

HINDUISM TODAY®

Affirming Sanātana Dharma and Recording the Modern History of a Billion-Strong Global Religion in Renaissance



From Seashell to Sacred Sound



(Cover) A young member of the Kosainagaran musician group in Tamil Nadu blows a conch with decorative brass fittings; (above) two Shalagrams sacred to Lord Vishnu picked from the Kali Gandaki River in Nepal

JANUARY/FEBRUARY/MARCH, 2026 • The Hindu Year Viśvāvasu, 5127 • विश्वावसु

Bodhinatha Veylanawami www.gurudeva.org

INTERNATIONAL

- Feature:** Join Us on a Rugged Trek along Nepal's Kali Gandaki River to Muktinath Temple **18**
- Vijayanagara's Arc:** The Rise and Fall of the Greatest Hindu Empire of the 16th Century **28**
- Conches Creation:** Meet the Harvesters and Carvers Who Turn Seashells into Instruments of Power **52**
- Kashi Vishwanath:** A Controversial New Corridor From Ganga to the Temple Elicits Ambivalence **62**

LIFESTYLE

- Singing to God:** Honoring the Accomplished Women Odhuvars of Tamil Nadu **36**
- Youth:** Life in Majority/Minority Hindu Countries **39**
- Educational Insight:** A Step-by-Step Guide for Dealing Effectively with Your Karma **40**

- Pausing Academics:** Rutvij Holay Takes a Gap Year from College to Deepen Brahmacharya **58**
- Interview:** Lakshmi Akka on Her Life and Devotion at the Feet of Arunachala in Tamil Nadu **66**
- Health:** Can We Ease the Debilities of Aging? **68**
- Mystic Songs:** Masterful Kerala Art Portrays Saint Tayumanavar's Three Forms of Siva **86**

OPINION

- In My Opinion:** India Awakened My Bhakti **9**
- Publisher's Desk:** Secure Your Inner Base Camp **10**
- Letters to the Editor** **12**
- Scriptures:** *Mrigendra Agama* on the Tattvas **17**

DIGESTS

- Global Dharma** **6**
- Quotes & Quips** **14**

USA Contacts: Letters to the editor, subscription and editorial inquiries may be sent to HINDUISM TODAY®, 107 Kaholalele Road, Kapaa, Hawaii 96746-9304 USA, letters@hindu.org. HINDUISM TODAY® (ISSN# 0896-0801; USPS# 023082), January/February/March, 2026, Volume 48, No. 1. Subscriptions from USA and Canada 1-808-822-3012; subscriptions, copies or bulk orders from other countries 1-808-822-3012; subscribe@hindu.org. Advertising: 1-888-464-1008, ads@hindu.org. HINDUISM TODAY® is published four times a year in January, April, July and October by Himalayan Academy Publications®, a nonprofit educational institution at 107 Kaholalele Road, Kapaa, Hawaii 96746-9304 USA. Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, Founder; Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanawami, Publisher; Paramacharya Sadasivanatha Palaniswami, Editor-in-Chief. Global subscriptions: US\$35/1 year, \$65/2 years, \$95/3 years, \$155/5 years, \$299/lifetime. **International Contacts:** In Malaysia: Datta Impexs, Jalan Cempaka 24, Taman Desa Cempaka 2, Bandar Baru Nilai, 71800 Nilai, NSDK. Tel: 1-012-607-7310; E-mail: dattaimpexs@yahoo.com, www.dattaimpexs.com. The Russian edition is available through contacting Dinanatha Bodhiswami in Moscow: bodhiswami@gmail.com. For permission to republish a HINDUISM TODAY® article, e-mail letters@hindu.org. Printed in USA. Periodicals postage paid at Kapaa, Hawaii, and at additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to HINDUISM TODAY®, 107 Kaholalele Road, Kapaa, Hawaii, 96746-9304.

© 2026 HIMALAYAN ACADEMY PUBLICATIONS®, 107 KAHOLALELE ROAD, KAPAA, HAWAII 96746-9304 USA. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.



www.hinduismtoday.com



subscribe.hinduismtoday.com



Kashi Aglow: A Grand Path from Ganga to Siva

The Kashi Vishwanath Temple corridor in Varanasi is lavishly illuminated at night, complete with a laser-like sky beam beckoning one and all to worship... Page 62

GLOBAL DHARMA

UNITED KINGDOM

Royal Navy Welcomes Its First Hindu Chaplain

THE UK'S ROYAL NAVY APPOINTED Bhanu Attri, originally from Himachal Pradesh, India, as its first-ever Hindu chaplain in August, 2025. For the first time, a non-Christian has been officially entrusted with offering spiritual support, according to *India Today*.

Attri was among 148 new officers who completed the Royal Navy's Initial Officer Training at Britannia Royal Naval College (BRNC) in Dartmouth. The 39-year-old chaplain will provide pastoral care and guidance to officers and sailors based on the teachings of Hinduism, reflecting the Navy's broader commitment to diversity and

inclusion.

His appointment followed a rigorous pathway distinct from other cadets. He completed six weeks of officer instruction, including survival training and four weeks at sea aboard the warship HMS Iron Duke, before undertaking three weeks of chaplaincy training to prepare for his unique responsibilities.

Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu extended his congratulations to Bhanu Attri, saying that his success is a proud moment for both the state and the nation.

Describing the role as "a profound honor," Attri said, "As a Hindu brought up in India, the



Royal Navy Milestone: Bhanu Attri (center) takes on his new role as the Navy's first Hindu chaplain after specialized training.

opportunity to represent individuals from diverse religions brings meaningful representation for the Hindu community and reflects the Navy's commitment to spiritual care for all. My family feels immense pride, a pride—grounded in generations of faith, service and resilience."

The Hindu Council UK (HCUK) outlined stringent criteria for the chaplaincy, including physical and mental fitness, deep grounding in Hindu philosophy, leadership experience, pastoral abilities and strong interfaith and cultural integration skills.

INDONESIA

World's Tallest Lord Vishnu Statue Arises in Bali

STANDING HIGH ABOVE THE limestone cliffs of the Bukit Peninsula, Bali, is the Garuda Wisnu Kencana (GWK) statue, a breathtaking sculpture of Lord Vishnu riding His loyal companion, Garuda.

This towering creation is not just a tourist attraction, but a proud symbol of Indonesia's culture, spiritual roots and artistic ambition, according to *The*

Economic Times.

The dream of the GWK statue began in the 1980s, not to make Bali just another holiday spot, but to create a national icon. Construction started in 1997, facing several delays due to financial troubles, and was finally completed in 2018.

Today, it stands almost 400 feet tall, with Garuda's wings stretching 210 feet wide. This

makes it taller than New York's Statue of Liberty. The Bali statue was built with over 2,000 tons of copper and brass sheeting over a stainless steel and steel-concrete structural frame and core. It was engineered to survive Bali's tropical heat, heavy rains and occasional earthquakes.



National icon: (above) An aerial view of the Garuda Wisnu Kencana statue, Bali; (below) close-up of the immense creation

In Hindu tradition, Vishnu is the preserver of the universe, while Garuda, half eagle, half mythical guardian, symbolizes freedom, courage and loyalty. In Indonesia, Garuda is also the national emblem, known as Garuda Pancasila.

This statue is a celebration of unity, diversity and ancient stories that are still part of Balinese daily life. It stands as a reminder of the island's commitment

to protecting both nature and heritage.

Hinduism reached Bali more than 2,000 years ago through trade between India and Southeast Asia. Over time, it blended with local traditions to create a unique Balinese Hindu culture. Today, temples (*pura*) and daily offerings (*banten*) are everywhere, showing a deep connection between faith, community and the natural world.



CANADA

A Grand Lord Ram Statue Graces Greater Toronto

FEDERAL CABINET MINISTERS and the leader of the opposition in the House of Commons joined thousands of devotees in August 2025, as the tallest statue of Lord Ram in North America was unveiled at the Hindu Heritage Center in Mississauga, Ontario, according to *Hindustan Times*.

The Center's founder and head priest, Acharya Surinder Sharma Shastri, said the murti stands at 51 feet in height, not including the pedestal, which is seven feet high. A proposed *chattri* (umbrella) will be added in the future after securing the requisite permits. The murti, fabricated in Delhi, is made of fiberglass with a steel superstructure. It is expected to last a

century and withstand winds of up to 124 miles per hour. While the statue was fabricated in India, it was assembled by local craftsmen in Canada, Shastri said.

Among those who attended the ceremony were Minister of Women and Gender Equality Rechie Valdez, President of the Treasury Board Shafqat Ali and Minister of International Trade Maninder Sidhu.

Sidhu greeted the gathering with a "Jai Shri Ram" and said the installation of the largest statue of Ram in North America was "something to be very proud of."

The Indian government was also represented by Acting Consul General in Toronto, Kapidhwaj Pratap Singh.



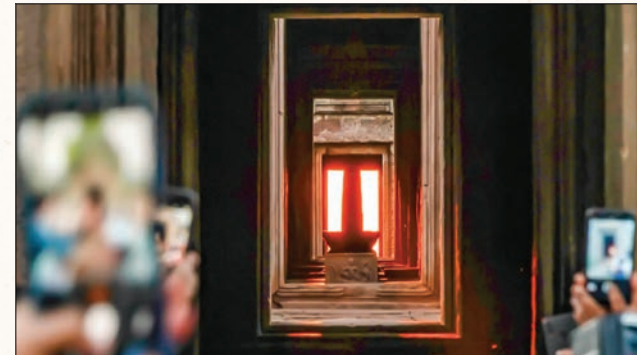
Hinduism everywhere: The 51-foot statue of God Ram dominates Mississauga's Hindu Heritage Center

THAILAND

Sunset through 15 Doorways

THE TOURISM AUTHORITY OF Thailand invited visitors to Buri Ram city from October 5–7, 2025, to witness the annual celestial phenomenon of the sunset alignment through the 15 doorways of Prasat Phanom Rung temple, according to *The Nation*. The sacred complex dedicated to God Siva was built atop the rim of an extinct

volcano over several phases between the 10th and 13th centuries. Its main sanctuary and surrounding structures were precisely aligned so that the sun's rays pass through 15 doorways on four occasions each year. The alignment attests to the advanced architectural and astronomical knowledge of its ancient builders.



Fascinating: The setting sun aligns perfectly through 15 doorways at Prasat Phanom Rung temple in Thailand

USA

Diwali Gains Holiday Status

CALIFORNIA HAS BECOME THE third U.S. state to designate Diwali, the "Festival of Lights," as an official statewide holiday, according to *Santa Maria Times*.

Governor Gavin Newsom signed a bill into law taking effect January 1, 2026. It authorizes public schools and community colleges to close on Diwali. State employees may elect to take the day off and public school students will receive an excused absence to

celebrate the holiday. The new law recognizes that Diwali is also celebrated by Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists. Pennsylvania, in 2024, was the first U.S. state to make Diwali a statewide holiday, with Connecticut following suit in 2025. Rohit Shendrikar, board chair of the South Asian Network in Southern California, said this law not only recognizes the South Asian community in California, but also the impact its members have had on the state.



New era: A woman makes a rangoli art using colorful powders and also lighting up diyas to celebrate Diwali

Nepal Crowns a New Living Goddess

A TWO-YEAR-OLD GIRL CHOSEN as Nepal’s new living Goddess was carried by family members from their home in a Kathmandu alley to a temple palace in September 2025, during the country’s longest and most significant Hindu festival. Aryatara Shakya, at two years and eight months, was chosen as the new Kumari, or “virgin Goddess,” replacing the incumbent, who is considered by tradition to become a mere mortal upon reaching puberty, according to *The Associated Press*.

Kumaris are chosen from the Shakya clans of the Newar community, indigenous to the Kathmandu Valley, and revered by Hindus and Buddhists in the predominantly Hindu nation. Girls, selected between ages two and four, must have unblemished skin, hair, eyes and teeth. Plus, they should not be afraid of the dark.

During the Indra Jatra festival, the former Kumari was wheeled around on a chariot pulled by devotees. The Kumari always wears red, has her hair pinned

up in a topknot, and wears a “third eye” painted on her forehead. The weeklong Indra Jatra festival was the first of a series of celebrations in September–October including Dashain, the main festival and Tihar or Diwali, the festival of lights.

The 15-day Dashain festival celebrates the triumph of good over evil. With offices and schools closed, families came together to celebrate the occasion.

Family, friends and devotees paraded the new Kumari through the streets of Kathmandu before entering the temple palace, which will be her home for several years.

Devotees lined up to touch the girl’s feet with their foreheads, the highest sign of respect among Hindus in the Himalayan nation, and offered her flowers and money.

“She was just my daughter yesterday, but today she is a Goddess,” her father Ananta Shakya said, adding that there were already signs she would be the



New Goddess: Nepal’s new living goddess, age two, carried to a temple in Kathmandu.

Goddess before her birth. “My wife during pregnancy dreamed that she was a Goddess and we knew she was going to be someone very special.”

The former Kumari, Trishna Shakya, now age 11, left from a rear entrance on a palanquin carried by her family and supporters. She became the living Goddess in 2017.

Families of the Shakya clan who qualify for the prestigious seat compete to have their

daughters selected. The family of the Kumari gains an elevated position in society and within their clan. But Kumaris live a sequestered life. They have a few selected playmates and are allowed outside only a few times a year for festivals.

Over the past few years, as traditions have evolved, the Kumari is now allowed to receive education from tutors inside the temple palace and to watch television as well.

THE U.S. COULD FACE A POTENTIAL closure of 15,000 churches this year, vastly outnumbering the few thousand new ones expected to open, *Axios* reported in October 2025. Over the next decade, the sharp decline in churches is expected to continue, potentially leaving communities, particularly rural ones, without essential services such as food aid, child-care and disaster relief that these institutions have traditionally provided. The decline in traditional church attendance coincides with a record 29 percent of Americans now identifying as religiously unaffiliated, while the proportion of Christians has dropped from 78 percent in 2007 to 62 percent, according to the *Pew Research Center*.

TWO HINDU TEMPLES IN EAST Denpasar, the capital city of

Bali, suffered heavy damage following severe floods in early September 2025, as reported by *NusaBali.com*. Government representatives visited the affected sites to assess the destruction and reaffirm support for their restoration. Plans are underway to secure funding and begin reconstruction in 2026, ensuring the temples’ spiritual and cultural roles are fully revived.

Global Dharma news provided by

HINDU PRESS INTERNATIONAL

Subscribe to a free daily news summary about Hinduism worldwide at hinduismtoday.com/hpi

PHOTO: THEJOURNALGAZETTEJ



HINDUISM TODAY was founded on January 5, 1979, by Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami (1927–2001). It is a nonprofit educational activity of Himalayan Academy, with the following purposes: 1. To foster Hindu solidarity as a unity in diversity among all sects and lineages; 2. To inform and inspire Hindus worldwide and people interested in Hinduism; 3. To dispel myths, illusions and misinformation about Hinduism; 4. To protect, preserve and promote the sacred *Vedas* and the Hindu religion; 5. To nurture and monitor the ongoing spiritual Hindu renaissance; 6. To publish resources for Hindu leaders and educators who promote Sanatana Dharma. Join this *seva* by sending letters, clippings, photographs, reports on events and by encouraging others.



Founder:
Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami
Publisher:
Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami
Editor-in-Chief:
Paramacharya Sadasivanatha Palaniswami
Publisher’s Aide: Paramacharya Sivanatha Ceyonswami
Deputy Editor: Acharya Kumarnathaswami
Managing Editor: Acharya Arumuganathaswami
Production Manager: Sannyasin Saravananathaswami
Assistant Editors: Sannyasin Tillainathaswami, Sadhaka Sabanatha
Subscription and Distribution Manager: Sannyasin Shanmuganathaswami
Advertising Manager: Sannyasin Kaivalyanathaswami
Russian Edition Editor: Dinanatha Bodhiswami
Correspondents: Choodamani Shivaram, Bengaluru; Lavina Melwani, New York; Dev Raj Agarwal, Dehradun; Nikki Thapa, Nepal; Anne Petry, France/India, Claire Burkert, USA/Nepal. **Copy Editor:** Chamundi Sabanathan. **HPI Staff:** Chandra Sankara. **Consultants:** Dr. S. P. Sabharathnam Sivachariyar. **Photo Contributors:** Thomas L. Kelly, Dinodia Picture Agency, Dev Raj Agarwal, Dehradun. **Distribution:** USA: New Leaf, EBSCO Subscription Services, WT Cox. Europe: Publications Overseas, SWETS **Subscription Service:** Malaysia: Datta Impexs. India: Central News Agency Limited, Delhi. Mauritius: CODIP. **Printer:** Quad/Graphics, Midland, Michigan.

IN MY OPINION

What India Taught Me

A journey from ritual to heartfelt devotion, where bhakti becomes an everyday connection

BY ASHA BAHROOS

GROWING UP IN NORTH America, Hinduism was often in the background. I knew prayers, stories and rituals, but it felt rigid to me, as if there were right and wrong ways to practice. It was not until I visited India last spring that I began to understand what Hinduism could truly feel like: natural, intuitive and alive. In one quiet moment, I saw bhakti not as an obligation but as a simple act of love. It redefined what faith means to me.

It was the morning of Holi in Indore, Madhya Pradesh. As I stepped into a mandir, I saw two elderly women in meditation before a black stone form of Shiva. When finished, they smiled softly, opened small pouches of *gulal* (colored powder), and gently pressed it onto the stone surface. Outside, the city pulsed with music and color. I had celebrated Holi back home with bonfires, parties and community festivals, but this felt entirely different. There was no sound except the faint rustle of cloth and the soft ring of a brass bell. The women were not performing a ritual. They were inviting Shiva to celebrate with them, not as a distant God but as someone deeply familiar. It felt as if they were saying, come play with us, Shiva. You are one of us. You are family! That simple gesture turned celebration into prayer, and prayer into play.

It brought me to tears. No priest instructed them, no rule required it. It came from a place of love that felt older than tradition. It was not about what is permitted or expected. It was about sacred connection. That moment helped me realize something that has continued to shape how I see my faith. In India, Hinduism does not feel like a religion of steps to follow, but like a spiritual reality you are born into.

I later explained this to my grandparents, who had moved to Canada many years ago. My *Dadi* (grandmother) told me something surprising: she did not miss practicing in India. When they first arrived, there were



no temples and no community structures. But her faith did not weaken; it deepened. She said the early temples in Toronto were not about formality but about comfort and hope. My *Dada* (grandfather) added that Hinduism itself never changed. Some chant. Some meditate. Some serve others. All of it is *seva*, and all of it is valid. Even the smallest act can be an offering.

I asked whether Hinduism in the West feels more rigid. My grandparents said it simply adapts. What matters is sincerity of heart. The environment may change, but the essence remains. Hinduism flows with its people. It finds the sacred in the natural world. We revere cows for their nourishment and maternal presence. We bow to trees and rivers because they give life. The divine is never far away. It is here, in the earth, in the sky, in the food we eat, and in the people we love.

In many ways, what I witnessed in Indore was not so different from what my grandparents had practiced all along; only the surroundings had changed—the temples, the traditions, the clothing. But the feeling was the same. My grandfather’s quiet generosity, my grandmother’s whispered prayers, and the women’s gentle offering were all expressions of the same truth. Hinduism is not about rigid repetition. It is about presence and intention. Faith does not live in temples or rituals. It lives in us. That morning in Indore did not teach me something new. It reminded me of what I had always known: you offer what you can, from where you are, to the divine that speaks to you. In that act of devotion, I witnessed a truth that has stayed with me ever since. Hinduism asks only for presence, love and the willingness to see beauty in all things. The divine can meet us anywhere.

ASHA BAHROOS, 21, is from Los Angeles, California and is pursuing a degree in pharmacy. She enjoys writing about Hindu philosophy and her experiences

Reaching Your Inner Base Camp

Hinduism offers methods to secure spiritual consciousness by purifying the mind and quieting the thrall of thought

BY SATGURU BODHINATHA VEYLANSWAMI

IN SPEAKING ABOUT HIS HIGHEST REALIZATIONS, Paramaguru Yogaswami once compared his inner climb through the chakras to the outer ascent of the world's tallest peak. "I climbed Mt. Everest in three days. There, there is nothing. No sun, no moon. Then you come down and there is dharma, *adharma* and all things."

Gurudeva, Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, gives this description of that state: "Many people think of the realization of timeless, formless, spaceless Parasiva, *nirvikalpa samadhi*, as the most blissful of all blissful states, the opening of the heavens, the descent of the Gods, as a moment of supreme, sublime joyousness; whereas I have found it to be more like cut glass, diamond-dust darshan, a psychic surgery, not a blissful experience at all, but really a kind of near-death experience resulting in total transformation. The bliss that is often taught as a final attainment is actually another attainment, Satchidananda, an aftermath of *nirvikalpa samadhi*, and a 'before-math.' This means that Satchidananda, *savikalpa samadhi*, may be attained early on by souls pure in heart. It also means that one need not gauge the highest attainment on the basis of bliss, which it transcends."

"In my experience, the *anahata chakra* (direct cognition) is the resting place of dynamic complacency, of thoughtful perception and quietude. Those of a lower nature arriving in the bloom of this chakra are released from turbulent emotions, conflicting thoughts and disturbances. This to many is the end of the path, attaining peace, or shanti. Once one attains shanti as just described, in my experience, this marks the beginning of the path, or part two, the second level. It is from here that the practices of raja yoga take hold, once shanti is attained." In his explanation, Gurudeva gave an apt description of the *anahata chakra*—the fourth center of consciousness—as a natural resting place on the way to the summit of Parasiva. Let's look more closely at our metaphor—comparing the inner climb through the chakras to the outer climb of Mt. Everest.

On the Nepal side of Mt. Everest, the last city below the starting point for climbers is Kathmandu. We can compare living in Kathmandu to where individuals are before they start striving to go within, before they even know about the chakras. The consciousness of those living in Kathmandu is centered in the first three chakras: *muladhara* (memory), *svadishthana* (reason) and *manipura* (willpower). When someone becomes a seeker of higher states of consciousness, it is like flying from Kathmandu to the town of Lukla, the first destination for climbers. The trekking route from Lukla to Everest Base Camp is about 40 miles one way, typically completed in 8 to 10 days to allow for acclimatization. The trail passes through several villages before



reaching base camp.

For our seeker to reach his inner base camp—anahata chakra—takes much longer than 8 to 10 days. It requires years of consistent daily sadhana—a journey through purification of the subconscious mind, improving concentration, living dharmically, resolving karmas and developing a devotional nature.

Needless to say, reaching base camp is not the ultimate goal for either our mountaineer or our seeker. For the mountaineer, there are four additional camps en route, making a total of five. It is by trekking from the fifth camp that climbers make the final assault on the summit, which lies at 29,000 feet—Earth's highest altitude above mean sea level. In his inner quest, the seeker must learn to stabilize awareness in the anahata chakra. Then, through raja yoga he attempts the ascent through the next two chakras: vishuddha (divine love) and ajna (divine sight). If he persists, he reaches the crown chakra, sahasrara, and realizes Parasiva—the Absolute.

Let's explore what is experienced when we function in the anahata chakra, our inner base camp. Gurudeva described it as the realm of artists, inventors, creators of all kinds. Each time you design or create anything, you are bringing the beauty of the within through your nerve system into manifestation. Gurudeva said, "It is a beautiful place to be, and you can be here all of the time by feeling the power in your spine. The minute you feel that radiant energy, you disconnect from instinctive/intellectual consciousness and soar into the fourth [dimension]." A few minutes of breath control will help you to feel the energy in the spine. Visualize a clear tube in the center of your spine being filled with yellow light coming down from the top of your head. Then inwardly see this pure life force flowing through the spine and out into the nerve system.

Gurudeva adds this description: "People with the anahata chakra awakened are generally well-balanced, content and self-contained. More often than not, their intellect is highly developed and their reasoning keen. The subtle refinement of their nature makes them extremely intuitive, and what is left of the base instincts and emotions is easily resolved through their powers of intellect. It is important that the serious aspirant gain enough control of his forces and karmas to remain stabilized at the heart center. This should be home



base to him, and he should rarely or never fall below anahata in consciousness. Only after years of sadhana and transmutation... can this be attained, but it must be attained and awareness must settle here firmly before further unfoldment is sought." Gurudeva's statements about the anahata chakra fit well with our Mt. Everest base camp metaphor.

The initial goal for every seeker is to experience the anahata chakra during their morning sadhana vigil and eventually hold that peaceful, creative consciousness throughout the day. However, having begun the day in a consciousness of contentment, creativity and intuition,

that joy with others.

While not everyone consciously aspires to the lofty realization of the higher chakras—vishuddha, ajna and sahasrara—and ultimately the realization of Parasiva, this is, in fact, the destiny of every soul. For those drawn to the Great Path in this life, the primary step is to awaken the anahata chakra during daily vigil and gradually learn to remain centered there throughout the day. For others still preparing for that ascent, simply living from the heart brings a quiet joy—nurturing creativity, deepening compassion, and bringing peace to life's every moment.

Base camp: A mountaineer walks through one of several base camps on the Tibet side, where climbers prepare and acclimatize to survive the severe demands of Mount Everest's 29,000-foot altitude.

seekers soon encounter the many ways that inner state can be lost. Here are six suggestions on how to sustain sublime consciousness.

1. Follow Dharma: The foremost requirement is to follow the *yamas*—Hinduism's ethical restraints. Adharmic actions, such as lying and hurting others, disturb the mind, roil the emotions and draw us out into the swirl of external consciousness.

2. Avoid Contention: Not letting disagreements turn into arguments is also crucial. Disagreements are natural, but they should be handled in an intelligent and harmonious way, and they should be resolved quickly, not left to fester. We must always be willing to compromise to keep discussions from turning into conflicts. Domestic arguments are the most destabilizing.

3. Limit Our Needs: Every day we are assaulted by a barrage of ads promising greater happiness if we acquire whatever they are promoting. This constant enticement presents a major challenge to sustaining a contented consciousness. Trendy new cars, faster computers, fashionable clothes—all promise the ever-elusive state of mind called happiness. We can rise above this false allure by holding the perspective that we are content with what we have. If we acquire something more, it will not be to make us happier, but to benefit our family in a meaningful way.

4. Be Thankful: Gratitude is an important aspect of inner consciousness. A key to nurturing gratitude is giving thanks for all the good things in life. We are grateful for our family and friends, grateful for our job or school, grateful for the home we live in, grateful for the wisdom and practices of our religion.

5. Live in the Now: The affirmation "I'm all right, right now," a metaphysical tool that Gurudeva gives us in *Merging with Siva*, is helpful in sustaining inner consciousness. It is a way to live in the eternity of the moment, to feel perfect in the now, with no worries about the future and no regrets about the past.

6. Find Inner Contentment: When we look at the world as the source of our happiness, life is a constant series of emotional ups and downs. When we derive our contentment from within, life is joyously free of external rewards, and we can share



LETTERS

Kudos

Heartiest namaste, and congratulations to your organization for the work you do for Hinduism. I enjoyed the beautiful collection and presentation on your web portal. It fills me with pride for our Sanatan world that we Hindus—wherever we live—will continue to feel proud of and show respect for our culture, religion and sacred traditions.

DR. BALAJI KUMAR SATAPATHY
DEPT. OF KARMAKANDA
DARBHANGA SANSKRIT UNIVERSITY
SATAPATHY75@GMAIL.COM

How My Work Is Worship

Thank you for the article “Work Is Worship” (Jul 2004). I have been in the line of work I’m in for over 15 years. It aligns with the amends I need to make for the life—or lives—I lived before. I often see reflections of myself at different stages of my past in those I encounter who are living their own current version. It is my duty to be a positive influence by sharing time and attention with them.

Anytime I wonder, “Is this still what I’m meant to be doing?” another life situation arises for me to face, and the answer is confirmed. My understanding of dharma has evolved throughout my practice, and I remember more often to be joyful in the tests life brings me. Though there has been progress, I fall short often. I still have much more willpower to cultivate.

HEATHER CANTAMESSA
HEATHERCANTAMESSA@OUTLOOK.COM

On Keeping Traditions Separate

I had been debating whether to send this in for a few years now, but I have concerns that secular mindfulness, while well-intentioned, does not leave one with much to work with in terms of long-term spirituality, and can

often mislead people into thinking that all traditions are interchangeable.

I want to share briefly some anecdotal evidence. In May 2013, I began attending a Mindfulness Club at BGSU, which was active until late 2020. Only one or two former members converted to Buddhism, none to Hinduism or Jainism, and one of the two who became a Buddhist believed that there should be racial separation between nuns. No doubt she had never actually picked up a Buddhist text, but she had been misled by very unqualified people. One member had a yoga teaching certificate and had never heard of the *Ramayana*.

I think reading from the scriptures (regardless of faith tradition), teaching basic ethical principles, and cultivating real knowledge will do more good in the long and short run for meditation students than poorly orchestrated “drum circles” or “laughing meditation” (yes, that is a thing). I frequently saw members try to mix Navajo religion with Zen, and it just did not look right. Many traditions like Shuddhadvaita and Gaudiya Vaishnavism are fluid and share elements, but there is no way to collapse Navajo religion into Zen or Lutheran Christianity into Kabbalah.

I remember during Mindfulness Club meetings at BGSU, we were all subjected to a long “talking circle,” yet nobody besides me knew how to properly pronounce common Sanskrit names or knew anything about Buddhist or Hindu festivals, like Diwali. Secular mindfulness, to me, is a lot like megachurches—TedTalks that give only surface-level knowledge.

BILL KENNEDY IV
WKENNED@BGSU.EDU>

On Faith & Courage

Reading the OpEd “A Legacy of Faith and Courage” (Oct. 2025) made me emotional, reliving the lives of our forefathers and the

memories we carry—even at the age of 76. This is where we are. If only all youngsters could relive memories like this and carry with them the true *sanskar*, I would truly appreciate it.

I remember my parents had strong faith in Lord Rama, and my seven elder brothers were required to chant the Hanuman Chalisa daily. We used to have bhajans in the evenings, with the whole family of siblings sitting together with our parents. My mother used to read the *Bhagavat* daily to women from around our neighborhood.

Yes, chanting the Hanuman Chalisa helps students become strong—mentally and physically. These days, some schools even include it in their morning prayers. Moral strength comes through chanting the Hanuman Chalisa and writing “Sri Rama Jaya Rama Jaya Ram.”

MEENAKSHI S.RAO
RAOMEENAKSHI7@GMAIL.COM

Sacred Nepal

Thank you, Nikki, for a thoughtful write-up, “Nepal Youth Speak Out” (Apr/May/Jun 2021). I write this a few days after Nepal’s new Gen Z revolt against the corrupt government. While the dust settles and the new generation navigates a new path forward, it is time to consider our roots, as pointed out in this article. Nepal is the land of Pashupatinath. It is the land where sages have come throughout the ages to find direction in life. Know that the very land where you live is filled with the timeless wisdom of the universe—you just need to look inward.

DHAN MAHAT
DBMAHAT@YAHOO.COM

The Great Kabir

“The Mystic Mind and Music of Kabir” (Jul/Aug/Sept 2016) is truly a unique biography of a spiritual scientist of the 15th century. His

timeless wisdom is a beacon of light for everyone in this world for endless years to come.

RUPESH KUMAR DHANANJAI
RUPESHKUMARDHANANJAI@GMAIL.COM

Musical Magic

I had the pleasure of listening to Behroze, in Greenville, South Carolina, several times. (“The Magic of Hindu Music,” Oct 2007). I was stunned by her enchanting voice and the way she sang so many songs—including some of the greatest bhajans and ghazals. I still have a few of her tapes, which I listen to in my quiet moments. Once when she was in Houston, I invited her to our home in Sugar Land, and we went out for lunch at a local restaurant. She had a very beautiful voice, and I was told she never missed a single swar in her singing. I think she sang beautifully.

DILIPKUMAR KAPASI
DILIPMEENA@YAHOO.COM

From the Kumbha Mela

Dear beloved Ellen (author of “How Women Experience the Mela,” Jul/Aug/Sep 2025), I feel blessed and humbled to read your profound experience of the Mahakumbha. You are truly a divine soul of Sanatana, or Vedic, Dharma and tradition.

HOM SHRESTHA
HSHRESTHA@LAURENTIAN.CA

SUBRAMANIAN RAMANI
SXRAMAN@HOTMAIL.COM

Hinduism and Science

Your article on the sacred science of Siddha Medicine by Dr. Kulreet Chaudhary was very informative. The venerable and powerful sage Agastya Muni is credited as the originator of Siddha Medicine as well as the Tamil language itself—with Lord Muruga!

There is a huge rise in dementia among the elderly where I live in San Ramon, and I wish to help them through the Siddha tradition. Even if I can help one person recover from this illness, it will be a great reward. I thank Hinduism for these ancient medical systems and their continued practice.

Thank you for your service through HINDUISM TODAY magazine, which is always so informative about Hindu temples and Sanatana Dharma. Of special interest, I noted the opening of a Hindu temple in Krakow, Poland, in Eastern Europe. God bless the editors for sharing this precious knowledge!

Youth Interest on the Rise

It’s impressive that the younger generation has a growing interest in our culture and rituals. Thanks for the detailed insight about the Kumbh Mela (Jul/Aug/Sep 2025).

VIREN CHAUHAN

CHAUHAN.VIR@GMAIL.COM

A Summary of Hindu Belief

“Nine Beliefs of Hinduism” (Jan/Feb/Mar 2020) is truly a most enlightening and concise listing that, at the same time, beautifully explains the ocean of Hindu philosophy in a short article. There is plenty of material in the Vedic, post-Vedic, and *Agama* scriptures for a wisdom seeker to digest and explore in depth, and this serves as a great starting point for anyone interested

VIREN CHAUHAN
CHAUHAN.VIR@GMAIL.COM

Aurobindo

The article “Sri Aurobindo” (Jul/Aug/Sep 2023) was really helpful for our reporting in Indian Philosophy regarding Sri Aurobindo’s life, works and thoughts. I learned a lot from it—thank you so much.

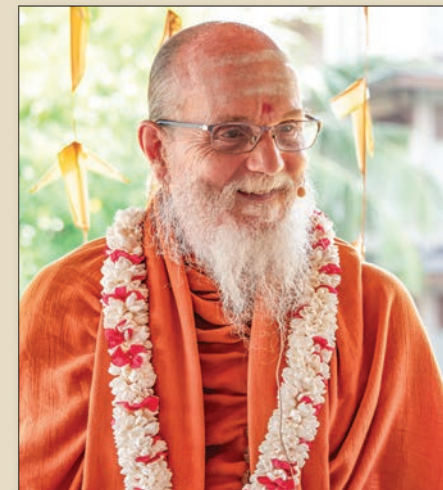
CABALLERO, STELLA MARIE P.
STELLAMARIE.CABALLERO@BISU.EDU.PH

Letters with writer’s name, address and daytime phone number should be sent to:

Letters, Hinduism Today
107 Kaholalele Road
Kapaa, Hawaii, 96746-9304 USA
or visit: www.hinduismtoday.com/letters

Letters may be edited for space and clarity and may appear in electronic versions of HINDUISM TODAY.

Our In-Depth Reporting on the Maha Kumbh Mela



By Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami

The 2025 Maha Kumbh Mela in Prayagraj, India, received extensive coverage across Indian television channels and newspapers. The “basic facts” about the event are well known. HINDUISM TODAY’s first article on the 2025 Mela—in our July 2025 issue—takes a distinctive approach. Rather than reiterating widely known information,

it brings the event to life through personal encounters and reflections. Dev Raj Agarwal walks us through the Mela in real time, gathering insights from saints and renunciates on key issues facing Hinduism. This people-centered narrative offers a depth and intimacy rarely found in standard reporting.

The saints and renunciates shared thoughtful insights on a wide range of topics, including the global significance of the amazing event, the role of dharma in the modern world, bridging ancient traditions with today’s generation, spirituality versus religion and environmental awareness. They also spoke on strengthening Hindu unity, the place of women in Hinduism, preserving Hindu identity abroad, challenges from academia, the relevance of meditation and yoga today and the use of technology to share Hindu teachings.

Among the many insights shared by spiritual leaders at the Mela, Ma Santoshi Mata offered a poignant reflection on the spirit of true pilgrimage: “The humblest pilgrims have a main goal—the holy bath—followed by darshan of saints. They carry belongings on their heads. Such pilgrims are the real form of dharma. No yatra is a real yatra without ordeals. We must feed them, look after them,

welcome them. We must also alert pilgrims to infiltration by fake saints.”

Ellen Coon focused on the voices of women pilgrims, capturing reflections that reveal the depth of their experiences. One described entering the river: “It feels like climbing into my mother’s lap—always there, always ready to take me. Once I’m in the water, I feel the utmost peace. Bliss. I don’t want to come out.” Another, reflecting afterward, said, “Very light, joyful! The water comes straight from Lord Sivaji and Parvati, so of course it feels amazing. We women should be more like Ma Ganga—pure, feminine, delicate and soft.” A Naga Sadhvi spoke of the mystical dimensions of the Mela: “During the Kumbh, especially the Maha Kumbh, all the devatas and Deities come to the Sangam in astral form to absorb and share blessings. You can feel their presence even if you can’t see them. Not just Deities—gurus and rishis who left their physical bodies 200 or 300 years ago still come in subtle form (sukshma sharir) to guide and uplift us.”

Donate at: bit.ly/help-HT, or contact us at +1-888-464-1008 • support@hindu.org

Annual Statement of Ownership

Statement of ownership, management and circulation (required by USPS DMM 70783) of Hinduism Today, published four times a year at 107 Kaholalele RD, Kapaa, HI 96746-9304, for October 1, 2025. General business offices of the publisher are located at 107 Kaholalele RD, Kapaa, HI 96746-9304. Name and address of publisher is Swami Bodhinatha Veylan, 107 Kaholalele RD, Kapaa, HI 96746-9304. Name and address of editor is Swami Sadasivanatha Palani, 107 Kaholalele RD, Kapaa, HI 96746-9304. Name and address of managing editor is Swami Arumuga Katir, 107 Kaholalele RD, Kapaa, HI 96746-9304. Owner is Himalayan Academy Publications, 107 Kaholalele RD, Kapaa, HI 96746-9304. There are no known bondholders, mortgagees, or other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities. The average number of copies of each issue during the preceding 12 months is: (a) Total number of copies printed: 10,625; (b) Paid circulation: (1) Sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors, and counter sales: 1,640; (2) Paid or requested mail subscriptions: 4,724; (c) Total paid and/or requested circulation: 6,364; (d) Free distribution by mail: 986; (e) Free distribution outside the mail: 3,184; (f) Total free distribution: 4,171; (g) Total distribution: 10,535 (h) Copies not distributed: (1) Office use, leftovers, spoiled: 90; (2) Return from news agents: not applicable; (i) Total: 10,625;

Percent paid and/or requested circulation: 60.41%. The actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date is: (a) Total number of copies printed: 11,421; (b) Paid circulation: (1) Sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors, and counter sales: 2,343; (2) Paid or requested mail subscriptions: 4,810; (c) Total paid and/or requested circulation: 7,153; (d) Free distribution by mail: 1,009; (e) Free distribution outside the mail: 3,169; (f) Total free distribution: 4,178; (g) Total distribution: 11,331; (h) Copies not distributed: (1) Office use, leftovers, spoiled: 90; (2) Return from news agents: not applicable; (i) Total: 11,421; Percent paid and/or requested circulation: 63.13%. I certify that all information furnished above is true and complete. I understand that anyone who furnishes false or misleading information on this statement or who omits material or information requested on the statement may be subject to criminal sanctions (including fines and imprisonment) and/or civil sanctions (including multiple damages and civil penalties). Swami Durganatha Shanmuga, Administrator.



QUOTES & QUIPS

Let what comes come. Let what goes go. Find out what remains.

Sri Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950)

Knowing all objects to be impermanent, let not their contact blind you. Resolve again and again to be aware of the Self that is permanent. **Tirumalai Krishnamacharya** (1888–1989), *yoga teacher*

It is curious that physical courage should be so common in the world and moral courage so rare. **Mark Twain** (1835–1910), *American author*

When you do things from your soul, you feel a river moving in you, a joy. **Rumi** (1207–1273), *Sufi mystic and poet*

When you practice what is right, even though you do not like doing it, and avoid what is wrong, even though you want to do it, you slowly change. Later, you find

yourself in a position where what is to be done is what you like to do and what is not to be done is what you do not like to do. That is, indeed, a successful life. **Dayananda Saraswati** (1930–2015)

If you see no reason for giving thanks, the fault lies in yourself. *Iroquois proverb*

One always begins with the simple, then comes the complex, and by superior enlightenment one often reverts in the end to the simple. Such is the course of human intelligence. **Voltaire** (1694–1778), *French writer*

A good chief gives, he does not take. *Mohawk Proverb*

What the caterpillar calls the end, the rest of the world calls a butterfly. **Lao Tzu** (4th or 6th century bce), *author of Tao Te Ching*

It's not what you look at that matters, it's what you see. **Henry David Thoreau** (1817–1862), *American author, poet and philosopher*

In the midst of great joy, do not promise anyone anything. In the midst of great anger, do not answer anyone's letter. *Chinese proverb*

You may not control all the events that happen to you, but you can decide not to be reduced by them. **Maya Angelou** (1928–2014), *American poet*

DID YOU KNOW?

No, Widow Burning Is Not a Thing

ONE OF THE MORE PERSISTENT AND DAMAGING misconceptions about Hinduism is the claim that it endorses “sati,” the practice of a widow immolating herself on her husband’s funeral pyre. This accusation is often tied to a mistranslation of *Rig Veda* 10.18.7. However, both the Sanskrit and respected scholarly interpretations clearly show that the verse encourages life, not death. The word “sati” originally meant “a virtuous woman,” not a funeral rite.

The verse includes the words *avidhavaah*, meaning “not widows,” and *anaagneh*, meaning “not toward the fire.” Yet early translators such as H. H. Wilson and R. T. H. Griffith took it as implying women approaching the pyre—a reading later criticized as arising from a confusion between *anaagneh* (“not toward the fire”) and *agnim* (“toward the fire”). This incorrect translation was later used to support the colonial narrative that Hinduism sanctioned sati, when in fact the verse says nothing of the kind. Even

Griffith’s 1896 version, though less extreme, failed to highlight the verse’s life-affirming message. In contrast, Jamison and Brereton (2014) translate the verse as instructing the women to “go up ahead”—that is, to move forward in life, not toward the flames. Their rendering, based on meticulous linguistic analysis, affirms that the women are being urged to continue living, and clearly not to sacrifice themselves.

This interpretation is consistent with traditional Hindu commentaries. The 14th-century Vedic scholar Sayaana explained the verse as instructing surviving women to return home, not to enter the flames. Modern historians and Sanskritists, such as Romila Thapar and Wendy Doniger, have also debunked the claim that the *Vedas* support sati. In truth, *Rig Veda* 10.18.7 is a compassionate call to life. The women addressed are not widows being commanded to die, but surviving family being told to step forward—not toward the fire—and rejoin society.



SHUTTERSTOCK

Colonial-era mistranslations: *A Hindu funeral pyre. The Rig Veda urges women to walk away from the fire, not enter it.*

There is no scriptural justification for self-immolation here. Although widow self-immolation did occur sporadically in certain regions of India, it was a social aberration, not a Hindu tenet, and was consistently condemned by Hindu teachers and reformers. The myth of Vedic support for sati stems from colonial-era mistranslations, not from the scripture itself, and has been amplified in modern times by its shock value, particularly on social media. Defending Hinduism means standing on the firm ground of linguistic and historical truth: the *Vedas* honor life, not self-destruction, and this verse makes that unmistakably clear.

SOURCES: JAMISON, STEPHANIE W. AND JOEL P. BRERETON, THE RIG VEDA: THE EARLIEST RELIGIOUS POETRY OF INDIA (OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2014); WILSON, H. H., RIG-VEDA SANHITA: A COLLECTION OF ANCIENT HINDU HYMNS (LONDON, 1854); GRIFFITH, RALPH T. H., THE HYMNS OF THE RIGVEDA (BENARES, 1896); THAPAR, ROMILA, THE PENGUIN HISTORY OF EARLY INDIA: FROM THE ORIGINS TO AD 1300 (PENGUIN, 2015); DONIGER, WENDY, THE HINDUS: AN ALTERNATIVE HISTORY (PENGUIN, 2009); SĀYAṂA, RIGVEDA BHĀṢYA (C. 14TH CENTURY CE).

Hinduism is not just a faith. It is the union of reason and intuition that cannot be defined but is only to be experienced. Evil and error are not ultimate. There is no Hell, for that means there is a place where God is not, and there are sins which exceed his love. **Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan** (1888–1975) *former president of India*

The most elegant and sublime of these is a representation of the creation of the universe at the beginning of each cosmic cycle, a motif known as the cosmic dance of Lord Shiva. The God, called in this manifestation Nataraja, the Dance King. In the upper right hand is a drum whose sound is the sound of creation. In the upper left hand is a tongue of flame, a reminder that the universe, now newly created, which billions of years from now will be utterly destroyed. **Carl Sagan** (1934–1996) *astrophysicist*

If you think you’re too small to make a difference, try spending the night with a mosquito. *West African proverb*

If thou desirest Truth, then still thy mind. **Sri Aurobindo** (1872–1950)

In enjoyment, there is the fear of disease;

in social position, the fear of losing face; in wealth, the fear of government; in honor, the fear of humiliation; in power, the fear of enemies; in beauty, the fear of old age; in scriptural erudition, the fear of opposing views; in virtue, the fear of temptation; in body, the fear of death. All the things of this world pertaining to man are attended with fear; renunciation alone stands for fearlessness.” *Vairagya Shatakam 31*

We meet ourselves time and again in a thousand disguises on the path of life. **Carl Gustav Jung** (1875–1961), *Swiss psychiatrist*

There are only two ways to live your life. One is as if nothing is a miracle. The other is as if everything is a miracle. **Albert Einstein** (1879–1955), *theoretical physicist*

Take no pride in the body. It will soon be mingling with the dust. **Mirabai** (1516–1521) *mystic poet*



HINDUISM TODAY

“Master, how do we attain Ocean-Realization? We’ve looked everywhere and we can’t find it!”

What we put into our subconscious mind is creating our future. **Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami**, *publisher of HINDUISM TODAY*

Peace is self-control, and self-control is freedom. **Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami** (1927–2001), *founder of HINDUISM TODAY*

PUZZLES

Word Search

Instructions: in the word cloud, find and circle the words given below. They might be horizontal, vertical, diagonal and even backwards.

K T E H Z C M D B U A B S A E C R Z K E D Y S V A B H A V A
I I G P Y B T E G D V H F J N I B S X D V R E M L T C U S S
A B T L Z C T J I D T S V A H I H I P N U Z A D H Y A T M A
I R H I E Y N V R V T T N S Q R D X P N Y M A S W E P L A N
S W S M R B D T Y A A O I G U G M C H P F V A C H W P E R K
Y H P N U M H P D M S R L T F O X U P Q C H E G V T H L A H
M W A A I L S N A N B Q I S Y J L D O D S H V A Y O A S N Y
Z A K K H S A S P X I O S A U M B M I U A T T I H C V F A A
E W N T T N H D U Q L A I T Q A D P R R X J N U P A D H I Y
W E A T A I Q K H F A Q D S N G R U A N K Z K E D K M M J A
I D E V A V I E A A B Q A I C A P J U Y V I S H U D D H A N
K J G S J H R U Y M R H N X K E A P G Y G P I X G D T A H T
L A B O L A K E E F A A G R M S A C D R W S E X X H B G S R
M A N I P U R A U S I P I R J N U S T S T K A C V R L N K A
H Y S A M S K A R A G T T R I P U R A H C V J F M I Z I I P
C Y L N S K Y A J A I X Z S K U N C A A Y C N I A K L T T
Q K T A D M R J N G N W H J C F H N U A J A H D O B N Z I P
Z P P X S A X J S U Q A A K P I A G K C X W X N W C E T T B
Z A S P Z X R X P B D J P M T D U T O Q A Y D I V A C T R C
A Y K A V A H A M L G Q L A H D A I N P F B G X Z F W L G A

PURUSHA	SVABHAVA
PRAKRITI	UPANISHAD
SAMSKARA	SHRUTI
UPADHI	SMRITI
TRIPURA	AUM
AVIDYA	LINGA
ANANDA	YANTRA
SMARANA	CHITTA
NADIS	ANTAHKARANA
MULADHARA	SANKHYA
SVADHISTHANA	DRASHTA
MANIPURA	AVYAKTA
VISHUDDHA	ADHYATMA
SAHASRARA	BODHA
MAHAVAKYA	SHAKTI
CHIT	DEVA
TAMAS	RISHI
RAJAS	MANTRA
SATTVA	TITIKSHA
NISKAMA	

I Want to Be a Monk

Life at Kauai’s Hindu Monastery in Hawaii is profound, spiritually demanding and richly rewarding. If you or someone you know feels called to a life of selfless service and meditation, we welcome the discussion. Candidates must be male, under age 25, single and ready to embrace a strict and traditional Hindu way of life. E-mail: monklife@hindu.org



More details about the Saiva Siddhanta Yoga Order can be found by scanning the QR code.



Join Us at 4 Dharmic Temples in L.A.



These four ten-minute videos capture class visits to a Hindu, Buddhist, Jain and Sikh temple. They were developed by Hinduism Today for use in California sixth and seventh grade social studies classes in which the history of these four Indian-origin faiths is taught. Each visit was hosted by a member or clergy of the temple and approved by the temple management. By these tours, students learn the basics of the related faiths and experience their sacred spaces.

HINDUISM



JAINISM



SIKHISM



BUDDHISM



See the videos at: bit.ly/TempleTourPlaylist



MRIGENDRA AGAMA The Tattvas in Brief

A Primer into these enigmatic evolutes of existence

The following is an abridged adaptation from Dr. S. P. Sabharathnam Sivacharyar’s translation of the Mrigendra Agama’s Vidya Pada, Chapter 10.

Editor’s note: This is a condensed summary, not the literal translation. Certain technical details and philosophical nuances found in the original have been simplified or omitted here to offer a clear, accessible overview.

From the vast Being of Lord Siva (which comprises the first five causal tattvas) arises *maya*, the field of limitation and manifestation. Within it, the Lord, here called Ananteshvara, stirs the energies that form the world of experience. To give souls the instruments, bodies and settings through which they may learn, He unfolds a sequence of principles known as *tattvas*—the building blocks of consciousness and matter.

The first to emerge is *Kaala* tattva, or time. Time divides the endless Now into moments and seasons so that the soul can journey through cycles of birth, experience and liberation. From time arises *Niyati* tattva, the principle of order or necessity. Niyati ensures that every soul encounters the results of its past actions and that all events unfold according to divine law.

Next unfolds *Kalaa* tattva, the principle of limitation in doing—the channeling of the soul’s boundless power into specific capacities for limited creation and action. Through *Kalaa*, infinite potential becomes defined and limited, and the soul gains the ability to act within time and order.

Next comes *Vidya* tattva, the principle of knowing. The soul’s inner light is dimmed by the impurity called *anava* mala (ego), so Siva brings forth *Vidya* to restore a measure of awareness—the power to discern and learn. From this awakening springs *Raga* tattva, the power of desire. It gives the soul the urge to act, to seek joy, to move toward experience. Even desire, in this view, has a sacred purpose: it draws the soul into life, where it gains the wisdom that ultimately leads to freedom.

Working together, these four principles—Time, Order, Knowledge and Desire—awaken the sense of individuality called *Purusha* tattva, the feeling of “I am the experienter.” From that, Awareness unfolds *Prakriti* tattva, the primal matter from which creation arises. Within *Prakriti* stir the three *gunas*, or qualities: *sattva* (clarity and light), *rajas* (activity and striving), and *tamas* (rest and inertia).

From the play of these three emerge the familiar faculties of mind:

- *Buddhi*, the intellect that decides
- *Ahamkara*, the “I” or ego that claims experiences as its own
- *Manas*, the coordinating mind that links thought and sensation



Then appear the ten organs—the five of knowledge (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching) and the five of action (speaking, grasping, moving, reproducing, eliminating)—followed by the five subtle elements of sound, touch, form, taste and smell, and finally the five gross elements of space, air, fire, water and earth.

These twenty-four comprise the impure tattvas, the instruments of worldly life. They are called impure not because they are bad but because they operate under the veiling power of *maya* and hide the soul’s innate purity. Together with the higher, more subtle tattvas, they form the well-known list of thirty-six tattvas, extending from Siva at the summit of consciousness down to the Earth at its densest level.

Each tattva serves a purpose. Time gives order; Order ensures justice; Knowledge gives light; Desire gives movement; Individuation provides identity; Matter provides substance; the *Gunas* animate all things; Mind organizes; and the Elements shape the physical world. Through these layers the soul acts, experiences and evolves.

The *Agama* teaches that karma alone does not govern life—karma itself functions under *Kaala* and *Niyati*. These tattvas are the architecture of bondage but also the ladder of liberation. When, through Siva’s grace and spiritual discipline, the soul rises above identification with these layers, it sees them as expressions of its own divine source. Time becomes timelessness, order becomes perfect harmony, desire becomes pure will, and knowledge becomes omniscience.

Thus, the tattvas are far more than a list of philosophical categories. They are a sacred map of consciousness itself—showing how the Infinite appears as the finite and how the finite can find its way home to the Infinite again.

DR. S. P. SABHARATHNAM SIVACHARYAR, of the Adi Saiva priest lineage, is an expert in ancient Tamil and Sanskrit, specializing in the *Vedas*, *Agamas* and *Shilpa Shastras*. This adaptation is based on his translation of the *Mrigendra Agama*.

Exploring the Kali Gandaki River and Muktinath Temple

Join our writer's remarkable journey up the Kali Gandaki River, source of the Shalagrama fossil stones sacred to Lord Vishnu, and onward to the famed Muktinath Temple revered by both Hindus and Buddhists. The river valley's history stretches back thousands of years, once connecting India to the Silk Road across Asia and later being a center of Buddhism.



It is called "Exploring the Kali Gandaki River in Mukti Nath Temple."

BY HURDITYA DEVA, NEPAL

UPPER MUSTANG, IN NORTHWESTERN NEPAL ON the fringe of the Tibetan Plateau, is often described as a land of Buddhist monasteries, fortress-like villages and windswept Himalayan deserts. For centuries, it remained hidden from the outside world, a closed kingdom preserving a way of life untouched by modernity until the 1990s. Scholars and explorers such as Giuseppe Tucci in the 1950s and Michel Peissel in the 1960s drew the world's attention to Mustang, portraying it as the mysterious "Forbidden Kingdom." Yet long before these accounts appeared in travel literature, the region was already sacred to Hindus.

Flowing through the heart of Mustang is the Kali Gandaki River, revered not only for its life-giving waters, which eventually merge with the Ganges, but also as the source of the Shalagramas. These fossilized ammonites, at least 65 million years old, are venerated as manifestations of Vishnu for their resemblance to His divine discus, the Sudarshana Chakra.

The most sacred place along the river is near Kagbeni, where the Kali Gandaki and Johong Khola rivers converge. Here, generations of Hindus have performed sraddha for their ancestors, convinced that such offerings bring their forebears release and peace in the higher worlds.

Near Kagbeni is the Hindu and Buddhist pilgrimage site of Muktinath, revered in the *Muktinatha Mahatmya* of the *Varaha Purana*. The text proclaims that whoever undertakes the arduous journey to this high Himalayan shrine (elevation: 12,000 feet) and bathes in its 108 sacred waterspouts will cast off the bonds of *samsara*—the endless cycle of rebirth—and attain liberation.

My own journey here, from June 30 to July 14, 2025, was first and foremost a pilgrimage, with research coming only secondarily. Walking its banks, speaking with local priests, and tracing the river's course to the upper reaches where the ammonites are said to originate, I sought to understand how geography, geology and devotion converge in the making of these sacred icons. Discovering the origins of the Shalagramas brought new depth to my understanding of Mustang as a sacred landscape, where rivers and rocks are not merely natural formations, but also vessels of divine presence.

For Hindus, Mustang is far more than a remote valley of rugged cliffs and colorful hills. It is a threshold—a place where myth and devotion converge, where scriptures find material form. It was with this sense of devotion, curiosity and scholarly interest that I embarked on

Nepal's famed temple: Muktinath Temple is nestled against a hillside in the Mustang district on the northern slopes of the Annapurna Range at an elevation of 12,467 feet

my own journey. What follows is not merely a travelogue, but a diary of discovery: a record of landscapes crossed, temples visited, rituals performed and sacred stones encountered, woven together with stories, memories and self-reflections.

Kathmandu to Kagbeni

After offering my prayers at a local Bhairava temple in Kathmandu (Bhairava being revered among other things as a protector of safe travels), I set off on the first leg of my journey: a six-hour bus ride to Pokhara (#2 on the map on the right). I was fortunate to board one of the city's "sofa buses," luxuriously equipped with reclining, Lazy-Boy-style seats that made the winding Himalayan roads surprisingly comfortable.

At Pokhara, I was immediately greeted by crisp mountain air and the awe-inspiring view of the Annapurna range, its snow-capped peaks glowing in the afternoon light. I met my guides Shankar and Sagar, both seasoned, professional men who knew the region well.

The next day, we set off early in the morning by land cruiser toward Kagbeni (#4), our first night halt along the Kali Gandaki. The river below the highway was in full force, its current strong and, like its name, the water dark and muddy. The landscape here was lush, almost rainforest-like, with a heavy humidity in the air.

We paused for lunch at Tatopani, a kind of resort town where Nepali and Indian tourists stop for the hot springs before continuing toward Muktinath. Along the riverbanks, busloads of Indian pilgrims were already



scrambling for Shalagramas. My guide shook his head—he explained that nothing would be found here anymore because the current was too strong and the lower reaches long since exhausted. For centuries, pilgrims had scoured these easily accessible banks, leaving little behind. There was also another reason: entry to Upper Mustang, where riverbeds are less exploited by tourists searching for Shalagramas, requires a special permit of \$500 per person, which is applicable, even for Indian pilgrims. In contrast, Lower Mustang, which includes Muktinath, requires only a \$50 permit.

Past Tatopani, the air shifted suddenly. It grew cooler and drier. The vegetation changed with it, the rainforest giving way to pine forests and the flora of higher altitudes. This is also the branching point for the famous Annapurna Circuit, where trekkers peel off into another valley.

We reached Jomsom (#3) next, the last real town before entering Upper Mustang. Its airport, renowned for sudden winds and treacherous landings, is one of the most difficult in the world—another reason we drove there.

By late afternoon, we arrived in Kagbeni, a sleepy village during the low season. Not a single foreign trekker was in sight. Shankar



Our route: (map not to scale) we began in Kathmandu, drove to Kagbeni, trekked 38 miles to Lo-Manthang (just 50 miles from the Tibetan border), then drove south to Muktinath and finally back to Kathmandu

took me to the *sangam*, the muddy confluence where the Gandaki and Johong Khola streams meet a third. As at Prayagraj, it is believed the third river is invisible. It is here that *sraddha* rituals for the ancestors are performed. I spoke with two resident priests, Govinda Acharya and Pratap Acharya, who stay throughout the year, conducting rites for visitors. They told me most pilgrims come during Pitru Paksha in September–October; otherwise, the place remains quiet, and in the harsh winters, almost deserted.



ALL PHOTOS: HRUDITYA DEVA

Trekking the Kali Gandaki River is a trip through ancient to modern times



(clockwise from above) Looking downstream at Kagbeni town (note the ancient gray structures in the middle); (inset) confluence of the Kali Gandaki and Johong Khola; recently built Garphu Monastery set against ancient cliff caves in Chhoser; Chandan's collection of enormous Shalagramas; apple growing and goat herding are the two main agricultural activities in the area; abandoned fortress and mud stupa outside Chele village





In the evening, I stayed at a hotel owned by a Tibetan man, Chandan. He showed me his private collection of enormous Shalagramas, some unlike anything I had ever seen—not in person, in books or even on the Internet. His collection runs into the thousands, with some stones weighing several tons. The rarer forms can fetch thousands of dollars.

Chandan explained how he acquired them: local Tibetan villagers, who often see these stones less as sacred objects than as commodities, scour the riverbeds and sell them to him. As a well-known hotelier, he is the first point of contact for both villagers and Indian dealers. Over years of trade, he has developed a keen eye for which forms and markings are most prized by collectors in Kathmandu and India. At times, dealers arrive with trucks, buying up everything they can, but Chandan prefers to sell carefully, knowing which stones command the highest value. For him

and the villagers alike, Shalagramas are as much a livelihood as they are sacred symbols.

As a researcher, I found myself reflecting on this dual life of the Shalagrama. For Hindu pilgrims, these black ammonite fossils from the Kali Gandaki are revered as direct manifestations of Vishnu; each spiral a cosmic mark of eternity and each stone a portable temple. Yet here in Mustang, I saw how these very same objects circulate in markets, changing hands through negotiation, trade and speculation.

This is also what drew me to Mustang: the chance to follow the river upstream, to trace the origins of these sacred stones, not only in myth and scriptures, but in the lived practices of those who collect, exchange and worship them. Somewhere between the river's currents, the pilgrims' prayers and Chandan's storerooms lies the story of how faith travels, how Divinity takes form in stone, and how



Ancient remnants: (left to right) "Sky caves" where Buddhist monks lived in the distant past at Chhusang; a view inside one of the multi-level complexes

the sacred finds its way into the most human of transactions.

Kagbeni to Lo Manthang

From Kagbeni, we embarked on a strenuous three-day trek on foot to Lo Manthang, the ancient walled capital of Mustang. Almost immediately, a striking black dog with a thick, shiny coat appeared, trotting alongside us with quiet authority. My guide told me she was a Tibetan Mastiff, one of the most prized and expensive breeds in the world. I named her Bhairavi, after the fierce sixth Mahavidya Goddess, who transcends space and time. She seemed to know the trails instinctively, occa-

sionally sprinting ahead to chase foxes before looping back to check on us.

The paths unfolded through landscapes that felt suspended between time and legend. We passed apple orchards, their fruit heavy on the branches, reminding us of the valley's reliance on orcharding and goat herding. Ochre-colored cliffs rose dramatically on either side, their jagged faces etched by centuries of wind and sun. Along the trail, small clay stupas, painted in earthy red and orange, lined the way. Many appeared quite ancient.

The villages we encountered were nearly empty, inhabited only by a few elderly Tibetans. Seeking better opportunities, the youth had moved to Kathmandu and even overseas. Mud-brick houses, built in the traditional style, stood as monuments to a simpler era. In corners of some villages, clay effigies of local protective and fertility Deities watched over the abandoned streets.

After lunch at a local inn, we climbed our first mountain pass. The trek was challenging: the altitude began to press on our lungs, the sun scorched our backs, and the dry wind parched our throats. Bhairavi, seemingly impervious, darted down steep slopes and back, leading us through the rocky terrain with agility and confidence.

That evening, we camped near Chhusang village (#5), the cliffs glowing like gold as the sun set. Early the next morning, we crossed another pass and descended into a secluded valley where a Buddhist cave monastery is located. It is said to have been a meditation retreat of Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche), the tantric master who introduced Vajrayana Buddhism to Tibet in the 8th century.

From there, we continued down to the Kali

Gandaki riverbed, where we set aside the day for the task of searching for Shalagramas. The riverbed, exposed by the retreating waters, was littered with dark stones glinting in the morning sun. Shankar and Sagar crouched over the gravel, scanning for the telltale smooth spirals. Initially, we found only broken fragments, yet even these were treated with reverent curiosity.

According to several Puranic texts, Shalagramas are living embodiments of Lord Vishnu, each stone carrying its own unique power. Beyond the familiar forms such as Chakrapurna (Sudarshana Chakra), Padma, Kaustubha and Hiranyagarbha, some are linked to specific avatars, from Kurma (the Tortoise) to Rama, Buddha, Narasimha and more. Locals speak of their "values" with reverent certainty: Kurma brings wealth and stability, Narasimha protects, Padma and Hiranyagarbha bring fertility, and the Chakrapurna, Vishnu's very discus, wards off malevolent forces.

As the sun rose higher, glinting off the ochre cliffs, a perfect Chakrapurna Shalagrama caught my eye. Smooth, dark, its spiral unbroken, it felt weighty yet alive in my palm. This was the first complete Shalagrama I had collected with my own hands. Further down the river, Shankar and Sagar tried to break a few pieces with another stone, revealing the chakra inside, which I discouraged, because broken Shalagramas are considered unsuitable for worship. They argued that foreigners often prefer them as souvenirs, and I recalled seeing similar fragments displayed in natural history museums in the USA and Europe.

After a long day of trekking and hunting Shalagramas at the riverbed, we finally

reached Lo Manthang (#8) in the evening. The walled town rose ahead of us like a fortress suspended in time, its warm orange-colored walls catching the last rays of the sun.

Lo Manthang

The town felt quieter than I expected. It sits in a wide valley, simple mud walls enclosing narrow streets lined with mud-brick houses and small monasteries.

The Royal Palace stands at the center of town, modest compared to what one might imagine of a kingdom, yet it retains an elegance in its carved windows and layered terraces. Nearby, monasteries such as Chokhang Gumpa and Thubchen Gumpa preserve centuries-old murals, dated to about the 1500s ce. The paintings are impressive and vivid with figures of Buddhas, protector Deities and mandalas.

Mahakala is central here, especially in the Sakya tradition followed by many of the monasteries in Mustang. This Deity is primarily revered as a guardian of the monastic community and the spiritual path. Its iconography depicts a dark-skinned figure, crowned with skulls and wearing a garland of bones. In fact, Mahakala and Bhairava are arguably the same protector Deity in both religious traditions, and both are widely worshiped in Nepal. They represent a fierce energy directed toward the welfare of the devotee or the community.

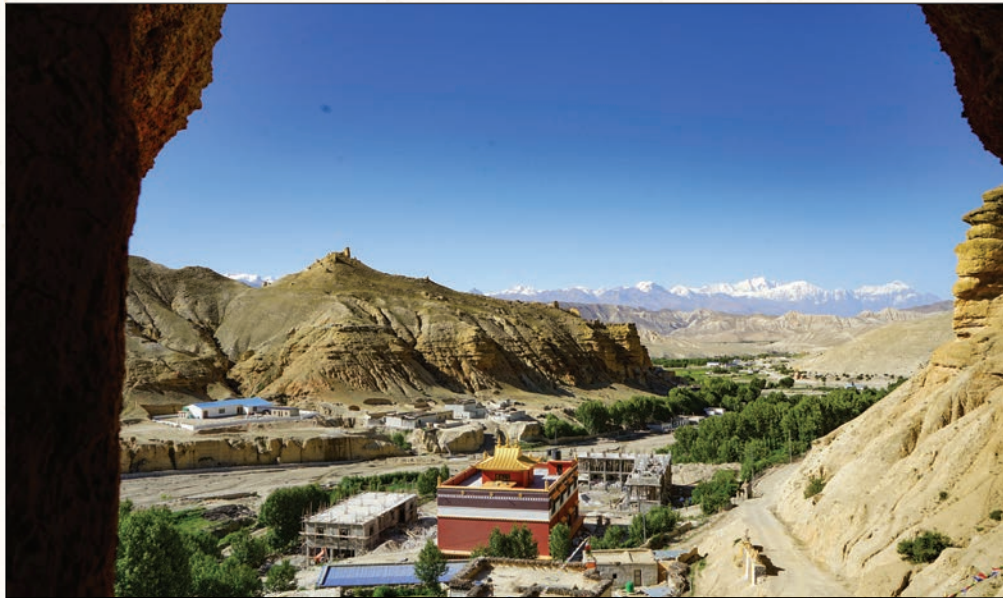
The quiet town of Lo Manthang becomes festive only once a year. The three-day Tiji festival in May reenacts the stories of Padmasambhava and Dorje Jono (a local name for Mahakala) through masked dances that depict the triumph of dharma over adharma.

Hiking the barren mountain slopes and occasional lush green valley



(left to right) Dorje Drolo, a fierce manifestation of Padmasambhava; trekking path on the way to Lo Manthang; author with Bhairavi, a mixed Tibetan Mastiff; a Sudarshana Chakra Shalagram discovered by the author; view of the distant apple orchards of Chhusang





The highlight of the celebration comes when a large sacred *thangka* is unfurled from the palace wall.

Bhairavi met many other Tibetan Mastiffs as we wandered through the palace complex and the surrounding monasteries. I considered leaving her with the monks so she would have company and be well fed, but she refused to stay. Each evening, she found her way back to my hotel, sitting by the front door, keeping watch and sleeping there through the night—as if guarding my room.

Lo Manthang to Muktinath

The next day, we decided to hire a car to complete the second part of our journey. The

weather had turned increasingly hot, and we were still exhausted from collecting Shalagramas the previous day. We brought Bhairavi along at no cost, and she joined us in the car. It seemed to be her first time traveling by car—she was clearly nervous and probably nauseous, as she kept salivating profusely.

It took us five hours to reach a quiet village called Yara (#9), where we spent the night. Yara serves as the gateway to Damodara Kund, the sacred source of the Kali Gandaki River. We decided not to venture there this time because it would have required an additional four days and could only be undertaken on horseback due to the steep terrain. Moreover, we would have needed to bring tents, cooks

and provisions, since there are no lodgings along the way. The guides said more Shalagramas could still be found there, as the place remains remote and rarely visited.

Even in Yara, however, we encountered a remarkable Shalagrama at a pilgrim's rest house—an enormous Kurma avatara (tortoise) weighing several tons. The caretaker performs a simple abhiseka every day with a water hose over the sacred stone and conducts minimal pujas.

The following morning, we prepared to continue our journey. As before, I tried to lift Bhairavi into the car, but this time she refused. She must have had an unpleasant experience the day before. I tried coaxing her with treats, but she stood her ground. The guides eventually told me we would have to leave her behind.

Tears welled up in my eyes unexpectedly—I felt a deep, inexplicable bond with her. Sagar took a white shawl and gently tied it around her neck as a gesture of blessing. I pleaded with the hotel owner to care for her, as winter would arrive in a few months and Yara is many miles from Kagbeni, where she first found us. Our return trip would take us again to Kagbeni where we would have let her go; but reluctantly, we had to part ways. I promised to send food for her. I even considered adopting her or finding her a home, but we were far from modern civilization and on a tight schedule to reach Muktinath (#11) by evening, just in time for the auspicious day of Guru Purnima the following day.

Muktinath

Perched high in the Himalayas at 12,300 feet above sea level, Muktinath stands as one of the holiest shrines in Hinduism. Counted among the 108 Divya Desams revered in the Srivaishnava tradition of South India, it is also the only one located outside India. The temple's sanctity has been sung by Tamil saints such as Periyalvar and Tirumangai Alvar, whose verses continue to inspire generations of South Indian devotees to undertake the difficult journey to the remote valleys of Mustang in Nepal.

Everywhere, the sectarian markings of the Tenkalai sect, formalized by Ramanuja of the Srivaishnava Sampradaya in South India, are seen on Deities, Shalagramas, walls and even on the foreheads of the priests, suggesting that the tradition has had a pronounced influence at Muktinath. With its inclusion among the Divya Desams, Muktinath was already well known as far south as Tamil Nadu by at least the 11th century ce. However, Tibetan Buddhists believe it to be older still, as Padmasambhava—who lived in the 8th century ce—is said to have meditated here.

When I arrived at the temple early in the morning, the mountain air was fresh and crisp. The first rays of sunlight gilded the snow peaks, and the faint aroma of incense drifted through the thin air. In the sanctum, a two-armed, seated bronze image of Vishnu holding *sankha* and *chakra* is flanked by Lakshmi and Sarasvati—an unusual triad, for elsewhere Bhudevi typically takes Sarasvati's place. Here, however, the local tradition venerates Sarasvati too, as a consort of Vishnu, symbolizing the union of wisdom, compassion and prosperity.



To my surprise, the officiant at the temple was not a Hindu priest, but a Tibetan Buddhist nun. Seated near the sanctum door, she received *archana* baskets from pilgrims and blessed each devotee with a touch of *kunkuma* on the forehead. It was a simple yet intriguing moment—Hindu pilgrims receiving blessings from a Buddhist nun at a Vaishnava shrine. In that instant, Muktinath felt like a place where Hinduism and Buddhism coexist harmoniously, each complementing the other.

For the Buddhists of Tibet, Muktinath is known as Chumig Gyatsa, or “the Hundred Springs.” According to Tibetan tradition, it

is the abode of twenty-one forms of Tara (female Bodhisattvas) as well as Dakinis, or female Deities embodying various energies and elements in Vajrayana Buddhist cosmology. Thus, the bronze Vishnu in the sanctum is seen by Buddhists as Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, while Lakshmi and Sarasvati are understood as Bodhisattvas of wealth and wisdom. In the sanctum, I also noticed smaller bronze figures of two male Deities. The nuns explained that they were images of Chepame (Aparamita) and Dorje Semba (Vajrasattva), or cosmic Buddhas representing boundless merit and purity.

Visiting the great Muktinath Temple high in the mountains



(clockwise from above left) Chhusang village, seen from a “sky cave” in the overlooking cliff; bathing under the 108 spouts behind Muktinath Temple; rest-house manager performs daily abhishekam to nearby giant Shalagram; Lakshmi and Sarasvati ponds in front of Muktinath Temple; Shalagram spotted in the riverbed; the trekking path by Chhusang Monastery at Drakma passes through this flag-covered hillside



ALL PHOTOS: HUEDITYA DEVA



The Shaktas, too, lay claim to Muktinath. According to their tradition, it is one of the fifty-one Sakti Pithas—sacred sites where parts of Sati’s body are said to have fallen. Her right cheek is believed to have fallen here following Daksa’s sacrifice. The Sakti Pitha shrine stands in a modest nearby temple, seldom visited, with its central image a simple Sivalinga.

At Muktinath, it is customary to bathe beneath the 108 brass spouts shaped like bulls’ heads, whose waters are believed to cleanse one’s sins and guide one along the path to moksha. Each spout pours freezing glacial water, said to represent the sacred streams of all tirthas. Once the sun had risen high enough, I decided the water had warmed sufficiently to take the bath. The air bit into my skin as I stepped beneath the jets. Most pilgrims rushed through the icy torrent, gasping, then dipped in the twin pools symbolizing Lakshmi and Sarasvati. I chose to move more slowly, steadying myself on the slippery stones, letting the cold bite deep until numbness turned into clarity. When I emerged, my body trembled, yet I felt a strange elation—a vitality that only a sacred bath can bestow.

By the time I re-entered the temple, the Vaishnava priest had arrived for the morning puja. At Muktinath, the daily rituals are performed by a Hindu priest, while Buddhist nuns tend to the temple during the non-puja hours. The priest performed the arati and offered food to the Deity, his Sanskrit chants interwoven with the low hum of Tibetan prayers outside. Here, sectarian boundar-



and passed from one generation to the next. To neglect such a stone, it is said, is to incur great sin.

In the afternoon, I spoke with the sadhus who dwell around the temple. Some had walked for months from Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, drawn by the same quiet pull of devotion. One of them, Kumar Baba from Tirunelveli, led us downstream to search for Shalagramas. By then, my own bags were already heavy with stones gathered along the way, and I was beginning to tire of them. Yet, upon returning to town, I stumbled upon what must be one of the largest Shalagramas in existence—surely a contender for a Guinness World Record: a colossal Kurmavantara Shalagrama embedded in the floor of my hotel, likely unearthed during its construction. It was more than five times

the size of the one I had seen earlier in Yara. The sight made it clear that this land had once been abundant with Shalagramas, with the temple of Muktinath standing at its sacred heart.

It is intriguing to consider that the Shalagramas date back over a hundred million years, to a time when the entire region of Mustang and Muktinath lay beneath the ancient Tethys Sea. What is now a dry, wind-swept valley was once the ocean floor, later pushed upward through the slow movement of the Himalayas. Seen from this perspective, the Puranic narrative that Vaikuntha, Vishnu’s abode, lies beneath the cosmic ocean takes on an unex-

pected resonance. The fossils found in the riverbeds of Mustang are, quite literally, remnants of the sea. The convergence of geology and myth here is remarkable—not because one confirms the other, but because both express, in different ways, the depth of time and the sense of the sacred embedded in this landscape. In this sense, Muktinath itself is Vaikuntha on Earth.

The next day, we began our return to Pokhara, stopping at the Shalagrama Museum run by a local Vaishnava pathasala. As we arrived, a few students were struggling to roll a huge Shalagrama into the museum’s display—it had just been donated by a villager who found it while digging in his field. The museum, located in the vicinity of a Vishnu temple built in a distinctive South Indian style complete with a *dvajastambha* (flagpole) and *vimana* (sanctum crown), has a fantastical, theme-park-like entrance shaped like a tiger’s mouth, through which visitors walk into a cave. Inside, there must be over 100,000 Shalagramas of different shapes and forms. They are at least 65 million years old.

The Shalagrama Museum

The priests told me they receive most Sha-

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

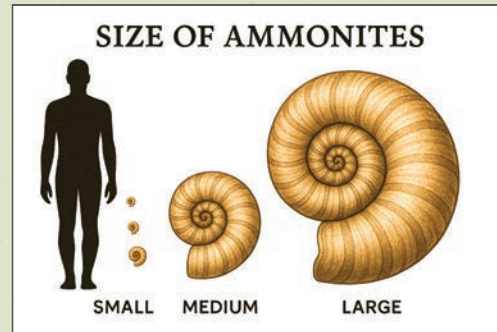
Hurditya Deva is a Thailand-based opera singer and scholar with a Masters and PhD in Sanskrit Studies. His research focuses on Sanskrit texts and epigraphy in India and Southeast Asia.

Ancient Sea Fossils

An ammonite is an extinct group of marine mollusks that lived throughout the world’s oceans from about 400 million to 66 million years ago, spanning the Paleozoic and Mesozoic eras. They perished along with the dinosaurs when an asteroid struck the Earth at the end of the Cretaceous period. At that time, what is now the Himalayas lay beneath the Tethys Sea, where ammonites flourished and deposited their shells in thick layers of sediment. When the Indian subcontinent later collided with the Asian landmass, the uplift transformed this ancient seabed into the

world’s highest mountain range, now rich in marine fossils.

Ammonites were relatives of modern squids, octopuses and nautilus. Their coiled, spiral shells were divided into internal chambers; the animal lived in the outermost one, while the inner chambers contained gas or liquid to regulate buoyancy. The wavy dividing lines between chambers—called sutures—form intricate patterns that help scientists distinguish among species.



lagramas from villagers or from those unable to care for them through daily puja. The museum’s mission is to promote correct worship, protect the sacred stones and educate people about their significance.

Our Return

After visiting the museum, we made our way back to Pokhara. As we descended from the cold, windswept passes, I kept thinking of Bhairavi, who had accompanied me throughout the pilgrimage, alert and watchful. The next day, we returned safely to Kathmandu, exhausted but revitalized by the spiritual journey of a lifetime.

Months later, I still thought of Bhairavi.

I asked my guide to contact the guesthouse owner; she was still there, sometimes disappearing with passing trekkers, only to return a few days later. Before winter set in, I arranged for my friends Shankar and Sagar to bring her food supplies, knowing the region would soon be inaccessible due to snow.

In the land of Bhairava, beneath the gaze of the mountains, Bhairavi had been a steady companion on this journey, guiding me through the temples, streams and valleys of Mustang. This experience left a lasting impression—a reminder that it is devotion, tradition and perhaps the simple presence of a cherished living being that ultimately may matter most in life.

The Museum with 100,000 Shalagramas



(clockwise from upper left) author touches a giant Kurma Shalagrama at Muktinath; view from the four-wheel-drive road from Lo Manthang to Muktinath; rare red Shalagrama; museum’s tiger-mouth entrance; display at the Shalagrama Museum





HISTORY



RAVI DEO/DALL·E

From Splendor to Silence: Vijayanagara's Grand Arc

COLONEL COLIN MACKENZIE (1754–1821) WAS stunned as he encountered, in what is now central Karnataka, an immense landscape filled with temples, thousands of enormous statues, small shrines and ancient buildings stretching as far as the eye could see. The year was 1800, and Mackenzie—a Scottish officer in the British East India Company and the first Surveyor General

of India—had rediscovered the ruins of the greatest Hindu empire of the 14th through 16th centuries: Vijayanagara. Unlike many of his fellow officers, Mackenzie relied on a number of “native” advisors, including a Telugu Brahmin named Venkata Lechmiah, who helped decipher many of the carved inscriptions and piece together the extraordinary and tragic history of the Vijayanagara Empire. Here is that story.



RAVI DEO/DALL·E



RAVI DEO/DALL·E



RAVI DEO/DALL·E

BY FRANÇOIS GAUTIER, DELHI

The Vijayanagara Empire was founded in 1336 on the banks of the Tungabhadra River in present-day Karnataka, South India. It stands even today as one of the last and greatest bastions of Hindu civilization in medieval India. It was forged in the midst of political upheaval when the whole of southern India was in danger of falling completely under Islamic control. Only the areas south of the Tungabhadra, including the Hoysala kingdom, remained under Hindu rule. At this desperate hour, two brothers, Harihara and Bukkaraya, rose to stop the Hindu decline and put a halt to the escalating madness. Without them, Indian history would have undoubtedly taken a different turn, reducing Hinduism to insignificance.

The City of Victory

The founders are fondly referred to as Hukka and Bukka. Their story starts in the early years of the 14th century. Their father, Sangama, was a powerful chief in the service of the king of a small Hindu kingdom known as Kampili (now part of Karnataka state). It was situated on the northern banks of the Tungabhadra River, a tributary of the Krishna River. The two brothers sought to claim back the small kingdom of Kampili, which had been taken over by Muslims. This was the beginning of what went on to become one of the finest Hindu empires the world has ever seen. They appropriately called the empire Vijayanagara meaning, “City of Victory.” The brothers derived their inspiration from a great sage named Vidyaranya.

Vidyaranya was born into a poor Brahmin family and studied the scriptures with distinction. He was known as Madhava until he was initiated as a sadhu. From a young age he had a hunch that he was destined to do great things. He spent a quarter of a century patiently waiting for the right opportunity. He began to fast regularly and led a very simple life. He meditated, prayed, planned and waited. He read history and books on good governance and came to the conclusion that only a strong leadership, one free from selfishness and corruption, is capable of guiding a kingdom or a country to greatness. His energy and determination grew with the passage of time, and he wrote many books, including one on how to tame the mind and achieve

.....
An empire emerges: (clockwise from far left) Vijayanagara's king oversees the extensive trade at the country's main port; the birth of Sage Vidyaranya; Hukka and Bukka meet their guru after their strange experience of seeing a hare viciously turn on a group of pursuing hounds; Hukka is crowned first king in a grand ceremony, with Bukka to his left and Vidyaranya to his right



Kingdom of Vijayanagara: The kingdom controlled much of South India by 1485ce.

liberation. Another focused on the life of Adi Shankaracharya.

Hukka and Bukka met Vidyaranya by an accident of fate. Like Vidyaranya, Hukka and Bukka had been through their own struggles; they had taken part in wars and witnessed the destruction of temples and upheaval of families. One day they saw a pack of hounds chasing a hare. Halfway through the chase, the hare suddenly turned around and—amazingly—the hounds fled in terror as the hare gave chase. As they reflected on the bizarre phenomenon, they encountered Vidyaranya, sitting cross-legged in meditation. The sage knew instinctively his wait was over.

A day was set for the inauguration of the kingdom. A flag was designed with a boar (the symbol of Lord Vishnu), a sun, moon and

a dagger, signifying strength. On the seventh day of the auspicious month of Vaishakha, in the year 1336, everyone gathered at the site. An elaborate religious ceremony was conducted by Vidyaranya and well-known pandits.

As the smoke rose from the sacred fire, Hukka was declared the first ruler of the then tiny kingdom and given the title of Harihara I. Vidyaranya was appointed the first prime minister. Bukka was made the crown prince. One of the first things they did was to embark on the task of building and training a strong army. Messages were sent to chiefdoms and small kingdoms to join in as allies.

Hukka and Bukka followed their guru's advice faithfully and set out on a policy of expansion. In 1346, Hukka managed to defeat the Hoysala Empire to their south. This was a very big achievement, as the Hindu ruler had been constantly at war with Vijayanagara. The area to the north of Vijayanagara was under the Tughlaq dynasty's control. This was a Turkish dynasty that ruled from Delhi in the 14th century and whose territory extended up to Karnataka. The Tughlaq armies were instructed to keep attacking Vijayanagara until the Hindu kingdom fell. Vijayanagara had to build several new forts across its northern boundary to check the constant Muslim threat. The river Tungabhadra served as a natural barrier making it difficult for soldiers to penetrate. Moreover, Vijayanagara's forces grew stronger by the day and were able to rebuff attacks and keep the line of control intact. Hukka died in 1356, leaving behind a growing empire and an able system of civil administration. After Hukka, Bukka reigned as Bukka Raya I and continued

the policy of expansion under the guidance of Vidyaranya.

In 1358, the Bahmani sultanate—the Persian sultanate that ruled over the Deccan Plateau in India in the 14th century—launched a ferocious attack on Vijayanagara. Both sides made claims to territories in each other's empires. Bukka sent an army of twenty thousand soldiers and emerged as the winner. Bukka died in 1377, leaving behind a large empire, that encompassed most of south India below the Krishna River. Even Goa came under its rule for a brief period.

One of the many projects Bukka launched was the writing of commentaries on the *Vedas*, to make the vast Vedic knowledge more accessible. He was a great patron of poetry and literature. He treated all his subjects, including Jews, Christians and Muslims, equally without any appeasement or disfavor towards any community.

The Empire Expands

Vidyaranya continued to hold the post of prime minister under the third monarch, Harihara II. The monarch erected many famous and majestic temples and buildings and promoted arts, literature, architecture, science, dance, music, religious movements, irrigation and water preservation methods. Military academies with vast grounds were opened where soldiers and elephants were trained to inflict maximum damage in the battlefields. Large sharp blades were tied to elephant tusks. Huge factories churned out armor and weapons. At the same time, soldiers were schooled in Hindu values that restrained them from indulging in rape, looting or harming the defenseless. He also built a

navy, so as to expand his kingdom and trade with other nations, sending his ships as far as Cambodia.

In 1386, at the age of 85, Vidyaranya retired from his post, happy that he had succeeded in creating foundations for Ram Raj—meaning a kingdom that embodies goodness, justice and spiritual values in the spirit of Lord Rama—and ushered in a new age or renaissance of Hindu society and culture. The Bhakti Movement received new impetus.

People sang bhajans in praise of God, visited temples and pilgrimage places without fear—something that had become unthinkable under the Sultans. Hindu pride was restored and Vidyaranya was able to retire with his head held high.

Vijayanagara continued to grow from strength to strength after Vidyaranya's passing. The capital city occupied an area of 64 square miles and became internationally known. Besides hundreds of temples, palaces and public buildings, there were military bases to house the million-strong army. It became a great maritime power and traded with Malaysia, China, Ceylon, Cambodia, Indonesia and what are now the Gulf states, and exchanged envoys with them. Nearly ten ports were developed on the coast. During this time, many Indians settled in places like Ceylon and Malaysia. Education was given a lot of attention, with schools and



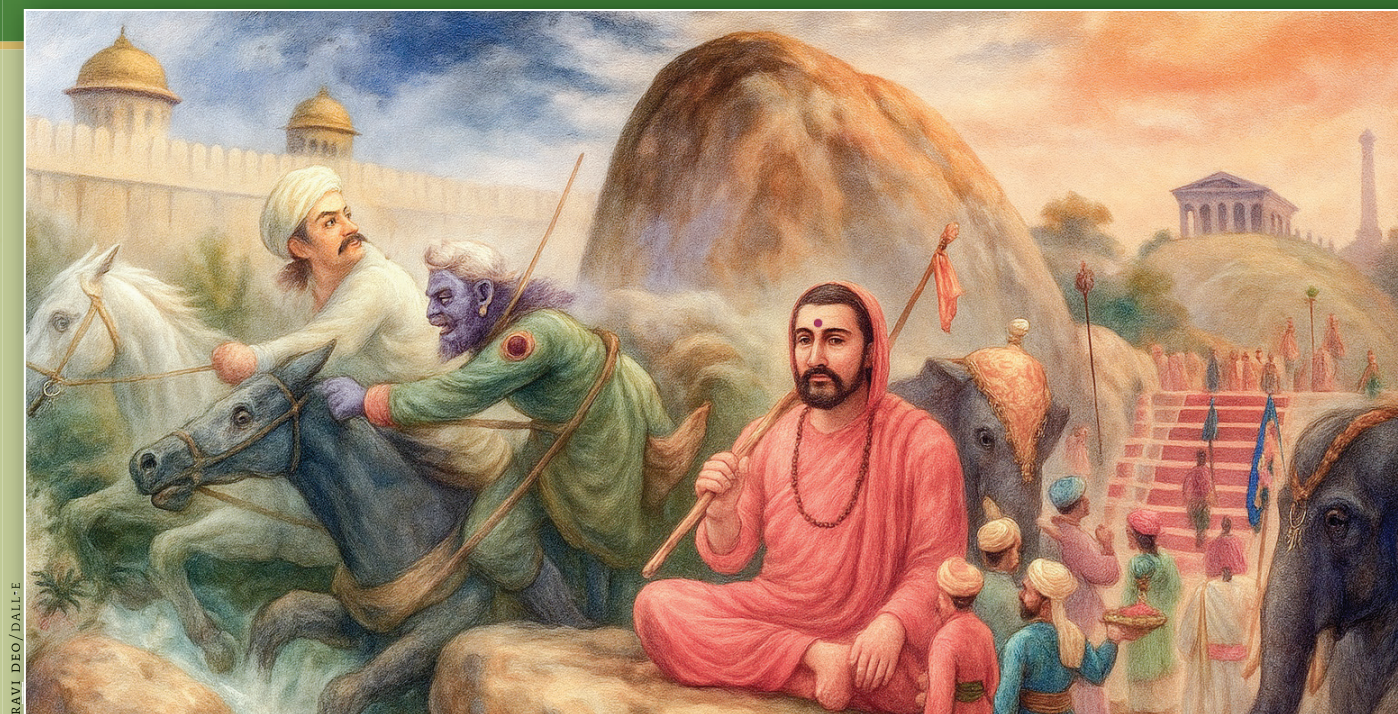
ANJALI HUGAY/DALL-E

universities established based on the ancient Hindu systems. Besides arts, literature, math, science, architecture and languages, yoga and ayurvedic instructions were given. Students were taught ancient scriptures and the true meaning of Vedanta as propagated by Adi Shankaracharya. Because of the rapid development, there was always a shortage of masons, architects and sculptors.

Respect was accorded to all religions. Jains, Buddhists and Muslims were allowed freedom of worship. Mosques and temples were

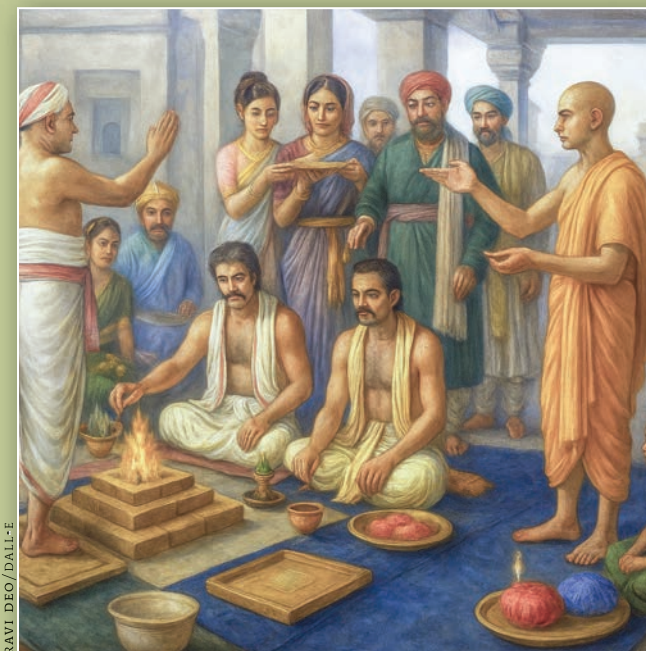
gave accounts of the city in glowing terms and agreed that not Venice nor any other European city could match it. For instance, merchant Niccolò de' Conti and the Portuguese travelers Domingo Paes and Fernão Nunes visited Vijayanagara and were greatly impressed. They wrote detailed accounts describing the city's magnificence. The Portuguese chronicler Fernão Nunes exclaimed: "The city is such that the pupil of the eye has never seen a place like it, and the ear of intelligence has never been informed that there

Building a Kingdom: (clockwise from above) the rulers supported the practice of all religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Islam; one of the brothers' first tasks was to build a strong army through alliances and training schools; the auspicious inauguration of the new kingdom by Vidyaranya in 1336, with Hukka and Bukka seated before the priest and sacred fire, and Vidyaranya standing to their left; before he met them, the guru had a vision of Hukka and Bukka's escape from the Red Fort in Delhi, and then of the vast empire they could create together to act as a barrier to Muslim invasions further into South India



RAVI DEO/DALL-E

An Empire Emerges



RAVI DEO/DALL-E



ANJALI HUGAY/DALL-E



RAVI DEO/DALL-E

existed anything to equal in the world.” The kingdom reached its pinnacle under King Krishna Deva Raya, who ruled from 1509 to 1529. It became one of the world’s leading economic powers and a global center for trade. He was a wise leader with foresight; many consider him the greatest of the Vijayanagara rulers. He was a generous patron of the arts and a reputable poet; many majestic monuments, courtyards and temples sprang up under him. He encouraged farming and was instrumental in devising an advanced system of irrigation. Barbosa, another Portuguese visitor, tells us: “The king allows such freedom that every man may come and go and live according to his own creed without suffering any annoyance, and without inquiry, whether he is a Christian, Jew, Moor [Muslim] or heathen. Great equality and justice are observed by all, not only by the ruler but by the people to one another.”

Between 1347 and 1518, the Bahmani Empire made consistent and aggressive attacks on Vijayanagara without success. Each defeat

was frustrating, but the Islamists never gave up. It did not matter that they lagged behind economically; they were simply consumed by feelings of revenge and continued the attacks. King Krishna Deva Raya personally fought more than a dozen battles with his unfriendly northern neighbors. One of the famous battles he fought was in 1520, over Raichur, a well-fortified center situated on



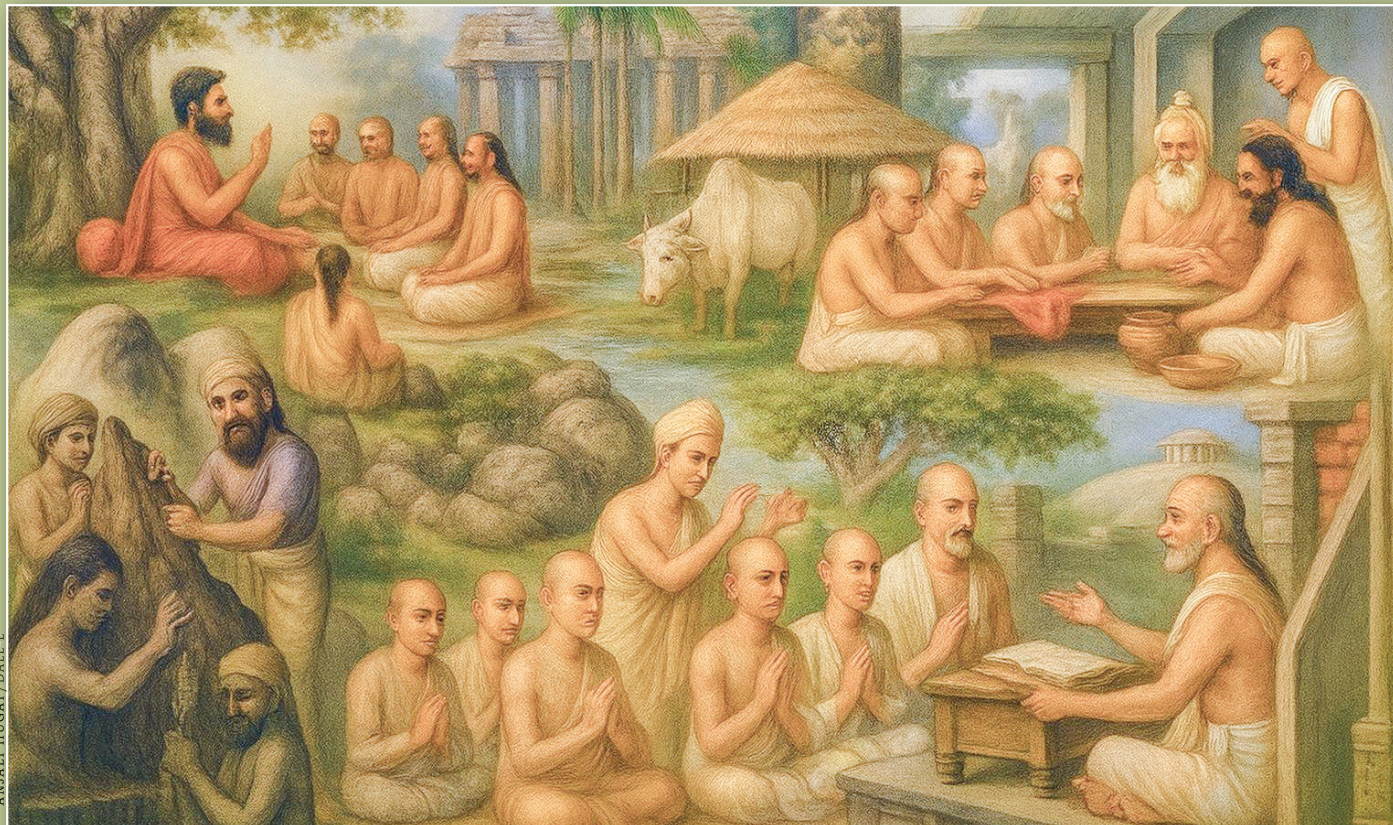
the fertile land between the rivers Tungabhadra and Krishna. An army of nearly one million, with over 30,000 horses and more than 500 elephants, advanced towards Raichur. The infantry—which included musketeers, bowmen and spearmen—led the onslaught. Ismail Adil Shah of Bijapur, who had superior firepower, marched southwards with 140,000 horse and foot soldiers. Lives were lost on both sides in the thousands, but in the end victory was Krishna Deva Raya’s. He entered the captured area in triumph but refrained from inflicting further damage or loss of life. A rattled Shah fled and gave up the idea of any further adventures against Vijayanagara.

The Slow Decline

After Krishna Deva Raya’s passing in 1529, the quality of leadership started to decline. He left behind instructions that his half brother should be the next ruler, as his own son, Sadashiva, was still in infancy. This upset many who considered either themselves or the infant son as the rightful successors. The lessons taught by Vidyananya, Hukka and Bukka were being forgotten. Sadashiva, a weak leader, was made king in 1543. In 1552 he had to recognize a brilliant leader named Rama Raya as his co-regent. Sadashiva almost destroyed the civil service that ran the empire efficiently by giving the top posts

The empire matures: (clockwise from above) the kingdom developed trade routes from Asia to Europe; Colonel Mackenzie started mapping the empire’s ruins in 1800 with the help of Indian scholars; education in Vijayanagara followed the traditional gurukula system, teaching scriptures, Vedic math, ayurveda, sculpture and architecture; the empire developed an extensive navy and shipping fleet

At Home, Traditional Learning Flourished as World Trade Expanded



ANJALI HUGAY/DALL-E



RAVI DEO/DALL-E

to his family members and henchmen. His greatest mistake was to enlist a large number of Muslim mercenaries into Vijayanagara's army. He also began to interfere in the affairs of Muslim kingdoms surrounding Vijayanagara. Annoyed by this, and with the memory of the defeat at Raichur still lurking in their minds, some Muslim states decided to join hands to tackle the prosperous infidel kingdom and settle scores once and for all. United they stood a better chance. Jointly they declared jihad against Vijayanagara in 1565. The decisive battle was fought on the southern banks of the River Krishna. The war lasted for nearly six months. It was known as the Rakshasi-Tangadi conflict. Several battles were fought during the six months and the Hindu empire's army won many. Yet its downfall began to emerge as more and more Muslim soldiers and commanders began to change sides. Some adjoining Muslim states had declared neutrality and promised not to participate in the war, but failed to keep their word. Such treachery resulted in the defeat of Hindus, and the City of Victory fell.

The victorious Hussain Nizam Shah paraded the severed head of Rama Raya and exclaimed: "Now I am avenged of thee! Let God do what he will to me!" The believers took their time in decimating the city. Slowly and unhindered, over a period of six months, they went on a rampage. They systematically stripped gold and precious stones from the engravings of the walls of palaces, temples



and magnificent monuments, and the treasury was looted. The plunder was so great that every man in the allied army became rich in gold, jewels, arms, horses and slaves; the sultans let every person keep what he had acquired, only taking elephants for their

own use. When they left, the city had been reduced to nothing but rubble and had become a ghost town.

Robert Sewell, a civil servant of the East India Company, who authored *The Forgotten Empire: Vijayanagara* writes: "Never perhaps

The Fall: (above) The invaders spent months destroying the city; (above right) fire envelops the many buildings, including the royal court, offices, army quarters, stables, homes and businesses; (below) once victorious, the invading armies plundered the city for months, leaving nothing of value

in the history of the world has such havoc been wrought, and wrought so suddenly, on so splendid a city; teeming with a wealthy and industrious population in the full plenitude of prosperity one day, and on the next seized, pillaged, and reduced to ruins, amid scenes of savage massacre and horrors begging description." The surviving ruins stand as a testimony to the greatness of Hukka, Bukka and Vidyaranya, whose vision led to the formation of the great Hindu Empire. The ruins teach us many valuable lessons, including the importance of having the right leadership in the country. They tell us that the country is safe only in the hands of selfless and fearless leaders; only they can leave behind a proud legacy. There is still evidence—most notably at the rare ruins of Hampi—of the greatness of Hindu Dharma. Regardless, the lessons from the period are as relevant today as they were centuries ago; Hindus salute Hukka, Bukka and Vidyaranya, forgotten heroes of India.

Poets and chroniclers continue to celebrate Krishna Deva Raya in popular lore. Even today, folk songs in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh speak of the grandeur of the "Rayas." The ruins of Hampi, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, attract scholars, tourists and pilgrims alike. The sense of awe that surrounds its stones and sculptures (all of which have chopped noses and ears, as the statues were too massive to destroy completely) speaks not only of a vanished past but of a civilization that achieved greatness through



synthesis — of art and war, of religion and trade, of openness and identity. What makes Vijayanagara truly unique is its adaptability. It absorbed foreign influences without losing its core Hindu character. It welcomed Muslims into its army and traded with Christians from Portugal, yet built temples with unparalleled devotion and scale. It built bridges—literal and cultural—between India's North and South, East and West.

Although the fall of Vijayanagara was swift and violent, its story did not end there. The echoes of its glory resonate in South Indian classical music, in the stone chariots and gopurams of temples, and in the popular memory of its rulers. The empire stands as a powerful reminder of what can be achieved when tradition and innovation coexist, and when diversity is embraced without compromising cultural identity.

The Empire's Final Battle and Destruction



The Shivaji Maharaj Museum of Indian History



The Museum: All the paintings depicted in this article belong to the Shivaji Maharaj Museum of Indian History, situated in Pune, which François Gautier and his wife Namrita have built. It has today 23 pavilions, among them one entirely dedicated to the story of Vijayanagara, as well as the unique Bharat Mata or Mother India temple, dedicated to another great Hindu hero warrior—Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj. This is a seva project, as François and Namrita feel that they owe a debt of gratitude to Bharat. Entry is free. Last year nearly 15,000 visitors came to the museum, many of them schoolchildren, learning the true history of their country. If you want to contribute to this noble project, you can donate either in rupees or in dollars, as the museum has both US and Indian tax exemption:

www.factmuseum.com/services
francoisgautier26@gmail.com

The Artists: Ravindra Deo has an art degree from Abhinav Kala Mahavidyalaya in Pune, India. His work has appeared



in the Balgandharva Art Gallery, Pune, the Nehru Centre Art Gallery in Mumbai and many more shows. He's participated in art demonstrations at schools across India. He has been running an advertising agency for the past 25 years. Anjali Hugay is also based in Pune. She studied fine arts at Chesapeake Fine Arts Studio in Maryland. She has displayed her work in many solo and group exhibitions and done commissioned work for customers in both in India and worldwide. www.facebook.com/artistanjali/.



Sacred singing: (left) Women odhuvars perform *Thevaram* hymns together; (right) Odhuvari Padmapriya sings at the height of a puja

gained official recognition only in 2006, when the government of Tamil Nadu appointed Smt. Angayarkanni as the first official female odhuvar of the Arulmigu Panchavarnaswamy Temple in Woraiyur. In recent years, increasing numbers of women have been appointed as odhuvars in state-run temples. Following this lead, charitable trusts and patrons have also begun appointing women odhuvars in other temples. For many women who have dedicated their lives to learning the holy texts and offering their voices in seva (volunteer service), this recognition brings greater satisfaction and credibility.

Odhuvari (temple singer) Angayarkanni's groundbreaking appointment was part of the government's social inclusion initiative, challenging long-standing gender, class and caste norms. Her entry into sacred singing was serendipitous; as a child, she had aspired to be a police-woman. While she was waiting for the police selection results, she enrolled in the Government Music College. After she completed her training in music and holy texts, she set aside her childhood dream, practiced for years and became an odhuvar.

Following her appointment, she rented a place near the temple to ease the commute from her remote village. The wages were very low. In the wake of her marriage and the birth of a daughter, maintaining a home on her own became financially unsustainable. After enduring hardship for seven years, she resigned and returned to her village, a decision she regrets deeply.

She reflects, "I did not give up easily. After so many years, I had to listen to my family. For my daughter's sake, I had to go back to my village. I left with a lot of pain. I loved my job. Today, we have more women odhuvars and associations like our alumni groups to ask for help. In those days we did not know how to navigate a career."

She eventually returned to the same temple after a few years and now works in a different role, but she still sings there, just as she did before. She has been persistently appealing to the authorities to regain her former position as an odhuvar. Her earlier resignation has caused her name to be omitted as the first woman odhuvar from many records.

Women odhuvars face hurdles at every step on their path to the hallowed halls of temples. In some cases, they are the first women in their families to enter the formal



ALL PHOTOS BY: PADMA KRISHNAN

workforce. While most of the odhuvars had family support during their training, many faced initial discouragement, as recalled by Odhuvari Shanti Priya. "Many people laughed at me when I started learning music and *Thevaram* (holy hymns). They did not think I could sing at temples, or that devotional singing could become my vocation." She feels vindicated now, as more women receive government recognition and support from other institutions.

Music, Family and Sadhana

Devotion to Siva, love for music and a deep reverence for Tamil literature are at the heart of the odhuvars. In the true spirit of bhakti, they seek divine power through their emotionally charged songs. For them, singing is not a mere performance; it is a profound prayer. Most of the women are drawn to a life of sacred singing by their love for music and devotion. Interestingly, many are inspired by other family members, who are devout Saivites and share their love of music.

Odhuvari Shanti Priya, who serves at the Virali Hills' Murugan temple, climbs 207 steps every day and sings from the *Thirupugahz*, hymns praising the presiding Deity. She remarks, "I was always singing. It is like talking to God for me. It is my way of bhakti. I went to music college while pregnant and sang through my two pregnancies. I did not have any guidance about becoming an odhuvar. I did not think devotional singing could become my career."

She did not sing at any temple for three years while caring for her young children. The Government Music College Alumni Welfare Trust encouraged her to return to

temple service after her hiatus. The Arampani Trust appointed her to her current position. She says her arduous climb is rewarded when devotees wait for her to sing after the puja.

Her advice to aspiring women is, "Come with a seva mindset. This is not another musical career. Singing for the Lord is an honor! Just sing and surrender."

Odhuvari Indira Gandhi, one of the pioneers, reiterates that singing is an act of intimate worship. She says with firm conviction, "When I stand in front of Swami and sing, I see Him. It is like talking to any other person."

She has been in this sacred service for two decades. In her case, it was her father's love for music and her brother's motivation that propelled her into devotional singing. Currently employed through a trust at a restored ancient temple near Trichy, her path was difficult.

She ponders, "I did not know we could reach God through singing for Him. I come from a farming family; no one knew you could study and become a devotional singer. I think it was a call from Siva."

For Odhuvari Priya, who sings in seva at the Adimoolar shrine within the Nataraja temple in Chidambaram, the songs stir a longing for a land she left behind as a child. A Sri Lankan refugee who came through the dangerous sea route as a three-year-old, she sees Sri Lanka through the Siva temples mentioned in the holy texts. She says nostalgically, "When I sing Sambandar's songs about the temples there, I get emotional. I want to go there and sing! I will visit Thirukonamalai and Thiruketeeshwaram someday." She teaches special-needs children and observes, "Their speech has improved a lot over the past year. I hope one day they can sing well. When they listen attentively and ask for a specific song, I am happy."

She wants to take her students to pilgrimage sites related to the sacred poets, such as Sirkazhi, where Sambandar was born. She feels visiting these places will bring the next generation closer to the great poet-saints of the past and will help them appreciate the legacy they will one day carry forward.

Devotion, Duty and Daily Life

Each of the women odhuvars regards her vocation as a sacred summons from Siva, nurtured by His blessings. Dharani asserts, "Only if He wills can we sing for Him." Priya regards the song as a mantra in itself: "Songs have to be sung in the prescribed way." This reverence for the sacred words is echoed by others, and they devoutly follow the strict discipline that accompanies this divine duty.

For women who still play traditional roles at home, being a professional odhuvar is strenuous. Their days typically start by 4am and end by 11pm. They juggle caring

DEVOTION

Rise of Women Temple Singers

In recent times, women have come forward to fulfill the role of the odhuvar, singing the ancient Tamil sacred songs as part of temple worship

BY PADMA KRISHNAN, INDIA

AS THE SUN DIPS BELOW THE BUSTLING city of Chennai, two men carefully carry a bookcase to the center stage at the Agatheshwar Siva Temple. Enclosed within are the *Thirumuraigal*—a twelve-volume collection of sacred hymns composed centuries ago in Tamil by poet-saints praising Lord Siva at various temples. With reverent hands, they clean the case, smear it with three horizontal lines of holy ash, adorn it with a rudraksha mala, and crown it with a gleaming turban. Soon, the wooden bookcase becomes more than an object—it embodies Siva Himself, the Deity praised in song by odhuvars (temple singers).

For the temple's kumbhabhishekam, its twelve-year consecration, the space takes on a festive look, like a joyous family celebration. A stream of odhuvars has gathered. Among them are many women who have traveled from across the state. Their tight-knit bond is visible in their affectionate in-

teractions among themselves.

This universal love lies at the heart of Saivism, lived and proclaimed by women poet-saints like Karaikal Ammaiyar and Auvaiyar, whose footsteps these odhuvars follow. They form a living thread between the Divine and devotees, carrying forward an unbroken oral tradition that stretches back thousands of years.

Who Are the Odhuvars?

The odhuvars are more than musicians. In their collective memory, they safeguard a vast repository of sacred knowledge—wise words strung into thousands of poems composed by saints during the Chola period, from the ninth to the thirteenth century. Each poem tells the story of Tamil Nadu's sacred landscape—its temples and the saints who once walked their grounds. The composers either performed or experienced miracles at these temples. The songs are often referred to as *pann isai*, a ten-stanza form common to

their repertoire.

The odhuvars have long held an important place in the life of temples, where they sang in front of the sanctum as part of every puja. Rulers and devotees admired and respected them for their prowess in music, language and knowledge of the scriptures. Faith in the curative properties of the songs made them sought-after healers.

Tamil scholar Pavalar Velayudham explains, "The *Thirumuraigal* saved Saivism and Tamil. Both were endangered by invasion and alien rule. Odhuvars, as custodians of the songs, played a key role in preserving our culture and language. The songs are one of the oldest musical traditions—one which the odhuvars have kept alive. It is a precursor to Carnatic music, and their influence is evident even in contemporary movie compositions."

The Female Revival

While women odhuvars have been singing in temples for thousands of years, they



ALL PHOTOS BY: PADMA KRISHNAN

for children and elderly family members at home alongside their jobs, which have strict schedules. The odhuvards' songs are essential to completing the puja rituals, and their presence at specific ceremonies is imperative.

Priya and Indira Gandhi emphasize the need to have family backing. "Our husbands are supportive. Without their help we cannot manage." They also cite the sacrifices the entire family makes. For many of them, this support is crucial to manage challenges such as travel and long hours during festivals. Performing at distant temples can cause concern for families, so the women often travel in groups to ease those worries.

Despite the modest compensation, they remain steadfast in their calling, valuing above all the opportunity to sing daily before the Deities. It would be difficult for a woman odhuvard to sustain a family with her own earnings alone. In many households their income is a secondary source, and as such they do not demand higher compensation. For some—especially those from historically oppressed communities who were once denied even entry into temple premises—this is a meaningful victory in their larger quest for dignity and social justice.

The challenges faced by women reflect a larger reality for the odhuvard community as a whole—men, too, now struggle to balance devotion with livelihood. Unfortunately, low wages have driven many odhuvard men to pursue other jobs. Across generations, male odhuvards have been the custodians of this heritage, preserving the sacred songs through centuries of social and political upheaval. Today, they face the universal challenge of sustaining an ancient service in a modern economy, though their professional networks still provide them with greater performing opportunities at special events. Traditional family dynamics often support their independent travel and allow them



more time and energy for daily practice. However, they face a deeper dilemma when they are the primary earners of the family. In spite of the problems, men continue to hold an influential place in this sphere.

Conclusion: A Tradition Reborn

Drawn from a cross-section of society, these women see a bright future for women odhuvards, as the Tamil Nadu government's Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Department, which controls over 36,000 temples across the state, has been proactively appointing more women. The government music colleges in Tamil Nadu play a pivotal role in preserving traditional art forms. They offer comprehensive courses in Thevaram, Thirumuraigal and classical music. These institutions, established in every district, train and nurture talent from rural and underprivileged communities. Following this lead, more charitable trusts are also opening doors for women to serve in temples across the region.

This growing support marks a quiet but significant shift—transforming what was once unpaid seva, offered

Voices of devotion: (above) Odhuvards from across Tamil Nadu unite for Thirumurai Isai Vizha, during the Raja Kumbhabhishekam celebrations at Agatheswarar Siva Temple, Villivakkam, Chennai; (below) odhuvard Angayarkanni

purely out of devotion, into a recognized and celebrated religious vocation. Their journey, marked by personal sacrifice and unwavering faith, stands as a collective triumph. Each new appointment lights the path for others to follow, encouraging more women to persist, to break barriers and to honor their inner calling.

The final frontier for many women odhuvards still lies within their own families. Becoming an odhuvard is not just a personal choice—it is a sacred commitment that extends to the entire household. Families who share in this commitment are the quiet pillars upholding the rise of female odhuvards.

With the support of nurturing homes and empowering institutions, the melodies of Thevaram will echo in women's voices through the pillared halls of many more temples. In their songs live the ancestral wisdom, the enduring flame of devotion and the quiet courage to carry it forward into the future.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Padma Krishnan is an independent journalist living in India. A certified hatha yoga teacher, she is passionate about exploring commonalities in ancient mystical traditions.



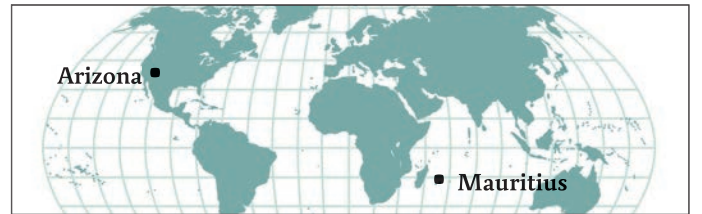
YOUTH

Majority or Minority: How It Matters

Two teens share growing up in Mauritius and America as Hindus

BY NAAVALAN ERASENTHIRAN AND KAPIL NATHOO

ON OUR RECENT VISIT TO KAUAI'S HINDU MONASTERY, WE MET for the first time and quickly bonded over a shared experience: facing racism on our way to Hawaii. In my (Kapil's) case, my mother and I were scolded by a fellow passenger as we rushed to get our carry-on, who called us typical foreigners causing trouble. In Naavalan's case, he was asked by the taxi driver on the way to the airport if he belonged to the religion that worships millions of Gods—usually an opening for a conversion attempt. Our two experiences sparked a deeper exchange about what it's like being Hindu in our respective countries—Naavalan in the United States and myself in Mauritius. While both of us are proud Hindus, our experiences are shaped by the vastly different proportions of Hindus in our countries—just 1% in America and nearly 48% in Mauritius. Our stories reflect the realities of living as a religious minority versus a majority and what that means for our identity, traditions and freedom to practice.



or discrimination.

One major difference is the public celebration of religious festivals. In Mauritius, festivals such as Maha Shivaratri and Ganesha Chaturthi are national holidays, alongside Christian and Muslim ones. Out of 15 public holidays each year, many are reserved for religious observances across communities. This promotes not just tolerance, but participation and celebration among faiths. I was honestly shocked when Naavalan told me that Diwali is still not a federal holiday in the U.S., even though a few states such as New York, California and Pennsylvania now recognize it.

In Mauritius, the risk of religious conversion is very low. Because the majority of the population is Hindu and most families are practicing, the religion is passed down strongly from one generation to the next. People are generally open-minded and respectful of others' beliefs. Even during Pope Francis' visit in 2019, he praised our nation for peacefully blending religious and racial diversity. That's something I see reflected every day in school, in shops and in public spaces.

Our Conclusion: Two Worlds, One Faith

Our stories reflect two very different realities. In the United States, Hindus often feel excluded, stereotyped or pressured to assimilate or convert. In Mauritius, Hinduism is part of the national fabric—respected, celebrated and protected.

But both of us share the same desire: to preserve and practice our faith openly, without fear or judgment. We believe that countries everywhere can learn from places like Mauritius, where multiculturalism is not just tolerated, but embraced. Creating an inclusive society means recognizing all traditions, whether they are practiced by 1% of the population or 48%.

For Hindus living as a minority, visibility, support and education can go a long way. And for those in the majority, such as in Mauritius, it's a reminder of how lucky we are to celebrate freely—and how important it is to protect that freedom for everyone.

Naavalan: Practicing Hinduism as a Minority



Being Hindu in America can be challenging. As a small minority, we often struggle to maintain our traditions in a predominantly Christian society. This can weaken our connection to our religion, especially when exclusion and stereotyping are common.

It's not unusual for Hindu kids to be bullied or teased for wearing traditional attire like a kurta, rudraksha beads or applying vibhuti. Sometimes we are mocked with stereotypes—being told we worship cows or have "millions of Gods," or ridiculed for revering Deities like Ganesha or Hanuman, who have animal forms. Such comments make it harder to feel accepted, and they discourage open expression of our faith.

Conversion is another pressure we face. In interfaith marriages, Hindus often feel pushed to adopt their partner's religion for the sake of family harmony, especially when raising children. Peer pressure from friends, schools or the workplace can also make Hindus feel that our beliefs are "weird" or "backward," making us more likely to give them up. And because political and religious leaders in the U.S. are overwhelmingly non-Hindu, many young people feel there's no place for their spiritual identity in public life.

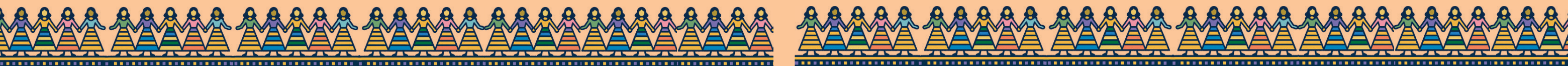
Kapil: Being Hindu as Part of a Majority



In contrast, I grew up in Mauritius, where Hinduism is practiced freely and widely. I've never faced serious religious bullying. Even when I was teased in elementary school, it was never focused on my faith. Here, people of all religions are deeply spiritual, and they respect each other's practices. Wearing a kurta or applying holy ash is normal and accepted, not a target for jokes

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Naavalan Erasenthiran, 16, is a sophomore in high school living in the United States. He is passionate about learning astrology and psychology. He also loves to explore new places. Kapil Nathoo, 17, is completing his final year of the French Baccalaureate in Mauritius. Born and raised on the island, he grew up following Saiva Siddhanta traditions and is currently pursuing the Master Course.



MANAGING YOUR KARMA



EDUCATIONAL INSIGHT

Wisdom tools for understanding and effectively coping with karma

BY SATGURU BODHINATHA VEYLANSWAMI

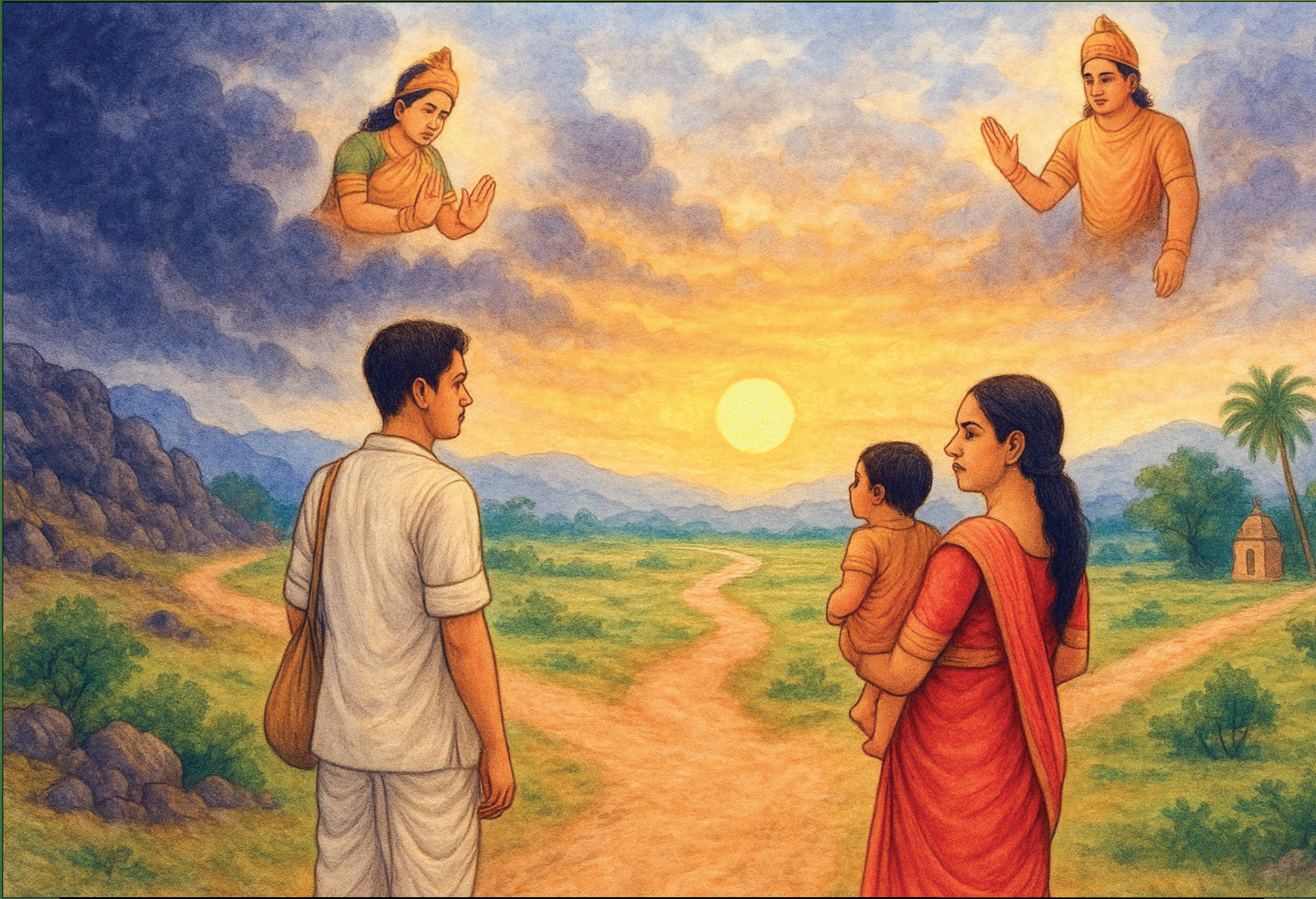
THE CONCEPT OF KARMA HAS SPREAD BEYOND THE CON-
fines of the Asian religions that revealed it to become
a core concept of today's media, yoga and New Age
movements. It is referenced regularly on American
mainstream television programs and in the movies. Last year, in
discussing the concept with a junior college class in Hawaii, a
student expressed contemporary culture's astute definition of
karma as "What goes around comes around." Unfortunately, most
individuals understand karma as an abstract principle but do not
apply it to their own life. This is like a student learning and under-
standing the laws of nutrition, being able to get an "A" on any test
on the subject, but following a personal diet of junk food three
times a day. What he learned is not influencing how he lives.

In this Educational Insight, the study of karma is approached in
three steps: 1) dispelling common misconceptions; 2) acquiring a
correct intellectual understanding of key concepts; and 3) manag-
ing your own karma by utilizing the correct understanding of this
unerring law to refine your actions and reactions in life. You've heard
of stress management workshops? Well, this a karma manage-
ment program in which we will learn ten principles for effective
karma management, drawn from the teachings of Satguru Sivaya
Subramuniaswami, who observed: "It is easy to study the law of
karma and to appreciate it philosophically, but to realize it, to apply it
to everything that happens to you, to understand the workings of it
as the day goes by, requires an ability to which you must awaken."

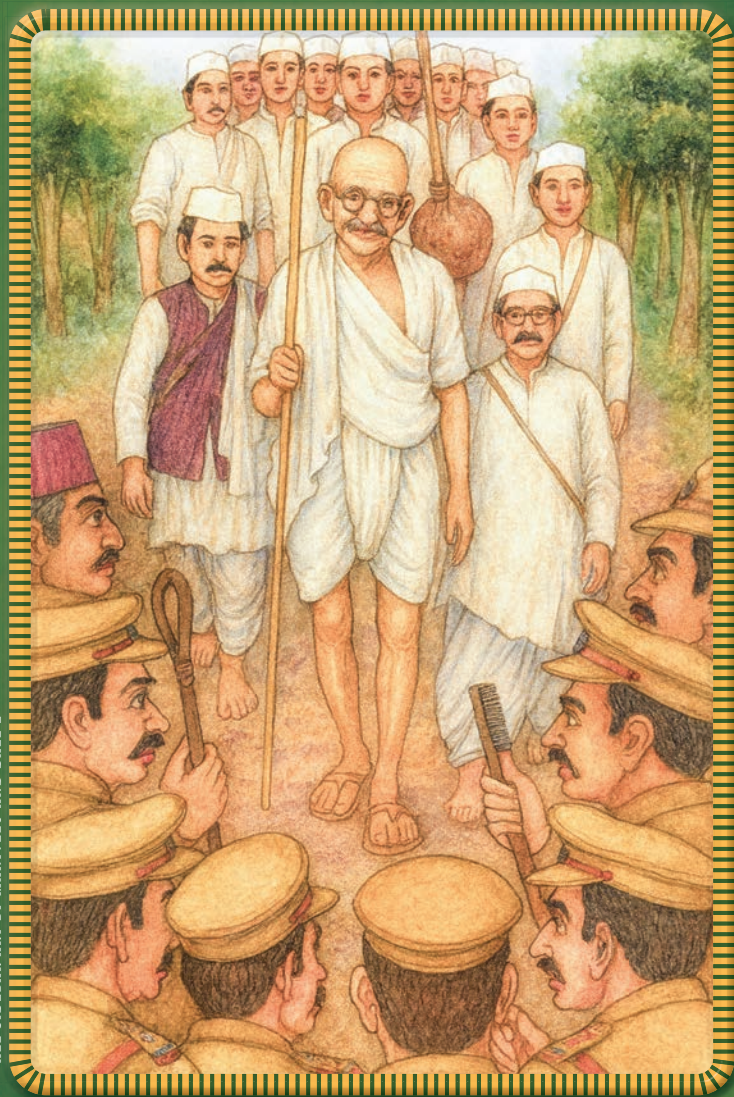
Gurudeva was adamant that karma does not dictate our destiny.
Our future is shaped by what we do now—by our actions and by
how we respond to the karmas already set in motion. We may not
control what comes to us, but we always control how we meet it.
That power, Gurudeva said, rests in the palm of our hand.

.....

The choices are ours: A family stands at a crossroad. To the
left is a dark and rocky future which the deva in the clouds
is advising against. To the right is a brighter path with a ru-
ral temple. A small decision here will have lifelong impact.



DALLE • E



Precept 1: Forego Retaliation

The protest march led by Gandhi on May 21, 1930, was attacked by police as it approached the Dharasana Salt Factory. The protestors did not retaliate or defend themselves, but allowed the injustice of the attack against them to recoil against the administration that ordered it. The march transformed a simple act—making salt—into a moral and spiritual protest against injustice. Gandhi deliberately chose salt, an everyday necessity, to dramatize how deeply colonial laws penetrated daily life and burdened the poorest. His 240-mile march drew worldwide attention, galvanized millions of Indians to join his nonviolent resistance, and exposed the British Raj's lack of moral authority. The march shifted the struggle from elite political debate to a people's movement grounded in conscience, courage and self-discipline—an example of karma management through righteous action.

Misconceptions To Correct

YOU HAVE NO DOUBT HEARD THE MOST COMMON FALSE concept about karma. It goes like this: "Nothing but bad things happen to me. It's my karma, and even when I strive to do better, my striving has no effect upon it. So why should I even try to make my life amount to anything? It's hopeless."

This misconception must be rejected for two important reasons. The first is that you can actually change your karma through the principles of effective karma management. The second is that how you live in this life creates the karma you will face in your future lives. So why not consciously use the law of karma to create a future that is filled with pleasant experiences rather than painful ones?

A second common false concept about karma, which you have probably also heard, blames one's karma on Saturn: "My life is in a state of chaos. Everything is going wrong, and it all started three months ago when Saturn entered Taurus and my karma changed. I have been advised that if I can successfully appease Saturn through having a priest do regular Sani *puja*, my problems will go away. So, that has become the entire focus of my religious life at this time." The fallacy of this is that, yes, karmic difficulties indicated by your astrology can be mitigated, but not by just paying a priest to do Sani *puja*. If that is all you are doing to work with your situation, it's not enough. In working through the trying times of life, your primary powers are willpower, devotion and understanding. Difficult karmas are best mitigated through traditional strategies, such as those outlined below, not by merely giving over such duties to others.

A second problem with this misconception is that it attributes the cause of our problems to the planet Saturn rather than to our own actions in the past. It is like begging the jailer to release you because being incarcerated is unpleasant, having forgotten about the crime you committed that put you in prison. Planets don't determine your karma, and neither do the actions of others. Karma is self-created, and you are the source of it all—good, bad and mixed.

Concepts to Grasp

1: Karma means act or deed.

Let's begin with the word *karma* itself. What does it mean? *Karma* means "action" or "deed," such as in the common phrase *karma yoga*, "union through action."

2: Karma is the law of cause and effect.

When we say "the law of karma," we refer to the law of action and reaction, also called the law of cause and effect. This law states that what we sow we shall reap, in this or future lives. Benevolent actions (*punya*karma or *suka*karma) bring loving reactions. Selfish, hateful acts (*papa*karma or *kuka*karma) bring suffering. Every action that we perform in life, every word we speak, even every thought that we think, has its reaction.

3: Karma is just and self-governing.

The law of karma is a divine, self-governing system of justice that automatically creates the appropriate future experience in response to the current action. However, unlike the justice systems of a country, which only punish the misdeeds of those who are caught, tried and found guilty, karma punishes misdeeds and rewards good deeds whether they are known or not. For example, if a man robs a bank and is never caught, no punishment is received through man's law. However, he will inevitably face the consequences of his crime through the unfailing law of karma. Similarly, the good deed of giving money anonymously to a charity will be rewarded, even though no one knows the giver's name.

4: Karma is our teacher.

Through understanding the consequences of their actions, individuals sooner or later learn to refrain from committing a particular misdeed. Any good system of justice does not want repeat offenders. It wants individuals to understand the error of their ways and reform their behavior. You've heard Alexander Pope's famous phrase that to err is human, to forgive is divine. Well, we can adapt his adage and say to err is human but to err only once is divine, meaning those who are striving to live a religious life are self-reflective and learn quickly from their mistakes. This is what we mean by saying "Karma is our teacher." It teaches us to refine our behavior—hopefully sooner rather than later. One way to tell a young soul from an old soul is to observe how quickly he learns karma's lessons and adjusts his life.

5: We each have a unique storehouse of karma.

Karma also refers to the legacy of past actions, a portion of which manifests in the present life, with the remainder left to unfold in future lives. To understand this more clearly, let us again reflect on the criminal justice system. Justice is known to move slowly. It can take years before a convicted criminal receives punishment. The law of karma moves even more slowly. The consequences, or fruits of actions, known as *karmaphala*, may not appear for many lifetimes. Thus, the karma we are born with consists of rewards and punishments from past lives that have yet to manifest and be resolved.

6: There are three types of individual karma.

Our individual karma is of three types: *sanchita*, *prarabdha* and *kriyamana*. Sanchita is the sum total of past karmas yet to be resolved. Prarabdha is that portion of sanchita karma scheduled to be experienced in the present life, shaping its events and conditions, including the nature of our body, personal tendencies and associations. Kriyamana is the karma we are presently creating. While some kriyamana karmas bear fruit in the current life, others are stored for future births.

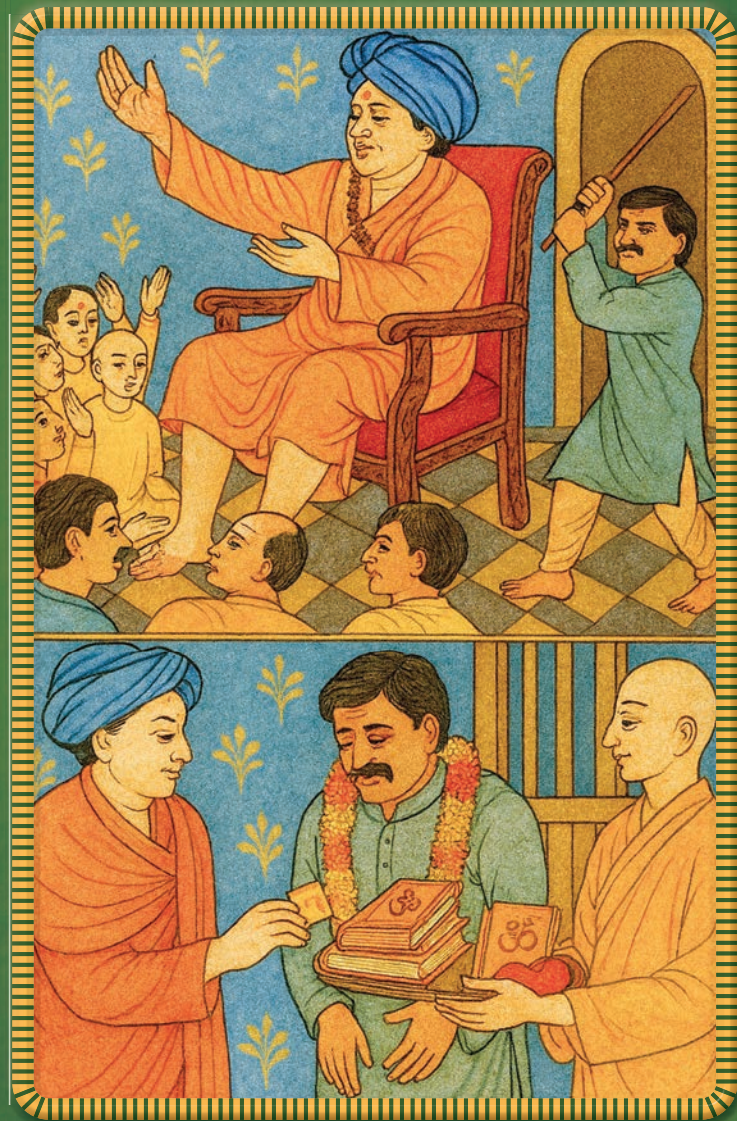
7: Astrology indicates the patterns of karma.

Prarabdha karma determines one's time of birth, which sets the framework for one's astrology and delineates the life pattern by influencing the release of these karmas. Thus, an individual will experience certain astrological periods as difficult and others as auspicious and positive. Astrology does not dictate our karma; rather, our karma determines our astrology. Understanding our horoscope, therefore, helps



Precept 2: Accept Responsibility

The lady is recovering from having her purse stolen by a fleeing robber. While she reflects, she recalls a time when she herself slipped a valuable necklace from another woman's purse. Now, with deep remorse, she realizes that the karma of that past theft has come back to her in this moment. In the same way, we can accept all that happens in life as the just and balanced working of the great cosmic law of karma. To recognize this truth is to free ourselves from resentment and blame. Great gurus urge their shishyas to respond even to life's painful events with appreciation, seeing them as lessons for the soul. My guru declared, "We must be grateful to others for playing back to us our previous actions so that we can see our mistakes and experience the same feelings we must have caused in others."



Precept 3: Forgive the Offender

In this true story, Swami Sivananda was once attacked during a lecture at his ashram in Rishikesh. A man came up behind him and struck him with a metal pipe. Devotees quickly restrained the attacker and locked him in a room, outraged at this violence. Though injured, Swami came to the room, looked kindly upon the man, garlanded him and forgave him completely. To forgive one who has harmed us is among life's hardest tests, for the instinct is to strike back or hold resentment. Yet, when we rise above anger and choose forgiveness, we free not only the offender but also ourselves. Such maturity of the soul lifts the burden of hatred and opens the heart to peace, demonstrating the highest form of karma management.

us manage our karma more knowledgeably as it arises to be faced.

8: Karmas are either active or inactive.

Sanchita, prarabdha and kriyamana karmas can each be divided into two categories: *arabdha*, "begun" or "undertaken" karma that is sprouting; and *anarabdha*, "not commenced," or dormant seed karma. An analogy can be drawn to a garden in which many seeds have been planted. Some sprout within days, others take weeks, and still others remain dormant for months. In the same way, some karmas manifest within a few years, some toward the end of life, and others only in a future birth.

9: We create our own future.

Our actions in the present are shaping what we will experience in the future, even in future lives. When we think of karma, we usually look to the past—reflecting on the rewards and punishments now manifesting and what we must have done to cause them. But we must also look ahead, to this life and those yet to come. Our present actions are influencing that future, making it either pleasant or painful. Therefore, before acting, a wise person reflects on the karmic consequences and thereby consciously molds the future.

10: Life is all about resolving karma.

The ultimate future to consider is liberation from the cycle of birth and death, *samsara*. As long as karmas remain unresolved, we will be reborn on Earth. Therefore, those intent on spiritual progress take the creation and resolution of karma very seriously. They not only strive to act wisely in the present but also perform additional religious practices to rid themselves, in this life, of karmas that would otherwise manifest in future births. This profound discipline is embraced especially by sagacious *sannyasins*.

Rules of the Road

First Precept: Forego Retaliation

There is no need for you to be the instrument to return a karmic reaction to someone else. For example, an individual is really nasty to you and you feel the impulse to retaliate by being nasty to him. If you follow that tack, you will create a new unseemly karma to face in the future. Better to let the law of karma take its own course without your intervention, which will generally happen through another person with less self-control who does not understand this law of life.

Let us take another example: a classic cowboy movie plot. Someone shoots and kills the hero's brother during a robbery, and the rest of the film is devoted to his chasing down the outlaw and shooting him in revenge. What, then, happens in the next life, the sequel? There is definitely a karma to be faced for killing in revenge. Perhaps another robbery will take place and the hero will be killed. Wisdom tells us that it is better to let the sheriff apprehend the outlaw and bring him to justice. The sheriff has taken an oath and is authorized to uphold the law and therefore creates no negative karma in capturing the outlaw, even if he has no choice but to kill him in the process.

Gurudeva said, "Retaliation is a terrible, negative force. When we retaliate against others, we build up a bank account of negative karma that will come back on us full force when we least expect it."

From the Tirukural: "Forget anger toward all who have offended you, for it gives rise to teeming troubles."

Second Precept: Accept Responsibility

Karma generally manifests through other people, and thus it is easy to see the other person as totally responsible for what happens to us. For example, you are attacked by a mugger who strikes you and steals your valuables. You are deeply upset with the malicious thief. However, the mystical perspective is to see yourself as responsible for whatever happens to you. You are, through your actions in the past, the creator of all that you experience in the present. You caused your loss; the thief is just the instrument for returning your karma to you.

Of course, it is easy to apply this principle when the effect is an enjoyable one (we know intuitively when we get good things that we deserve them) and not so easy to apply it when it is not enjoyable, but in both cases we are equally responsible. In the end, you have no one to praise but yourself when your life is filled with successes and no one to blame but yourself when your life is filled with difficulties.

Gurudeva said, "As long as we externalize the source of our successes and failures, we perpetuate the cycles of karma, good or bad. There is no one out there making it all happen. Our actions, thoughts and attitudes make it all happen. We must accept and bear our karma cheerfully."

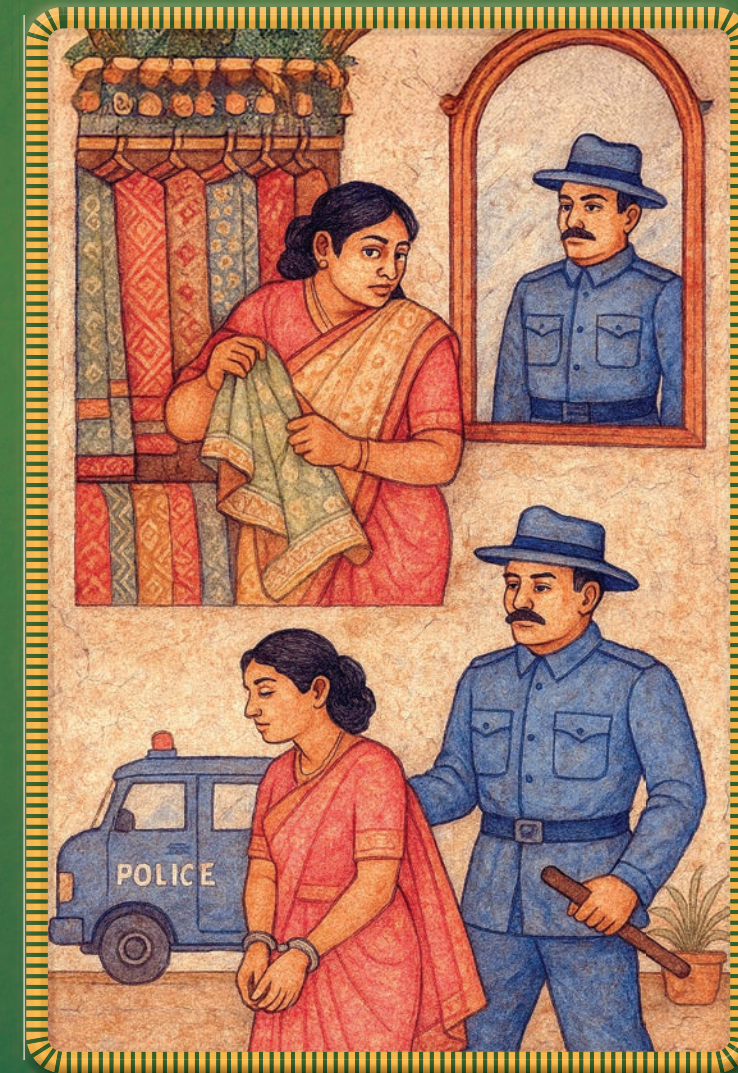
From the Tirukural: "Why should those who rejoice when destiny brings them good moan when that same destiny decrees misfortune?"

Third Precept: Forgive the Offender

Take as an example a teenage boy on the way home from school. One day a gang of his peers tease him for being different and beats him up. A common response is to be angry with the boys and harbor ill feelings toward them for years. This is problematic, however, as it keeps the lower emotions constantly churning in his subconscious mind. Unless he forgives them, he perpetuates the event in his own mind, long after it is over.

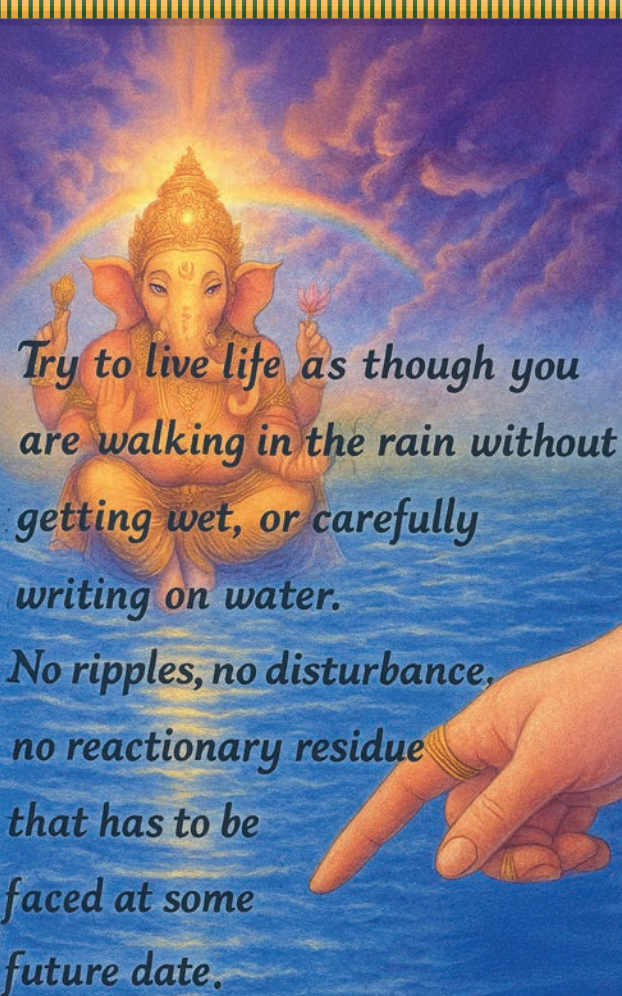
Gurudeva often told the story of when a man attacked Swami Sivananda, hitting him forcefully in the head with a pipe during evening satsang at his Rishikesh ashram. Swamiji's followers were outraged and angrily subdued the culprit. To everyone's surprise, Swami Sivananda responded with the opposite sentiment. He asked that the man not be punished or turned over to the police. The next day he met with his attacker and gave him a train ticket home, several spiritual books and money. Swami said, "Thank you so much for being the instrument to bring this karma back to me. Now I am free of it." He felt no animosity toward the man whatsoever.

From the Tirukural: "If you return kindness for injuries received and forget both, those who harmed you will be punished by their own shame."



Precept 4: Consider the Consequences

This well-to-do lady could easily afford the beautiful outfit she admired in the department store. Yet, in a moment of weakness, she chose to steal it, thinking she would go unseen. The store's security guard caught her, and soon she was handcuffed, escorted to a police van, and facing a day in court. Her lapse in judgment shows how a single dishonest act can bring humiliation and karmic consequences. Every choice we make plants a seed whose results inevitably return to us. As Paramahansa Yogananda insightfully taught, "Before you act, you have freedom, but after you act, the effect of that action will follow you whether you want it to or not. That is the law of karma."



*Try to live life as though you
are walking in the rain without
getting wet, or carefully
writing on water.
No ripples, no disturbance,
no reactionary residue
that has to be
faced at some
future date.*

Precept 5: Create No New Negative Karma

Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami often said we should “live like writing on water.” He meant that our thoughts, words and deeds should be so carefully considered that they leave no lasting scar, no ripple of harm that will return to us in the future. Most people create new karmas every day through careless speech, harsh emotions and unwise actions. But the wise learn to move gently and consciously, like walking in the rain without getting wet. By practicing ahimsa, forgiveness and mindfulness, we pass through life without disturbing its waters, creating only kindness and upliftment for ourselves and others. By ceasing the creation of negative karmas, we allow the balance of positive karmas to dominate.

Fourth Precept: Consider the Consequences

Quite often our actions are based upon an emotional reaction to what someone has done or said to us. The consequences of such actions are not clearly and carefully thought through. For example, someone insults you, so you insult them back. If you took time to reflect, you would see that the consequence of harming someone else with your words in the present is for you to be harmed again in the future by someone else’s words. This behavior creates an endless cycle of being harmed and harming others, which is only stopped by considering the consequences before acting and not harming back. Mahatma Gandhi once said, “An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.” So too, instinctive retaliation ultimately makes the whole world angry. The principle of considering the karmic consequences pertains equally to positive actions. The wisest approach is to not simply react to things that happen to us, but to take time to consider the karmic repercussions of all actions before we take them.

The habit of considering the consequences before acting can be developed at an early age when parents and teachers utilize positive-discipline methods to help children face the natural and logical consequences of their actions. An insightful letter from Lord Ganesha on consequences in Gurudeva’s book *Loving Ganesha* reminds us: “Keep track of your paces, for your walk makes marks. Each mark is a reward or a stumbling block. Learn to look at the step you have made and the step you have not made yet. This brings you close to Me.”

Gurudeva elucidates our fourth principle: “It is our reaction to karmas through lack of understanding that creates most karmas we shall experience at a future time.”

From the Tirukural: “All suffering recoils on the wrongdoer himself. Thus, those desiring not to suffer refrain from causing others pain.”

Fifth Precept: Create No Negative Karmas

Now that we have a good grasp of the karmic consequences of various kinds of actions, what is needed next to progress even farther in the management of karma is a firm commitment to refrain from thoughts, words and actions that create new negative karma. Perhaps we should all take a pledge, such as “I promise henceforth to refrain from all actions that create negative karmas.”

This is actually not as difficult as it sounds. How do we know if a specific action will create negative karma or not? Scriptures such as the *Tirukural* may make mention of it. We can ask a Hindu religious leader his or her opinion. We can ask our parents or elders. And once we get the knack of it, our own conscience will be able to provide the answer most of the time.

Gurudeva advises us: “Wise handling of karma begins with the decision to carry the karma we now have cheerfully, and not add to it. A firm decision to live in such a way as to create no new negative karmas is a sound basis for living a religious life, for following the precepts of dharma and avoiding that which is adharmic.”

From the Tirukural: “What good is a man’s knowledge unless it prompts him to prevent the pain of others as if it were his own pain?”

Sixth Precept: Seek Divine Guidance

We don’t have to manage our karma totally on our own. Help is available, divine help, in fact. Such help comes from none other than Lord Ganesha, who has the duty of helping sincere devotees manage their karma in the best way possible.

Once an individual develops a personal relationship with Ganesha through sincere worship, he naturally drops off any remaining adharmic patterns of behavior and becomes fully established in a dharmic life. Not only does Lord Ganesha help you become established in dharma, but in the best personal dharmic pattern for this life, known as *svadharma*, your natural occupation and duties to family, friends, relatives, deceased relatives, community, guru and temple.

When we seek His permission and blessings before every undertaking, Ganesha, the Lord of Obstacles, guides our karmas through creating and removing obstacles from our path, similar to a mother watching over her young children at play. Gurudeva explained, “He also has an extraordinary knack for unweaving complicated situations and making them simple. He can unweave His devotees from their karma, simplifying and purifying their lives.” How can we invoke this divine guidance when we encounter karmic difficulties? Simply by chanting His name or a mantra, or placing a flower at His feet, visiting His temples for *puja*, meditating on Him or just visualizing His holy form and inviting Him mentally to help in our time of need. He will respond.

Gurudeva comments on *svadharma*, “Such a life is the fulfillment of all previous efforts and thus erases the uncomplimentary deeds and adds beneficial ones, so a next birth can be most rewardingly great and useful to the whole of mankind.”

From the Tirukural: “Draw near the Feet of Him who is free of desire and aversion, and live forever free of suffering.”

Seventh Precept: Mitigate Past Karma

Once we have stopped acting in ways that create new negative karma, our life will be sublime enough to focus on ridding ourselves of karmas of the past, mitigating them—meaning to make them less harsh, painful or severe.

To better understand mitigation, let’s make a comparison to the judicial system. A man commits armed robbery and receives a ten to twenty-year sentence. But due to good behavior in prison, he is paroled after only five years. He has mitigated his sentence, made it less severe, through his good behavior.

Let’s now take an example of karma that is mitigated. You are destined to lose a leg in this life because you caused someone to lose his in a past life. If you are living a selfish, low-minded kind of life, the karma would come full force and you would lose your leg. However, if you are a kindly person who regularly helps others, the karma would be mitigated and you might read in the morning paper about someone losing a leg due to a land mine and take on the emotion of that experience as if it had happened to you. Later on, while hiking, you stumble and your leg is injured, but not severely. The full force of the karma was softened by your kind and helpful actions. Karma is mitigated by the following practices.

Dharma: Living virtuously in itself helps modulate the release of karmic seeds, evening out the ebb and flow of karma

Precept 6: Seek Divine Guidance

Facing difficult karmas and uncertain choices, this devotee turns to Lord Ganesha for clarity. As the benevolent Lord of Obstacles, He is revered for removing barriers that block our progress and for placing new ones in our path when needed to guide us wisely. By sincerely worshiping Him, we find that confusion gives way to simplicity and tangled problems become manageable. Seeking divine guidance lifts our spirit and keeps us aligned with dharma, ensuring that our karmic lessons unfold with grace rather than struggle. Gurudeva wrote: “It is said that to make a visit on hardship pilgrimage (third-class on trains, on foot or by crawling) to 108 Ganesha temples and roadside shrines is most auspicious to smooth out the karmas of the future by dissolving, through His grace, the negative karmas and mistakes of the past, made knowingly or unknowingly.”





Precept 7: Mitigate Past Karma

In a fit of anger, a father has beaten his son earlier in the day, forgetting his vow to his guru never to strike the child again. Now, filled with genuine remorse, he fasts at dinner in a self-imposed penance, seeking forgiveness and cleansing his heart of regret. Such acts of tapas, or austerity, help to soften the weight of past karma by transforming negative energy into renewed resolve. Through prayer, self-denial and contrition, he strengthens his will to guide his son with patience and love rather than fear and anger. By admitting our faults and atoning sincerely, we mitigate karmas already set in motion and set new patterns for the future. Gurudeva taught, “Mercy, through personal prayashchitta, sincere penance, can help relieve the bad karma, but that, too, is all for naught unless one stops the practice.”

and minimizing “karmic explosions” that might otherwise occur. Thus negative karmas in one’s individual pattern are naturally avoided or mollified, and positive karmas are accentuated and brought into fruition.

Karma Yoga: Helping others—karma yoga, performing good deeds—and thus acquiring merit which registers as a new and positive karma is one way of alleviating the heaviness of some of our past karma.

Bhakti Yoga: Worship, bhakti yoga, that is intense enough to cause us to receive the grace of the Gods can change the patterns of karma dating back many past lives, clearing and clarifying conditions that were created hundreds of years ago and are but seeds now, waiting to manifest in the future. The key concept here is intensity. Dropping by the temple for fifteen minutes on the way home from work is unlikely to accomplish such a transformation.

Pilgrimage: Taking a pilgrimage is an excellent way to generate an intensity of worship. Over the years, Gurudeva’s devotees have pilgrimaged to India, visiting major temples such as Chidambaram, Rameshvaram and Palani Hills. Many have come back transformed. They physically looked a little different, behaved differently and fit back into life in a more positive way than before. Their karma was changed by the grace of the Gods.

Vows: A *vrata*, or vow, can also generate an intensity of worship, such as fasting during the day and attending the temple on each of the six days of Skanda Shashthi or the 21 days of Vinayaga Vratam.

Penance: A fourth way to mitigate karma is through penance, *prayashchitta*. This is like punishing yourself now and getting it over with instead of waiting for your karma to manifest a punishment in the future. A typical form of penance is to perform walking prostrations around a sacred lake or mountain, up a sacred path or around a temple.

It is advised to perform penance that is directly related to a misdeed. Let’s take the example of a teacher who frequently used corporal punishment to discipline students but now strongly feels hitting children for any reason, even for discipline, is wrong. An appropriate penance would be to print and distribute to teachers literature on alternatives to corporal punishment. This type of penance should only be undertaken after a certain degree of remorse is shown and the urgency is felt by the devotee to rid his mind of the plaguing matter.

Gurudeva said, “When pre-dawn morning *pujas*, scriptural reading, devotionals to the guru and meditation are performed without fail, the deeper side of ourselves is cultivated, and that in itself softens our karmas and prolongs life.”

From the Tirukural: “Be unremitting in the doing of good deeds; do them with all your might and by every possible means.”

Eighth Precept: Accelerate Karma

Why wait twenty more births to achieve spiritual maturity when you could achieve it in two births? That is the idea behind accelerating karma. When we begin meditating and performing regular daily *sadhana*, preferably at the same time each day, our individual karma is intensified. In our first four or five years of striving on the path we face the karmic patterns that we would never have faced in this life had we

not consciously intensified our spiritual practices. Those on the spiritual path resolve much more karma in a single lifetime than others. They could be called professional karma managers.

Of course, family duties in the *grihastha ashrama* don’t allow much time for *sadhana*. Thus, the principle of karma acceleration is best fulfilled in the stage called *sannyasa*, both by those following the path of the monk and by everyone after age seventy-two. Retirement can be more than playing golf. It is an opportunity to intensify our spiritual practices and thus accelerate our karma.

Gurudeva said, “By this conscious process of purification, of inner striving, of refining and maturing, the karmas come more swiftly, evolution speeds up and things can and usually do get more intense. Don’t worry though. That is natural and necessary. That intensity is the way the mind experiences the added cosmic energies that begin to flow through the nervous system.”

From the Tirukural: “Not allowing a day to pass without doing some good is a boulder that will block your passage on the path to rebirth.”

Ninth Precept: Resolve Dream Karma

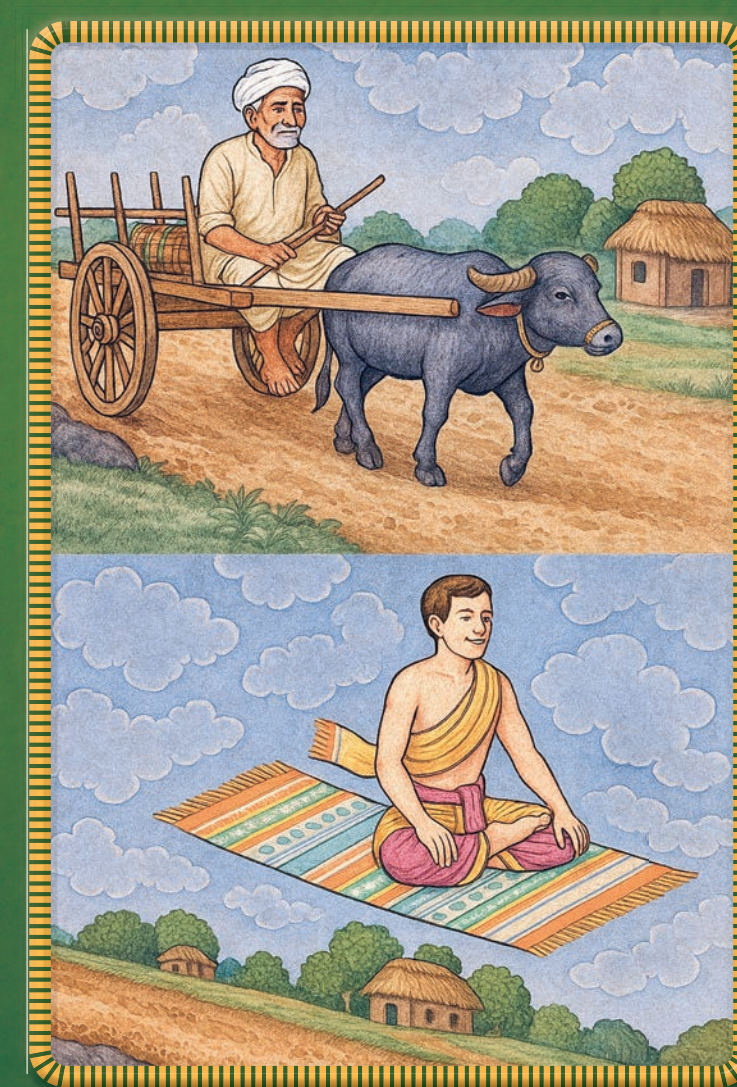
Though some of our dreams are only the result of thoughts occurring in our own mind, other dreams are astral experiences, being conscious in our astral body and interacting with others in their astral body. These astral plane actions create karma, just as our physical plane actions do. This is the basis of the Hindu ideal that one would not steal or injure even in a dream. Why? Because such transgressions create negative karma that will come back to you. These are real karmas that may eventually manifest on the physical plane. However, this can be avoided if you happen to have further dream experiences in which appropriate actions are taken to dissolve the karma. More commonly, though, we can resolve dream or astral-plane karmas in the same way we would physical-world experiences, by performing penance for them in our waking state, while remembering the high standards of virtue and good conduct that should always be maintained, even during sleep. For instance, if in an emotional dream you injured someone intentionally, you could perform a simple penance the next day to atone, such as skipping a meal to impress the mind.

Gurudeva said, “These kinds of dreams—when a person is in his astral body and can feel what he touches, emote to his experiences, think and talk—are not what is known as the dream state. This is an astral experience, similar to the death experience, but the astral body is still connected to the physical body.”

From the Tirukural: “The highest principle is this: never knowingly harm anyone at any time in any way.”

Tenth Precept: Incinerate Karma

In the practice of yoga, we can burn up negative seed karmas without ever having to live through them. What we have to do is find the seed and dissolve it in intense inner light. Let’s take the analogy of growing alfalfa sprouts. You place the seeds in a jar and keep them moist until they sprout. But if you heat the seeds in a frying pan before putting them into



Precept 8: Accelerate Karma

Most people move through their karmas slowly, like a farmer plodding along by bullock cart. By intensifying our spiritual practices—through meditation, service, study and self-discipline—we can accelerate our progress on the path. The difference in the rate of resolution of karma is as great as the difference in speed between a flying carpet and the ponderous bullock cart. The ancient siddhas taught that tapas and devotion have the power to burn through lifetimes of karma, bringing clarity, freedom and rapid advancement toward liberation. Gurudeva observed, “By this conscious process of purification, of inner striving, of refining and maturing, the karmas come more swiftly, evolution speeds up and things can and usually do get more intense.”



Precept 9: Resolve Karma in Deep Sleep or Meditation

In his dream, a child is going through a traumatic experience, and his deceased grandmother appears to comfort and protect him. Such dream states can provide a safe and subtle arena in which karmas are faced and released. Just as difficulties arise in waking life, they may also surface during deep sleep, where they can be worked through without outer consequences. Likewise, in profound states of meditation, past impressions may come forward to be understood and dissolved in the light of awareness. By allowing these experiences to unfold inwardly, the soul is freed from burdens that might otherwise manifest outwardly, bringing peace and progress on the spiritual path. My guru explained, “When you sleep, you are cleaning out the subconscious mind and educating it to face the experiences that you must go through as you evolve.”

the jar, they will no longer sprout. Similarly, karmas exposed to intense inner light are destroyed.

Gurudeva explains, “Having pinpointed the unmanifested karmic seed, the jnani can either dissolve it in intense light or inwardly live through the reaction of his past action. If his meditation is successful, he will be able to throw out the vibrating experiences or desires which are consuming the mind. In doing this, in traveling past the world of desire, he breaks the wheel of karma which binds him to the specific reaction which must follow every action. That experience will never have to happen on the physical plane, for its vibrating power has already been absorbed in his nerve system.” This incineration of karmic seeds can also happen during sleep.

Gurudeva continues, “It is the held-back force of *sanchita* karma that the yogi seeks to burn out with his kundalini flame, to disempower it within the karmic reservoir of *anandamaya kosha*, the soul body.”

From the Tirukural: “As the intense fire of the furnace refines gold to brilliance, so does the burning suffering of austerity purify the soul to resplendence.”

Conclusion

No matter how deep our understanding of karma may be, actually applying our understanding of karma to the events in our daily life can still be a challenge. Why is this? Our humanness gets in the way; our ego is challenged and we react to preserve our self image; our emotions are stirred and we respond impulsively, without reflection. How can such human weaknesses be overcome? It is done by perfecting

Karma, or destiny, is an expression of a beneficial law: the universal trend towards balance, harmony and unity. At every moment, whatever happens now is for the best. It may appear painful and ugly, a suffering bitter and meaningless; yet considering the past and the future, it is for the best, as the only way out of a disastrous situation. Swami Nisargatta

our character, which Gurudeva defined as “the ability to act with care.” This is done through mastering Hinduism’s code of conduct—the ten *yamas*, restraints, and the ten *niyamas*, observances (see: nall.ai/yamas-niyamas). With a strong character in place, the mastery of karma becomes natural to us. Gurudeva mystically summarizes this process as follows: “Bhakti brings grace, and the sustaining grace melts and blends the karmas in the heart. In the heart chakra, karmas are in a molten state. The throat chakra molds the karmas through sadhana, regular religious practices. The third eye chakra sees the karmas past, present and future as a singular oneness. And the crown chakra absorbs, burns clean, enough of the karmas to open the gate, the door of Brahman, revealing the straight path to merging with Siva.”

Timeless Wisdom on Karma

Karma is the eternal assertion of human freedom. Our thoughts, our words, and deeds are the threads of the net which we throw around ourselves.

Swami Vivekananda

Before you act, you have freedom, but after you act, the effect of that action will follow you whether you want it to or not. That is the law of karma.

Paramahansa Yogananda

The meaning of karma is in the intention. The intention behind the action is what matters. Those motivated only by desire for the fruits of action are miserable.

Bhagavad Gītā

Go, my breath, to the immortal Breath. Then may this body end in ashes! Remember, O my mind, the deeds of the past, remember the deeds, remember the deeds!

Shukla Yajur Veda, Isha Upanishad 17

Thus acting from the principle of maya itself down to the lowest level, karma, even when it manifests as good, is an obstacle still, because it is not toward liberation that it leads. Karma does not dissolve without its various fruits being tasted and consumed.

Mrigendra Agama, Jnana Pada 8A.5–6

The sages and illumined ones knew all about karma. They full well knew that what we have done to others will be done to us, if not in this life then in another. They knew that violence which one commits will return to him by a cosmic process that is unerring.

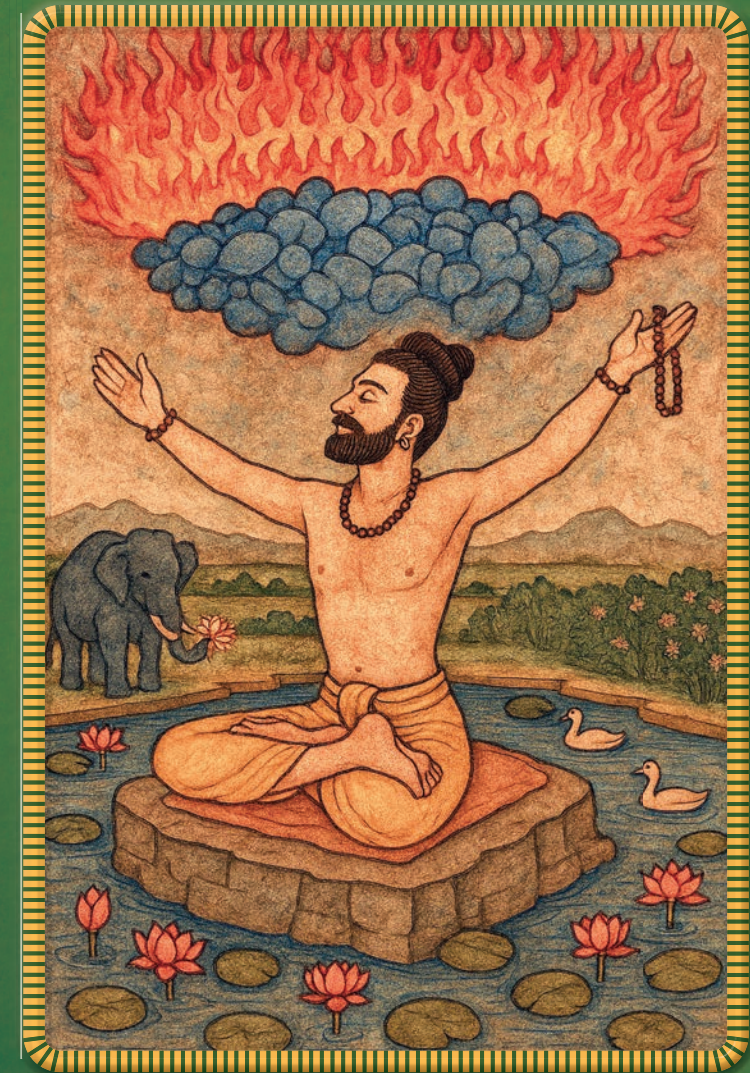
Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami

There is no one above us or superior to us. Good and evil cannot touch us. For us there is no beginning or end. We don’t like or dislike. We don’t desire material things. The play of the mind doesn’t trouble us. Nor are we limited by place or time or karma. We simply watch that which goes on around us.

Satguru Yogaswami

Treat people how you want to be treated—because karma is watching.

A 20th-century proverb



Precept 10: Incinerate Karma

This yogi is joyously emerging from a profound meditation in which he has uncovered and “fried” the seeds of future karma. The flames above him symbolize karmas consumed before they could sprout into physical experience. Advanced yogis are able to confront such karmas directly on the subtle plane, dissolving them through the power of tapas, devotion and inner fire. By burning these seeds before they mature, the yogi frees himself from lifetimes of entanglement. This highest practice of karma management reveals the soul’s innate purity and hastens the journey to ultimate liberation. Gurudeva taught that “Seeds of karma that have not even expressed themselves can be traced in deep meditation by one who has many years of experience in the within.”



PHOTOS: ANNE PETRY

Conches: Ocean Depths to Temple Steps

The sacred conch connects sea and spirit, blending science, craftsmanship and faith in one resonant symbol of creation

BY ANNE PETRY, INDIA

MY HOUSE IS LOCATED NEAR A HINDU temple. Day and night, many different sounds echo from the sacred site, but there is one that cannot be ignored. As its resonance seeps through the walls and into my ears, it seems as though the world has been put on hold. The tone is deep and profound, almost overwhelming, and I am taken on a short journey into the unknown. This special sound is produced when someone blows into a conch seashell, also known as *shankha*.

One day, my foreigner's curiosity took over. I wanted to know why conches are such an essential part of Hindu worship. What's the significance, and where does the ritual come from? I enjoyed the similarity between the words *conch* and *consciousness* as I pondered the subject.

Nature's Wonder

Basically, a conch is a marine animal—a large sea snail. In our case, we're referring to the *Turbinella* and *Strombus* families. The shells are beautiful spiral structures averaging about five inches long, but in rare cases they can grow to the size of an American football. One of their most prominent features is their shiny surface, ranging from creamy white to pale pink. They may have spotting or marbling characteristic of an oceanic environment. The shells are protective dwellings for their inhabitants, but after being vacated, they usually sink to the seabed or drift up onto tropical and subtropical beaches around the globe.

What makes the conch so extraordinary is its hollow body with a typical outlet that creates a natural resonating chamber. Blowing through a hole carved at its pointed end

produces a resonant note that carries great distances. This acoustic characteristic results from the shell's gradually expanding spiral design. The spiral follows a logarithmic pattern—meaning it increases in a gradual, mathematically consistent way in keeping with the Fibonacci sequence, with the golden ratio defining its growth pattern.

In recent decades, awareness of marine conservation has grown along India's coasts, especially in Tamil Nadu and Kerala, where most ritual conches are gathered. The sacred *Turbinella pyrum*—the species used in Hindu worship—is protected under India's Wildlife (Protection) Act of 1972, which regulates the collection of live shells. The Gulf of Mannar Marine National Park off Tamil Nadu's coast now serves as a key habitat where harvesting is closely monitored to preserve coral and mollusk populations. As a result, responsible



SHUTTERSTOCK



The seaside: (far left) a cleaned and cut shell from the *Turbinella pyrum* species; (clockwise from above) the southern coast of India, where many shells are gathered; a local fisherman prepares his nets; a man organizes recently collected shells; a live—and protected—conch snail roams the beach

.....

collectors and manufacturers focus on gathering shells from conches that have died naturally. This sustainable practice helps maintain the species while allowing the ancient tradition of conch use to continue in harmony with the sea.

Men of the Sea

Conches come from the sea, so the first step of my journey was to travel to a place where they are collected. Initial research pointed to the temple city of Rameshwaram. A great opportunity to hit two mangoes with one stone, and finally get to visit this important pilgrimage site and bathe in the temple's twenty-two wells! As I approached the city, I saw many fishing boats



along the coast. "A good sign," I thought to myself. "Some of them must be bringing back conches from the sea." After settling into my hotel, I went to the harbor, hoping to see conches in the day's catch in fishermen's nets. "Out of 800 boats, only one or two conches will be found," said Fleming Jesuraja, the

owner of one of the boats. Although he holds a bachelor's degree in computer engineering, he's back in the family business. "The main interest of fishermen nowadays is catching fish. Finding conches is not on our agenda. If it happens, we gladly sell them to a local manufacturer, but they've become quite rare due to changes in the new nets and limited fishing areas in this region." Fleming's proud father joined us, and I asked him where the conches are mainly found. He answered, "The shankhas are collected mostly 120 miles south of here, in the area of Thoothukudi. That area is fertile when it comes to seashells. Another key location is the sea near the state of Kerala on the western coast of India."

My Quest Continues

Slightly disappointed, I walked the streets of Rameshwaram and visited the shops that sell conches to learn more about their origins. The entire area around the great temple was filled with small- and medium-size sellers offering a variety of seashells.



ALL PHOTOS: ANNE PETRY



Cleaning conches: (clockwise from upper left) uncleaned seashells fresh from the shore; women sort cleaned conch shells at a small production facility; a man polishes a shell with a brush wheel



Buyers gathered around a shop while the seller grabbed a conch, inhaled deeply, and blew into it so that everyone knew his merchandise was genuine. Some people tried it themselves but quickly learned that it's not only about power but also about technique.

In the recent past, due to their high cost, conches were owned mainly by temples and wealthy individuals, while ordinary people might display only an image of one in their homes. Today, however, conches are affordable, and many pilgrims carry their own. They stop in front of holy places and, without notice, lift the conch and blow with full lung capacity—this is the sound I often hear from my home.

To learn more, I decided to visit the big sellers. I found myself in a vast store—the “Walmart” of seashells—with shells of every size, shape, color and species, crafted into bracelets, earrings, lamps, souvenirs and other decorative objects. Yet, likely due to the language barrier, I failed to discover where the shells come from. I consoled myself with the fact that at least I had blown a conch for the first time in my life!

So now what? What better way to drown

my sorrows than in a sweet glass of chai at a local tea stall? As I sipped and pondered my next move, a rickshaw driver pulled up in front of me. I decided to try my luck and asked if he knew anything about the origin of conches in this town. “Mangadu,” he replied naturally. “What? Where is that?” I asked. He pointed toward the outskirts of the city. Shocked and skeptical, I hopped into his rickshaw and let him carry me to the nearby village of Mangadu.

“Kalam Sea Shell Mart,” read a small billboard at a roadside factory. I kindly asked the guard to let me in. What I discovered inside was something I never thought I’d see: a massive factory dedicated entirely to seashells and marine products, especially conches. I met two of the managers, sisters Jasmine and Rashida, daughters of the founder and managing director. “This is a family business established in 1979 by our father, Mr. S. Abdul Kalam—not the 11th president of India, though both were born in Rameshwaram and were neighbors,” Jasmine explained with a smile.

Their hospitality was impeccable as they explained everything about the trade. Jerssam Kalam, the founder’s grandson, representing the new generation of management, said, “We buy raw conches from fishermen all over India. The majority come from the regions of Keelakarai and Thoothukudi, as well as from the Gulf of Mannar and the state of Kerala.” Rashida added, “Only 10 to 20 conches a day come from Rameshwaram, and mostly by accident. In Thoothukudi, special equipment is used for deep diving—conches can be found as far as 330 feet

underwater, so scuba divers specialize in retrieving them. They’re mostly collected from September through December.”

I asked whether the devastating tsunami of 2004 had affected the ecosystem. Jasmine replied, “The tsunami caused a loss of some species, but it also revealed new ones. Luckily, the varieties used in Hinduism are still with us.”

Later, when I asked Jerssam about sales, he shared, “The demand for conches is growing. India is the biggest market for seashells—90 percent of religious conches are sold here, with the rest going to Nepal, Singapore, Malaysia and Canada. Of all conches sold, about 70 percent are used for bangle making, with the remaining 30 percent divided between those used for their instrumental sound and those for abhishekam rituals.”

As you can imagine, a raw conch doesn’t come out of the ocean white and shiny—it’s covered in a brown film, and the inside is far from clean. The preparation is the work of skilled professionals. Rashida explained, “Conches meant for blowing are manually cut at the pointed tip to create a hole. Any residue inside is washed out with water. The brown outer layer must then be removed. One way is to soak it in a chemical liquid, but many customers won’t buy a chemically treated conch, so the layer is instead removed manually with a grinding brush. Further polishing brings out the shine. Hot water adds luster, and storage in direct sunlight increases brilliance. Once finished, the conches are sent to Kolkata for religious carving.”

Watching the men and women at work was fascinating. I was amazed by their attention to detail, though saddened to hear Jerssam say, “The younger generation isn’t very interested in learning this kind of work, so we must think about using machines in the future, especially as demand grows.”

Origins and Scripture

The Sanskrit word *shankha*, also written *shankh* or *shankham*, simply means “conch shell.” It is an ancient term found in the *Rigveda* and *Atharvaveda*, where it refers to both the natural shell and the trumpet made from it. While its exact linguistic root is uncertain, scholars agree that it is a genuine Sanskrit word of early Vedic origin. The *Atharvaveda* describes a shell amulet used for protection, and the *Shukla Yajurveda* mentions shells in purification rites. In later texts such as the *Mahabharata* and *Puranas*, the conch appears as a sacred emblem of purity, victory and the proclamation of dharma. The *Skanda Purana* and *Shiva Purana* further praise the conch for its purifying and auspicious qualities, and it is often depicted among the attributes of Vishnu, Lakshmi and occasionally Siva, representing spiritual resonance and the cosmic vibration of Aum.

Abhishekam

This well-known ritual is the pouring of a sequence of carefully prepared nectars onto a sacred murti and bathing it in them. This rite is almost like a symbolic language in which each offering carries specific meaning and energy. Water from a holy source, turmeric water, milk, curd, ghee and honey are just a few of these offerings.

When holding a conch with its pointed end facing away from you, you can see that its opening faces upward, either on the left or right side. When viewed from the wide end (apex), most conch shells in nature spiral in a counterclockwise direction; these are called left-turning, or *vamavarta* shankhas. Only a small minority are right-turning, the *dakshinavarti* shankhas, which are considered the most auspicious, representing positive energy and divine connection. They are held in the right hand. The same conch used for abhishekam cannot be used as an instrument since it does not have a hole cut at one end.

Once, while in Tamil Nadu, I had an encounter with a Hindu priest from the Arunachaleswarar Temple in Thiruvannamalai—Swami and Sivacharyar Senthil Kumar. “The significance of using a conch in abhishekam is the vibrating effect it has on the surroundings. It brings positive and auspicious energies,” he explained. And indeed, while attending a puja conducted by him, I could see the effect on people: there was a festive atmosphere, a sense of importance and an uplifted feeling. “What could be the reason for that?” I wondered. “The shankha is the ultimate vessel because it’s a natural object,” he said. “It is associated with purity since it comes from the ocean, which is considered immaculate and always able to maintain its cleanliness.” I asked if there were any other uses for the conch besides puja. “In



Sacred symbol: (from top) Lord Vishnu carved as Adishesha in the historic Badami Caves, Karnataka; in His raised left hand He holds the conch; a conch being used to pour water in worship of the Sivalingam

addition to the common Hindu usage, it is also used on special occasions such as weddings and birthdays,” answered Swami Senthil Kumar, adding, “In some places in India, after the puja, the priest may sprinkle holy water from the conch onto the devotees.”

The Sacred Resonance

The practice of blowing the conch is perhaps its most familiar religious use and carries profound spiritual and cultural significance. This sacred instrument serves as a ritual trumpet, producing a deep, resonant sound that carries over long distances and is impossible to ignore. On both religious and spiritual levels, the sound symbolizes creation and marks the commencement of ceremonies. It is also a powerful call to attention, helping devotees center their minds as rituals progress.

In temple worship, for instance, the conch marks important moments, such as the



opening of the sanctum doors, the beginning of arati (lamp offering), and the culmination of abhishekam ceremonies. Furthermore, its vibrational quality is said to pacify negative energies, cleansing the space and preparing the environment for divine presence. It thus becomes a symbolic invitation to the Deities—a representation of the awakening of the Divine. The sound emanating from a conch is considered one of the purest vibrations, believed to echo the cosmic sound Aum, the primordial vibration of creation itself.

Beyond its ritual function, in rural settings the far-reaching sound of the conch,



ALL PHOTOS: ANNE PETRY



Crafting and carving: (clockwise from upper left) artisans at work carving shells and bangles; a flower is carved into a shell; a completed sacred carving; two finished bangles; a woman makes "Aum" designs on some of the smaller shells; (opposite page) a man blows a conch during a temple event in South India

much like the nadaswaram, creates a sense of communal connection, allowing even those unable to attend temple ceremonies to pause and receive a gentle reminder of the Divine—pulling them out of the endless rhythm of daily life and into the present moment for reflection. There is something undeniably special about this natural artifact, linking the listener to something profound

and elemental that transcends ordinary experience.

At the Feet of the Guru

At times, we can find a conch placed at the feet of a guru. It is there not only for symbolism and for its role in purifying the space and invoking divine blessings, but as a call to spiritual awakening and the removal of ignorance. For example, Adi Shankaracharya of the Advaita Vedanta tradition is often depicted with a conch in his teachings and iconography. It is also considered a means of spreading divine knowledge.

To illustrate further, the tradition of Sri Raghavendra Swamy uses the conch shell in worship, holding it to dispel negative influences. The idea of "divine sound" aligns

closely with the concept of the conch. The Indian saint Sri Ramana Maharshi often referred to the symbolism of sound in his teachings. Sri Aurobindo and the Mother also incorporated the conch as a symbolic instrument in their teachings. In fact, the Mother specifically used the conch's sound during certain ceremonies at her ashram, believing it effectively summoned divine consciousness. In the United States, Swami Vivekananda introduced the conch during his travels, helping raise awareness of this sacred artifact.

Finally, it is customary in many households to keep a conch in a sacred space. Often this is for practical use, but sometimes its presence alone is enough. Another reason, I heard from Sourabh Ghosh in Kolkata, is that "the conch is associated with Kubera, God of Wealth, and we believe it brings abundance and prosperity. It is traditionally placed in a dignified location, on a red cloth or in a clay pot. It is also believed to transform negative energy into positive."

Other Surprising Uses

Continuing my visit at Kalam Sea Shell Mart, I saw that during the polishing process of the conch, a lot of raw material such as shell powder and shell dust was produced. I was astonished that absolutely nothing went to waste—everything from a conch could be used. Let me share a few examples.

In some cases, when a temple is built, shell powder is placed under the base of the main statue, as it is believed to protect the site from insects and pests. Some people also place a conch or shell dust in the foundation of their house before construction begins. They may conduct a sacred fire ceremony (havan, a Hindu fire ritual). During this rite, they place a conch on top of the wood to ask forgiveness in advance for any harm caused

to animals during the upcoming construction. And since a conch is nearly 100% calcium, the powder is also sold to the pharmaceutical and cosmetic industries and used in gardening products.

Finding a Seashell in Kolkata

Having heard about the conch-carving work taking place in Kolkata, I realized the story would not be complete without visiting the artisans themselves. I arrived in the bustling metropolitan city of 20 million and, after asking several locals, found my way to the main street where most of the seashell shops are located. Passing from one shop to another, I suddenly heard a grinding sound from the back of one—the unmistakable noise of craftsmanship in progress. Following it, I was delighted to find exactly what I had been hoping for: a conch carving and design workshop in action.

In small, cave-like spaces, artisans sat on the floor working intently. The place—as well as the carvers themselves—was covered in fine white shell dust from their work. A narrow corridor led to the back, revealing that the whole complex was actually the private home of one family. Three brothers lived there with their wives and children; they owned both the workshop and the storefront I had seen earlier. The eldest brother, Mr. Jewel Nandy, explained, "Our family business was established in 1961. We're the fourth generation to take over, and we have 17 workers in total. We're proud to be among the most renowned manufacturers in Kolkata. We buy the raw material nearby and do all the rest of the work ourselves."

The artisans used both electric tools and delicate handwork, depending on the task. Highly skilled and creative, they worked with care and devotion, allowing me to sit close by—without my shoes, of course—and observe. Some of the carvers were also designers, responsible for the beautiful religious motifs often seen on carved conches. Their skill granted them a special status and an income of up to us\$650 per month, significant in this region where field workers might earn around \$100. Omkar Nandy, a younger brother and co-owner, is himself an artisan. It was heartening to see that the family not only managed the business but also knew the craft from the inside. "We're very proud and privileged to do this type of work and provide Indians with these important religious items," Omkar said.

At one point, I saw Mr. Omkar Nandy finish a piece. Before putting it away, he held it reverently, whispered a prayer, and only then

placed it aside. This devotional gesture gave the work a deeper meaning. I asked what he was praying for. "I pray to my Goddess Maha Manasa Devi," he said. "I pray for the item's wholeness and that it will be sold in a proper way. We even have our own temple inside the house—please come and see." Indeed, next to the living room they had established a medium-sized temple with all the traditional equipment. While Mr. Omkar proudly showed me the shrine, a puja ceremony was taking place, and it was wonderful to observe the priest blowing into a conch that had been carved in this very home.

Bangles in Bengal

While in West Bengal, I learned about a unique Hindu tradition common in this region: it is customary for married women to wear bangles made from conches. This explains why all the shops in Kolkata sell not only conches for puja and blowing but also for bangle making. Wearing conch bangles is not as mandatory now as it once was, yet many women continue the practice since the bangles are considered auspicious and are blessed by a priest before being worn. Usually, the bride's family buys them and presents them during wedding rituals. "The bangles are sold only to Hindu women," said Jewel Nandy. "If a husband dies, the wife breaks the bangles and no longer wears them. Many women also replace their bangles every seven years or choose fancier ones if their financial status improves. In that case, the bangles might be studded with diamonds, gold or jewels." I asked about prices. "Depending on the quality, they start around five dollars and go up to seventy for plain ones without adornments," he said. "Sometimes we can make three or four bangles from one conch, depending on its size and

the customer's hand."

At the Nandy brothers' shop, I met several women, married for many years, trying on bracelets and debating which to buy. Snigdha Kar, age 55, told me, "This is a very old tradition. Only married women can wear shankha." I asked if she wore hers daily. "Honestly, I don't wear them every day—it's complicated. I use public transport, and there's a big chance they'd break. But for weddings or festivals, I always wear them." Another woman, Oalaka Nanda, 62, living in Uttar Pradesh, shared, "There, women don't wear shankhas, but it's part of my culture, so I've kept the tradition. Whenever I come to Kolkata to visit friends, I buy shankhas for my married daughter and conches for my family."

One more interesting fact came up in conversation with Mr. Nandy: "A new fashion trend is becoming popular—married men are starting to wear bangles as symbols of their marital status."

The First Sound and Last Sound

I left Kolkata feeling that the cycle was complete. I had followed the conch's journey from its harvesting to its final ritual use. Back home, a few reflections came to mind.

In a time when the connection between humans and nature often feels obscured, the conch stands as a bridge—a reminder of the beauty and inspiration found in our surroundings. The conch represents infinite space and the essence of pausing from time to time to listen to the pure sound—the first sound that ever existed.

There is a Tamil saying, "*Sangu suttalum venmai tharum*"—when a conch is subjected to extreme heat and pressure, it remains undamaged and begins to shine. This expression symbolizes how true character remains unchanged through hardship, showing that one's essential values endure despite difficulty. It's another beautiful example of how deeply the conch is woven into the fabric of Hindu culture.

The conch accompanies a person from birth to death. As a baby, one might be given milk to drink from a small conch. Later, one hears it blown in temples and pujas. When building a house, a conch may be placed under the first brick, and once the building is complete, another is kept inside. At the end of life, a conch is blown in one's honor as a final call to guide the soul on its journey to the afterlife. Thus, the shankha's warm resonance accompanies us throughout our cycle of human life.





EDUCATION

I Took a Gap Year in College

A break in secular academics added great depth to my brahmacharya stage of life

BY RUTVIJ HOLAY

BRAHMACHARYA, “DIVINE CONDUCT,” IS CONSIDERED TO BE THE first, or “student phase” of a Hindu’s life, marked by learning and restraint. In a world where education is considered to be a degree, most Hindus assume that college fulfills brahmacharya.

In reality, however, education is to brahmacharya as exercise is to yoga. While the former is certainly a major benefit of the latter, mere education cannot make a brahmachari. Even celibacy alone does not constitute brahmacharya. It is so much more: self-discipline, spiritual knowledge and knowing oneself. It is to speak truth and personify peace as directed in the *Upanishads*. All this has appealed to me



COURTESY RUTVIJ HOLAY

since the age of six.

As I grew and learned more, my need to embody brahmacharya grew as well. This desire came to a head in 2023, as floods diverted a Vishwa Hindu Parishad project I was sent on from Uttarakhand to Kerala. I had the chance to spend significant amounts of time with sannyasis like Swami Advayananda of Chinmaya Mission, who had, through years of effort, become lifetime brahmacharis. Within a day, he was able to take the clutter in my mind, and help me organize it in order to ask questions in a more efficient manner—a skill that has helped me both in spirituality and the material world, one more valuable than anything else I have been taught in the latter.

That meeting stayed with me: if a day living amongst brahmacharis could do so much, how much more could I gain by staying longer? By the time I returned to the US, I had worked up the courage to tell my mother I wished to defer my admission to Stanford, and instead pursue brahmacharya. After days of continuous, passionate discussion, a compromise was reached: I would complete one year at Stanford alongside a summer internship in order to fully understand what I might throw away, and if I still wanted to go, a gap year could be considered after my freshman year.

True to my word, I completed an enjoyable internship at a venture capital fund after freshman year at Stanford, taking courses mainly in computer science and economics. To my parents’ dismay, however, my desire to study our shastras in a traditional manner had not diminished whatsoever. While they were never happy about my leaving, what eventually convinced them to oppose it less vehemently, ironically, was a talk with one of Stanford’s academic counselors. Students are required to talk with them before taking a leave of absence, and my parents hoped that she would “knock some sense” into me. Instead, she pointed out that students who took gap years at any point in their college career tended to have higher grades and better job placements, and so wholeheartedly encouraged me to go.

While convincing my parents, I had also begun the process of creating a tentative plan, including finding an ashram to study in. With the help of monks at Kauai’s Hindu Monastery, I found a place to start my journey in Kerala at the ashram of Swami Chidananda Puri. The ashram seemed to have more of an intellectual focus (in line with my personality), was smaller and so would allow me to directly interact with Swamiji. Further, I had previously worked in the area and knew the local language.

The rest of my trip was rather unplanned: I would stay in Kerala as long as I “felt like it,” and go to other ashrams where I had made contacts as circumstances demanded. The only other set part of my agenda was to visit the Kumbh Mela at Prayag. The idea was that, since swamis from all of Bharat would come, I could perhaps learn more in one month at the Kumbh than I might learn in a year of wandering Bharat. Logically, this plan bordered on foolhardy. Looking back, however, I feel that by proceeding anyway,

.....

Meeting the guru: (left) Rutvij sits with Swami Chidananda Puri, an exponent of Advaita Vedanta; (above right) the Kiratamurti Mandir, honoring a form of Shiva, serves as the center of the ashram. Rutvij prayed here every morning and returned in the evening to meditate in His presence



COURTESY JUSTIDIAL.COM

I fell back on the Divine and let it guide my journey, which made it more fulfilling than anything I could plan.

Advaitashramam: Kolathur, Kerala, India

So, I wrapped up my summer internship and took a flight to Kozhikode, from where I was picked up and taken to the village of Kolathur, around two hours away. From what I understand, this is one of the few remote areas left in a rapidly industrializing Kerala. There were only three places of interest in the area: the ashram, a mandir to Shiva, and a Narasimha Mandir with a kund (holy pool) in which I bathed daily.

Besides that, the area was surrounded by forest, at least from an American perspective. It provided a certain serenity, waking up to the sounds of birds and seeing the rays of sun break through the trees. At the same time, for me it was scary, too, living in a forest. Creatures—from mosquitoes to spiders the size of your hand—would easily find their way into our sleeping quarters.

The first things that we were told to do at the ashram were those

that would add a certain amount of basic discipline into our lives: how to cut vegetables, how to clean and how to wash our clothes. It was the last one that was the most difficult for me, given that, living in the US, I had never even seen clothes being washed by hand, rather than in a washing machine.

For around a month, Swamiji would come up to me, smell my clothes, and issue an assessment ranging from “terrible” to “bad, but not as bad as before.” After a month of trial and error, I was finally able to get my clothes to a decent level of cleanliness. From this, I was to learn two lessons. First, just as the clothes returned to their natural state of cleanliness by removing the dirt from them, we would return to our natural state of godliness by removing the dirt from our mind: desire, anger, greed, attachment, ego and jealousy. Second, considering how much bigger and more complex we are compared to a piece of cloth, if it took me a month to clean a shirt, it could take me years to cleanse myself. These incidents alone, perhaps, disprove one of the criticisms of the ascetic life—no matter how one views it, it is not easy.

Studying Vedanta at the Ashram

In our studies, alongside me there were two other brahmacharis: one from Kerala named Sanju, and the other from Tamil Nadu named Bijin. Given Swamiji’s fame in Kerala, it would not have been hard for him to do some advertising, similar to how even schools as prestigious as Harvard do in the United States, and attract many more students. Instead, Swamiji let students come naturally, with me finding him online, Sanjuji being a devotee from childhood, and Bijinji coming on a recommendation from Mata Amritanandamayi. It was a reflection of part of the first verse of the *Ishopanishad*: “Do not desire, for what wealth is one’s own?”

As we began going through the content, what also struck me, especially in contrast to the industrialized American education system, was the personalized education we received. Given that I already knew Sanskrit at a basic level, instead of starting from the very beginning with everyone else, I was told to bring my Sanskrit up to a level from which I could fully understand the shastras by studying the *Laghu Siddhanta Kaumudi*, a relatively short text on Sanskrit grammar. In order to support my studies, Swami Chidananda Puri and the other sannyasis would spend hours answering my questions

Heart of Brahmacharya

EVEN A CURSORY LOOK AT THE ANCIENT VOWS THAT YOUNG Hindus took shows how much stricter brahmacharya was than a modern Western celibate life. One of these vows, it seems, was repeated by the students at the gurukuls, and immortalized in the *Taittiriyaopanisad*: “I will speak *rta*, I will speak truth. May Brahman protect me; may Brahman protect my guru. Om! Peace! Peace! Peace!”

While the first two lines reinforce the idea of discipline and restraint (though *rta* is a term that requires a much longer explanation, and thus is best left untranslated), Adi Shankaracharya’s explanation of this *Upanishad* heavily elaborates upon the last line, noting that “peace” is repeated thrice to prevent obstacles to the brahmachari’s education—once for the peace of the Earth (such as the prevention of natural disasters), once for the peace of all living beings,

and once for peace inside one’s self. In other words, the brahmachari was meant to be the personification of peace itself.

The *Chandogyopanishad* supplements this understanding even further, increasingly praising brahmacharya by noting that what has been called sacrifice, worship, silence, indestructibility, amongst others, is indeed brahmacharya. According to Adi Shankaracharya, the reason for this is that brahmacharya is the means to achieve these ideals.

It is the brahmachari, who having sacrificed his desire for a family (if he takes a lifetime vow), who may truly be said to perform a yajna, and can thus gain the fruits of such actions.

It is only the brahmachari, having won over his desires and quieted his mind, that may engage in true contemplation about the atma, and can thus reach the quintessence of mauna. It is by the effective use of such tools, then, that the brahmachari will attain Brahmaloka, a fruit of penance that is perhaps only secondary to moksha itself, which is why brahmacharya is called the path of the two oceans.



COURTESY RUTVIJ HOLAY



COURTESY ADVAITHASHRAMAM

on grammar, with their knowledge being supplemented by shastris from Bengaluru as well. Such a level of support for students to go above and beyond is something I've never seen in Western education.

At the same time, where I fell behind, I was provided support as well. While I speak Malayalam, being Marathi, my skills are nowhere near those of a native speaker, and so, to ensure that I understood everything, Swamiji would often repeat the same information in English whenever he saw a blank look on my face. Swamini Sivananda Puri would spend around an hour after each class ensuring that I understood everything.

With this system, we slowly made progress on the academic side. In two months I covered the *Laghu Siddhanta Kaumudi* and texts that provide an introduction to Vedanta philosophy: *Tattvabodha*, *Manishapancakam*, *Sadhanapancakam* and *Drk Drshya Viveka*. The *Ishopanishad*, with commentary by Adi Shankaracharya, was

assigned by Swamiji to me personally to give a taste of the heart of Vedanta before I returned to college, so I could decide whether I wished to study further.

It was through this studying that I rooted out many of the fundamental misconceptions about the Vedanta school in Hinduism. Once, for example, we read the *Tattvabodha*, in which we discussed the *karanasharira*, the root of our gross and subtle bodies, purely composed of maya and described as unexplainable. When Swamiji said that this is because maya is not real, I—seeking to confirm what I had previously studied—asked whether that means that maya is false. Swamiji responded, “No! It is just not real.” In other words, maya is unexplainable precisely because it is neither real nor false.

I had always been under the impression that Advaita Vedanta views the world as an illusion, which leads to the question of why we do anything if everything is false. It was only after I came to this ashram, however, that I realized Vedantins do not deny the world. They hold that it is not wrong to say that what we do in the world matters, at least for our own spiritual journey, if nothing else. It is just that when we become tired of the gross world, there is a deeper truth, and a deeper satisfaction, waiting for us.

It was also through staying at the ashram that I understood the proper way to study the shastras. Initially, I would try to read them as one may read Harry Potter: finishing a page in less than a minute, with the conception that the truths of the texts can be understood by merely looking at the words on the page or hearing them spoken. When I didn't understand the shastras after reading them at home, I would assume it was because of a lack of Sanskrit knowledge and go online to learn more Sanskrit before attempting the texts again, often to no avail.

When Swamiji started teaching the *Ishopanishad*, however, he took two or three hours on merely the first *shloka*. First, he broke down the grammar of the *shloka*, explaining its meaning, and then going into the commentary on it. Then the class was dismissed, and we were told to spend some of our free time meditating on the verse and its meaning. The process was frustrating at first, but eventually

Nature and learning: (clockwise from left) The serene leaf-covered kulam (temple pond) where Advaitashramam students take their daily bath; Rutvij with Swamini Sivananda Puri (right side in photo), Swamiji's first disciple from whom Rutvij learned the introductory Advaita scriptures; Swami Chidananda conducts a Vedanta class

it revealed secrets in the text that I would not have even imagined existed. It was as if I was slowly peeling the layers of an onion, getting to subtler and subtler meanings in the hopes of one day reaching the heart of the text, and reveling in it.

It is incidents like this that show the dangers of studying without a guru. As Yama warned Nachiketa all those years ago, “The path is as hard to travel as walking upon a knife's edge.” This is, of course, because of the usual pitfalls of the senses, but also because the scriptures are difficult to understand. There is so much misinformation in the world that it is very easy for a well-meaning person to get distracted by a misunderstanding. At least at the beginning, it is essential that we have a guru who is able to guide us through the method of reading and understanding the scriptures, so as to avoid any wrong turns.

Perhaps even more important, however, is that the guru, rather than just being a knower of the shastras, may be said to be the very incarnation of them. It is one thing to merely hear the line “Do not desire, for what wealth is one's own,” and discuss it academically. It is another to understand what that looks like. That can only be seen in a guru. Just as for a student aspiring to become a doctor, no amount of hearing about the doctor's job can match shadowing a doctor, so too do descriptions of liberation fall short of seeing someone who is liberated.

Such people not only allow you to see an ideal to aspire to, but also become one with whom you can be completely honest. While, since coming to Advaitashramam, I never wanted to leave, I was not fully sure if Swami Chidananda Puri was meant to be my guru. I wanted to see others and confirm the right path for me while attending the Kumbh Mela. I told him this, and where others may have been offended, he gave his blessing to the idea, with some caveats.

First, he recommended I go to Gujarat, where his guru's guru stayed, and meditate there in isolation before leaving for the Kumbh. Second, at the Kumbh, he asked that I see as much as I can, the good and the bad, and learn to accept everything without judging. If I find a guru that I feel is a better fit, then it would be better to go with them. If not, and if I wish to continue my studies, then I am always welcome back at Advaitashramam. As I left for Gujarat, Swamiji called me to his room. Instead of asking for any guru *dakshina* (monetary donation), he instead tried to give me money, noting that, since I would be alone, I should have something to protect myself should the worst come to pass. In this moment alone, all the warnings I had received about greedy swamis received a fitting reply.

Conclusion

Clearing misconceptions was one of many benefits of this journey. The greatest benefit, however—the one that I am most certain will not go away—is peace. I can fully surrender to Ishwara, leaving my plans to the Divine, and know that I will be fully taken care of. Though it may not be as accessible in the cities, there is peace in knowing that a properly dharmic way of living, of learning, is not dead, and is something that we can bring back in our lifetimes. Most importantly, from all that I learned with Swami Chidananda Puri and the other swamis I met throughout Bharat, I gained a certain amount of peace in understanding the path to living a meaningful life.

It is such understanding that is needed more than ever, given how



COURTESY RUTVIJ HOLAY

clearly the life of the average student has failed to create a dharmic society. In the US college system as of 2023, 64.7% of students reported feeling lonely. At least 60% met the criteria for at least one mental illness, with 15% considering suicide. Interestingly, the more education one has, the worse the problem becomes, with only 55% of community college students suffering from mental illnesses as opposed to nearly 70% of bachelor's degree students. One only needs to take a glance at society to see even more problems.

Given that the goal of the Western education system—accepted by most teachers, administrators and parents—is to create a strong citizen who will contribute to society, to dharma, it is clear that the current system has failed. As Hindus, we are fortunate to have been given an alternative through ashrams and gurukuls—one that will shape our youth into well-rounded human beings, and be a medicine to the myriad of problems that we currently face. They can provide not only knowledge of the material world, but of ourselves to help us gain peace and fulfillment by abiding in our true nature.

It will likely be difficult for parents to send their child to a gurukul for 12 years (yet), or to even have them do something like I did. But taking a gap year after high school, or at least just two months in the summer, can produce a much better human being. It can ground them in their faith as they leave for college. Throughout Bharat, thousands of ashrams, mathas and gurukulas are ready and able to offer such a program. A better path awaits—it is up to us to walk it.

These are incomplete reflections on my journey in Bharat, with significant portions (such as my isolation in Gujarat and time at the Kumbh Mela) cut both for the sake of brevity and due to the private nature of certain conversations. Readers interested in additional details may email rutvijholay@gmail.com.



ANCIENT CITIES

Kashi Reimagined: a Corridor through Time



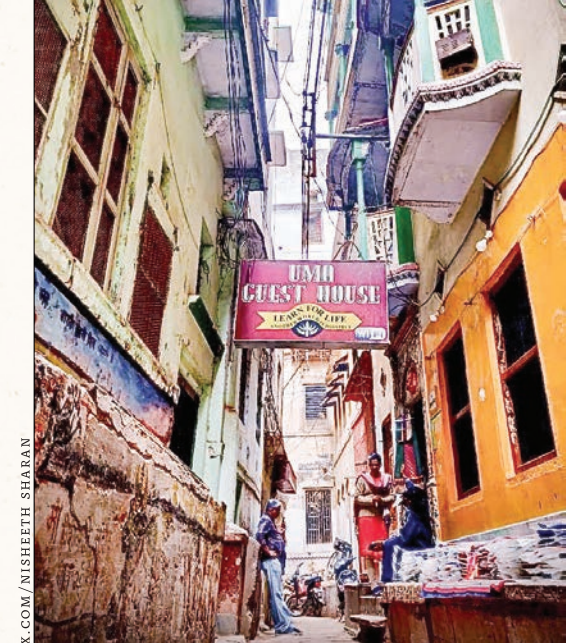
An ambitious new walkway links the Vishwanath Temple to Mother Ganga, raising questions of what is gained and what is lost.

By ANURADHA GOYAL, INDIA

ON A BOAT RIDE ON THE GANGA RIVER at Varanasi, I sat nostalgically observing the ghats and the vibrant life on them. I have been visiting this ancient city since childhood and have vivid memories of Ganga, its ghats, its boat rides and the air of divinity that they all carry. This time, the riverfront was dramatically different near Manikarnika ghat, as the new path to Kashi Vishwanath Temple has been laid. A massive staircase leads to a majestic gateway. It provides direct access to the temple from the river Ganga, enabling people to take a dip and do the darshan without wending through narrow lanes (“gullies”) to reach the temple.

Visually, the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor is a 21st-century stamp on the age-old crescent-shaped ghats, right in the middle of an old city best known for its narrow gullies leading to the ghats of Ganga on one end, and the main road leading to the rest of the city on the other. In a way, these gullies are as much a cultural heritage of Varanasi as the ghats and innumerable temples located in and around the ghats. To me, they are like the visual version of Indian scriptures. Each narrow street is a story in itself that leads you to another story. A detour will take you to yet another story. They are mazes that you can enjoy losing yourself in. A popular saying is, “Gaya Pinde, Prayag Munde and Kashi Dhoonde.” Connecting three important pilgrimage cities in India, it says that one goes to Gaya for Pinda Dana (the post-death ritual); to Prayag for Mundan (tonsuring of the hair); and to Kashi for Dhoonde, (searching), where one gets lost in the narrow lanes with multi-story houses on each side.

The corridor project was inaugurated with much fanfare in late 2021, after two years of construction, at a cost of US\$385 million. It increased the area of the temple complex from a mere 3,000 square feet to about 500,000 square feet that can accommodate upwards of 50,000 people. Roughly 1,400 homes and businesses around the temple were relocated to clear space, tempering the network



of interconnected gullies on the ghats. The government and the authorities described it as a major development project that would improve the experience of Varanasi.

Visitor Reactions

The corridor also drew criticism, most notably for the removal of numerous ancient temples to clear land for the project. Several of these smaller shrines held significance for certain yatras and rituals. During my recent two-month stay in Varanasi, I spoke with a wide range of people to hear their anonymous views on the project. Opinions, I found, are divided right down the middle.

Those who have visited the city only after the inauguration of the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor tend to admire it greatly. There are many more tourists visiting the sacred city after the corridor came up, casting a fresh spotlight on the city that was always atop devout Hindus’ pilgrimage lists. A big publicity campaign has brought the social-media-savvy younger generation to the city in hordes. Today you can see them on ghats, on boats, at famous eateries and in temples, shooting reels and adding to the euphoria of visiting Kashi.

People who had visited earlier, and see the clear difference between before and after, hold ambivalent views. On the positive side, many admire and appreciate the clean, open environment of the newly built corridor leading to the temple. The shrine itself has remained untouched. It stands as it was—built in 1780 by the queen of Malwa, Rani Ahilya Bai Holkar, and later adorned with gold by Maharaja Ranjit Singh of Punjab in 1835. More recently an anonymous devotee from South India donated additional gold for the temple. The area around the shrine has been cleared to form a vast courtyard, offering worshipers an unobstructed view of the temple. Two additional courtyards now extend the approach from the Ganga, creat-

ing broad, open avenues that guide pilgrims gently from the riverbanks into the heart of the temple precincts. Within the premises, new facilities have been added, including guest houses, eateries, bookshops, virtual reality darshan and secure locker options. Two expansive multi-purpose halls, called Trimbakeshwar Halls, are also part of the complex. These can be rented for private, religious, cultural or even corporate events near the temple.

New facilities include buying VIP tickets, called Sugam Darshan or easy darshan, that allow you to escape the long queues for a fee, which at the time of writing is US\$3.40. This includes a shastri as your guide, a small box of prasad and a locker for your electronic items. Foreigners pay US\$6.80 for the same and additionally get an *angavastram* (shawl-like garment) after passport verification. There is also a wheelchair service for the elderly and disabled. Walking from Godowlia towards Bansphatak, you often see wheelchair-bound devotees being guided to the darshan. This has been a real help, as navigating the narrow gullies was never easy for seniors or those with mobility challenges. The lanes often turn slippery after rains or when water is carried from the Ganga for the abhishek of Baba Vishwanath.

One point that often goes unnoticed is the greater sense of security provided by having multiple routes. Today, the temple can be accessed from three sides: the traditional Vishwanath Gully, the new gateway from the Ganga side, and a gate from the main road near Bansphatak. While there has not been a stampede here in recent times, relying on a single narrow entryway could have proved disastrous if one ever occurred. People also recall that many of the smaller temples were once poorly maintained—some unclean, some even without worship. Much of that filth has now been cleared, and after all, who doesn’t appreciate cleanliness!

Transformation: (clockwise from left page) Bird’s-eye view of the whole corridor; steps from the river to entrance gate; this narrow lane channeled hundreds of thousands of people to the temple prior to 2020

On the downside, many pilgrims miss the informality of earlier visits. Before the 1990s, there were no checks at all to enter the temple. Later, some minor security measures were introduced, and once mobile phones became common, they were no longer allowed inside. But that was about it—there were no stringent checks. Devotees could stroll down the narrow Vishwanath Gully, slip in through the small gate, offer prayers or do abhishek, visit the smaller shrines, stop at the Annapurna Temple next door, and remain as long as they wished—or at least as long as the crowds of the moment allowed.

No one likes to be treated with suspicion when visiting the “Lord of the World.” The newly introduced security checks and long queues feel unwelcome and irritating. What devotees resent most is that darshan lasts no more than one or two seconds. Male and female staff stand on stools, literally pushing pilgrims forward the moment they reach the sanctum. For those who have traveled long distances for this sacred sight, it is deeply disappointing. Many also regret that sitting within the premises is no longer allowed, even though there is now more open space than ever. In practice, you are limited to a quick glance at the Shivalinga before being ushered away.

There is, of course, a facility to offer pujas and book Rudrabhishekas, with details listed on the temple’s website. Most of these must be reserved in advance, depending on availability. Still, for a pilgrim who simply wants to sit quietly, meditate, or spend time in the temple’s presence, such lingering is now discouraged.



Resident Reactions

What do the Kashi Vasis—residents of Varanasi—feel about this sweeping change that has so dramatically affected tourism in their city? They, too, are ambivalent. On the one hand, more tourists generally means more money in the hands of the locals, since the pilgrim economy is largely in their hands, with big hotels located away from the nerve center of activities—the ghats. Locals also appreciate the government for major improvements in infrastructure such as more reliable power supply, which used to be extremely erratic, and newly upgraded roads. Traffic now flows much better, with certain areas marked pedestrian, some restricted to cycle rickshaws and others allocated for e-rickshaws, which are key modes of transport in the old city. As in the rest of Uttar Pradesh, the law-and-order situation has improved dramatically, allowing people to move about and do business with a lot more confidence. Together, these changes brought by the corridor project have offered residents a better daily quality of life and created new opportunities for business and employment.

Residents also acknowledge that the city was in dire need of cleaning. Decades of accumulated garbage surrounded ancient temples, and tackling it would not have been possible without such a massive effort. The scale of the effort is also visible in the newly laid underground sewerage system, which has left the streets cleaner and easier to walk through. Bright wall paintings now line many lanes, adding splashes of color and offering scenes that reflect a quintessentially Banarasi character. My observation is that while authorities can take up cleaning efforts, it is the people of the city—and the visitors—to keep it clean. Both must recognize the spiritual significance

Corridor scenes: (clockwise from above left) One of the gates welcoming pilgrims into the Vishwanath Temple's new courtyard; multiple security checkpoints; artwork is projected onto the corridor walls at night, and a pillar of light rises behind the temple; vibrant paintings adorn walls next to the walking path; architectural model of project with key components such as a new hospice for the elderly and infirm, pilgrim dormitories and exhibition halls

of cleanliness. Yet there remains a gap, as it is still common to see garbage casually thrown wherever convenient.

As devotees of Mahadev, residents do have concerns, mostly about systems and processes at the temple. Many, especially the older generation, have a routine of taking a dip in Gangaji and then having darshan of Baba Vishwanath at dawn—sometimes as early as 4am. Their day began only after the *snana* and darshan. Now, after bathing in the Ganga, they must pass through security checks where they may be physically touched. Yet taking a dip in the Ganga is meant to purify oneself before entering the sacred *dham*, or abode of Shiva. The Sanskrit word for this is *shaucha* (purity), and any kind of touch is seen as *ashaucha* (impurity). An age-old tradition, once integral to the rhythm of life in Kashi, is thus being interrupted. Devotees also resent that the offerings they bring are taken away by the security staff and handled casually. Not being allowed to place the offerings themselves has left many feeling hurt and disappointed.

Additionally, long queues at the temple are not practical for local residents, who cannot afford to spend hours waiting. A small window of time has been allocated for locals to visit the temple through a gate but many find it difficult to fit into that schedule because of personal and professional constraints. Residents of Kashi have been asking for special access, suggesting that their Aadhaar cards could be used to verify local status. I under-



stand that this could open a window for misuse, but automation—applied wisely—could offer a workable, compassionate solution.

Most people appreciate the building of the corridor, even though it came at the cost of some old temples. What they miss, however, is the earlier sense of informality and intimacy in visiting their beloved Vishwanath. The air of divinity is replaced with an air of authority. Yet, with a few thoughtful adjustments, I am sure the temple trust could restore a more relaxed, devotion-centered environment.

My Recent Explorations

In my own visits to the temple, I felt that the positive *bhava*—the uplifting emotion—was often overshadowed by the tedious entrance process. It is understandable that crowds must be managed so everyone can have darshan. Yet even during quieter times, the practice of quickly pushing devotees away continues, almost in a robotic manner. Flower offerings are tossed casually into a tub. It would feel more appropriate if an archaka received them, or at least if they were handled with greater respect, so that sentiments are not hurt. Or, perhaps devotees, with deep devotion in their hearts, could be allowed to offer flowers to an alternate Shivalinga.

I also looked through visitor reviews on travel sites, and many pilgrims echoed the same concerns about insensitive behavior and lack of clear information. The official temple website, too, needs a better user inter-



face. Ideally, it should provide information in all major Indian as well as international languages. At the time of writing, only English and Hindi are available.

Around the temple, the road from Godowliya chowk to Dashashwamedha ghat has been made pedestrian, giving people more room to walk comfortably. Only two-wheelers are allowed, and the stretch is lined with large shops, with smaller hawkers and stalls in front. What was once a haphazard scene has been reorganized with coordinated signboards in matching colors and designs, making it more pleasing to the eye. Pilgrims now find it easier to reach the main ghat, where thousands—sometimes even lakhs—gather for the famous Ganga Arati. Until about 15 years ago, this dramatic ritual was unique to Dashashwamedha, but now nearly every ghat hosts its own aarti. The new platforms and decorations for these ceremonies have become a defining feature of the ghat skyline, especially striking when seen from a boat on the Ganga.

Near the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor, I

wandered through the bylanes of Assi Ghat at the southern end of the old city. It is almost a ritual for me to visit the home of Goswami Tulsidas ji, his Akhada monastery and Lolark Kund. In earlier years, I would ask around for directions, sometimes navigating from the city side and sometimes from the ghats. Getting lost in the lanes of Kashi was part of the experience. This time, however, I encountered sandstone boards pointing to these landmarks. Similar markers now stand outside nearly all prominent temples and sites of interest. You can regard them as excellent guides, or as a lost opportunity to interact with the city and its people by asking the way.

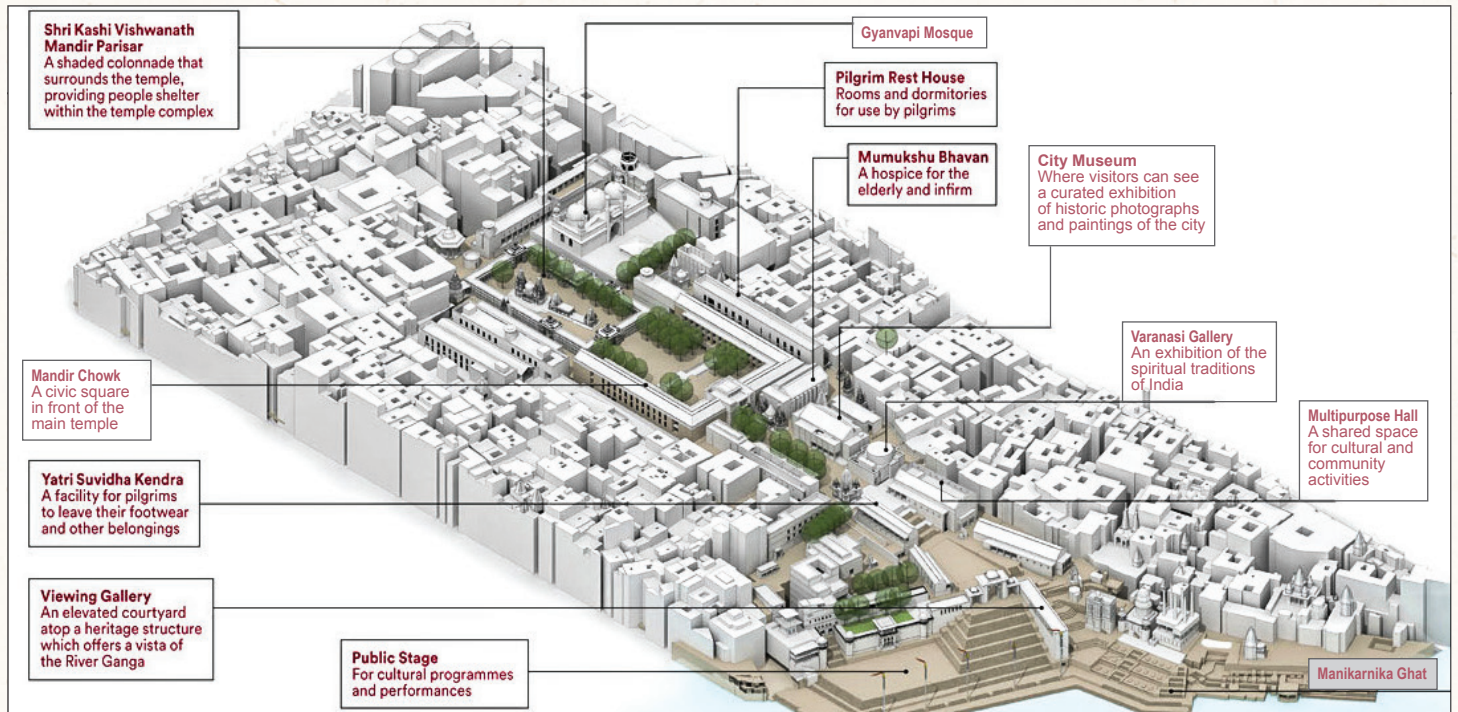
As I write, a 2.5-mile-long cable car project called the Kashi Ropeway is underway to ease urban transit. It will connect the city's main railway station with Godowliya Chowk, an area that is otherwise very congested. This will allow visitors to bypass the city and reach the ghats directly from the station. With about 150 ten-passenger gondolas, it will be the first ropeway in India built for public transportation and only the third of its

kind worldwide. In addition, another corridor project is being planned around the Kaal Bhairava Temple.

Conclusion

Overall, I believe any project of this magnitude is bound to have two sides. Some of the criticism around the inauguration of the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor pointed to political gains for the ruling party. But that was short-lived, quickly forgotten after the elections. Large public projects inevitably reward those who initiate them, while upsetting those who missed the chance to shape long-lasting changes.

Ancient cities tend to contain eternity within them through the lived experiences of generations who reside there or visit as pilgrims. There are rare points in their timeline that see significant changes that alter their geography and leave an irreversible impact. The building of this corridor is one such moment, coming 239 years after Kashi Vishwanath Temple was last rebuilt, and once again bringing a fresh focus to the city.



INTERVIEW

“Siva and Parvati Are the Same”

With Lakshmi Akka

BY ERICA BASSANI

IN THE SPRING OF 2024, I WAS IN TRUVANNAMALAI, INDIA, KNOWN as the place where the saint Ramana Maharshi lived most of his life. After dwelling at the feet of holy Mount Arunachala for some months, I was sure there was an unexplored female side to discover. Since everybody for centuries worshiped Arunachala as an emanation of Siva, I was looking for His counterpart, Parvati, which must be there, too. But where to find Her? It was then that my dear friend Ambika told me about Lalita Devi's temple and Lakshmi Akka. A few days later, we were on our way to interview her. After meditating in the temple, we were welcomed in Lakshmi Akka's home. She was sitting on a wicker chair, and couldn't move much due to strong knee pain. I knew it was because of all the walking she did around Arunachala for so many years. Although she doesn't normally give interviews, she was extremely kind and allowed me to ask her some questions. The only thing she refused was to take a picture of her! She has such a kind gaze and elegant figure that it is really a pity not to share it, but it was her strong will that her appearance not be revealed. For 22 years at Ramanasramam, Lakshmi Akka took care of the room housing Ramana Maharshi's murti, did all the preparations for Navaratri every year and translated the official chanting from Tamil to Telugu.

Lakshmi Akka, why did you leave your home at eighteen to come to Tiruvannamalai?

As a young woman, suddenly in my mind these questions arose: What is life? What am I doing? The idea of going to spend some time in an ashram became stronger and stronger. I heard about Ramanasramam from my family doctor, who was a devotee. So, I came. At that time here in Tiruvannamalai there were few people, and everybody was asking me: Why did you come here? Why are you not married? I had no answer to offer them! And nobody was helping me. I didn't know what was happening to my life, and often I found myself crying. The first three months were painful, but then Bhagavan (Ramana Maharshi) arranged everything for me to stay.

I imagine you found a place to stay. What was your day like?

I was sleeping in a very small room at that time. Sometimes snakes would come in; so I'd go out! The water was often coming in. A friend came to see me and when she saw the room she cried! "How can you live in such a room?" she asked me in tears. I told her I was happy there. Every day I was going for *giripradakshina*, the walk of 14 km all around Mount Arunachala. I woke up at 2am, took a little coffee on the way and went barefoot—every day for twenty-two years. On monthly Shivaratri, I'd do it twice, morning and evening, and on Mahashivaratri I'd go five times in a day. Many people were



offering food on the way, so much so that my bag was always full. It was not like now, full of houses and shops. There were few people back then and beautiful sounds, wonderful smells. I was mad with happiness. Arunachala was giving me darshan every day.

What was your inner process as you were devoting yourself to Arunachala every day in such a dedicated manner?

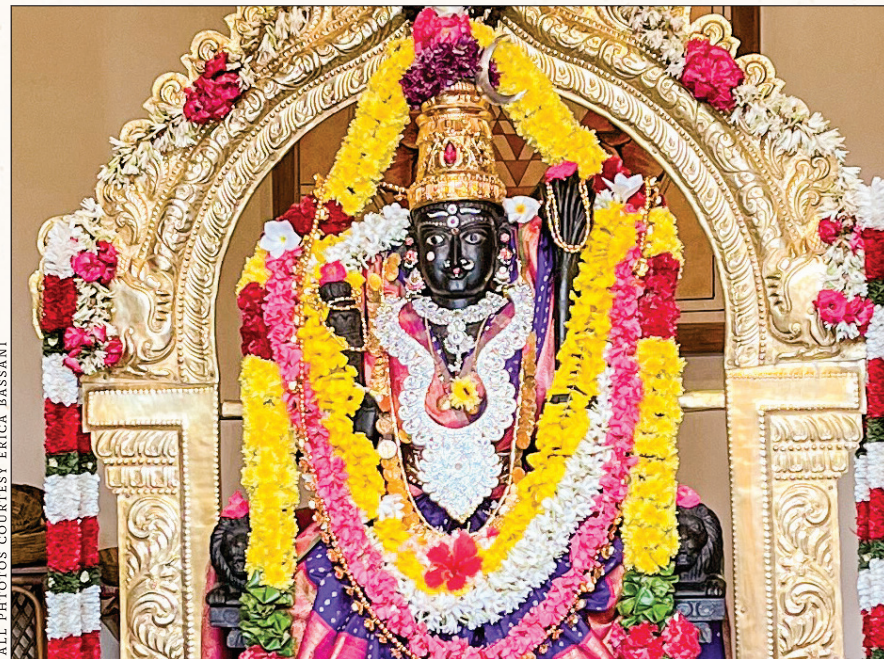
As a *sadhaka*, I was not after my own desires. More and more, my only interest was Bhagavan's wish. Whatever Bhagavan wanted for me, I was happy to accept. It's a full surrender. *Sadhakas* don't want anything. So, everything goes smoothly! You see, I came here and my family gave me no money. But here we go, fifty years later, everything was arranged for me. When the mind settles for peace; it becomes still. Whatever happens around, it doesn't change you inside. This is all a big *maya*. We don't know anything. He (Bhagavan) does. Erica, you didn't come here, some force brought you here. We are also not talking. People can laugh about this. It's just *ahamkara*, I-making. Everything is already finished. We are deluded people! Really. We think we are speaking now, and I am telling my story, but this is *maya*. Everything happens outside of our plans. I couldn't imagine that I would end up living here, you see. Somebody offered me this land. And so it is for everything, including you coming here today. I just see the supreme power of my guru, Ramana. We are blessed. Everything is the same. If you are rich or poor, if there is good food or not, if you have a big room or a small room, all is same. We are all the same. The differences that we see in the appearance, are just *prarabdha* (the karma of this lifetime).

Can you tell me more about pradakshina?

Each and every person that goes on pradakshina is after something. They want to succeed in their studies, or get married, or fix one problem or the other. On the opposite, the *sadhaka* goes on pradakshina to offer him or herself to the Guru. Bhagavan knows everything. So,



Lalita Devi darshan: (clockwise from left) Outside of Lalita Devi Temple in Tiruvannamalai town; closeup of Lalita Devi's glowing, flower-bedecked murti; central shrine housing the murti



ALL PHOTOS COURTESY ERICA BASSANI

So, the mountain symbolizes Siva, the divine Father; what about the Mother?

Siva-Parvati are the same. Arunachala is half Siva and half Parvati; it's both. I'm now going to show you a pradakshina map. You see, these are pictures I took of the different faces of Arunachala. The hill, according to where you are standing in the pradakshina, looks almost completely different. At the starting point of giripradakshina you see Arunachala as Nandi, the bull of Siva. And so on, it changes until you see also Parvati. Arunachala is the power that is containing shakti.

How did this Lalita Devi Temple come into being?

That is my uncle's service to Devi. This man supported me greatly. I always call him "uncle," but he was not my biological uncle, rather a friend of my grandfather. He was an army officer and was going around with guns. He was very much respected. He also left his family once his children were grown up and came to live at Arunachala. He protected me! I was in my twenties and you can imagine young men wanted me. But he was making everybody afraid so I could continue with my sadhana in peace. He was a very good man indeed. Also, I didn't want to show my beauty, so I made my hair shorter. I only wanted sadhana. If we come in total surrender, we are safe.

This uncle had darshan of Lalita Devi and I also wanted it, so he facilitated that for me. I lost touch with this world when I saw Her, She had ten arms and was an explosion of gold. It was very powerful. For two days I didn't move, and on the third day I came back to consciousness.

And after twelve years, we built the temple dedicated to Devi.

I am impressed by this big rock you have here in the living room. What's the story behind it?

Back in the time when I had just moved to this new place, the owner of the land came for a visit. This big rock was in the middle of the block and he asked me, what do you want to do with it? And I answered: leave it, Bhagavan will come. So, I put a little lamp and I left it there on the rock. After some time, my auto driver sculpted the statue of Bhagavan that you see on top of it, and offered it to me. What a work of devotion! So now I have Bhagavan sitting on a rock in my living room.

The Author: Erica Bassani is a copywriter, author and spiritual seeker since her early twenties. She's combined her highest passion with her deepest love by founding the Women Awakening Project (www.womenawakeningproject.com), a space to gather interviews with female masters of all spiritual traditions.

Combating Aging

How to stave off the debilities of old age

BY DR. VIRENDER SODHI

REUJENATION IS AN AYURVEDIC SPECIALTY WHOSE main purpose is to maintain health and virility as age advances. We all age, but we don't need in the process to enter an era of disease. We can age gracefully and avoid diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, autoimmune diseases, obesity and cancer.

Rejuvenation therapy, or *rasayana*, is one of the eight clinical specialties of ayurveda, which include internal medicine, surgery and ophthalmology. The purpose of *rasayana* is to prevent aging, impart longevity, build immunity against diseases, improve mental faculties and add vitality and luster. The *rasayana* treatment should be customized for each person, based on age, constitution, adaptability, body tissues, microcirculation, digestion and vitality. Methods include *achar rasayana* (behavioral modification), *pancha karma vigyan* (detoxification program) and the taking of specific herbs and preparations for the body. In modern herbology these *rasayana* herbs are referred to as *adaptogens* for their ability to adapt according to the body's needs.

The first task is to follow a good daily routine, called *dincharya* in ayurveda. Nine suggestions for a good daily routine are: 1) Wake up early, before sunrise. The sun activates the pineal gland to send messages to the pituitary gland, which in turn messages the adrenal glands to release adrenal cortisol, which wakes us from deep sleep. 2) Drink one to three glasses of warm water in the morning. This encourages peristalsis to begin and helps bowel evacuation. 3) Oral and physical hygiene is of utmost importance. A daily shower encourages digestive health and a healthy heart in addition to general cleanliness. Brushing and flossing are important for healthy teeth and gums. 4) Get in touch with your senses by massaging your body with oil customized for your body type. To sharpen your sense of smell, put a few drops of oil in your nose. Wash your eyes with triphala water. To make triphala water, open one capsule in one cup of distilled water, boil for ten minutes, then strain through a coffee filter. You can use an eye cup available at drug stores. Care for your ears by putting a couple of drops of olive oil in each, or dip a Q-tip in olive oil and lubricate your ears. 5) Walk daily for 30-45 minutes, depending upon your schedule, and meditate regularly. 6) Eat a healthy breakfast according to your constitution, adjusted as needed to correct any imbalances. 7) Fried, processed and artificially sweetened foods should be avoided at all times. 8) Sexual activity, considered sacred in ayurveda, is advised frequently in the winter, and at intervals of 3-4 days during other seasons. 9) Finish your day by calming the mind by meditation and breathing exercises.

Use a commonsense approach to your seasonal routine, or *ritu charya*. During the summer, dress lightly, eat fruits and vegetables and drink lots of fluids to prevent dehydration. During the winter, dress warmly. In particular, keep your vital organs, such as the heart and lungs, warm. Eat more nuts and seeds to get extra oils and energy for winter, and lubricate your skin with oils or cold creams. In spring, dress neither too light nor too heavy. It is the season for

allergies, so avoid mucus producing foods such as excessive sugar, dairy products, fried and heavy foods. Also, fasting on vegetables, fruits and rice proteins can be helpful. Autumn is considered best for internal cleansing.

Over time, we accumulate toxic materials in our bodies that lead to diseases. We may eat properly, do our yoga, exercise and meditate, but still not avoid this accumulation. This is why the *pancha karma* cleansing routine is advised. These treatments mimic the body's natural ways of detoxification. There are three phases: *poorva karma*, preparation for detoxification; *pancha karma* itself, involving five methods of cleansing; and *pashchtya karma* to help restore the function of the body to its natural state with rejuvenating ayurvedic herbs called *rasayana* herbs.

The following are the principal *rasayana* herbs and preparations. **Ashwagandha** (*Withania somnifera*): Research on ashwagandha has shown it to be a stress adaptogen, to promote healing and to have diuretic and anti-cancer properties. I have used ashwagandha extensively in my practice for insomnia, fatigue, stress, depression, anxiety and cancer. It can also be used as an adjuvant in chemotherapy and radiation treatment. **Amla** (*Emblca officinalis*): Amla is an excellent rejuvenator. It has power-

ful antioxidant properties and counters the toxicity of heavy metals. It also provides protective properties after one has been exposed to toxic or carcinogenic chemicals. It has powerful anti-cancerous properties and, like ashwagandha, has been used in cancer therapy to cut down the side effects of chemotherapy and radiation. **Sitawari** (*Asparagus racemosus*) has tonic, adaptogenic, alterative (curative) and aphrodisiac activities. It is used to treat debility and chronic diseases like infertility, impotence, menopause, lung abscesses and chronic fevers. **Triphala** (a combination of *Terminalia chebula*, *Terminalia billirica* and *Emblca officinalis*): Triphala is another prized adaptogen. The combined herbs are synergistic and have digestive and eliminative actions. It has anti-parasitic, anti-yeast, antibacterial and antihistaminic properties. It improves the flow of bile, lowers cholesterol and can be used as adjuvant in chemotherapy and radiation treatments. **Shilajit-mumiyo** (mineral pitch) is a rich source of natural minerals. Russian athletes used it as non-steroidal body builder and a stamina enhancer. Ayurvedic medicine considers it as an aphrodisiac, a tonic for the kidneys and prostate. It helps with benign prostate enhancement and is an immune enhancer. **Pippali** (*Piper longum*): Pippli helps in digestion, enhances acid and enzyme secretions. It significantly enhances the absorption of nutrients, herbs and drugs and has shown anti-allergic, anti-asthmatic and anti-parasitic actions.

Thus, by eating well, following a good daily and seasonal routine, occasionally undergoing a cleansing regimen and following up with the right rejuvenative herbs, you can optimize your health as you age.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Virender Sodhi holds an M.D. (Ayurveda) from India and a N.D. from Bastyr College of Naturopathic Medicine, USA. Web: www.ayurvedicscience.com. His newest book, Free Medicine, Your Body, a Natural Pharmacy, is now available on Amazon.

Hindu Heritage Endowment

You Can Help Support the Monks

The monastery's introductory video states it well: "Tropical rainforests, soaring cliffs, cerulean seas, cascading waterfalls. This remote island is home to Kauai's Hindu Monastery, a center of global outreach for Hinduism and intense spiritual practice leading to experience of the Divine within all."

Kauai, to say the obvious, is a beautiful tropical island. The Hawaiian archipelago is the most remote land mass in the world—2,450 miles to San Francisco, the nearest major city on the US mainland. The monastery experiences both the positive and challenging aspects of life on an island, including hurricanes, torrential rains and \$5 tomatoes.

The year 1992 brought the challenging side of tropical life to the forefront. Hurricane Iniki struck a direct hit on Kauai. The eye of this Category 4 hurricane went right over the monastery. Island wide, historic damage was wrought by that storm. The airport tower was damaged, and as a result only emergency evacuation and supply flights took place for months. Three monastery buildings were destroyed, along with 10,000 trees and plants. It was months before electricity and running water were restored. During that time, the monks used a raucous diesel generator to supply electricity and lived quite simply, baking bread for hungry neighbors and bathing in the river.

We are often asked, "How does the monastery support itself?" Our answer is that none of the monks works in the world; we are totally dependent on donations from supporters around the world. In 1992 we were cut off for a few months from the two ways donations were normally received: visitors and mail. More recently the monastery was strictly closed to visitors from March 2020 to June 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Clearly, during a major island crisis, our strong dependency on visitors and mail for income is not a stable financial situation. One of Gurudeva's responses to Hurricane Iniki was to focus on building endowments for the monastery. Thus, in 1997 he created the Kauai Aadheenam Monastic Endowment with the goal of creating a grant large enough to cover all the monks' living expenses. This fund will one day provide financial security for future hard times, but it has not yet reached that goal.

The description of the endowment explains, "Kauai Aadheenam Monastic Endowment provides for the regular monthly living expenses of the monastics. Monastic living expenses covered include regular monthly expenses for food, utilities, medical, personal items, automobile expenses including insurance, minor maintenance and equipment repair, housekeeping supplies, birds and animal care. This endowment also supports special items such as monastic travel, study courses, beginning training of young monks and bulk orders of clothing."

If you would like to directly help support the monks' living expenses, you can donate to the Kauai Aadheenam Monastic Endowment at www.hheonline.org/funds/fund_01.html. The endowment allows the monastery to use your funds as an investment and draw on the grant income over time. This is a way to donate and see your impact last into perpetuity.



The monks of Kauai's Hindu Monastery on the front steps of Iraivan Temple in 2025

JULY TO SEPTEMBER ENDOWMENT CONTRIBUTIONS

Kauai Aadheenam Monastic Endowment			Hindu Heritage Endowment Administrative Fund		
Ambika Alagere	US\$6.39		Sanjay & Nayna Patel	10.44	
Rajendra Giri	153.00				
Brijianand Jugurnauth	31.98		Kauai Aadheenam Religious Art and Artifacts Fund		
Kulagan Moonesawmy	12.80		Mary Etta Wagner	30.00	
Gowri Nadason	83.61				
Purany Ponniah	300.00		Murugan Temple of North America Pillaivar Shrine Fund		
Chamundi Sabanathan	78.75		Pathmini Saravanapavan	150.00	
Hitesvara Saravan	63.00				
Hridaya Sivalingam	42.00		Thank You Bodhinatha Fund		
Anonymous	123.00		Sumathi Raja Chanda	450.00	
Total	895.01		Lutcheemee Curpen	301.00	
			Peshanidevi Dandapani	108.00	
Iraivan Temple Endowment			Chellappa Deva	25.00	
Fidelity Charitable	216.00		Iryna Doroshenko	54.00	
DAFgiving360	100.00		Debashis Ghosh	300.00	
Fidelity Charitable	108.00		Brijianand Jugurnauth	23.40	
Eshwar & Aarati Bandlamudi	303.00		Gunasekaran Kandasamy	151.45	
Frank Burkhardt	30.00		Gaurav Malhotra	251.00	
Ajay & Jamuna Chalasani	200.00		Kulagan Moonesawmy	10.64	
Omkar Kodambari Chavan	63.00		Seedha Lutchmee Moonesawmy	10.64	
Michael Doyle	108.00		Logan Mootoosamy	50.00	
James Feketa	108.00		Abhilaash Abraams Nair	22.75	
Rajagopal Krishnan	324.00		Toshadevi Nataraj	100.00	
Vasaant Krishnan	90.00		Adi Natha	40.00	
Gowri Nadason	139.37		Mano Navaratnarajah	150.00	
Bhavani Nataraj	15.00		Cassan Pancham	1,000.00	
Gajanan Nataraj	18.00		Janaka Param	1,008.00	
Easvan Param	303.00		Nuckiren Pyeneeeandee	21.31	
Dolly & Asokan Paramanathan	502.00		Suresh Ramamurthi	108.00	
Louis Parrott	2.80		Chamundi Sabanathan	1,008.00	
Mohan & Rajalakshmi Sabapathy	600.00		Hitesvara Saravan	360.00	
Muthu & Nandini Senthilkumar	50.00		Pathmini Saravanapavan	400.00	
Pranavan Sinmayanandan	25.00		Aran Sendan	108.00	
Nutanaya Sivaceyon	22.75		Egambrum Sinsamy	106.38	
Guhan Yoganathan	216.00		Logavalli Sinsamy	106.38	
Other Donations	68,555.28		Nandi Devi Sivanathan	34.09	
Anonymous	341.00		Ravi Thaker	66.00	
Total	72,440.20		Viji Vasudevan	136.46	
			Mangaleswary Vimalanathan	50.00	
Kauai Aadheenam Annual Archana Fund			Anonymous	16,141.00	
Malvi Gandhi	75.00		Total	22,701.04	
Usharani Iswaran Magana	126.00		Murugan Temple Yalpanam Festival Fund		
Akash Katir	251.00		Pathmini Saravanapavan	150.00	
Gayathri Logathanan	22.69				
Dhanya Nadesan	250.00		Manitha Neyam Trust Fund		
Sadhunathan Nadesan	250.00		Anil Ananda Badhwar	30.00	
Subramaniam Pennathur	49.98		Pranavan Sinmayanandan	25.00	
Manishankar Sagum	8.54		Nutanaya Sivaceyon	68.40	
Makuteswara Srinivasan	100.00		Jeeva Velusaami	33.00	
Nandi Deva Sundaram	300.00		Anonymous	50.00	
Anonymous	33.00		Total	206.40	
Total	1,466.21		Taos Hanuman Fund		
			Anonymous	108.00	
Hinduism Today Lifetime Subscription Fund			Manjung Hindu Sabha Orphanage Fund		
Venkata Bhagavatula	249.00		Rajiv Verma	150.00	
James Donowick	299.00				
Rohit Reddy Gajjela	249.00		Himalayan Academy Publications Endowment		
Vidyadhishananda Giri	249.00		Fidelity Charitable	54.00	
Usharani Iswaran Magana	249.00		Vel Mahalingum	12.80	
Nageswara Rao M	249.00		Mano Navaratnarajah	225.00	
Tejwantee Meetoo	64.01		Total	291.80	
Bhaveshan Moorghen	8.54				
Jayendra & Sushma Patel	249.00		Spiritual Park of Mauritius Endowment		
S N Rajagopal	249.00		Anonymous	1,008.00	
Rangaswamy Sridharan	250.00				
Isha Milan Thaker	299.00				
Total	2,663.55				

JULY TO SEPTEMBER ENDOWMENT CONTRIBUTIONS

Kauai Aadheenam Yagam Fund		Anonymous	504.00	Namit & Nidhi Kapoor	501.00
Rajendra Giri	153.00	Total	928.04	Jaya Krishnamurthy	1,000.00
Nandi Devi Sivanathan	34.09				
Anonymous	33.00	Jaffna Kannathiddy Kali Kovil Endowment			
Total	220.09	Anonymous	108.00	Velika Lawrence	3.33
Yogaswami Hindu Girls' Home of Sittandy Endowment		Hindu Temple of the Woodlands Endowment			
Menaka Ganesathan	150.00	DAFgiving360	1,000.00	Ioana-Gabriela Manoliu	170.00
Gaurav Malhotra	520.00	Indra & R. Neelameggham	1,000.00	Umasankaran Mohambourame	153.00
Vimala Muniandy	90.00	Total	2,000.00	Kulagan Moonesawmy	6.39
Subramaniam Pennathur	50.01				
Muthu & Nandini Senthilkumar	250.00	Pakistan Hindu Empowerment Fund			
Nandi Devi Sivanathan	22.74	Ishani Chowdhury	65.00	Sadhunathan Nadesan	300.00
Guhan Yoganathan	48.00				
Anonymous	891.00	Murugamoorthi Thirukkovil Endowment			
Total	2,021.56	Raj Padman Padmalingam	20,000.00	Bhavani Nataraj	15.00
Maha Ganapati Temple of Arizona Endowment		Digital Dharma Endowment			
Anonymous	75.00	Rajendra Giri	153.00	Cassan Pancham	1,200.00
		Gunasekaran Kandasamy	50.00	Urmila Ravichandran	1,225.00
Murugan Temple of North America Puja Fund		Kulagan Moonesawmy	12.80	Tarangadeva Sinhaputra	63.00
Pathmini Saravanapavan	150.00	Anonymous	396.00	Nandi Devi Sivanathan	34.09
		Total	611.61	Vibha Sundaram	303.00
Anantha Ladies Home Endowment		Kauai Aadheenam Feed the Monks Fund			
Pranavan Sinmayanandan	25.00	Benevity	200.00	Ravi Thaker	18.00
Anonymous	50.00	Fidelity Charitable	432.00	Jeeva Velusaami	38.00
Total	75.00	Sanjiv Aggarwal	1,500.00	Saravan Veylan	324.00
		Ambika Alagere	6.39	Anonymous	5,046.00
Cows of Kadavul and Iraivan Temples (Kovil Maadu) Endowment		Yuvaraj Athur	153.00	Total	14,480.53
Arun Aarooren	75.00	Anandkumar Ayyachamy	50.00		
Ambika Alagere	6.39	Charles Close	216.00	Concord Shiva Murugan Temple (CSMT) Endowment Fund	
Rajendra Giri	153.00	Markison Davis	1,000.00	Natraj Narayanswami	45.00
Brijianand Jugurnauth	31.98	Iryna Doroshenko	108.00		
Natraj Narayanswami	30.00	Kunal & Sanyogeeta Ghurbhurn	8.51	Himalayan Acres Endowment	
Nandi Devi Sivanathan	22.77	Rajendra Giri	153.00	William & Susan Revak	5,000.00
Rodney & Ilene Standen	30.00	Saravanan Gurusamy	101.00		
Arunasalam Vathavooran	75.00	Suresh & Meena Joshi	121.00		
		Brijianand Jugurnauth	31.98		

MISSION STATEMENT: Hindu Heritage Endowment is a publicly supported, charitable organization recognized as tax exempt by the IRS on April 22, 1994. Employer ID 99-0308924. Founded by Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, its philanthropic mission is to provide secure, professionally managed financial support for institutions and religious leaders of all lineages of Sanatana Dharma.

PROFESSIONAL ADVISORS: Halbert, Hargrove, Investment Counsel; Lynn M. Gaumer, J.D., Stelter Co. and Sonoda & Isara LLP, certified public accountants. HHE is a member of the Partnership for Philanthropic Planning, the source for education, research and advocacy for professionals who have a role in designing and implementing donors' philanthropic plans.

I WANT TO PARTICIPATE: Where should I Send My Donation? You can send your gift to an existing fund, create a new endowment or request information through the address below. Donations may be made online at www.hheonline.org to join our family of benefactors who are Strengthening Hinduism Worldwide. Thank you.



HINDU HERITAGE ENDOWMENT

KAUAI'S HINDU MONASTERY

107 Kaholalele Road, Kapaa, Hawaii, 96746-9304 USA

808-822-3012 • hhe@hindu.org

www.hheonline.org • www.facebook.com/hhecares



God Siva's Absolute Being, Parasiva (the Self)
is worshiped each year on

Maha Sivaratri

The Self is timeless, causeless and formless.

Therefore, being That, it has no relation whatsoever
to time, space and form.

Form is in a constant state
of creation, preservation and destruction within space,
thus creating consciousness called time,
and has no relationship

to timelessness, causelessness or formlessness.

The individual soul, when mature, can make the leap
from the consciousness of space-time-causation
into the timeless, causeless, formless Self.

This is the ultimate maturing
of the soul on this planet.

— Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami

Wishing you
a beyond-blissful
Maha Sivaratri



Amma Sri Karunamayyi's

America Tour March 13 – August 2, 2026

Venues for Darshan and Blessings

Phoenix: March 13 – 15

Los Angeles: March 20 – 22

Ojai: March 24 – 25

SFO: March 27 – April 5

Seattle: April 10 – 12

More cities will be added soon.

Stay tuned and sign up online to receive
notifications.

www.karunamayyi.in

Email: events@karunamayyi.in temple@karunamatyi.in

Grand Guru Purnima Celebration

Phoenix July 29th – August 2nd, 2026



After 35 Years in Exile: Bhutanese Hindu Families Rebuild Faith and Community in the USA



About GBHO

The Global Bhutanese Hindu Organization (GBHO), founded by Bhutanese Hindu families after two decades in Nepali refugee camps and resettlement in the U.S., is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit dedicated to preserving Sanatan Hindu Dharma and Nepali heritage. GBHO unites the diaspora through spiritual, cultural, and community programs, fostering peace, wellness, and harmony for all.

About Om Center Divya Dham

OM Center Divya Dham is GBHO's first major project, purchased in 2022 in Galion, Ohio, with the support of 108 community members who provided loans to acquire the property. The center sits on 150 acres and includes a community temple, residential buildings, event halls, forest hiking trails, ponds, farming land, and additional facilities currently under construction, serving as a hub for spiritual, cultural, and community activities.

Support Our Dream, Empower Our Community

We have the vision, programs, and devoted community—but without your support, our dream cannot thrive. Please help us repay community loans and build a lasting legacy that will uplift and unite generations to come.

GBHO Key Programs & Initiatives



Spiritual Services
Education & Learning

Arts & Culture
Health & Wellness

Youth & Leadership
Community Service

Environment & Social
Community Facilities

TALLEST AND BIGGEST KALASH IN AMERICA REPRESENTING BHUTANESE HINDU COMMUNITIES ACROSS 11 DIFFERENT COUNTRIES.



ओम सेन्टर दिव्य धाम

Contact US

419-955-8235, 844-424-6365

Email - gbho@hamrogbho.org

Address:

4270 State Route 309,
Galion, OH 44833

11 FEET
HEIGHT

विश्वशान्ति महाकलश
WORLD PEACE MAHAKALASHA



Facebook

YouTube

TikTok

Become A Member

Donate & Support Us

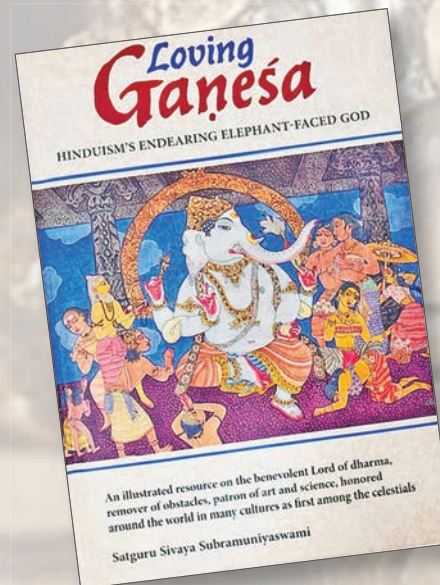
Shop Online



Email: gbho@hamrogbho.org

MiniMela

Kauai Hindu Monastery's
Spiritual treasure box



Newly released 3rd edition of Loving Ganesha

by Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami is now available with more exquisite illustrations and now in full color. In the clearest, most captivating terms, the satguru introduces you to this great God, shows the many ways to develop a rapport with Him so as to illumine and uplift your life. Learn about this endearing God who, of all the Gods, is closest to us. Learn how to contact Him, pray to Him and celebrate His presence in your home.

Hinduism's most essential

teachings as presented and illumined by Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami. The three volumes may be acquired together or separately. They elucidate Hinduism's:

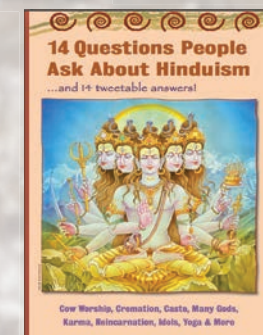
- tenets and philosophy, vol. 1
- lifestyle, culture, ethics, vol. 2
- metaphysics and mysticism, vol. 3



Path to Siva • Composed by Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami to present Hinduism's teachings in a way youth could more immediately appreciate. It contains all of Gurudeva's teachings rearranged, compacted, trimmed, and turned it into a delightful, beautifully illustrated 96-page handbook of liberating knowledge and wisdom. (Adults are also fond of this book.)

14 great answers

to those 14 tough questions people ask you and your children (Why many Gods? Do Hindus worship cows?... etc.)—a 16-page booklet created by Hinduism Today's editors.



36-bead rudraksha mala grown and assembled by devotees of Kauai's Hindu Monastery and blessed by the swamis.



5 rudraksha beads grown at Kauai's Hindu Monastery and blessed by the swamis.

Study materials and guided studies:
bit.ly/ha-master-course

And much more at:
minimela.com



Vegan Vitamins & Supplements

No animal products or derivatives of any kind

High quality
Wide selection
Affordable prices



...and many more!



DEVA vitamins are 100% vegan, vegetarian and certified by the Vegan Society, the non-profit organization that actually invented the word "vegan."

Available for purchase at:

WHOLE FOODS & other
Natural Health Food Stores.

January-February-March 2026

(888) 988-DEVA

www.devanutrition.com
info@devanutrition.com

HAWAII HEAVEN



Two-story home in a quiet cul-de-sac in beautiful Wailua Homesteads

- two large decks and patio for indoor/outdoor living
- second water heater —> potential for a guest house
- 10 min. from Hindu Monastery
- See mls#721545

Yelena Okhman Realtor®(S) • Remax Kauai
808-635-6552 • yelenastars@gmail.com



Hindu Global Charity



We have projects in India, Pakistan and Kenya.
Above, food distribution in Pakistan.

American Hindu World Service (AHWS) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit dedicated to educating the American public and the world about Hindu perspectives on global health and international development. It is now working in education, women's empowerment and maternal/child nutrition. It is active with other religious communities on interfaith issues, and serves without discrimination as to ethnicity, gender, nationality, or creed • More at www.ahwsngo.org

AHWS • PO Box 1483, Laurel, MD 20725-1483, USA
+1-443-761-9890 • ahwsngo@gmail.com



Life Insurance and Estate Planning

Rely on a professional for Retirement and Estate Planning

For information, contact one of the most highly trained financial advisors:

Niraj P. Baxi, msi, clu, chfc
Tel: 800-686-8436
niraj@baxifinancial.com
www.baxifinancial.com

VASTUVED INTERNATIONAL



Building design in the ancient tradition of Vastu Shastra
Residential and Commercial Properties
Comprehensive Vastu Design Theory and Application for Everyday Life

<http://www.vastu-design.com/vastu-architecture-book.php>
www.vastu-design.com 1-641-472-2157



CoHNA COALITION
OF HINDUS OF
NORTH AMERICA

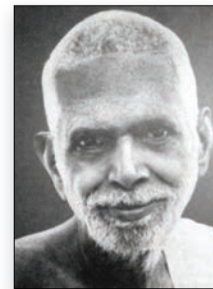
CELEBRATING **5 YEARS OF DHARMA IN ACTION**



CHANGE BEGINS
WITH **SEVA**. CHANGE
BEGINS WITH **YOU**.

5 years of seva &
results. Help us make
the next 5 years even
better. Gift to CoHNA:
cohna.org/donate

Additional information at:
WWW.COHNA.ORG



"Paul Brunton is one of my 'eyes.' My Shakti [spiritual power] is working through him. Follow him closely."

—Ramana Maharshi

"The Maharishi was determined to give his everything to Paul Brunton because Maharishi's teaching had to spread everywhere. Paul Brunton threw open the doors for seekers all over the world to know that there is light."

—Sri Ganeshan, former President of Ramana Ashram, and Maharshi's great nephew

THE HIDDEN TEACHING BEYOND YOGA

The Path to Self-Realization and Philosophic Insight, v.1
520 pp. | 6 x 9 | \$21.95

THE WISDOM OF THE OVERSELF

The Path to Self-Realization and Philosophic Insight, v.2
592 pp. | 6 x 9 | \$21.95

"Brunton had a mission to bring to the attention of intelligent sincere seekers, the Knowledge freely available in tradition but obscured by history and rendered incomprehensible or alien. He had to write in his own gifted way that was understandable to the modern person. Certainly, PB was a remarkable human being. These volumes (The Hidden Teaching Beyond Yoga & The Wisdom of the Overself) are an elaborate philosophical and practical exposition, which demands time and effort. Those who attempt the task will not be disappointed."

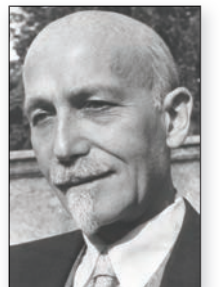
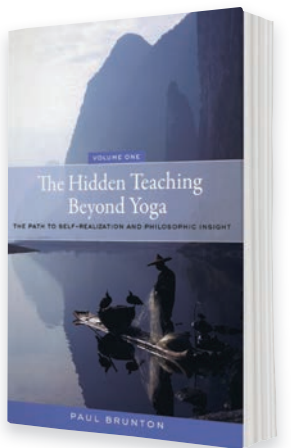
—Ramana Ashram's Mountain Path

Please visit **www.PaulBrunton.org** to explore his teachings further.

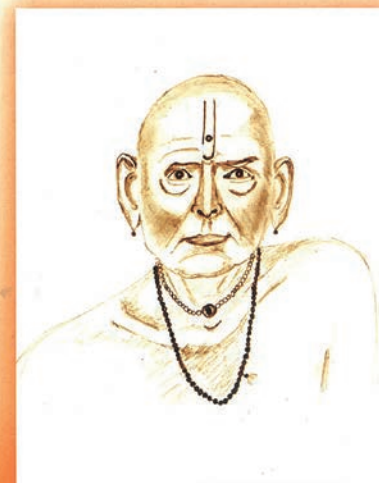


TO ORDER—
LARSON PUBLICATIONS • **www.larsonpublications.com**

eBooks are available from Amazon, Barnes & Noble



ETERNAL FRIEND
SHRĪ SWĀMĪ SAMARTH
MAHĀRĀJ OF AKKALKOT



By
MUKUND M. HANUMANTE, Ph.D.

**Find
the Divine
within**

Eternal Friend offers the keys
to the Divine that ever resides
within—is always there, ready to guide
and help you attain that peace and
contentment which is your true nature.

*"Eternal Friend is a doorway to auspiciousness
and infinite peace."*—Shri Sathya Sai Baba

*"Eternal Friend helps people manifest their
deepest soul potentials."*—Dr. David Frawley:

By M. Hanumante, PhD • 142 p.
hardcover • color

mukund@juno.com
<https://akkalkotswamisamarth-usa.org>

CLASSIFIEDS

Classified ads are us\$55 for 20 words, \$1 for each additional word. "Box ads" are \$80 and \$150 • 10% to 35% discount for repeat ads • 888-464-1008, 808-634-5407 fax: 888-217-3108 • ads@hindu.org www.hinduismtoday.com

Devotional Supplies

For All Your Spiritual Needs

Shop at the home of **Hinduism Today** for all your devotional and spiritual supplies. Books, including the complete works of Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, incense, rare rudrakshas, malas of all types, elegant statues, children's books and much more.

www.minimela.com

Free Products & Services

Home-Study Course in the Vedanta. Contact Parashakti Vidya Gurukul, PO Box 250, Spring Valley, NY 10977 parashaktividya@aol.com

Miscellaneous

Vedic Life Association
We are proud to be Hindu!
<http://www.vediclifeassociation.org/>

Professional Products & Services

Freight Forwarder

Ship >45 kg or more
Anywhere from US
+1-888-247-7732
Sales2@air7seas.us
www.air7seas.com



Indoor/outdoor painting—No. California
Residential, commercial, interior & exterior. Color consulting. Licensed, bonded & insured. Vama's Painting Co., 925-279-1051.

Fine Quality Neem Products

Specializing in fresh neem leaf, neem sticks, living neem trees and other Ayurvedic herbs. Our complete line of neem products contains more neem than any other U.S. manufacturer, all at fresh-from-the-farm prices.

www.neemtreefarms.com
877-500-6336



Publications

Creation of a Great Yogi. The book, *Boy Yogi*, is the inspiring true story of a teen who courageously meditated for 12 years and became the great Shri Shivabalayogi Maharaj. View *Boy Yogi* on YouTube & Amazon. The book is free in the USA. Contact: germaine108@yahoo.com

*****Sri Aurobindo books.** Ayurveda. Reiki. Vedic astrology. Alternative health. Plus over 14,000 health & wellness products. Wholesale-retail-mail order. Free catalogs. Lotus Press, HT Box 1008, Silver Lake, WI 53170 USA • www.lotuspress.com

Sri Chinmoy Books

Sri Chinmoy's soulful offerings in the form of books, music and art have been the source of inspiration and wisdom for seekers for over 50 years.

+1-734-994-7114
srichinmoy.org
srichinmoybooks.com



Dreaming Peace: The History of Positive Thinking and What It Means in the Post-Truth Era, by Nori Muster
norimuster.com/books/

Babaji's Kriya Yoga Publications

Books, correspondence course, seminars, ashrams, audios, videos, pilgrimages.
babajiskriyayoga.net
1-888-252-9642



Divine Life Society Publications

Choose from over 100 free e-books and 300+ printed books on Hindu philosophy, yoga, meditation and more by Swami Sivananda and his disciples.

www.dlsebooks.org • www.dlsbooks.org

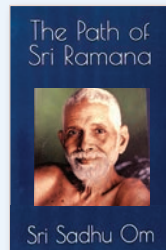


Lemurian Scrolls. Celestial messages given in 1973 to the founder of Hinduism Today, Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami. Here is the story of humanity from before its beginning, through all its earthly experiences 'til today—whither now, and what will have been the purpose of it all? Gain great understanding and wisdom • www.minimela.com

The Teachings of Sri Ramana

The best comprehensive and introductory book on the teachings of the great sage by Sri Sadhu Om, one of his direct disciples. Available at Amazon marketplaces worldwide.

ramanahou.org
vimeo.com/ramanahou



सा विद्या या विमुक्तये

KNOWLEDGE IS THAT WHICH LIBERATES

Vedic Wisdom - Online

Mission

The Hindu University of America provides education in knowledge systems based in Hindu thought involving critical inquiry, ethics, and self-reflection. Committed to fostering the culture and traditions of Hindu Dharma in an atmosphere of academic excellence and freedom, it prepares students for service, leadership, and global engagement.

Vision

Promoting dialogue across disciplines, cultures and civilizations, while enabling self-discovery, conscious evolution and harmony, the Hindu University of America will set the standard for the study of Hindu Dharma.



www.hua.edu

Hindu University of America is an institution of higher learning, teaching, reflection and research based in the knowledge systems rooted in and emerging from Hindu thought, where you will find a welcoming, global community of learners led by passionate faculty.

Help Iraivan Temple welcome its pilgrims soon



Iraivan's major event of 2023 has been the Crystal Lingam installation ceremony, held in March and May, which culminated a year of myriad accomplishments. We are now creating new infrastructure to allow for public access through the Rudraksha Forest and the magnificent San Marga path so future pilgrims can worship & meditate in this spiritual haven.

Donate at himalayanacademy.com/iraivan
Contact iraivan@hindu.org



“—
“The practical solutions offered by HPN |
enable our children to live and breathe
Sanatana Dharma.” —
~ Parent of a 5th Grader

HINDU PARENTS NETWORK

EMPOWERING HINDU
PARENTS THROUGH
EDUCATION & ADVOCACY



Encouraging conscious Hindu parenting through workshops, resources & community



Promoting respectful Hindu education in school classrooms and standing against bullying



Inspiring confidence in Hindu teens through immersive camps, workshops, and programs



Explore our **Beautiful Tree Program** that connects diaspora Hindu kids to their heritage! Join by visiting bit.ly/hpn-btp

CONNECT WITH LIKE-MINDED PARENTS & BECOME A VOLUNTEER!

✉ contact@hinduparentsnetwork.org

🌐 www.hinduparentsnetwork.org

📷 linktr.ee/hinduparentsnetwork



LEARN.
VOLUNTEER.
DONATE.

Wishing all a
most blessed
& enlightening
MahaSivaratri



2026



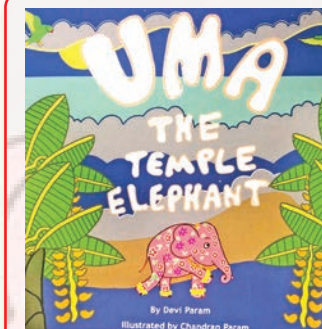
EASAN KATIR

private wealth management
since 1983

easan.katir@gmail.com

1-530.320.3287 (USA)

easankatir.com



Uma, (Story of dreams)

Baby Uma was born to be a worker elephant but this is not the life she wants. Determined, she dreams of another world where she can make her own choices.

Tiru (Story of friendship) Baby Tiru has lost his mother. Hungry and afraid he meets Thamby, a vegetarian village boy who shows him that friendship lasts forever.



By Devi Param
Illustrated by Chandran Param
Order from [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)

Want to conduct a
puja but don't know
where to start?

*Our newest resource has
you covered!*

Our brand new Puja Guide walks you through crafting the mantra, preparing your area, and gathering the necessary offerings. We also provide a short, easy to follow demonstration!

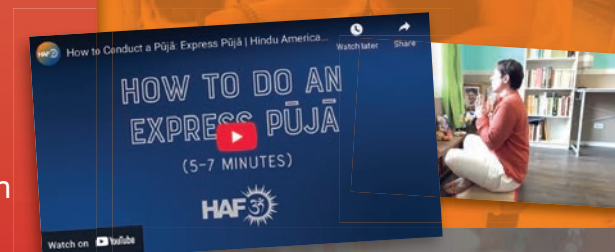
Ready to get started?
Visit myhaf.org/puja-ht



Hindu American Foundation
hinduamerican.org

Express Puja (5-7 min)

Just starting out? Short on time?
Not a lot of space? Watch the
video and try the Express Puja!



Short Puja (10-12 min)

Want to dedicate a bit more time for devotion? Our **Short Puja** gives you just the right amount.

Thorough Puja (20-30 min)

Feeling confident?
Our **Thorough Puja** guides you through the full 16-step process.

HELP SAVE INDIA'S ANCIENT TEMPLES & TRADITIONS



Temple Renovation



Oil Donation
to Poor Temples



Annadanam

Practicing Hindus Preserving Our Past

India's ancient temples are dying. In Tamil Nadu alone, more than 12,000 temples do not have any poojas happening or even a single lamp being lit. Thousands of temples across the state are lying in ruins waiting to be renovated. Behind Every Temple is a 501c3 Non-Profit organization dedicated to ensuring these sacred sites are protected and renovated for future generations. In addition to temple renovation, we also provide free oil to ancient temples in poor condition and regularly perform annadanam (feeding) for intellectually disabled people. We are entirely volunteer-run, so 100% of your tax-deductible donation goes directly to these projects.

For Hindus, dana (giving) is an integral part of one's dharma, so we invite everyone to help participate in these noble projects and help keep India's temples and traditions alive



To Learn More Visit Us at:
www.behindeverytemple.org



SCAN ME

Arboring
My little boat
In a sea of silence,
Thy Trident
Is my anchor.

Over the seas
Of Samsara,
Thy Name
Is my compass,
Thy Hand
My rudder,
Thy Crescent Moon
My delight.

Thy Name Is My Compass, by Dr. Arjunan Subramaniam.
Desa Parkcity, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 18-19 August, 2020

Siva's Many Forms



Kerala muralist Suresh Muthukulam captures the vision of Saint Tayumanavar (1705–1742), the Tamil mystic whose songs bridge devotion and realization. In his verses, Siva appears as Father, Mother and the boundless Vastness beyond name and form. Here, the saint is shown with arms raised in adoration before the radiant Sivalingam, symbol of the Infinite. Tayumanavar, revered for his luminous poetry and life of inner silence, taught that true worship lies not in ritual alone but in dissolving the ego in God's grace. Many of his songs are addressed to the green parrot of Goddess Shakti—a celestial messenger through whom his love and longing find their way to the Divine.

Canada CAD 10
India INR 225
Malaysia MYR 14
Mauritius . . . MRU 115
Singapore . . . SGD 10
UK GBP 5

