



the VEDANTA Kyokai

NEWS, UPDATES AND MISCELLANY FROM THE VEDANTA SOCIETY OF JAPAN



Monthly Calendar

• Birthdays •

Sri Shankaracharya
Saturday, April 21

• Kyokai Events •

April Retreat

**Subject: The Teachings of
Sri Chaitanya Deva**

Sunday, April 15, 10:30 a.m.
All, with family and friends are
cordially invited.



✧ Thus Spake ✧

"Devotion to God increases in the same proportion as attachment to the objects of the senses decreases." ... Sri Ramakrishna

"Everything is produced by ignorance and dissolves in the wake of Knowledge." ... Sri Shankara

MARCH RETREAT

Zushi Centre Celebrates 172nd Birth Anniversary of Sri Ramakrishna

The Vedanta Society of Japan celebrated the 172nd birth anniversary of Sri Ramakrishna at the Zushi Centre on March 18th. The programme began at 6 a.m. with mangalarati, chanting of Vedic prayers, hymns and meditation. Many devotees who had been engaged in the previous day's preparations and had spent the night either at the main ashram or at Holy Mother's House nearby attended. Breakfast was served at 7:45 and afterward volunteers began busying themselves with final preparations for the day's events.

By 10 a.m. it was evident that this most popular of the Society's celebrations would be attended by an exceptionally large gathering. The main shrine, the meeting room and even the hall had all shoji screens (sliding doors) removed to accommodate the throng. The video and sound crew had also set up TV monitors in key areas so that everyone, no matter where they were seated, could observe firsthand the programme activities. At 10:30 Swami Medhasananda, in the presence of visiting Japanese monk, Swami Samananda, and many devotees

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March Retreat (from page 1)

then conducted the worship (puja) and offering which continued for about one hour. Swami then led the entire congregation in a pranam mantra (salutation) and everyone was given flowers to offer (pushpanjali) at the shrine in groups of three.

Symbolic Ritual

Some minutes later attention was turned to the meeting room where mics had been set up for a talk and translation and an opening song. Swami began by greeting everyone on the occasion of the 172nd birth anniversary of Sri Ramakrishna and explained that according to the Indian lunar calendar Ramakrishna's birthday fell on February 19th of this year, the day after the February Zushi Retreat was held, so the Society had decided to hold the celebration for the March Retreat. Because many in the gathering were attending for the first time, Swami briefly mentioned the day's programme of mangalarati, vedic chanting, chanting from the Bhagavad Gita and meditation of the early morning session and the first part of the day's programme. He explained that they had just witnessed a puja or ritualistic worship of Ramakrishna and that pujas are very symbolic.

"Since many of you may be unfamiliar with such worship, you have just seen the five articles of arati we used today," he said. "According to Hindu philosophy the Lord has made this universe with five elements. These are earth, fire, water, air and what is translated as ether, but is much deeper than that. We have performed arati with five articles that symbolize these five elements. We used fire. We used a conch shell containing water and the shell itself is from the sea. We used a piece of cloth to represent ether, as it consists of two threads which are interwoven symbolizing the ether that penetrates everything. We used flowers to represent the earth. And finally, the waving of the chamar, made from the tail of a chamar cow, to symbolize air. With these five symbols of the five elements we offer arati or worship to God. We have produced none of these items, we are using articles produced by God to worship God.

We are offering items created by the Lord to the Lord, all that we can actually offer is our devotion to the Lord."

Swami Samananda Introduced



Swami then introduced Swami Samananda and noted that there were two Japanese monks in the Ramakrishna Order. Samananda Maharaj had stayed at the older Holy Mother House in 1977 prior to the Zushi Centre's construction in 1978. He joined the Order in 1983 and took his final vows in 1993. He takes care of the flower garden at the Advaita Ashram in the Himalayas of Mayavati, India. Of the 160 centers of the Ramakrishna Mission, only this center and its branch and main

publishing house in Kolkata have no shrine and no ritualistic worship is performed, only meditation on the Supreme Reality with no form and no attributes. Swami then joked that though Samanandaji had become an expert at flower gardening, he had not been asked to speak on that topic, but rather on Advaita Vedanta and Sri Ramakrishna.

Swami Medhasananda then led the congregation in Vedic mantras, followed by readings from the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna in English and Japanese, and an opening song performed by Sri Subhas Mukhopadhyay, visiting from Canada and participating in this celebration for the third year. Swami Samananda then gave a brief talk on Sri Ramakrishna and Advaita (see Advaita Talk in this issue) with Mr. Itoh reversing his usual role as interpreter from English to Japanese to Japanese to English. Swami Medhasananda thanked the swami for his lucid exposition on Advaita and told some anecdotal stories of Sri Ramakrishna as a living phenomenon (see Talk).

Lunch Prasad

After this talk the service of many was required to prepare the meeting room, the up- and downstairs halls, even the library and other nooks and crannies to accommodate the overflowing crowd for a delicious

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March Retreat (from page 2)

prasad lunch. Before leading grace upstairs, Swami Medhasananda, noting that many Japanese were not so fond of sweets and often left these Indian treats and favorites of Sri Ramakrishna and Buddha untouched, described a couple of these items and implored one and all to at least try them on this day. "One of these was offered to Lord Buddha and only afterward did he attain Nirvana. So you don't even need to go to the Himalayas and practice Advaita Vedanta just enjoy the sweets and you'll attain Nirvana." he joked.

Music and Cultural Programme

After lunch there was much activity to clean-up and put away tables and prepare a stage and sound system for the special music programme. A very large share of the morning crowd had stayed on to enjoy the event and at about 3 p.m. Mr. Mukhopadhyay led off the performances. He was followed by a succession of devotees singing one or more Indian songs from various traditions. Performers included Mrs. Rita Kar, Mr. Biswa Ghosh, Mrs. Bhaswati Ghosh and Mr. Ashish Trivedi. Shanti-san then offered an original piece in

Japanese with a sing-a-long chorus and Lonnie performed two original numbers in English.

A short break followed for removal of the instruments, stage platform and monitors in preparation for the programme's featured guest artist, Sri G. D. Bajpai and his troop of Bharatnatyam dancers. Nurtured in the temples of Southern India, Bharatnatyam is symbolic spiritual expressions through rhythmic and dramatic sequences in dance. Considered to be one of the most important of India's classical dance styles, it is known for its grace, purity, tenderness, statuesque and sculpture-like poses. Sri Bajpai staggered his superb solo recitals with enchanting choreographed performances by four children, two of whom were his daughters. The entire musical programme was well received with much appreciative applause throughout. •



Thought of the Month

*Faith is to believe what you do not see;
the reward of this faith
is to see what you believe.*

...Saint Augustine



Advaita Vedanta & Sri Ramakrishna

A Talk by Swami Samananda

A Most Unique Divine Incarnation

This year marks the 172nd birth anniversary of Sri Ramakrishna. He was born in the small village of Kamarpukur in East Bengal. From his very childhood he sought to know God. In time he came to practice the many religious paths of India such as Shakti, Vaishnava, Advaita, Tantra, and even those of Christianity and Islam, achieving perfection in each. It is because of this he was admired by all.

Most spiritual aspirants practice a single path, only a few achieving the goal with great difficulty. For example, Totapuri practiced 40 years before attaining the ultimate goal of nirvikalpa samadi, yet Sri Ramakrishna reached this state in just one night. Divine incarnations like Buddha and Christ attained and taught a single path to perfection. Perfect in many religious paths, Sri Ramakrishna truly deserves to be called a divine incarnation.

Sri Ramakrishna taught those who came to him for spiritual advice in different ways, according to their character, qualities and understanding. More than giving eloquent or scholastic instruction, his purpose in teaching was to lead people to God by clarifying and removing their doubts and leading them to truth. Without clarifying one's doubts, one cannot make progress in spiritual practice.

Vivekananda and Advaita

Of his young disciples, Sri Ramakrishna only allowed Swami Vivekananda to practice Advaita Vedanta and he forbade the others to study Advaita scripture. Sri Ramakrishna understood that only Narendra (Swami Vivekananda) possessed the qualities necessary to absorb the teachings of Advaita. Sri Ramakrishna saw that should the others imbibe this philosophy, their spiritual progress may be delayed.

This is because each person has his own 'best way' to realize God. If one is best fit for Bhakti Yoga, for ex-

ample, the study of Advaita may in fact have a negative effect on the Bhakta. Even Narendra had difficulty in accepting Advaita philosophy in the beginning. One day while taking to Hazra (a character of the divine play at Dakshineswar), Narendra ridiculed the very idea that an inanimate thing like a glass could be made of spirit. Sri Ramakrishna overheard this comment and placed his hand on Narendra's chest. After this touch Narendra could clearly perceive that the same God pervades the glass, his body and everything else. After this personal experience, Narendra accepted Advaita philosophy.

In later days, Swami Vivekananda established the Advaita Ashrama in the Himalayas near Mayavati to practice Advaita philosophy. The property, a tea plantation owned by a retired man from Britain, was purchased and converted into an ashram. [Swami holds up a photograph]. The second floor has very large halls, and here they would spread the tea leaves out for a day to soften them. In those early days of the ashram, the monks lived there separated from the softening tea leaves by curtain partitions.

Swami Vivekananda, himself, first arrived in 1901. Upon his arrival he noticed that one of the monks had been worshipping a photo of the Master, but he said nothing at that time. That evening during dinner, however, Swami Vivekananda began talking about the ideal in establishing an Advaita Ashram. He then said that despite this ideal, some had begun worshipping Sri Ramakrishna there. Not agreeing with this point, the monk in question then wrote a letter to Sri Sarada Devi - The Holy Mother. In response Holy Mother wrote, "My son, Sri Ramakrishna was actually an Advaitist and his sons and daughters are also Advaitists."

Growth of Belief Systems

In olden times when people suffered from the natural calamities of weather, earthquakes and the like, they

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Advaita and Sri Ramakrishna [from page 4]

sought a power higher than mankind to hold on to. This early concept of God was more connected to nature. Gradually came the concept that souls of departed ancestors could provide protection. Tribes then developed along with the idea that a particular God or being would provide protection for that particular tribe. With interaction between people from differing tribes came the desire to establish whose deity was superior. This rivalry brought conflicts wherein the god of victors remained, while the gods of the losers were to be forgotten. Tribes became kingdoms and then countries, along with the idea that they were protected by an almighty and all pervading God. The idea that this god favored this king and/or that country also developed. For one example of this, in Japan the emperor was believed to be directly descended from heaven.

Whether one or several gods were recognized within a system, the idea was the same. Basically, God would fulfill their desires while protecting them. This idea actually reflects two different ideas; God and myself. Even today many people still visit churches or temples with this idea. The idea of God has changed with the development of human society. In the future this idea may continue to change along with the advancing intellect of humanity as a whole. But such future development can only be accomplished in India. This is because true religious freedom exists in India.

The Path to Advaita

People of high intellect realized that all created forms, including manifestations of God, one day cease to exist. They reasoned that such a concept of God was not Almighty. They then gave up the idea of God with name and form and began seeking God without name or form. The conclusion they reached was that God without name and form created this universe.

If so, the question then arises, 'From what did God without name and form create a universe of name and form?' If the infinite God is without name and form, then God must be limited, separate from the materials needed to create name and form. In order to solve this apparent contradiction God must then be both infinite and finite materials. This idea then is like the spider

that weaves a web from itself, then dwells within its own web. This theory is called modified non-dualism.

People may then ask, 'if this infinite God became the many parts, how can the infinite become divided? And further, how then can parts of the infinite perish? That is like light and darkness existing together!' According to this doubt, a theory that infinite God created a finite universe is wrong. Then what is this universe and what are the many living beings of this universe? Logically speaking, the things of this universe don't really exist and are all part of the collective illusion called maya. It is like when a person dreams at night of a place of many mountains and trees and such, awaking to find nothing. What really existed was the dreamer, not the things of the dream. That entity that was dreaming is God. That means that the mountains and trees and rivers of the dream were nothing but God. Because of illusion we think ourselves different and separate from God. This is non-dualism, and it is called Advaita in India.

Realization Ends Religious Conflict

Returning to why Swami Vivekananda established the Advaita Ashram; there are conflicts between different religions, for example between Israel and the Palestinian people. These conflicts arise from the dualistic elements of the opposing religions, because each side believes they are the chosen people of God. They believe their religion and concept of God is the only true religion, the only true God. Without solving this darkness of religion, there can be no peace and harmony between religions. Thinking they are different, people can be very cold to others. People cannot be cold to others if they feel oneness with them as Advaita teaches. For this one must first realize one's true nature is the same as God. The next step is to realize the true nature of other people is God, too. Only then will conflict between religions end.

Swami Vivekananda said that existence, knowledge and bliss absolute (Satchidananda) are our own nature and we don't have to acquire them from outside. We only need to express those things from within. To express these, we only need to become aware of these qualities. Please continue to be aware, and that aware-

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Advaita and Sri Ramakrishna [from page 5]

ness will lead to the highest. Your will is almighty. Look back at yourself ... Who led you from a single-cell amoeba to a human being? That was your own will. No one can deny that your will is almighty. That thing which led you to human-hood will lead you to the highest.

The Advaita Ideal

Advaita teachings are very simple. There are no austerities - no spiritual practice. You only need to understand this truth. This simple teaching is the oldest and most profound, but didn't spread because it became mixed or confused with other dualistic views. Usually we think that we can only reach spiritual realization by practicing japam and other practices. According to Advaita this view is wrong. This is because if liberation or spiritual freedom or realization were only possible through certain practices, then such realization would be limited. What is liberation? What is freedom? It is becoming free from birth and death.

By practicing can one become immortal? If one becomes free, then one must have been free from the beginning. It is like the small seed of the tree containing the flower of the tree from the beginning. We are already free. When we practice, we use our body and mind which are not immortal. When we attain realization, we understand we have been free from the beginning.

It was for this ideal of Advaitism, the divinity of human beings and the oneness of the universe, that the Advaita Ashram was established. When people understand these ideals there can be harmony of religions and harmony between all peoples. So what we really need to do is to become aware of our own nature and express that awareness. This is the most important and meaningful use of the life we have been given. I pray that God helps you all to have a very meaningful life. Thank you ...

Swami Medhasananda Speaks

Swami Medhasananda thanked the swami for his talk and quipped that he had said that the practice of non-dualism was easy. "Samananda Maharaj lives in an

ashram up in the Himalayas where it may be easier to practice non-dualism, but is it true of us who live on the plains, in the plane of dualism?" Swami added that Samanandaji did his job wonderfully well and gave a very lucid exposition of Advaita, which is difficult to do. Swami Medhasananda then gave the following brief talk.

A Living Phenomenon

"The famous British author and playwright, Christopher Isherwood, once wrote that Sri Ramakrishna was a phenomenon. But I would like to say that he is not a past phenomenon, but a living phenomenon. This I shall illustrate with a few incidents."

"When Sri Ramakrishna left his mortal body the Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi, was in the Cossipore Garden House crying profusely. Sri Ramakrishna appeared before her and asked why she was crying. 'Am I dead? I am here. I have only passed from one room to another room.' "

"In the West Swami Vivekananda would give nine or ten lectures a week. Sometimes he would find himself wondering what he would speak of next. Sri Ramakrishna would then appear and brief him on what to discuss the following day. It was not a vision, it was a reality. On one such occasion a devotee even asked about the strange voice in his room and if he had had a visitor the night before. You see this was not only Swami Vivekananda's vision, it was audible to others as well."

"Once before the Jagannath Temple in Puri a Christian missionary was preaching about Jesus Christ and at the same time abusing Hinduism. Swami Premanandaji, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, happened to be present. He didn't like the abuse and began chanting Hari Bol, Hari Bol, Hari Bol. Soon those listening to the preacher, too, began to chant and then dispersed. That night Sri Ramakrishna appeared before him and asked why he had disturbed that Christian missionary. 'He was preaching about me,' he said. 'Tomorrow morning go and seek his pardon.' After a long search he found the preacher and apologized."

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Advaita and Sri Ramakrishna [from page 6]

"Swami Chetanandaji, the head of the St. Louis Center in the USA, once received a call. It was from a highly educated girl living out on a farm in Kansas who later came to visit the Swami. At that time she told the swami that Sri Ramakrishna had initiated and given her a mantra. Charged with emotion and tears running down her face she revealed this to the swami."

"So we see that Sri Ramakrishna is not merely a phenomenon, but a living phenomenon. He is still guiding, disciplining and protecting us. There is a Bengali saying that says divine incarnations sport in the world even now and some are fortunate enough to witness their sport. As the bible says, 'Knock and the door shall be opened'. If we but knock, the door to Sri Ramakrishna will be opened. We will see his divine form and his divine sport and our lives will be blessed." •

News from Headquarters

Revered Swami Gokulananda Passes Away

The Vedanta Society of Japan is deeply saddened to learn of the passing away of Swami Gokulanandaji, senior monk of the Ramakrishna Order and Head of the New Delhi Centre. The swami breathed his last at Sir Gangaram Hospital around 10:25 a.m. on March 31, 2007. He was 79. He was admitted to the hospital for brain surgery on March 20, after suffering a stroke. In spite of all efforts by the doctors and nursing staff he did not regain consciousness.

Inspired by the ideals of Swami Vivekananda and responding to his call to the youth of the country to work for the under privileged, Swami Gokulanandaji, after a brilliant post graduate education and a short stint in teaching, joined the Ramakrishna Order in 1954 and became a monk in 1963. He served with distinction in various Mission centers especially in the North East where he endeared himself to the local people by learning their language and achieving the fluency to deliver lectures in their native tongue.

He was head of the New Delhi Centre for the last 21 years and was dedicated to spreading Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda's teachings and message, not only in Delhi, but all over India and Asia. A widely-travelled monk to various parts of the world, he has over ten books to his credit including a translation of the "Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna" in the Khasi language. His book "How to Overcome Mental Tension" has been very popular, running into eight editions, and has been translated in several Indian languages.



The Prime Minister of India, Dr. Manmohan Singh, issued the following statement: "I learnt with profound sadness the news of the passing away of revered Swami Gokulanandaji Maharaj. I had the privilege and opportunity of knowing Swami Gokulanandaji during his tenure at the New Delhi Centre of the Ramakrishna Mission. He was a great teacher and scholar and endeared himself to thousands of

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A Story to Remember

Life Is a Reflection of You

A young boy and his father were hiking up along a mountain trail. Suddenly, the son slips, hurts himself and screams, "Ahhh!"

To his surprise, he hears the voice repeating, somewhere in the mountain, "Ahhh!"

Curious, he yells, "Who are you?"

He receives the answer, "Who are you?"

Puzzled at the response he screams, "No, you first!"

He receives the answer, "No, you first!"

He looks up at his father and asks, "What's going on?"

The father smiles and says, "My son, pay attention." And then he calls to the mountain, "I admire you!" The voice answers, "I admire you"

The boy is surprised, but still does not understand.

Then the father explains: "It is called an echo, but really it is just like life. Because life gives you back everything you say or do. Our life is simply a reflection of our thoughts and actions. If you want more love in the world, create more love in your heart. If you want more compassion from others, practice more compassion yourself. This relationship applies to everything. In all aspects, life will give you back everything you have given to it. Your life is not a coincidence, it is a reflection of you."

... Author (unknown)

News from Headquarters [from page 7]

followers through his wisdom and compassion. He will be truly missed. I hope the Ramakrishna Mission will seek inspiration from his legacy and continue the good work he was doing. I convey my sincere condolences to all his disciples and admirers."

Swami Medhasananda noted that the Vedanta Society of Japan had lost a great friend, and that he personally had lost a most revered teacher and example. Swami Gokulanandaji visited the Japan Centre on the occasion of the 150th Birth Anniversary of Sri Sarada Devi and the opening of the newly constructed Holy

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Mother's House in January 2005. He will be sorely

missed by all who had the blessing to have met him. •

New Centre of the Mission Established

The Ramakrishna Center of Durban, South Africa has been officially affiliated to the Ramakrishna Mission as one of its branches. Being invited by Swami Saradanandaji, then head of the center, Swami

Medhasananda and a few Japanese devotees had visited the center a few years ago and all enjoyed it immensely. •

Photos from Sri Ramakrishna Birth Celebration



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