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The December Workshop 2015



The Gathering of Seekers

Dusk slowly descended on Asia Plateau, and a red moon rose to greet us. The 14 of us who had gathered for the December workshop were excited. It was a journey many of us had undertaken in the past, yet one which was new every time- The Journey into the depths of the self.

All of us gathered there were of different ages, came from diverse backgrounds, and belonged to different walks of life. However, one common thread wove us all together and brought us to Asia Plateau, leaving families and friends behind during the season of celebrations. It was the deep inner urge to live a meaningful and authentic life, in harmony with our conscience.

We gathered at the room in the Rock view building, and carefully arranged it keeping all the tables and chairs in the perfect position so that we would all be able to see each other. We kept a small table in between, covered it with a clean cloth and kept candles over it. We cleaned and placed a table in the side of the room where the water jugs and tea sachets could be kept along with our mobile phones. The level of meticulous detailing and thought put into the simple re-arrangement of the room seemed like a prelude, to how we would inspect every corner of our own being, remove the unnecessary and arrange the essential in the most thoughtful manner, in the course of the workshop.

Neha Behen lit the lamp and the convener commenced the workshop. He spoke of the last years December workshop and the profound impact it had on the participants. We all introduced ourselves and in line with tradition, we kicked off the workshop by going through the post mortem report of the previous year's youth Conference. This was a thorough, systematic and objective analysis of what went well and what could be improved in the LMAD experience. This process of continuous refining over two decades was what had helped LMAD evolve into the powerful, profound, one-of-a-kind program it is now.

After making a note of what changes need to be implemented for the next youth conference, we had a discussion on anger management and how a module can be created to address this issue.

The convener oriented us about the importance of coming to this program as Individuals. He told us how we were not to get influenced by others, but rather stay focused on our own self. We were all here as separate souls on our personal spiritual journey towards enlightenment. Hence, we were asked not to interact with our room-mates post the session lest it dilute the impact of what was discussed, or influence us negatively or distract us from our main objective of consciously becoming better human beings.

One participant mentioned that in the process of this workshop, people tend to go really deep into themselves where they may be immersed in contemplation, and another person talking about something trivial would distract them and disrupt their reflective state. Thus it was mutually agreed that we would keep to ourselves, except during meals or when we came together for a session.

“We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then, is not an act, but a habit.”

Keeping with the profound truth of the above statement, we were asked to go to bed reflecting upon our habits, and the patterns we have set for ourselves.

The convener told us that our mind is an incredibly powerful tool and is capable of amazing things. He asked us to experiment by asking our minds to wake us up at 6:00 am without an alarm, and see the results. We all agreed to meet the next morning at 6:30 am sharp.

As we ended the day, the atmosphere in the room was charged with enthusiasm to embark on the journey within. Filled with hope and wielding a positive mindset, we cherished the unsaid, yet shared feeling that we would all be climbing our inner mountains, and watching others climb theirs, in silence.

The Plunge into ourselves

Panchgini dawns are extremely chilly and the moment we wake up, our mind does everything in its power to convince us to snuggle up inside the warm blanket for 5 more minutes. It took phenomenal will power to get up and step outside in the cold. However, once we did, the view was spectacular. The stars shone brightly in the dark sky, and the crescent moon smiled at us, as if to say, 'Well done on overcoming the laziness with your will power!'

We assembled and started the morning session at 6:30 am. The convener immediately brought us on the same page by asking us a question; 'What are you searching for in life?' This was a question, which we would ask ourselves everyday, going deeper and deeper within to find out.

It took a few moments for this seemingly simple question to sink in, but once it did, the impact was profound. On that contemplative note, we left outside to do our morning quiet time, asking our inner voice what we were truly looking for in life.

The world is a strange place, we are told to want many things that we don't need. We are brainwashed constantly by advertising and television to believe consumerism is the right way of life, that continuous instant gratification that accompanies impulsive shopping is the only way to experience lasting joy. Well, we know that not true, but we still indulge ourselves in fleeting sensory pleasures, in materialistic desires, in searching for happiness outside, like the musk deer roams the forest chasing the intoxicating fragrance that comes from itself.

This question, made us stop roaming and pause to see what we were running after in our lives. Was it money? Was it happiness? Was it peace, love or pleasure? Was it material possessions and career advancement or fulfillment and meaning in life?

Personally, It came as a surprise that many of the things I was searching for in life, had already found me and were waiting for me to open my eyes and acknowledge how blessed I was.

We returned and began sharing our quiet time thoughts. A beautiful space had been created amongst us, where we could share our deepest thoughts freely, without any fear of judgment. In this workshop, sharing ones quiet time insights played as important a role as being quiet and reflecting. When one person shared freely, the others saw if what was said related to them as well. That way, it allowed us to see ourselves from different perspectives and understand ourselves better.

In this session, people shared deeply about where they were currently. Mentally, spiritually and emotionally, and what state of being they were searching for. A common sharing was that many of us wanted to be in a state of alignment with our inner voice, and be true to ourselves.

Next, we were given another powerful question. 'Why were we here in this December workshop?' 'What was our intention for this workshop?' Some of us had attended this workshop before, so we also asked ourselves, why had we agreed to come again?

While meditating upon this question, our vague intentions for being here, crystallized into definite shape. We wrote down what inner goals or state we wished to reach with the help of this workshop. What inner reorientation we wished this workshop to provide, so that we are poised on our highest paths towards self-realization.

While sharing our thoughts, one participant in particular shared very deeply. His voice resounded loudly with profound truth and his words strongly resonated with everyone present. He spoke of how he wished to move from a mind driven existence to a conscious, inner voice guided life. He spoke about how he wanted to exercise his will power and conquer his senses, and in the process, be absolutely true to himself, and the greatest potential within him. The silence after he spoke was ringing with the force of his intentions.

We then had a discussion on 'I & We'. We spoke about how the 'I' needs to be fulfilled, and only when it is overflowing from the well of inspiration, joy and love within, can it move into serving the 'We'.

We understood that as we move through the different phases of life, the definition of 'I' keeps changing to encompass our family, our society, our country and finally all of humanity.

This workshop was all about the 'I'. It was carefully designed to understand and fulfill every aspect of the 'I', so that eventually we could move to the 'We'. The convener told us a moving, inspiring story of a person who is a daughter to him and how she kept her ego aside and moved from 'I' to 'We'

We then reflected about our good habits, bad habits and habits we wished to imbibe.

We were slowly inching closer to the heart of the workshop. We had asked ourselves a few questions; all of them had one element in common- the 'I'.

We constantly refer to this enigmatic 'I' but what is it really? Do we know what we mean when we say 'I'? Are we talking about our body? Is it our thoughts and feelings? Is it our intellect? Or is it our soul? This was what we set out to understand, or at least scratch the surface of, over the course of the next few hours.

We sat in silence, contemplating this 'I'. We are all unique, aren't we? We have our own nuances, our own little quirks and tendencies. We are composed of so many different elements- our perspective, ideas, thoughts and feelings, shaped by so many different factors- our education, upbringing, family, friends and experiences we have had, we become a tapestry woven by a million multi colored threads.

Untangling all of these threads, and attempting to see ourselves was not easy at first, but soon we started glimpsing of our true self.

It felt like looking into a mirror for the first time.

When we returned, we were all deeply immersed within ourselves, and this question needed more time for reflection. So instead of immediately sharing, we had a discussion on what spirituality meant to us, and how we could walk the spiritual path. One participant spoke of how different religions propagated different truths that were seemingly irreconcilable. This brought forth a stream of opinions; some said that at the heart of every religion were love, brotherhood and service to mankind, while others disagreed. The discussion grew heated, until the convener offered a different perspective; that we all choose the path that is right for us, and let others choose their paths. This resonated with all of us and personally I saw how our life was like a mountain, and we were all climbing up through different paths at different speeds, but ultimately all the paths lead to the same destination- the peak.

Post this discussion we heard feedback from two of the participants who had organized the Jamshedpur conference.

We then discussed the December gathering which had taken place just before this workshop commenced and critically analyzed whether it had attained its objective, whether it had had the impact we had envisaged, and what changes would be made the next time we conducted such a gathering.

Having had a long day, as soon as we turned the lights off and hit the bed, we were fast asleep.

Beyond the Surface

For many of us gathered there, Asia Plateau was a magical place that we held close to heart. The phenomenal transformations we have undergone here, had made it a school that we kept returning to; to learn new lessons, to rekindle the spirit of curiosity and remember what it was like to be innocent and pure as a child once again.

In many ways, it was a symbolic place too, for when we came here, like the plateau, we too became leveled. We were all on the same page and considered equal to each other irrespective of religion, age, gender, and profession. Stripped of all such differences, we were free to find out who we are and what we were truly searching for.

This morning, we delved deeper into the question, what are we searching for?

The sagacious insights that emerged were testament to the ground we had covered over the past few days. We had moved on from wanting materialistic, quantifiable achievements to identifying deeper needs of the soul, like self-actualization, meaning in life, fulfilling work, freedom from negativity and thinking about the past, and we wanted to let go intangible burdens we were carrying that were holding us back; like pain, fear, guilt, jealousy, comparison, judgment and insecurity.

“What you seek, is seeking you”

This profound truth started to make sense to us, As we became clear on what we truly wanted, we saw how it was possible to obtain it. Many times, as soon as we realized that a lot of pain and anger we carried was hurting us more than the person who caused it, we immediately let it go as it made no sense to carry it.

The convener told us that our life is a beautiful thing. It is filled with happy, positive moments and a little bit of negativity or a few mistakes don't define it. In fact, happiness is our real nature and the foundation of our life. So we began to count the bricks that compose the structure of our life by jotting down all the happiest, most positive moments we have experienced so far, all the way back to the time when we were children.

When the came back, the happiness and glee in the room was palpable. People's faces were pasted with a smile and everyone was upbeat. We could feel an overflowing bliss permeating the air around us. As we began sharing our joyful moments, others remembered theirs and quickly scribbled it in their list. We noticed how people have very different ideas of happiness, for some it was their first pay check and getting their dream job/ course/ spouse, while for others, the little things like someone saying thank you, or a friend writing a heartfelt card made them ecstatic.

We left in soaring spirits, and when we returned, we had another extended quiet time to meditate upon the question, “Who/What am I?”

Before we left, the Convener shared a few insights into his own answer to that question, while it is highly subjective, it gave us direction in terms of how to go about answering that question. Looking very closely at ourselves, we become aware of our tendencies, our behavior, our way of acting and doing things. For example; he told us that he is a highly organized person, and that he used to get very angry but now controls it and is learning to channelize that energy towards productive endeavors.

The quiet time that followed was intense. We found many things in ourselves as we questioned who we are. We found lies, vices, insecurity, guilt, mistakes, anger, hurt, pain and sorrow. We also found honesty, joy, compassion, forgiveness, gratitude, love and positive traits. Apart from these, we found what principles we value, what our passions, qualities and characteristics are. We understood what we love doing, what makes us feel happy, identified whether we are introverts or extroverts, who we are at home, whether we are responsible, whether we are honest, dependable and reliable or lackadaisical and untrustworthy. Our conscience to put us through the purging fire of this question; ‘Who am I?’ Out of the ashes emerged a clear understanding of the kind of people we were, the good, bad, ugly and beautiful.

This had a profound impact on us, in the process of questioning; we had increased the volume of our inner voice. In objectively seeing both the good and bad in us, we started believing more in ourselves, and our ability to be aligned with the truth, irrespective of how bitter it was. We didn't need validation or appraisal from outside anymore, for we knew no one could make us feel better or worse than our own conscience did.

This newfound understanding also came with the awareness that we had barely scratched the tip of the iceberg; that this question could take a lifetime to truly understand and answer.

We had an open session where all of us asked the convener any questions we had about the spiritual journey and the challenges that are a part of it. Some of them were;

“ How do you trust again after being betrayed?”

“ How do you place the spiritual over the material when the world runs behind money?”

“How do we break negative Habits?”

“How do we apply the insights we gained here, once we are in the outside world where everything is so different?”

“How do we control our sensory desires?”

The convener then shared with us a few experiences from his life. Some of them were downright shocking. I wondered how someone could endure so much hurt, betrayal and pain and yet have the compassion/ courage to forgive and continue to trust. The courage and magnanimity of heart required to do so was extraordinary, but by doing so, he had set an example, and shown us that it WAS possible to respond to hate with love and to betrayal with forgiveness. He had shown us that it was possible, to stand up against the entire world, if the truth is on your side. He ended the story with a few words that are etched in our souls forever;

“The Truth will prevail.”

We went to the lounge and switched off all the lights, being the second last day of the year, we wanted to slowly bring the year to a still halt, so we could begin the next one from a place of quiet and stillness.

We sat in different corners of the dark lounge, closed our eyes and slowly became aware of our body becoming very still. Slowly the silence started ringing and our breathing grew slower and deeper. We felt the blood coursing through our hands; the tiniest movement was magnified by concentrated awareness on being still. We were almost in a trance.

Being very still, personally I became aware of the vast reservoir of energy, which I could tap into at anytime to accomplish anything. It was my source of will power, my mainline connection to the infinitely powerful God within me. It felt like being plugged in, to my source, my center, where I was powerful, calm and fully aware. I realized that from stillness emerged consciousness, that stillness was the kingdom of my soul. We had taken the plunge into the ocean of our inner world, and through awareness, emerged with the realization that We ARE the Ocean.

We opened our eyes, amazed at what we had experienced and feeling full of energy even after the long day.

Then we went to our rooms and slept soundly.

Resurfacing

The last day of the year had dawned upon us, the sunrise painted the speckled clouds that lay suspended in the sky, first in hues of rippling gold, then in a glorious orange and finally to a hot pink before they slowly flew away, carried by the mellow winds.

Being still and quiet for a while now had made it easier for us to slip into the state of communion with our inner voice. The stream of thoughts that continuously flow through our mind slowed down to a trickling halt and in that silent space, the question of “What we were searching for?” was deeply ingrained.

The fleeting moments of silence slowly prolonged into minutes of quiet contemplation, where the question germinated like a seed. Answers sprouted slowly, and we found that what we are all really searching for wasn't materialistic desires but rather inner peace and happiness that comes from within.

However, we get trapped in the dogma of chasing materialistic pleasures thinking they bring us happiness.

It isn't surprising that we do so; our society, media, and education condition us to seek happiness, validation and meaning outside of us. Asking ourselves this question reoriented our gaze inwards, towards the source of our true happiness, made us realize we are running in the wrong direction after things we don't really want, wasting precious time and energy. From this clarity emerged a lot of answers about our search, which resulted in a profound sharing.

The quiet morning of the last day of the year saw 13 of us completely engulfed in our own little worlds, searching for answers to this enigma called life.

The convener read out a few letters he had received from participants who had attended previous conferences and had genuine questions regarding quiet time and what it actually is.

We then moved to a discussion on the meaning of quiet time. Each of us shared what quiet time meant to us. Some asked, "What is the difference between quiet time and introspection"? Or "If you don't give the quiet time some direction, like giving it a question, isn't it a meaningless waste of time?"

A discussion took place and finally we were all on the same page that quiet time is more an act of listening to our inner voice than thinking or introspection, which involve the mind.

The letters the convener read out were his responses to the questions asked to him. He answered them from his inner voice and that was apparent from the depth and force of truth the words carried. It took us on a journey about inner voice, quiet time, listening, and the impact it has on our lives. For the second time in the workshop, there was a long silence, where we absorbed the deep reflections shared.

We had contemplated what we are searching for, then about Who am I. Having gained a certain clarity on these two, the next question was presented to us, and immediately, it struck a chord, like a pieces of the puzzle falling into place, revealing a glimpse of the bigger picture.

“Who/ What do I want to be?”

We had understood who we were as of now. Consciously elevating ourselves from here was the purpose of this workshop, and this question served exactly that purpose- To understand who/ what we wanted to be, to imagine what our highest self was like; and to envision the characteristics/ qualities/ habits of that greatest version of ourselves.

We had an extended quiet time on this question. While questioning this, we also became painfully aware of how far we had strayed from our highest paths towards enlightenment, how we had our ego/ vices/ lack of will power to hold responsible for that, How running after immediate gratification of our sensory desires had slowly taken us away from the deeper calling of our soul. It was not easy to acknowledge, but it was the truth.

Simultaneously, it also brought a spark in our eyes when we imagined the possibilities of what we could become, of the wonderful qualities we were capable of possessing, and the tremendous impact we could create, if only we stayed true to ourselves.

When we shared our reflections on this question, a powerful energy of strong desire to become that version of ourselves permeated the room, charging all of us with the inspiration to take any steps, no matter how difficult, towards achieving our goals.

A few participants shared very profoundly. It was evident that in their quiet time their inner voice had shown them how far away they had gone and now they had seen a glimpse of who they could be. The passion towards bridging that gap became an all consuming, driving force which transformed each word of theirs into a powerful blow, inflicted against their own ego and base desires and that of others.

A lot of connections were discovered, many people wanted similar things. For example, many of us, wished to be more disciplined and true to others and ourselves. Many of us wanted to shift to healthier diets and habits, and almost all of us wanted to make regular, disciplined quiet time an integral part of our lives.

This question stayed with us and stirred a revolution within, to overthrow the mind/ body regime, and catalyzed the reclamation of the throne of our inner kingdom, and crowning its rightful king, our Soul.

We set out to the Asia Plateau to witness the last sunset of the year. We also wrote down on a piece of paper all the negative/ embarrassing/ hurtful things which happened in 2015 which we did not want to carry with us into 2016, and we burned it at the plateau. The sunset transformed the sky into shades of purple and gold- the colors of royalty.

We had dinner and assembled in the lounge again for another bout of stillness. Despite the firecrackers outside, we slipped into the state of stillness. If anything, it only strengthened our resolve that we could access this state irrespective of where we are and what our external circumstances are.

We were still in the dark for an entire hour, with our eyes closed. We became oblivious to the noise outside and focused deeply on being absolutely still. We had lit 15 candles in front of us and silently prayed.

As the clock struck midnight and the noise outside became louder, we became more still and quiet, completely engulfed in the state of inner stillness, the state of communion with the divine within us.

Thus, we welcomed 2016 and prayed that it is a year, which sees us all be true and evolve into the highest version of ourselves.

The Ascent

The first quiet time of 2016 came disguised as a test. We were given the option of coming by 7 instead of the usual 6 15, but told that it would start by 6 and we could come anytime in between.

Most us came by 7; some of us came by 6 30, and very few of us came by 6. This showed like an exam, where we stood on our resolve towards being more disciplined human beings.

We sat outside the rock view-building library as tradition dictated and watched the first sunrise of the year. As the sunrays fell upon us, we felt the energy of newness, the warmth of light within and without. We gladdened at the sight of the fresh canvas that lay ahead of us, and the thought of the incredible masterpieces we would create.

Well, we knew the masterpiece we would paint of our lives (our highest self), we had the colors in the easel (good habits) and the desire to make it! But we lacked the most essential equipment; the will power, the brush with which we would paint the strokes of our masterpiece!

For exactly that purpose, in the morning quiet time, we focused on creating a roadmap to chart our transition towards becoming who we wanted to be.

We had a long quiet time, and when we returned, we had a very refreshing power nap.

After waking up, we returning to our quiet time. This was very inspired and energized session. We knew who we were, what we wanted to be and now we were figuring our how to get there, it was almost like a game. We asked ourselves, how am I going to get there? What steps am I going to take?

We eliminated the bad habits we wanted to remove, made positive commitments on the good habits that we would imbibe, and in our own way, charted the journey towards our destiny. Some made a routine, some wrote a list of positive commitments, and some decided to give up vices they were addicted to.

We then had a session on will power and how to acquire it. This was tremendously helpful to all of us as this was the missing link in between who we were and who we wanted to be. The convener told us how, the will power is like a muscle and on being exercised, and it grows stronger.

He shared personal examples and ways of making it stronger. We also decided on who would be our buddies to ensure we were staying on track and achieving our positive commitments.

The workshop was drawing to a close and the convener presented the best performer of this workshop certificate to Sangeeta for being exceptionally focused and disciplined and adhering to all the rules mentioned in the beginning. We were all happy to see her emotional response of hugging the convener with tears of joy in her eyes.

We had resurfaced from our plunge into the depths of our soul and were aware of the ocean-like inner reservoir of resources we now possessed to achieve our goals and realize our dreams. Now ahead of us lay the long winding and uphill task of adhering to our positive commitments, consciously exercising our will power and climbing the inner mountains we would face in applying what we had learned here, in the outside world.

Now, we are on our way towards becoming the best we can be, putting one step after another, with the silent knowledge that the peak is seeking us.