



the VEDANTA *Kyokai*

NEWS, UPDATES AND MISCELLANY FROM THE VEDANTA SOCIETY OF JAPAN



Monthly Calendar

• Birthdays •

Swami Adbhutananda
Friday, Feb 02

Sri Sri Ramakrishna Deva
Monday, Feb 19

• Kyokai Events •

February Retreat
Sunday, February 18, 11 a.m.
All are cordially invited.

Announcement

Please note that Sri Sri Ramakrishna's birth celebration will be held at the Zushi Centre as the March Retreat. The afternoon session will also feature a programme of devotional music.



✘ Thus Spake ✘

"Spiritual practice means to keep the mind steady at His feet and to be absorbed in His thoughts."

... The Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi

"The world becomes bound by action unless it is done for the sake of sacrifice. Therefore, O son of Kunti, give up attachment, and do your work for the sake of God."

... Sri Krishna

JANUARY RETREAT

ZUSHI CENTRE CELEBRATES 145TH BIRTH ANNIVERSARY OF SWAMI VIVEKANANDA

The January Retreat at the Zushi Centre was in celebration of Swami Vivekananda's 145th birth anniversary. The Vedanta Society of Japan celebrates Swamiji's birth anniversary twice a year, once for members and friends at the monthly Zushi Retreat at a date more closely corresponding to the Indian lunar calendar month of his birth (January 10th this year) and also at a public celebration held the Toshima-Kokaido Public Hall in Ikebukuro, Tokyo in June of each year. The public ceremony will be held again in Ikebukuro on 10 June 2007.

The Society's celebration began with Swami Medhasananda conducting a worship in the shrine. Afterward all moved to the adjacent meeting room where the swami then led the congregation in Vedic peace prayers. Brahmachari Sumit Maharaj then read from Swami Vivekananda's writings on Jnana Yoga in English and in Japanese by Ms. Yuzawa. The reading was followed by

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Swami Vivekananda's Humanism

A Talk by Swami Medhasananda

There are so many facets of Swami Vivekananda's life worthy of study; his spirituality, his love for country, his message to the West and his programmes for the uplift of humanity. Today's talk will address the humanistic aspect; Swami Vivekananda's humanism.

According to the dictionary, humanism is a system of beliefs that concentrates on human needs and seeks rational ways of solving human problems. Humanism is the understanding of human problems and the setting of human initiatives of benevolence, compassion and mercy. Ideas of the modern period such as equality, fraternity, liberty and humanism have become very popular. We often hear about the activities of groups such as the Human Rights Commission attempting to expose and address violations of human rights. The irony, as we see now, is that countries often rail against the violations of other countries while failing to recognize those they themselves commit. What were Swami Vivekananda's thoughts, ideas and programmes on humanism?

Three Grades of Love

There are different grades or levels of love that we feel for our fellow human beings. Love for blood relations and friends being the most common. Still higher than this is love for others based on some common ground, such as place of birth, tradition or system of belief. People love other people belonging to the same village, city, state, region or nation, and they love others belonging to the same culture or religion. These two types of love we see quite commonly. Sri Ramakrishna made the distinction between these two common types of love and the highest type of love; that of loving people of all countries and religions. He used two words to express this idea, *maya* and *daya*.

According to Vedanta philosophy we understand *maya* to mean illusion, but Sri Ramakrishna meant *maya* in the sense that it is a discriminating love; love which discriminates, while *daya* means indiscriminate love; love for all people. Sri Ramakrishna categorized love into these two; that which discriminates and the higher love that doesn't. This universal love knows no limitation or boundary. Further, there is no expectation of something in return for this love. And as all types of love find a means of expression, this highest love is expressed as service.

The Highest Love

This highest form of love begins as a feeling of fellow-

ship with all of one's fellow beings. Humanism is just part of this all encompassing love, as it is limited to the needs of human beings alone. Let us consider Lord Buddha. His love for others was deeper and more comprehensive. His wasn't only a concern for mankind, but for all beings and all forms of life. In Buddhism we find the sayings, "For the good of many, for the happiness of many" and "friendship and compassion." These are very important ideals to followers of Lord Buddha. And while Buddha's concern was for all beings, we see that Swami Vivekananda expressed this as love for all souls; for all forms of Atman. While there is not much difference in application, Buddha did not acknowledge the Atman and, being a Vedantist, Swami Vivekananda taught that Atman pervades everything and everyone. He would say that when you give a morsel of food to a dog, you worship God in that dog. "God is in that dog, He is all and in all," he said. Swami Vivekananda's humanism was based on realization of the Self. His was not just an intellectual understanding, it was a spiritual realization.

In this regard, the other day I attended a private function honoring Swami Vivekananda organized by one of our members. There one lady told me that her older daughter had said that she knew of the audience's enthusiastic ovation for Swamiji when he began his address at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago with the words, "Brothers and Sisters of America," but that she

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had a question. "My daughter asks me," she continued, "if it was only the words he chose, or if there was something deeper to cause such a spontaneous reaction to such simple words." The woman asked me to explain it to her, so that she may convincingly explain it to her daughter. In fact, many people wonder about the mystery behind this. The secret behind the audience's reaction is that there was a self-realized, honest conviction in his words. Swamiji actually saw the same Atman in everyone, and he really meant his words. In ordinary cases, such words may be used as an address in speech making. They carry no conviction and this is the difference.

There is a beautiful Sanskrit verse that says, "My mother is Parvati, my father is Shiva, all devotees are my friends, and all of the three worlds is my country." Swamiji said that after long spiritual practice he came to realize that it is God that dwells within all embodied souls or jiva, and that one who serves these embodied souls, serves God. On another occasion he also said that after so many austerities he understood this to be the real truth; "God is present in every jiva; there is no other God beside that." Then again he said, "Do you love men? Are not the poor and afflicted men your God? Serve them first!"

Two Types of Paramahansa

Sri Ramakrishna and other great holy men have been rightly called Paramahansa. These realized souls being like that great swan of Hindu scripture who separates and takes only pure milk from a mixture of water and milk – milk symbolizing right knowledge. Sri Ramakrishna further said there are two types of Paramahansa; the jnani-paramahansa and the premi-paramahansa, jnana meaning knowledge and prema meaning love. The jnani-paramahansa is satisfied with his own realization of the Atman, while the premi-paramahansa wants to share the joy and knowledge of his realization with others.

As an illustration of this Sri Ramakrishna asks us to imagine one who finds a ripe mango and devours it all, even wiping all traces from his mouth and hands, while an other person will not eat it himself, but share it with as many others as want it. This is the difference be-

tween the jnani-paramahansa and premi-paramahansa. Sri Ramakrishna, the Buddha and Jesus Christ were premi-paramahansa, and, of course, Swami Vivekananda is in this category as well.

Not only that, the premi-paramahansa wants to serve that Atman he has realized and also sees in others. There is a beautiful verse in Chapter 6 of the Bhagavad Gita, where Lord Krishna explains to Arjuna that 'in his view' that yogi is the best yogi who identifies himself with others; that feels others' joy as his own joy, that feels others' pain as his own pain. Swami Vivekananda belongs to this category of the best yogi.

Patriotism vs Love

No doubt Swamiji had tremendous love for Indians and there were many patriots at that time taking up the struggle against British Imperialism. Swamiji was a patriot and there were political leaders who were also patriots, but what was the difference in the patriotism between these two? I found a very important difference in the reminiscences of Swami Akhandanandaji, a brother disciple of Swami Vivekanandaji, where he points out that while political leaders may indeed love their country, in Swamiji there was a total identification with the country; no difference between you and me, the lover and the beloved. With political leaders there remains a difference, a separateness, between the two. They do not experience complete identification with the lover and the beloved.

But more than this, Swamiji loved all peoples of all countries. He said very clearly that he belonged as much to India as to the rest of the world, "to me what is the difference between India and the rest of the world? Nothing." His love for others was not common human love, but a total identification with others. His humanism, therefore, was much deeper and more comprehensive than the common ideal of humanism.

Seeing Shiva in Jiva

There are two incidents I would like to share that illustrate this. Once when Swamiji was preparing to depart for the USA to address the Parliament of Religions in Chicago, he met Swami Turiyanandaji and Swami

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Brahmanandaji, two brother disciples, in Bombay. He addressed Turiyanandaji saying that he did not know much of so-called religion, but that he could feel the sufferings of other people in his own heart. We need to understand this statement in the light of that verse from the Gita noted earlier wherein Krishna did not say that he is the greatest yogi who meditates and worships Me always, but that he is greatest who identifies himself with everyone; who feels others' joy as his own and who feels others' pain and suffering as his own.

The other incident was recollected by Swami Turiyanandaji of a time when Swami Vivekananda was staying at the home of Balaram Bose, the great householder disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, after his return from America. Turiyananda had gone there to meet Swamiji and found him deep in thought just pacing back and forth. After some time Swamiji began crying bitterly and singing. By the lyrics of the song Turiyanandaji understood that Swamiji was so deeply moved by the suffering of humanity that he just could not contain himself.

Swamiji had a special love for the poor; the illiterate, the exploited, the fallen. Swamiji said, "He who sees Shiva in the poor; in the weak, in the diseased, really worships Shiva. And he who only sees Shiva in the image; his worship is only very preliminary, basic." Sri Ramakrishna said, "Who are you to have compassion for jivas? Not compassion, but see Shiva in jiva, and with that idea worship jiva."

There is a very famous story of an encounter between Swami Vivekananda and the preacher of a cow-protection society. The story goes that after Swamiji's much celebrated return from the West, he was visited in Calcutta by this preacher and Swamiji asked him about his society's programmes and activities. The preacher said that in keeping with traditional Hindu reverence for cows, when cows became old, weak or diseased they had created a shelter where they could be kept and cared for and protected from butchers. Swamiji listened and asked what he wanted from him. The preacher answered that he had come seeking financial help for his programme. Swamiji said that it was a good and noble quest, but noted that many Indians had died from a recent famine and asked if his society had done anything for those starving people. "Those

people died because of their bad karma," replied the preacher. This angered Swamiji very much, but he simply said that if bad karma had resulted in the starvation of people, the same could be said regarding butchers falling upon the cows, yet he protected the cows. The preacher answered, "But the cows are our mother." Swamiji ridiculed him saying, "Indeed, cows are your mother!" In other words, who could give birth to such people? He said that with available funds, first he would address the needs of human beings. If there should be excess moneys, then he would help his society and not before.

Swamiji's Unique Approach

As a monk, Swamiji was unconventional in his approach and inspired many others to serve. One letter to a disciple stated, "Feel for the poor people and seek help from God. That help will come." In another letter to Swami Nirmalanandaji, a brother monk who of course desired liberation and had renounced hearth and home, he wrote: "My dear Tulsi, you have given up everything. Why don't you give up the desire for your liberation as well? Don't care for heaven or devotion or liberation. Work intensely for the devotion and the liberation of others. A sanyasin who has no idea of doing good to his fellows is a brute, not a sanyasin." This idea from Swamiji may be shocking to many, even some monks, but he not only preached this ideal, he practiced it as well.

It should be remembered that the type of service he rendered in the West was different from his service to India. His service to the West was mainly spiritual, because people there were spiritually starved. There he saw spiritual starvation. Their problem was a problem of affluence. Theirs was a hunger of the soul; an appetite that could only be satisfied by food for the soul. In India the need was physical as well as spiritual. There were so many poor, diseased and illiterate people in India, much of which had been caused at that time by the long exploitation of India by Britain.

Swamiji initiated relief work with an outbreak of the plague in Calcutta with the help of his disciple, Sister Nivedita (Margaret Noble), and his disciple, Swami Sandanandaji. He then established the Ramakrishna

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A STORY TO REMEMBER

The Hospital Window

Two men, both seriously ill, occupied the same hospital room. One man was allowed to sit up in his bed for an hour each afternoon to help drain the fluid from his lungs. His bed was next to the room's only window. The other man had to spend all his time flat on his back. The men talked for hours on end about their wives and families, their homes, their jobs and such.

Every afternoon when the man in the bed by the window could sit up, he would pass the time by describing to his roommate all the things he could see outside the window. The other man began to live for those one-hour periods when his bedridden world was enlivened by all the activity and color of the world outside.

As the man by the window described a park with a lake and swans and flowers and children, daily events and the majestic skyline in exquisite detail, the man on the other side of the room would close his eyes and imagine the picturesque scene.

Days and weeks passed in this way.

One morning, the day nurse arrived to bring water for their baths to find the man by the window had died peacefully in his sleep. The other man was saddened at the loss of his friend, but when it seemed appropriate he asked to be moved next to the window. There, slowly and painfully, he propped himself up on one elbow and slowly strained to see for himself the marvels he had been told of. The widow faced a plain brick wall.

As his health steadily improved, the man continually wondered what could have compelled his roommate to have described such wonderful things outside this window. He only realized the depth of the man's kindness to him when the nurse later told him that the man was nearly blind and could not even see the wall.

(Author Unknown)

Zushi Retreat Celebrates Swami Vivekananda's Birth [from page 1]

Swami's talk entitled, Swami Vivekananda's Humanism (see story in this issue).

At the conclusion of the talk a new Japanese-language book, *The Life of Nag Mahasaya*, the great householder devotee of Sri Ramakrishna, was released. The book was translated into Japanese by long-time devotee, Mr. Karino, and chapters of the work have appeared in the Society's regular publication, *The Universal Gospel*, over a few



years and with the completion of the translation the Society has published the book.

Swami noted that the life of this devotee was truly wonderful and so special that he wondered at the difficulty one would have in living by his ideal. "But let us know the ideal," said Swami. "That in itself is justification for publication and then it is up to us."

Both the meeting room and the dining room were utilized for the delicious lunch prasada that was then served. Later, the afternoon session consisted of a lively Q&A session, reading, devotional music and meditation. •

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Mission in 1897 under the ideals of self-realization and service to others with the idea of worship. There is no mention of compassion or help herein, only the idea of worship. In an organization such as the Red Cross, such help is offered to those who are helpless. The emphasis is different with the Ramakrishna Mission where help is offered to the needful with the idea of worship. Swamiji's humanism gave a new orientation to the monastic tradition of Hinduism by initiating humanitarian work by monks in the Modern Age. Though originally challenged, this ideal of serving society as a part of spiritual practice has now been almost universally adopted by other religious orders of Hinduism.

At our Ramakrishna Mission in Varanasi (Benares) there is a hospital. On Swamiji's birthday each year, the patients there are actually worshipped with garlands and sandal-wood paste on their foreheads. So this idea is literally implemented at this hospital; seeing Shiva in the patients and worshipping them so. Narayana means Supreme Divinity. Expressions such as poor-narayana, patient-narayana, illiterate-narayana are commonly heard throughout the activities of the Ramakrishna Mission to keep this ideal at the forefront of service rendered. The Ramakrishna Mission centres throughout the world are implementing this idea of service as worship from Swamiji.

Effect on the Devotee

What is the effect of this idea on the devotee? Firstly, God will be more pleased by this worship than if He is worshipped only in a church or in an image. Secondly, the heart becomes purer, because rather than the constant thoughts of I and mine, our thoughts become more unselfish, more you and your, more thy and thine. And through this process we make spiritual

progress. This is a great strategy for our spiritual practice introduced by Swamiji.

Perhaps you have heard the name of the great dramatist and devotee Girish Chandra Ghosh. He once remarked, "You see, I don't consider Vivekananda great because he is a great scholar or a great monk. I consider him great because he has a great heart." Lord Buddha said that he would not take final nirvana before everyone attains nirvana. He would take birth again and again so that others could reach liberation. Swamiji also said, "It may be that I find it good to get outside my body; to cast it off like a worn-out garment. But I shall not cease to work. I shall inspire men everywhere." Notice that he said everywhere, not only India. The body imposes its limitations, but his spirit, outside the body, has no such limitation and go anywhere and everywhere. He continued, "Until the world shall know that it is one with God."

In conclusion, let our ideal be the same. Let us all try to become a Premi-Vedantin, not just a Jnani-Vedantin. Not just trying to realize the Atman only for ourselves, but let us try to help others in their realization of the Atman. Let us see the Atman, the Shiva in others, and let us try to serve them. Let us try to be more unselfish. Let it make our hearts broader. This will benefit us, as it benefits others. •

THOUGHT OF THE MONTH

*A candle loses nothing by
lighting another candle.*

... Erin Majors

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