

Year End Family Vedanta Retreat at the Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, Saylorsburg, PA

Dec 24th – Dec 31st, 2011

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आनो भद्राः कृतवो यन्तु विश्वतः - May good thoughts come to us from all sides. Where else can this vision of Rigveda come true other than in the Campus of Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, Saylorsburg, PA during the Year End Family Vedanta Retreat Dec 24 -31, 2011? Every camper who participated will surely acknowledge this fact.

The camp officially started on 24th Dec with registration and orientation and the camp days were packed with activities for both children and adults. A typical day started at 5.45 am with abhishekam and puja to Lord Dakshinamurti which was then followed by a 30-minute meditation session. After the meditation session, the volunteers involved themselves in Gurukula seva like cutting vegetables, vacuuming or any other chores to be taken care of. The morning classes consisted of Vedic Chanting or Sanskrit taught, respectively, by Sri Suddhatmaji and Sri Kalpeshji and Narada Bhakti Sutra taught by Sri Swami Tattvaidananda Saraswati. Yoga classes for adults were conducted by Mark Hertal in the afternoon. In the evenings, Sri Swami Tattvaidananda Saraswati taught Sundara Kandam. Following evening arati and dinner, Swamiji also took satsang every day. In parallel to the adult classes, vedic heritage classes, yoga, chanting and Tae Kwon Do were held for children and these were taught by Sri Sharad Pimplaskar, Smt Lata Pimplaskar, Lance, Aoife, Mark and Sambavi.

Narada Bhakti Sutras: Swami Tattvaidanandaji began his exposition of Narada Bhakti Sutras by pointing out that a Sutra conveys briefly and clearly a topic which requires discussion and that which is not something obvious and that the Indian tradition contains a very rich Sutra literature. Swamiji expounded on supreme love, *parā bhakti*, with remarkable clarity and repeatedly emphasized that it was the way to self-realization. His explanations of the words like "tanmayāḥ", "tadīyāḥ" etc were so insightful. The take home message of basing one's actions on love in relative spheres ultimately culminating in love of all, which is love of *Īśvara*, was very profound and relevant.

Sundara Kandam from Valmiki Ramayana: Swamiji's afternoon talks were devoted to expounding the Sundara Kandam from Valmiki Ramayana. He introduced Valmiki as an unparalleled poet and his Ramayana as containing poetry of the highest order. One could feel the richness of the poetry as Swamiji read out

¹ We are grateful to Sri Joshi for providing the picture in this article

each sloka. The narration was on Hanuman searching for Sita in all the wrong places and finally locating her in the Asoka vana. Swamiji compared Hanuman's searching for Sita in the wrong places to that of a Jiva searching to find Shanti among the worldly objects. In this regard, the Vedantic perspective of Hanuman as a seeker resonated well with the attendees. The verses which described the love of Rama and Sita complemented nicely the Narada Bhakti Sutra classes which underscored Love as the underlying theme. Swamiji's explanations also made all to appreciate the richness of the plethora of similes contained in the verses.

Meditation: Swamiji's meditation classes were an education on silence. Silence is the natural state of the mind and speech, Swamiji asserted. To achieve this state of mind meditation is the method. Starting by stressing the importance of correct posture, which he clearly outlined, he took the participants, step by step into the world of silence – the world of Being. Doing is changeful; thinking is changeful. Being is eternal. To achieve the state of Being, do not strive, do not think, do not expect, do not try to grasp anything, drop all thoughts. Empty the mind and live in silence. Meditation is to empty the mind and just Be. Swamiji exhorted us to learn to be silent in all situations. He further stressed the importance of practice. Swamiji also introduced Loving Kindness meditation in a couple of sessions.

Yoga: To rejuvenate the body and rekindle the mind, the B.K.S Iyengar method of Yoga in the afternoons was very helpful. Mr. Mark Hertal was an excellent teacher who took time making the yoga student get comfortable and established in the poses. It was a total experience in itself.

Satsang: The satsangs were a great opportunity for the participants to clarify their doubts. Swamiji's reply to every question was straightforward and comprehensive.

Children's Program: Children's classes were conducted in three groups, viz., juniors, seniors and teens. The children went to their respective classes with lot of enthusiasm. They had Vedic chanting, Vedic Heritage, Yoga, Drama practice, Arts & Crafts and Games in their schedule. The teenagers also had Vedanta classes every day. The various classes kept the children occupied the whole day with



constructive activities as well as imparting the basic ingredients of the Hindu Dharma in a fun-filled way. The highlight of the events was the cultural program and the talent show held on Dec 30th and 31st, respectively. It was a delight to see the children chant what they had learnt in the classes. There was Bhagavad Gita dhyana sloka chanting, Chapter 12 chanting and Upadesa Sara chanting. With Smt Savithri Mani's organizing and coordinating abilities, the children performed beautifully on the stage with drama, bhajans and dances.

Dakshinamurti Mula Mantra Japa: The Mula mantra japa was performed on 31st morning. More than 100 families joined in the japa. Each family performed puja to a kalasa wherein the Lord was invoked. The Dakshinamurti mula mantra was chanted 1008 times making a total of more than one lakh chanting. The waters from the kalasas were later used for doing abhishekam to Lord Dakshinamurti.



New Year's Eve: The New Year's eve celebrations started with a talent show by children. Pujya Swamiji greeted the campers live on the webcam from India. This was an electrifying surprise to the campers. There was a midnight āraṭi along with guided meditation by Swami Tattvidananda. The New Year was ushered in with the chanting of Om Namaśśivāya.

New Year's Day Celebrations: On the New Year's Day it was a grand and wonderful sight to see the full-fledged Abhishekam of Lord Dakshinamurti. Swami Tattvidananda shared his thoughts on the urgent need for atma vidya. Swami Sarvabhootatmananda from Rishikesh also spoke asking the devotees to make ample use of the Arsha Vidya Gurukulam and its facilities to further their spiritual growth. In Pujya Swamiji's videotaped message Swamiji said "May this new year be new all the time, fresh all the time. Getting up every day is a new day. The New Year begins with a new day, the next day is a new day, and every day is a new day-again. It is a new day of the New Year. Let us keep it that way -



New day of the New Year." It was great to be in the company of devotees and mahatmas on the New Year's Day and to witness the abhishekam and a colorful pushpa anjali to Lord Dakshinamurti.

Like every year, the 2011 Year End Family Vedanta Retreat at the Campus of Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, Saylorsburg, PA was a memorable event enriching the campers in all possible ways but most importantly in their spiritual quest. Many campers made the reservations for the 2012 Year End Retreat before returning! It is of course, needless to say that the tireless dedication and efficiency of the Gurukulam staffers under the supervision of Sri Suddhatma, the Gurukulam manager, made the retreat a wholesome experience for all the campers.