

[Tales of Yogis and Caves](#)

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SADHANA

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Kailash Ashram builds seven chambers for solitude

Choodie Shivaram, Bengaluru

Sri Jayendra Puri Swami oversees all Kailash Ashram activities and receives thousands of devotees. The ashram's powerful Rajarajeshwari temple, its priest training school and resident swamis and pundits all function as intended by the founder, Sri Tiruchy Mahaswamigal. But Jayendra Puri Swami, his successor, recently felt a need for greater emphasis on sadhana, personal religious discipline, at the famous ashram of Bengaluru. He recounts the moment of insight: "To provide the correct atmosphere to perform sadhana, the idea of the caves came in a flash." July of 2007 saw the completion of seven individual, man-made caves of concrete designed for yogic retreats.

When Sri Jayendra Puri Swami announced his wish to go into one of the caves for 72 hours, little did he anticipate a group of enthusiastic volunteers immediately wanting to join him. And they were not sadhus or ascetics but children brimming with undiluted devotion and innocence. Every boy in the priest training school, from eight to nineteen, proclaimed that he wanted to go.

"I had only jokingly asked if they were prepared to come into a cave and experience it. But I never imagined they'd jump at the offer. So we gave them numbers and drew lots to select five. I was only hoping that the youngest would not be selected. I left it for Divine Grace to guide the choice," related Swami. The boys, on the other hand, were fervently praying to Goddess Rajarajeshwari for their name to be selected. Swami said admiringly, "They were fully aware of the rigors of staying in the cave and what was expected of them, yet they were eager to go through the

experience."

Each cave is made for a single person and has three small chambers, one for sleeping, one for meditation and one for other activities, besides a bathroom. A thick glass on top allows sunlight to illuminate the cave during the day. The door cannot be locked from the inside, only from outside. It also has a viewing glass to monitor the health of those inside.

A person on retreat inside the cave does not see or talk to anyone. Food is served through a small, shuttered opening in the entrance. The striving yogi can leave a small note on his tray to convey a message or express a need, but he is not allowed talk.

While one cave is reserved for the use of Sri Jayendra Puri Swamiji, the other six are open to others seriously seeking to meditate. There is also a dormitory at the end of the row of seven caves that can house five people who come to do sadhana. A large kitchen nearby provides meager meals. This first facility is for men; a similar one is planned for women.

The Young Yogis

The five boys chosen ranged in age from 13 to 15. Swamiji prepared them for the experience, explaining what they would be experiencing. With garlands, honors and expectation hanging on their shoulders, the five yogis and one swami entered their individual caves as the evening fell. Once inside, they were completely cut off from the outside world. The doors were locked from the outside.

Following Swamiji's guidelines, each boy took within him only bare necessities. Nothing else was allowed, not even books. "Just providing a peaceful spiritual atmosphere is not enough," Swami explained. "If he has the freedom to still interact with the outside world, then the tapasvin will be deceiving himself. The caves facility is provided for sadhana, and restrictions are set down so that he will do only sadhana."

The youth were closely monitored from outside. Their diet was fruits, placed in the window thrice a day. None of them pleaded to get out. Whatever they were experiencing--be it loneliness, claustrophobia, cold or insects--did not cause them to waver from their resolve.

Emerging three days later, they reported "a sense of happiness we had never experienced before." Fifteen-year-old Jayaram, from Bangarpet village, shared, "I wanted to do tapas, so I prayed to Gayatri to be chosen." Once in the cave, he recounted, "I was given fruits three times a day, apples, bananas and mosambi (Indian sweet lime). I was never tempted towards other food, never felt hungry, never regretted going into the cave and never felt like coming out."

The youngest, Puneela, 13, spent his days immersed in activity. "I swept the room, had a bath, did sandhya vandana (Vedic prayers three times a day) and spent the rest of the day doing japa. I did not remember friends or home; I was not scared of the dark or of being alone. I would love to go back and stay for longer."

Fifteen-year-old Shivagurunathan, from Salem, did japa continuously, something he had never done before. "I could hear Swamiji doing puja in his cave. I listened to him singing. I'd do japa throughout, and practice yoga twice a day. Forever we were immersed in thoughts of God. Swami had advised us not to talk to anyone; we strictly followed this," said the priest-in-training.

"I was confident that the children could make it," said Swamiji. "I did not give them an assignment this time. But had I given one, each would have completed it. This time I just wanted to see how they would do. They have amply proved their spiritual resolve."

Swami's Retreat

Confident the boys were being closely monitored, Swamiji enjoyed his own time of solitude and retreat. He reports that once inside, he found himself lost to the world and completely immersed in the Divine. He felt an overwhelming presence of Goddess Rajarajeshwari. "I went in the cave without any specific goal. I was just

very, very happy being all alone to myself with Devi. There was no feeling of dependence. I did not have any unusual mystical experiences. I concentrated completely on Devi puja. This was my sole intention, to contemplate it thoroughly--a wonderful opportunity I never had until today. I could feel that it could go on for my whole life, and I would not need anybody. I felt the Mother will be with me always. Though I always knew this, it struck me here in a deeper, special way. I was not worried about anything, even if food failed to come, I would have continued." Even menial tasks appealed to Swamiji: "I completely enjoyed the daily chores, such as mopping the floor and scrubbing the puja vessels."

Swamiji declared, "When I go next, it will be for a longer period, perhaps a month. Many rishis and saints have found such seclusion a necessity. It is related to the opening of some of the chakras."

After these enthusiastic reports from Swamiji and the youth, there is a line of seekers wanting to have the experience.

The caves are not for the curious or uncommitted. Complete medical tests are required, and each candidate must spend 15 days living at the ashram in a communal room in preparation for his time of solitude.

Month-Long Fasts and Future Retreats

"The ideal time in the caves is one month," says Swamiji. "We have prepared a special discipline for this, the chandrayana vrata, a progressive reduction of food. This fast consists of diminishing portions served in clay pots--one designed for each day--until the portion reaches the size of a thumb on the new moon day. Then the size of the pots gradually increases until the full moon day, when the person comes out." During this fast, only one type of food is given--kichari, a balanced porridge of rice, dhal and vegetables. This monotonous diet prevents desire from being directed toward eating.

The most likely next residents will be the other boys of the priest school. Chetana, from Sringeri, is eagerly waiting his turn. So are the other sixteen, their bright eyes

twinkling with daydreams of yogis and saintly sadhana. Swamiji challenged them, "Are you willing to do 10,000 japas a day for twelve-and-a-half days when you go in next?" "Yes!" was the roar that filled the room. Swamiji knows his students will do what they are ordained to do.