

## Winter Retreat 2008 at the Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, Saylorsburg, PA\*

The winter retreat at the Arsha Vidya Gurukulam (AVG), Saylorsburg, PA is perhaps the most popular retreat. This is easily attested by the fact that there is usually a long wait list to get into the retreat. The retreat is filled up as early as in June. Most interestingly, people who attend the retreat make the reservations for the next year retreat before they return home! There are several reasons for the high demand of the winter retreat, also called as the Christmas Camp. Firstly, Pujya Swami Dayananda Saraswati's presence in the camp is the overwhelming reason for people of all ages look forward to spend their holidays with Pujya Pujya Swamiji. Secondly, the winter retreat offers to people a most enjoyable way to wind down from the yearlong hurry-burry life in the relaxed atmosphere of the Gurukulam. Thirdly, it offers the same level of rejuvenation to every member of the family. Children of all ages look forward to meeting their friends and form new friendships. Teens and young adults who are in colleges use the opportunity for a reunion with their friends. Parents, of course, have a lot to catch up with their friends. Finally, the campers look forward to usher in the New Year at midnight of Dec 31<sup>st</sup> in the august presence of Pujya Pujya Swamiji.

The retreat this year ran from Wed-Wed, Dec 24-31<sup>st</sup> with a streamlined program for each day. The program varied for adults and children of different age groups. Thanks to the wonderful Gurukulam staff and the leadership of Suddhatmaji, the General

Manager of the Gurukulam, all the programs were meticulously planned and conducted. The day started at 5.45 am with the *abhishekam* to Lord Dakshinamurti. Notwithstanding the wintery chill in the air during the early morning hours, many of the campers attended the *abhishekam* regularly. There were three Vedanta classes, one meditation session, Vedic Chanting and an evening satsang with Pujya Pujya Swamiji. During the afternoon, there were yoga classes for adults. The campers had sufficient free time and also time for doing Gurukula Seva. Everyday campers relished the sumptuous and tasty food prepared by Sri Ramachandran who adroitly managed feeding the campers and the daily continuous stream of visitors to the Gurukulam.

Pujya Swamiji took two classes daily on Adi Sankara's Dasa Sloki. Pujya Swamiji unfolded beautifully the 10 verses with a methodical build-up of each verse. He underscored the importance of the *hetu* in the 3<sup>rd</sup> line of each verse and because of which how the Dasa Sloki stands out as a significant and important Vedantic text. Pujya Swamiji further stated that because of its profundity, Madusudhana Saraswati, one of the greatest exponents of Advaita, wrote a detailed commentary on Dasa Sloki called *siddhanta bindu*. Pujya Swamiji taught how the refrain *sivah kevaloham* in each verse is an equation that needs to be understood. After explaining all the ten verses, Pujya Swamiji showed beautifully the *sangati* between each verse. Campers not only saw the brilliance of Pujya

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Swamiji's exquisite unraveling of a great text but also witnessed Pujya Swamiji's uncanny insights into the ways of Sankara's presentation.

Swami Tattvavidanandaji daily taught a class on Srimad Valmiki Ramayanam. Swami TV has been teaching Ramayana during the past six winter retreats and this year he continued where he left off in the *Kishkindha Kanda*. He read selected Sanskrit verses, gave a detailed meaning of each of them, and weaved the story line to a spell bound audience. Although the events in Ramayana are ones that are known to all, Swami TV injected a freshness, which made every one eagerly look forward to the class. Pujya Swamiji pointed out how the geography of India is so thoroughly described through the words of Sugriva who instructed the contingents of *vanaras* dispatched in different directions in search of Sita. Pujya Swamiji also pointed out the vedantic insights contained in some of the verses.

On Wednesday Dec 31<sup>st</sup>, a Dakshinamurti *mulamantra lakshaarchana* was conducted under the direction of priests Ganesan and Ravi. More than 100 devotees chanted the Dakshinamurti *mulamantra* 1008 times and at the end of the *japa*, an *abhishekam* was performed by Pujya Pujya Swamiji using the water from all the *kalasas* that the devotees used for the Laksharchana *puja*.

The highlight of the retreat was the ushering of the New Year at the midnight of Dec 31<sup>st</sup> with the chanting of Om Namasivaya that was led by Pujya Pujya Swamiji. Exactly at the stroke of midnight, to the accompaniment of the blowing of the conch, a deeparadhana was performed to Lord Dakshinamurthi. Retreat participants both adults and children received their blessings from Pujya Pujya Swamiji and greeted each other with New Year wishes. The exhilaration continued with

people treating themselves to pizza, soda and chocolates which is a AVG's custom on New Year's Eve.

Although the camp officially ended on Dec 31<sup>st</sup>, many campers stayed at the Gurukulam for the **New Year *maha rudrabhishekam to Lord Dakshinamurti*** and Pujya Pujya Swamiji's New Year address. In addition to the campers, nearly 700 devotees came to the Gurukulam from the tri-state area (New York, New Jersey and Philadelphia) to witness the *maha rudrabhishekam* and to hear Pujya Pujya Swamiji's New Year message. The day was bright with plenty of sunshine and luckily, there was no snow. Priest Ravi led the *sankalpa* for all the devotees before the beginning of the *maha rudrabhishekam*. During the *alankara* of Lord Dakshinamurti, Pujya Pujya Swamiji delivered his much awaited New Year address. Pujya Swamiji began his talk exploring the cause for the world economic meltdown and pointed out how "end justifying the means" attitude lead to disaster. Pujya Swamiji developed his theme that both means and end represent the same *dharma* of the Lord and violation of the means is violation of Isvara's order. Following Pujya Swamiji's address, an *ashtotra pushpanjali* was performed to Lord Dakshinamurti.

Lord Dakshinamurti looked resplendent decked with carnations of different colors and all devotees received the grace of the Lord and Pujya Pujya Swamiji. The New Year celebration concluded with prasada distribution and a sumptuous lunch.

The campers returned home feeling immensely happy and satisfied after a rejuvenating retreat. They will cherish the memories of the camp for many months and contemplate on the teachings throughout their life.