

[Seeking Their Spiritual Roots](#)

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Seeking Their Spiritual Roots

Hear from youth who spent three weeks on pilgrimage to Cambodia, Malaysia and India as they strived to connect with Hinduism's depths

The asian odyssey was the 2008 edition of Himalayan Academy's biannual pilgrimage program during which Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami led 97 devotees from 15 countries through the Hindu temples of Cambodia, Malaysia and India from January 15 to February 4. Worship, meditation and personal reflection filled each day as the pilgrims sought to strengthen their connection to the Divine. They visited Angkor Wat, the world's largest Hindu temple, participated in Thai Pusam at Batu Caves in Kuala Lumpur and pilgrimaged in South India to Tiruvannamalai and the famed Arunachala Hill, Rameshvaram Siva temple, Tiruchendur Murugan temple and Kanya Kumari at India's southern tip.

Among the group were thirteen youth, age 11 to 33. Most were Hindus, some born of Indian parents (though only one actually in India), others of Western converts to Hinduism. Here they recount their expectations, experiences and observations during their spiritual journey.

Niraj, 30, England

Niraj Thaker (nirajthaker@hotmail.com) is an information technology specialist working in the London's financial sector. He came on the pilgrimage to become closer to his guru and make spiritual progress.

Why should young people consider the religious path? Hinduism is such a deep, mystical religion. There is clarification and knowledge available from wise people--gurus, saints and devotees. They can help you transform your life and understand your inner self. For me, Hinduism is my way on earth. I have had profound experiences on this path.

What's been the pilgrimage high point for you? Batu Caves was one. I had hurt my leg badly in Cambodia. It was extremely painful to walk. I had to conjure up courage and willpower to climb up to the cave. We started from the Divine Life Society where we prepared the milk pots to take as offerings. As soon as the chanting started, I was energized and ready to go. I could not feel any pain. All I could feel was just love--love for Lord Muruga. There were 272 steps but it felt like two seconds. Once in the cave, I put all my energy into the milk pot, all of my prayers and apologies. After that, I felt completely cleansed. The other high point was Tiruvannamalai temple in India. The ancient temples are God--they represent Siva Himself. As soon as you enter the temple, you know it is alive and welcoming you, nourishing you. Everything was alive, the temple itself, the pillars, the floor, even the guardian deva statues on the side seemed alive.

Aubrey, 20, Canada

Aubrey Burke (aburke@uvic.ca) is about to enter his third year of college at the University of Victoria in British Columbia. He is in the process of making major decisions about his education and future career.

What were your high points? I very much enjoyed the little Skanda Ashram of Ramana Maharishi on Arunachala Hill in Tiruvannamalai. I was quite amazed with the feeling of love. I felt like I could have stayed there a long time. The other place that I really enjoyed was Vivekananda Memorial at Kanya Kumari. The rock where he meditated had a strong energy. I was there only momentarily, but would have liked to sit there for hours, if not days.

How did you find the camaraderie among the youth here? I met Niraj before on Facebook through the Subramuniya group. That was kind of cool. It's good to have people around the same age going through the same sort of things you are, such as, "What career am I going after?" The group strengthens your quest. I know I'll be friends with them for the rest of my life, and that's very special.

What's your impression of India? I think it is important that everyone that is interested in yoga or Hinduism come once in their lifetime to India. It is different. There is a temple around every corner, a shrine everywhere you go. It is a magical place. I've wanted to come to India since I was in eighth grade. There is so much flourishing spirituality here.

What are you doing after the pilgrimage? I will be going on the eight-temple Ganesha pilgrimage in Maharashtra, and then the six Murugan temple pilgrimage and the five Siva elemental temples in South India. Then I'll head north. I may even go to Mount Kailash. I'll be in India for four more months.

Kartikeya, 18, California

Kartikeya Katir graduated in June from Da Vinci High School, Davis. He had been working for several years to qualify for initiation from Bodhinatha during the pilgrimage (see the video at www.youtube.com/watch?v=8dY3UvRQiyk). One of his goals on the pilgrimage was to decide where to go to college.

For [a very high resolution movie of his initiation click here](#) or watch the You Tube below.

What is the value of spirituality? It is a guide to help me make choices throughout my life. It's easier to deal with situations when you have an idea of what the right thing to do is. The understanding of karma has the biggest impact on my daily actions. I see myself thinking, "Well what kind of karma might this create?"

What's been your high point? My samaya diksha (initiation) into Saivism's most sacred mantra, "Aum Namasivaya," at Tiruvannamalai. At one point, Bodhinatha placed his hands on my head and blessed me. It was the clearest that my mind had ever been. It was amazing. The wells at Rameshwaram were also unexpectedly intense. It was about releasing sins encountered throughout your life. Every time that I would go to a well, I would have all of these emotions and memories come up. I could physically feel them getting caught up by my throat. As soon as that water hit me, they just completely evaporated into nothing. I couldn't even remember what I was upset about.

What did you decide about college? My parents and I had very conflicting ideas about where I was going to go to school. They wanted me to stay at home. I wanted to go out somewhere else. As I've thought about the different aspects of being at home and away from home, I came to agree with my parents. It is the best decision.

Bijamati, 13, Mauritius

Bijamati Pareatumbee lives on the island of Mauritius. Her family are long-time devotees of Bodhinatha and his predecessor, Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, known as Gurudeva. She traveled with her mother.

What has been the high point for you? I was not that religious before I came on the pilgrimage. I wasn't concentrating on my spiritual life. Now I am. I have become a lot more religious. The best things I have done so far in this trip are the 16-kilometer walk around Arunchala Hill in Thiruvannamalai and the 22 baths in Rameshvaram. I felt the well bathing washed away the bad things we have done, our bad karma.

What is your impression of India? I like it here. The temples are extremely big. You can get lost in them. You can also sit for many hours if you want to.

Shivani, 25, California

Shivani Rajan (laufah@hotmail.com) of Canyon, California, recently earned a BA in Fine Arts and will next be studying herbal healing from a Native American Indian perspective. Her father, Deva, and brother, Kailas, were also on the pilgrimage.

What is your personal objective here? I am coming to a crossroad in my life. I am either going to go into medicine or teaching. I am also spiritually at a crossroads in trying to decide how much my life is going to be about being a Hindu and how much is more about just being Shivani Rajan, and what the difference is.

Why is a spiritual approach to life important to you? I want to live expressing my soul, and there is no other way to do that. I think life is pretty pointless if it does not have a spiritual drive or goal. Without a spiritual life, nothing is ever satisfactory. The waves are too high in the ocean of the world. You are not able to control things and just get flipped around. If you are very spiritual, you have more control over how you respond. Also, I think you have to have a huge amount of trust in the world and the universe. Ganesha is my best friend. Seriously, I feel constantly protected and cared for. I meditate and do puja daily and also sing, which I find very

gratifying. I spend some time in nature every day.

What are your observations as a born Hindu raised in the West? I think it is really important for children to be given a lot of respect and the opportunity to be together--without adults around--so that they can really explore what it is being a Hindu in America or in the West. There were times when I felt that Indian culture as I was taught to live it carried more than just Hinduism, so it felt excessive because we are American Hindus. To me, Hinduism is, in the end, whatever you want it to be. There is a lot of freedom in it. Once I let go of the past experiences as a kid, I could accept a lot of the concepts that I was brought up with and embrace them.

What was the high point for you? On an internal level, the meditations towards the end of the pilgrimage were especially rich and deep. Externally, the mind-blowing vibrations from the puja at Tiruchendur Muruga Temple resonate within me still, and will never be forgotten.

Did you accomplish your goals? In the last few months I've come to feel more myself than I have felt since I was 8 years old. I feel strong, sure of my path and well endowed with tools to help me manage life's challenges. I have direction and courage, and I feel educated in the way a good captain needs to be.

What have you realized about the pilgrimage since coming back? That I can retain what I learned during it through practicing meditation and daily sadhana. I feel sure of my inner strength and voice in a way that I think could only have resulted from spending so much time in all of the temples we visited in the company of a great many old souls. Pilgrimage seemed to scrape off the barnacles collected through the day-to-day grind of being out in the world, worrying about money, my future, health, politics, the planet, etc. It has a wonderful, "spiritually exfoliating" affect that I've gained much from.

Nathan, 31, California

Nathan Sendan (nsendan_@_gmail.com) was born in a family of Gurudeva's devotees. He now lives in California with his wife and two children. His six-year-old son, Chidambaram, accompanied him on the pilgrimage.

How did the trip impact your son? I think it will definitely have made an impression on him, but I won't know what it is until we get back home. We'll have to see what he talks about. He's filtering it now all through a six-year-old perspective. He was able to pay attention at the temples, and I think it was good for him to be exposed to all of that. I have to do more daily religious practice myself for it to have a lasting spiritual impression on him.

Did you accomplish your main purpose? Time will tell. My main purpose on the trip was to get a disconnect from my day-to-day life back in California. If this actually creates some space in my life to do something other than think about work, then it will have been successful.

Shailesh, 30, California

Shailesh Trivedi was born and raised in the United States to a Tamil mother and Gujarati father. The family runs a flower farm in San Diego.

What was your purpose in going on the pilgrimage? India is like a spiritual playground. On pilgrimage, I knew that I could really allow myself to become absorbed in worship and sadhana, more so than at home. The energy of the temples is strong, as well as the power one feels seeing all the other pilgrims worshipping alongside. For me, a pilgrimage is a sort of life calibration, a strong reminder of what I believe in and who I am.

How did you free yourself to go? I have been wanting to go on a pilgrimage for many years, but January and February, the cool time in India, was also the busiest time of the year for the flower farm. Then in October of 2007, a massive wildfire swept through our area and destroyed our farm. I suddenly found myself having basically no flowers to sell for the upcoming season. The fire turned out to be a blessing in disguise, as it allowed me to take a break from farming and everyday life, and dive into a spiritual journey without any distractions.

What did you get out of the trip? It was everything I thought it would be and more. The temple experiences and sadhanas performed were rare and strong, just as I always dreamed. The guru, swamis and fellow pilgrims were great inspiration and showed me so many different perspectives on how to see God, how to be happy and how to just be. After the group pilgrimage ended, I went alone to the six Murugan

temples. I found myself very focused and energized in my sadhana.

Shren, 30, South Africa

Shren Moodley works in marketing for Unilever Hindustan, South Africa. Toward the beginning of the trip, while still in Malaysia, he said, "I can't wait to get to India. I can't wait to get to the temples."

How did religion become important to you? There was a stage in my life where I was a bit lost and confused. I was born a Hindu. My mom and dad taught me the culture and how to pray. But my faith wasn't as strong as it is now. A few years ago I was lost in my life and curious to find out my roots. I went on the Internet and came across the books of Satguru Sivaya Subramuniaswami (founder of Hinduism Today). I have been reading them since 2003. No human being could have ever written these. The books answered all the questions I had as a child, such as, Why is there hell? or Why would God create violence? I don't have those questions any more. Every question has found an answer through this philosophy.

What's your advice to other young people? As I was growing up in South Africa, we learned that temples and literature are important. But we didn't learn how important the guru is. When a guru puts it into words that you understand, you get a series of small realizations that make you feel at peace.

What has been the high point of the pilgrimage for you? Tiruvannamalai temple. During the abhishekam worship, I was right in front of the main sanctum just before they dressed the Deity. The shakti, the power, was absolutely awesome. I came on the trip because I thought I was going a little bit off the path. It has gotten me focused back. It has gotten Siva to the forefront of my mind.

Misha, 27, South Africa

Misha Visram is an administrative assistant working for Unilever Hindustan. She and Shren are engaged to be married.

Why are you on the pilgrimage? I want to grow spiritually and learn to meditate. A

few years ago, I started going to the temple every week. I also started questioning everything that I have been doing, to understand things better. One of things that really got me excited about coming was Shren's passion when he speaks about all of this. I want to be like that. I want to know all of that.

What's the value of religion to youth? With the youth of today, religion is forgotten. We do not speak our mother tongue. We have become very Westernized. We have forgotten who we are and where we came from. Religion is the only thing that can give you those answers. You can only tell a person so much. It is for them to realize it.

What's been your high point? I felt really uplifted and good at having accomplished the Batu Caves experience. At Tiruchendur Murugan temple, we attended a five-hour homa and puja that was just out of this world. I never experienced so many priests and so many swamis at a ceremony. I can't really explain it, the energy.

Panshula, 30, Chicago

Panshula Ganeshan, of Chicago, Illinois, works in the grocery business and also teaches English. He adopted the Hindu religion in 1999.

Why should youth take up spirituality? When we're living a good religious life, we have a steady center that we can identify with. Then we can face the challenges of our karma coming back to us in a smoother manner. Our emotions are much calmer and life is much more peaceful. Living a good religious life has manifested a continuous peace that does not waver.

What was the high point of the trip for you? Bathing at the 22 wells of Rameswaram temple to cleanse ourselves of past transgressions. At each well I had a transgression in mind; the water was symbolic of purification. I really felt those transgressions were forgiven, and at the end of the whole experience I was purified.

How do you compare the temples in India with those in Chicago? To be perfectly

honest, I found that the temples at home were just as powerful and meaningful as the old temples in India. I realized what Saint Tirumular meant when he said, "Chidambaram is everywhere. Divine Dance is everywhere. Siva Shakti is everywhere."

Have you become a better Hindu? I saw in India that Hinduism is a total, complete way of life. And that's impressive. I feel like I live the complete Hindu life in the West, but in a Western context. When in India, you are a Hindu living in a Hindu context. So being in India impresses the mind that there is this whole Hindu context that is not there in the West. You can only see that by being in India.

How would compare the temples in Cambodia and India? It was so interesting to go to Siem Reap where all the temples, though younger than those we saw in India, were dilapidated, broken down, leveled. The worship had stopped. The culture had dispersed, disintegrated, moved away. And then to go to India and you see older temples still going, the worship still there, the priests still doing the pujas. That was a beautiful thing to realize the continuity of Hinduism in India; there's nothing like it in the world.

Do you have any advice for future pilgrims? I would say, don't come to India thinking things are going to be easy and lavish. For a foreigner, it is a shock. It's difficult. It's not comfortable. But I think experiencing that awakened my sense of gratitude for all the conveniences I have in my life.

Kailas, 23, California

Kailas Rajan, Shivani's brother, has worked at different times in the construction, food and medical industries. He is a talented carnatic singer and drummer.

What prompted you to come on the Innersearch? I was born and raised as Hindu. At 14, I went off to military school and went my own way for a while. Now I want to come back and kind of reestablish my views and get more of a concrete foundation of what my beliefs actually are. I came on this trip to decide to continue being a non-practicing Hindu or to start to pursue it more actively.

What is it that catalyzed you to seek a spiritual angle to life? For me, it was when I turned 17 or 18. I started becoming really frustrated with myself as a person. I was just unhappy in general. I had a lot of anger. For a long time I actually couldn't decide why that was. As I got older, I realized that my frustration stemmed from the lack of an active spiritual life, from a solid understanding of what my beliefs are.

How would you encourage young people toward personal experience of their religion? I think the experience is ultimately there most of the time. You just have to open yourself up to it.

Tatiana, 32, New York City

Tatiana Martushev (tmartushev@hotmail.com) is a licensed therapist who works with chronically ill people.

Why have you come on the pilgrimage? My objective is to heal myself and to understand healing at a deeper level so I can provide that to my clients. I also want to create more clarity, balance and joy in my life.

How did spirituality become important to you? I think I was born spiritual. My family were strict Russian Orthodox. But as a child I would tell my mother about reincarnation and how I struggled with coming back. That was not a concept acceptable to my family, so every since then I kept it to myself. I think I reincarnated for a specific purpose. I learned to meditate on my own when I was nine. Now I am looking for a more structured purpose for this spirituality.

What were the high points? At Thai Pusam I had this moment where I felt very embraced and very taken care of. I felt this sensation that I had my family in the Mother and Father of the universe, and in the Gods. I had this moment of perfect clarity where something came into my mind and said, "You will never be alone again." It was a profound moment, something that I will always carry with me.

Ruby, 11, Thailand/USA

Ruby Rattana Inthawong traveled with her father, Janava Dharamadeva (

janavadharmadeva@yahoo.com) of New Mexico, and her mother, Daraneerat Inthawong of Thailand, where Ruby was born. Her father is a long-time devotee of Gurudeva and officially became a Hindu during this pilgrimage. It was his intention to expose his daughter to Hindu religion.

What did you expect from the trip? I hoped the pilgrimage would make me a better person. And I wanted everyone to be happy in the journey. I also wanted to see some monkeys in India!

What did you like most about the journey? I liked Angkor Wat and Batu Caves. It was kind of scary seeing people carrying the kavadis. I now have a better understanding of Hinduism. I want to come back to India when I am older.

After the pilgrimage, Hinduism Today asked Janava how it impacted Ruby. He writes, "Before the pilgrimage, Ruby would sometimes lose her awareness in a sad and crying section of the mind, even for an hour. Now, when this happens, she can come out of that area almost immediately. She told me that she recently learned to 'focus on the tiny Ruby in her heart and then come out to a happy place.'" (This concept of controlling one's awareness was taught on the pilgrimage.) Daraneerat, her mother, says Ruby learns things faster, is better organized and has an increased interest in tambon, which is a Thai word for spiritual practices intended to gain merit.