

2009 Year-end Retreat at the Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, Saylorsburg, PA*

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The year-end retreat at the Arsha Vidya Gurukulam (AVG), Saylorsburg, PA was, as usual, well attended by nearly 200 adults and 95 children of different age groups from Dec 25-31, 2009. Each year the number of attendees is increasing and thanks to the building renovations at the Gurukulam which got completed just a few weeks prior to the camp, accommodations were provided to most campers. However, a few had to stay at the nearby hotels and commute to the Gurukulam. Not surprisingly, people made reservations for the 2010 retreat while at this year's camp and a sizable number had to go on the waiting list already! Well, everyone at the camp unanimously agreed that that there is no better place than the Arsha Vidya Gurukulam to spend the year-end holidays, wring out the old year and welcome the new one.

Pujya Swami Dayananda Saraswati arrived at the Gurukulam on December 25th around 5 pm and to every one's pleasant surprise came to the lecture hall to take class at 6.15 pm. There was amazement how Swamiji could do this after a 15 hour flight and whether he ever experiences jet lag at all. "Essence of Kenopanishad" was the subject matter for the camp and Pujya Swamiji started off with the explanation of the word upanishad and then the dhyana sloka, "*apyayantu mamangani..*"

Notwithstanding a mild snow on a couple of days, the wintery weather, marked by chill and crisp air, was generally unexceptional. From Dec 25th-31st, the camp had a well orchestrated daily program. The day started at 5.45 am with the *abhishekam*

to Lord Dakshinamurti. This was followed by a 30 min guided mediation session conducted by Swami Tattvavidananda Saraswati. Swamiji methodically built the sessions during the week such that at the end of the retreat the campers got insights into shedding the external world and turning attention to oneself during the mediation. This was certainly something everyone could take home and practice. There were two classes on essence of Kenopanishad taught by Pujya Swamiji and one class on Ramayanam taught by Swami Tattvavidananda. In addition, there were chanting classes, yoga and a night *satsang* with Pujya Swamiji. There was also ample free time to do *gurukula seva*, browse the bookstore, visit the library and catch up with friends.

Pujya Swamiji expounded on the salient verses of Kenopanishad and presented its essence in an easily understandable and succinct manner. The directness and elegance of Kenopanishad in describing the nature of the vastu were further amplified by Swamiji's uncanny insights and communication *par excellence*. Swamiji's book served as a useful companion to read after the classes and get further clarity of the Vedantic vision of oneself. Swamiji's narration of the meeting between the *yaksha*



and the devas and the appearance of Uma to teach Brahma Vidya to Indra was captivating and highlighted the importance of *sabda pramana* in acquiring self-knowledge.

Swami Tattvavidanandaji taught a class on Srimad Valmiki Ramayanam. This was the 7th year since Swamiji started teaching Ramayanam. He concluded the *Kishkindha Kanda* and started with the *Sundara Kanda*. Swamiji explained the uniqueness of *Sundara Kanda* in the whole Ramayana and presented how Hanuman, the main character in this *kanda*, can be looked upon as a *jignasu*. To illustrate this point, Swamiji drew attention of the listener to the similarity of the verses in Ramayana and Bhagavad Gita. Swamiji's marvelous articulation of the story as well as the Vedantic purport of *Sundara Kanda* kept the class spell bound and left the campers insatiate.

On Dec 31st, 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 using the water from all the *kalasas* that the devotees used for the *puja*.

A talent show was the highlight of a cultural program on the evening of Dec 31st. The program consisted of vocal and instrumental music, dance and plays. Young adults, teens and children of the camp all participated. The whole program was orchestrated adroitly by Ms. Savitri Mani whose name has become synonymous with the cultural program at the Gurukulam. At 11.30 pm Pujya Swamiji led the campers in chanting Om Namasivaya to usher in the New Year and the New Decade. Exactly at the stroke of midnight, to the accompaniment of the blowing of the conch, a deeparadhana was performed to Lord Dakshinamurthi. People received their blessings from Pujya Swamiji and greeted

each other with New Year wishes. Keeping up with the AVG tradition, the campers treated themselves with pizza, soda and chocolates.

Although the camp officially ended on Dec 31st, many campers stayed at the Gurukulam for the New Year *maha abhishekam* to Lord Dakshinamurti and Pujya Swamiji's New Year address. Despite the cold weather, more than 1000 devotees came to the Gurukulam to witness the *maha abhishekam* and to hear Pujya Swamiji's New Year message. Priest Ganesan and Ravi led the *sankalpa* for all the devotees before the beginning of the *maha abhishekam*. During the *alankara* of Lord Dakshinamurti, Pujya Swamiji delivered his much awaited New Year address. Swamiji said in his address which was punctuated with humor that in the New Year one should stop asking the question, "Why me?" He propounded that a better question to ask is, "What can I learn from my experience?" He further said that a prayerful attitude would help with the transition, "Why me?" to "What can I learn from my experience?" Of course, one has to have enough knowledge to learn from one's experience and Swamiji pointed out that Arsha Vidya Gurukulam is a place where one can acquire that knowledge. Following 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, Pujya Swamiji and Swami Tattvavidananda. The New Year celebration concluded with a sumptuous lunch.

Finally, the whole year-end retreat was a memorable experience for the campers. This would not have been a reality if it were not for the tireless dedication and efficiency of the Gurukulam staffers under the supervision of Sri Suddhatma, the Gurukulam manager.