

A retreat at Amboli Ashram

VAIRAGYA SHATAKAM by Bhartruhari



The 3-Day retreat was held during 19th-23rd Sept 2014. All the participants arrived at Amboli Ashram by 19th evening. In the INTRODUCTION session on the 19th evening after dinner, we learnt that there were 25 participants who came from various places like Mumbai, Bangalore, Kolhapur, Pune and Dubai.

Their professions ranged from Scientists, Engineers, Bankers, Doctors, Industrialists, Social Activists, Teachers, and House Makers. Some were still pursuing their careers and some had retired. However one thing in common was they were interested in yoga and spirituality. Having spent a major portion of their life in running after unending desires and ever eluding contentment, they had now come to seek

self -knowledge. For the next 3 days, we would be studying and practicing under the able guidance of our teachers -NiloferGiri and SribantaGiri.

We were given the time-table for the next 3 days consisting of Guided Meditation, Asanas and Pranayam, three sessions of classes followed by question & answer and chanting.

After a good night's rest and after tea/ coffee, the participants assembled at the spacious yoga hall. To reach the yoga hall, we had to climb the steps set amidst a beautiful garden of flowering plants and water ponds with blooming lotuses. This yoga hall is at the highest elevation, commanding a beautiful view of the Amboli village and the surrounding hills and forest.

The first session of guided meditation, Pranayam and asanas was to be conducted by GIRI Sir. This session started by chanting of Gayatri mantra facing the rising sun in the east. It was very rejuvenating and readied us into a rightful mood for the meditation.

The guided meditation was wonderful and gave us an inner experience of the components of the SELF namely, body/ breath/mind. It was clear that the instructions came from a mind that had discovered itself. The steps in meditation were: (1) Becoming aware and relaxing the body (2) Channelising the mind to its source, by using the parameters of breath, mental arithmetic, imagery and mantra. At the end of meditation, there was clarity and serenity.

The guided meditation was followed by Pranayama. The breathing practices

belonging to the category of Bhastrika, Kapalbhata and Ujjai were given. These practices were done using individual components of the respiratory system, such as diaphragm, rib cage, clavicle, glottis, and nasal tunnels. Yogic Pranayama involving combination of diaphragmatic breathing/ inter costal breathing/ clavicular breathing in a single breathing cycle was also given. Retention of breath (Kumbhak) was avoided as it is meant for advanced practitioners. The Pranayama sessions were very much appreciated by the participants and they used to practice them even outside the class whenever some time was available.

The Pranayama session was followed by Asanas. The emphasis was given to passive stretching using props such as bolsters, bricks, belts etc. The asanas were given in the postures of standing, sitting and lying down.

This schedule was followed for the 3 days of the Retreat.

The central theme of the workshop was a study of the text "VAIRAGYA SHATAKAM" by Bhartruhari. Out of the 100 original Sanskrit verses, only 29 carefully selected verses were analyzed threadbare.

The venerable teacher of the centre, Nilofer GIRI, covered the topic in 9 discourses totaling over 12 hours lasting over a period of 3 days. Her mastery over Sanskrit, enchanting voice, knowledge of scriptures, love with compassion and her realization of truth synergized into a wonderful presentation of the text, fulfilling the purpose of the participants in understanding the purpose of life and master the art of living.

The teacher narrated the historical background about Bhartruhari and how he had enjoyed his life of wealth, power and sensual pleasures. However, a moment of realization of the futility of such a life had led him to pursue the path of knowledge, thereby, making him a renunciate. The life for him became meaningful, full of unending joy and contentment.

Our teacher devoted considerable time in explaining the starting Verse 1, which is a prayer to Lord Siva to grant grace in destroying the moth of ignorance

(in running after unending worldly pleasures, but resulting in more desires and more sorrow) by a powerful beam of light from his third eye (awaken the knowledge of reality leading to VAIRAGYA resulting in happiness and contentment).

In the body of the text 3 main topics were covered : (1) Acknowledgement of SUFFERING due to pleasure hunting, (2) Cause of suffering as incessant and binding DESIRE, and (3) Removal of the cause of suffering by VAIRAGYA and BRAHMA JNANA.

Suffering at various levels of body, mind, intellect and emotions is discussed at great length. In spite of repeated suffering, desire multiplies and intensifies, resulting in enslavement and helplessness of intelligence. The appropriate use of knowledge is non-negotiable to get out of this vicious circle. This leads to freedom from the bondage of ignorance and its related suffering. Many verses are devoted to point out that the peace, joy and

compassion of a sage is superior to that of a king. In the 100th verse, sage Bhartruhari is thanking Lord Siva for grace in granting Brahma Gyana, the knowledge of Whole and recognizing that he IS THE WHOLE!

At the time of death, he is totally freed from the bondage of the world. He bids good-bye and acknowledges the important role of his family of five elements: earth as mother, wind as father, fire as friend, water as relative, sky as brother. The participants listened in silence and awe and the beloved teacher had interacted and elevated our understanding.

During the 3 days of the camp, the weather had become totally cloudy with intermittent rains. The clouds had enveloped the ground. It was literally like "living in the clouds!" Amboli looked wonderful in her pristine glory!

The chanting sessions were held in the ancient temples of the Amboli village to have their deep impact.

On one of the days, we were taken to visit the centre " AIM for Seva", where the under privileged are given free boarding, lodging and value education. We had wonderful times in listening and watching little innocent children with folded hands, reciting Bhagavad Gita and Tukaram Bhajans. The camp ended on the evening of 22nd. All had carried wonderful memories with new learnings to lead fulfilled lives; as we recognized, we do not need anything other than ourselves to be fulfilled!

As viewed by a participant