

Fall Vedānta Retreat by Swami Tattvavidānanda at AVG Saylorsburg

The 2024 Fall Vedānta retreats, guided by the venerable Swami Tattvavidānanda, began with a two-week course primarily on Aparokṣānubhūti, a Prakaraṇa Grantha text. Following this course, there was a five-week program that covered the much-anticipated course on the Aitareya Upaniṣad with Śrī Śaṅkara Bhāṣyam. These retreats, like past ones, covered an enormous number of topics that can help listeners assert wisdom in a variety of life-situations. A brief summary of teachings by Swamiji are described here.

We are ever grateful and offer our Namaskāraḥ to Puja Swamiji, Puja Swami Viditmanandaji, Puja Swami Tattvavidānandaji and other Mahātmas for their vision, blessings and love that enabled such an enlightening program to be made possible.

The five-week program was particularly remarkable because the Aitareya Upaniṣad is rarely taught using Śaṅkara Bhāṣyam. This is partly due to difficulties involved in making sense of the commentaries to arrive at a unified vision. The available palm-leaf manuscripts are known to be damaged, leading to later day people filling in whatever they could. This has resulted in multiple versions of Śaṅkara's commentaries on this Upaniṣad, posing a unique problem of arriving at consistency.

Later day Advaita scholars have provided reconciled versions, but their works are mostly in Sanskrit. More recently, scholars such as Swami Gambhīrānanda have provided useful English translations. Erudite Vedanta scholars like Swami Saccidānandendra Sarasvatī have provided cogent visions in Sanskrit. Swami Tattvavidānanda researched all the available scholarly works and wrote a book in Telugu, providing Śaṅkara's commentary with Telugu translations. Swamiji used this book to delineate the beginnings and endings of Pūrvapakṣa and Siddhānta sections with clarity.

As always, Swamiji presented the entire Śaṅkara Bhāṣyam in his distinctive style, going over every word and phrase, unlocking insights and making them relatable. In addition, he used metaphors from stories, insights from literary works, philosophical wisdom, and examples from fundamental sciences to reinforce the sense of oneness in how the material is presented. The interest in this course was so high that onsite accommodations were fully booked, prompting seekers worldwide to tune in via the ashram's online streaming services.

Jagadeesh Acharyaji taught Sanskrit, while beginners at various levels were guided by Brahmaçārīṇī Pūrṇaji, Swamini's Girijatmanandaji and Ramadhavanandaji. The spiritual pursuits of the retreat were augmented by daily yoga sessions led by Lance and Monica.

Nididhyāsanam sessions conducted every morning by Swamiji before breakfast were incredibly useful for all attendees. These sessions added depth to the daily discourse, providing assimilation opportunities.

For certain words of the Bhāṣya, Swamiji delved into etymology, Nirukta, and applicable Pāṇini sutras to establish the correct meanings and understanding, unfolding the right vision of the teachings. The entire seven weeks flew by and felt remarkably fresh, thanks to Swamiji's labor of love. Between the daily Satsaṅga and classroom sessions, the retreat also touched upon life's profound questions, making seemingly dry discussions relevant to all listeners, regardless of their background.

Swamiji always maintained that he is forever a learner and student, open to learning from anyone. He often remarked that attendees are unaware of how much he has learned from them. Swamiji's message was clear: No guru, no śiṣya, and the purpose of communication is mokṣa, here and now.

The students are ever grateful to the ashram staff and their managers for ensuring our stay was conducive to learning. We wish well to retiring staff members like Suddhātmāji, Vimalāji, and Sureshji. We are grateful to the new team taking over, including Karthikji, Vaniji, and Kishoreji. They have a big task ahead as they transition to their new roles for next year's programs.

Aparokṣānubhūti – Two-week retreat

The two-week-long 2024 Fall Vedanta Retreats focused on unfolding the profound wisdom contained in the first dozen verses of the Aparokṣānubhūti text. The teachings began with a prayer and delved into the topic of Sādhana for Self-realization, followed by an exposition on how one contemplates self-enquiry. While these were the primary topics, numerous others were addressed in detail.

For instance, there was an in-depth teaching on what constitutes Śravaṇam and how it differs from merely hearing what the speaker says. The critical question raised was: who is in the class? If a body-mind identified persona such as a husband, wife, grandparent, executive, or professor shows up, can such a persona gain the wisdom for radical inner transformation? The answer is a resounding NO. After all, these classes are not for realized individuals. So, who should attend an in-depth Vedanta class? What is the reason for coming to the class? Is listening done primarily to gain knowledge in the mind? What does it mean to go beyond verbal expressions since the word is not the thing the word points to?

These weighty questions demand absolute clarity, as understanding is sacred in Vedanta.

Rather than provide basic answers to satisfy curiosity, the questions are left open in this brief write-up. A burning question is more effective as a starting point for learning than a quick answer to satisfy the mind. Moreover, anyone can easily get audio and video recordings of the entire seven weeks of classes from the ashram bookstore.

Highlights

◆ **Abhedagarbha Namaskāraḥ**

The text opens with a prayer to Śrī Hari. This raises the question: how does a text teaching non-duality start with a prayer that seemingly conveys a message of duality? The purpose is to understand non-dual prostrations to one's innermost reality.

To achieve this, it's crucial to comprehend the etymological meanings of words like Hari and Śrī. One interpretation of Hari is "Harati iti Hariḥ," meaning "He who removes suffering is Hari." Hari's abode is in the cave of the heart, discovered by a sādḥaka. We live in a world created by thoughts of 'me and mine,' localized in brain cells. Prostration transcends head-level thinking to abidance in the heart, where one realizes Hari as the innermost reality. All sources of sorrow and suffering arise from an isolated ego living as 'me and mine,' and abidance in the heart removes this suffering once and for all.

Vidyāraṇya Swami wrote a commentary on this text and offered a unique etymological meaning for Śrī. It is not the name of the puranic goddess Lakṣmī married to Nārāyaṇa. The word derives from "Dhātuḥ Śrī Śraye," meaning taking refuge in the ground of all thoughts, which is Ātmā, the innermost reality. Hari, who is Śrī, is the ground of all existence, Ātmā abiding in the cave of the heart. The prayer seeks to move from brain cells holding thoughts of 'me and mine' to the heart, the abode of Ātmā, to realize bliss, the nature of existence. That Ātmā, which is Ānanda, is the cause of the appearance of the higher power Īśvara.

To contemplate this higher power in relatable terms, consider this: during a major rainfall in certain Texas cities, the power required for evaporation from the sea and uplifting to clouds was estimated to equal a power of million atomic bombs! If that's the power in an event limited in space-time, think of the power of the sun, billions of stars in each galaxy, and billions of galaxies in the known universe. While all these are vast, yet space-time limited, consider the power beyond physical constraints, one not limited by space-time. That is the higher power to which one surrenders to as Īśvara.

As a Sākṣi abiding in the heart, I know all that the mind knows and does not know. In that understanding, I am all-knowing. Biologists say the entire history of the evolution of the universe is within me because the genetic stack I carry results from millions of years of

evolution. Psychological history is within me as I carry the language and thoughts that evolved over millennia.

As a Sākṣi, I witness the mind spanning the universe with the aid of sense organs, the power of the mind, and instruments like electron microscopes or radio telescopes that allow the reach of the mind from the tiniest particles to the origins of the universe about 13.5 billion years ago. In this understanding, I am all-pervading, all-knowing, and the knowledge I carry includes the history of the entire evolution.

This contemplation brings Īśvara into the heart as Sākṣi, making the utterance of Śrī Hari very relatable.

♦ **What is Aparokṣānubhūti?**

Our conception of the world is defined entirely by our world experience. We sense the world using sense organs (Pratyakṣa) and conceptualize it through the mind using methods like syllogism and presumption. We may also derive understanding from scriptures, which provide testimony of realms like heaven or hell or an extra-cosmic God, representing another means of knowing the world. All these are remote (Parokṣa) because cognition through the mind is always indirect and mediated.

However, the experience of sorrow or pleasure is not known through the sense organs or the mind's processes. Instead, it is directly known by the Sākṣi, the witnessing awareness, and is termed Aparokṣā. How do we know the existence of this witnessing awareness? It is self-shining, timelessly present even during sleep, and is called Nitya Aparokṣā, which is Ātmā or Brahma.

Anubhūti means direct experience or realization. The title suggests that the verses of this text are about understanding and realizing one's innermost reality. Anubhūti is not the result of accumulation of knowledge but a deep feeling that is not relying on the memory of past-experience but feels ever fresh. It is a feeling behind the thinking that leads one to a fearless life of not being afraid of old age and disease as well no fear of death.

♦ **Sādhana**

Broadly speaking, there are three main classifications of means to Self-realization. These means are not necessarily constrained by space-time causality, as the very act of perceiving them as a process and contemplating the time required introduces false ideas of psychological time, which is a form of bondage. Moreover, a contradiction arises when a timeless reality already within oneself is approached through the prism of a space-time bounded process.

Sādhana consists of Bahiraṅga Sādhana, Antaraṅga Sādhana, and Sākṣāt Sādhana. The

latter refers to learning through Śravaṇam, Mananam, and Nidhidhyāsanam. The verses of this text describe the former two. Bahiraṅga Sādhana involves developing an attitude of karma yoga, which goes beyond the mere conception of execution of duties without desire for the results thereof. Even knowing what is one's duty is often not easy because of wrong ideas in the mind. For example, a person taking themselves as a 'grandpa' has really no duty towards 'grandchildren' assuming their parents are there to attend to the children's needs.

To fully comprehend a passing statement by Swamiji on this topic, the following background is provided:

The laws of nature and the second law of thermodynamics reveal that any system moves from order to disorder, with entropy, a precise measure of this process, increasing in any system. Where life forms are present, there is an assertion of negative entropy, though the total entropy of the organism and its environment continues to increase. A blade of grass, through photosynthesis, converts the disorder of dispersive carbon dioxide and water into orderly glucose molecules, a feat exceptionally difficult to replicate in a lab. Similarly, a vulture consuming a carcass gains negative entropy to sustain its life.

Thus, there is a continuous struggle at every level of an organism, from single cells to complex life forms, to seek negative entropy, even at the cost of predation. Organisms discriminate in their quest for negative entropy. In humans particularly, the gene pool seemingly provides a mechanism for deceiving the truth of oneness by instilling a sense of separateness from the whole. This intelligence at the genetic level appears necessary for the survival of any life form. The neurons in brain cells, deceived by the truth of oneness, can bind a human being to a false sense of 'me and mine,' governing all thinking and action.

Unlike other life forms, humans are uniquely endowed with the gift of Viveka, the discernment of what is real and what is unreal. Sādhana aims to counteract genetic deception, and in karma yoga, the teaching is to recognize the wisdom of not succumbing to desire for the results of any action. While the sense of doer-ship remains, the sense of enjoyer-ship is relinquished. In the language of bhakti, Hari is pleased with tapas of this kind. Tapas involves the mind's willingness to endure difficulties in the search for truth, fostering an attitude and calmness of mind to face situations with equanimity and endurance.

To do justice to this topic, in addition to listening to these lectures, readers should procure a set of eight lectures given in 2014 by Swamiji on the topic of karma yoga

(<https://avgbooks.org/shop/yoga-sound-14-mp3karma-yoga/>). Additionally, a book (<https://avgbooks.org/shop/vision-of-karma-yoga/>) based on these lectures, is available at the ashram bookstore and is highly recommended.

Aitareya Upaniṣad with Bhāshya – Five-week retreat

Samvāda – a play

Swāminī Śrīvidyānanda once again masterfully and creatively wrote a script, enrolled students, and directed this more-than-an-hour play. In a theatrical display of intellectual combat, students brought to life a debate known as the "Samvāda." This play is based on the Saṁbandha Bhāṣyam prior to the vākyas of the Upaniṣad.

For those interested in witnessing this engaging debate, a reference is provided below to watch the play on YouTube, where the clash of ideas comes to life in a captivating performance.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tJHgHXDU9FU>

Topics

This retreat delved into a myriad of topics that hold direct relevance to our everyday lives. It was a profound exploration of the Bhāṣyam, where each word became a gateway to meaningful discussions on life experiences.

A summary of the five-week course highlights will be presented in the future edition of the Arsha Vidya Monthly Journal.

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- Report by T.K. Srinivas, USA

To be continued...

