Festivals: Guru Purnima
Category : April/May/June 2010
Published by senthil on Mar. 02, 2010

Guru Purnima
Honoring the Illumined Teachers

Hindu scriptures assert that more valuable than gold, and far more rare, is a guru, a knower of spiritual truths, also called a satguru. A guru is the devotee's best friend, a father and a mother, a trusted confidant and a demanding mentor and guide on the path to God. The guru embodies all that the spiritual seeker aspires to be; in the guru, one sees his own infinite potential. Hindus honor these rare leaders on Guru Purnima, the full moon day in June/July, the Hindu month of Ashada.

What is Guru Purnima?

Guru Purnima is the annual festival which honors spiritual teachers, preceptors and mentors who dispel the darkness of ignorance by bringing forth wisdom and illumination. Purnima is the Sanskrit word for full moon.

What are the customs of Guru Purnima?

On this special day all of one's thoughts are focused on the holy preceptor, tuning into his mind, meditating on his teachings and expressing gratitude for his blessings and guidance. In ashrams, monasteries, halls and home shrines, Hindus gather to venerate the guru of their lineage. The day's primary activity is a formal ritual, called puja, in which his holy feet or a pair of his sandals are honored. At the guru's major centers, the puja is a grand event, preceded by a festive procession. It is especially auspicious to pilgrimage to the guru's ashram or monastery on this day.

Why is the full moon of Ashada the day of the guru?

In India, this day marks the start of the four-month monsoon season. Traditionally, mendicant saints do not wander during this inclement time, but settle in temporary camps where devotees gather to partake of their wisdom. The first day of learning was dedicated to honoring the preceptor, and it is believed this custom became established as Guru Purnima. The full moon is also known as a propitious time for attaining fulfillment, completeness and spiritual advancement, and for beginning all

new endeavors.

Why are the guru's feet the focus of veneration?

According to tradition, God's presence can be most clearly and completely felt in the illumined satguru. To sit at his feet is to be close to God and our own deepest Self. All nerve currents terminate in the feet. Vital energy points relating to every organ of his physical and inner bodies--astral, mental and soul--are there. Touch the feet and we touch the spiritual master. Venerating the feet of the guru is also an acknowledgement of our deep respect and our knowledge that by following his footsteps we will attain spiritual perfection.

Are gurus worshiped as God?

A few Hindu denominations worship their gurus as the embodiment of God, and may even revere him as an avatar. But most Hindus see their guru as a great illumined soul in whom God's presence is most powerfully apparent.

Tidbits About the Guru

What is the guru's role? It is the guru's task to lead aspirants to God. He sets souls on the spiritual path, corrects those who stray, softens karmas, inspires lifelong practice and, through initiations, awakens the seeker's superconscious knowing. He helps us become aware of our shortcomings and strengths and gives us tools to overcome weaknesses and refine ourselves. The guru, knowledgeable in Hinduism's scriptures, its sacred, practical and philosophical treatises, has the ability to help us unlock their esoteric meaning and gain insight as we study. He guides us in our meditations, helping us navigate the mind and ultimately transcend it.

What is darshan? Darshan, literally "sight," is the mystical meeting of guru and devotee. Hindus travel great distances to experience darshan and receive the blessings of a illumined soul established in his enlightenment. Hindus believe that the spiritual power, called shakti, coming from a great soul accelerates their spiritual evolution, changes patterns in their life by purifying their subconscious mind, renewing their spirit and commitment to religious life.

Are all gurus renunciate monks? Hindu spiritual teachers may be either unmarried renunciates or householders. Many Hindu institutions are led by luminaries who

follow the householder path. Most gurus, however, are celibate monks--swamis, sadhus or acharyas--who have renounced worldly life and received initiation into a monastic order.

Are gurus centrally organized? Hinduism is actually a multitude of faiths and lineages loosely bound together by common beliefs and practices. There is no central organization. Each guru within his or her own sphere of devotees is the authority on religious matters, his or her wisdom sought and words obeyed. Some are heads of institutions with large followings, while others are reclusive sadhus who rarely appear in public.

Traditional Offerings

When visiting a guru, just as when going to a temple, devotees bring an offering, such as flowers, fruits (a lime is traditional) and, for renunciate gurus, a piece of unstitched cloth. These items are presented in a basket or on a metal tray. A monetary gift, called dakshina, wrapped in a betel leaf, is often included. In ancient days, gurus were given gold by the king and cows by the wealthy to sustain their schools and allow them to freely share wisdom.

Fact & Fiction

FACT: Hindus consider the mother to be a child's first guru. She and the father are responsible for their offsprings' upbringing, welfare and education. Upon coming of age, youth may turn to a satguru to begin their spiritual training.

FICTION: Some incorrectly criticize Hinduism as a world-negating faith that overemphasizes asceticism and austerity. In fact, while its large contingent of celibate monks pursue the path of renunciation, yoga and deep meditation, the vast majority of Hindus are householders dynamically engaged in family life, career and community service. Tradition affirms the pursuit of four goals: righteousness, wealth, pleasure (including sensual) and liberation.

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