

Arsha Vidya UK – Manjakkudi Retreat 2024 – with Pujya Swamini Atmaprakashanandaji

It is always a delight to be back in India, a land of cultural forms based upon a vision of reality. These cultural forms take many guises – being expressed in artwork, sculptures, through dance, music, worship and more. As we were to discover during the teaching at the camp, the cultural forms present an opportunity for the mind of the individual to be wholly captured, and oriented towards its subtler basis – the spirit behind the form.

It was therefore a delight and a blessing to spend two weeks in *Manjakkudi*, the birth place of HH Parama Pujya Sri Swami Dayananda Saraswati-ji. The grace of Pujya Swamiji is plain to see in this small village. From the schoolchildren who have access to university-level education, to the varieties of rice being preserved by local farmers through traditional farming methods, to the facilities for in-depth Vedanta study, with graceful accommodation and teaching facilities. In the '*Jñānapravāha*' lecture hall is a sculpture of Pujya Swamiji, a form for a teacher of teachers, whose spirit is the source of all spiritual wisdom, the essence to be understood through all *Upaniṣads*.

The quality of sound in this lecture hall was pristine — only exceeded in clarity by the mind of the teacher whose grace was showered upon all attendees. Pujya Swamini Atmaprakashanandaji began the camp by unfolding the meaning behind the cultural forms presented in the small text of *Kāśī Pañcakam*, composed by *Ādi Śaṅkarācārya*. *Kāśī* is a city of pilgrimage, well-known to all Hindus. In these five verses, *Śaṅkarācārya* encapsulates how *Kāśī* is a symbol for the light of all lights, of one's own nature of consciousness.

The evenings at the camp were spent learning stotras of *Ādi Śaṅkarācārya: Vedasāra-śiva-stotram*, *Lakṣmi-narasimha-karāvalambam*, and others. Pujya Swamini Atmaprakashanandaji explained how in these *stotras*, *Śaṅkarācārya* shows the student how to pray and what to pray for. The *stotras* dwell on the Lord in all his forms, and also as the formless. Through this prayer, the minds of all students were well nourished – captured by the beauty of the Sanskrit words, the melodies and their prayerful meaning.

The main teaching at the camp was the text *Advaita Makaranda* – The Nectar of Non-Duality. Pujya Swamini Atmaprakashanandaji masterfully presented an in-depth exposition of this profound text of twenty-eight verses. Within it is an explanation of the nature of the individual, and the Lord, and how there is essentially non-difference between the

two. Both being of the nature of existence, consciousness, happiness. This beautiful text granted the attendees the opportunity to discover and dwell upon their own reality, the intended truth behind all cultural forms.

Between classes, numerous trips to various temples and birthplaces of Carnatic musicians (*Saint Tyagaraja Swami, Muthuswami Dikshitar, and Syama Sastri*) were untiringly and flawlessly organised by Swaminiji. The area of *Kumbakonam, Thiruvavur* and *Thanjavur* is rich in culture. Although all temples visited were a blessing to all (an opportunity for the accumulation of *puṇya*), temples and *mūrtis* of particular prominence were *Swamimalai Swaminatha Swami (Kumbakonam)* and *Bṛhadīśvara (Thanjavur)*.

In the pursuit of the vision of non-duality, one's mind has to become refined, for which cultural forms are a blessing. The refinement has to be to the degree that sufficient grace permits discovery of the spirit behind the form, the vision permeating expressions of poetry, art, music, dance and songs of devotion. The retreat at *Manjakkudi*, graced by Pujya Swamiji and Pujya Swamini Atmaprakashanandaji, permitted both the resting of the mind with such forms of blessing, and the discovery and dwelling upon the truth behind the forms.

- Report by *Tristan Curteis*

