



The Vedanta Kyokai

News, Updates and Miscellany from the Vedanta Society of Japan

APRIL 2005

Volume 3 Number 4

Thus Spake ...

"The tortoise moves about in the water. But can you guess where her thoughts are? They are on the bank where her eggs are lying. Do all your duties in the world, but keep your mind on God."

... Sri Ramakrishna

"Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

... Jesus Christ



**Celebrating Sri Sri Ramakrishna Deva's
170th Birth Anniversary**

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Monthly Calendar

• April Kyokai Events •

• April Retreat •

Subject: Who am I?

SUNDAY - April 17

at Zushi Centre 11:00 a.m.

All are welcome to attend.

• Akhanda Japam •

(Continuous Spiritual Practice)

5 a.m. to 8 p.m.

FRIDAY - April 29

Contact Kyokai for Scheduling

The March Retreat "Understanding Sri Ramakrishna"

The 170th Birth Anniversary of Sri Sri Ramakrishna Deva was celebrated at the Vedanta Society of Japan's (Nippon Vedanta Kyokai) monthly retreat in Zushi on March 20. The public programme was to include a brief puja, arati and flower offering from 10:30, a morning session talk from 11:30, a lunch (Prasad) break from 12:45, and a very special musical programme of Indian, Japanese and Western devotional songs from 3 p.m. (See Story)

By 11:00 a capacity crowd overflowed into the adjacent meeting room from where guests were quietly jostling for glimpses of the proceedings as Swami Medhasananda conducted the puja and arati. Everyone was then encouraged to offer a flower at the shrine, which they did in twos and threes, and the congregation shifted to the meeting room for the morning session talk entitled 'Understanding Sri Ramakrishna'.

Swami was clearly pleased with the turnout and enthusiastically welcomed one and all to the retreat and Sri Ramakrishna's 170th Birth Celebration. "I see that many of you newcomers are students, not only interested in Indian music, but also in the Indian spiritual tradition. I believe this interest is very important to any serious study, since the very basis of Indian culture, and its music and dance, is religion and philosophy. And while nothing is free in Japan, we do not charge any money to attend our functions. We don't convert people either. And whether you practice a faith or not, you are welcome to come here. And Zushi is quite a nice area to enjoy, too. So, two points; no conversion and no money (laughter). I invite you to come again and enjoy the peaceful and spiritual atmosphere here."

For the benefit of these students and friends the swami began his remarks with a brief introduction to Sri Rama-

krishna, Swami Vivekananda and the Vedanta Societies. "Sri Ramakrishna is regarded as the great prophet of modern India; by many as a Jesus Christ or Gautama Buddha. The main characteristics of his Gospel are the harmony of religions; one of His most famous utterances is 'as many faiths, so many paths' - the idea that there is not only one way to realize God; and he taught that one should not only see God in temples, churches or images, but in everyone, and serve them. "

"One of his main disciples, Swami Vivekananda, went to America to preach this Gospel in 1893. He visited Japan on the way and liked many qualities of the Japanese people very much. Many of these qualities are still visible today, for example, the sense of discipline, hard work, love of country and sense of beauty. The great Okakura Tenshin went to India to ask Swami Vivekananda to return to Japan, but due to failing health he could not return. Quite some years later, this Centre was established and we have 155 Centres worldwide today.

"People the world over like the universal ideas of Vedanta temples, the message of harmony and the rationality. In our shrines you'll also find photo representations of Jesus Christ and Gautama Buddha, so we not only preach harmony of religions, but we practice this harmony. We observe these birthdays in our temples as well. That is the feature of genuine Indian philosophy and religion, not only of Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. "

Swami then summarized the ancient origins of Vedanta and stressed the universality of this religious philosophy. "Sri Ramakrishna taught that though we call God differently; Bhagavan of the Hindus, Allah of the Muslims, God of the Christians; they are not different, they are one and the same God. The sun that rises in Japan and the sun that rises in Indian and the sun that rises in America, are they

(cont page 3)

March Retreat (from page 2)

different suns? The sun is called by different names in different languages, but it is the same sun."

"Another idea of Vedanta is that the purpose of life is to realize the Self or God, because only by realizing the Self or God the purpose of life is fulfilled. All secular joys are temporary and fleeting and only spiritual joy is eternal. According to Hinduism, and this is very interesting, one may take any path according to one's liking to realize God." The swami then touched on the paths of devotion to God (bhakti yoga), selfless service and work for God (karma yoga), the path of philosophy or discrimination (jnana yoga) and the path of meditation (raja yoga) and control of the mind and senses."

Again addressing the music students in particular, Swami continued, "Not only these, but according to Hinduism. through music, through song, through playing an instrument and through instrumental music one can achieve God." After highlighting one example with a story, he continued, "In my life I have seen some classical musicians in India. When they were performing, to me it looked like they were meditating. You see, as a yogi meditates with deepest concentration, without caring who is watching; when a classical singer or musician performs he doesn't care who is watching him or for other's appreciation, they dive deep. So what is the difference between a yogi and such a musician? And Sri Ramakrishna said the same thing, that if you can really sing with great devotion, you can realize God. There are many examples, Ramprasad, in Bengal, who just by singing realized Mother Kali, is one."

Returning again to understanding Sri Ramakrishna the swami said, "When we study the life of Sri Ramakrishna and his teachings, we understand one thing, and that is that it is very simple... If you read the Bible, the new testament, you'll get the same impression - it's so simple... The same thing about the teachings of Gautama Buddha... It is only the scholars who put everything into very difficult language. But realized souls always speak in a very simple and easily understandable way. At the same time it is very deep. This is the characteristic, simple but deep. Common people are all simple, but not deep. Then again the more you read, the more you develop, and the more you develop, the more you understand the sayings of these great souls. The important thing is to dive deep, don't just float, dive deep."

"Why are their teachings so deep? Because their consciousness is always connected to the Supreme Consciousness. As Sri Ramakrishna would say, 'I am just the instrument of my Divine Mother. I am the machine, Mother is the operator. Mother doesn't allow me to take a false step.' To say it in another way, their consciousness is connected to that Supreme Consciousness and whatever they say is for the welfare of all people, for the welfare of all humanity. Whatever they do, they do for the welfare of humanity. So if we study the life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna in that way, we will come to understand that, first of all, it is very deep. Secondly, it is all true. Thirdly, it is for the welfare of all. It is for the welfare of humanity." •

• THOUGHT OF THE MONTH •

IT IS EASIER TO PREVENT BAD HABITS
THAN TO BREAK THEM.

... BENJAMIN FRANKLIN



• A STORY TO REMEMBER •

Really, My Friend, It is Up to You

A young man who had just completed his spiritual training and was eagerly intent on becoming a teacher moved to a new town. He tried to teach but no one came. The only spiritual interest in the town were the many followers of a wise and well-known rabbi. Frustrated, the young teacher devised a plan to embarrass the old master and gain students for himself. He captured a small bird and one day went to where the master was seated, surrounded by many disciples.

Holding the small bird in his hand he spoke directly to the master. "If you are so wise, tell me now, is this bird in my hand alive or is it dead?" His plan was this: If the master said the bird was dead, he would open his hand, the bird would fly away, the master would be wrong, and students would come to him. If the master said the bird was alive, he would quickly crush the bird in his hand, open it and say, "See, the bird is dead." Again, the master would be wrong and the young teacher would gain students.

He sat poised in front of the master demanding an answer. "Tell me, if you are so wise, is the bird alive or is it dead?" The master looked back at him with great compassion and answered quite simply, "Really, my friend, it is up to you."

...Chassid

Observing the Zushi Retreat (and myself)

'Sunday is a very special retreat honoring the 170th birth anniversary of Sri Ramakrishna. I'm on the schedule for the afternoon musical program. I have a song prepared. There's a newsletter to write. I really do have to go,' I tell myself again. Some months are harder than others to pry oneself away from all that becomes our daily routines, that constant shifting of demands on our time and minds, that really is so very unimportant in the grander scheme. It's in honoring the promise to be there in Zushi, to break away from one's daily life, that the fun begins.

First come all those quite legitimate excuses to cancel, to just not go, that arise and are reasoned down. Then there are those thoughts of the measured routine of the ashram schedule itself, with its set time for this and its set time for that; with those great gaps of time with either assigned chores or nothing in particular to do at all. Certainly nothing to get excited about there. As the overnight bag and Saturday morning train schedule are rechecked, the mind tries again, 'You have plenty to do right here at home. Can we afford two days away?'

It isn't really until the train finally pulls into Zushi Station, that I completely accept that this is what I'll be doing for the next two days. A quick stop at the supermarket, one last call on the cell phone before switching it off, and it's a short taxi ride up the hill to the Centre. Then as I enter the genkan, or foyer, I catch myself (again) taking a survey of the shoes and anticipating who might be there before even offering a greeting to Sri Ramakrishna, his photograph greeting me as I enter. I apologize. I'm here.

On the wall is the Duty List, which I scan and find my name. There are so many names on the list, all performing some function in preparation for the public celebration on Sunday. I wonder if they too struggled to get out of the house. I leave my bag in the small anteroom and make my way upstairs to the shrine. Walking down the hall, the adjacent meeting room is awash in the scents and colors of fresh flowers; containers of

flowers, folding tables covered with sorted stacks of flowers by color and type. There is the shuffling of people in and out and several sets of busy, nimble fingers preparing garlands and bouquets. I pay my respects at the shrine and then take my time in going from room to room and in greeting people.

The chaotic kitchen, as usual, is best observed by cautiously sticking one's head in through an open door and offering a simple, 'Hello'. The tempo of clanging pots and pans, the excited voices and the aromas make it evident that lunch, although perhaps a little later than officially scheduled, will be served. This is another feature of the Zushi Centre, not just during the retreats, but always; the guests will be fed. Watching or participating in the transformation of the smaller dining room and adjacent room into one dining hall with so many people, at once both helping and underfoot, is a delight. This is one of the advantages of the sparsely furnished Japanese style rooms of our smallish Centre; they are so easily transformed into whatever space they are needed for.

A very tasty lunch is served and afterward all either return to their assigned tasks or enjoy free time. Gradually, the afternoon wears on, some begin taking their leave, and the unfinished chores are set aside and rooms cleaned in preparation for evening arati, or vespers. This evening's service is well attended. After dinner, the men's sleeping quarters are sorted out, while the women who will stay on make their way over to Holy Mother's House for the night.

At 6 a.m. Sunday the morning service is also well attended. After breakfast more volunteers arrive and there is a certain anticipation and distinct earnestness in the last minute preparations. As the rooms are readied for the arrival of guests, the shrine is receiving its final touches, the items for a puja worship are prepared, a professional video camera is set up and tested for multiple, simultaneous, VHS recordings of the day's proceedings.

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Observations (from page 5)

Microphones are checked and rechecked. The wires connecting all these elements to the VHS recorders upstairs and computer downstairs are tested and taped down. At 10:25 the little bell is rung and a sizable crowd assembles.

The shrine room is nearly full by 10:30 a.m., and anticipating even more arrivals, Swami Medhasananda appeals to everyone to move forward and sit as close as possible. The room is silent as Swami conducts a brief worship, or puja, afterward giving short explanations as to the representative meanings behind the various articles used, for the benefit of the many new faces in the crowd, including several students of Indian music, specifically of the tabla. They are here because their teacher, Mr. Dinesh Dyoundi, will be a featured performer in the afternoon's special musical program. The crowd builds to over capacity as the discourse is about to begin (see March Zushi Retreat - Understanding Sri Ramakrishna).

After the morning talk, lunch is served. With over 100 guests, this is a Herculean effort. Tables are set up where the morning talk was just held. More seating is arranged in the adjacent hall. Downstairs the converted dining hall is straining, more seating is needed. The hallway and even the little library is prepared for more diners. It's cramped. It's chaotic. Everyone is happy. Everyone is hungry. The meal is delicious, no, would delight the most critical gourmet. Afterward, a clean-up and a retransformation of rooms and preparation for the musical program complete with a stage are made. While microphones are tested and instruments tuned the crowd begins to gather.

At 3 p.m. Swami welcomes all to the Special Musical Programme that begins with Indian devotional songs sung by Ms. Bhaswati Ghosh, Ms. Tanushri Goldar, Ms. Nilanjana Chandra, and a beautiful Hindi bhajan by Soma Chaudhuri; Samudra Datta Gupta and Dinesh Dyoundi accompany on the harmonium and tabla respectively. Ms. Kaori Izumida (Shanti-san) then performs two of her

lovely Japanese devotional compositions, narrating the lyrics in English first. Then, yours truly, sings two original English compositions with score provided on CD-ROM. After a very brief pause, the stage is ready for the grand finale, two magnificent ragas with Mr. Kenji Inoue (as Swami pointed out, an accomplished musician and neighbor in the Zushi area who never refuses a request to perform at the Kyokai) and Dinesh Dyoundi, noted earlier, on the tabla.

The programme lasts well beyond the two hours scheduled and I take my leave as late afternoon tea is being served. On the short walk down the hill to the bus stop I recall that Swami had mentioned a school survey taken in the USA during his morning talk. The survey had asked the participants whether schools or parents had taught them how to solve the real problems of life; the problems of personal crises, relationships, setbacks and disappointments at home and the workplace. The answers, by 70-80%, was 'no'; while they had been taught how to advance toward a good career, they had not been instructed on how to lead a happy life. After becoming established in life, these problems arise and they are not in a position to solve them. It means trouble. "Dive deep," the swami had said. "Sri Ramakrishna said, 'Don't float on the surface, dive deep.' Then you can really understand and benefit from your education."

'Yes', I say to myself as the bus pulls up, 'and how fortunate to find the right teachers. Just two nights ago you were making all manner of excuses for not spending time here. The atmosphere, holy company, prayer, music and food... What on earth were you thinking?' •

... the editor

NOTE: VHS Video and CD audio of both the morning and afternoon sessions of the Zushi March Retreat celebrating Sri Ramakrishna's 170th birth anniversary are available. Please contact the Centre via phone or email for more information.

Special Music
Programme
Zushi Retreat
20 March 05
Sri Ramakrishna's
170th Birth Anniversary



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