Our Three Kinds of Temples
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Our Three Kinds of Temples

The community temple, the home shrine and the sanctuary inside you are readily available to stabilize and uplift your daily life

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Audio Only:

It would be hard to overestimate the power and importance of the temple in Hindu culture and spiritual practice--the home of God to which we go for solace and connection with the divine. When we think of temples, we naturally think of community temples, those always welcoming, often ornate, magical spaces which I like to call pura mandiras. Worshiping in these temples is a central practice in Hinduism. But there is a broader, seldom discussed understanding of the temple in Sanatana Dharma which embraces two other sacred places of communion as equally important. One is the home shrine, or griha mandira, and the other is the soul temple or atma mandira.

The Community Temple, Pura Mandira

Hindu communities revolve around the local temple, which serves as the hub of culture, worship, festivals and more. For the devout, the ideal is to attend a puja at the community temple daily, or at least once a week, and to participate in the major holy festivals celebrated within its precincts. This allows us to experience the blessings of God and the Gods regularly and to enjoy frequent fellowship with other devotees, which is uplifting and engaging. Though God is everywhere, it is easiest to receive His blessings at the temple. My Gurudeva, Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, had many insights into temple mysticism: the ray of the temple, its subtle force field and how the three worlds work together in that sacred space. All this was

apparent to his inner sight. He wrote, "If you could view the temple from the inner worlds, you would see a brilliant ray coming from the Third World, or world of the Gods, right into the temple on the physical plane. This ray allows communication similar to a live video conference. The priest opens the connection by performing puja. When the puja is performed with loving devotion, the ray becomes strong and inner doors open from God's world to ours; the angelic helpers, called devas, hover around and through the temple, and blessings pour out to the devotees. A Hindu temple's devonic rays have the power to transform the course of karma, open inner doors to new opportunities, assuage long-held hurts and provide inner visions equaling the fullness of devotion."

Regular worship at the community temple deepens our humility and our devotion to God. It also purifies and lifts our energy into higher chakras. In addition to worship, we can also perform service (seva, or karma yoga) at the temple and accrue even more spiritual benefits. The Tirumantiram, an ancient scripture by Rishi Tirumular lists a number of traditional chores in verse 109: "The simple temple duties, lighting the lamps, picking flowers, lovingly polishing the floors, sweeping, singing the Lord's praise, ringing the bell and fetching ceremonial water--these constitute the dasa marga (path of the servant)." Additionally, those who are qualified can volunteer to teach Hinduism to the youth.

If you are finding fulfillment by worshiping in your community temple, don't stop there. Consider extending your devotional life to the griha mandira, or home shrine.

The Home Shrine, Griha Mandira

The ideal Hindu home centers around the home shrine, a special room set aside and maintained to create a temple-like atmosphere which holds us close to our spiritual goals and practices. In this holy space we conduct puja, read scripture, perform sadhana, sing bhajana and do japa. Here we can always feel the presence of God and the Gods, whom we honor especially in the morning and evening and before meals, which we offer to them before we partake. Here worship traditionally begins before dawn, with the simple act of dedication for the coming day. After a bath, morning puja is performed, usually by the husband. The wife and older children may also perform their own puja at another time of day. The form of home worship, called atmartha puja, is simple: we lovingly invoke the Deities, tender choice offerings and beseech their blessings for our family and the world. This early morning worship begins the day on a religious note, blessing the work and activities that follow. Evening devotionals include a simple arati, bhajana, meditation and reading of scripture--a day's-end routine that carries family members to lofty,

celestial realms during sleep. The temple-like atmosphere of the shrine room can prevail throughout the home if family members handle disagreements and difficult issues in a harmonious, professional way, avoiding arguments and expressions of anger.

You can bring some of the power of the community temple into your home shrine by lighting an oil lamp when you return from the temple. This sacred act brings devas who were at the temple into the home shrine room, where, from the inner world, they can bless all family members and strengthen the religious force field of the home. This is one of my guru's unique insights into the mysticism of temple worship.

How elaborate should the home puja be? It can vary from short and simple to long and complex. Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswathi Mahaswamiji (1894-1994) of Kanchi Kamakoti Pitham commented, "Every family must perform puja to Ishvara. Those who find it convenient to do so may conduct elaborate types of puja after receiving proper initiation into them. Others need perform only a brief puja, not lasting more than ten minutes or so. Office-goers must offer at least this brief worship. The sacred bell must ring in every home."

Ideally, all members of the family gather together in the shrine room for a puja each morning. Additionally, visiting the shrine at other key times brings special benefits. Visiting the shrine before leaving the home reminds you that work is also worship when approached in a spiritual way, a strategic attitude that helps you maintain a religious perspective during your time out of the home. Visiting the shrine upon returning home provides a few moments to release any negative, worldly vibrations you have taken on while away. Visiting before an important event, such as a job interview or a major exam at school, you can pray for special blessings and guidance. Retreating to this oasis when emotionally disturbed or reflecting on a personal problem reminds you to spiritually center yourself and overcome the challenge or upset condition with the blessings of God and the Gods. These are several ways the home shrine can benefit the family. By your example you teach these practices to your children--practices that will sustain them as they make their passage through life.

Performing your own individual puja in the home shrine with sincerity and regularity unfolds a relationship with the Divine that is likened to that of a child to a parent, called satputra marga, or "path of the dutiful child." The Tirumantiram

summarizes, "Puja, reading the scriptures, singing hymns, performing japa and unsullied austerity, truthfulness, restraint of envy and offering of food--these and other self-purifying acts constitute the flawless satputra marga" (verse 1496).

If you are finding fulfillment by worshiping in the home shrine, don't stop there. Consider worshiping in the atma mandira, if you are not already practicing yoga meditation.

The Soul Temple, Atma Mandira

The third place of worship is the temple within the body, which I call the atma mandira. My paramaguru, Yogaswami of Jaffna, Sri Lanka, said, "God lives in this house built of earth, water, fire, air and ether. Therefore, keep the house clean and the mind pure, and conduct yourself with calmness." His disciple Markanduswami recounted his guru's instructions: "Yogaswami said, 'Leave your relations downstairs, your will, your intellect, your senses. Leave the fellows and go upstairs by yourself and find out who you are. Then you can go downstairs and be with the fellows.' "

Yogaswami was describing the internal form of worship--meditation in the sacred chamber of the soul, wherein we quiet our physical body, still our astral and mental bodies, become centered in our immortal, spiritual body of light, and strive for, discover, near and ultimately merge with God within. Through meditation, we temporarily set aside our mundane concerns and experience our refined, spiritual nature that is always serene and centered, the source of intuition, solace and strength for all our activities. Consistent practice of meditation has the power to increase our concentration, observation, understanding, compassion, appreciation, cooperation, mental acuity, emotional stability, willpower and our ability to see God in all things and all people.

Awakening Wisdom

God abides in all three of these temples. In the community temple He is worshiped in elaborate, formal ways, mystical ways that bring His shakti, or power, into the inner chamber to bless the world. In the home shrine He is worshiped in simple, loving ways which bring His presence into the home to guide the family through karma's sometimes difficult passages and bless their pursuits. In the chamber of the heart He is worshiped as the Life of life, as the Self of ourself, to awaken peace of mind, insight, inspiration and enlightenment. The three temples stand as a central

pillar of Hindu life.

Successful worship in the three temples over many lifetimes culminates in jnana, divine wisdom, which we see in an enlightened being, a soul in its maturity, immersed in the blessed realization of God, while living out earthly karma. In verse 1444 of the ancient yogic text Tirumantiram, Rishi Tirumular sums up our thoughts: "Being the Life of life is splendrous jnana worship [achieving jnana]. Beholding the Light of life is great yoga worship [meditation]. Giving life by invocation is external worship [performing puja]. Expressing adoration is charya [attending puja]." As you see, our experience of the three temples of Hinduism is an ancient one that survives in the 21st century.