

## Sat-sang with Swami Pratyagbodhananda at Syracuse

As the name connotes, Swami Pratyagbodhananda's discourses are always full of insight, witty, and lovely. Not a single moment is dull, the entire session is filled with humorous anecdotes, colorful stories, and scintillating observations on human follies, rather frailties. But, through all questions, prodding's, tooth-pulling queries, and responses, the preceptor wants nothing but wisdom and welfare for his students. Swamiji's command over English idiom and vocabulary is superb. He has at the tip of his tongue – the right word, always the most precise word to convey exactly – what is meant. Total unity between thought (meaning) and word is very difficult to achieve in practice; Kalidasa himself immortalized the travails of communication in the couplet: *vagarthau...*

Swamiji's heart is full of kindness for all. But when it comes to calling a spade a spade, he spares none. He is totally impartial: Swami exhibits the same level of abhorrence to any and all bad habits. Whether they belong to Gujarat, Andhra, Tamil, or Uttar Pradesh, or even North America – they are all taken to cleaners, when they (students, disciples) are found wanting in correct Sanskrit pronunciation or any behavioral trait. But, wherever there is any virtue (or redeeming quality), he points *it* out with the same acuteness of observation. A good deed is never just glossed over, without proper appreciation. Ex: American kitchen counters are

sparklingly clean, adorned with a fresh bouquet of flowers in a vase.

When it comes to speaking Sanskrit words, many tend to trip and commit mistakes. Ideally, one should read and write in Sanskrit (Devanagari) script. And practice, practice a lot uttering Sanskrit verses and words. Also, gradually learn how to break, give pauses to long phrases with correct emphasis and intonation. Swami illustrated the problem with the word, "*prasadam*". This word gets mangled by the people of south and north (India) alike. Thus, original *prasadam* gets morphed into *sadam* in Tamil. Up north, it is spoken as "*par-shad*". The native English speaker (as do today's urbanites in Indian mega cities) has difficulty with pronouncing aspirated consonants (and of course, double and triple consonants): *buddhi*. Misspeaking and mispronunciation are not just innocent mistakes. Often they lead to misunderstandings, some times with disastrous consequences. Purity of body, purity of food, and purity in speech – they are all important for spiritual progress. Thus carelessness in these matters, can lead to unnecessary pitfalls (delays) in the path, a fact often stressed by many enlightened teachers.

To a mellowed (unbiased, unencumbered mature) adult, Swamiji's remarks appear harmless; they are simply meant to stimulate the audience, guide them to learn Sanskrit words with utmost care. Diction is very important (in Hindu liturgy

as in any tradition) – clear pronunciation with proper emphasis on aspirated consonants is a must. Without correct diction, we cannot utter Vishnu sahasranama (or any *nama-vali*) flawlessly. Nor can we decipher the deeper meaning of Lalita sahasranama. For those, who are learning to recite Sanskrit words via English transliteration, the guidance of a preceptor is needed – needed badly. Much grief and hardship can be avoided if one follows closely the words of Swami Pratyagbodhananda (or puja Swami Dayanand Saraswati). Just reading, muttering the English transliterated verses, names, or slokas is not enough. One must have rudimentary knowledge of Sanskrit characters, pronunciation of vowels, diphthongs, consonants, and one must also understand the key to the English transliteration scheme. A bit of hard work, in deed. Alas, there are no short cuts to any learning! Who said any spiritual progress is easy?

One session was devoted to japa (chanting the Lord's name). The efficacy of calling Vishnu's name is illustrated vividly with a short story: How an illiterate, yet ardent devotee called the Lord, (a)gha Mochan. Even calling His name incorrectly yields veritable results. Because embedded in such actions is pure bhakti feeling. Also, Swami emphasized how in the case of the Lord, the name has the same power as the Lord Himself. The name and named are the same. We can do the nama japa, anywhere, at any time, and even mispronunciations and mistakes are pardoned by the Lord Narayana. In a sense, nama japa is (or appears to be) slightly superior to chanting a 'mantra'. For a (un-initiated) devotee, a nama japa is more accessible, it requires less (mental) preparation.

At our local Lakshmi Narayan temple, Swami spoke at length on the origins of Sri Bhagavatam, how the book came to be written. He talked about the birth of Sage Suka; Veda Vyasa's dissatisfaction and despair – even after writing all the eighteen puranas and Maha Bharata, he was still tormented by unhappiness – a feeling of incompleteness enveloped him. Then Narada suggested Vyasa to write Sri Bhagavata Purana. The discourse included the story of Parikshat, his impending death due to a curse (mediated by the great serpent, Takshaka), and his attainment of moksha (Vaikuntha) after listening to Srimad-Bhagavatam narration. Swami also described the six essential attributes of "Bhagavan".

The last session was conducted for young children. Despite being a Sunday afternoon (tail end) event, it too brought out a great vivacity during the interactive discussion with youth. Our Swami urged Mr. Raman to initiate a Purna Vidya Teaching Program for Syracuse children. After eliciting responses (on what they did for Mothers Day) from the audience, Swamiji ended the session with a story of Lord Krishna and a poor village student. Krishna acts as a loving elder brother (Gopal Bhaiya) to the young kid and presents him with a small miraculous milk pot.

Hindu scriptures extol the benefits of sat-sang, association with the Lord's bhaktas. Visiting or meeting a swami like Sri Pratyagbodhananda is tantamount to going to a holy place (like Brindavan). In deed, it is an indescribable boon for all Syracuse Indian residents to see the Swami in our midst, in our homes. Lucky for us, we all got to spend three days in Swamiji's company and participate in sat-sang.

These days, despite a plethora of modern (English) books, videos, and Internet articles (audio & video), it is extremely difficult to come across correct, authentic exposition of traditional scriptures (Ramayana, Bhagavata Purana, and Maha Bharata). In this context, it is very lucky to have a speaker like Swami Pratyagbodhananda who can crisscross four languages and bring the original

meaning of Veda Vyasa's Sri Bhagavata purana (with Sri Vallabha-acharya's commentary) – bring he did, its original glory with witty jokes and hilarious interludes. That, itself is a great soul uplifting religious retreat! We pray for Swamiji's health and hope he would conduct many more spiritual discussions across several continents.

### **Events in AVG Saylorburg**

- Jun 25-26 Swami Veditatmanandaji's talks on "How & Why to live a Dharmic Life", in Salt lake City, UT
- Jul 1 & 15 Taittiriya Upanishad Bhasya Class with Dr. Swaminathan 8:30 am to 9:45 am; Bhagavad Gita Classes by Swami Veditatmanandaji from 10 am to 12:30 pm followed by Lunch. Satsang 1:15 pm to 2:15 pm
- Jul 4 Guru Poornima - Abhishekam to Lord Dakshinamurti, Guru Pada Puja, Talk by Swamiji 11 am to 12:30 pm followed by Lunch
- Jul 1 to 4 Independence Day Weekend Retreat with Swami Veditatmanandaji on Person of Wisdom
- Aug 12 - Pujya Swamiji's 81st Birthday Celebrations
- Aug 12-17 Carnatic Music Workshop
- 2012 AVG Program Schedule
- Aug 12-17 Purna Vidya Teachers Training
- Aug 15 & 29 Pradosha Puja 5:15 pm to 6 pm followed by regular Arati 6 to 6:30 pm and Dinner 6:30pm to 7:30pm
- Aug 19 AVG's 26th Anniversary Celebrations : Pujya Swamiji's talk on Creation is the Creator
- Aug 23-26 -Labor Day's Patrons Retreat