Education: How Chinmaya Mission Trains Leaders
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How Chinmaya Mission Trains Leaders

The two-year Vedanta course at Sandeepany Sadhanalaya in Mumbai demands rigorous personal discipline, deep devotion and intense scriptural study

Chinmaya Mission's training program is no ordinary course of study. It is a 24/7 commitment of body, mind and soul to an immersive spiritual adventure. A recent graduate, Acharya Vivek, recounts his extraordinary experience. By Acharya Vivek, Chinmaya Mission Niagara, Canada

Some great men try to improve the world by changing the outer settings of economic and societal conditions. A few greater men try to change the processes and the vision of the masses. The very greatest achieve a complete and lasting transformation, one individual at a time. That was Swami Chinmayananda's vision when he created Sandeepany Sadhanalaya in 1963. Sandeepany was the name of Lord Krishna's guru, and sadhanalaya means, "place of sadhana"--disciplined spiritual practice. Here the acharyas (teachers) of Chinmaya Mission are trained in a two-year program which begins and ends on Ganesha Chathurti. A year later, a new course begins. I was honored to join the 13th course, which commenced in 2005.

I was born and raised in Niagara Falls, Canada, to devotees of Swami Tejomayananda, the current head of Chinmaya Mission. I pursued all that any young Canadian would: higher education, travelling, fancy possessions. Like everyone else, I followed these pursuits for the sake of happiness. And like everyone else, happiness eluded me--time and time again. This was an intensely tiring period of my life.

Relief came from a most unexpected source. I had learned that Swami Tejomayananda himself was going to be the Resident Acharya, head teacher, for the upcoming Vedanta Course. Wondering how the head of Chinmaya Mission could

take so much time away from the 300 centers and 300 acharyas around the world who constantly seek his presence, I asked myself: Will studying Vedanta from a swami in an ashram teach me to be content? Is this what I am looking for? The answer came to me: I will never know unless I try.

I was one applicant among 700. Of these, 160 were interviewed, and 70 were selected. In August of 2005, sixty of us arrived at the Mumbai ashram. We were a perfect sampling of the global diaspora: seven countries, five decades of birth dates--ages 21 to 65--and, yes, two genders, all unmarried. We were dispatched to our assigned buildings: unmarried men in Vivekalaya and unmarried women in Yashodalaya.

Householders and older participants were called "guest students" and technically distinguished from the brahmacharins (unmarried seekers). In practice, however, everyone taking the course was called "brahmacharin," i.e., one pursing Brahman. The guest students were housed in Chinmaya Vihar and treated more leniently. For example, their rooms had attached baths and air conditioning, and they could leave the ashram more freely for errands and such. On the other hand, during the course they were not called as often to speak in front of classes or the public. Being householders, they, of course, did not have the option of taking Brahmachari Diksha, the formal initiation into the path of renunciation, upon completion of the program.

My classmates' reasons for enrolling in the course were much like mine. Cauvery Bhalla of Mumbai said, "It is our common experience to get an object only to figure out that's not what we truly wanted. It is also common to come across people who know exactly what they don't want, yet are unable to point out what it is they do want. So, life goes on, endlessly chasing one object after another yet feeling no satisfaction. This has been the problem of humanity since time immemorial."

Sudha Shastry of Sydney, Australia, shared a similar idea: "I desperately needed a change. I needed more meaning to my life. I decided to give Sandeepany Sadhanalaya a try. I had nothing to lose. If it did not work out, I could always go back to my job."

Atharvana Chaitanya, who had come from Ahmedabad, India, offered his initial

impression of Sandeepany: "This holy institute of Vedantic studies offers just the right environment for any seeker of knowledge to blossom into a perfect being. Everyone is given enough 'space,' within a non-judgmental atmosphere, to be able to drop all inhibitions and be what one is."

The Day Begins

Our first day of classes was September 7, and I was rattled. Never had I witnessed such oppressive heat and rain as Mumbai had to offer during this monsoon season. Never had I lived in a place where everyone seemed to know what they were doing, except me. Sudha, I found out, was equally lost, sighing, "I did not know what I had signed up for."

We gathered in our freshly donned white outfits for the inauguration ceremony. Swami Purushottamananda, Swami Brahmananda and the senior acharyas welcomed and blessed the class. Swami Purushottamananda declared, "It is time to forget about your dress and your address."

Ring, ring, ring, went the 4am bell--for 750 consecutive mornings. Although I had no problem with this discipline, some of us found it a hardship even after two years! Our first class of the day was Vedic chanting at 5:30 with Samvid Chaitanya. Born in Kerala, Samvidji spent many years as a wandering monk in the Himalayas, and eventually found himself at Sandeepany Sadhanalaya. We were fortunate that Swami Tejomayananda selected this young, experienced brahmachari to live with us and guide us through our challenges. "A scholar and teacher par excellence," said Shivani Khorana of Delhi, "Samvidji kept us engaged with his innovative teaching style and approachable nature."

Lacking any previous voice training, I found the Sanskrit chanting with its high pitch and low pitch quite a struggle. Vedic chanting was a sadhana I had never been exposed to in the West! Eventually I came to love it as a fine art.

The chanting set the mood for the next class: Vedanta philosophy. Like all classes during the course, it was taught in English.

Having casually grown up within Chinmaya Mission, I arrogantly thought I knew what Vedanta is and who a guru was. In retrospect, I knew nothing. I joined Sandeepany to study spirituality. Yet, at the time I had no idea what was special about Vedanta versus what I learned in high school or university. Soon, though, I came to understand that every class I had ever taken, at any level of schooling, was objective science--a study of the outside world. What I was now studying in the ashram was subjective science--a study of myself. I was humbled by the realization that I knew so much about the world and so little about my body, mind and soul.

Cauvery expresses a similar experience: "Imagine walking into a city of mirrors--a city where every inch, the roads we walk on, the walls that surround us, is covered with mirror glass. Every step in that city would be an effortless discovery of a new facet of oneself. Some facets would reveal beauty, and some facets ugliness. Sandeepany Sadhanalaya is such a city of mirrors."

Delving into Vedanta Scriptures

Every morning at 7am and every afternoon at 4pm, guided by Swami Tejomayananda, we would plunge into the mystical language of our scriptures--breaking up our habits of limited thinking in the process. Mentally and intellectually raised to heights I had never imagined, I was ready to listen to him all day, every day. Swamiji personally taught eighty percent of our Vedanta classes over the next two years, an extraordinary commitment.

The first text we studied was Adi Shankaracharya's Tattva Bodha. Our journey continued with Vidyaranya Swami's Panchadashi, Ramana Maharishi's Saddarshanam, Mandukya Upanishad with Gaudapada's Karika, and dozens more. Finally, we took up Adi Shankaracharya's Jivanmuktananda Lahari--the experience of an enlightened personality.

Through Swamiji's devotion to India's great saints, I was able to catch a glimpse of their greatness. This was especially true for Veda Vyasa Rishi and his Shrimad Bhagavad Gita. With tears in his eyes, Swamiji would bring tears to my eyes as he lovingly taught what Lord Krishna taught Prince Arjuna in the Gita. I am filled with reverence knowing the scripture dates back over 5,000 years, yet its message of serving and surrendering is as relevant today as ever.

When I was a youth, Swami Tejomayananda would stay at our home whenever he visited Niagara Falls. Devotees from all around used to flock by the hundreds to be in his presence. To me, the whole scene seemed boring. He was just another swami, only with a cool title--head of Chinmaya Mission. Only after I actually listened to him explain the subtlest of texts, like the Upanishads and Brahma Sutras did I come to appreciate his brilliance.

"There are only a few acharyas in the whole world who can teach what he can the way he can. Perhaps this is the reason why Swamiji was honored as 'Hindu of the Year' in 2005 by Hinduism Today," remarked Prabhat Chaitanya, a student from Toronto, Canada.

Sanskrit, Language of the Gods

After an hour's discourse and breakfast, Sanskrit class commenced at 9:30am. When I had first mentioned to Swamiji that I was interested in joining the Vedanta Course, he laughed, and told me to learn as much Sanskrit as possible before coming to Sandeepany. Determined, I started setting aside an hour a day to learn this language of the Gods. Within a month I had to give up as I struggled to even write the script. A teacher would be necessary for me to ever learn Sanskrit. But here, thanks to Samvidji, I not only learned the alphabet, but how to read shlokas, write exams and interpret our scriptures. Shivani said of Samvidji, "Not only did he get us to learn Sanskrit, he also instilled a deep love for the language."

Knowing Sanskrit was a great aid in chanting the Lord's names--which was our next session. I had never been a ritual-oriented person. Rituals seemed irrational, insubstantial. Hence, when informed we were to chant Vishnusahasranama at noon every day, I had the same initial reaction as towards Sanskrit study--an inefficient use of time. But this seemingly mindless chanting eventually became quite meaningful. Swamiji took the time to explain what each of Lord Vishnu's 1,000 names signifies and how by remembering His divine qualities, one could nurture the same within oneself.

Practical Classes

We had periodic "organizational classes" in which we learned how to conduct the Bala Vihar children's classes and camps, how to facilitate a study group and how the Chinmaya Vidyalayas are run--all grassroots activities of the Mission. These classes were not on Vedanta, but on how to spread it. For example, Swamini

Vimalananda, who looks after the education facet of Chinmaya Mission, gave us an overview of the Mission's various schools and their curriculums. Another class was on Vanaprastha Samsthan, Chinmaya Mission's retirement communities. There were no classes in management of Chinmaya Mission branches, or in personal counseling of devotees. We were expected to pick up these skills from observation of the guru and senior acharyas. As a personal devotional practice, we were taught the Paduka Puja, the daily ritual worship of the guru's sandals. This is a common form of worship among all devotees of Chinmaya Mission, one which we would later be expected to teach.

Evening Satsanga

After lunch, rest and our 4pm Vedanta class it was time for arati and evening satsanga at 6:25pm. All day my head was stretched to its limit. Tired, I welcomed this class which focused on the heart. Filled with devotional singing and the clapping hands of the public and brahmacharins, every evening was restful and memorable. The highlight of our satsangas was Swamiji's line-by-line explanation of Sant Tulsidasji's entire Sri Ramacharitramanasa--the first time he has ever done this in a Vedanta Course!

Classmate Vimal Singh of Durban, South Africa, said for us all, "Living and studying with the master, studying the ancient language of Sanskrit, the camaraderie of fellow seekers, the incessant company of saints and swamis, the celebration of a kaleidoscope of festivals, the joy of singing the Lord's name, the glory of silence, the dynamism of puja, drama, dance and music--this was all a fulfillment of some long-standing urge."

After the evening class, we took dinner and retired for the night, only to wake again at 4am--a schedule we maintained nearly every day for the two-plus years. The exceptions came for truly exceptional events--the celebration of unforgettable festivals and pilgrimage to sacred places.

Our scriptures teach us that Mahasivaratri is one of the most sattvic festivals and so one of the most important for a seeker. Words cannot describe what I experienced seeing and serving the 100,000 devotees paying homage at the Mandir. The line formed at 3am and did not clear until 3am the following day. I will forever cherish the delight I saw in the eyes of believers as they prostrated before Lord Siva.

Our Days of Pilgrimage

After a year of study at Sandeepany, we set out on pilgrimage to Uttarkashi, to visit Tapovan Kutia. This was the ashram home of Swami Chinmayananda's guru, Swami Tapovan Maharaj. Our goal was to honor and pay respects to the guru parampara (lineage). No one was allowed to leave Sandeepany during the course without permission, and few wanted to. But now, everyone looked forward to this pilgrimage.

I was ecstatic about the adventure. En route we visited many holy places and stayed at several monasteries. Eventually we reached Tapovan Kuti, and this became home for a month. Our studies never ceased; only the context changed--heat to cold, plains to mountains. While in Uttarkashi, we had a chance to have darshan at glorious temples like Kashi Vishwanath and Ganga Mata. Our month passed in a moment.

I had visited Tapovan Kutia with two friends in 2000. At that time it was just a cool place in the Himalayas. The experience at Tapovan Kutia during the Vedanta Course was completely different. Swami Tapovanam was a great ascetic who believed in deep sadhana, and at Uttarkashi we were naturally inspired to engage in deep sadhana. Many took up disciplines, such as maintaining silence or fasting. The atmosphere was powerful and purifying.

On our way home, we paid our respects at the ashrams of other gurus of Hinduism, including Anandamayi Ma in Haridwar, Swami Sivananda in Rishikesh and Swami Narayana in Delhi. Truly, the religious wealth of Bharat is immeasurable.

Challenges and Fulfillment

When I lived in a university residence, I often heard students complain about how difficult it is to live in close quarters with others. I also heard some of my married friends whine endlessly about living with their spouse. Both these situations are trying, but there is always a chance to escape--which is what we always do. We try to run away from our mind via entertainment, relationships, even work.

Living in Sandeepany was a thousand times more challenging. All that I had ever depended on was taken away: cell phone, television, restaurants, friends--I was only left with my mind. I was forced to live with the minimum; and if I could not handle this, I suffered. There was no escape from this suffering but to face it and transcend it.

Classmate Vimal had a similar experience: "Only after studying at Sandeepany did I realize that happiness is independent of outer circumstances; that it resides in my own heart. One is forced to spend time in solitude, in ruminating, in silent searching, in discovering, in fighting the uprising of negative tendencies within." For some, the experience was too much. Of the 60 of us who began, ten left before completion for a variety of reasons, including being dismissed.

Returning to the World

Returning to Canada, I quickly realized that nothing had changed. The people were the same, the places were the same, the things were the same. What had changed was my vision of life and its purpose. Enlightenment was no longer a foreign concept to me; it had become the entire focus of my life. I grew closer to those who recognized and understood this change in me, and more distant from those who did not.

Now seeing the mundane world as just another form of God, interacting with it became simply one form of sadhana. My first assignment was serving at Chinmaya Dhara, Chinmaya Mission's center at Niagara Falls, Canada, which was wonderful. It took around eighteen months for me to earn the community's respect as a teacher. I was thankful for this period because it forced me to prove my commitment and conviction to spreading spiritual knowledge.

Sandeepany Sadhanalaya calls out to those spirits who are ready to question the feeble sense of contentment that the objects, beings and circumstances of the world have to offer. Those who heed this call are those who are ready to do what it takes to discover that contentment comes from within. They depart from Sandeepany blessed by their guru with the strength to carry themselves and others through the challenges of living. PIpi

Chinmaya Mission, www.chinmayamission.com(the international website) and

www.chinmayamission.org(for Chinmaya West), is currently conducting its 14th Vedanta Course. Applications for the 15th course are due in January, 2011.