



The Vedanta Kyokai

News, Updates and Miscellany from the Vedanta Society of Japan

July - August 2004

Volume 2 Number 7

Thus Spake...

"Give up this dry discussion, this hotch-potch of philosophy. Who has been able to know God by reasoning?" ... The Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi

"All attempts to explain God are in Vain; O Nanak, admit His greatness. He alone knows Himself." ... Guru Nanak

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Monthly Calendar

• Birthdays •

Swami Ramakrishnananda
Tuesday, July 15

• Kyokai Events •

ZUSHI RETREAT
Sunday 18 July 11 a.m.
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Tokyo Commemorates Sri Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda

Once a year—for 11 consecutive years, guests, well-wishers, friends and members of the Vedanta Society of Japan (Nippon Vedanta Kyokai) transform the public hall/theatre (Toshima Kohkaido) in Tokyo's Toshima Ward into a veritable shrine of religious tolerance and universal wisdom in a public celebration of the birth of that greatest of the world's modern-day prophets, Swami Vivekananda.

Each June is the main venue by which the Society offers Swamiji's universal message to the Japanese public. No fees are charged and no collection plate is ever passed. The event is mainly funded by advertising space in a special brochure published for the occasion and other donations.

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Tokyo Commemorates (cont from page 1)

A broad discussion of Swamiji's unique and thought-provoking teachings for understanding the practical value of faith and in undertaking the pursuit of spiritual life are highlighted and explored by a panel of scholarly speakers from many faiths and points of view. This year the Celebration Committee decided to introduce another of the Ramakrishna Mission's Holy Trinity and dedicate the symposium talks to Sri Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother, this being Her 150th birth anniversary.

The Transformation

Although the event was scheduled to begin at 2 p.m., volunteers began arriving early. There were flowers to be trimmed, sorted and arranged; extensive sound and video equipment to be unloaded and all the necessary wires to be strung and connected and exhaustively tested for proper settings; there were boxes of Japanese- and English-language books, CDs, cassette tapes, photographs and incense to be unpacked and arranged for sale in the foyer; the stage was arranged for the panelists, the musicians, the event-title banner, a podium, a new, larger-than-life, full-colour, framed picture of Swami Vivekananda standing poised and confident and, for this year, an immense framed image of Sri Sarada Devi, in the popular sitting pose found in most shrines, in stunningly contrasting black and white. The lighting, too, had to be aimed and adjusted, with levels fine-tuned for both stage effect and the panelists' comfort, as well as visibility for an audience sitting in a dimmed theatre.

In addition to all this activity, downstairs (in what could be called the back stage dressing rooms were it not for the fact that these rooms are actually under the stage) musicians and singers are tuning and

rehearsing. Excited chatter and brief outbursts of laughter emanated from back-stage-right and out through the halls, as still other volunteers were putting the final preparations to a tasty lunch of curries and soups enjoyed by all the volunteers.

At 2 o'clock sharp Swami Medhasananda, joined by two devotees, established a somber and reflective mood by chanting vedic prayer verses. Swami then delivered a brief welcome address, introduced the panelists and gave a brief introduction about the Holy Mother. Speakers, Ms. Yasuko Yamada and His Excellency Sri Manilal Tripathi, Ambassador of India, then offered bouquets at the feet of the Holy Mother and Swami Vivekananda respectively.

Ambassador on Vivekananda

The ambassador then delivered a talk on Swami Vivekananda focusing "on his views on the universality of all religions and his call for amity, understanding and harmony among all segments of the human race and all members of the extended family of man." The ambassador went on to quote the words of praise and admiration for Vivekananda and his legacy from such luminaries as Rabindra Nath Tagore and former Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru.

Later, in quoting Swamiji's own words on acceptance, he said, "Swami Vivekananda upheld the validity of all religions and their right to independent existence. In talking on the universality of religions, he said, 'Our watchword should be acceptance and not exclusion. Not only toleration, but acceptance. I believe in acceptance. I accept all religions and I worship God in whatever form they worship Him. I salute all the prophets of the past, all the great ones of the

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Tokyo Commemorates (cont from page 2)

present and all that are to come in the future."

"Swami Vivekananda's constant effort was to draw attention to the unifying, harmonizing virtue in the religious thought of all the great persuasions," he continued. "The importance of service, for example, is emphasized by the tenets and scriptures of all religions. There is a dictum in Hindu scriptures which, translated into English reads as follows: 'Amidst all the Puranas and scriptures, know the statement of the sage Vyas to be true that doing good to others conduces to merit, and doing harm to them leads to sin.' This compares to the Christian injunction: 'Know thou, that in the service of thy fellowmen, do thou serveth me,' and the same idea is contained in the Islamic saying: 'Not mere professing of the faith, but good works and service to fellowmen is true prayer.'"

"Friends," said the ambassador in closing, "the concept of the whole human race being one family—*Vsudhaiva Kutumbakum*— is India's unique contribution to the common heritage of mankind. References to the entire human race belonging to a single family can be found repeatedly in our scriptures dating back many thousands of years. We have been fortunate that an unending chain of exceptionally gifted men and women have be born on our soil to reaffirm this spirit of universal brotherhood, this ethos of oneness of mankind—not merely global friendship, but of a family-ship of an entire mankind. Swami Vivekananda was an outstanding embodiment of this spirit and among the most eloquent advocates of this ethos."

Holy Mother Symposium

At the end of the ambassador's

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●Thought of the Month●

Although men are accused of not knowing their own weakness, yet perhaps few know their own strength.

It is in men as in soils, where sometimes there is a vein of gold which the owner knows not of.

... Jonathan Swift

address, he officially presented the release of a special issue of the Society's monthly organ, *The Universal Gospel*, dedicated to the Holy Mother, and a new CD of guided meditations in Japanese, which sold well in the foyer (see ad on page 8). Swami then led a short guided meditation in both English and Japanese creating a peaceful atmosphere. The programme's master of ceremonies, Ms. Kuniko Hirano, then introduced the moderator for the symposium, Dr. Tsuyoshi Nara, Professor Emeritus, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies. Dr. Nara also served as translator from both English to Japanese and Japanese to English for the speakers. The symposium was entitled, *The Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi's Life and Teachings*.

Ms. Yasuko Yamada, Executive Director of the Padma Yoga Ashram, was the first of three speakers. Ms. Yamada presented a personal approach to the topic in an address she titled, "Holy Mother and Me". She gave a brief description of a visit to the Holy Mother's "very beautiful" birthplace in Jayambati and personal reflections on a young Sarada's family and upbringing and village life there. Ms. Yama then went on to note some of Holy Mother's teachings by which she tries to live each day. "She was

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the embodiment of universal motherhood, and is worshipped as the Living Mother today." she said. "Five days prior to Her passing, She addressed a devotee, 'Why are you sad? You have seen Sri Ramakrishna. You must regard everyone as your own. Do not forget, I'll always be with you.'" Ms. Yamada concluded, "When I direct my attention to the picture of Holy Mother, it's as if Her smile says, 'Return,' and in relating this story to you now, my mind is already in Jayambati."

The next speaker, Ms. Ajanta Gupta, a news reader with Radio Japan, began by confessing that an in-depth discussion on the wonder of Sri Sarada Devi was beyond her capacity and that she would rather focus her comments on her own perceptions of universal motherhood. She went on to discuss the Mother's family, birth, and unique marriage to Sri Ramakrishna, completely devoid of any carnal manifestation. After rhetorically asking what the differences were between an ordinary mother and the Holy Mother, Ms. Gupta cited many examples of Mother's impartial compassion, unquestioning love and caring propensity for imparting moral learning to all; the pious, the fallen, Indian and foreigner alike. She also recited a story wherein Sri Ramakrishna rebuked the Mother for allowing another to bring His evening meals and asked Her to promise it wouldn't happen again. In response Sarada Devi told the Master that as Mother She could not make such a promise saying, "You are not my Master alone, You are for all!"

Professor Kathy Matsui of Seisen University took yet a different approach in her presentation, saying that in her opinion the Holy Mother was, in fact, the ideal role model and first practitioner of the UNESCO

vision of womanhood in a free-world peace culture. Given all the various social roles for women in the modern world, Prof. Matsui pointed out that Sri Sarada Devi was both a housewife and a working woman of the highest order. As a wife She was cooking and serving Her husband and His disciples as Her own, showering unconditional love on one and all. As a working woman She carried on Her husband's mission not as a duty, but with all love and happiness. "The Holy Mother," she concluded, "was a forerunner of the global citizen. She made no distinctions of caste or creed, Indian or foreigner, and her compassion included all beings, human or animal. She rejected all artificial barriers. Love oneself and love others without any expectations; with this message the Holy Mother transcends all group-centered limitations and represents the highest ideal of a global role model."

In Closing

Professor Nara then made a few closing remarks and gave his impressions of the three different approaches in the panel's talks in both Japanese and English. The Celebration Committee Secretary, Mr. A. P.S. Mani, then gave his thanks for everyone's participation in a short address.

Then the audience was treated to devotional songs in Japanese composed and arranged by Kaori Izumida (Shanti) and performed by her and group of six lady-devotees, all dressed in beautiful Japanese summer kimonos. This was followed by an Indian presentation of songs by a seven-member group, featuring Mr. Samudra Gupta on keyboard and Mr. Masanori Hisamoto on tabla. In this case, the ladies all wore the finest saris. After these performances tea and snacks were served, followed by a slide presentation entitled, Holy

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Mother Sri Sarada Devi, with commentary in Japanese by Professor Nara, bringing this year's programme to a close at a little past 5 p.m.

Shortly afterward, the work of returning the Toshima Kohkaido to its former state began in earnest. Just a busily; the wires that went up, came down; the books and the rest were repacked; flowers and bouquets were free for one and all to take home. By 7:30 Swami Medhasananda and some 20-plus remaining volunteers and friends were making their way to the other side of Ikebukuro Station, where a dining room had been reserved. There they enjoyed each other's company; were treated to dinner by a certain visitor from the Philippines; and gave thanks for a successful celebration and a day well spent.

• A Story to Remember • On a Tokyo Train

The train clanked and rattled through the suburbs of Tokyo on a drowsy spring afternoon. Our car was comparatively empty - a few housewives with their kids in tow, some old folks going shopping. I gazed absently at the drab houses and dusty hedgerows.

At one station the doors opened, and suddenly the afternoon quiet was shattered by a man bellowing violent, incomprehensible curses. The man staggered into our car. He wore laborer's clothing, and he was big, drunk and dirty. Screaming, he swung at a woman holding a baby. The blow sent her spinning into the laps of an elderly couple. It was a miracle that the baby was unharmed.

Terrified, the couple jumped up and scrambled toward the other end of the car. The laborer aimed a kick at the retreating back of the old woman, but missed as she scuttled to safety. This so enraged the drunk that he grabbed the metal pole in the center of the car and tried to wrench it out of its stanchion. I could see that one of his hands was cut and bleeding. The train lurched ahead, the passengers frozen with fear. I stood up.

I was young then, some twenty years ago, and in pretty good shape. I'd been putting in a solid eight hours of aikido training nearly every day for the past three years. I liked to throw and grapple. I thought I was tough. Trouble was, my martial skill was untested in actual combat. As students of aikido, we were not allowed to fight.

"Aikido," my teacher had said again and again, "is the art of reconciliation. Whoever has the mind too tight has broken his connection with the universe. If you try to dominate people, you are already defeated. We study how to resolve conflict, not how to start it."

I listened to his words. I tried hard. I even went so far as to cross the street to avoid the chimpira, the pinball punks, who lounged around the train stations. My forbearance exalted me. I felt both tough and holy. In my heart, however, I wanted an absolutely legitimate opportunity whereby I might save the innocent by destroying the guilty.

This is it! I said to myself, getting to my feet. People are in danger and if I don't do something fast, they will probably get hurt.

Seeing me stand up, the drunk recognized a chance to focus his rage. "Aha!" He roared. "A foreigner! You need a lesson in Japanese manners!"

I held on lightly to the commuter strap overhead and gave him a slow look of disgust

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A Story to Remember ... (cont from page 5)

and dismissal. I planned to take this turkey apart, but he had to make the first move. I wanted him mad, so I pursed my lips and blew him an insolent kiss.

"All right!" he hollered. "You're gonna get a lesson." He gathered himself for a rush at me.

A split second before he could move, someone shouted. "Hey!" It was earsplitting. I remember the strangely joyous, lilting quality of it - as though you and a friend had been searching diligently for something, and he suddenly stumbled upon it. "Hey!" I wheeled to my left; the drunk spun to his right. We both stared down at a little old Japanese. He must have been well into his seventies, this tiny gentleman, sitting there immaculate in his kimono. He took no notice of me, but beamed delightedly at the laborer, as though he had a most important, most welcome secret to share.

"C'mere," the old man said in an easy vernacular, beckoning to the drunk. "C'mere and talk with me." He waved his hand lightly.

The big man followed, as iron a string. He planted his feet belligerently in front of the old gentleman, and roared above the clacking wheels, "Why the hell should I talk to you?" The drunk now had his back to me. If his elbow moved so much as a millimeter, I'd drop him in his socks.

The old man continued to beam at the laborer. "What'cha been drinkin'?" he asked, his eyes sparkling with interest. "I been drinkin' sake," the laborer bellowed back, "and it's none of your business!" Flecks of spittle spattered the old man.

"Oh, that's wonderful," the old man said, "absolutely wonderful! You see, I love sake too. Every night, me and my wife (she's seventy-six, you know), we warm up a little bottle of sake and take it out into the garden, and we sit on an old wooden bench. We watch the sun go down, and we look to see how our persimmon tree is doing. My great-grandfather planted that tree, and we worry about whether it will recover from those ice storms we had last winter. Our tree has done better than I expected, though, especially when you consider the poor quality of the soil. It is gratifying to watch when we take our sake and go out to enjoy the evening - even when it rains!" He looked up at the laborer, eyes twinkling.

As he struggled to follow the old man's conversation, the drunk's face began to soften. His fists slowly unclenched. "Yeah," he said. "I love persimmons too...." His voice trailed off.

"Yes," said the old man, smiling, "and I'm sure you have a wonderful wife."

"No," replied the laborer. "My wife died." Very gently, swaying with the motion of the train, the big man began to sob. "I don't got no wife, I don't got no wife, I don't got no job. I'm so ashamed of myself." Tears rolled down his cheeks; a spasm of despair rippled through his body.

Now it was my turn. Standing there in my well-scrubbed youthful innocence, my make-this-world-safe-for-democracy righteousness, I suddenly felt dirtier than he was.

Then the train arrived at my stop. As the door opened, I heard the old man cluck sympathetically. "My, my," he said, "that is a difficult predicament, indeed. Sit down here and tell me about it."

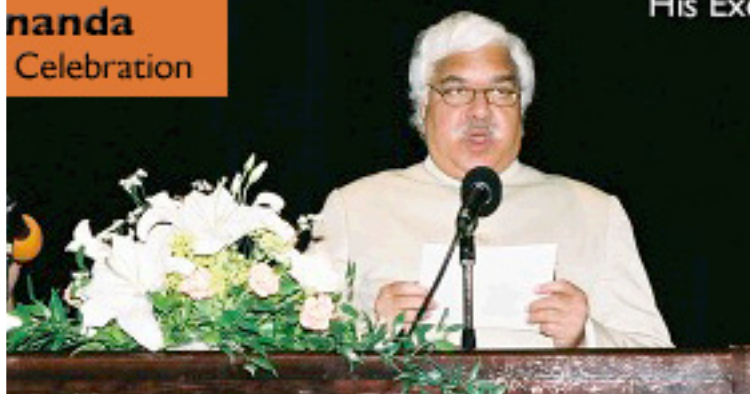
I turned my head for one last look. The laborer was sprawled on the seat, his head in the old man's lap. The old man was softly stroking the filthy, matted hair.

As the train pulled away, I sat down on a bench. What I had wanted to do with muscle had been accomplished with kind words. I had just seen aikido tried in combat, and the essence of it was love. I would have to practice the art with an entirely different spirit. It would be a long time before I could speak about the resolution of conflict.

- by Terry Dobson (from *Soul Food, Stories to Nourish the Spirit and the Heart*)

Pictures from
The Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi - 150th Birth Anniversary
Swami Vivekananda - 142nd Birth Anniversary Celebrations

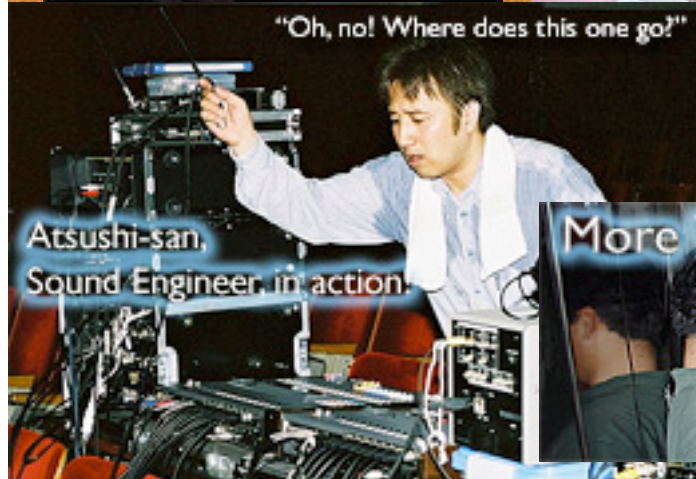
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