



Chinmaya Mission India Journal

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Thanksgiving Camp

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Every time I met Radha at Krishnalaya, she was looking for her six-year-old daughter. Cell phone in hand, worried exchanges with her husband, she would look around every where for the child only to discover a little later that her daughter was with some other children, somewhere in the camp. Not knowing about the whereabouts of her little one was something Radha was not used to. It took her the camp stay to realize that this was what was special about Krishnalaya – it is so safe there that she could actually stay away from her child for hours on end and find that the child was perfectly happy making new friends or exploring something. This, and the chance to slow down, stare in rapture at the new statue of Lord Krishna that adorns the entrance to the ashram, meditate, do yoga, take long walks in the middle of the day, help around with chores as a community and above all attend the lectures conducted by Prabodhji, made this a truly unforgettable experience for Radha. And she was not alone.

On the last day of the camp, choked voices, copious tears and parting hugs were the norm at Krishnalaya! “How could I have gone through life so far with many impressive degrees to my credit, but not knowing my Real Self,” mused one of the campers as she shared her experience as a first timer at Krishnalaya. She was referring to the subject of the text that our acharya Prabodh Chaitanya had chosen for the camp – Chapter 3 of Panchadasi by Swami Vidyaranya.



This chapter is an introductory text on Vedanta that tries to explain and provides some background information about the subtle subject matter of the Upanishads. Chapter three describes the nature of the Self by discarding what it is not. The five sheaths or layers that cover and veil the real Self in all of us are dissected one by one. Two times each day, after a half hour of guided meditation led by Prabodhji, we sat entranced as he systematically explained the nature of each of these trappings that we tend to identify with.

The real Self is hidden in a deep cave within us and we can reach this Self by recognizing and negating what we are not. The Self, free from the five sheaths is Atma or Brahman. Swami Vidyaranya says that the pervasiveness of Atma is so obvious that not recognizing it is akin to being unaware of the tongue while speaking! He also describes Brahman as Anantam or Infinite. It is beyond space, time and objects.

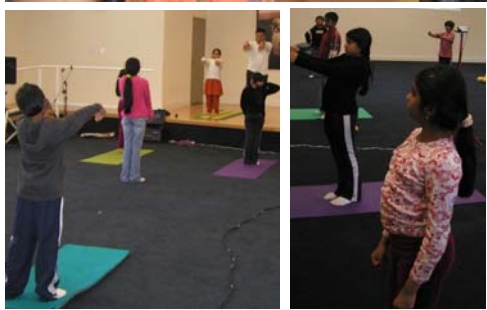
Why does one need to listen and learn about Brahman? Swami Vidyaranya says that to know Brahman is to become Brahman and be released from the cycle of transmigration. With this teaching Prabodhji concluded the third chapter of Panchadasi on the last day of the camp.



While the adults and the Yuva Kendra teens attended the discussion sessions where we answered questions related to the Panchadasi lectures, the children, who were divided into two age level groups, attended Balavihar with their teachers. The younger children (under eight years) listened to stories about Lord Shiva and Lord Krishna and also learned the Madhurashtakam, in praise of Lord Krishna. These children then prepared for a play in the afternoons, which they presented to the rest of the camp on the evening of the third day.



The older children learnt about devotion by creating a hotline to God! They learnt about the different stages in the process of feeling devotion – having faith, creating a pure heart, and achieving quietness of mind. They all wrote messages to God on this hotline and presented what they learnt in the form of a play.



Shruthi Mandir (how appropriate!) was the place where we met everyday for all our group activities. In the darkness of the morning, the large hall lit only by the soft glow of the numerous candles and lamps, we sat in silence as we tried to learn the art of meditation. We also listened to lectures, met for group discussions, gathered for vedic chanting, sang bhajans at aarati every evening and assembled for post-dinner cultural activities here. Shruthi Mandir was transformed into a scene of boisterous shouting on the eve of the jeopardy style game night complete with blowing honkers and the children accusing the quizmaster of unfairness!



There were three age appropriate sessions of yoga everyday at Shruthi Mandir, led by one of the mission members who is a certified yoga instructor.



After the lecture on the morning of the 26th, we attended a beautiful paduka puja of Gurudev Swami Chinmayananda, took prasad, and all too soon it was time to bid farewell. Nature seemed to reflect the mood of the campers who were loath to leave. In the pouring rain, people lingered over breakfast and reluctantly packed up for the long drive back. So long until Christmas camp, Krishnalaya!



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