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Newsletter March 2005

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The sun is many times larger than the Earth, but owing to the great distance it appears like a small disk. So the Lord is infinitely great, but owing to our being too far from Him we fall very, very short of comprehending His real greatness.

-Sri Ramakrishna

Words To Inspire

In deep meditation a man is not at all conscious of the outer world. A hunter was aiming at a bird. A bridal procession passed along beside him, with the groom's relatives and friends, music, carriages and horses. It took a long time for the procession to pass the hunter, but he was not at all conscious of it. He did not know that the bridegroom had gone by.

A man was angling in a lake all by himself. After a long while the float began to move. Now and then its tip touched the water. The angler was holding the rod tight in his hands, ready to pull it up, when a passer-by stopped and said, 'Sir, can you tell me where Mr. Bannerji lives?' There was no reply from the angler, who was just on the point of pulling up the rod. Again and again the stranger said to him in a loud tone, 'Sir, can you tell me where Mr. Bannerji lives?' But the angler was unconscious of everything around him. His hands were trembling, his eyes fixed on the float. The stranger was annoyed and went on. When he had gone quite a way, the angler's float sank under water and with one pull of the rod he landed the fish. He wiped the sweat from his face with his towel and shouted after the stranger, 'Hey!' he said. 'Come here! Listen!' But the man would not turn his face. After much shouting, however, he came back and said to the angler, 'Why are you shouting at me?' 'What did you ask me about?' said the angler. The stranger said 'I repeated the question so many times, and now you are asking me to repeat it once more!' The angler replied, 'At that time my float was about to sink; I didn't hear a word of what you said.'

A person can achieve such single-mindedness in meditation that he will see nothing, hear nothing. He will not be conscious even of touch. A snake may crawl over his body, but he will not know it. Neither of them will be aware of the other.

In deep meditation the sense-organs stop functioning: the mind does not look outward. It is like closing the gate of the outer court in a house. There are five objects of the senses: form, taste, smell, touch and sound. They are all left outside.

-Sri Ramakrishna, from *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (p. 744-745)

What Catastrophe Teaches Us

(Based on a talk delivered by Swami Kripamayanda at the Vedanta Society of Toronto, February 13th, 2005)

Let us try to imagine a tranquil setting. A sunny Saturday morning; a beautiful tropical beach; blue sky; sparkling water; children laughing and playing; parents and the elderly resting and enjoying the calm and relaxing away from the stress of their weekly duties. Everywhere there is joy and safety. Not a care in the world for anyone. Suddenly the ocean changes its mood - it becomes a killer. Of course, as all of you well know, I am referring to the tragic event which took place on December 26, 2004. Anywhere from 228,000 to 310,000 people are thought to have perished.

This was a catastrophe. In the dictionary, catastrophe is defined as: an event producing a subversion of the order of things. We live on a planet of physical extremes. Catastrophes are far from uncommon. Hurricanes, brutal cold fronts, heatwaves, ice storms, tornadoes, cycles of flood and drought have dotted the earth throughout all of time. New structures are formed, and old ones are torn down. This is the rhythm of nature - this is how Mother Nature acts to further Her creation. Of course, catastrophes are not always caused by nature. There are also manmade catastrophes. In recent memory, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 for example. Look at the way the world has changed since then. Catastrophes do more than just shake up the world. They shake up our world view. They force us to ask us that most difficult question: 'why?' And not only 'why me?', but 'why us?' Answers to this question can be searched in two contexts. One is science. The other is religion.

Science will be able to tell us the causes of disastrous events. Earthquakes are results of strenuous tectonic activity and if we happen to be near such activity, we will be affected. Science tells us we are just victims of natural phenomenon. Science deals with causes - not purposes. 'What purpose does a volcano have in erupting?', is the wrong question for a scientist to ask. 'Purpose' assumes that there is some conscious agent or factors working in the background. Science is unable to supply any kind of fruitful attention to this. When science becomes dumb and powerless, religion steps in.

Religion identifies God as the Supreme Conscious Principle. When causation becomes conscious, there is a reason why we suffer. Many are filled with the question: what is God's motive behind catastrophes - behind our suffering? Let us understand. God's will is inscrutable. The human mind is far too limited an instrument to understand God's mysterious ways. The human mind, when it's purified, can reflect the Light of God and give it spiritual illumination and all the answers that come with that lofty experience. But before that purification takes place, the mind cannot receive Divine answers in their fullness. From who's perspective is a catastrophe good or bad? From God's perspective, is suffering and death necessarily bad for humanity? Suffering teaches us about the attachment to God, about detachment from the world, and about our real divine identity. Listen to what Brother Lawrence wrote to an ailing nun:

'I am not asking God to deliver you from your sufferings, but I do ask Him earnestly to give you the strength and patience to endure them as long He wishes you to; comfort yourself with Him who keeps you fastened to the Cross; He will release you from it when he deems proper. Happy are those who suffer for Him; accustom yourself to suffering thus...The world does not understand these truths...'

I have added emphasis to the 'accustoming' ourselves with suffering because suffering should be understood as a necessary condition of physical life. Our conception of the world being one thing and suffering another is completely wrong. The world is suffering. It is a fact. What we are to do is 'comfort [ourselves] with Him'. This is the spiritual approach. If we maintain this approach, with steadfastness and faith, should we be scared of destruction? We are scared because we perceive only what is physical, or gross. We have not yet developed our spiritual vision to perceive and see subtle forms. When salt is mixed with water, it dissolves and can no longer be seen. But is the salt then gone? No. Taste the water, and you have your answer. The salt has merely changed its form, but its existence has in no way been diminished.

When Narendra first met Sri Ramakrishna and asked the question, 'Sir, have you seen God?', the answer that he received was, 'Yes, I see Him just as I see you, but in a more intense way'. Subtle forms can be seen in the same way we see our world, but they appear as more intense, more real than what we are accustomed to. If we could see the world in its more intense subtle state, then our view towards gross matter would drastically change, altering our perspectives on violent changes in our physical environment.

So this is an attempt to furnish our psychology with the necessary belongings, facts and attitudes to constructively deal with the profound suffering associated with catastrophes.

On one side of the world - tsunami. On the other? Help. Aid. Humanitarian missions and pledges for global assistance. What is the role of devotees when others are in such dire need? There is prayer. Soul power is employed in sending positive thoughts to those that require strength and stability. This is indeed very much needed. And it helps a great deal.

There is also charity. Swami Dayatmananda recently wrote in Vedanta magazine, 'Real charity is to offer oneself to God and see the divine in all beings.' This is the total view. The highest charity is spiritual charity. Give in spirit. To do this, we can best help those in need by redoubling our efforts - try to increase our dependence on God and energize our spiritual life. Our souls belong to the Supreme Soul, and this interconnectedness is the causeway to convey our sympathy and strength-giving prayers. There is also the positive and affirmative way of feeling the divine in all beings. To feel this divinity in others, we must interact with them. Let's shake hands with them. Say hello. It is the weak who do not feel friendly to others. Unfriendliness is riddled with fearfulness. Be strong. Be friendly. God is all around. Help with a smile, with a hand and with divinity in your eyes.

The history of nature is littered with massive upheavals, giant collisions and devastating forces mixing together to create many changes in the form of the environment. Destruction is the opposite of creation. In this world of opposites, this plane of relativity, we need to accept certain facts of our existence. We need to accept that if there is a rise, there must be a fall - if there is fullness, there must be emptiness - if there is glory, there must be tragedy.

This is truth. Whether we like it or not, it is right there in front of our eyes. The reaction to perceived negative events is what we must try to learn to control. We see some tragic event reported on the evening news. What is our first feeling? Analyze this. Do we think about the illusory nature of our existence? This maya? Do we think about the indestructibility of the real Self? Do we think about the immutable, perfect, free, eternal and infinite Soul of our soul? Why not? Is it because we haven't trained ourselves yet? Or because we aren't truly convinced that the truth is the Truth? That is a question of faith.

You see, the world is really unreal. It appears, then disappears. It means very little to us really. This whole world is filled with fleeting objects which distract us and take us away from the only purpose of life - realizing God.

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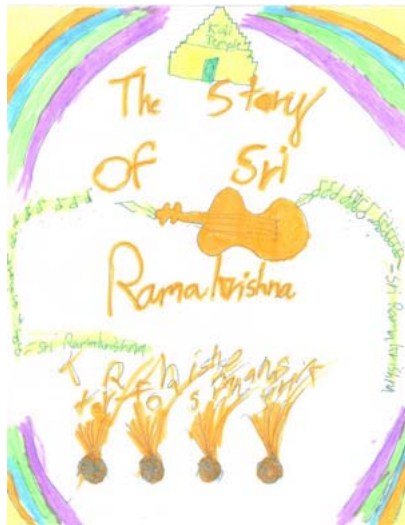
Sri Krishna pleads with Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita, to stop grieving. Over and over again, Sri Krishna is telling Arjuna to give up this sentimental reaction. It is unbecoming of a great warrior like Arjuna. It belittles the glory of That which he truly is. It was necessary for Arjuna to detach himself from his emotions. His emotions were distorting his view as it were.

When Sri Ramakrishna was asked about the will of God in cases of brutal massacres such as those committed by Genghis Khan, what was his response? Sri Ramakrishna asked back, What are we to know about the will of God? How can we ever know what God's motive is? Why He does what he does? That doesn't interest me. I just want to love him. I want to devote all my thoughts, words and deeds to God. That's all.

We need to focus on what we know to be true and try to establish ourselves in that truth. What is the truth of a tsunami? Its truth lies in its power to destroy all that lies in its path. What is the truth of an earthquake? Its truth is in its power to split the earth's crust like a peanut shell. What is the truth of a volcanic eruption? Its truth lies in its power to make the surrounding area look like a giant ashtray.

But what is our truth? In what power does our truth lie in? What can tell us how powerful we are? Can science tell us how powerful we are? Well, its trying. That's all very good. We are coming to know a lot about the nature of phenomena through the power of science. Nature has science to tell us how powerful it is. We have spirituality to tell us how powerful we are. Science helps us to arrive at the driveway of truth, but to reach Truth's front door and knock on it, is only really possible for religion.

Quantum Leap



The Story of Sri Ramakrishna

Once a long, long time ago there lived a man and a woman. They were very devoted to God. Their names were Kshudiram and Chandramani. One day Kshudiram had went to Gaya and prayed to God and, before he went back home, he got a dream that Vishnu will be born to him and his wife. Chandramani, one day at Shiva worship time, got light as the baby came into her stomach. Then the child was born and named Gadadhar. His father Kshudiram told him stories. As he grew he thought about God more and more. Then when he was a man he went to a Kali Temple and prayed. It took a long, long time to see the Mother. Then he saw God while practicing other religions. Everyone called him Sri Ramakrishna. He got married to Sri Sarada Devi. Sri Ramakrishna had a student named Narendra. Sri Ramakrishna gave him a power message and then Narendra, with the name Swami Vivekananda, passed the message around the world. Ramakrishna Math & Mission was made by Swami Vivekananda. In our Math, we are lucky we have many wonderful swamis.

By Arunachala Trivedi, Age 7, Student of Vedanta Vidya Mandir

Belur Math News & Tsunami Relief Update

The **Ministry of Human Resource Development**, Gov't of India, have accorded the **Ramakrishna Math & Mission** permission to start a deemed [to be] university named Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda Educational and Research Institute. The headquarters of this university will be at Belur Math. For the present, the university will consist of the Mission's International Human Resource Development Centre (IHRDC) for the Disabled, at Coimbatore. Later on, by phases, some other institutions of Mission centres engaged in the field of rural development, value education, disaster management, etc., as well as the proposed research centre at Swamiji's Ancestral House would also be included within the ambit of this University. (Incidentally, it may be mentioned that this is the first and so far the only university institution in India in the name of Swami Vivekananda.)

Dr. Manmohan Singh, Prime Minister of India; Sri Pranab Mukherjee, Union Defence Minister; Sri Gopalkrishna Gandhi, Governor of West Bengal, and Sri Nirupam Sen, West Bengal Minister of Commerce & Industries, visited Swamiji's Ancestral House on January 12th.

Tsunami Relief Update

The Vedanta Society of Toronto would like to announce that on February 3rd, 2005, the Society humbly issued, as a first installment, a sum of \$18,283.00 CAD (Rs. 641,550 INR) to Ramakrishna Mission General Secretary, Belur Math for relief work in India and Sri Lanka. We would like to heartily thank our generously dear members, friends and supporters who all rallied together with large-hearts to give aid to Tsunami victims. We are now actively collecting funds in order to send a second installment of financial help. Please donate to this worthwhile cause - to help assuage the prolonged effects of one of the worst natural disasters in history. Thank you. Tsunami Relief Work News: Our centres in India and Sri Lanka continued relief operations among the tsunami victims by distributing food items, utensils, clothes, blankets, medicine etc. Relief given in Tamil Nadu, India to 63,567 persons. Relief given in Andaman Islands, India to 40,500 persons. Relief given in Batticaloa, Sri Lanka to 121,790 persons.

Past Events



The **Birth Anniversary Celebration of Swami Vivekananda** was held on February 6th, 2005, with a special programme of homa, worship, devotional singing, reading, meditation, and flower offering followed by distribution of prasad. Close to 200 devotees attended the blessed event.

Upcoming Events



Public Celebration: Sri Ramakrishna Birth Anniversary, Saturday March 12th, 2005 11 AM. A special worship with homa, puja, bhajans, meditation flower offering and distribution of prasad.

Regular Services

Daily Meditation

Meditation is held at the Centre every morning from 6 am to 7 pm. Devotional singing and meditation is held every evening from 6 pm to 7 pm.

Vigil

The Centre conducts a silent vigil of intensive meditation from 6 am to 6 pm once a month. This month's vigil is on **March 19th**. For participation, please call the centre.

Interviews and Instruction

Swami Kripamayananda grants interviews to those interested in knowing more about Vedanta, Indian Philosophy, and spirituality and its practices. Please call in advance and make an appointment.

Sunday Service

Lectures are given every Sunday at 11 am by Swami Kripamayananda or distinguished speakers. The service includes devotional singing, reading, meditation and refreshments. **Please use front entrance.**

Upanishad Lecture

This month's lecture is on **March 10th**, at **3:10 pm** at the University of Toronto's Sidney Smith Hall, Room 1078. (Sidney Smith Hall is located on St. George St. between Harbord St. and Wilcocks St.) The topic is the **Svetasvatara Upanishad**.

Scripture Class

Scripture classes are held every Friday at 7:30 pm. **Please use upstairs kitchen entrance.**

Vedanta Vidya Mandir - Children's Programme

An educational programme for young people, teaching Indian Spirituality, History, Mythology, Values, Music and Yoga - is usually held twice a month. The next class dates are **March 13th and March 27th**. Classes are from **1:30 pm to 4 pm**. Students must be registered in advance.

Soup Kitchen

The Centre runs a Soup Kitchen service for the needy, twice every month. This month's dates are **March 5th and March 19th**. Volunteers gather at the centre at **9 am**.

Book Store

The Book Store carries selected titles from Ramakrishna - Vivekananda literature, as well as other material related to Vedanta and Indian Philosophy. Please call for store hours.

Ram Nam Sankirtan

Singing of Ram-Nam in Sanskrit will be held on **March 20th** at **5 pm**.

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