

[How Ganesha Became Our Life's Pilot](#)

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PILGRIMAGE

## How Ganesha Became Our Life's Pilot

A devotee shares his experience and the blessings he found at the eight famed temples

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In December of 1997 I found my-self in Mihintale, seven miles from Anuradhapura, a site of immense importance to Sri Lankan Buddhism. Wandering near the principle Dagoba, I saw a simple hand-painted sign, pointing down hill behind the main site, which said "Lord Ganesha Grotto." Despite the fact that I had, until then, considered myself a militant atheist for years, I had always had a fascination with this God whose loveable elephant's head was perched improbably upon a corpulent human body.

When I entered the grotto, upon sight of the icon, I became, for a brief moment, both fully conscious and completely unconscious. It was like being struck by lightning, only completely positive. I do not know how long I spent in that grotto; I only know that I grinningly stumbled my way back up the path and tried to explain what I had experienced to my wife. I had found my chosen Deity. I resolved that, upon my return to Europe, I would pursue every piece of information I

could about Ganesha and bring Him more meaningfully into my life.

The first major publication I obtained was Satguru Sivaya Subramuniaswami's Loving Ganesha. I read and re-read this seminal, priceless book countless times. I further developed a considerable library of "Ganapati-alia" and studied many of the major scriptures of Hinduism. I immersed myself not only in the God who revealed Himself to me in that mountain cave in central Sri Lanka, but extended my study to take in Hinduism in general.

It soon became obvious that reading alone was not going to enhance an increasingly spiritual approach to life. All the major Ganesha literature spoke of the Ashtavinayaka Yatra, the holiest Ganesha pilgrimage in all of Hinduism. I fully resolved to undertake this pilgrimage.

Ashtavinayaka Yatra is Sanskrit for "Eight Vinayaka (i.e., Ganesha) Pilgrimage." It consists of visiting eight temples surrounding Pune, in western India not far from Mumbai. Even with a car, it requires two or three days of gruelling travel over about 1,000 kilometers to reach the eight villages of Morgaon, Siddhatek, Theur, Lenyadri, Ozar, Ranjangoan, Mahad and Pali. All of the icons at these temples-except one-is a swayambhu or "self-emanating" murti. That is to say that these murtis were all discovered naturally in the form of Ganesha and were not the product of a sculptor's work. It is a difficult pilgrimage but, beyond the normal hazards of

the local traffic, absent of the dangers of high Himalayan ventures.

In December, 2000, my wife and I set off on this pilgrimage at 7:00 am from Pune. This Maharashtra city is centrally located to all the eight temples, and is one of the launching points for the pilgrimage. As with the famed six-temple pilgrimage for Lord Murugan in South India, there is a traditional order, though few follow it, as it means backtracking. We did as most pilgrims do and after three hours of rough roads arrived at Sri Oreshwar in the town of Morgaon, which is the first temple of the traditional order. It is considered the holiest and most awakened of the Ashtavinayaka temples. The swayambhu murti is lovely, in a sitting posture, facing east with a trunk turning left. Diamonds have been embedded in its eyes and navel. As with all the Deities of this pilgrimage, it is covered in a thick coating of sandalwood paste which is re-applied several times a day. This builds up over time and then cracks open every century or so-reportedly last in 1788 and 1872-revealing the much smaller, perfectly formed swayambhu murti underneath. The anointing with sandalwood paste then starts all over again. I offered prayers to Lord Ganesha, circumambulated the sanctum and broke a coconut, the traditional offering. By comparison to South Indian temples, all those we encountered on the pilgrimage were relatively modest, and this one was vaguely reminiscent of Mogul

architecture.

Several more hours on country roads brought us to the banks of the Bhima River, whence we were to board a boat to the opposite shore to reach the village of Siddhatek and the Sri Siddhivinayaka Temple, second in the customary order. You can drive all the way to the temple, but the boat trip is a time-saving, if harrowing, shortcut. The boat was filled with people, animals and motorbikes. If we had been any lower in the water, well, we would have been in the water. But this was business-as-usual and the competent oarsman rowed us across safely.

The small temple is a short walk up a hill. The Ganesha here has His trunk turned to the right, a feature calling for extra care in worship, and as such, this is the one Ashtavinayaka temple where individuals cannot perform their own pujas. Circumambulation was possible, but I wasn't prepared for a three-mile walk barefoot around the hill. Blessed by Sri Siddhivinayaka, our trip back across the river was uneventful, even though our boat was even more packed.

Our third stop— and the last of this first day— was the closest of the Ashtavinayakas to Pune, Sri

Chintamani at Theur, the fifth temple. Ganesha here is heart-shaped, and decorated with diamonds in His eyes and navel. Chintamani means "Jewel of Consciousness," and worship of Him is said to free one from all worries and calamities. Indeed, one night, not long thereafter, my wife Monica muttered in her sleep, "Chintamani is the pilot." When she awoke I asked her what she had been dreaming. She couldn't remember, but it seemed so appropriate that this beautiful representation of Sri Ganesha, the remover of obstacles and worries, should be the pilot of one's destiny. "Chintamani is the pilot" became the catch-phrase of our journey thereafter.

Following a night in Pune, our first stop the next day was the Sri Mahaganapati Temple in Ranjangaon, the eighth temple. Like most of the temples on the Ashtavinayaka pilgrimage, the present external structure of this temple dates from the heyday of the Peshwa rulers—in the late 18th century—although stone pillars of the older temple which are visible in the compound show that there was a place of worship here at least as early as the 9th or 10th centuries. One of the

unifying and most intriguing characteristics of all the Ashtavinayaka temples is the fact that no one has a clue how long they've been there. The entrance to this shrine is especially large and the swayambhu murti is most attractive, although local legend maintains that the real icon, consisting of ten trunks and twenty hands, was moved to the cellar at some time in the past due to fear of Muslim invasion.

Sri Vighneshwar Temple at Ozar, the seventh, is 85 kilometers north of Pune. The present temple dates from 1785, and was renovated in 1967. The Deity has emeralds embedded in its eyes and diamonds on its forehead and navel. This is the only Ashtavinayaka temple to possess a golden dome and pinnacle. Our arrival was particularly auspicious. We entered the sanctum just as worship was in progress; tiny finch-like birds flitted in and out between the sanctum and the outer chamber where the devotees had gathered. It was utter magic and I was completely lost in the moment.

The village of Ozar, a small square just outside the entrance to the temple, was, to my mind, the finest of all the village-based Ashtavinayaka temples— a serene and welcoming place, at least when we were there.

Then came the second day's final port of call—the remarkable cave temple at Lenyadri, Sri Girijatmaj, the sixth temple. To reach this, one must climb 307 sheer steps along the cliff face to gain entrance to the temple, one of 18 formerly Buddhist caves carved deep into the high mountainside. The temple here is exceptional—one large hall carved out of stone leads directly to the sanctum. The swayambhu murti here, like at Siddhatek, is attached directly to the cave wall.

To get to the eighth Ashtavinayaka temple, Sri Varadvinayaka at Mahad, we had to cross

back over the low mountain range that divides the Maharashtrian coast from the inland plain on the third and final pilgrimage day. Sri Varadvinayaka at Mahad, the fourth temple, is the most controversial of the Ashtavinayaka temples for the simple fact that, a few years ago, the trustees decided that the ancient swayambhu murti was too worn to continue using, so they consecrated a carved icon in its place. Some devotees filed a suit against the trustees and, until a court decision is reached, the original Deity sits in front of the sanctum, next to the offering box. I dutifully worshiped both Deities, circumambulated the temple and proceeded to the last of the Ashtavinayaka temples.

Sri Ballaleswar Temple at Pali, the third, is one of the most distant from Pune. It's the only one of the Ashtavinayaka Temples to be named after the devotee who discovered the swayambhu murti. Some time in antiquity a



young boy ("Ballal") at this site became a devout Ganesha devotee. The swayambhu murti at Pali is one of the most characterful—long and "melting" at the shoulders, it wears a crown not unlike a cap and resides in a tall, stone hall with eight stone pillars. It is said that if you make 21 circumambulations of this temple your problems will be solved and your desires fulfilled.

As we left the site, it struck me that it was over. We had completed my dream and performed the sacred Ashtavinayaka Yatra. I was consumed with a mixture of elation and sadness and deeply overcome. I wanted to start the whole process over again, but I realized that it was the internalization of my experiences that mattered now. All blessings to Vinayaka for allowing me a safe pilgrimage—and the same to those this article might inspire to do likewise! Our Lord Ganapati as Chintamani is, indeed, the pilot

of our lives.

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## How Ganesha Changed My Life

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## BY EASVAN PARAM, CALIFORNIA

In 1998, my wife and I were inspired to undertake the Eight Ganesha Pilgrimage to express our gratitude and appreciation for the many boons that we had received in the previous year. We didn't quite know what to expect, as there isn't much available on the subject. Though familiar with the popular pilgrimages of South India, we had never traveled to Maharashtra. We didn't know anyone there and had no contacts upon which to rely. However, from the moment we began planning our trip, and at each step along the way, every door was open, all obstacles vanished and a helping hand was always outstretched.

Never had I made a pilgrimage where the gentle hand of the inner worlds was so easily felt guiding and arranging events. There was an unusual easiness, a calm and unhurried pace to everything. Feeling Lord Vighnesvara with us allowed a patience with circumstances I had never experienced before. I just knew everything was working out for the best, even when our plans changed unexpectedly.

Although each temple was different in some respects, there was a consistent sweetness when approaching the shrine at each. After prostrating, Vinayaka would appear quickly to my inner vision, smile deeply and

graciously welcome us saying, "So glad you came. I've been expecting you."

The boons I received from the pilgrimage have remained clear and vivid even as the days and years drift out of sight. I gained the foundation of knowing that the Lord of Dharma is as ever present as a mother's love. I learned that patience and affectionate detachment are based on the unshakable belief that all is as it should be. I now have a friend and life companion who is always there ready to help when needed.

It is difficult to talk about experiences

of an inner nature like this without using cliches. Many erudite and unfolded souls have come before and covered the ground so thoroughly. Ultimately, it's not about words. It's about experience and bringing alive in yourself the knowing that Lord Ganesha is always there, just over my shoulder .... just a thought away.

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