

Mahāvākya Vicāra: Rishikesh Camps and Events

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Introduction

The 2012 winter Vedanta camps commenced in Rishikesh just a few days after Śivarātri. The four week-long camps, each focusing on a mahāvākya from an upaniṣad began on the 24th of February with over 250 students "packed like noodles in the lecture hall," to quote Pujya Swamiji. People from various countries and age-groups participated. The hall was consistently filled beyond capacity, and eager jijñāsus crowding the hall did not seem to mind accommodating other campers practically in their laps. This was not all. As there was no room for other attendees, the overflow population of sādhakas comprising local sādhus, day-scholars, tourists, and brahmachārins from other āśrams were directed to the old lecture hall upstairs to watch the live class feed projected on a big screen. Groups from Japan and Brazil entertained everyone each evening before satsang by singing bhajans, accompanied by the mandolin and mridaṅgam.

Pujya Swamiji taught three classes per day. The morning and evening classes unfolded the mahāvākyas, while the mid-day class unfolded the Brahmasūtra, specially given for the long-term course students from Nagpur in Pujya Swamiji's Satsang room. The rest of the people were able to watch the live-feed of the Brahmasūtra classes on a screen in the lecture hall. Although these classes were filled with technical and Sanskrit terms, this was not enough to deter people, except the few faint of heart, from attending regularly, and the lecture hall remained nearly as crowded as during Pujya Swamiji's live presence.

Beginning and intermediate Sanskrit classes

Beginning and intermediate Sanskrit classes were conducted daily by Swamini Svatmavidyananda and Swamini Ramananda. The presence of people from other countries with absolutely no knowledge of the language necessitated an additional alphabets class taught by Swamini Swatmabodhananda.

"Tat Tvam Asi" was the topic of the first camp. Pujya Swamiji defined the term, mahāvākya, as a sentence revealing the identity of the individual and the Lord. Pujya Swamiji explained that such a sentence or statement is in the form of an equation, with the jīva (the individual) on one side, and Īśvara (the total) on the other. Contrary to the popular belief of there being

only four mahāvākyas, Pujya Swamiji clarified that the upaniṣads are filled with mahāvākyas, although the four mahāvākyas, namely tat tvamasi, prajñānam brahma, ahambrahmāsmi, and ayamātmā brahma, which were the topics for the four camps, are often highlighted as they each belong to one Veda.

To watch Pujya Swamiji in action, a master at his craft, unfold the mahāvākyas week after week is something that bears no comparison. When asked to comment about the Mahābhārata war, Hanumānji said that it was nothing compared to the war between Lord Rāma and Rāvana, which was exactly like...the war between Lord Rāma and Rāvana. Likewise, Pujya Swamiji can only be compared to himself. Only Pujya Swamiji can handle the same topic in a myriad of ways, making the truths of the upaniṣad shine for each and every person present. The introductions to the mahāvākyas were extremely diverse and innovative, while maintaining the general focus on the universal human problem --a sense of smallness and finitude. Pujya Swamiji touched on salient issues to which everyone could easily relate.

A Notion is That Which Cannot be Sustained

One introduction diagnosed the basic human problem as being that of a sense of alienation from the whole, caused by self-ignorance, and emphasized the human need for being connected to the whole. Pujya Swamiji showed how one can discover this connection by the study of the mahāvākya, where the jīva, the individual, is equated with jagatkāraṇam brahma, Īśvara as the cause of the universe. Another introduction focused on notions that one has about the oneself (jīva), about the world (jagat), and about God (Īśvara). Notions have nothing to do with truth, for, as Pujya Swamiji declared, "That which cannot be sustained is a notion, whereas that which cannot be negated is truth." Freeing oneself from erroneous notions about the self is mokṣa. In yet another introduction, Pujya Swamiji raised the issue of self doubt as a universal and fundamental human problem. Anything that one assumes to be the nature of the self --happy, sad, etc.-- is subject to doubt. Until one encounters Vedanta, one is perpetually in doubt about oneself. All contending philosophies about the self are products of self doubt. The quest for happiness, in which everyone engages, is also due to self-doubt. One cannot accept that one is sad, and one is in doubt about where happiness is located. Pujya Swamiji clearly revealed that happiness is neither a noun nor an adjective, but the very nature of the seeker. Exposure to the mahāvākya is the only way of assimilating this truth, and putting doubts about the self permanently to rest. The magnificent introductions left the audience spell-bound yearning to hear more. Consequently, many who had intended to attend only one camp,

extended their stay; a few left to attend to pressing engagements, only to return the following week, including some people from as far as Dubai.

Having outlined the talks in each camp with deft brush strokes of wisdom and humor, Pujya Swamiji then commenced the more detailed and intricate work of preparing the minds of the listeners to appreciate the vision of the mahāvākya. Here again, those who were fortunate enough to be able to participate in more than one camp could clearly see the creativity and ingenuity in Pujya Swamiji's presentation. Whether he was discussing the śruti as a pramāṇa, a means of knowledge, or the necessity for śraddhā, the śāstra came alive and danced in his hands. The term, śraddhā, was defined as the ability to trust that the words of the śruti -- handled by a teacher-- have something beneficial to say. In one camp, Pujya Swamiji elaborated on śraddhā as the regaining of the very trust that was lost by the individual in childhood through the discovery of the fallibility, and the consequent untrustworthiness, of parents and care-givers. When the child is small, it tends to idealize its parents as Gods. The child's own helplessness and inability are compensated for by total trust in the people that brought it into this world. As the child grows, it begins to discern inconsistency in the words and actions of the parents. It also sees the parents as eminently fallible. Continued fallibility, broken promises, and displays of emotional instability on the part of the care-givers leaves the child disappointed and unable to trust. Consequently, as an adult, also, the person is unable to trust in anything. Pujya Swamiji pointed out that the reason why a growing number of youngsters refuse to get married in contemporary India is because of this lack of trust. When the person encounters the śāstra from this infrastructure of mistrust, the teachings will not deliver their message. Therefore, trust in the guru and the śruti-vākya is a crucial attitude to cultivate, for without the ability to trust the words of the teaching, one tends to look at the guru and the śāstra with the same suspicion and disenchantment with which one greets other things in life.

In another camp, Swamiji unfolded the meaning of śraddhā as the dropping of resistance in knowing the truth. This is important because there are no options in knowing. Knowledge is without options, and is as true as the the object it reveals. Śraddha, therefore, is trusting the pramāṇa, the śruti as a means of knowledge. Pujya Swamiji also emphasized that as long as various options with regard to the nature of the self are open to a person, such a person continues to to be ignorant, in spite of listening to the śāstra for a long time. Śraddha, therefore, is the closure of all options with regard to self-knowledge, in the mind of the student, other than the committed pursuit of Vedanta. Only then can Vedanta bless the endeavor.

The Entire Jagat is Just Words and Meanings

Week after week, it became abundantly clear that Pujya Swamiji's repeated unfolding of the vision of the mahāvākyas --that the jīva, the one who suffers from notions of finitude and bondage, is indeed Īśvara, the cause of the universe-- was anything but a repetition. Here again, one could continually delight in the versatility, crystal-like clarity, precision, and creativity in Pujya Swamiji's thinking and presentation. In one camp, Pujya Swamiji showed how the entire jagat --including one's body, mind and sense complex-- is just words and their meanings. All things in the universe starting from one's body-mind-sense-complex to galaxies are just words with meanings. When we look into each thing, it is without being; it disappears, like even a shirt, which is nothing but fabric. When we say, "shirt is", the shirt, in itself, is without being in the sense that there is no independent substance called shirt. It is a name given to a modification of fabric. Again, there is no such thing as fabric --it is but yarn. Yarn resolves into fibers, fibers into molecules, and molecules into particles. We proceed with the enquiry in this way to finally confront the observer of the particle, oneself. This conscious entity, who is conscious of everything from the shirt to the particle does not resolve into anything, for the "I" can never be negated. That which cannot be negated is satyam. Satyam is not yet another object; it is a term that denotes the truth of oneself, the subject. Satyam has no location, size or form --it is consciousness that is limitless, the name for which is brahman. Brahman means that which is limitlessly big, which has no boundaries. Brahman is ātman, the self, and lends its existence to everything that is described with the word "is." The "is" in phrases such as "shirt is, fabric is, yarn is, particle is," belongs not to the thing itself, which is just word and meaning, but to brahman. The jagat shines in borrowed existence, lent by brahman --the name given to the locus of all names and forms, itself free of names and forms.

"Nāmni nāmāni" is a new phrase coined by Pujya Swamiji, which means, "In the one name resides the existence of all names." As the pot arises from its cause, clay, is sustained by clay, and returns to clay, so too, the jagat is non-separate from its cause, brahman. One cannot say that the jagat is existent, as its existence belongs to brahman; one cannot say that the jagat is non-existent, as it is available for objectification and transaction. Therefore, one has to understand the reality of the jagat as mithyā, a term used to denote a reality that is empirical, but which essentially is dependent on something else. Mithyā is not an object, but a term that denotes the reality of anything that cannot be categorically said to exist, or dismissed as non-existent, like a pot. Whatever the pramātr, the knower, confronts is mithyā. This includes everything that can be witnessed both within and without one's own body-mind-complex. The only thing that the knower cannot confront as an object is oneself, the subject, because the svarūpa of

the knower is satyam, limitless. That is why one needs a pramāṇa, a means of knowledge in the form of the words of the śruti, from outside oneself to understand the nature of the ātman. Pujya Swamiji said that the abiding confusion about Vedanta is because the terms satyam and mithyā are not properly understood. People often conclude that mithyā means delusion or illusion, and therefore, they think that they have to go beyond the mithyā to reach satyam. Whenever one is looking at mithyā, one is looking at satyam, as mithyā cannot exist without satyam. Mithyā is satyam, but satyam, being independent of everything is not mithyā.

The Immediate Meaning of the Words "Tvam" and "Tat"

The entire purpose of the teaching of Vedanta is śokanivṛtti, the removal of samsāra, characterized by sorrow. Like the sage Nārada, who was well-versed in all disciplines of knowledge, but was still subject to sorrow, one can be very knowledgeable about mithyā without knowing satyam. Nārada approached the teacher Sanat Kumāra for the teaching as he had heard that the knower of the self crosses sorrow. When the teacher asked him what all he knew, Nārada listed practically every discipline of knowledge from the Vedas to the art of warfare. Sanat Kumāra told Nārada that all he knew was "a heap of words" without knowing their content--the one thing, knowing which everything is as well known. Pujya Swamiji emphasized that the removal of sorrow does not take place just by knowing that one is consciousness. One has to understand the nature of this consciousness as both being free of all limitations, and as being manifest as the cause of the universe.

The mahāvākyas unfold an equation between the jīva, who like Nārada, feels finite, and brahman as Īśvara, the cause of the universe. Like a mathematical equation, the equation between jīva and Īśvara is also a matter of understanding, not belief. If an elementary school teacher were to say to a student, " $5 + 4 = 20 - 11$ ", the young student might be initially perplexed by the single digits and the plus sign on one side of the equation confronting the double digits and the minus sign on the other side. How can the two sides be identical? A similar question can arise when one looks at the equation "prajñānambrahma," which means that the one who obtains as the conscious entity that is behind the operation of the sense-organs, the prāṇa, the mind, and is the invariable content of every cognition, is indeed brahman, the cause of the universe. The apparent differences between the jīva, the individual, and Īśvara, the cause of the universe, are obvious. The jīva,, characterized by self-ignorance, identifies with everything finite, such as the body, the states of the mind, etc., and therefore suffers from a notion of bondage. This is known as tvam-pada-vācya, the immediate meaning of

the word "I." By contrast, the tat-pada-vācya, the immediate meaning of the word Īśvara is one who is all-pervasive, almighty, and omniscient. In every camp, Pujya Swamiji stressed the fact that unlike other theologies, the upaniṣad does not present Īśvara as an entity separate from the jagat, situated in a place called heaven. Such beliefs are contrary to reason and common sense, whereby "God," who is without limits and all pervasive, cannot be separate from everything else, or located in a specific place, much less have a gender. The various laws that comprise this jagat are not mandates, but manifestations of Īśvara. The sun, the moon, the air that we breathe, are all Īśvara. The physiological laws that govern the functioning of the body are also Īśvara. Therefore in the tradition, it is possible to invoke Īśvara in any form, or as the presiding deity of any law. Even the functions of the body and mind are manifestations of Īśvara --kidneys are Īśvara, pancreas is Īśvara. The psychological order is Īśvara, and the so-called disorder within any one order is also Īśvara, because the so-called disorder in one sphere is an intrinsic part of the manifestation of another order, usually the order of karma. Therefore that which is infallible is Īśvara. Any disturbance in any part of the order can be nullified or mitigated by invoking Īśvara in the form of the devatā, the presiding deity of that particular order. This sophisticated understanding as there being not one or many gods, but all that is there is god is not available in any tradition. Even if some of the indigenous traditions in the past had some understanding of the sacredness of everything, it has been mostly lost as it was not backed by the sampradāya, the teaching tradition.

The tvampadavācya and the tatpadavācya have meanings that are apparently contradictory. The immediate meaning of the word "tvam" yields the helpless, hopeless individual, the jīva, who struggles to be free from a sense of bondage and limitation life after life. The immediate meaning of the word "tat" is the all-powerful and limitless Īśvara, the cause of the universe. How can the two be identical? Just as in the mathematical equation, we have to see past the apparent contradictions of the single and double digits, the plus and minus signs, to arrive at the non-difference between between the two sides of the equation, so too in the mahāvākya, we have to look at the implied meanings of the words tvam and tat, tvampadalakṣya and tatpadalakṣya, to understand that all that is there is one indivisible brahman, the whole.

The Implied Meaning of the Words "Tvam" and "Tat"

The implied meaning of the word "tvam" is that which is invariable in every cognition, that because of which the eyes see and the ears hear, that which obtains as the witness of everything, but which itself does not need a

witness to establish its existence. This is the self-existent self, the ātman, the conscious entity upon which the entire Vedanta śāstra is based. The self is not established by a means of knowledge, on the contrary, all means of knowledge can exist because the self is self-evident. The self, as it were, associated with a particular body-mind complex, as though appears limited, but the so-called limitations belong to the upādhi, which is mithyā, and not the ātman, the self, which is satyam. It is just like how the red cloth placed behind a quartz crystal ball makes the crystal appear to be red, when, in reality, it is not so. The ātman is brahman, one non-dual consciousness, that obtains as the subject, the witness. If an burning oil lamp is covered by a clay pot with several holes, the single flame appears as many, without really undergoing any change. The one consciousness likewise shines through various cognitions and various bodies, much like the reflection of the sun seen simultaneously in many pots of water.

The implied meaning of the word tat is also brahman, consciousness, which alone exists limitlessly, and which is nothing but knowledge. Like the individual lends his or her existence to the dream, and the dream is nothing but a manifestation of the individual's knowledge, the jagat is a manifestation of Īśvara. The dreamer projects the dream by covering the waking state, and undergoes no change whatsoever as a result of the dream. The dream is an model example to help assimilate that the creation is projected exactly like the dream, by veiling the non-dual oneness, without brahman undergoing any change. Brahman as the cause of the universe is Īśvara.

Pujya Swamiji further illustrated this point with the story of the wave and the ocean. An elderly Atlantic wave was very sad. As it lapped helplessly back and forth on the shore, reminiscing the glorious bygone days when it was a tsunami and a breaker, it noticed a tiny wave nearby that was very cheerful. The Atlantic wave asked, "You seem to be new. Where are you from?" The small wave replied that it was from the Indian ocean. The Atlantic wave persisted, "Why do you look so cheerful?" The Indian wave responded by saying, "Why do you look so sad?" The Atlantic wave then launched into a story of how great it used to be in its erstwhile years, and now it was at the end of its life, a small useless wave biding its time till it was gone. The Indian wave replied by saying the that the Atlantic wave was not a wave at all; in fact, it was the ocean. "What?" said the Atlantic wave astonished. "You cannot say that. That is blasphemy. The ocean is god; I am at best just odd. I came from the ocean so it is the cause, whereas, I exist because of the ocean. The ocean is all, but I am so small." The Indian wave persisted and asked the Atlantic wave, "What are you made up of?" The Atlantic wave replied, "Water." "What is the ocean made up of?" asked the Indian wave. Again the Atlantic wave replied, "Water." "You see," said

the Indian wave, "You are the ocean. Ocean tvamasi. All of you is water, and the entire ocean is nothing but water. The same water with a name and form is known as the wave, and with another name and form is known as the ocean." The Atlantic wave became enlightened. Both wave-ness and ocean-ness are statuses of water. Water alone, in terms of this example, is satyam. Likewise, both jīva-ness and Īśvara-ness are mithyā upādhis superimposed as it were on brahman. Brahman as jagatkāraṇa is the total, and brahman as the self-existent witness obtaining in the body-mind complex comprises the individual. Not knowing this is a costly mistake, as due to this ignorance centered on the self, one takes oneself to be what one is not, and is subject to grief and other afflictions. As Pujya Swamiji put it, "not knowing the infinite is an infinite error. It is because of this one becomes an infinite seeker, instead of being a seeker of the infinite."

In this way, the precision and clarity of Pujya Swamiji's teaching left nothing to chance. The mahāvākyas came alive in a manner whereby their message was easy to assimilate. Pujya Swamiji focused on healing from a sense of alienation by connecting to Īśvara. He stressed that discovering Īśvara in one's life is an important precursor to assimilating the message of the mahāvākya. Without this crucial step of healing the basic sense of disconnection of the individual from the whole, one's understanding would be half-baked and incomplete.

It was clear from the questions posed to Pujya Swamiji at the nightly satsangs, that it was a seasoned audience, many of whose members had been exposed to Pujya Swamiji's teachings. The satsang questions, for the most part, were of a high caliber. A definite highlight of the satsangs was Pujya Swamiji leading bhajans in his incomparable voice. Much to the delight of all, Swamiji taught "śantākāraṃ bhujagaśayanam", among many other bhajans.

Other Highlights and Events

During the camps there were a record number of bhaṇḍāras, nearly one every other day. Two students from Brazil, Bruno and Maria were fortunate enough to have their wedding conducted on the banks of the Gaṅgā, and blessed by Pujya Swamiji. A traditional vaidya, Dr. Vasudevan, visiting from the Arya Vaidya in Coimbatore delivered an afternoon talk on the basic principles of Ayurvedic healing. Baba Ram Dev visited the ashram one afternoon during the bhaṇḍāra, and interacted with some of the students. Drs. Hiren Joshi and Pratima Tolat gave a power point presentation of their work at the Shyamalaji rural and tribal hospital in Gujarat.

Pujya Swamiji addressed the 5th annual International and Interfaith Conference of the Council of Elders that met in Haridwar in the middle of March. This is a large gathering of indigenous religious leaders, many of whom know Pujya Swamiji, and respect his contributions to the field of interreligious harmony. In his short address, Pujya Swamiji emphasized on the need for coalitions and networking on part of endangered religious leaders and groups, as this was the only way to overcome alienation from oneself, one's cultural and religious heritage. He said that it was through the formation of conscious networks alone that one could resist religious and cultural encroachment on the part of aggressive religions. At Pujya Swamiji's invitation, a group of forty-five delegates from the conference visited the āśram on the last day of the conference. They were primarily Romuvas, who live in Eastern Europe, and claim Hindu heritage. They have been able to keep their practices despite the spread of Christianity. Pujya Swamiji honored them with shawls. The group visited the temple, and participated in the Gaṅgā āraṭi. During satsang time, the delegation members performed some of their ethnic songs to the accompaniment of the "kokles", a Latvian stringed instrument similar to a dulcimer. Their leader later presented Pujya Swamiji with a CD of their songs.

During the camps, Pujya Swamiji released some books. These included the Malayalam translation of the Muṇḍakopaniṣad, and two excellently illustrated and designed pūja books published by the Arsha Vidya Tirtha, Jaipur, entitled "Namaḥ" and "Pūja Stuti Ratnam." Pujya Swamiji also released a CD containing a series of talks on the Gurupādukā-stotram given by Swamini Svatmavidyananda.