



The Vedanta Kyokai

News, Updates and Miscellany from the Vedanta Society of Japan

MARCH 2005

Volume 3 Number 3

Thus Spake ...

"Never quarrel about religion. All quarrels and disputations concerning religion simply show that spirituality is not present. Religious quarrels are always over the husks. When purity, when spirituality goes, leaving the soul dry, quarrels begin, and not before."

... Swami Vivekananda

"He who believes in one God and the life beyond, let him speak what is good or remain silent."

... Prophet Muhammad

The February Retreat

"Naren has Accepted Mother Kali"

The monthly retreat at Zushi Centre on Sunday, February 20, celebrated the 143rd birth anniversary of Swami Vivekananda. With a ringing of the bell, members and guests quietly assembled in the main shrine where Swami Medhasananda conducted a brief worship. Afterwards, focus shifted to the adjacent meeting room for the morning session talk which began with Vedic chanting and readings in Japanese and English from Swami Vivekananda's talks on Raja Yoga.

The swami offered his welcoming comments in both English and Japanese, as our usual interpreter, Mr. Ito, had yet to arrive, but upon surveying the room, determined that it would be more practical to proceed in Japanese only, since the majority in attendance were Japanese and most of the others were competent in the language. "Chotto komarimasu (I'm in a bit of a fix)," he said with a laugh, "since
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Monthly Calendar

• Birthdays •

Sri Sri Ramakrishna Deva
Saturday, March 12

Swami Yogananda
Thursday, March 29

• Kyokai Events •

March Retreat

**Sri Sri Ramakrishna Deva
Birthday Celebration**
SUNDAY - March 20
at Zushi Centre 10:30 a.m.
All are welcome to attend.

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• NEWS • FROM HEADQUARTERS

NEWS AND GENERAL ANNOUNCEMENTS OF INTEREST FROM BELUR MATH

TSUNAMI RELIEF AND REHABILITATION WORK

IN ANDAMAN ISLANDS, TAMIL NADU, KERALA AND SRI LANKA

From: RAMAKRISHNA MISSION

AN APPEAL

After conducting extensive primary relief work in Tsunami affected areas, the next phase in Ramakrishna Mission's service is REHABILITATION of the affected people. A survey of their requirements is going on. Steps are being taken to provide new boats (catamarans), fishing nets, and shelters to the fisher folk – the main sufferers in the worst affected areas. Efforts are also being made to rehabilitate children orphaned by the disaster in the Andaman Islands.

The Rehabilitation work will be extended further, depending upon the availability of funds. The total cost is likely to exceed Rs. 10 crore.

For detailed reports on Tsunami Relief and for information regarding the mode of/for sending donations, please visit the following websites.

1. www.sriramakrishna.org/tsunami/
2. www.sriramakrishnamath.org

We thank all those who have contributed for this noble cause. We appeal to others also to come forward and help us in this noble endeavour. All donations paid in cash or by cheque/draft drawn in favour of "Ramakrishna Mission" are exempt from income tax under section 80-G of the I.T. Act. Donations may please be sent to:

The General Secretary
Ramakrishna Mission (Headquarters)
P.O. Belur Math, Dist.: Howrah
West Bengal-711202, India
Fax: 91-33-26544346
E-mail: rkmhq@vsnl.com

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Ramakrishna Math
Mylapore, Chennai – 600 004,
Tamil Nadu, India
Fax: 044-24934589
E-mail: srkmath@vsnl.com

Zushi Retreat - The Afternoon Session

With the end of the morning session, everyone enjoyed a delicious lunch prasad prepared by Mrs. Papia Banerjee and Mrs. Sophia Hazra.

Around 2 p.m. the remaining guests reassembled in the meeting room. Swami Medhasananda then led some Vedic chanting, followed by readings from Swamiji's works and a Q & A session regarding the morning talk. Mr. Samudra Gupta and Mrs. Ananya Karmakar then each sang Bengali devotional songs and Shanti-san sang her compositions in Japanese. Swami then led all in the chorus of a Sanskrit composition written by a disciple of Swami Vivekananda. The session ended with a short meditation.

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our dear Ito-san is late, I should continue in Japanese. I am sorry for the few who cannot understand, but it is too distracting for me to give a talk in both languages." .

Turning to the subject of the day's talk, 'Narendranath has Accepted Mother Kali', the swami noted, "It is difficult for ordinary devotees to progress in spiritual life unless they worship God with form. It is very difficult to concentrate on an abstract idea. The purposes of ordinary worship are to please God; to show one's gratefulness to God; to show one's love and respect to God; and to pray to God."

[Just then Mr. Ito arrived to a warm welcome and some teasing. "I was listening in the hall," said Ito-san. "Your Japanese was pretty good." The swami then jokingly noted that not all agreed with his assessment. Personally speaking, not being fluent in Japanese terminologies used in religious discourses, this reporter, for one, was quite relieved to see Mr. Ito.]

The swami continued saying that for worship, we have to imagine God, but that that imagination is about reality, not the unreal; not about an impossibility like a palace in the sky, but imagination on the reality, on God. "This is the difference between imagination and baseless hallucinations about God; accepting a symbol, a medium, for the presence of God and imagining the presence of God in that symbol, that medium, that image. Images may be made of stone, wood or clay, but as Swami Vivekananda said, 'I have never heard a devotee say, O, clay, O wood, O stone, O metal, be pleased with me, please grant my prayer.' No, they always pray to God!"

In this regard, the swami told of a
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Bengali saying about the famous Charitot Festival for Lord Jaganath in Puri in which the Lord is carried along the road in a chariot. Upon seeing the devotees lining up, bowing and offering respect, the road itself feels all this is directed at it, the chariot, as well, feels this adoration is for it, and the idol, too, believes itself to be the object of this respect. And the Lord within the image smiles. "You see, the use of images is like the kindergarten of spiritual life," he said. "When we learn to concentrate, to meditate, slowly we become qualified to concentrate on God without form; the Supreme Reality. It is like when one is reminded of the father by seeing his photograph."

"Another misconception are the many forms of God in Hinduism. According to Hindu philosophy reality is One, but it has two aspects. One is absolute and one is relative. When that reality is relative it is active. When the same reality is active, it creates, sustains and destroys. This is the relative aspect of the One reality. When absolute, there is no name, form or action. So absolute and relative are two aspects of the same Reality; active and inactive. Like the same person sleeping or waking.

"How does Mother Kali fit into the Hindu pantheon? Mahakali (Kali the Great) or Nityakali (Kali the Eternal) is the absolute; the stage prior to creation, pure consciousness, no action, no form, no name, no universe. The second is the relative, consisting of Kali the dispeller of fear and giver of boons, Kali the protector, and Kali the destroyer. So we see here the absolute and the relative aspects in Kali. They are one in the same reality." Swami then explained questions as to why Mother Kali, both absolute and relative, would have a black complexion. He said that Sri Ramakrishna had said so

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• Thought of the Month •

The preferable (shreyas) and the pleasurable (preyas) approach man. The man of intelligence, having considered them, separates the two. The intelligent one selects the electable in preference to the delectable; the non-intelligent one selects the delectable for the sake of growth and protection (of the body, etc.).

... Kathopanishad, 1.2.2.

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convincingly that it is because we see her from so far a distance that She looks black. As you approach her nearer and nearer, finally there is no color. Like one approaches the sky or ocean to find no colour at all.

He then explained the qualities, sattva (equilibrium), rajas (action) and tamas (inertness), by which Kali creates, preserves and destroys. "Now it is the same Mother Kali who binds us and liberates us," he said. Average people want to enjoy the many things of life and higher souls seek liberation. "So what ever one may want, temporal or spiritual, one must pray to Mother Kali to grant that prayer."

Swami then explained why Narendranath had not accepted Kali at the time, citing a western education that nurtured doubt in God, atheism and materialism. He said that with the rise of the British rule, Christian missionaries came to prove their faith was superior to Hinduism. Their criticism was both subtle and systematic. They developed school and college curriculums that included Bible lessons with lectures on the narrowness and superstition of Hinduism. Narendranath, like many western educated Indian youth, began to criticize many Hindu practices, especially image worship.

"The Brahma Samaj was a group that wanted to present the essence of Hinduism in a more logical way," he said. They believed in the

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supreme reality as highlighted in the Upanishads, while rejecting most Hindu rituals and all forms of worship through images.

Many young Indians did not wish to convert to Christianity and the Brahma Samaj appealed to them. One of the requirements of membership to the Samaj was a vow to renounce any form of image worship.

Rakhal, later Swami Brahmananda, and Narendranath were old friends and members of the Samaj. He had come to Dakshineswar and visited Sri Ramakrishna, and before long was visiting the Kali Temple. When Naren later visited Dakshineswar and witnessed Rakhal bowing down to images, he scolded his gentle-natured friend for breaking his oath to the Samaj and called him a hypocrite. Sri Ramakrishna intervened at this and explained that Rakhal now believed in Kali worship, that not everyone's temperament is suited to practice the worship of the formless God and to not interfere with Rakhal's spiritual practice.

"You see the doubts about images were: How can the infinite be finite?" said the swami. "How can the formless be with form? And for all these reasons Narendranath had his doubts."

"What surprised Narendranath most about Sri Ramakrishna was that this priest, this image worshipper, could possess such tremendous spiritual knowledge, such compassion, such love, such purity. He

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wondered at how someone possessed of such a high spiritual state could justify the worship of an image such as Kali. Of course, Sri Ramakrishna explained that Brahman and Mother Kali were one and same, but Naren had not been convinced."

"Sri Ramakrishna was anxious that Naren should accept Mother Kali, as he knew that he was destined to be a teacher of religion to the world; to propagate Sri Ramakrishna's message of the harmony of religions. Unless Narendranath accepted the logic behind the idea of image worship, his concept of religion would be one-sided and narrow. And it would be difficult for such a person to become a world teacher."

Swami told the story about the sudden passing of Narendranath's father and the dire financial condition his family found itself in. Even food was difficult to come by. Naren searched for work and went without food himself to provide what little he could. He came to the idea that he would ask Sri Ramakrishna for help, for even though he could not accept Kali, he knew that whatever Sri Ramakrishna asked of Her was granted. He implored Sri Ramakrishna to pray to Mother Kali for his family's welfare. Sri Ramakrishna replied that he could not ask the Mother for such things, but that he had prayed to the Mother for him, but She had refused, saying that since Narendranath did not care for her, why should she look after him?

"Sri Ramakrishna then said that this night (being Tuesday) was especially auspicious for praying to the Mother, and promised that whatever Narendranath prayed for this night would be granted by Mother Kali. He assured Naren saying that Kali, being the all powerful creator of this

universe, could surely grant his simple prayer and urged him to go to the temple. Narendranath believed these words from his guru and waited for nightfall. At nine o'clock Sri Ramakrishna sent him off. Upon entering the temple, Naren felt in his heart that at this moment he would meet the Divine Mother. He felt a deep joy and sensed the living presence of Mother. Immediately he prayed, 'Please give me discrimination, please give me knowledge, please give me devotion. I don't want anything else.' This he prayed again and again."

Upon his return, Sri Ramakrishna asked if he had prayed for his family and Naren said that he had completely forgotten about that. Sri Ramakrishna sent him back. When he returned, Sri Ramakrishna again asked if he had prayed for his family. 'No,' he replied again. Sri Ramakrishna scolded him to control his spiritual emotion and go back and ask that Mother relieve his family's financial problems. The third time Narendranath did not lose himself, but remembered that Sri Ramakrishna had once remarked that when one finally meets the emperor, one should not only ask for an insignificant thing like a pumpkin or a gourd.

"So praying to the Mother of the universe for money," said swami, "would be like asking for a pumpkin from a king, hence Naren repeated his prayers for discrimination, knowledge and devotion. When he returned to the Master again he answered that he could not pray for financial help, because Sri Ramakrishna had made him forget. He said that since it was due to Sri Ramakrishna's 'tricks', he insisted that Sri Ramakrishna take responsibility and pray to the Mother for his family. He refused, but Naren insisted. At this the Master assured

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• A Story to Remember •

Safeguard Oneself

The Buddha tells the story of a family of acrobats:

A grandfather and granddaughter traveled and made their living by performing balancing acts. They came to the Buddha to discuss what was the best way to safeguard and care for each other. The grandfather put forth the idea that each should care for the other, that he should care for his granddaughter in the balancing, and she should take care of him. Thus they would protect each other.

The granddaughter asked the Buddha if that was not backward. "Would it not be better for each of us to care for ourselves, and in that way we best safeguard each other, and our acrobatics will prosper?"

After listening to the little girl, the Buddha replied, "Though she is young, she is wise. If you as a grandfather guard yourself with care and pay attention to what you do, you will also guard the safety of your grandchild, and if you as a child guard yourself with awareness, with care, with respect, then you guard both yourself and those around you."

... Buddhist Tradition

February Retreat (from page 5)

him that his family would never again want for simple food and coarse cloth."

Although Narendranath was an accomplished singer, up to this time he did not know any songs in praise of Mother Kali. This night he requested Sri Ramakrishna to teach him a song of Mother Kali and the Master taught him, O Mother, Thou Art Our Sole Liberator, which he sang all night long. The next day two visitors arrived from Calcutta to find the Master in a very elated mood and Narendranath sleeping in a corner of his room. The Master excitedly explained that Naren had accepted Mother Kali the night before and had

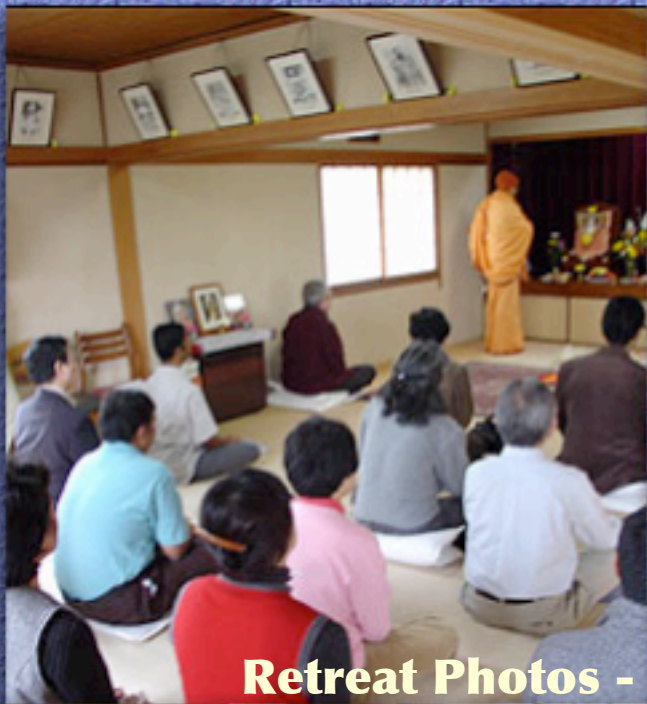
sung and sung to Her throughout the night. "Like a child," said the swami, "the Master was so elated. He repeated again and again to the visitors, 'Is it not good that he has accepted Mother Kali? Is it not good?'"

This was a great turning point for Swami Vivekananda, which made his spiritual life full, complete and harmonious, and allowed him to play the role of a world teacher of religion.

- the Editor

Correction:

In our February issue, 'Prema Kalpataru' should have read 'Spiritual Kalpataru'. The editor apologizes for any confusion.



Retreat Photos - 20 Feb '05



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