



The Vedanta Kyokai

News, Updates and Miscellany from the Vedanta Society of Japan

April 2004

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Thus Spake...

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

... Sri Ramakrishna

"Riches are not from the abundance of worldly goods, but from a contented mind"

... The Prophet Muhammad

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Monthly Calendar

• BIRTHDAYS •

Sri Shankaracharia
24 Apr

• KYOKAI EVENTS •

Zushi Retreat
Sunday 18 April
Morning Session 11 a.m.
Lunch Prasad 12:30
Afternoon Session 3PM

All are invited to attend!

Zushi Retreat Fetes Sri Ramakrishna's 169th Birth Anniversary

On Sunday, March 21st, the Vedanta Society of Japan celebrated the 169th birth anniversary of Sri Sri Ramakrishna Deva at the Zushi Centre. Although the day's programme started at 6 a.m. with mangalarati, chanting, bhajans and meditation, most visitors began arriving after 10 a.m. to participate in the offering and meditation in the main shrine room conducted by Swami Medhasananda at 10:30.

At 11 a.m. the Swami directed everyone's attention to the adjacent meeting room to commence the morning talk session. After chanting, a brief reading from The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna in English and Japanese and a song by Mr. Subhas Mukhopadhyay accompanied on tabla by Mr. Dinesh Chandra, the Swami introduced the special guest speaker H. E. Sri Manilal Tripathi, Ambassador of India to Japan.

Zushi Retreat (cont from page 1)

Early in his talk, Ambassador Tripathi stated that the best homage one could pay Sri Ramakrishna on this birth anniversary "would be to rededicate ourselves to the essence of His spiritual legacy." He went on to ask, "What did Sri Ramakrishna teach? What is the essence of His spiritual legacy?"

"To my mind," he continued, "the most profound aspect of Sri Ramakrishna's sayings was the easy manner in which he was able to express His thoughts and ideas. He had the remarkable gift of being able explain the most complex philosophical propositions in the simplest of language that everyone could easily understand."

"As Sri Ramakrishna saw it," he summated, "religion is not a house in which one lives. It is like a road or path that one takes to reach a destination. And there could be many paths to reach the same destination. If this truth, explained by Him in such simple terms, is correctly perceived, there would be no room for religious dogmatism or rigidity. There would be no intolerance. There would be no disharmony, least of all bloodshed in the name of religion."

The Ambassador went on to point out that Sri Ramakrishna did not preach a new religion; that He wanted each one to follow his own faith and his own calling with greater devotion; that His desire was that each human being should understand and love the rest of mankind. "...the simple words of eternal wisdom that Sri Ramakrishna uttered and Vivekananda devoted his lifetime to spread, can bring us back to the path of sanity."

Before concluding his remarks with a verse from Chapter 6 of the Bhagavad Gita, the Ambassador summarized his remarks by saying, "Swami Vivekananda and the Ramakrishna Mission brought into focus the philosophy of karma yoga - the yoga of action - in a manner that all can comprehend easily:

serve mankind in any way you can without ulterior motives; that is the surest way to attain the Truth. The best way to honour the legacy of Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda would be to dedicate ourselves to this human dimension of religion; to undertake to revive, nurture and promote this spirit of service and of harmony."

After thanking the Ambassador for his presentation, the Swami referred to his speech by stating that with the founding of the Ramakrishna Order the idea of service and secular relief as practiced by the monks of the Order had not been a significant part of the Indian ethos since the decline of Buddhism.

He also pointed out in this connection that even among the 'monk class', themselves elective outcasts of society, the monks of the Ramakrishna Order were once regarded as the 'sweeper class' of monks. This was because they served one and all, regardless of social constraints, religion or ethnicity. They would nurse patients, clean hospitals or whatever was required in the spirit of service. The dedication of these early missionaries and the growing regard for the teachings of Ramakrishna as postulated by Swami Vivekananda gradually changed this attitude. Now many other monastic orders in India who once ridiculed or marginalized the Ramakrishna Order operate hospitals and dispensaries in the spirit of service as well.

Next the Swami took up his topic, 'The Appeal of Sri Ramakrishna'. "This appeal is simple and yet profound. Look at that photograph," he said pointing to garlanded picture on the wall behind him. "On the surface, not much is really remarkable about it. Not especially handsome or even clean-shaven. Certainly not impressively dressed," he said with a smile. "And yet, to those who have eyes to see, there is something very special there.

In fact, during his lifetime at Dakshineswar

Zushi Retreat (cont from page 2)

many neighbors referred to him as 'that mad priest of the Kali Temple.' When Narendra, the future Swami Vivekananda, was confronted by one of his professors, a Christian who admired and recognised the great potential in the young student, as to why he would go to Sri Ramakrishna, an ordinary temple priest, the answer was direct, 'Sir, I had no other way; no alternative but to surrender.' "

"Again, when the famous religious leader and great orator, Keshab Chandra Sen and his followers would visit Dakshineswar, he would listen to Sri Ramakrishna in rapt attention. At times some of his followers would be embarrassed by Keshab's silence and urge their leader to make his own comments. At this Keshab told them to keep quiet and listen, saying to interject his ideas would be like 'trying to sell a needle to a blacksmith.' "

"The young disciples would argue and fight with the Master before surrendering. They realised He understood more about them they knew of themselves. They were like glass cases and the Master could perceive their present, past and future, conscious and subconscious mind, offering the highest goal of human life, liberation, with tremendous, unselfish love. Swami Vivekananda, himself, had said that even with his long association with the Master, 'I could not fathom the depth of Sri Ramakrishna.' "

The Swami concluded his remarks with a story regarding the circumstances behind the photograph now revered in households and Vedanta Centres the world over. Sri Ramakrishna had originally refused to have his picture taken when devotees first proposed the idea. Undaunted, arrangements were made for a photographer to come to Dakshineswar, but Sri Ramakrishna, declining to be photographed, left the room and sat on the terrace of the Vishnu Temple. Narendra, who happened to be present, came to the rescue. He made the Master enter into samadi instantly by initiating spiritual conversation. Then, at his bidding, the photo was immediately taken. Later when the photo was shown to Sri Ramakrishna, he commented that it represented the highest state of yogic samadi. "So even a photo of Sri Ramakrishna, which appears to be outwardly ordinary and unimpressive, is really extraordinary with a tremendous appeal to devotees and to any spiritually advanced souls", the Swami said.

The morning session and all partook of a sumptuous lunch prasada made possible by the courtesy of Mr. Shyamal Kar and Mrs. Rita Kar. This celebration at the Zushi Centre broke all previous records with over 100 members and guests in attendance the majority of whom were Japanese; many staying for a special cultural programme of music and songs in the afternoon (see Musical Programme story).

Swami Gives First Talk in Tajimi

On Saturday, 28th of February, the Swami gave a talk for the first time in Tajimi, Gifu Prefecture which was organized by Mrs. Rie Ueno and friends. Thirty-two attendees, including 8 boys and girls ranging from elementary to high school age, were all glad for the experience. Everyone enjoyed the three-hour programme that included a twenty-minute Q&A session and a five-minute meditation. Following Vedic chanting, the Swami mentioned the long relationship between India and Japan, and then spoke on the basics of Hinduism and Hindu ideas on the attainment of inner peace in Japanese. After the talk, some offered the Swami a sampling of home-made Japanese dishes. It was a precious, delightful day for all.

●Thought of the Month●

It is not because things are difficult
that we do not dare,
it is because we do not dare
that they are difficult.

- Seneca

Musical Programme Delights One and All

As part of the Society's celebration of Sri Ramakrishna's 169th Birth Anniversary, a multi-cultural music programme performed by the Society's devotees and friends had been planned to include songs in Sanskrit, Bengali, Japanese and English. After lunch the upstairs meeting room and shrine became a flurry of activity in preparation for this highly anticipated event.

Under the supervision of Mr. Atsushi Suzuki, the Society's professional (and ever-willing-volunteer) sound engineer; carpets, amplifiers, mixing boards, MD and CD players, microphones, stands, speakers and instruments were either shifted, put away, transformed or set-up in the main shrine room. As 3 p.m. drew near, sounds of rehearsing musicians emanated from behind closed doors. Vocal exercising from the garden area and elsewhere, and the familiar "oo - oo - ah - ah" of the Japanese-style sound check charged the atmosphere. Guests and participants maneuvered for preferred seating in back of the shrine, in the carpeted hall and in the meeting room. As usual, Swami Medhasananda encouraged and directed traffic with "Move closer!", "Come, sit here!", and "So-and-so-san, can you see from back there?"

Satisfied that all were accommodated, the Swami welcomed all and formally launched the programme with a hymn accompanied by Mr. Subhas Mukhopadhyay (visiting from Canada) and his son, Sumit Mukhopadhyay, who will be leaving Japan in April, and Mr. Moichi Chiba, affectionately known as Mo-kun at the Centre. At the last minute, they were also joined onstage by our friend and special guest Mr. Kenji Inoue on tanpura.

This ensemble set the standard for a full two-and-a-half hours of music and fun at the feet of the Master. The performers included the rich-voiced stylings of Mr. Samudra Datta Gupta accompanying himself on harmonium; the ever popular Ms. Rita Kar also on harmonium; more songs from Mr. Subhas Mukhopadhyay; the beautifully lilting voice of Ms. Ananya Karmakar; original Japanese songs written, arranged and performed by Ms. Kaori Izumida (Shanti); sing-along songs in English written by Rabindra Danks, sung by Lonnie Hirsch, along with an original "I Take Your Name" written by Lonnie for the occasion. But the grand finale was the excellent sitar and tabla recital performed by Mr. Inoue and Mr. Dinesh Chandra (new to Tokyo), two professional musicians who had just met, yet played like they had rehearsed this recital for days.

At the close tea was served and the crowd thinned as the guests began to take their leave and make the journey home.

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A STORY TO REMEMBER

Every-Minute Zen

Zen students are with their masters at least ten years before they presume to teach others. Nan-in was visited by Tenno, who, having passed his apprenticeship, had become a teacher. The day happened to be rainy, so Tenno wore wooden clogs and carried an umbrella. After greeting him, Nan-in remarked, "I suppose you left your wooden clogs in the vestibule. I want to know if your umbrella is on the right or left side of the clogs."

Tenno, confused, had no instant answer. He realized that he was unable to carry his Zen every minute. He became Nan-in's pupil and studied six more years to accomplish this every-minute Zen.

- from Zen Traditions

Swami Visits Beppu

On Sunday, March 14th the devotees of Beppu enjoyed their second retreat with Swami Medhasananda. We had received the Swami on the evening of the 13th and on the morning of the 14th met at a devotee's apartment for prayer and reading from the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna. This was followed by a guided meditation conducted by the Swami in Japanese. At noon a gathering of 30 devotees and guests, including some from Nagasaki and Kumamoto City, met at the oldest public hall in Beppu City.

There the Swami gave a talk entitled the 'Saints of India' pointing out that many Indians believe the fulfilment of life is in spiritual realization. These saints come from many walks of life. Monks and householders, men and women alike pursue the realization of God, some attaining sainthood.

One such saint was the great poetess, Mirabai, who remained devoted to Krishna through many trials and much suffering. Mira spoke of her devotion and unshakable faith in her poems, many referring to her favorite aspect of the child Krishna. Before the Q&A session, the Swami, in response to our request, sang a devotional song from Tagore which he translated for us. The talk was ably interpreted by

Ms. Shoko Tachibori.

During the tea break, a song on Sri Ramakrishna was sung by an Indian devotee of Beppu City and a Bengali folk song was performed by a Japanese devotee.

Throughout most of the retreat the Swami had managed quite well in the Japanese language, even making jokes that brought peals of laughter. The lecture had stimulated the mind and the songs had stirred our hearts; and as the Swami pointed out, the goal is achieved in uniting the heart and mind.

The following day some of us took the Swami to visit Usa Shrine in Usa City, where we paid our respects. Upon coming to a pond, the Swami picked up a small, flat stone and tossed it. To our delight and surprise, the stone skipped across the pond at least five times.

These and other activities; of taking meals together; of walking through the neighborhood to the lecture hall; are all pleasant memories of the brief three days spent with the Swami and of 'satsang' (spiritual session with a holy person).

[See the original story contributed by Ms. Michiko Shinriki in the Japanese edition.]



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Sri Ramakrishna's 169th Birth Anniversary at Zushi Centre 2004



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