



the VEDANTA *Kyokai*

NEWS, UPDATES AND MISCELLANY FROM THE VEDANTA SOCIETY OF JAPAN



Monthly Calendar

• Birthdays •

Shankaracharya
Tuesday, May 2, 2006

Buddhadev
Saturday, May 13 2006

• Kyokai Events •

**May Retreat Zushi
Gautama Buddha
Birth Anniversary**
Sunday, May 21st, 10:30 a.m.
All are welcome.
~~~~~

## ✧ Thus Spake ✧

*"The darkness of centuries is dispersed as soon as a light is brought into a room. The accumulated sins of countless lives vanish by a single glance of God." ... Sri Ramakrishna*

*"Whoso in this world, overcomes this base unruly craving, from him sorrows fall away like water-drops from a lotus leaf." ... The Buddha*

### APRIL RETREAT: MORNING SESSION

## What is Vedanta?

### What are Vedanta Societies?

Around the world we are known as Vedanta Society centres, while in India we are known as Ramakrishna Mission centres. This can cause some confusion, especially when Indians travel abroad and inquire about local Ramakrishna Missions, as even some Indian embassy staffers do not realize that local Vedanta Societies and Ramakrishna Missions are one and the same. The justification for these dual identities being that it was decided that outside of India more emphasis should be placed on the principles and philosophy of Hinduism than on personalities; a particular incarnation, prophet or saint. "There is no contradiction here," said Swami Medhasananda, "as we see the very embodiment of Vedanta in Sri Ramakrishna."

(cont on page 2)

## In This Issue

- |                                                 |                                                           |
|-------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| • Thus Spake ... page 1                         | • Thought of the Month ... page 5                         |
| • Monthly Calendar ... page 1                   | • Swami Narrates Trip to Greece and Italy ... page 6      |
| • April Retreat - What is Vedanta? ... page 1   | • A Detailed Account of Swami's Trip to Italy ... page 10 |
| • Dhyanam Reviewed in Global Vedanta ... page 5 | • A Story to Remember ... page 14                         |

## WHAT IS VEDANTA?

(from page 1)

While many may have heard of Hinduism and have some idea, few outside of India are familiar with the term and it is quite important for devotees, friends and visitors, alike, of these centres to understand the meaning of Vedanta. If one is asked by a friend, 'What is this Vedanta Society?', one should have a clear idea.

"In one sense, this Vedanta is very easy, and in another it is very difficult," said Swami. He went on to describe a Sanskrit poetic form known as a sloka consisting of two lines of 16 syllables. He said Vedanta is so easy to describe that the great philosopher Shankara is said to have summed up its essence in only one line, but the moment one tries to lead a Vedantic life one begins to realize just how deep the waters are. "Yet even though this practice can be difficult," he continued, "to the extent that one practices, to that extent one realizes peace and joy and enlightenment. And to that extent one's life is transformed."

### What are Vedas?

"Firstly, it must be understood that the Vedas do not only encompass those spiritual truths that Hindu saints and sages realized, but anywhere in the world, whoever realized spiritual truths, those spiritual truths, too, are also Vedas. In this sense then the spiritual truths found in Buddhist scripture, the Bible and Qur'an, and can also be called Vedas."

"These Vedas, as evoked in India,

have two parts; a ritualistic portion and a knowledge portion. The ritualistic portion describe various sacrifices whose aim it is to get enjoyment, not only in this world, but in heaven. Practitioners aspire even to the more intense enjoyments of heaven. These are generally sense enjoyments, and are enjoyed in heaven in a subtle way. So the soul ascends to heaven with the senses, without a gross body of flesh and blood, to enjoy. You may ask, without a physical body, how does one enjoy physical senses? Well, one experiences many sights, sounds and such in dreams without any physical proximity to these objects, yet we experience intense joy and intense fear."

"On the other hand, the knowledge portion of the Vedas tell us that even heaven is not eternal. So should the karma of various sacrifices allow one to enter into this heaven, the effects of that karma do eventually wear away or come to an end and one must again come back to this life in a body. There is no end to this birth and death. Again on this earth you do something and get another birth to either enjoy or suffer. As long as you have desire and you enjoy and you work, there is no end to birth and death. As long as one has desires, there is no end to birth and death and its sufferings. This is the analysis of the protagonists of the knowledge portion. To find eternal peace and joy one must seek an end to this repeated birth and death through various approaches to rid one of desire. The goal is called liberation and emancipation, freedom from this cycle."

"These spiritual truths are described in the Upanishads, and based on these Upanishads a philosophy has been formulated known as Vedanta. Literally meaning, Veda plus anta, or the culmination of or the essence of the Vedas. The sage Badarayana was the major proponent of this philosophy and author of the Brahma Sutras based on the Upanishads. It should also be understood that it is this Vedanta philosophy that enabled Hinduism to survive throughout the ages and to resist the onslaughts of Islam and, later on, Christianity. In this modern age we find that Vedanta is even becoming more popular, not only surviving in India, but spreading throughout the world. The reason for this is that Vedanta is deeply spiritual, rationalistic, comprehensive and universal."

### Philosophical Arguments

"One should try to follow the philosophical arguments of Vedanta in order to better understand what Vedanta is. First of all, Vedanta questions the perceptions of this universe that we glean based upon information received through our senses. Are these always dependable and true? Is this world as it appears? For example, we tend to believe what we see is true. We see the sky is blue. Poets speak of blue skies as good and happy times. Yet we know there is really no such thing as 'sky' and we know it is not 'blue'. The moon appears so beautiful and we enjoy moonlight. Poets compare a loved one's face to the beauty of the moon. Had the poet ever gone to the moon, I am certain he would not compare

(cont page 3)

## WHAT IS VEDANTA?

(from page 2)

his beloved's face to the crater-pocked moon. Again, we know is a thing called moonlight, but does the moon have any light? It is but borrowed or reflected light. These are examples that appearance and reality are different. Vedanta asks that we not take for granted that what we see is true."

"Then there are relative truths and absolute truths. The sun photographed from various distances are relative representations of the sun. The photos of the sun are relative suns, while the actual sun is absolute. Vedanta asks us to apply these principles and ask whether our ideas about ourselves, this universe and God are relative or absolute truths.

"We must ask if it is real or unreal and whether is it relative or absolute. This is the philosophical inquiry required by Vedanta."

### **No Compromise**

"This is the real search for the truth and here Vedanta makes no compromise with our sentiments, our traditions or our religion. Vedanta is uncompromising in that search for truth, and to follow Vedanta one must not compromise with any illusion or untruth. Vedanta is for the courageous. One who is weak in body and mind, intellect and emotion can never realize the spiritual truth of Vedanta. Vedanta encourages us to 'Know Thyself'. We have a body and a mind and intelligence and Vedanta asks us to examine if we are really these. Are you really

just this gross body? Are you really just the senses, the mind, the vital energy, the ego, or something else? Begin your inquiry here."

"Turn these questions to the universe as well. Is it really as you see it, as it appears? Are these stars and galaxies naturally occurring phenomena? Do these plant and animal life-forms represent the real nature of the universe, or is there something else, something deeper?"

### **The True Nature of God**

"Again, is God just some picture or image or some bearded fellow in the sky? According to Vedanta, God is the Supreme Reality known in Sanskrit as Brahman. This Supreme Reality is absolute existence, absolute knowledge and absolute bliss. It is smaller than the smallest of what we can perceive; It is greater than the greatest that we can perceive. It is eternal. It is infinite. It is universal."

"What is meant by absolute existence, knowledge and bliss? And what, then, is relative existence, knowledge and bliss? I just returned from a visit to Greece and Rome and saw many old structures, say 1000 years old. 2000 years before they did not exist, and 2000 years from now, there is every evidence that through forces of nature mostly these same structures will not exist. This is what is called relative existence. Something that was there, but no longer exists, or something that is there, but will not exist, all conditioned by time and space; this is relative existence. When I was in Greece,

I could not be in Japan at the same time. I am conditioned by time and space; limited by location and time, this is relative existence. The Supreme Reality, Brahman, by contrast, is everywhere in all time."

"In the same way our knowledge is limited or relative; someone's intelligence greater or lesser than another's. Think of Einstein, the great scientist and accomplished violinist, did he also write great poetry? Was Shakespeare also an inventor of machines? This is all limited knowledge. Bliss is joy. We get joy on certain occasions, but soon we understand that this joy is short-lived. Brahman is absolute bliss, joy without beginning or end. Brahman is without birth or death, eternal. Brahman eternally free, Brahman has not acquired freedom. We are bound and we acquire freedom. Our freedom is not eternal. Brahman is ever free; free from illusion and delusion; free from imperfection, eternally perfect. Even the saints acquire perfection, but Brahman is eternally perfect; free from the qualities of sattva, rajas and tamas. Brahman is the substratum of the universe. As the Sun lends its light to the Moon, Brahman lends His consciousness to human beings and animal beings, His existence to the Earth and the Sun and the galaxies, and we become conscious. This is the nature of Brahman, the Supreme Reality."

### **Brahman and the Universe**

"Brahman created this universe and entered into it. An example of this has been given in Hindu

(cont page 4)

## WHAT IS VEDANTA?

(from page 3)

scripture: As the spider creates a web out of itself, enters into it and lives within it, in the same way, Brahman created this universe, entered into it, and lives in it. Shankara says this is why although all things are apparently different; man, woman, plant, animal, stone, earth, moon, all are actually nothing but Brahman. The universe as it appears is just an illusion."

"As referred to earlier, when Shankara summed up the Vedanta philosophy in half a sloka, he said:

'Brahman is the only reality,

This universe, as it appears, is only illusion. Jiva (the embodied self) is none, but Brahman.'

"Vedanta says that whatever you see, everything, is only Brahman. Why we see things as being different is the because of name, form, action and quality. Vedanta further reduces these to name and form. Name and form is just relative, apparent, short-lived. If we eliminate the differences of name and form, that which is temporary, relative and apparent, what is left is the substratum of this universe, Brahman. As a concrete example, take a gold ring, a gold bracelet and gold earrings. What makes them different? Melt them down and they are all gold, the difference is name and form and use. In the same way, because of our name and form and works or actions, we appear to be different. But we are all Brahman."

"Or take the Yuki Matsuri, the

Snow Festival, in Sapporo, Hokkaido. There along the central parkway, artists form buildings and animals and many beautiful renderings out of ice. We say, 'Look at that beautiful house.' 'Look at those animals.' But they are all made of ice, of snow. The Upanishads give many such examples of things made of lumps of clay, of stone or of iron, the differences only in name and form; which is but short-lived; which is but relative; which is but apparent."

"There is a story to illustrate how Brahman pervades this universe. A teacher, when asked by his disciple to explain this further, told the student to put salt in a bucket of water and bring it the following day. The next day the teacher asked if the student could see the salt. "No," was the reply. "Taste the water from the top," said the teacher. "How does it taste?" "Salty," was the reply. "Now taste some water from the middle of the bucket. How does that taste?" Again it was salty. "And from the bottom?" "Salty," said the student. We can't see the salt, but it is there. In the same way, we can't see Brahman, but He is there."

### **Our Relationship to Brahman**

"Vedanta says that although it appears that I am body, I have mind, I have vital energy, I have ego, in reality we are only consciousness, we are only Brahman. Our real nature is just like Brahman, absolute knowledge, absolute existence, absolute bliss. All these; body, mind, vital energy, are short-lived. Our real nature is Atman, soul, which is eternal, infinite,

universal, perfect, pure."

"Why don't we experience this? Vedanta says that we do experience it everyday, unconsciously, involuntarily. There are four stages of our consciousness; waking, dreaming sleep, dreamless sleep and pure or supra-consciousness. In the third stage, in dreamless sleep, when there is no function of mind or ego, nothing, we are involuntarily in closest proximity with the pure Atman, pure consciousness. Because this happens involuntarily, unconsciously, there is no effect on our character, there is no transformation of our life. If, however, through spiritual practice and conscious effort, we can realize that Atman, in the fourth stage of existence, supra-consciousness, it totally transforms our character. We are transformed. We become a saint, a realized soul. This state is known as Jivanmukta, liberated while still in the body."

"What prevents us from realizing Brahman while in the three lower stages of consciousness? According to Vedanta, it is because of Maya, or illusion. It is due to spiritual ignorance. Think of the magician and his magic. The magician creates such an illusion that we cannot see the trick, only the illusion. In the same way, that Great Magician shows us only illusions, so that even in our so-called waking state we are fooled and deluded. We are always watching the show without understanding that we are being fooled and deluded, our love and tears and fighting, whatever."

(cont page 6)

*The following "Compact Disk Review" appeared in the Winter 2005-2006 issue of Global Vedanta.*  
(Subscriptions available at: <http://www.vedanta-seattle.org/pages/globalvedanta.html>)

## DHYĀNAM

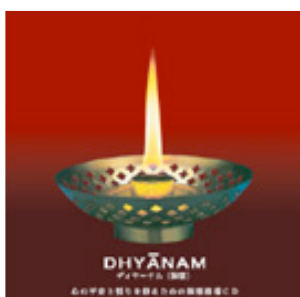
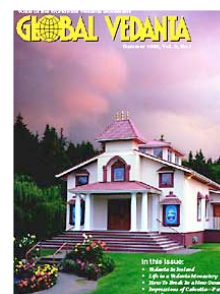
Hindu Guided Meditations for Peace and Enlightenment

Compact Disk: \$12.00

Produced by Swami Medhasananda

Vedanta Society of Japan

Reviewed by Allen Freeman



Once, long ago, I observed a person in a meditation group swaying back and forth so vigorously while "meditating" that those sitting on either side of him were almost bumped off their seats. This simple error in technique would not have occurred had the group been following the clear instructions on this new CD: after guiding the aspirant into the proper sitting position the swami says "Remain still and don't move any part of your body."

Swami Medhasananda, head of the Nippon Vedanta Kyokai (Vedanta Society of Japan), has produced a very unusual, hauntingly beautiful and undoubtedly useful volume on compact disk. In it we find some well performed hymns and chants, clear instructions from the swami (not only on what to do physically while attempting to meditate, but also guides as to the mental processes necessary for successful meditation), chanting on OM, breathing exercises, etc.

The volume is divided into two parts. The first provides guided meditation through Bhakti Yoga (the path of devotion). Here there is much reference to God and the meditator visualizes God as "sitting in the lotus of your heart." The second part is for aspirants wishing to meditate through Jnana Yoga (the path of knowledge). There is no mention of "God" here, but one learns about Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute, Pure Consciousness, Brahman, etc. Track 10 from this part lasts 23 minutes and can be listened to as a sort of meditative lecture covering many of the essential parts of Jnana Yoga.

The volume is designed so that those with the technical capabilities can program only the tracks they wish to hear. For instance, they may wish to program several repetitions of the meditation track (no instructions here, only the sound of a drone instruments) in order to lengthen the period of meditation. Likewise, they may wish to add time to the breathing exercises.

Dhyānam should prove useful for many wishing to practice meditation. •

### • Thought of the Month •

"Go to your bosom: Knock there, and ask your heart what it doth know."

... William Shakespeare

## WHAT IS VEDANTA?

(from page 3)

### Process of De-superimposition

"Our struggle is to rid ourselves of this spiritual ignorance, this Maya. To get rid of Maya, we have to understand how Maya works. Maya acts in two ways. First it covers the truth, the real nature of Brahman, then it superimposes or shows us something else, which is untrue, illusion. Vedanta gives the classical example of the snake and the rope. In darkness a rope is mistaken for a snake. First Maya covers the real nature of the rope with darkness. Maya then projects something different, super-imposes snake on the rope, super-imposes unreal on the real. Maya covers our real nature, which is Brahman; then projects that we are body, super-imposes that we are body over Atman. In the same way, everything in the universe is covered. Brahman is covered and this universe is projected. We have to go through a process of de-superimposition. We have to de-hypnotize ourselves."

"This process starts by hearing; listening to spiritual truth and reading about this truth again and again from a qualified spiritual teacher. I am not the body, I am Brahman. We are so identified with the body, that unless we listen again and again, and again and again, that de-superimposition is not possible. When we bring the light of a lamp on that snake and see that it is rope, still there is fear, our heart palpitates and we repeat, it is not a snake, it is not a snake. Slowly we get calm. In a much deeper and intense way we identify with our body. I am a man. I am a woman. I am Japanese. I am so and so. My family is, my wife is, my husband is, my children are, and on and on. All this is just super-imposition. We must hear truth again and again. 'Tat Twam Asi', Thou Art That, and we have to realize 'Aham Brahmasmi', I am Brahman. The next step is intellectually understanding that spiritual truth. The next step is meditating on that truth which you have heard and understood from the guru, the teacher. Go deeper. Meditate on that truth which you have understood intellectually."

"This is also known in Vedanta as a process of negation. Neti, neti, neti. Not this, not this, not this. Continuous awareness. Meditation is not just sitting and closing one's eyes. Meditation is continuous awareness. Continuous discrimination between the unreal and the real; I am not body, I am not body, I am not mind, I am not mind. This is necessary because we constantly and strongly feel the opposite way. When experiencing joy, who has the experience of joy? When diseased, are you the disease? Sadness. Who is sad? It is the mind that is sad. I am not mind, I am Atman. I am pure consciousness. I am Supreme Reality. According to some, this is meditation according to Vedanta."

"The culmination of all this long, sincere spiritual practice is that by the grace of the Supreme Reality, one realizes that one is really Brahman. The final stage of this realization is nirvikalpa samadhi. Where all this multifold universe loses its differences, and is united in one. We, the universe and God, all become united in consciousness. The result is all one's delusions and illusions vanish. All his ignorance and sufferings vanish. He becomes full of peace and eternal joy. He becomes free, even in this life. There is no more birth and death for him. He becomes a man of eternal wisdom. Thus, he fulfills the purpose of human life." •

## Swami Narrates Trip to Greece and Italy

*The following is Swami Medhasananda's description of his trip to Greece and Italy during the afternoon session of the April Retreat.*

### GREECE

I left Narita Airport on April 5th via Alitalia Airways on an 11-hour flight to Rome. I find that a one or two hour flight is fine, but an 11-hour flight over seven time zones is exhausting. I arrived in Rome before 7 p.m. only to wait three to four hours for a delayed connecting flight of English tourists from

London before flying on to Athens. I arrived in Athens at 2 a.m. and was met by 85-year-old John Manetta, a great devotee, who took me to a hotel he had reserved for me. I slept from 3 a.m. and was ready when John came calling at 10 a.m. to take me sightseeing.

We saw the Acropolis on its hilltop, but did not stop there, but rather stood in the remnants of the public meeting place called the Assembly of the classical

(cont on page 7)

## SWAMI NARRATES TRIP

(from page 6)

period. Here it was compulsory for Athenians to participate in direct democracy, one without ballots and a representative type government. Here citizens met, discussed, debated and made decisions on public policy. From there we went to the old marketplace. Here Greek philosophers of old did not seek solitude, but sought to influence the populace with their ideas. It was here that Socrates was accused of corrupting the youth of Athens and forced to drink hemlock as punishment.

Mr. Manetta then took me to his home, where he lives with a daughter, and where he had prepared an Indian meal for me. Later, we met other devotees and had a spiritual discussion and a Q&A session. The following day we decided that since John didn't drive, we would take a tourist bus to see the points of interest and old monuments. On the Acropolis the Parthenon of the 5th century B.C. is now in ruins and there is an effort to restore it. In 1687, under the Turkish Ottoman Empire, it was used as an ammunition dump and was hit by a Venetian cannonball, nearly destroying the 2400-year-old monument.

That same evening I met a group of devotees that meets regularly at John Manetta's home, though there is no formal Vedanta Society in Greece. Let me first tell you a little about John:

I first met John in 1996 during celebrations of Swami Vivekananda's Centenary visit to Europe. During my research on Varanasi (Banaras) I had also contacted him for information about a Greek scholar, Demetrius Galanos, living in Varanasi during the era covered in the book, *Varanasi at the Crossroads*. John was born and raised in Alexandria, Egypt, where he lived with his family. At the age of thirty he discovered a French publication on Jnana Yoga in a little bookstore, which impressed him very much. Inside this book it was noted that the Ramakrishna Mission also published two English journals. About this time an Indian business associate of his father's

visited Alexandria and helped John subscribe to these journals and he learned of and purchased other books as well.

In 1953, the year of Sri Sarada Devi's 100th Birth Anniversary, he boarded a ship for Bombay. At Belur Math he asked then President Maharaj Shankaranandaji, a disciple of Swami Brahmanandaji, for initiation, who was willing, but advised that questions and necessary correspondence between guru and disciple would be most difficult at his advanced age. Instead he suggested that he take initiation from then Vice President Swami Yatiswaranandaji in Bangalore, which he did. He visited India quite a few times afterward. John later moved, with his family, from Alexandria to Athens.

There he discovered a book in Greek entitled, "A Man Who became Mad for God", featuring the biography and sayings of Sri Ramakrishna. He came to learn that the publisher was working on a Greek

version of The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, but John found that the quality of the Greek translation was not so good because different portions of the book were translated by different people to be assembled later. John contacted the publisher group, which not only agreed to let him

translate the work, but offered a part-time secretary to help on a weekly basis.

Once completed, however, said group had lost interest and John was given the right to own and publish the manuscript. I saw the published book, it is huge, and John has translated 9 or 10 other Ramakrishna and Vivekananda literature to date. He believes publishing books is very important to the spread of ideas. Despite cataracts and hearing loss John continues his translation work, cooking and taking me sightseeing, as well as looking after a daughter. I asked him how he keeps up with so much at his age and he just smiled and shrugged. Really, I appreciate and admire this indomitable spirit so much.

(cont page 8)



## SWAMI NARRATES TRIP

(from page 6)

Anyway, the informal Vedanta group meets Friday evenings in the rather large shrine in John's home. The regular program includes reading from scripture, discussion, singing of Sarva Mangala Mangalye, chanting and meditation. Occasionally, monks of the Ramakrishna Mission based in Europe also visit. But I urged John to take some concrete steps at formalization of a Vedanta Society, saying my concern was that all of his efforts might be lost in his absence. I gave a general talk on spiritual matters and growth of the movement in Japan. Those assembled exhibited great devotion to Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda and the following Q&A session was lively.

### ITALY

I returned to Rome on April 8, and was met by brothers and Japan Society friends Enrico and Carlo Colombo, who now work and live in the Philippines. The next day we were joined by another friend of theirs and together we took in a lot of sights.

Later, we went to the city of Assisi. Here I was very impressed with the spiritual practice of St Francis. In the nearby caves there is no pomp or grandeur of the churches, and it was difficult to live. The spiritual atmosphere reminded me of the Himalayan caves where Hindus and Buddhists contemplated and prayed totally secluded from the humdrum of daily life. Here we stayed at Sat Chit Ananda Ashram founded by Father Anthony, an Indian and Catholic monk of the Dominican sect. He had come to Rome for further training and after completing the required four years, he decided to leave the order, not wanting to be bound by their particular rules and regulations.

Father Anthony went to England, then back to India

where he was with the Brahma Samaj of Calcutta for some years. There he became familiar with the Ramakrishna Institute of Culture. He also travelled some with Mahatma Gandhi and started a society in Bombay to care for the sick and destitute and to look after poor orphans. For many years he travelled between Europe and India giving talks, and for the past six years he has set up an ashram in Assisi. Here he lives alone, takes care of the chores, prepares his own meals, and goes here and there for talks. Father Anthony rises at 3 a.m., bathes, meditates, practices yoga, has breakfast and starts his day.

On his shrine are Christ, St. Francis, Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, Swami Vivekananda and many other divinities, and he hopes to propagate the harmony of religions as taught in the Upanishands. He is an inspiration and a great example of 'living in the now.' Aside from some hearing loss, his independence and mobility are inspiring too. With all his activities and caring for us, his guests, I asked if he was concerned for all his

work should he fall ill.

He said he wasn't worried at all and that his philosophy of life is, 'Let me live well today.' Before returning to Rome, I presented him with copies of our Bhagavad Gita, Vedic Chanting and Guided Meditation CDs. By the way, Father Anthony is 91 years old.

In Rome it was my particular pleasure to stay at a monastery of

the Camillian Order of Catholics. This was made possible by Manila resident, Carlos Colombo, who through communications with a monk of that order formerly stationed in Manila, offered the stay at their monastery in Rome. Such guest quarters are usually reserved for their devotees, friends, benefactors, and relatives of the inmates. This was a rare and special opportunity for me, as a monk of the Ramakrishna Order, to get a first-hand-view of Catholic monastic life and it helped to remove some wrong understanding.



(cont page 9)



## SWAMI NARRATES TRIP

(from page 6)

The Order of Saint Camillus was founded some 400 years ago. And while all Catholic monks take general vows of poverty and chastity, particular sects have additional vows. The Camillians serve the sick and have 40 branches in 30 countries working with AIDS patients, particularly in Africa and Asia.

I enjoyed dining and interacting with the very friendly and open monks. I took the opportunity to ask whether their idea of contemplation was the same as our meditation and learned that contemplation can be on a particular parable, for example, with reflection on one's relationship to Christ. Chanting and prayers are before breakfast and lunch in the chapel with contemplation on an individual basis. Before supper, lay devotees gather in the main church and the monks can either attend services there or contemplate on their own.

Swami Vivekananda once said that there are many similarities between Catholic monastics and Hindu sanyasins, and I really understand now. Like our order, here too there is much joking and laughter and camaraderie between the brothers at mealtimes.

I should say, these similarities don't really exist with Protestants who marry, have families and possessions and don't believe in rituals. Regrettably, only 30 years ago the Camillians would have as many as 60 novices joining mostly from Europe, but recently these numbers have fallen to as few as three or four, and most of these recruits are from Asia or Africa where much of their work is done. As such, some seminaries are being converted to homes for the aged, guest houses and hotels.

Adding to my good fortune, it was the Holy Week, the last week of Lent before Easter, and many monks and devotees were at hand. While there was no time for a formal talk and Q&A session on Hinduism, I was asked to give about

a 10-minute talk at dinner. I took this opportunity to explain a little about the organization, philosophy and activities of the Ramakrishna Order and our Japan Society. They listened with great interest as I told them how comfortable I was being with them. I talked about our similarities, our shared idea of seeing God in the sick and needy and serving them. Just as they want to serve Jesus in serving the sick, we too run dispensaries and hospitals, as well as schools and colleges in India. I concluded by quoting the saying that 'All roads lead to Rome' and linked it with Sri Ramakrishna's words, "As many faiths, so many paths."

I also presented copies of our CDs as the head of the Camillian Order, a monk from Ireland, rose to say a few words. In his talk he said that although there are differences, we share a common goal and it was good to learn more about others. He thanked me for the CDs and said he was pleased to get the Guided Meditation CD during this Holy Week.

Afterward I felt that all the monks had taken me into their inner circle. Some enthusiastically shook my hand, some hugged, and a couple even kissed my cheek. This is real harmony of religions, by living and working and sharing ideas together, not by giving speeches on the harmony of religions from podiums. And although I was happy to experience the Pope reading in St. Peter's Square to the multitudes gathered there, this was not so important to me as the relationship I had established with the brothers of the Camillian Order.

Upon my return to Japan, I had received an email from the General Secretary saying that he too was happy that we can, in spite of differences, indeed, live in harmony. •

# A Detailed Account of Swami's Trip to Italy

*Enrico Colombo sends us this detailed account of Swami Medhasananda's visit to Italy from April 8 to 14, 2006*

**APRIL 8, 2006**

Swami Medhasananda reached Rome in mid-afternoon and was received at the airport by Carlo. Together they reached the city by train. Carlo had arranged an accommodation at the Camillians' Monastery, thanks to Father Luigi, a Camillian Father whom he had met and become friends with years before in Manila. Your reporter joined them late in the evening after a business engagement in Bari, in the South of Italy.

**APRIL 9, 2006**

Maharaj and the Colombo brothers had breakfast with the Camillian Fathers and Brothers in the canteen of the monastery.

The Camillians are a Catholic Order with a specific mission to serve the sick. The order is formed by Fathers (ordained priests who celebrate Mass, impart all Catholic Sacraments and also devote their lives to the specific mission of being of service to the sick) and Brothers (members of the order, who are also ordained but do not celebrate Mass or administer



Sacraments). The Camillian Order operates many centres in different parts of the world and its headquarters are located in a 'basilica' (old church of special devotional and historic interest) of the middle ages and buildings in the city centre of Rome. St. Camillus, the founder of the Order, lived part of his life and passed away here: a beautiful chapel has been established in the room where he died.

All the above information, and more, was

obtained during breakfast by Swami Medhasananda from Fratel (Brother) Luca, the Secretary General of the Order. Fratel Luca is a young, informal, frank and extremely friendly monk who immediately established an easy and warm relationship with Swami and all of us.

One other interesting subjects Swami wanted to explore was the difference between "monks" and "priests" in the Catholic tradition, as compared to the Hindu tradition.

We then learned that Catholic monks are also priests (celebrating Mass, etc.) who are normally stationary in one monastery, live a life of individual relationship with God and basically refrain from mixing with the external society. Catholic monks and priests alike take a vow of celibacy, whereas in India such vows are only required of monks.

We started our Rome visit in St. Peter's Square (Piazza San Pietro) where we joined a huge crowd celebrating Palm Sunday, an important ceremony in memory of Jesus, riding a donkey, greeted by the crowds waiving palm branches. This happened not long before he was arrested by Roman soldiers and then put to death on the cross. The Pope was officiating the Mass in St. Peter's Square, his image was made available to



the crowd by means of giant TV screens. Carlo translated for Swami the important passages of the German Pope's discourse, which was rendered in an almost accent-less, fluent Italian. After lunch at a nearby restaurant (an informal diner frequented by Italians, and clearly not a

(cont page 11)

## DETAILED ACCOUNT OF TRIP TO ITALY (from page 10)

tourist spot), we all returned to St. Peter's Square and visited the Basilica which is the largest church in the entire Catholic world. We spent a couple of hours admiring the beautiful pieces of art, including Michelangelo's Pieta (the compassionate embrace by Mother Mary of the dead body of Jesus).

Our next visit included the Fori Imperiali (old Roman ruins)



and the Colosseo (the circus where gladiators fought among themselves or with ferocious animals). Having stood or walked for the best part of the day, we returned pretty tired to the monastery by evening. There we were

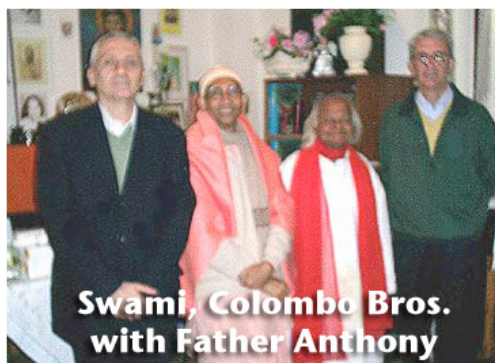
joined by a lifelong friend of the Colombo brothers, Massimo (Max) Quartini from Milan. Max visits frequently the Ramakrishna Centre in Gretz, near Paris, and he did not want to miss the opportunity to meet a visiting Swami of the Ramakrishna Order.

### APRIL 10, 2006

By 8.15 AM our party was standing in a long line waiting to access the Vatican Museums. Surprisingly in only about 30 minutes we managed to enter the Museums where we spent the whole morning admiring an incredible number of pieces of art, many of sacred inspiration. Among them we saw the famous frescoes by Raffaello and the Sistine Chapel by Michelangelo.

We then had lunch at the monastery where we took temporary leave from the good Camillian Brothers and Fathers (we would return after very few days to spend the last evening and night of this Italian pilgrimage). We then left Rome by rented car (a small Italian style job where the four of us and the baggage squeezed in with some difficulty) and headed for Assisi.

We arrived there by early evening and found our way to The Sat-Chit-Ananda Mission of Father Anthony Elenjmittam. Father Anthony is a former Dominican (Catholic) monk and friend of Mahatma Gandhi. He is Indian but has lived many years in Europe and more recently in Italy. He is 91 years old and, after leaving the Dominican Order years ago, runs the Sat-Cit-Ananda Centre all by himself.



Swami Medhasananda was accommodated in a very small room (I would call it "cell") adjacent to the Shrine/Conference Room. The rest of us stayed at a newly acquired apartment in the same building. All accommodations were rather basic, but, thankfully, they provided for good sleep and shelter from the pretty cold weather.

We dined at a nearby restaurant where we caught the waiter by surprise with our requests of simple food such as boiled rice, soup and vegetables. Obviously, this was not part of the restaurant's usual menu, but they did their best to bear with us and we all managed to quench our appetite before retiring for the night.

### APRIL 11, 2006

Our day started with an hour session of questions and answers with the good Father Anthony. This enabled us to learn about some of his extraordinary religious adventures and experiences and become acquainted with his efforts to realize a "Cosmic Ecumenism" and an ideal bridge between the Christian West and the great religions of Asia.

We then started our visit of Assisi, a small town on the top of a hill, world-famous because of St. Francis, the great mystic, who practiced and preached poverty and brotherhood for mankind and even for animals and nature.

(cont page 12)

## DETAILED ACCOUNT OF TRIP TO ITALY (from page 11)

Appropriately we first visited Eremo, the hermitage where St. Francis used to stay and practice spiritual disciplines with a few brother monks. This is located on the slope of a hill a few kilometres away from the town. Even now it is a very simple, bare place with none of the dazzling artistic decorations we had admired at St. Peter's. A Franciscan monk very kindly guided us through the visit and gave us interesting information about the hermitage, St. Francis and the monastic order named after him. Swami sat a few minutes in meditation in the very small cell, carved in the rock of the hill, where St. Francis used to stay.



By the time we finished our visit it was well past noon and we looked for a place to have lunch. The restaurant we found did have some fish and vegetables and kindly agreed to prepare some boiled rice to meet our special request. During lunch we were joined by Mr. Vito Degrandi, an Italian devotee of Hinduism, also well acquainted with the Ramakrishna Order.

In the afternoon we had a meeting with a publisher and printing house in connection with an attempt to publish an Italian translation of the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna. The meeting had been arranged for us by Father Anthony.

### APRIL 12, 2006

After a breakfast at an Italian style coffee shop (by now Swami had adjusted to the local ways of breakfast; croissants with “cappuccino” or tea), we visited the Church of Santa Chiara. We saw there the cross that spoke to St. Francis and the

tomb of Santa Chiara. We then took our leave from Father Anthony and thanked him for his help and hospitality.

We still had some very important places to visit in and near Assisi though, and we stopped at the Cathedral (where the mortal remains of St. Francis are buried) and the “Porziuncola”. This



is the place where St. Francis passed away in the nearby village of Santa Maria degli Angeli: Originally it was a small and simple hut; around it a huge church had been later erected.

We then left Assisi and drove towards Florence. We stopped for lunch in Perugia at a very ordinary eatery for working people. When we inquired about the availability of fish the kind lady in charge informed us that she cooked fish on Fridays (this is according to an old Catholic tradition) and therefore she had none on that day. However, she did have plenty of different vegetables and pastas (for the Italian members of our small group) and she agreed to cook some boiled rice for Swami. When we finished our meal and were about to depart, the nice lady thanked us for our visit to her restaurant and told Swami that she was waiting for him next Friday so that he could taste her fish preparations! We all laughed.

We drove on in the afternoon and reached Florence about 4.30 PM. Carlo had a business engagement at the head-office of his company, so we drove directly to this place in order to drop him there. We were however briefly received by the company's president in his office. While Carlo took care of his business meeting, we reached our hotel in a village outside Florence. Later on we were treated to

(cont page 13)

**DETAILED ACCOUNT OF TRIP TO ITALY**  
(from page 11)

dinner at a simple restaurant near the hotel by Mr. Angelo Fontani, a long time business partner and friend of Carlo's.

**APRIL 13, 2006**

After a quick Italian breakfast our group split: Carlo had to go back to work, Max was complaining of a muscle pain which made walking difficult for him, so Maharaj and your reporter headed for the Florence city centre riding a public bus.

We first visited Hotel Minerva, near the railway station, where Swami Vivekananda stayed in December 1896. We actually entered the hotel hall (now a very modern, elegant place) and approached the reception. When we explained to the receptionist the reason of our visit he laughed in a friendly way and stated that "he was afraid their computer system did not keep records that old". We thanked him and left, it was nice being there anyway.

Next we intended to visit a museum displaying Michelangelo's David and a few other of his works, but that was not meant to happen. When we reached the museum there was a huge and very slow moving queue. We lined up for a while and then realized that it was a hopeless case unless we had a full day available, so we left.

We walked to the nearby "Duomo", the Cathedral, only to find that its doors were closed to visitors as a religious function was on-going. Your reporter started to think at that point that the day was not auspicious for visits to the famous sights of Florence, but then we had a lucky break. We explained to a guard that our visit had a religious aim more than simply sightseeing and we were kindly allowed in. We were then able to stand quietly and listen to the Mass for a while.

We carried on walking after that and headed for the Uffizi, probably the single most important painting museum in Italy, but as expected the waiting lines were far too long to negotiate in the short time available for us. So we just did what all the tourists do in Florence and strolled through Piazza Signoria and Ponte Vecchio (the old bridge on the Arno river). These are very famous places in Florence, but have no particular religious interest.

As our available time was running out, we boarded a bus back to the hotel. A quick lunch followed and a farewell: Max was catching a train back to Milan and Swami Medhasananda, Carlo and your reporter drove back towards Rome and the Camillian monastery. Upon reaching there after a rather long drive we had a very nice dinner, a memorable one in some ways.

The General of Camillian Order, Father Frank Monks, had in the meantime returned to Rome from a trip abroad and many other members had gathered. The canteen of the monastery was crowded. After a meal (fish and vegetables were available as a courtesy to Swami) some short celebrative discourses took place. Swami was at this point invited to say a few words. He thanked the good Camillian Brothers and Fathers for their warm hospitality and had words of deep appreciation for their open approach in hosting a Hindu monk in their monastery. He added that he felt quite at home there noticing how the Camillian Brothers and Fathers had had a lot of fun and laughter during supper, exactly as he had seen many times in the monasteries of the Ramakrishna Order. He added that another very close similarity was the belief that serving the sick and the needy was performed as a means to develop at the same time one's own spirituality. Swami then briefly described some features of the Ramakrishna Order. Finally, he stated his happiness at experiencing in person on this occasion how members of different religions can live together in peace and harmony, even while maintaining their own religious identity. Swami Medhasananda concluded his short discourse thanking the Camillian monks once again to a round of applause. Maharaji then handed as a gift to Father Frank Monks, the Superior of the Order, some CDs produced by Nippon Vedanta Kyokai.

In response to Swami's remarks Father Frank Monks expressed his thanks to the Swami for sharing with the audience his views and information on the monastic order to which he belongs. Father Monks further mentioned that the CDs that the Swami gave him as a gift were particularly fit for the Holy Week (the period of the Easter celebration) and would be listened to attentively. Father Monks continued stating that it is worth noting that, in spite of the differences

(cont page 14)

## DETAILED ACCOUNT OF TRIP TO ITALY (from page 11)

in respective beliefs, both the order to which the Swami belongs and the Camillians are working towards the alleviation of the people's sufferings, particularly the poor and the sick. In concluding his remarks Father Monks mentioned that he would pray for continuing divine help in the swami's work.

We stayed in the canteen for a while longer chatting with Father Luigi, Brother Luca and others. Brother Luca had a very early engagement the next day and would not be able to see us for breakfast. He embraced us all goodbye. And at the end of a long and nice day we all retired in the simple but comfortable rooms of the monastery.

APRIL 14, 2006

After breakfast, accompanied by Father Luigi, we briefly visited the chapel erected in the room where St. Camillus passed away and the church itself. There we sat quietly for some time. It was time to leave the monastery and head to the airport for our return flights. We all thanked Father Luigi, embraced him and were gone. •

... Reported by Enrico Colombo

*Swami adds that it was Enrico who also took upon himself the tiresome job of driving the long distances from Rome to Assisi to Florence and back to Rome.*

---

• A Story to Remember •

### Things Aren't Always What They Seem

Two traveling angels stopped to spend the night in the home of a wealthy family. The family was rude and refused to let the angels stay in the mansion's guest room. Instead the angels were given a small space in the cold basement. As they made their bed on the hard floor, the older angel saw a hole in the wall and repaired it. When the younger angel asked why, the older angel replied, "Things aren't always what they seem."

The next night the pair came to rest at the house of a very poor, but very hospitable farmer and his wife. After sharing what little food they had the couple let the angels sleep in their bed where they could have a good night's rest.

When the sun came up the next morning the angels found the farmer and his wife in tears. Their only cow, whose milk had been their sole income, lay dead in the field. The younger angel was infuriated and asked the older angel, "How could you have let this happen? The first man had everything, yet you helped him," he accused. "The second family had little but was willing to share everything, and you let their cow die."

"Things aren't always what they seem," the older angel replied. "When we stayed in the basement of the mansion, I noticed there was gold stored in that hole in the wall. Since the owner was so obsessed with greed and unwilling to share his good fortune, I sealed the wall so he wouldn't find it. Then last night as we slept in the farmer's bed, the angel of death came for his wife. I gave him the cow instead. Things aren't always what they seem."

Sometimes that is exactly what happens when things don't turn out the way they should. If you have faith, you just need to trust that every outcome is always to your advantage. You just might not realize it until some time later.

...Anonymous

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](mailto:info@vedanta.jp)