

Nine-week Vedanta Retreat at AVG, Saylorsburg, PA

With the raging Covid-19 pandemic in full swing the nine-week course on Kaṭhōpaniṣad, chapter 2 with Śāṅkara bhāṣyam was conducted and concluded successfully. Swami Tattvavidananda kept the 30 to 40 students attending in person and 150 or more students from many continents attending seamlessly online spell bound with over 100 hours of classes reinforced with daily meditation and satsaṅg sessions. While Kalpesh Jasapara's Samskr̥tam classes provided the much needed knowledge of the language to follow the bhāṣyam, Chitra Rajan's music and chanting classes guided the students inwards to tap the calmness essential for the study of Vedānta.

Retreat Highlights

The entire camp was a meditative experience for most of the participants. Nine weeks appeared to have gone by quickly with detailed exposition and threadbare analysis of a number of topics. The topics were directly relevant to cross the chasm often created by conceptual frameworks and ideations. Riding on the great minds of Mahātmas, quoting from the works of Masters, and employing insightful metaphors, Swamiji brought home the teachings to resonate in the heart beyond appealing to intellectual levels of understanding. He explained how the human mind creates a verbal and linguistic world and then gets bound by it. Just as a drop of water contains the entire ocean, so too, as Swamiji unfolded one topic the entire vision of the text came into the forefront. One was left in wonderment and awe while being in the presence of such ever fresh expressions of truth.

The Teaching

The powerful teachings of Kaṭhōpaniṣad are about the removal of the fear of death. Swamiji challenged the students to 'die to the world, body and mind here and now!' All knowledge is but cognition and every cognition is entirely re-cognition that is based only on past information. The past is indeed dead, and all imaginations of the future are based on projection of the mind

based on the past. Hence one is never in the present and therefore unable to realize the unknown and unknowable. 'Death' here is effectively dying to the mind. This has many implications.

- Body is an idea in the mind and hence one must die to the body.
 - The world we know appears and disappears with the mind like a pair of dipoles. Hence dying to the mind is akin to dying to the world.
 - Vedānta is positional in frozen traditional thinking. But Swamiji explained that Vedanta begins when knowledge based on memory ends. This means die to the past, die to memory, die to all knowledge which is based on past, and therefore die to death in order to come alive.
 - Die to the small self (ego) while living and breathing which means die to all forms of identifications. The real death is to *avidyā*, *kāma* and *karma* cycle. Die to all to realize the immortal Self.
1. Swamiji was throwing gems like the above and ever fresh expressions about meditation. He pointed out that meditation is not to be contaminated by the field of the known. It is not *yoga* but *viyoga* of the known. Meditation is the movement in the unknown and unknowable that the mind can never fathom.
 2. Thoughts create mental space, desire creates psychological time, and one is bound completely by the prison walls of time, space, and causality.
 3. *Mokṣa* which is timeless cannot be put into a process which is only about the past and known.
 4. Self-knowledge is not remote. Both ignorance and *mokṣa* are in the 'here and now'. Swamiji kept reiterating that self-knowledge is about knowing all that is not Self and that the negative understanding is the highest understanding.

Samples of Covered Topics - Creative thinking

Chapter 1.3.2 of the Upanishad says that *ātmā* needs to be discovered through creative intelligence because it is hidden (as though). Since our existing beliefs and notions cover our real nature, creative thinking and an open mind are needed for this discovery.

Outgoing nature of sense organs

The first verse says that *Īśvara* created the sense organs outward facing by design (as though). It really means outgoing is intrinsic to the sense organs and hence human beings generally have a resistance to go within. One has to stop searching outside for what can be found only within.

Need to go within

Those who have the courage and discrimination, to differentiate between self and non-self, to look within are called *dhīrāḥ*. There are plenty of opportunities to bring about inner transformation if one is willing to think creatively and go against the flow like a river flowing upward. The *dhīrāḥ* do not seek the *dhruva* in the *adhruva*. *Dhruva* is the North Pole star that represents the changeless whereas *adhruva* is the changing or the transient. Here the body, mind and sense organs are also included in the *adhruva* category.

On the other hand, the immature ones, who go after the desire for pleasures of the world, get caught in the net thrown by death. Death refers to the spiritual rather than physical death. Desires are powerful and along with body identification lead to karma, *saṁsāra* and rebirth. *Saṁsāra* is compared to a tree with spread out roots, branches and leaves that is difficult to fell. People still go after desires and pleasures due to nescience and greed.

Nature of inner light

After highlighting the need to discover the inner light, Lord Yama describes the nature of inner light in response Nachiketa's question in chapter 1, 'what is that which is other than *dharma* and *adharma*; cause and effect; past and future?'

The inner light illumines everything including the sense organs, only due to which the sense organs illumine the outer world of sense objects. Forms such as the body, table etc., do not cognize other forms, whereas all forms are known to the inner light of awareness.

Initially, Lord Yama arrived at the inner light through the sense organs. Now he says that this inner light is also immanent in all the three states - waking, dream and deep sleep and yet it transcends them i.e., the content of

the three states do not affect the inner light in which the states are experienced.

The Inner light

The inner light is *Brahman*. In addition, another astonishing revelation is that there is no difference between the inner self and the self in all. *Sarvātma bhāva* means to be connected to humanity, the entire 'life' and then the entire 'existence.'

Belief systems encourage fragmentation which leads to comparison and limits one to the shell of 'me and mine'. This shell is the cause for the sense of 'other' which in turn breeds fear. God is included in the 'other' due to conditioning of the mind from the childhood.

Nature of Brahman

Brahman is also the *aditi* (*śakthi*, power) which manifests as the world of names and forms. One who realizes the underlying unity is able to transcend the names and forms and abide in the inner light.

The *aṅguṣṭhamātra puruṣaḥ*, *Brahman* resides in the small thumb like space in our own hearts. Śaṅkarācārya compares it to the space inside a small section of a bamboo. The Upaniṣad says that *Brahman* is beyond time - the Master of past and future. When this is understood well, one is in the 'now', not bound by the past or future and therefore there is no fear of insecurity.

Brahman in the heart is likened to knowledge without smoke. Smoke is the negative emotions/*vāsanās* like jealousy, anger etc. For a *jīvan muktha* knowledge does not generate any such thoughts.

Divisive thinking – seeing differences or many

Even though there is no difference between the inner self and *Īśvara* differences are seen at two levels – between *jīvā* and *Īśvara* and between objects in the world. Due to conditioning of the mind and belief systems, differences are seen among Gods and among other devotees, such as, 'my God is superior to your God', etc.

When the mind is in the *rājasic* mode driven by desires or *tāmasic* mode driven by fears it can never see the oneness. It gets caught in the division between mind and matter. Mind in *rajas* and *tamas* eclipses the inner light

which empowers them like the moon eclipses the same sun from which it borrows the light. Only a *sāttvic* mind can realize oneness by understanding that the differences are only in the medium and not in the underlying light of awareness. Lord Yama says, “The one who is caught in such divisive thinking goes from death to death.” Death here is the spiritual death that is triggered by fears.

Several examples are given by the *Upaniṣad* to help the mind to understand the divisive thinking pattern. Rainwater falling on the mountain slope gets scattered, divided and perish. Divergent water fails to converge even though the source is one and the same. But, when pure water is added to a pot of pure water, there is no separation or division. Fire, the principle of *agni* is only one although it expresses in different forms like flame, conflagration, heat in hot water etc. Air, the principle of *vāyu* is also only one even though it expresses in different forms like the wind, breath, storm etc. In these above instances, it is the human mind that divides and particularizes thus leading to seeing one as many.

How to realize the vision of oneness

Lord Yama enumerates different methods of analysis and some *upāsanas* to help us realize the vision of oneness:

Contemplation helps one to understand the inner light that lends sentience to the insentient body. One should learn to focus on the inner awareness because the body is just scaffolding that disintegrates and once it becomes unusable the *jīvā* gets another body.

The prime mover is sitting as *vāmana* in the body, inhaling and exhaling. This *vāmana* is the power and intelligence operating the body/mind. The ego (me and mine) which prevents us from realizing the *vāmana* is only an observer and not the mover.

One attaches undue importance to the waking state and names/forms due to which the “I am” or the awareness that pervades all the states (waking, dream and deep sleep) is not recognized. For this we need to analyze the sleep state. When we close our eyes, we are able to see ourselves without the sunlight. This is the inner light that illumines all sources of light like the

Sun, Moon, Fire, Lightning etc. In fact, inner light is the original source that illumines Space, Time, and everything else.

Vedic upāsana

Generally, in Vedic *upāsanas*, two altars are used - the fire and sun. Here Lord Yama teaches *upāsanas* on fire and the rising and setting sun. They are not meant for fulfilling desires, but to sense the *viśvarūpa*. These *upāsanas* can be done with open eyes. They involve visualization of fire and sun as manifestation of the *Hiranyagarbha*. There is not much distinction between these *upāsanas* and *jñānam*. Only a small division is admitted and although technically called an *upāsana* they flower into *jñānam* very soon.

Comments by Students

At the conclusion of the program students had many comments regarding the Course. These comments truly reflect the impact the teaching has had in their lives.

“The first and foremost message that I heard over and over by Swamiji to all *jijñāsus* is, “Most of you are stuck in your spiritual journey – at the level of conceptual Vedānta.” Swamiji used two other terms for conceptual vedantins – con-market vedantins and country club vedantins. He has been telling us to go beyond or transcend conceptual Vedānta and asking us to wake up. This time he was more forceful – like a loud wake up alarm that never stops. It is out of his intense love that he is telling us to cross this final hurdle and be free. Get rid of superstitions, theological god, and binding desires then only you will realize that there is no otherness.”

“As regards gaining deeper understanding, Swamiji has provided extreme clarity on many of the key topics including death, *mokṣa*, *pramāda*, true *upāsana* or *bhakti yoga*, and vedantic meditation. The most striking was the realization that you are beyond *asti* and *nāsti*; beyond known and unknown. You are the “absolute presence.”

“As I kept on listening to Swamiji, I felt that *Upaniṣads* seem to follow an approach similar to the scientific approach – the difference being that

science follows an outward journey while Vedānta emphasizes an inward journey to discover the ultimate reality.”

“This week, after a class addressing *viyoga*, I went outside to the vast and vibrant *shānti* Trail. Midway through a few brisk laps, a point from class came to me. While thinking myself to be a limited person, I know only a small corner of life. Then came an enigmatic image from the class: ... I myself am free in the vastness, the expansiveness of Being.”

“It is a blessing that I am here. Swamiji made us understand the meaning of *aditi*, the *Hiraṇyagarbha upāsana*, what is not meditation, what is *vāmana*, how thoughts create space, what is birth-death, identification with things and thoughts, the "I am", and so much more that I am unable to articulate here. The way you are unfolding, I have not heard before. Every class brought something fresh to the fore. The *Brahman* as the only reality, intimate, never away, *sulabham*, right now and here has started to look more real (if I may say so) and not far-fetched. Rāmana Maharshi's *hṛdaya guhara madhye* ... is made clearer to my understanding.”

“The meditations are new and fresh and are linked to the verses that you are explaining in the class. That is a tremendous help in gaining further clarity. My heart is full of gratitude, Swamiji.”

“We love you. You open our minds, our hearts, so the light can shine through. It’s all Love. So incredibly grateful.”

“The teaching coming through Swamiji is transforming lives. We are awed at this opportunity and the fact that he braved the Covid pandemic to come. We would love to listen and learn everything that comes from Swamiji be it Upaniṣad or Gītā or Dhammapada or anything he wants to share. Wholehearted thank you for everything, as it has helped to dissolve some of the conditioning. Swamiji we can never thank you enough, perhaps the best way to thank you is to imbibe and live the teaching as clarity of understanding is the most precious gift”.

“Swamiji, the teaching made this life meaningful and blissful. My sincere gratitude to you for this wonderful teaching.”

“Heartfelt gratitude for sharing the nectar of the scriptures with us. The daily morning guided meditations have helped me immensely. I will not forget the cat/rat meditation (watching the mind), coal mine meditation highlighting the awareness, The Presence meditation guiding how to negate the names and forms and be in the pure Presence. Hoping to bring meditation practice into daily life. I can’t say how happy I am.”

“Namaste. In the lingering darkness of COVID-19, there has been a bright light over the past nine weeks and these are the lectures of Swamiji. Swamiji, thanks a lot for coming to the United States despite the pandemic. We feel blessed.”

Conclusion

The spirit of oneness that came through by hitting our heads was not conceptual but one that resonated in our hearts. Everyone who attended the classes in earnest now cannot but look at a blade of grass with awe and wonderment as the *vibūthi* of *Īśvara*. These not praises of a Mahātma who needs no praise as he is the embodiment of teaching itself and in the teaching role he seemed to many students as Ādi Śaṅkara himself.

Om Tat Sat

Written and compiled by TK Srinivas

11-21-2020

“Submit not out of mere faith, but out of wisdom to the Cosmic Will, infinitely mightier than yours. In this submission, you will shed your load and make yourself an instrument for the expression of the inscrutable ways of the Cosmic Will. And your life shall be lighter than what the word ‘light’ conveys.”

- Swami Dayananda Saraswati