



the VEDANTA Kyokai

NEWS, UPDATES AND MISCELLANY FROM THE VEDANTA SOCIETY OF JAPAN



Monthly Calendar

• Birthdays •

Bhagavan Buddha
Wednesday, May 2

• Kyokai Events •

May Retreat

Subject: Lord Buddha

Guest Speaker:

Professor Yokoyama

Sunday, May 20, 11 a.m.

All, with family and friends are cordially invited.



✧ Thus Spake ✧

"All that we are is the result of what we have thought. The mind is everything. What we think we become." ... Lord Buddha

"All knowledge that the world has ever received comes from the mind; the infinite library of the universe is in our own mind." ... Swami Vivekananda

APRIL RETREAT

Sri Chaitanya - His Life and Teachings

A Talk by Swami Medhasananda

Sri Chaitanya Deva was a great saint of medieval Bengal and the founder of Bengal Vaishnavism. There are many references to Sri Chaitanya in the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna; his love for God; his renunciation for God. Sri Ramakrishna also sang many songs related to Sri Chaitanya. Not only did Sri Ramakrishna inspire devotees with examples of Sri Chaitanya, but he was greatly influenced by Sri Chaitanya's wonderful spiritual life. Devotees were even given to understand that Sri Ramakrishna had, in fact, had been born as Sri Chaitanya in his former incarnation.

What is Vaishnavism?

Vaishnavism comes from the word Vishnu. The devotee of Vishnu is a Vaishnava and the philosophy and practice is known as Vaishnavism. The three great Gods according to Hinduism are Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. Each of these three have distinct functions with regard to this universe. The function of

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April Retreat (from page 1)

Brahma is to create. Vishnu is in charge of sustenance. Shiva is charged with destruction of this universe. According to Hindu philosophy, there is no final destruction. It is not a total annihilation, it is a change of state from gross to subtle. What Shiva does is change the gross universe into the subtle universe.

It is interesting to note that each of these great Gods have three aspects, the primary ones just mentioned and two more. They are each Supreme Gods; meaning that Vishnu not only sustains, he also creates and destroys. So to the devotee of Vishnu he not only sustains the universe, he also creates and destroys the universe. The same is true with regard to the devotee of Shiva, to whom Shiva also creates and sustains. They are also each the Supreme Reality; meaning that they have no form or quality, but are pure consciousness. Unless we understand this point, we may have trouble understanding Shiva and Vishnu. This can be particularly difficult for foreigners and other religions to understand. One of these three can be in charge of a particular function; each performs the role of a supreme God - creating, preserving and destroying; and each are the Supreme Reality as Brahman.

Background

The devotees of Vishnu are known as Vaishnavas and the devotees of Shiva are known as Shaivas. There are many sects among these Vaishnavas; Rama's devotees are known as Ramayets; Ramananda devotees are known as Ramanandis; Ramanuja followers are Ramanujis; Nimbarka is another great sage whose followers are Nimbarkis. The Bengal Vaishnava, founded by Sri Krishna Chaitanya (1485-1533), are known as Gauriya Vaishnava. In ancient times the Bengal area was known as Gaur and Gauriya is derived from that. As for his name, Sri Krishna Chaitanya; Sri is honorific, Krishna you understand, and Chaitanya means consciousness. He is also known as Sri Gauranga.

At the time of his birth, India was under Muslim rule and there was a lot of religious persecution. Hindu temples were destroyed and people were forced to convert to Islam. In Hindu society too, there was a lot of caste suppression; higher castes suppressing lower castes. Religion had become formal and ritualistic,

genuine spiritualism had been nearly lost and many vices were rampant in society. In such a background many genuine devotees prayed to the Lord to appear, to incarnate, as He had promised in two famous verses of the Bhagavad Gita. Therein Krishna says that in every age, whenever there is a predominance of vice, to punish the wicked and protect the virtuous and establish religion, he incarnates himself.

Birth and Youth

Listening to the prayers of these sincere devotees, the Lord incarnated as Sri Chaitanya. He was born in Navadvipa, on the bank of the Ganga in Bengal to Jagannath Mishra and Sachi Devi, a very pious family. His elder brother became a monk. In his childhood, Sri Chaitanya (named Nimai) was very naughty - there is some similarity with Swami Vivekananda in this regard. As Brahmins would bathe in the Ganga, Nimai would grab at their legs. It is said that as Brahmins would sit on the bank and offer food to the Lord with closed eyes, young Nimai would stealthily approach, eat the food and run away. The neighboring ladies would also complain to Nimai's mother that her son was making their children cry. So many complaints poured into the ears of his parents, Jagannath and Sachi Devi.

Another trait of the child was his mental brilliance and devotion to Vishnu. As he grew he became more devoted to his studies, becoming a great scholar of Sanskrit. Later on he opened a Sanskrit school where he taught. Nimai would often invite Sanskrit scholars of the area to engage in scriptural arguments and took great delight in defeating them. As a result such scholars were afraid of confronting Nimai. Still later he came in contact with a reputed Vaishnava saint, Ishvara Puri, and his devotion to Vishnu and Krishna, the incarnation of Vishnu, became thousand-fold.

Ban on Singing Kirtan

Meanwhile he was married to Lakshmi Devi and upon her passing he married Vishnu Priya Devi. The name is significant in that Priya means beloved, so her name, Vishnu Priya, means one who is beloved of Vishnu. She was also a very devoted girl. Nimai's time was spent in either teaching at his school or in singing or chanting the name of Krishna. Nimai not only sang alone, he also loved singing and chanting and dancing in the

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Swami Visits Kyushu, China & Nagoya



On April 16, the General Secretary released two new books translated from English into Chinese at Hangzhou University in Hangzhou, translated by the university's Professor Wang. The books are Selected Works of Swami Vivekananda and Pantanjali's Yoga Sutras by the late Swami Prabhavanandaji of the Vedanta Society of Southern California.

Swami Smarananandaji Maharaj also gave a discourse on the Bhagavad Gita to a group of univer-

sity students. He then attended an International Conference on Dialogue of Civilizations organized by Hangzhou University where he also gave a talk. Swami Medhasananda also attended this conference and replied to a question on the caste system in India put to him during the Q&A session.

During his stay in Shanghai, Swami Medhasananda stayed with Mr. Alarka Kundu and his wife, Babli. The Kundus are Indian devotees and Alarka is a former student of a Ramakrishna Mission college in India, and the swami is grateful for the great care they showed him. Swami also visited a Buddhist temple complex in Shanghai where he witnessed Chinese devotees at prayer in the temple and some monks in residence there.

Visit to Nagoya

On April 22, Swami Medhasananda delivered an address to a group of about 50 yoga students in Nagoya. The visit was organized by Ms. Ishaka, a veteran yoga teacher and long time subscriber to the Kyokai's magazine. The talk, given in Japanese, was held in a hall in a local Shinto Shrine compound on the theme of Physical Health and Mental Health. After the talk all the participants gave self-introductions followed by a question and answer session. The programme ended with a guided meditation. •

Fukuoka

Swami Medhasananda gave a discourse on Bhakti Yoga before the Yoga Niketan group of Mr. Keshin Kimura in Fukuoka (Kyushu) on March 30th. Swami addressed the group in Japanese. A question and answer session took place during lunch and Ms. Shoko Tachibori helped with interpretation. The meeting was organized by Ms. Kishi.

Beppu

Later that day the swami proceeded on to Beppu by car and stayed with Professor D. N. Sinha of Beppu University. On the following day, March 31st, Swami again spoke on Bhakti Yoga in a rented space organized by Ms. Michiko Shinriki. During a tea break the group enjoyed two beautiful songs sung by Mrs. Dorina Sinha. Swami was again assisted by Ms. Tachibori during the question and answer session that followed.

Visit to China

Swami Medhasananda visited Shanghai from April 16 to April 20 on the occasion of a visit to China by Revered Swami Smarananandaji, General Secretary of the Ramakrishna Mission. Revered Maharaj visited Beijing (Peking) and gave a talk at Peking University and the Indian Embassy in Beijing.

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name of Krishna in the company of growing numbers of devotees. Many instruments were also used.

The Muslim ruler of the area did not like this group singing. He thought it was a disturbance that created a lot of noise. He ordered a ban against such public singing declaring it disturbed the public peace. When this news reached Nimai's ears he said he would not obey such an order. He organized hundreds of devotees to join in public singing and chanting and dancing. When this huge kirtan (devotional singing) party approached the residence of that Muslim ruler he became very fearful. Rather than come out and confront the crowd, he stayed hidden within. Nimai then asked to meet him and when he gathered the courage to meet with him, Nimai said that they were chanting the name of God and why should there be a ban against that? The ruler understood and lifted the ban.

Becoming a Sannyasi

This kind of group singing continued for years and Nimai's devotion grew until he realized it was impossible for him to continue a householder's life. He decided to renounce and persuaded his mother to give him permission. One night as his wife lay sleeping, Nimai left home. A similar story is told of Gautama Buddha, but perhaps a greater attraction for family life existed for Siddhartha with the birth of a child, too. Nimai went to a place called Katwa where he met a saint belonging to the Dasanami sect of sannyasins. This order of monks was founded by the great saint Shankaracharya. Dasanami means ten names and corresponds with ten sub-sect orders of monks. These names include giri meaning mountain, aranya means forest and puri means house, for example. The Ramakrishna Mission belongs to the Puri sect of the Dasanami order of monks since Sri Ramakrishna received initiation into sannyasi from Tota Puri. The monk Nimai met belonged to the Bharati sect of the Dasanamis and was known as Kesava Bharati.

Nimai prayed to him to initiate him into the order. Kesava Bharati did not know much about Nimai other than his renown as a great scholar of Sanskrit. At this time Nimai was also in the prime of his youth and very physically handsome and Kesava Bharati wanted to test his fitness to embrace the life of renunciation as a sannyasi. Kesava's test was very unique. It is said that one who can control his palate (hankering for food) can control other cravings more easily. So Kesava

Bharati put some grains of sugar on his tongue. In our case the sugar would immediately melt and we would enjoy the sweetness. In Nimai's case, the granules of sugar did not dissolve at all, showing complete control over this sense. Kesava Bharati initiated him as Sri Krishna Chaitanya.

Sri Chaitanya then went to Puri in the state of Orissa. In Puri there is a very famous temple to Lord Jagannath: Jagannath means one who is Lord of the universe and is a form of Vishnu. Sri Chaitanya passed his days there visiting the temple and praying and chanting to the Lord. The pang of anguish and separation from the Lord he felt would generate such heat that the leaves of the tree under which he sat would smolder. We read in the life of Sri Ramakrishna where the pang of separation from the Lord would generate such heat that the Brahmani could not touch him, and she would have to wrap a cloth around him in order to lead him to the Ganga to bathe.

States of Consciousness

Sri Chaitanya had three types of state (dasha) or condition: bahyadasha, ardha'bahya dasha and antar'dasha. In bahyadasha he experienced both inner and outer consciousness and in that state he could both sing and dance with the devotees. In ardha'bahya dasha he experienced inner consciousness and outer semi-consciousness and he could only dance and not sing. In the highest state, antardasha, he had only inner consciousness and he could neither sing nor dance, but remained in the states of nirvikalpa samadhi and/or savikalpa samadhi. Again, we have discussed many such similarities in Sri Ramakrishna's life in the past.

In savikalpa samadhi there still remains the appearance of differences between the devotee, devotion and God; or dhyana (meditation), dhyeya (the object of meditation or the Supreme Reality) and dhyata (the person who is meditating). In devotion we refer to this as Bhakta (devotee) Bhagavan (God) and Bhakti (devotion) and an awareness of these differences still exists in savikalpa samadhi. In nirvikalpa samadhi this awareness is totally gone and all merge as one.

Sri Chaitanya had an ever growing number of devotees and followers. There are places where Sri Chaitanya lived in Puri that are still maintained. If you visit even now, you can feel a wonderful spiritual vibration. Sri Chaitanya took pilgrimages to south India

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A Story to Remember

It Filled the Whole Room

A wealthy businessman in Hong Kong had spent the best years of his life building up his mammoth textile business. One day, he was told that he was dying from an incurable disease. His immediate thought was of his business. Who would carry it on? And which of his three sons could he trust it to?

He called his three sons and gave them a 10 dollar bill each. To each he said, go into the market place and buy something that will fill this empty room. You must not spend anything more than 10 dollars and you must be back before sunset."

When evening came, the first boy dragged a bale of hay into the room. When he undid it, it hid two walls of the room. The old man gave a grunt of satisfaction. The second boy brought in two bags of cotton and when he undid them it covered the three walls.

"Excellent!" exclaimed the old man. Then he turned to the third boy, "what have you bought?"

"Father," he replied uncertainly. "Part of the money went to feed a hungry child, and part I gave to a church. Afterwards I found that I had only one dollar left. With that I bought this candle."

Saying that, he lit the candle and its light filled the whole room!

- www.ramakrishnamath.com

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and later to Benares (Varanasi) and Vrindaban. He had a special attraction for Vrindaban because of its association with the sport of Sri Krishna's life. Sri Krishna had been born there some 2500 years earlier and all those locations associated with his life in Vrindaban had been forgotten. All these holy places or trithas were long buried and here and there only mounds could be seen. When Sri Chaitanya visited a particular spot and had a spiritual experience it was understood that that locale had an association with Sri Krishna. These places were excavated and some relics of Sri Krishna's era were discovered. The grove of Niduban was discovered in this way.

His Passing and Legacy

He later returned to Puri and passed his last days there. How he passed away is shrouded in mystery.

According to one opinion, he entered the shrine and merged into the image of Jagannath there. According to another, he drowned in the Bay of Bengal. This because he was in an ecstatic state in thoughts of Krishna most of the time. For example, if he spotted a forest grove, he would take it to be Vrindaban. If there was a river or body of water, he would take it to be the Yamuna River. In one such ecstasy it is surmised he drowned in the Bay of Bengal in 1533.

Sri Chaitanya left a great impact upon Indian culture and society. As mentioned earlier, real spirituality had nearly been lost and had been replaced by ritualism in the name of religion. By his own example, Sri Chaitanya demonstrated genuine spiritual life. For about four-hundred years the impact of Sri Chaitanya was very palpable, especially in eastern India. I also

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mentioned caste discrimination in society earlier; Sri Krishna solved this by declaring that there was no caste distinction among the devotees of God. There were devotees who belonged to many different castes among his followers. Not only that; there was also one Muslim who was known as Yavan Haidas.

Chanting and Love of God

Sri Chaitanya's teaching was that one must grow pure, ecstatic love for Sri Krishna, because Sri Krishna was God Himself. Sri Radha was his Shakti (power of God) and though they took birth as two, they cannot be separated and are one. As fire and the power to burn cannot be separated, Krishna and Radha cannot be separated. Sri Ramakrishna said the same in that Brahman and Shakti (or Prakriti) cannot be separated.

How do we grow this love for the Lord? Sri Chaitanya said this can be done by continuous chanting and remembrance of God. Sri Chaitanya gave emphasis on group chanting. His famous chant is of Hari, Krishna and Rama, the three names of Vishnu. These are repeated in combination to total sixteen names in two verses and is called a Maha Mantra.

Three Primary Teachings

Swami A. C. Bhaktivedanta started ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness) in the U.S. and in my youth we saw many pictures of young Americans with shaved heads and marks on their foreheads, singing and dancing on the streets of New York and elsewhere singing just these two lines in differing tempos and accompaniments. Being from Bengal I know this chant very well. Why don't you join me? It goes like this:

*Hare, Krishna, Hare, Krishna, Krishna, Krishna, Hare, Hare
Hare, Rama, Hare, Rama, Rama, Rama, Hare, Hare.*

(Swami led the group in chanting along.)

What is the effect of this chanting? Firstly, the heart is purified and then love for God grows. What else does the devotee need? Purification of the heart and love for the Lord. Not only that; a holy vibration is created in this environment. So Sri Chaitanya recommended this practice for his followers. At the same time he stressed that one should be compassionate with creatures. He was also very strict about leading a moral life. These were the three primary teachings.

Teachings in Eight Verses

Although he was a great scholar, he didn't write commentaries on scripture like Shankara had. It is told that before he became a monk, one day he was boating with a friend and fellow scholar. While they were talking Nimai revealed that he had written a commentary on certain scripture and asked if he would like to hear it. With great enthusiasm the scholarly Nimai launched into his commentary and gradually noticed his friend's face becoming increasingly pale. Nimai later asked his friend what was wrong and finally at Nimai's insistence he divulged that he had written a commentary on the same subject. After hearing Nimai's treatise, however, he admitted that he realized how insignificant his own work on the subject was. The moment Nimai heard this, he threw his manuscript overboard and this incident ended his writing commentaries. The only known work written by Sri Chaitanya is called Shikshashtaka, or eight verses, which contain his teachings that I will summarize with my remaining time.

Verse I:

Chanting the name of Sri Krishna and singing his glories purifies one's heart.

It puts out the fire of worldliness; it serves nectar and finally gives liberation.

Verse II:

The names of the Lord are many and the Lord's power is instilled in those names.

There is no fixed time for chanting these names, but so unfortunate am I that I still don't chant the name.

Verse III:

Be humbler than a blade of grass; have more forbearance than the trees.

Why? Grass is trampled underfoot and trees are carved, plucked and burned without complaint.

Give honor to one who is very lowly and chant the Lord's name always.

Through this our egotism is subjugated and we can practice humility.

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Verse IV:

O Lord I don't want wealth, no friends, no relatives, no beautiful woman, no poetry; I want pure love for your lotus feet. I don't mind if I am born again and again, I only want pure love for thee.

Verse V:

O Lord I am your servant. I am distressed by falling into the ocean of worldliness. Please regard me as the dust of your feet. I am humbler than the humblest; please be gracious with me.

We see here that total surrender is necessary.

Verse VI:

O Lord, when by chanting your name, will my eyes shed tears continuously, will my voice be choked, and will my body tremble in joy. When will that blessed day arrive, O Lord.

Sri Ramakrishna said that the criteria for knowing one has advanced spiritually is when by hearing God's name just once you start shedding tears. If we compare this ideal state to ourselves, we may well wonder what will happen to us. Just moments ago we all chanted together and there was no shedding of tears, no choking of voices. Bodies were not trembling. But this is the ideal we should reach.

Verse VII:

In the pang of separation from the Lord, every moment feels like ages to me. The whole universe appears to be void. I wonder when that time will come.

This is how the devotee should feel when they practice devotion. Sri Ramakrishna would say that people will shed jugs of tears for family, friends and wealth, but

who is going to shed tears for the Lord? Unless we really feel for the Lord, there cannot be any advancement in spirituality. Balaram Bose, the great householder devotee, once asked Sri Ramakrishna that although he had called on God, remembered God and praised Him so many times, why couldn't he have the vision of God? Sri Ramakrishna answered by asking if he really felt for God as he felt for his own children. Balaram honestly replied that, no, he didn't. Until and unless our separation from God seems like ages, we have not advanced in spiritual life. God will grant us his vision when we reach that state.

Verse VIII:

O Lord, you may crush me with a hug or give me tremendous pain by denying your vision to me; but however you chose to behave with me, you will verily be the Lord of my heart.

This is love for the sake of love. This is the purest love. I don't mind if my beloved doesn't return my love. More so, I don't even mind if my beloved tortures me and causes me pain. As we often see in the lives of the devotees, there are so many troubles and sufferings. The genuine devotee doesn't mind these sufferings. Sri Chaitanya and Sri Ramakrishna said the same thing. 'O Lord, I don't want anything. I don't want friends, wealth, property, no name, no fame, no physical comforts, I want only you. I want pure devotion to you. You are the Lord of my heart forever.' •

Thought of the Month

Compassion is the basis of all morality.

- Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860)

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