

The 2010 Six-Week Fall Vedanta Camp

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The Mandukya Upanishad occupies a special place in the philosophy of Vedanta. It is said that if one were to study only one Upanishad, Mandukya would be the natural choice, as it contains the core of Upanishadic thought and wisdom. Yet, the Mandukya is the shortest of all the Upanishads, consisting of only 12 mantras.

We began our four year journey studying the Mandukya under Swami Tattvavidananda at our Saylorsburg Gurukulam in October 2007. Every fall, students from across the world gathered in the Pocono Mountains to watch Swami Tattvavidananda systematically unfold the Mandukya Upanishad and the Mandukya Karika, a commentary on the Mandukya written by Gaudapadacharya that brilliantly elucidates the profound message locked in the Mandukya's 12 terse mantras. Our journey through the Karika was completed on November 20, 2010 when Swamiji explained the final chapter – Alatahanti. In addition, we also studied chapter seven of the Bhagavad Gita, which covers the yoga of knowledge and realization.

Between 2007 and 2009, Swamiji devoted his attention to the first three chapters of the Karika that conclusively establish the truth of non-duality. During the fall 2010 retreat, he completed the fourth and the final chapter titled Alatahanti. The word Alata means 'burning torch'. Alatahanti means quenching or the extinguishing of this torch.

The metaphor of a burning torch is used to illustrate the illusory nature of the world we live in: when the torch's fiery tip is waved around in the dark, it appears to generate various images when in fact no such images actually exist. Swamiji compares Alata to our mind. As the mind starts spinning, all sorts of thoughts and situations appear on the space-time canvas that haunt us continuously.

We learned that the only way to attain Shanti (peace) is to have a handle on this Alata, and to stop this incessant rotation of the mind. When these agitations in the mind end, one is in a position to realize his own Self. As such, gaining handle on the mind is Alatahanti. The chapter further expounds on the non-dual, changeless Reality behind the apparent diversity we see around us. It goes on to refute the beliefs of other philosophies concerning creation and uses reason to show that the very concept of causation is meaningless. Finally, it provides keen insight into a realized person who has discovered the Ultimate Reality.

We studied the first six chapters of Gita with Shankar Bhashya during the last several retreats. These opening chapters explain the significance of 'Tvam' in the Mahavakya 'Tat Tvam Asi'. This year, Swamiji took up chapter seven - the Yoga of knowledge and realization – to introduce us to 'Tat-Padartha-Shodhana'. It explains the term 'Tat' in the Mahavakya by

clarifying the meaning of Ishwara. The chapter deals with who and where God is, how He created the world, and how to go about realizing Him. Krishna begins to remove Arjuna's doubt as to how the inherently limited mind of a seeker can ever fully comprehend the limitless.

In this chapter of Gita, Lord Krishna explains both the theoretical and practical aspects of Vedantic philosophy to attain knowledge and perfection. 'Dnyana' is an acquired knowledge. As Swamiji explains, "The mere Dnyana is the domain of the head; it is scholarship and is of very little practical use. It must be turned into 'Vidnyana', the domain of the heart or the experiential knowledge, to realize Ishwara." Although out of a multitude of spiritual aspirants only a very few come to know the ultimate Truth, Krishna reveals here that steadfast devotion – Bhakti - to Ishwara is an effectual driver to realize Ishwara.

In addition to the Upanishadic and Gita classes with Swamiji, the students benefited from expert training on other important topics. Sri Suddhatmaji riveted us with Vedic chanting of Bhagyasuktam, Dashshantimantra and the Bhashya pathanam of Mandukya Upanishad and Gita. Mr. Kalpesh Jasapara, a fellow student, tutored us in Sanskrit grammar accompanied by a detailed exposition of phonetics and sandhi. Sri.Lance Daniel kept all of us in good shape with regular yoga lessons. There were over 70 students attending this camp from across the United States as well as from around the world. Each day began with a guided meditation in which Swamiji carefully emphasized the principles discussed in the class. The day concluded with an hour-long satsang with

Swamiji. Each satsang included Swamiji's commentary on selected verses from Kalidasa's Raghuvansha and concluded with Sri Ram bhajana led by Preetha Acharya and in her absence, Savitri Mani.

For the last several years, my fellow students and I have been coming to these Fall retreats to understand ourselves better and to receive reinforcement and inspiration for continuation of our personal sadhana. As usual, Swami Tattvavidanandaji easily surpassed even the loftiest expectations we had for our time with him. The Alatahanti prakarana and the Gita chapter on Dnyan Vidnyan yoga perfectly complemented each other. To watch Swamiji unfold the wisdom in the Karika with the help of Shankara's Bhashya and Anandgiri's Tika is the ultimate reward for a Vedanta student. As one listens to Swamiji, the Vedantic ideology and Advaita philosophy no longer seem peripheral to one's life or the so-called Samsara. The confusion and the dilemmas of everyday life seem at once manageable and even irrelevant.

We particularly resonated with Swamiji's declaration that "the Awareness Absolute is the only Reality. It is not perceivable or conceivable but It is supremely accessible. All you have to do is transcend the mind." Swamiji underscored the importance of Vidnyana by saying, "Atmavidya is like a boat to cross Bhavasagar but you must know how to row, and that's Vidnyana." Self-realization seems less of a bewildering task after each retreat. Indeed, Swamiji reassures us that with one's earnest efforts, liberation can be attained in the here and now. It is this simple take-home message that holds the secret behind the exploding popularity of these fall retreats!