

[Washed in the Waters of Rameswaram](#)

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Pilgrimage

Washed in the Waters of Rameswaram

The 22 wells of this famed South Indian temple relieve pilgrims' karmas and bestow blessings

In February of 2008, nearly 100 pilgrims led by Hinduism Today publisher Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami trekked to Rameswaram in Tamil Nadu to worship Siva. As is the tradition there, they also sought blessings and made atonement for transgressions at the temple's sacred wells. This article follows the experience of a few of these pilgrims and recounts the temple's history and the significance of the wells.

You have braved the twelve-hour bus-and-train ride from Tiruvannalamai, the protracted hotel check-in, the struggle to find wholesome food and check your e-mail, and now, weary but jubilant, you are waist-deep in the Bay of Bengal's salty surf. Surrounded by fellow pilgrims, you bend three times beneath the ocean waves, then face the Sun to honor Surya, whose presence in the sky, so far away, allows life on our planet to exist. You are ready, at last, to experience the wells of Rameswaram.

The Ramanathaswamy Ramalingeswarar Temple, or Rameswaram temple as it is commonly known, is one of India's most revered pilgrimage destinations, on a par with Varanasi in the North. In fact, it is said that a pilgrimage to Varanasi will not bear fruit if one does not also take the long journey to Rameswaram. It is one of 12 Jyotirlinga Siva temples. For Vaishnavas it is one of the four primary sacred places, called char dhams, along with Badrinath in the North, Puri in the East and Dwaraka in the West. It is equally revered by Vaishnavites and Saivites because here Lord Rama established the Deity--Rameswara, i.e., "Rama's Lord," or Siva. Sita made the Sivalingam of sand, and together Rama and Sita commenced the worship in the presence of Lakshmana and Hanuman. The island of Rameswaram marks the India side of Ramsetu, the bridge that Lord Rama, as recounted in the Ramayana, built to cross over to Sri Lanka to rescue Sita from Ravana.

At some point a small temple, managed by a sadhu, was built around the powerful Sivalingam. In the 12th century, Parakrama Bahu, the Hindu king of Sri Lanka, built the existing central stone sanctum. Thereafter occurred many rounds of expansion and renovation which continue to this day. The labyrinthian complex is large even by Indian temple standards, with thousands of feet of high, granite pillared corridors. Mahasivaratri is the premier festival here, conducted over ten days.

Now, wading out of the sea, you walk some 700 feet to the temple tower and enter a fantasy world of stone chambers and steel handrails, which you soon learn are essential guides to the journey inside. At the first well, you stand as groups are organized into little tribes that will spend the next 90 minutes together. As instructed by your guru, you hold in your mind the far-too-many wrongdoings of this life, sometimes called sins, but that's a charged word that seems too Abrahamic. The caravansary of your misdeeds marches past--the wrongs, the hurts, the transgressions, the vices and victims of your ignorance--all there, carried all this distance. At each well one among them will surge forward, be acknowledged and--as the sacred waters of Sivaness pour over you--washed away, cleansed and released forever. How it must feel, you wonder, to be free of all that.

The soon-to-be-purified pilgrims are ready, and you are urgently called to follow a thin man who scurries ahead holding a tin bucket tied to a long, yellow rope. Only here, you reflect, at Rameswaram, can one gain Siva's fluid clemency. The guide rushes through several dark halls and you and your tribe of 15 try to keep up, confused by the hundreds of other pilgrims following dozens of other bucketeers, all criss-crossing, scurrying barefoot along the wet stone floors, worn smooth by millions of previous pilgrims' feet. Suddenly the bucketeer stops at the second well and climbs atop the well wall with such deftness that you forget how precarious his perch really is. He tosses the bucket into the water, some 20 feet below, and with lightning moves born of years of practice, brings the brimming pail up, splashing the cool water unerringly on the crown of your head. Others step forward for their turn, and you take that moment to purposefully watch one ancient misdeed disappear.

Off the tribe goes, through a dim tunnel, out into an open, sunny courtyard, then back into the dark corridors, left and right until the third well is reached. It seemed miles, but it could not have been. You realize you've become disoriented in both time and space. That might be a cause for concern, but not here, not now. It is a blissful state, a touch of superconsciousness, the feeling of being everywhere and everywhen at once. Pilgrim Jeffrey Thomas of Oregon described the feeling, "We moved in smaller groups through the labyrinth, not really sure what direction we

were going, following and going forward and letting go, releasing, especially when the water fell, because there were different temperatures at different places within the temple."

The wells continue in no logical order, some close, others far. Some round and others square. One turns out to be the giant temple tank, 100 feet square and filled with water lilies. You feel the lightness of the soul as misdemeanors and felonies fall away. The magical power of purification floods forth. Your mind wanders to the story told yesterday about the founding of the temple, how absolution was precisely Rama's purpose in establishing the shrine. While he was within his duty as a king to fight and kill Ravana, the villain who kidnapped his wife, Ravana was a brahmin, and the Dharma Shastras proscribe killing a brahmin. As penance for his offense, Rama worshiped Siva with intense devotion, right here. Even the great ones need grace it seems.

This morning, a swami explained that penance, prayaschitta in Sanskrit, is an act of atonement through an expression of devotion toward the Deity--such as pilgrimage or austerity. The Hindu pilgrim who bathes at Rameswaram does so with the intention of seeking God's grace to permanently alter his karma. As anthropologist Steven Huyler explains, "Relationships with the Divine in India are believed to be reciprocal. Health and good fortune are the natural products of a symbiotic relationship with the Gods. Misfortune and calamity are the result of imbalance, of inappropriate behavior and misguided thoughts and actions. Occasionally a devotee might be required to conduct intense rituals to demonstrate devotion and to reestablish the karmic equilibrium. In this process, miracles are viewed as common occurrences, blessings bestowed by the Gods upon faithful devotees."

Knowledgeable pilgrims bring to Rameswaram their personal list of sins to absolve and blessings to seek. Niraj Thaker (age 31) of England recounted his experience, "Just before the well bathing, memories came up of times I've been angry and even violent in my thoughts. I asked the water elements to cleanse me of that and help me heal. When I reached the last well, a strong message came to my mind: 'There is no misdeed that cannot be erased. There is no misdeed that cannot be worked on.' It felt like I was repairing things in my life."

You are at well number 17 and feel strangely different, right with yourself and the world. The loud echoing of hundreds of devotees racing through the stone halls

seems miles away. Sweet waves of love and oneness are welling up, and you observe that the experience has abruptly transformed from a rushing out of the blemished to the rushing in of beatitude. Only later will you learn that's exactly what is happening. Most of the early wells purify and those at the end offer boons and special graces. It makes sense; we must be empty of the burdens of the past to allow the Divine to enter and fill us. Is this what it feels like to be pure, to perfectly forgive yourself for all you have ever done? Such divine feelings have never been felt before, not even in meditation. "How long can this last?" you wonder.

Each well has a story, you are told. The first, Mahalakshmi Tirtham, was blessed by Goddess Lakshmi and bestows riches. The second, third and fourth, Gayatri, Savitri and Saraswati Tirthams, lifted a curse from a rishi. At the eleventh, Sage Vatsanaba was rid of the sin of ingratitude. At Ganga Tirtham, the 13th well, Rama was absolved of the sin of killing Ravana. At the 16th, called Ganasuruthi, a king attained enlightenment. You reach the final well, the twenty-second. Called Kodi Tirtham, it is said to confer blessings equal to bathing in the holy Ganges ten million times. There is no bucket here, just a tiny copper cup holding a few scant ounces. How ironic. The greatest blessings from the smallest demitasse!

Lindsey Boyer of New York had on previous visits to Rameswaram chosen to take only sprinkles of water. This time she underwent the full bathing and found it was completely different: "The whole experience of well bathing in these purifying waters brought me an overwhelming joy. Once I was wet, I was freed from all mundane concerns. And by the time we moved from the sin-removing wells to the blessing ones, I was out of sins to think about. Much tension in my body has been washed away. I was free to just be with God rather than attaching myself to external things."

Kartikeya Katir (age 18) of California, described his experience: "Every time I walked up to a well, all of these emotions and all of these memories would come up. I could physically feel them getting caught up near my throat. But as soon as that water hit me, the memories completely evaporated into nothing, and I couldn't even remember what I was upset about."

Soaking wet, you leave the hallowed home of Lord Siva reluctantly and ramble back to the hotel in silence, not wanting to say a word lest you break the spell. How privileged we are, you remind yourself, to be here at Rameswaram, the only place on the planet where this particular spiritual encounter is possible. You have done it,

endured a hundred hardships and fulfilled the pilgrim's quest for purification, and felt Siva's magic touch your soul. Would that all the world could feel each day as you do this moment. You know there will be other not-so-divine experiences in life, and probably other mistakes as well. But they, too, can be conquered. But, for now, they seem infinitely far away. Plpi

"By the end of it, I felt newly born"

Lucy Souter, shown in the photo below at Kodi Tirtham, the final well, relates her experience: "I was very nervous initially about the practical details of how I would manage being all wet, if it would be uncomfortable, etc.

"Once the experience started, I found it so moving that I completely forgot about all those things. I was instead thinking about sins as being things that separate me from God and ways in which I identify with my mistakes and frailties and weaknesses rather than with my soul and my connection to God.

"At each well that went by, I found myself focusing on one thing that I wanted to let go of. Then I'd get doused with this bucket of water in such a startling way that for a minute whatever I was thinking completely dropped out of my head. As the bathing process went on, I just felt lighter and lighter and more and more joyful until, by maybe number seventeen, I just started singing, and I couldn't stop.

"I was very, very happy. It was definitely a spiritual experience, a peeling away of layers of worldly and superficial things that kept me away from God. By the end, I felt newly born. It was an amazing feeling.

"Over the twenty-four hours that followed, I'd find things creeping back that I thought I'd put down. But being able to remember what it felt like to have put them down, to have wanted to put them down and to have put them down, made me rise above them again.

"I recommend it to anyone open to the power of ritual to change them spiritually. It was the most powerful tool I've ever experienced."

