

Sri Ramakrishna Birthday Celebration

The pulsating, ancient sound of Vedic Chanting by the Vedanta Society Nuns launched this year's public celebration of Sri Ramakrishna's birthday celebration at Vedanta Hall.

In his introductory comments to a panel session on Joy of Spirituality in the Light of Sri Ramakrishna's Life and Message, Robert Grant observed that: "We're surrounded by complicated, obsessive and expensive attempts to find joy," citing the trend for "short but extravagant holidays: action-packed, micro-managed, dripping with luxurious locales and food, all shared in minute detail on social media;" as just one example. He contrasted this with the "mart of joy" that surrounded Sri Ramakrishna and how "waves of heavenly bliss" would flow in his room where devotional talks and singing and dance gave rise to the deepest, simplest and purest joy. Robert wryly observed that: "Here in Sydney over 140 years later we also have many 'Marts of Joy' every weekend with dancing and singing and people falling on the ground in 'ecstasy.' But while those who attended Sri Ramakrishna's Marts of Joy woke up the following morning exclaiming: "Good morning God!" many Sydney revelers might exclaim: "O God! Morning!"

Walter Mason, blogger and writer and Vice-President of the Charles Dickens society, Sankar Chandrasekaran, retired electronics engineer and keen student of Sanskrit, Gita and the Upanishads, and Pravrajika Sridharaprana, Nun of Sri Sarada Math of the Ramakrishna Order, comprised the panel.

They explored three themes: firstly, describing 'How they find simple joys in their everyday lives.' Sridharaprana found it joyful to interact with and serve the devotees. Asked to 'Share stand-out moments from their Spiritual Journey,' Sankar described how, after several attempts, thwarted by riots in Tibet and group Visa issues, he and friends finally completed a pilgrimage to Kailash and Manasarovar leading to indescribable joy. Sridharaprana shared her life-changing experience of visiting the Sri Ramakrishna Math in Bangalore, a Centre with a rich spiritual history associated with Sri Sarada Devi, saintly monks and enthralling devotional music. With two travel books full of anecdotes of the enriching and exotic times he spent in Vietnam and Cambodia Walter described sacred meetings with Nuns and Monks and solitary ascetics.

A 'Favourite teaching or incident related to Sri Ramakrishna' took us to a quiet and exclusive shop in the upper levels of Sydney's Queen Victoria Building where, with only an occasional sale to occupy him, Walter read Christopher Isherwood's biography of Sri Ramakrishna, revealing a rich, mystical world for his imagination. Sankar had a very personal take having acted the role of Sri Ramakrishna in several plays.

Next on the program was a sublime performance of sacred music straddling Jewish, Christian and Hindu songs, by Australia's leading performers of the art, Dr. Kim Cunio, Associate Professor at the ANU and his partner, Heather Lee, award winning soprano.

