

The Three-Year AVG Course at Rishikesh Ashram

The students of the three-year course, that began in Anaikatti in 2010, stood outside the temple awaiting the arrival of Pujya Swamiji. The sound of Ganga flowing over the rocks below and the cold nip in the air reminded one this was Rishikesh and not Anaikatti.

It was Sunday, 10th February, 2013. That afternoon, Pujya Swamiji would begin a four-week study of Chandogya Upanishad. What is it that makes this study stand apart from the teaching up until this point? It is not that Pujya Swamiji's unfolding Chapter Six of Chandogya along with bhashya could be done with anymore clarity, thoroughness, or enthusiasm than the previously unfolded Upanishads. What is it then? Perhaps it is the additional grace manifesting to give the



students the opportunity to study in the very place where one's Guru living in a grass hut, taught and studied for many years.

The Rishikesh ashram acharya, Swami Santatmanandaji, and others, have taken no shortcuts in assuring that the students are able to focus on their studies. When one sits down for the first Chandogya class of the day at 8:30 am, each student has had the freedom to attend puja, take time for japa, and sit in a guided meditation, which is followed by breakfast. Nothing is required of the student other than to simply be in the right place at the right time.

The Sixth Chapter of Chandogya is the story of Svetaketu that Pujya Swamiji so lovingly and colourfully portrays as the brilliant, but very proud, young man who has returned home after 12 years of study at a gurukulam. How does a parent





address such an attitude observed in his child? Uddalaka, Svetaketu's father, simply asked his son, what brought about this prideful conduct? Did you ask your teacher for that knowledge, knowing which, all else is as though known?

Of course, Uddalaka knew that Svetaketu had not been taught that knowledge – there is no room for pride in knowing the truth of oneself. Svetaketu was initially not convinced that such a knowledge existed. He asked how this sort of knowledge could be taught. Uddalaka explained that it is like knowing clay. If one knows clay, all objects that are made of clay are as though known – the clay pot, bowl, etc. Indeed, pot, bowl etc., do not have any existence apart from clay. It is merely name and meaning that creates the so-called differences between pot and bowl etc. Uddalaka gave several further examples to assure that Svetaketu understood that a product is not separate from its cause.

Having understood what he was told, and convinced that there was a knowledge whereby everything could be as well known, Svetaketu is worried that his father may send him back to the gurukulam for

further study. In order to avoid this potentiality, Svetaketu tells his father that he is sure the teacher did not have this knowledge and asks to be taught by his father himself.

The teaching that ensues is a detailed vichara of satyam and mithya. Without understanding mithya, one cannot know the sadvastu. The basic definition of mithya is that which cannot be categorically stated as real, nor can it be categorically stated as unreal – this is called anirvacaniya. However, to truly understand what this means is not easy. Even among those who ask for the knowledge and make efforts towards understanding there can be a lot of confusion. Therefore, proper vichara is necessary.

The jagat, universe, is nothing but sat, or consciousness. However, there are those who contend that everything comes from non-existence, which the Upanishad necessarily refutes. Everything has a cause – there is no pramana for the birth of something from nothing. Some others will argue that not only did everything come from non-existence, but that the non-existence is non-dual. How can non-existence that is non-dual and time of creation be spoken of together? Further, without pramana, the non-existence must have been witnessed in order to say it was. Thus, the non-dual non-existence requires the presence of existence to prove its non-existence!

Next the Upanishad says that sat visualized, I shall become many, aikshate bahusyam. Sankaracharya raises the question, if sat is partless how is it that all these forms are in the jagat? Answering, by pointing to the rope-snake example, one understands how when something is not known for what it is, there exists the possibility of taking it as something else. Does this mean that

everything that is perceived is unreal, like the snake on the rope? No, it is sat alone, which is nothing but what is real, that is being taken as something else.

So what is sat? Is it sentient or insentient? Clearly, only something that has sentience can visualize. However, there are those who hold that sat is insentient. They argue that statement, “sat visualized”, is a figure of speech, and no different from saying that the insentient river-bank “wants to fall” into the river. As Pujya Swamiji pointed out, figure of speech is only indicated when there is a contradiction. Here there is no contradiction as the cause of the jagat is the subject of sruti pramana alone. In fact if one were to take it as a figure of speech, it would be contradictory. It is from this point that the Chandogya classes are proceeding.

Bhagavad Gita class continues in the afternoons. Rajavidya-rajaguhya-yoga, otherwise known as Chapter 9 is currently being unfolded. When one says that there is nothing but Isvara some kind of understanding of the truth has taken place. However, to include oneself in “nothing but Isvara”, that is to know oneself as non-separate from Isvara takes a prepared student and knowledge that is free from vagueness and doubt. What can be done to assist one in gaining the grace that is



required for such preparation and knowledge to take place has been the topic of the last few verses that Pujya Swamiji has covered thus far.

Satsangs have seen many requests for Pujya Swamiji to share stories of how he came to Rishikesh and what life was like living in a grass hut on the bank of Ganga. After a particularly rainy and windy 24-hour period, one person was inspired to ask, how Swamiji survived the weather, wouldn't the grass hut blow away?! Pujya Swamiji has obligingly shared many stories with us, which both inspire and serve as a reminder that the opportunity that we are given for devoting ourselves to this study is a rare thing indeed.

This month is particularly auspicious for Ganga bathing, it being kumbha mela. The chill of Ganga's waters is not noticed as much as her rush to bless the one taking snanam, pouring herself over and around the submerged body. Even when not bathing, her dance mesmerizes one as she weaves over, and around the rocks. The sun drawing a path across her more placid waters, and sparkling like gemstones in whirlpools and eddies, has the ability to draw one to contemplate on the grace which has brought one to this place, this teaching and this teacher.

Report by Julie Carpenter