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Overview: Bhagawad Gita Marathon Retreat #3 Krishnalaya 2024

Pujya Gurudev, Swami Chinmayananda, conducted a Bagavad Gita Marathon Camp in Krishnalaya, Piercy, California in 1991 covering all the 18 chapters of the Srimad Bhagavad Gita (May 29-July 2). After an interval of three decades, we were incredibly fortunate to have Pujya Swami Swaroopananda conduct the Bhagavad Gita Marathon (BGM) retreat covering every verse in great detail, at this same sacred venue. In 2022 Pujya Swamiji taught us the first 6 chapters; in 2023, Swamiji covered chapters 7-9. This year, Swamiji covered chapters 10-12. The intention is to cover the final 6 chapters by 2026, coinciding with the 75 anniversary of the Chinmaya Mission.

The inauguration of the BGM Retreat Part 3 commenced at 7 am on 3rd September with Pujya Swami Swaroopananda hoisting a beautiful saffron-colored flag with the 'Om' symbol. The flag was kept up throughout the camp as a reminder of our glorious heritage rooted in Sanatana Dharma. Pujya Swamiji was then honored per Vedic tradition with a beautiful Garland, Purnakumbam and Aarti by Br. Darshan Chaitanya, Swami Ishwarananda, and Br. Soham Chaitanya, respectively.

Swami Ishwarananda welcomed us all and provided a brief overview. The first 6 chapters predominantly describe the journey of the soul represented by Arjuna – the subject or individual (jiva). With guidance and encouragement from Sri Krishna, the individual works towards building a more contemplative mind, culminating in Chapter 6 where Bhagavan Sri Krishna provides instructions on meditation. Arjuna –
the individual, is now prepared and ready to learn more about the Glories of Bhagavan. Thus, begins the next section of the Bhagavad Gita – Chapters 7-12 extolling the Glory of God. Sri Krishna continues with the teachings and includes a declaration and revelation on who He is – His All-encompassing Form and True nature. The final 6 chapters (Ch. 13-18) describe the relationship between the jiva and the Divine, thus, completing the exposition of the Maha Vakya – Tat Tvam Asi – You are That!

After the inauguration of BGM Retreat Part 3, delegates gathered to watch the inaugural activities for Krishna Dham. With encouragement from Swami Swaroopananda, the residence next to Pujya Gurudev's Kutia was renovated under the guidance of Swami Ishwarananda. Lalet and Sadhna Sharma worked tirelessly and meticulously with contractors to upgrade and remodel the dwelling so that it can now house visiting Swamins and Brahmacharins when they conduct activities at Krishnalaya. Krishna Dham has a small temple with Lord Ganesha, a satsang area, a separate sitting room, one bedroom, a brand new kitchen, and laundry room. The original Murtis of a Shiva Linga, Lord Ganesha and Lord Ganesha's vahana – Mushika (mouse) continue to bless the dwellings – outside, at the entrance.

The camp routine included early morning guided meditation by Br. Soham Chaitanya for three days and Swami Ishwarananda for another 3 days; three discourses a day by Pujya Swami Swaroopananda; melodious bhajans led by Br. Sohamji and other devotees, preceding each discourse; study group discussions with specific questions for reflection each day; evening Q & A with Swami Ishwarananda and Br. Sohamji; ample opportunities for satsang with Swami Swaroopananda, Swami Ishwarananda and Br. Sohamji in the form of walks, discussions over meals and informal after-dinner gatherings. The retreat setting, embraced the natural beauty of Piercy, amidst lush-green trees and hills. Participants also had the opportunity to stargaze in the evenings and visit the Eel-Ganga River, lovingly named by Pujya Gurudev. Engaging in seva was an integral part of the daily routine. The delegates, including Swami Ishwarananda, took a field trip to the Richardson Grove – a forest of tall, majestic ancient, giant redwood trees. Pujya Gurudev visited this grove during His stay at Krishnalaya.

The devotees were blessed to celebrate Ganesh Chaturthi (7th September) in the august presence of Pujya Swami Swaroopananda, Swami Ishwarananda, and Brahmachari Darshan Chaitanya. The samashti puja was conducted under the guidance of Swami Ishwarananda, Venkatesh Srinivasan and Uma Venkatesh. In the evening, a soul-stirring dance piece on Sri Ganesha, combining the traditions of Bharat Natyam and Kathak was offered by Kanchana Venkat and Leera Rawal. The youngest delegate, 15-year old, Sahanav Ramesh offered a moving Bharat Natyam dance on Sage Markandaya, especially choreographed for this retreat. The camp ended on 9th September with an enjoyable campfire gathering where devotees sang bhajans and shared jokes under the starlit sky, in the presence of our Pujya Swamins.

With Bhagavan's and Gurudev's Grace, Pujya Swamiji completed Chapters 10-12 in detail. Swamiji made us laugh, cry and gasp in wonderment, while enthralling us with the vision of Bhagavan Sri Krishna – leaving us mesmerized and in awe after each discourse. Those of us present saw the brilliant Glory of Bhagavan and Sri Gurudev unfold before us. We may have left Krishnalaya physically but Krishnalaya has not left us. We look forward to the next BGM retreat.

~ Prepared by Sevaks at BGM Retreat #3 ~