty, nothing will happen. This morning for example my wife and I set out early, but were delayed for nearly an hour due to a train incident, as it turned out we were a late in arriving here, but through the Lord's grace, we did arrive."

He went on to say that initially he had hoped to complete supervision of the translation and transliteration within six months, but try as he might he could not. He said that Mrs. Tanaka was a very talented and competent translator with whom he had worked many times before. Even so, he checked every sentence by translating the Sanskrit himself into Japanese and then comparing the two. He said that had he simply translated himself it may not have taken so long, but he wanted to maintain her work as much as possible.

Professor Nara also said the transliteration was much more difficult than he had anticipated. Even though he appreciated the hard work Mr. Kimura had done taking the roman script into the Japanese phonetic script, there was much that the professor felt needed correcting. He was also very thankful for the many who had contributed to the project.

Admitting that he had not really wanted to do the work, he felt he was forced to do so by God. The Lord sent Sri Ramakrishna and later sent Swami Vivekananda. Swami Vivekananda then visited Japan on his way to Chicago to address the Parliament of Religions and became world famous. "I must admit I knew nothing of Sri Ramakrishna or the Mission, but had only wanted to study an Indian language," he continued.

"Ultimately, I met three Indian students in Japan studying Japanese culture and Buddhism at Tokyo University Foreign Studies. One of them was by chance one of the first graduates of a Ramakrishna Mission College."

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A STORY TO REMEMBER

The Wages of Fear

Every year Disease paid a visit to a remote mountain kingdom with its companions Fear and Death. One year, however, Fear arrived at the gates of the kingdom some days before Disease and Death. The wise old gatekeeper, who had not known Fear for years, failed to recognize Fear and allowed it to pass without questioning.

When Disease and Death later arrived at the gate, the gatekeeper was alert and demanded, "Disease, how many victims do you intend on taking?"

"This will be a short visit, not more than 100 or so, this time," Disease said.

"Death, how many will you take?" the gatekeeper asked.

"As usual, I shall probably only take what Disease gives me."

Saddened, but powerless to keep them out, the old gatekeeper let them pass. "I expect you to keep your word."

Weeks later, Disease and Death returned and called out to the gatekeeper to open the gates and let them depart.

"Disease, how many victims did you take?" the gatekeeper asked.

"Only 99," Disease answered, "as promised."

"And Death, how many did you take?" asked the gatekeeper

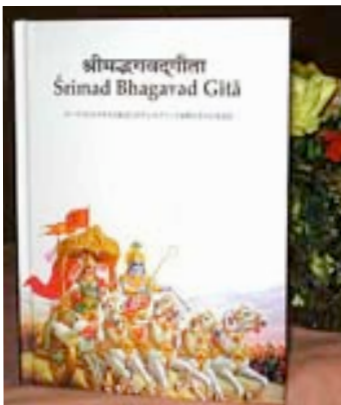
"I took over 300," Death declared.

"What? You said you'd only take what Disease brought you!" the gatekeeper cried.

"Yes," Death answered gravely, "but most of those who died were taken by Fear who entered your gates before us. Fear is yet within your walls, and I may have to return soon."

- Indonesian Folklore

February Retreat (from page 2)



"So you see it was all quite unintended on my part, it was divine providence, the will of God. I also wish to tell you that as I began translating, I felt that I was Arjuna himself, talking to Sri Krishna, and that it was a thrilling experience for me." With that Swami joked that it was time for the 'ritual' portion of the ceremony as the two laughed and posed for photos.

Vivekananda, Champion of Freedom

Swami laughed saying that he had done much homework in preparing his talk on Swami Vivekananda for today, as it is an important topic, but as there is not much time before lunch, but that perhaps less study will be needed for next year's talk. "But again", he said, "as Professor Nara just mentioned, it depends on God's will."

Srimad Bhagavad Gita - new hardcover edition

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Swami Speaks on the Universality of Vedanta in Manila

[On this 5th visit to the Philippines, 11-13 February, Swami Medhasananda held private meetings with those seeking spiritual advice and gave a two-hour talk, Vedanta, the Universal Religion, in the late afternoon of 12 February.]

THE MEANING OF VEDANTA

Swami Medhasananda began his discourse in a cheerful mood commenting about the nice warm weather of Manila, a welcome, if brief, relief from Japan's cold February. He also pointed out how Manila's climate and fruit trees reminded him of India and expressed his happiness at visiting once again.

Departing from the topics of his discourses over the past four years, he stated that today's subject would probably sound quite new to them: a new approach to religion. He invited the audience to listen carefully to the explanations regarding Vedanta, especially now that some devotees were trying to establish a Vedanta Society in the Philippines, as it is important to understand the meaning of 'Vedanta'."

"Although the concept of 'Vedanta' is probably unknown to most in the Philippines, this is not the case for many other countries, such as, for example, U.S.A. and Europe, where since a hundred years ago many people have become familiar with it. He explained that the term 'Vedanta' means 'goal of the Vedas'. It is formed by two words: 'Veda' which comes from India's ancient scriptures, and 'Anta', which means 'end' or 'goal'."

"Veda further means 'knowledge of God, or divine knowledge'. The Veda scriptures are not just a record about a particular incarnation of God, like the Bible recording the teachings of Jesus Christ, or the Koran the teachings of the Prophet Mohammed. The Vedas have no specific author; they are the result of revelation and are as eternal as the spiritual truths represented in them."

"Such truths are revealed in the hearts of sages at the birth of a universe, and when a cycle is completed and such universe is dissolved, the Vedas abandon

their gross form and assume a subtle form."

"Swami underlined to his audience that according to Hindu philosophy, the universe is not 'created' or 'destroyed' but only changes its condition from subtle to gross and then back to subtle or, in other words, it is 'projected' at the beginning and later on 'dissolved'. The universe goes through repeated cycles being projected, sustained and dissolved."

"Vedas have three portions," continued Swami. "The first portion is about rituals and it is aimed at obtaining satisfaction of desires by performing different rites, offerings and sacrifices (every religion, including Christianity, has its rituals). The second part of the Vedas is about 'mantras', or holy words, aimed at worshipping deities. The third part of the Vedas is about philosophy, knowledge and is called Upanishad."

"Vedanta philosophy is based on the Upanishad. 'Upanishad' means 'to study by sitting near a teacher' and implies that knowledge cannot be achieved through books, but only by being in the company of a teacher, who imparts such spiritual truth to his disciples.

"The age of the Vedas goes back at least five thousand years. During this long period some of the Upanishads were forgotten and lost. The remaining ones are very famous and form the basis for Vedanta philosophy."

THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN EASTERN AND WESTERN PHILOSOPHIES

Swami then called the attention of his audience to the main difference between modern Western philosophy and Indian or Eastern philosophy. While both philosophies seek the truth, Western thinkers try to reach the truth by using only the intellect or intelligence, whereas in the East and in India, truth is sought with one's whole being. Western philosophers are satisfied by intellectually understanding truth. In India and the East, truth has to be perceived, realized through one's whole being and life. So the

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Manila Talk [from page 4]

West establishes a difference between practice (equivalent to religion) and understanding (philosophy).

"For Eastern seekers, in Vedanta there is no such difference and philosophy and religion are the same, truth is pursued through both practice and understanding; truth should be realized. In the West a philosopher may be considered very much advanced intellectually irrespective of his personal life. That would not be possible in India and the East where one seeks truth through both intelligence and a pure life."

"Vedanta, the most famous of the six Indian philosophies, has strongly influenced Indian society and history for thousands of years and has allowed India to withstand many foreign invasions. While elsewhere foreign invaders completely destroyed the local religions of the countries they invaded - think of the native religions of the inhabitants of the Americas and Australia, for example - and replaced them with their own, the long invasions of Muslims and British in India did not succeed in destroying Indian culture and religion. Vedanta was the reason behind India's resilience."

VEDANTA IS UNIVERSAL

"As already mentioned Vedanta has been met with deep interest in many parts of the world, such as America, Europe and other Asian countries, where people of different religions are very fond of Vedanta and study it actively even as they maintain their original religion. Many Christians and Buddhists are doing this. Many churches in the West invite Swamis to give speeches about Vedanta for their congregations; hopefully this will happen some day also in the Philippines."

"What makes Vedanta so interesting and acceptable to intellectuals, liberal Christians, Buddhists and even Muslims is that Vedanta has a very rationalistic approach, although at some point it transcends rationalism when the issue of realization is involved."

"Vedanta is also universal. An Indian monk of the Vedanta Society of Hollywood, California, once said regarding this: 'If you gathered Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed and Krishna in the same room they

would embrace each other, but if you assembled in that room four of their respective followers, they would begin to argue and possibly fight."

Swami underlined that quarrels arise when too much importance is given to the non-essentials of religion, rather than the essence of religion. Similarly, when formalities and rituals are emphasized, rather than the spirit of religion, fights may arise.

"And what is the spirit of religion? Love for God, purity of heart, and service to others. All these are there in any religion. Vedanta gives emphasis on the spirit of religion, not on the external aspects. Vedanta does not believe that only one religion is true and produces saints, whereas other religions are not true and may not generate saints. According to Vedanta every religion is a path to God realization, this is its universality."

"Vedanta gives the following beautiful example: As different rivers flow to the ocean from different sources and merge their waters there, so people of different tendencies, various as they may appear, follow different paths, crooked or straight, all leading to God. Vedanta respects and accepts the Prophets and Incarnations of all religions. Vedanta also accepts different methods of God realization, such as devotion, selfless work and meditation."

VEDANTA FOR THE MODERN WORLD

"In today's world of fast communication and globalization Vedanta indicates how to harmonize the relationship among different cultures and religions and at the same time accepts that differences are there and should be there. Vedanta says: 'In spite of all your differences you are all united in spirit' and share 'Unity in diversity!'"

"Finally, Vedanta is very liberal and, especially, spiritual; placing realization as its first aim and not limiting itself to social activities, like some other religions do. Vedanta poses some basic questions such as: 'What is the true nature of God?' 'What is the true nature of this universe?' 'What is our true nature as human beings?' 'What is the connection among these three elements; God, universe and us?' The Upanishad imparts a very important suggestion: 'Know thyself'. Vedanta has a very special approach to all these questions."

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Manila Talk [cont from page 5]

"First of all, it teaches that one has to understand the difference between the apparent and the real, also one has to understand the difference between the relative and the absolute. We say the sky is blue, but is blue the real colour of the sky? No, blue is only the apparent colour of the sky. We look at the sun and it appears to us like a small disk, but is the sun really small? No, in reality it is extremely large."

"Copernicus, was the first to state that our planet is revolving around the sun. Until then the concept generally accepted as 'real' was that the sun revolved around the Earth. Copernicus was initially challenged for declaring a truth that disregarded the apparent and identified the real. We can easily be deceived by appearance and ignore reality. Vedanta invites us to question and discriminate our perceptions, asking ourselves whether what we perceive is real or only apparent."

"Likewise Vedanta invites us to discriminate between relative and absolute. Take as an example, life and death: on the relative plane we are born and we die, but on the absolute plane only the body is born and dies, our self, our soul is neither born nor dies."

"Basic questions posed by Vedanta include, 'What is the nature of God?' According to Vedanta God is the Supreme Reality, Pure Consciousness, in Sanskrit, Brahman. According to the scriptures God is infinite: smaller than the smallest and greater than the greatest. Interestingly, Vedanta's definition of infinity coincides with that given by science."

"God is 'Sat' 'Chit' 'Ananda', or absolute Knowledge, Existence and Bliss. This concept of the absolute, applicable to God, is opposed to that of the relative, applicable to humans."

"Human existence can last perhaps around a hundred years, but then it is bound to terminate. It is therefore a relative existence, conditioned by time and by space (a human body can only be in one place, but not somewhere else at the same time). Human knowledge is likewise limited (even Einstein, the great scientist, had knowledge limited to science, his literary talent, for instance, was not comparable to that of Shakespeare). Similarly human joy, or bliss, is relative and once again conditioned by time and other factors."

"Brahman is free from ignorance, bondage and delusion, opposite to humans. Brahman is also free from the three qualities that are always present in humans, in different combinations: sattva, the quality that reveals and induces balance and quiet; rajasa, the quality that binds us through activity; and tamasa, inducing indolence and inertia, a destructive quality."

"According to Vedanta our own consciousness is possible through the consciousness of Brahman, in the same way as His consciousness allows the universe and all natural phenomena (such as the sun, light, water, etc.) to exist and operate. As the moon 'borrows' its light from the sun, so the consciousness of the human beings is a reflection of Brahman's consciousness."

"The scriptures say: 'It is not that God is in everything: God is everything.' But how can Brahman, pure consciousness, something so subtle, create a universe so material? A banyan is a huge tree. A teacher once instructed his student to break the small fruit of the huge banyan tree in two. The teacher then asked the student if he saw anything inside. 'Only seeds, Sir', was the student's answer. At that the teacher instructed his student to take one seed, break it and tell what he saw. The student answered that he saw nothing. But the teacher explained that inside the very small seed of that enormous banyan tree there was the subtle essence of the tree itself."

"Why can we not see Brahman in the universe? 'Name' and 'form' are the elements that give us the impression of differences between objects or between human beings. If we managed to remove name and form then we would be able to see the underlying same consciousness permeating everything and everyone: Brahman. One example is that the differences between golden ornaments such as earrings, nose-rings, necklaces and bracelets is only the result of the shape and name of such ornaments. If a goldsmith melts them then the underlying essence of these ornaments will result in gold."

"So the method to find Brahman is in analyzing and eliminating names and forms. Going back to Vedanta's basic question of what is the true nature of ourselves, human beings, apply this same method of analysis, elimination, and discrimination. If we do that we finally find out that we are not the body, we

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Manila Talk [from page 6]

are not the vital energy, senses, mind, intellect, ego; we are pure consciousness. Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is within you." His words did not refer to the body, but to the spirit."

THE SELF AND THE SUPREME REALITY

"In conclusion Vedanta believes in the oneness of existence: the Supreme Reality that exists in the universe also exists in our selves. So the answer to the questions about the true nature of God, the universe, us and what the connections among them are, is that we are all united in spirit, pure consciousness. Why do we not understand this?"

"Vedanta believes that we all experience every day three stages: waking stage, dreaming stage and dreamless sleep. There is however a fourth stage called Turiya or knowledge, realization, eternal awakening. According to Vedanta the waking and dreaming states are equivalent, because during the waking state we are deluded by wrong perceptions of the apparent and the relative. By reaching the Turiya state, through spiritual practice, we then realize that our present waking state is a dream in reality, and that we attain to wisdom, freedom, perfection or, in other words, we reach heaven in this life."

"There are three steps to achieve the state of Turiya. First we must listen to spiritual truth, our true nature being pure consciousness. Secondly, we have to reason about it, to apply our thinking, questioning and analysing so that we can become intellectually convinced about it. In the third step is to practice it, through meditation (by pointing our mind towards the spiritual truth in the same way as an arrow is aimed at a target) and through negation/affirmation - denying our identification with body, mind, ego, etc., and identifying ourselves with pure consciousness."

"Finally, the question of why we forget that we are pure consciousness arises. According to Vedanta, Maya, or spiritual ignorance, is the reason and from that comes our suffering. Vedanta has a classic example to explain this spiritual ignorance, the example of the snake and the rope: A farmer was walking down a village path at dusk, when it was almost dark. He saw a snake in front of him, became scared and started shouting for help. Some villagers came with a lantern and sticks to kill the snake, but when they projected the lantern's light onto the snake they could see it was only a piece of rope lying on the path, not a snake. In this example the farmer's fear was generated by ignorance, a wrong perception

of reality: the rope had always been a rope, but was perceived as a snake. Similarly, we are pure consciousness, but, out of ignorance and wrong perception of reality, we identify ourselves with the body and mind."

"One may ask at what point and how one became subject to the spell of Maya and forgetful of one's own perfect, pure nature. Vedanta's answer to that question is that the question itself is irrelevant: the problem is not so much identifying at what point one became subject to Maya, but rather how to get out of that spell and avoid the suffering that Maya causes."

"Here is an example given by the Buddha: Suppose an arrow pierces your body, what is your priority: ask yourself who shot the arrow and why and how and from where? No, your first priority is to remove the arrow from your body and get medical treatment, your first priority is to take care of the suffering. So, though it is a pertinent question at what point Maya cast its spell on us, Vedanta does not give a clear answer, but urges us to direct our efforts towards escaping the spell and terminating the suffering through spiritual practice." •

[Contributed by Enrico Colombo in Manila]

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He went on to say that the subject Swami Vivekananda, the Champion of Freedom, encompasses many ideas. And although the word champion is used in Japanese now, this word also encompasses other meanings, such as being an advocate, of liking, practicing and pursuing something. "There are also many kinds of freedom; political freedom, economic freedom, social freedom, freedom of speech, press, judiciary, women's liberation, but the real freedom that all these freedoms lead to - that gives direction to these other freedoms, is freedom of mind and freedom of soul."

"Swami Vivekananda was a protagonist of that freedom of the mind and the soul in his own life and in his teachings, and cherished the idea that all should experience that freedom. What we mean by this is freedom from attachment, freedom from secular desires, freedom from delusion, freedom from ignorance; freedom from the impulses of greed, anger, fear, hatred, vanity and pride - to become aware of the true nature of one's soul."

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"This is mental and spiritual freedom and Swamiji said that freedom of mind and soul is our birthright. Everyone, even an ant, is heading, consciously or unconsciously for that freedom. No one is actually fond of bondage, and unless you have freedom, you cannot really have love or joy. In today's reading it is said the love we commonly experience is that of a slave, real love is not possible without freedom. If there is no real freedom, there is no real love, no real fraternity, no real equality, no real rationality, no real knowledge.

Modern civilization and the French Revolution all highlighted four things; liberty, equality, fraternity and rationalism that leads to knowledge. But these are based upon a fragmented idea of humanity. In the name of establishing liberty and equality in many places we see so much bloodshed, because these ideals are not based on something universal."

"The universal aspect of these ideals is the idea of Self. This Self includes universal love, freedom, equality and rationalism. If we place our emphasis on the ideal of Self, we will inherit the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity in a natural way. This is why Swami Vivekananda always placed emphasis on the idea of Self, because it brings us real freedom."

"The following reveal how Swamiji was free from orthodoxy, attachment, delusion and petty things like jealousy. Once Swamiji's Irish disciple, Sister Nivedita (Margaret Elizabeth Noble), wrote a letter to him charging that he was jealous of her famous new-found Indian friends, like Rabindranath Tagore. In response Swamiji answered, 'Margot, know once for all that whatever vices I may have, I am never

jealous.' Swami Turiyananda asked how Swamiji could be jealous, because a man can only be jealous of his equals or his superiors. 'Was there anyone even equal to Vivekananda?' he concluded. Though one may doubt this explanation, on a higher philosophical level, such as given in the Gita; if one sees everyone in himself and himself in everyone, how can such a man be jealous of others? He sees the same Self in everyone. One certainly cannot be jealous of oneself, seeing that same entity in everyone."

"In another example we see he was free from temptation. In the prime of his youth, preaching in America, Swamiji was a striking figure of a man and some western lady devotees sought to caution him of the disguised motives of some women. Swamiji assured them not to worry and gave a concrete example. He said that as an invited guest at palaces of India, the prince or king would often assign a very beautiful maid servant to fan him throughout the night. He assured these devotees that he knew temptation and not to worry about him."

"Swamiji was free of those weaknesses and delusions that cause trouble for others. He was free from all bondage. That great Mahamaya seeks to bind us always with the rope of attachments and desires. Speaking of Swamiji, the great actor and dramatist, Girish Chandra Gosh, a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, said that even Mahamaya did not have enough rope to bind the infiniteness of Swami Vivekananda. Something must be of a length or breadth, must have some finite limitation, to be bound. Swami Vivekananda was spiritually infinite and beyond the bondage suffered by ordinary people."



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"On a visit to Amarnath in the Himalayas, Swamiji received the boon from Shiva that he may decide his own time of death. Before his passing he asked a puzzled attendant for an Almanac, checked some dates, and returned it. Swamiji liked the idea of American independence and had once written a poem to the 4th of July. It was later learned that Swamiji had chosen that 4th of July from the Almanac to leave the body."

"We see that Swamiji was indeed the champion of freedom in every aspect of the word champion and in the ultimate meaning of freedom." •

• THOUGHT OF THE MONTH •

"Reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one." ... Albert Einstein

Memorial Meeting for Mr. Sumitra Rao

FOUNDER/FIRST SECRETARY OF JAPAN SOCIETY PASSES AWAY ON VISIT TO INDIA

The afternoon session of the February Retreat was dedicated to a memorial service for one of the founders and first General Secretary of the Vedanta Society of Japan, Mr. Sumitra Rao. He was 90 years old. He had passed away on the 5th of February in hospital in Bangalore while on a visit.

Swami Medhasananda noted that Bangalore was Mr. Rao's favorite city and that it was curious that he should pass away there. Suddenly feeling poorly, he checked into hospital and shortly thereafter suffered a massive heart attack that proved fatal. Swami pointed out that it was again a curious and appropriate that such a fervent proponent of Swami Vivekananda and his teachings be honored by the Society on a day dedicated to Swami Vivekananda's birth anniversary.

Brief eulogies and reminiscences were given by the current Secretary, Mr. Masanobu Osonoi, Mr. Sakae Machida, Professor Nara, and Mr. Rao's son, Mr. Sachchidananda Noma. The atmosphere lightened when Professor Nara diplomatically noted that he remembered Mr. Rao as a man who "strongly held to his principles", someone then said "ardent", and the room broke into fond laughter when his son suggested "stubborn". Mr. Rao will be missed by all who knew him.

[For more on the founding of the Vedanta Society of Japan and Mr. Rao's invaluable contributions to the Society, please visit the "About" pages on our website at www.vedanta.jp]

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