



the VEDANTA *Kyokai*

NEWS, UPDATES AND MISCELLANY FROM THE VEDANTA SOCIETY OF JAPAN



Monthly Calendar

• Birthdays •

Sri Sri Gouranga
Saturday, Mar 03

Swami Yogananda
Thursday, Mar 08

Rama Navami
Tuesday, Mar 27

• Kyokai Events •

March Retreat
Sri Sri Ramakrishna Deva
Birth Celebration

Sunday, March 18, 10:30 a.m.
All, with family and friends are
cordially invited.



✘ Thus Spake ✘

"One may gain political and social independence, but if he is a slave to his passions and desires, he cannot feel the pure joy of freedom."

... Swami Vivekananda

"Let him cultivate goodwill without measure towards the whole world, above, below, around, unstinted, unmixed with any feeling of making distinctions or of showing preferences"

... The Buddha

ANNOUNCEMENT

ZUSHI CENTRE MARCH RETREAT TO CELEBRATE BIRTH ANNIVERSARY OF SRI RAMAKRISHNA

The Zushi Centre March Retreat will celebrate the master's birth on Sunday, March 19, from 10:30 a.m. The morning session will include a worship and talk on Sri Ramakrishna followed by prasad lunch.

The afternoon session will feature a programme of devotional music. All, with family and friends, are cordially invited to attend.

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February Retreat Practicing Harmony

A Talk by Swami Medhasananda

Everyone understands that there is so much disharmony nowadays. There are conflicts between religious groups, social groups and country against country. There is so much disharmony; disharmony in the family; disharmony in society. While the technical revolution and Internet has served to bring people nearer to each other, on the other hand there is an even greater necessity for harmony than before. The sad thing is that disharmony is so evident now at both the macro level and the micro level. While there are many expressions of harmony, such as social harmony and harmony between nations, we will concentrate on spiritual or religious harmony for our discussion.

I will start with a wonderful quote from Swami Vivekananda: "I accept all religions that were in the past and worship with them all. I worship God with every one of them in whatever form they worship Him. I shall go to the mosque of the Mohammedan. I shall enter the Christian's church and kneel before the crucifix. I shall enter the Buddhist temple where I shall take refuge in Buddha and in His law. I shall go into the forest and sit down in meditation with the Hindu, who is trying to see the Light which enlightens the heart of everyone. Not only shall I do all this, but I shall keep my heart open for all religions that may come in the future."

Harmony of Religions

Who inspired Swami Vivekananda with this idea of the harmony of religions? This assembly obviously knows that it was Sri Ramakrishna. In ancient times Sri Krishna was the champion of harmony; in the modern age Sri Ramakrishna is the champion of religious harmony. In reading the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna one comes across this idea of the harmony of religions many times. He would say that the man who is able to synthesize is really a perfected man. He would also say, "Why should I be monotonous? I accept and respect the worshippers of Shakti. I accept and respect the worshippers of Vishnu. I accept and respect the followers of Vedanta. I also accept and respect the members of the Brahmo Samaj (a modern age society of protestant Hindu ideas)."

In the Gospel there is also the story of the cloth dyer with a single vat of dye who asks what color one would like. If the request was for blue, the cloth would be dyed blue. If red, then red. Everyone could have their

cloth dyed to their own liking from that same vat. In ancient India the poet and dramatist Kalidasa was famous for his many wonderful examples. In the modern age Sri Ramakrishna is renowned for the examples and parables he used in teaching His disciples.

Again, one devotee asked Sri Ramakrishna, "Revered Sir, what is the difference between a Hindu and a member of the Brahmo Samaj?" Sri Ramakrishna gave this wonderful example by saying: "A flute has seven holes. One flutist may play and perfect but a single note, while another plays various melodies by using all seven holes." He said that this was the difference between the two. The Brahmos play only one note; God without form. The Hindus, on the other hand, bring about many different melodies. "That is to say, they enjoy God in His various forms and aspects."

Acceptance of Underlying Unity

In this respect another question was asked whether God was with form or without form. During that era this was a question that had come to disturb many western-educated Indians. Image worship was very common in India, but as with the Islamic conquerors before them, along with the Christian missionaries of Britain again came the criticism of Hindus as 'idol worshippers'. This caused great confusion: Is God with form or without form? Again, as another example, Sri Ramakrishna solved this by saying that though water, ice and vapor appear to be different, in essence are all the same. In the same way God is sometimes with form and sometimes without form. Another example is of the chameleon in the tree: sometimes it takes the color red, blue or green, and sometimes no color at all.

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Practicing Harmony [from page 2]

Then there is the question of the devotee's relationship with God, the Supreme Reality. There are three schools of Vedanta regarding this relationship; dualism, qualified non-dualism and non-dualism. According to the dualist, God and devotee are completely separate. According to qualified non-dualism God is the whole of which the devotee is a part. Non-dualism proclaims that God and devotee are one and the same.

Sri Ramakrishna reconciled these three ideas by giving Hanumana as an example. When Hanumana is aware of his body (body-consciousness) he thinks he and Rama are different, or God and devotee are different. Again, when he thinks of himself as the embodied Self, or possessing a soul within a body, he thinks that Rama is the whole of which he is a part. When he only has awareness of spirit, he finds no difference between Rama and himself.

As Jesus had said that He and God were one; Sri Ramakrishna also had the same realization saying that at times He felt he was a servant of God, sometimes he felt God was the whole of which He was a part, and at other times He could find no difference between God and Himself.

Whose Faith is Genuine?

There is another issue regarding the authenticity of other faiths. There are many faiths such as Hinduism, Islam, Christianity and Buddhism and within these there can be many sects as well. The question then comes if all these faiths are authentic? Are they true? Are they genuine? In Hinduism we see Shaktas criticize Vaishnavas and vice versa. And we see Christians criticize other sects of Christians. Muslims criticize other sects of Islam. And among these there are those who harshly criticize everyone's faith but their own. So the question of the authenticity of one's faith arises. Sri Ramakrishna gave the example of a pond. The Hindus take water from the pond and call it 'jal'. The Christians take water from the pond and call it 'water'. The Muslim takes water from the same pond and call it 'pani'. These are all water regardless of the name. The same God is called Allah, Bhagavan, Ishwara.

To emphasize this particular point, in his first speech at the Parliament of Religions, Swami Vivekananda (Swamiji) quoted from the wonderful Shiva Mahimna stotra: 'As the beautiful streams, having their sources in different places, all mingle their waters in the sea, O Lord, the different paths which men take in following differing tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee in the same way.'

Swamiji had an idea regarding the harmony of different methods of and thoughts on spiritual practice, or in other words, the harmony of yogas. He designed an emblem for the Ramakrishna Mission highlighting this idea of the synthesis of yoga. I believe most of you are familiar with the symbol and you can see it on the outside wall of our Kyokai. The waves of the ocean symbolize karma yoga. The lotus is the symbol of bhakti yoga. The rising sun is the symbol of jnana yoga. The snake here is the symbol of the kundalini or raja yoga. With the help of all these the Paramatman, the Supreme Reality, is realized and symbolized here by the swan.

The followers, the devotees and the monks of the Ramakrishna Mission should all practice this idea of harmony because Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda is the ideal before them. Everyone should, in fact, practice this idea of harmony, but especially the followers of Sri Ramakrishna. Sri Ramakrishna was not narrow-minded, sectarian or exclusive, He was broad-minded, non-sectarian and inclusive. As you know in our Centres Buddha's birth is observed; Christmas Eve is observed, and we are happy to visit a mosque or church or Shinto shrine. We invite leaders of different religions to give talks and in our literature this idea of harmony of religions is often emphasized.

Understanding Spiritual Harmony

In order to practice spiritual harmony, we need to understand the various aspects of spiritual harmony. There are three such aspects. The first is the harmony of various ways of spiritual practice, or harmony of yoga. Then there is the harmony of the relationship with God. And finally, the harmony of different religions and religious sects. Firstly, while there are four

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Practicing Harmony [from page 3]

yoga paths, we need to understand that these are not exclusive of each other. There is no watertight difference among them, rather, each yoga has a predominate feature. I believe it is interesting how each yoga, though accentuating a particular feature, is not exclusive of another.

Karma yoga is primarily centered on work, but when the karma yogi practices, his basic purpose is to realize the Atman. He must, therefore, have a fair idea about that Atman and that is jnana yoga. Again, he must have devotion to work, and that is bhakti yoga. If he wants to perfect his work, he has to meditate upon it, he has to think about it deeply, and that is raja yoga.

Jnana yoga is primarily focused on knowledge. But when a jnani feels a great attraction for Brahman, the Supreme Reality, that is bhakti. He serves his spiritual teacher, or guru, which is both bhakti and karma yoga. He studies scripture and this is karma yoga. He meditates on the Supreme Reality, again, this is raja yoga.

Bhakti yoga is predominately devotion. The bhakti has his chosen deity and he must know about the nature of this chosen ideal, and this is knowledge, or jnana. His ritualistic practice is definitely karma. He meditates on his chosen ideal, and this is raja.

Raja yoga is meditation. The raja yogi, too, must know the nature of the Paramatman on which he meditates. That is his jnana. The attraction he feels for the Paramatman and his guru is bhakti. Then karma yoga is included as the practitioner exercises different postures and breathing techniques such as pranayama.

Some Pitfalls

As we can see, no single yoga practice is exclusive of the others and there are even some pitfalls in the practice of each yoga. For example, a karma yogi may become too attached to his work and the results of his work. Desire for name and fame in recognition of his work may manifest. A karma yogi must be careful in these regards. A jnana yogi may develop so much love for the study of scripture and engage in argumentation. As Shankara pointed out, this becomes a source of entertainment for the jnani, not a quest for knowl-

edge and liberation. The bhakti yogi can develop too much sentimentality and become too emotional. Swamiji said that the danger here is through too much highly emotional dancing and singing, though the kundalini may rise sharply, it can fall just as sharply and there is a danger of straying from the path. One must be more guided by reasoning and discrimination than by raw, sentimental emotions. The bhakti can also fall into orthodoxy or fanaticism believing that only his chosen ideal is genuine and all others are not. The raja yogi can be tempted by occult powers obtained through their practice. The desire to exercise such powers for the ego and enjoyment can bring their ruin and be their downfall. In harmonizing one's practice, one has to be aware of these pitfalls realizing that a particular yoga practice is not exclusive of the others.

Harmonization in Practice

There is yet another way of harmonizing the predominate features of these four yoga practices; jnana's knowledge, karma's work, bhakti's devotion and raja's meditation. Swami Premeshananda was a highly respected monk of our Order who had also inspired many others to become monks as well. He would say that if one wholeheartedly follows the daily routine of an ashram of the Ramakrishna Order, one finally becomes a perfected soul. He does not need any other spiritual practice - not go to the Himalayas or go into a forest, or take leave for spiritual practice. How is this so? It is because the daily routine of these ashrams encompasses practice of all these yoga forms.

Most of you are familiar with our daily routine here at the Vedanta Kyokai, and this is more or less the model of our ashrams. We meditate both in the morning and evening; this is raja yoga. We decorate the shrine and offer flowers, incense, food and sing bhajans; this is all bhakti yoga. Karma yoga is our activities in publishing and sending out books, upkeep of the grounds and buildings, gardening, even preparing meals and answering the phone and talking to devotees. Jnana yoga is involved with our morning and evening group reading of scripture and personal reading time, and our constant discrimination throughout all these activities that this world is unreal and only the Lord is real. We see that by simply following the daily routine of the

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A STORY TO REMEMBER

A Sioux Creation Story

The Creator gathered all of Creation and said, "I want to hide something from the humans until they are ready for it. It is the realization that they create their own reality."

The eagle said, "Give it to me, I will take it to the moon."

The Creator said, "No. One day they will go there and find it."

The salmon said, "I will bury it on the bottom of the ocean."

"No," said the Creator again. "They will find it there, too."

The buffalo said, "I will bury it on the Great Plains."

The Creator said, "They will cut into the skin of the Earth and find it even there."

Grandmother Mole, who lives in the breast of Mother Earth, and who has no physical eyes but sees with spiritual eyes said, "Put it inside of them."

And the Creator said, "It is done."

(Author –Traditional)

Practicing Harmony [from page 4]

ashram, with purpose and awareness and devotion, we are harmonizing and practicing all the forms of yoga and it is enough. A practical mix of yoga techniques makes spiritual practice interesting as well.

There are various relationships between God and devotee, for example, looking upon God as one's master, as one's friend, as one's child, as one's sweetheart or father or mother. In whatever way appeals to our heart, we may look upon God in that way - there is no contradiction. Then again, we look upon God as the whole of which we are a part. And sometimes we can even look upon God and ourselves as one and the same.

Philosophy of Spiritual Harmony

How do we practice harmony between the many religions and religious sects? Sri Ramakrishna's advice was to hold fast to your own ideal, your own faith, and at

the same time respect other faiths. Respect other religions, other religious scriptures, other religious leaders, devotees and religious places. Study other religious scriptures and get inspiration from them.

What is that which brings unity in diversity? What is that which reconciles conflicting ideas and groups? What is that in which all contradictions meet? What is that which excludes none and includes everyone? Swamiji remarked that it was Hinduism which had discovered the underlying unity behind all diversity long ago. The following are some quotations from the Upanishads which promulgate this underlying unity; 'I bow down to that God who resides in fire; who resides in water; plants, trees, and has covered this whole universe.' Again, 'O Lord, Thou art woman, Thou art man, Thou art the youth, Thou art the maiden, Thou art the old man tottering with his staff, Thou facest everywhere.' The Bhagavad Gita also focuses this underlying unity in God or the Atman: The Lord said, 'O

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meeting room was transformed into an assembly area where teams unpacked books, folded and inserted the information, and repacked the

February Retreat Afternoon Session

After lunch a request was made for karma yoga volunteers to help place information inserts inside recent publications. Soon the upstairs



boxes of books for storage. At 3 p.m. the afternoon session began with a prayer, a reading and a Q&A session.

Following a guided meditation, Shanti-san was requested to lead the assembly in a chorus of her devotional songs in Japanese. •



Practicing Harmony [from page 5]

Arjuna, there is no being higher than Me. As a row of pearls threaded on a string, all the worlds are held on Me.' The same Self, the same Spirit, the same God pervades everyone and everything; saint and sinner, rich and poor, high and low, theist and atheist. As Sri Ramakrishna said, "I see that it is God, Himself, who has become all this; men, images and shalagram (a stone representing Vishnu). I see one alone in all. I do not see two, I see only one."

The Same Spirit Pervades All

So, if we want to do away with disharmony and its evils, we have to appreciate the underlying spirit of harmony; unity in Atman, unity in God, unity in Self. We must believe in that and give emphasis to that in our interaction with others. There are many conferences on religious harmony. In India Gandiji tried on many occasions to bring about harmony between Muslim and Hindu. After the 9/11 attacks in the USA in 2001 many religious conferences were held in the name of harmony. I, too, have had occasion to attend conferences on religious harmony. Why is it that we don't see much effect from such conferences? The reason is that most of the participant leaders do not really believe in this underlying unity of existence. I don't say that this is only the responsibility of the leaders; in democracies everyone has his own conscience and freedom of belief. Unless the leaders, as well as the devotees and common people, believe, appreciate and practice this underlying unity of existence, the harmony of religions is impossible.

Spirituality-based Harmony is Unique

The same spirit pervades everyone and everything. This concept of spirituality-based harmony is unique for five reasons. Firstly, it synthesizes individual freedom and social obligations; individual freedom means regarding individual aptitude, taste and capacity with respect. Secondly, this concept recommends a positive and peaceful way of harmony. No political or philosophical violence or bloodshed results. Thirdly, it is all inclusive and embraces all seemingly different faiths and groups. We see scientific groups where scientists who believe in God are excluded by the others. In communist society the rich and bourgeois are ex-

cluded. Even among Hindus there are those who preach that Sri Krishna is the only God. If you preach that Krishna is the only God, or that Jesus is the only son of God, or that Mohammed is the last prophet, you exclude all others who don't accept that view. Spirituality-based harmony as discussed above includes everyone. Fourthly, this concept is based upon truth realized by many illumined souls of India. The early Vedic sages realized that Brahman is everywhere, pervading everyone and everything. Fifthly, and most importantly, this concept of spirituality-based harmony paves the way for the harmony of various other political and social aspects of human life.

The Age of Harmonism

We need a philosophy which can be the basis for harmony in all aspects of human life. A former student of the college I was associated with near Belur Math and now a distinguished economist holding an office with the world bank, once gave an address to that college's student body. In his address he said that capitalism as a world system had been experimented and failed. Communism, too, had been experimented and failed. "Now," he said, "the age of harmonism has arrived, and I believe it will succeed."•

THOUGHT OF THE MONTH

*You must be the change you
wish to see in the world.*

... Mahatma Gandhi

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