

Fall 2011 Week(s)-long Vedanta Camps at AVG Saylorsburg, PA

As has been the tradition now for several years, the Arsha Vidya Gurukulam at Saylorsburg, PA continued this year with its autumnal Vedanta courses for the seekers of Advaita Vedanta across the United States. Each year the Gurukulam celebrates its anniversary in the middle of August along with Pujya Swami Sri Dayananda Saraswati's birthday on the 15th. This year marked an important milestone in that this was the 25th anniversary for the Gurukulam. These Silver Jubilee celebrations were followed by the two weekend Labor Day Patron's Retreats in late August and early September, leading next to the regularly scheduled one-, two- and six-week camps.

This year's one-week course, during Sept. 17-24, as usual had both Pujya Swamiji and Swami Tattvaidanandaji teaching classes each day in the wonderfully designed classroom of the Temple Hall, with the divine grace of Lord Medhā Dakṣiṇāmūrti ever available to tap when all classes and lectures are in session. The chosen topics for this year's one-week camp were the Jyotir Brāhmaṇa section of the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad taught by Pujya Swamiji, and Swami Tattvaidanandaji continuing with the text covered over a couple of years now of Narada Bhakti Sūtra. This year's enrollment reached the maximum capacity of about 125 students, keeping the ever-smiling and helpful staff at the *āśramam* on their toes, providing excellent accommodation and services as always.

Each morning began auspiciously precisely at 5:45 a.m. with *abhiṣekam* to Lord Gaṇeṣa and Lord Dakṣiṇāmūrti conducted by pundits Sri Ganesan and Sri Ravichandran. Sri Suddhatma's chanting of the *Śri Rudram* and the *sūkhtams*, along with the rest of the mantras of these hour-long morning prayers reverberated in the temple hall for all students and attendees to join and keep in sync. The class schedule then started with the daily guided meditation. With Pujya Swamiji's physiological health requiring much medical attention during these camps this year, Swami Tattvaidanandaji carried more of the teaching responsibilities than the prior years, including leading the morning guided meditation and the nightly concluding *satsanga*.



Despite all the medical procedures, Pujya Swamiji showed no signs of slowing down, continuing the daily teachings with his trademark humor and punctuating wit. The teachings were deeply incisive as ever, superseding all bodily discomfort any other would have betrayed, as Swamiji unfolded the Jyotir Brāhmaṇa section. It is a dialog between Yajñavalkya and Janaka in

the form of questions and answers, for the student to gain a better understanding of the light within oneself that 'sees' it all as the *sākṣi*. Swamiji meticulously unfolded many verses in this section chosen to highlight the salient learning it contains. In his own imitable style, Pujya Swamiji explained using this text how many concepts in the *śruti* might appear at first reading to be either confusing or contradictory, by unfolding the simple concept of 'as though' as explained through *anyat iva*.

In continuation of the Narada Bhakti Sūtras from earlier years, Swami Tattvavidanandaji once again stressed *bhakti* as a *sādhana* that can take one closer to the Truth, *tattva*. Many of us students who have had the privilege of studying under Swamiji for years know his teaching style to be unwavering however strict from what the teaching is, especially when expounding the *jñāna* path to self knowledge. With the chosen topic here being *bhakti*, Swamiji spared no quarters in elevating *bhakti* on par if not above *jñāna* as a path to *mokṣa*, recalling *bhagavān* Śrī Kṛṣṇa from the *Gītā* time and again, as this text parallels *bhakti* in the *Gītā*. To drive home the point, Swamiji made comparison of trees growing in a forest seeking sun light, *mokṣa*; at the canopy it did not matter anymore out of which of the tree trunks, *jñāna* or *bhakti*, the branches and foliage emanate once they were able to 'see' the light.

Immediately following this camp was the two-week course, from Sept. 25 to Oct. 8. Having a single text in continuation from camp to camp allows a gentle flow in the process of unfolding any topic. The continued choice of Narada Bhakti Sūtra as a text for the one- and the two-week courses over the last few years prepares a student to better condition one's heart, as a form of its purification towards these studies. This year, too, the transformation in one was palpable as we continued studying this text from the one-week into the two-week camp, with a lasting taste of *bhakti rasa*. Swamiji also used the serene morning guided meditations to establish that firm foundation every seeker needs, on which to build a heart and a mind conducive for such a transformation, be they on *samatvam*, *śaraṇāgati* or even silence.

Pujya Swamiji's two-week course text similarly was also a continuation from last year's camp, of Śrī Ādi Śaṅkarācārya's Upadeśa Sāhasri. Once again Swamiji continued with the direct teaching in detail so that the *mumukṣu* clearly sees that *mokṣa* is the most desirable end. Whether the teaching pertained to general traits of scholarship such as staying humble or a deep technical concept, Swamiji made it abundantly clear that it is all about understanding a 'word' and its 'meaning', using this text. Since words convey only a limited meaning, Pujya Swamiji's unfolding of the purport of these teachings made this study that much more enriching, due to the innumerable quotations in this text by Śaṅkarācārya from so many different sources of *śruti*.

In addition to all the formal course teachings, one learns by just being in this Gurukulam setting away from routine *saṁsāra*. That these camps each Fall invariably straddle the *Navarātri* celebrations adds to the visual delight of seeing the *mūrti* in *alangāram* as *Durgā*, *Lakṣmī* and



On Mahānavami, as Goddess Sarasvati

Sarasvatī, as also the arrangement in steps of *kolu* from the *āśramam*'s collections. Cultural programs – of classical Carnatic music concerts and dances – during these camps enrich the diverse experiences in these serene acres amidst the Poconos Mountains of Pennsylvania. Hours of unscheduled, open time each afternoon permit all students to explore the grounds in quiet solitude, particularly around the well-laid trail, *Śānti*, or peruse one of the best libraries of Advaita Vedanta books, audio and video collection in the US. Other regularly scheduled lessons in chanting, music, *Saṁskṛtam* or yoga each day round-out a busy daily class schedule that concludes each day with an evening *ārati* to Lord Gaṇeṣa and Lord Dakṣiṇāmūrti. True to Gurukulam traditions each day ends only after at least an hour-long *satsanga* from 8 p.m., during which questions from the students are answered, clearing any doubts one may have for a better understanding of the Self.

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