Day-by-Day Building Swami Dayananda's American Ashram
Category : May 1990
Published by Anonymous on May. 02, 1990

Day-by-Day Building Swami Dayananda's American Ashram

Dhruva

June 10, 1986: The Adventure Begins

At long last, a letter has arrived announcing that the property for Swami Dayananda Saraswati's new ashram has just been purchased in the village of Saylorsburg, in the rolling green Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania 70 miles west of New York City. The dream is a reality: I'm going to Arsha Vidya Pitham to live a life of study and contemplation in a traditional three - year residence course. I've been asked to come six months early to help ready the property for the fifty students arriving in December. Through taking this course I hope to achieve unswerving discrimination between the real and the unreal, between the enduring and the transient. My friends think I'm irresponsible to leave the security of home and career, forsaking personal relationships to make this knowledge my own.

June 23, 1986: Meeting Rain and Mud

I arrived at the ashram yesterday. It was pouring rain in the hilly, green countryside which added to the sense of entering a frontier. This morning I toured the muddy grounds and dilapidated bungalows. The air is heavy with moisture, scented with the musky fragrance of over 1,000 pines and blue spruce planted to shade and shelter the property and its wildlife. The building which will house Swamiji's quarters, our classroom and administrative offices needs to be completely gutted and rebuilt; five dorms of six to eight rooms each and a dining hall and temple have to be designed and constructed from scratch. We don't even have money for citrus fruit; where will we get enough to take on these massive projects? This is the rainy season and we wade ankle - deep through swamps of

mud to get everywhere. It's an overwhelmingly depressing introduction to ashram life.

July 10, 1986: We Persevere - Barely

I've been here nearly a month, surprised, like everyone, that we've survived the twelve - hour days of gloom, rain and sweat and that so much has been accomplished. There are only twenty of us doing everything from cooking and cleaning to designing and constructing the new buildings while renovating the existing cabins.

August 17, 1986: The Sanskrit Study Begins

We've raised enough in donations to begin the Sanskrit course. It is basically free: students pay $250 a month to cover room, board and health insurance; general operating expenses will be met from donations. There are several of us who can't afford even this small fee and we'll work and additional twenty hours per week to pay our paid much attention to taking care of the material side of things, and I have never seen him turn down anyone who had a burning desire and dedication to study Vedanta.

August 21, 1986: Some Get Frustrated

It rains constantly. The cabins smell damp; the dank odor of mold pervades everything. Leaves are falling early, in great numbers, loosened by the ceaseless, pounding rain. I'm feeling as pounded on as the leaves - experiencing anger, frustration and physical exhaustion from the demands of ceaseless work and the efforts made to just get along with everyone.

November 6, 1986: Puja in the Rain

The gurukulam was officially inaugurated today, the date and time chosen by an Indian astrologer as the most auspicious. Over two - hundred people came in spite of the driving rain, biting cold and acres of mud. We had a four - hour - long puja in the open shell of a cabin under construction, where fifty of us huddled against the freezing dawn along with Swamiji and the pujari.

January 19, 1987: Accepting Ashram Life

The first day of the course. There are forty-five American and three Indian students. Swamiji gave a profoundly moving orientation talk last night on the benefits and beauty of a life of study and contemplation. He explained, in great detail, the demands of living in a situation where one cannot escape one's mind, with sixty other people from a whose presence and moods there is no escape; of a work week that is seven, not five days long, which begins at 5:00 AM and ends at 10:00 PM; of being given jobs that you would not choose to do in the world; of eating food that is not to your liking; and, on top of it all, of attending three to four classes a day which require one's full attention. It will be imperative, he stressed, to naturalize our likes and dislikes and change the ways in which we've become accustomed to deal with uncomfortable situations.

November 1, 1987: We Survive One Year

A year has flown by and today is our first anniversary! This has been an emotional setting-in period packed with nonstop study and physical labor. We're learning to detach from our individual desires for the benefit of the ashram. We've laughed, cried, prayed, fought and worked our way through two family camps, a Bharat Natyam Dance Camp with Dr. Padma Subramanyam and a teenager's Hindu Heritage camp. We've begun to study the Atmabodhah, Kena Upanishad and Paninian grammar.

June 5, 1988: Preparing the Siva Temple

The groundbreaking ceremony for the Lord Dakshinamurthi Temple/Lecture Hall Complex was held today amidst gleaming lawns and bed of flowers that didn't exist

a year ago. In addition to three or four classes a day, the men have been working twelve hours a day in rain, snow and blazing sun, digging the foundation for this huge building in addition to any other repair/construction needs. The women do everything else. The complex will house our offices and library, a lecture hall for three hundred and a sanctum sanctorum for Lord Dakshinamurthi.

October 15, 1988: Finally, Sanskrit Success

A clear, golden day heralds the occasion of our second anniversary. Four hundred guests are expected, an indication of the ashram's increasing popularity. Lakshmi Shankar is giving a concert and P.K. Kaul, the Ambassador of India, is our chief speaker. Today's ceremonies will begin with the student body chanting the entire Taittiriya Upanishad. We have practiced nightly for over a year to learn to chant the Taittiriya to perfection. I am amazed that we, who could barely pronounce the Sanskrit alphabet a year ago, are now able to read and translate what we study and chant with relative ease.

July 30, 1989: Peace Unfolds Within

I'm more than ready to fold into the quietude of autumn, into the deep beauty of the Brahma Sutras, into chanting and studying the Gita. It's amazing that no matter how physically or emotionally drained I feel, it all disappears when I'm sitting in class and Swamiji weaves the vision of the rishis through my heart and mind, instantly liberating me from all cares. Walking on the back road before dinner, I was pleasantly surprised to see a herd of deer on fire with the red and gold of the setting sun. Night comes quickly: clouds fade into the horizon's edge and the world loses its limits of space and time. I'm becoming peaceful and joyous because of a teacher who has taught me to appreciate myself as the source of all things.

November 30, 1989: Built for the Future

A beautiful, three-ton granite sculpture of Lord Dakshinamurthi, newly arrived from India, lies on its bed of honey-colored straw in a wooden crate in the temple. This growth of this ashram has seemed to parallel my own inner growth. It's amazing to

realize that, because of Swamiji's work and vision, along with our own labors and the unfailing support of the Indian community, the unfailing support of the Indian community, what was once a run-down summer resort is now a beautiful gurukulam and temple whose graduates and inhabitants will provide teaching, service and inspiration to countless future generations.

December 14, 1989: The Flame of Knowledge

Graduation day, a day met with a strange mixture of elation and sadness. We begin the ceremonies with a long, elaborate puja to invoke the blessings of the Gods as we prepare, with the bright energy of new beginnings, to re-enter the world. Swamiji gave one last talk, exhorting us to keep the flame of knowledge burning ever more brightly and steadily by becoming teachers ourselves. In three years I have attained more than I sought: a body that enjoys work; a heart that loves itself and other; a mind that abides in the vision of its non-dual nature.

Address: Arsha Vidya Pitham, PO Box 1059, Saylorsburg, Pennsylvania, 18353, USA. Phone: 717/992-2339.

Article copyright Himalayan Academy.