

[Visiting a Hindu Temple](#)

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WHAT IS HINDUISM?

Visiting a Hindu Temple

A guide to the inner and outer workings of Hindu places of worship

The Hindu temple is a sacred space where man and God commune. It is the home of God and the Gods. Within these sacred abodes, priests conduct puja rites--presenting flowers, water, incense, lights, food and other choice offerings--to honor God and the Gods and invoke their presence and blessings.

In this Insight, we explore the experience of attending a temple, drawing from Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami's wisdom on the mysticism of Hindu worship. While basic customs described here are common to temples of all traditions, we focus mainly on the style of puja done in the temples of South India.

God and the Gods are real beings; they are not mere symbols or figments of imagination. If you could view the temple from the inner worlds, you would see a brilliant ray coming from the Third World right into the temple on the physical plane. This ray allows communication similar to a live video conference. The priest opens the connection by performing puja worship. When the puja is performed with loving devotion, the ray becomes strong and inner doors open from God's world to ours; the angelic helpers, called devas, hover around and through the temple, and blessings pour out to the devotees. A Hindu temple's devonic rays have the power to transform the course of karma, open inner doors to new opportunities, assuage long-held hurts and provide inner visions equaling the fullness of devotion.

Devotion in Hinduism is known as bhakti. it is an entire realm of knowledge and practice unto itself, ranging from the child-like wonder of the unknown and the mysterious to the deep reverence which comes with understanding of the esoteric interworkings of the three worlds. Hinduism views existence as composed of three worlds. The First World is the physical universe, the Second World is the subtle astral or mental plane of existence in which the devas, or angels, and spirits live, and the Third World is the spiritual sphere of the Mahadevas, the Deities, the Gods. Hinduism is the harmonious working together of these three worlds. Religion blossoms for the Hindu as he awakens to the existence of the Second and Third Worlds. These inner worlds naturally inspire in man responses of love and devotion and even awe. They are that wonderful.

Devotion in Hinduism occurs on many levels and at different cycles of time in the evolution of the soul. All forms of devotion are equally valid, and none claims itself as the only proper form of worship. There is devotion to the tribal Deities, to the scriptures, to the saints and to the satguru. But the most prevalent expression of worship for the Hindu comes as devotion to God and the Gods. In the Hindu pantheon there are said to be 330 million Gods. Even so, all Hindus believe in one Supreme Being who pervades the entire universe.

The many Gods are perceived as divine creations of that one Being. These Gods, or Mahadevas, are real beings, capable of thought and feeling beyond the limited thought and feeling of embodied man. So, Hinduism has one God, but it has many Gods. There are only a few of these Gods for whom temples are built and pujas conducted. Ganesha, Siva, Subramaniam, Vishnu and Shakti are the most prominent Deities in contemporary Hinduism. Of course, there are many others for whom certain rites or mantras are done in daily ceremony, often in the home shrine. These include Brahma, Surya, Sarasvati, Lakshmi, Agni, Chandra, Ayyappan, Hanuman, Mariyamman and others.

The Hindu traditionally adopts an Ishta Devata. This is a personal Deity chosen from the many Hindu Gods, often according to the devotee's family background or the feeling of closeness to one form of divine manifestation. It is the unique and all-encompassing nature of Hinduism that one devotee may be worshiping Ganesha while his friend worships Subramaniam or Vishnu, and yet both honor the other's choice and feel no sense of conflict. The profound understanding and universal acceptance that are unique in Hinduism are reflected in this faculty for accommodating different approaches to the Divine, allowing for different names and forms of God to be worshiped side by side within the temple walls. It may even happen that one may adopt a different personal Deity through the years according

to one's spiritual unfoldment and inner needs.

The Hindu religion brings to us the gift of tolerance that allows for different stages of worship, different and personal expressions of devotion and even different Gods to guide our life on this Earth. Yet, it is a one religion under a single divine hierarchy that sees to the harmonious working together of the three worlds. These intelligent beings have evolved through eons of time and are able to help mankind without themselves having to live in a physical body. These great Mahadevas, with their multitudes of angelic devas, live and work constantly and tirelessly for the people of our religion, protecting and guiding them, opening new doors and closing unused ones. The Gods worshiped by the Hindu abide in the Third World, aided by the devas that inhabit the Second World.

It is in the Hindu temple that the three worlds meet and devotees invoke the Gods of our religion. The temple is built as a palace in which the Gods reside. It is the visible home of the Gods, a sacred place unlike every other place on the Earth. The Hindu must associate himself with these Gods in a very sensitive way when he approaches the temple.

Though the devotee rarely has the psychic vision of the Deity, he is aware of the God's divine presence. He is aware through feeling, through sensing the divine presence within the temple. As he approaches the sanctum sanctorum, the Hindu is fully aware that an intelligent being, greater and more evolved than himself, is there. This God is intently aware of him, safeguarding him, fully knowing his inmost thought, fully capable of coping with any situation the devotee may mentally lay at His holy feet. It is important that we approach the Deity in this way--conscious and confident that our needs are known in the inner spiritual worlds.

The physical representation of the God, be it a stone or metal image, a yantra or other sacred form, simply marks the place that the God will manifest in or hover above in His etheric body. It can be conceived as an antenna to receive the divine rays of the God or as the material body in or through which the God manifests in this First World. Man takes one body and then another in his progression through the cycles of birth and death and rebirth. Similarly, the Gods in their subtle bodies inhabit, for brief or protracted spans of time, these temple images. When we perform puja, a religious ritual, we are attracting the attention of the devas and Mahadevas in the inner worlds. That is the purpose of a puja; it is a form of communication. To enhance this communication, we establish an altar in the temple

and in the home. This becomes charged or magnetized through our devotional thoughts and feelings, which radiate out and affect the surrounding environment.

Chanting and satsanga and ceremonial rituals all contribute to this sanctifying process, creating an atmosphere to which the Gods are drawn and in which they can manifest. By the word manifest, I mean they actually come and dwell there and can stay for periods of time, providing the vibration is kept pure and undisturbed. The altar takes on a certain power. In our religion there are altars in temples all over the world inhabited by the devas and the great Gods. When you enter these holy places, you can sense their sanctity. You can feel the presence of these divine beings, and this radiation from them is known as darshan. The reality of the Mahadevas and their darshan can be experienced by the devotee through his awakened ajna vision, or more often as the physical sight of the image in the sanctum coupled with the inner knowing that He is there within the microcosm. This darshan can be felt by all devotees, becoming stronger and more defined as devotion is perfected. Through this darshan, messages can be channeled along the vibratory emanations that radiate out from the Mahadevas, as well as from their representatives, the Second World devas who carry out their work for them in shrines and altars.

To understand darshan, consider the everyday and yet subtle communication of language. You are hearing the tones of my voice through the sensitive organ, your ear. Meaning comes into your mind, for you have been trained to translate these vibrations into meaning through the knowing of the language that I am speaking. Darshan is a vibration, too. It is first experienced in the simple physical glimpse of the form of the Deity in the sanctum. Later, that physical sight gives way to a clairvoyant vision or to a refined cognition received through the sensitive ganglia within your nerve system, the chakras. Through these receptors, a subtle message is received, often not consciously. Perhaps not immediately, but the message that the darshan carries, direct from the Mahadeva--direct from Lord Ganesha, direct from Lord Murugan, direct from Lord Siva Himself--manifests in your life. This is the way the Gods converse. It is a communication more real than the communication of language that you experience each day. It is not necessary to understand the communication immediately. The devotee may go away from the temple outwardly feeling that there was no particular message, or not knowing in his intellectual mind exactly what the darshan meant. Even the words you are now reading may not be fully cognized for days, weeks or even months. The depth of meaning will unfold itself on reflection.

Visiting a Hindu temple, receiving darshan from the majestic Gods of our religion,

can altogether change the life of a worshiper. It alters the flow of the pranas, or life currents, within his body. It draws his awareness into the deeper chakras. It adjusts his beliefs and the attitudes that are the natural consequence of those beliefs. But the change is slow. He lives with the experience for months and months after his visit to the temple. He comes to know and love the Deity. The Deity comes to know and love him, helping and guiding his entire evolutionary pattern. Darshan coming from the great temples of our 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. Through the grace of the Gods, those seeds can be removed if the manifestation in the future would not enhance the evolution of the soul.

Devotees ask, "Why do we circumambulate the temple?" When we come to the temple out of the world, off the street, we are often shrouded by negative vibrations, which can actually be seen in our aura. Our nerve system may be upset, especially now, in the technological age, when we often suffer from stress and strain, the insecurity of so many changes and the rapid pace of life. In order to prepare ourselves to enter the sanctum sanctorum of the temple, the great mandapam inside, we walk clockwise around the temple very slowly. In this way we prepare our mind. We consciously drop off worldliness, letting the sufferings go, letting all disturbances leave our mind the best we can, and trying to reach deep inside of ourselves where peace exists eternally. We become as celestial as we can during the time we are walking around the temple, so that we can communicate with the celestial beings within the temple.

In a Hindu temple there is often a multiplicity of simultaneous proceedings and ceremonies. In one corner, an extended family, or clan, with its hundreds of tightly knit members, may be joyously celebrating a wedding. At another shrine a lady might be crying in front of the Deity, saddened by some misfortune and in need of solace. Elsewhere in the crowded precincts a baby is being blessed, and several groups of temple musicians are filling the chamber with the shrill sounds of the nagasvaram and drum. After the puja reaches its zenith, brahmin priests move in and out of the sanctum, passing camphor and sacred ash and holy water to hundreds of worshipers crowding eagerly to get a glimpse of the Deity. All of this is happening at once, unplanned and yet totally organized. It is a wonderful experience, and such a diverse array of devotional ceremonies and such an intensity of worship can only be seen in a Hindu temple. There is no place on Earth quite like a Hindu temple.

Esoterically, the Gods in the temple, who live in the microcosm, can work

extraordinarily fast with everyone. There is so much going on that everyone has the sense of being alone. The weeping woman is allowed her moment of mourning. No one feels that she is upsetting the nearby wedding. No one even notices her. The temple is so active, so filled with people, that each one is left to worship as he needs that day--to cry or to laugh or to sing or to sit in silent contemplation in a far-off corner.

Like the Hindu religion itself, the Hindu temple is able to absorb and encompass everyone. It never says you must worship in this way, or you must be silent because there is a ceremony in progress. It accepts all, rejects none. It encourages all to come to God and does not legislate a single form of devotion.

Hindus always want to live near a temple so they can frequent it regularly. When we go to the temple, we leave with our mind filled with the shakti of the Deity. We are filled and thrilled with the shakti of the temple in every nerve current of our body. When we return to our home, we light an oil lamp, and that brings the power of the temple into the home. This simple act brings the devas in the Second World right into your home, where they can bless the rest of the family who perhaps did not go to the temple. Each Hindu temple throughout the world has its own rules on how to proceed and what to do within it. In some temples, in fact most temples in South India, all the men are required to take off their shirts and enter bare-chested. However, if you are in a business suit in the South Indian temple in New York, that's all right. You are not required to take off your shirt. Every temple has its own rules, so you have to observe what everybody else is doing the first time you go.

In the beginning stages of worship, a Hindu soul may have to wrestle with disbelief in the Gods. He may wonder whether they really exist, especially if his own intuition is obscured by assimilation of Western, existentialist beliefs and attitudes. Yet, he senses their existence, and this sensing brings him back to the temple. He is looking for proof, immersed in the process of coming to know the Gods for himself. He is heartened and assured by hundreds of saints and rishis who have fathomed and found close and enduring relationships with the Gods, and who then extolled their greatness in pages of scripture and chronicle.

The devotee stands before the sanctum and telepathically tells the Gods a problem, and with hopeful faith leaves and waits. Days or weeks later, after he had forgotten about his prayer, he suddenly realizes the problem has disappeared. He attempts to trace the source of its solution and finds that a simple, favorable play of

circumstance and events brought it about. Had the Gods answered his prayer, or would it have happened anyway? He brings another prayer to the Gods, and again in time an answer appears in the natural course of his life. It appears to him that the Gods are hearing and responding to his needs. Trust and love have taken root. He goes on, year after year, bringing the Gods into his secular affairs, while just as carefully the Gods are bringing him into their celestial spheres, enlivening his soul with energy, joy and intelligence.

The Hindu looks to the Gods for very practical assistance. He devoutly believes that the Gods from their dwelling in the Third World are capable of consciously working with the forces of evolution in the universe and they could then certainly manage a few simpler problems. He devoutly believes that the Gods are given to care for man on the planet and see him through his tenure on Earth, and that their decisions are vast in their implications. Their overview spans time itself, and yet their detailed focus upon the complicated fabric of human affairs is just as awesome.

The Gods of Hinduism create, preserve and protect mankind. It is through their sanction that all things continue, and through their will that they cease. It is through their grace that all good things happen, and all things that happen are for the good. Now, you may wonder why one would put himself under this divine authority so willingly, thus losing his semblance of freedom. But does one not willingly put himself in total harmony with those whom he loves? Of course he does. And loving these great souls comes so naturally. Their timeless wisdom, their vast intelligence, their thoroughly benign natures, their ceaseless concern for the problems and well-being of devotees, and their power and sheer godly brilliance--all these inspire our love.

Worship is pouring all your energy into one-pointedly adoring the God or Goddess feeling your loving sincerity, the Deity responds with life changing blessings

Approaching the Temple

Temple Manners

Remove your shoes before entering. Be respectful of God and the Gods at all times, as if approaching the benevolent leader of a great realm. Bring your problems, wishes or your sorrows but leave improper manners outside as you enter this holy sanctuary. Do not enter the shrines without invitation. Do not sit with your feet pointing toward the Deities, the guru or another person. Hugging and other demonstrations of affection between adults are not appropriate. Refrain from gossip and worldly talk. Treat the priests with respect.

Look and Feel Your Best

You will want to look and feel your best when you go to the temple, God's home. Prepare yourself by bathing and putting on clean clothing. Traditional dress is best - saris or punjabis for ladies, long dresses for girls, and kurta shirt and dhoti or pants for men and boys. But any nice, modest clothing suitable for sitting on the floor is acceptable.

Prepare Mentally; Bring a Gift

Prepare your mind by thinking about God in anticipation of your visit. Bring an offering, such as fruits and flowers. Prostrate and walk around the temple where possible. Hands pressed together in namaskara, greet the Deities at their shrines, starting with Ganesha, and present your offerings. Inwardly feel God's uplifting presence, called sannidhya.

Prostrate to the Deity

Prostrating is a traditional expression of worshipful surrender and adoration. The form of prostration differs for men and women. Men perform a fully prone pose, called ashtanga pranama, in which hands, chest, forehead, knees and feet touch the ground. Women perform a kneeling pose, panchanga pranama, in which hands, head and legs touch the ground.

Worship Wholeheartedly

Ardent worship takes many forms in a temple. You can be immersed in the joys of devotion, in prayerful communion, seeking solace for a loss, singing hymns, chanting mantras or celebrating a rite of passage. Meditation is appropriate, especially after the puja, and emotion is not out of place. God will receive your devotion, however you offer it.

There are three worlds of existence: the gross plane where souls live in physical bodies; the subtle plane, where souls reside in astral bodies; and the causal, divine plane of God and the Gods.

Attending the Puja Ceremony

Conducted by a trained priest called a pujari, a Hindu worship service or puja, literally "adoration," is similar to a grand reception for a king. Pujas can last from ten minutes to several hours, but all follow one basic pattern. First, the pujari purifies himself, the sacred implements and the place of worship. He chants in Sanskrit the time, place and nature of this particular puja. Through hand gestures (mudras) and chants, he beseeches the Deity to come and dwell in the image. Ringing a bell and chanting mantras and hymns from the ancient Vedas and Agamas, the pujari then offers precious substances to the Deity, including water, uncooked rice with turmeric powder, holy ash, sandalwood paste and kumkum. Sometimes water, sesame oil, turmeric water, saffron, milk, yogurt, ghee, honey, lime juice, vibhuti, sandalwood paste, panchamritam (mixture of five fruits), coconut water and rosewater are poured over the Deity in a ritual bath called abhishekam. Devotees are seated during most of the puja, in some traditions, men on the right and women on the left. After abhishekam, the Deity is dressed in new clothes and beautifully decorated with flowers. At this point, devotees may sing devotional songs. After decorating the Deity, the pujari offers incense, oil lamps and food. He offers flowers while chanting 108 names of the God. At the high point of the puja, a large, sacred lamp is waved before the Deity and the temple bells are rung loudly as God sends His power through the holy image of Himself. When the lamp is lowered, everyone prostrates to the Divine. The lamp is then carried out to bless the worshipers, who often leave a donation on the tray (or later in the temple offering box). Finally, depending on the tradition, sacraments such as holy ash, holy water, sandalwood paste, kumkum, fruit, sweets and flowers are passed out to bless all present. These include a portion of the offerings - flowers, cooked food and more - brought by devotees. Devotees may then sit in meditation, basking in the blessings invoked by the puja.

Partaking of the Sacred Flame

The sacramental lamp which has just been offered at the high point of the puja is sometimes passed among the devotees. The devas can see and bless you through this flame as it lights up your face. Sometimes you, too, can glimpse into their

world. When the priest comes to you with the lamp, hold your hands a few inches apart with your palms down. Reach out and pass both hands devoutly over the flame. Then bring your hands back, turn your palms toward your face and touch your eyes with your fingertips to receive the Deity's blessings. At Lord Vishnu's shrine, the priest may bring out the silver or gold crown of the Deity and lightly touch it to the head of each devotee as a personal blessing.

Receiving Holy Ash & Water

A sacrament offered in many temples is holy ash, vibhuti, by burning dried cow dung cakes with ghee, flowers, yogurt and other ingredients. It symbolizes the purity we attain by burning the bonds of ego, karma and maya to reveal the soul's natural goodness. The priest will put a pinch of ash into your right palm. (Accept all offerings with your right hand.) Transfer the vibhuti into your left palm, then apply it to your forehead using your right hand, generally three broad stripes for men, one short stroke for ladies. Next, a small spoonful of holy water, or tirtham, is placed into your cupped right hand, which you then sip, afterwards touching the right palm to the crown of your head.

Accepting Other Sacraments

Chandanam, or sandalwood paste, is a traditional precious substance, valued for its wonderful scent. A small dab is placed in your hand by the priest, which you transfer to your left palm with a wiping motion. Dip your right-hand ring finger into the paste and apply it with a small circular motion between the eyebrows. Kumkum, a red powder, is next. The priest will either place a small pinch in your right hand or invite you to take some from the container which he holds for you. Apply the kumkum on top of the sandalwood, creating a dot, bindi, which represents the third eye of spiritual seeing.

Internalizing Your Worship

The bhakti of uncompromising surrender, prapatti, to the God during a temple puja awakens the amrita. The amrita is the sweet essence from the sahasrara chakra. It is the binding yoke to the Divine. Sit down in the lotus posture after the puja and internalize all the feeling that you had for the God during the worship. Draw into yourself the pranas you feel around your body. Then draw those energies up the spine into the head. This is done with the mind and with the breath. Devotees who want to awaken the higher chakras and sustain that awakening on the safe path will throw themselves into becoming uncompromising bhaktars.

Invoking Special Blessings

An archana is a short puja for an individual, usually done after the main puja. It is a way of asking God for something specific, such as success in school or business, or to express thanks for good fortune. Inform the priest that you want an archana. You should bring fruit and flowers, as well as the archana fee, on an offering tray, which can also have a coconut, incense, kumkum, camphor and sandalwood paste. As you stand before the shrine, the priest will ask your name, gotra (family lineage), and nakshatra (birthstar). During the archana, pray for your special needs. Afterwards the priest will return part of your blessed offerings to take home.

Celebrating Rites of Passage

A central part of every Hindu's life, samskaras are sacred rites of passage. You can arrange for a samskara with the temple priest. There is a charge for these rites, which usually include a puja and homa, or fire ceremony. The priest will set an auspicious time, explain how to prepare and what to bring, as well as what you do during the ceremony. The principal samskaras held in temples, homes or halls are: name-giving (11 to 41 days old for a child, or anytime for an adult entering Hinduism); first solid food (6 months old); ear-piercing (1, 3 or 5 years old); head shaving (1 to 4 years old); first learning (4 years old); initiation into Vedic study (9 to 15 years old); marriage and funeral.

Religion is the harmonious working together of the three worlds. This harmony can be created through temple worship, wherein the beings of all three worlds can communicate.

Free Will and Surrender to the Divine

As we come closer to the wonderful Gods of Hinduism, we come to love them in a natural way, to be guided by them and to depend on them more than we depend on ourselves. The exuberant enthusiasm so prevalent in the West, of holding to an existential independence and expressing an autonomous will to wield the direction of our lives, loses its fascination as we mature within the steady radiance of these Gods and begin to realize the divine purpose of our Earthly sojourn.

One might ask how the Hindu can become so involved in the love of the Gods that he is beholden to their will. Similarly, one might ask how does anyone become so involved and in love with his mother and father, trusting their guidance and protection, that he is beholden to them? It works the same way. Where you find the Hindu family close to one another and happy, you find them close to the Gods. Where they are not close, and live in a fractured or broken home, the Gods will unfortunately have been exiled from their lives. They will not be invoked, and perhaps not even believed in.

Many think that the ultimate devotion, called prapatti in Sanskrit, means giving up their willpower, their independence and their judgment. This is not the meaning of prapatti at all. Not at all. I shall give an example. People who are employed by others work with full energy and vigor, utilizing all their skills on the job, day after day after day, year after year after year. They give of their talents and energies freely, but they do hold back some of the energies and fight within themselves. This is called resistance. That resistance is what they have to offer on the altar of purification. Getting rid of resistance, to be able to flow with the river of life, is what prapatti is all about. Prapatti is freedom. This truly is free will. Free will is not an obstinate will, an opposite force invoked for the preservation of the personal ego. This is willfulness, not free will. Free will is total, intelligent cooperation, total merging of the individual mind with that of another, or of a group. . In religious life, we must have prapatti twenty-four hours a day, which means getting rid of our resistance.

There are various forms of free will. There is free will of the ego, or the instinctive mind, there is free will of the intellect that has been educated in dharma, and there is free will of the intuition. For many, free will is an expression of the little ego, which often entangles them more in the world of maya. For me, true free will means the dharmic will that is divine and guided by the superconscious. In reality, only this kind of will makes you free.

You might ask how you can love something you cannot see. Yet, the Gods can be and are seen by mature souls through an inner perception they have awakened. This psychic awakening is the first initiation into religion. Every Hindu devotee can sense the Gods, even if he cannot yet inwardly see them. This is possible through the subtle feeling nature. He can feel the presence of the Gods within the temple, and he can indirectly see their influence in his life.

Pray first to Ganesha. When in the temple, take every opportunity to serve in simple ways, sweeping the floor, polishing the brass, making flower garlands.

During the puja, focus on the acts of worship, rather than letting your mind wander. Learn the inner meaning of what the priest is doing and follow along.

Go into the temple as you would approach a great king, a governor, a president of a great realm, anticipating, with a little trepidation, your audience with Him.