

University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
Sunday, February 24, 2013
Parents Weekend Multifaith Service

Student Reflection by Naga Phani Aetukuri, Ph.D. candidate

Namaste Everyone!

I am Naga Phani, an nth year graduate student at Stanford in Materials Science. We do stop counting after a while! ☺ And no, I am not talking about my crazy experiments with atom thin layers!

Being a PhD student, I was asked several times: how would your spiritual dimension change if it were to be proved beyond doubt that several of the spiritual books you read are only a work of fiction. My answer today would be: 'In no way!' It is not their origins that influenced me; it is the moral message in these writings that influenced me. The moral message would remain the same and indeed we shall be thankful for anyone who created such great works of fiction, if these really were!

In this regard, I shall tell you a story, a story of my PhD qualifier examination. Back then, I was learning about Karma Yoga – a spiritual practice in Hinduism where you are devoted to your duties and perform them without any expectations of the result. The emphasis is on enjoying the process. And for this you do not need God belief! I wanted to enjoy the qualifier exam and I wanted to experiment and see if this Karma Yoga really works!

The qualifier involved a presentation and answering the questions that the committee asked. This was a two-hour process. All through, I made a conscious effort to not worry about my passing or failing the exam and focused only on enjoying the process. There were occasions when I did not know the answers. Yet at no point during the exam, I realized later, was I nervous. After the exam, my advisor who was also on the committee told me that me remaining cheerful through the entire two-hour process really impressed the committee; of course in addition to my performance in the exam. I thoroughly enjoyed the process and so I was happy all through. It was an experiment then, but now this is an experience that I will take with me from Stanford and I believe this will be a large part of the rest of my life.

The reading of Karma Yoga was possible because of the presence of the Hindu Students Association, the Stanford Associated Religions and the CIRCLE – Center for Inter Religious Community Learning and Experiences at Stanford. The CIRCLE is an amazing place, a microcosm of a bigger and diverse world, showcasing the beauty inherent in diversity. It is a celebration of the diversity at Stanford rather than striving for uniformity. The CIRCLE will be one of my long lasting memories at Stanford and I would take with me two very important ideas. First, the acceptance of different traditions and a sense of fraternity rather than tolerance, which I think is a much lower idea. Second, Karma Yoga: selfless service with the emphasis on service and not the results of it; either good or bad.

Sarve Bhadrani Pashyantu – Let us look towards the common good of all!