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MY TURN

Childhood qualms no match for God's presence

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I grew up in a Christian family, a Protestant one. Protestants tend to be relatively austere in their practices, viewing even their Catholic brothers' propensity for ritual with some suspicion.

With that kind of mindset, I came in contact with the religious thought and culture of the Hindus. Around the age of sixteen the impact of spiritual India began to enter my life, first through contemplative literature--the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore, the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads. Although they initiated new stirrings deep within, still, my heart was not blasted wide open. I had not yet met my guru.

Then I met Gurudev, Swami Chinmayananda. I was twenty-six, with an unappeased hunger that had still not been satisfied. Swamiji blasted my heart wide open as his love-drenched intellect pierced through my rational mind to reach the sanctuary within. Around that time, the symbolic and ritual aspect of Hindu worship also became known to me. Yet, the

Protestant in me affirmed, "I am a Vedantin, not a Hindu. The ritualistic aspect of the spiritual search is for the Hindu, not for me, a Westerner. I'm striving for the essence behind the symbol."

My first trip to India, about ten years after I had met Swamiji, included unforgettable visits to temples and some dutiful prostrations in front of "idols." I did it out of respect for the spiritual traditions of a country I had grown to revere and out of my intellectual appreciation that each symbol stood for a deeper meaning behind it. But the Protestant in me still persisted in her protest against worship of inanimate stone and wood.

Then, in the fall of 1987, I had the good fortune to participate in a Chinmaya Spiritual Camp at Sidhabari, Himachal Pradesh, India. The spiritually charged setting left my mind in awe. One morning after meditation, I found myself walking toward the temple. After doing my pranams in front of the idols in the sanctuary, I followed the other worshipers to the rear of the temple. As I turned the corner, my eyes fell upon a wooden image of Ganesha. A blast of overpowering emotion almost pushed me to the ground. Lord Ganesha, through the idol, had just come alive for me. In fact, He had caught me totally unawares, had taken me by surprise by this unexpectedly powerful announcement of His undeniable presence. "Lord Ganesha, what have You done?" I said. "Of all the idols that I have contemplated upon in my intellectual studies of Hindu symbolism, You of all the many Deities left me quizzical and wondering--You with the animal head, the bloated belly, the broken tusk. I could never take You seriously. And now among the bevy of beautiful, inspiring images of Hindu Gods, dear

Lord, You chose to speak to me through this strange, even comical, form!"

My mind pondered over what had transpired. Perhaps my encounter with Ganesha was simply the extension of a fulfilling hour of contemplation that had ended just moments before my visit to the temple. The next day I decided to test the previous day's newfound reality. As I rounded the corner toward the back of the temple, I found myself talking to Ganesha, half-reverently, half-jokingly: "Ganesha, will You really be there for me again? Will you assert Your reality through the dead image of carved wood? Go ahead, prove it to me!" And He did so again and again, for many days afterward. The idol barrier had been broken.

On my return trip to Delhi, I had no train reservations and was trying to persuade the train conductor to allow me to use an extra ticket from a friend. In vain. The conductor's face remained stern. Departure time was fast approaching. "Ganesha!" I cried in my mind, "Help me!" The very instant I said those words, a smile broke across the conductor's face. "OK," he said. "You can take this train."

The Protestant protests no more.

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