

[Sacred Is Secret](#)

Category : [April 1999](#)

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WORSHIP

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A peak into a maharaja's never-seen-before daily worship

Photographer and art historian Stephen Huyler has spent the past several years documenting the personal worship of Hindus, called puja, throughout India. The fruition of his work will appear in Meeting God: Elements of Hindu Devotion, Huyler's newest book, to be published by Yale University Press in the fall of 1999. The rare images below and Huyler's recounting take us into an unnamed royal shrine room for the yearly Maha Sivaratri puja

By Stephen P. Huyler, Maine

For centuries of daily worship, no one outside the immediate royal family and their priests had ever been allowed to attend a maharaja's household puja. Yet, remarkably, one maharaja and his chief pujari had visions in their dreams that I should be invited! (Please see hard copy for remarkable

photos)

The puja room was deep in the center of the palace. The ambient energy was strong, and it seemed to pulsate as the pujari unwrapped a large crystal (sphatika) Sivalinga. The entire room hummed with its energy. It seemed an entire galaxy within itself. I felt dazed. I was then told that this was one of the nine Sphatika Lingas brought out of the Himalayas by Sri Adi Shankara himself in the seventh century.

The priest then unwrapped three other phenomenal images--a pure crystal Rajarajeshwari, a large emerald Ganesha, and a flawless emerald Sri Chakra Yantra. The images were given an elaborate bathing. The Sivalinga was dried and carried to a wooden shrine and lovingly placed in a brass box. The image was then elaborately dressed in silk and adorned with rudraksha strands and garlands. The other images were dried, wrapped in cloths, and placed in a second brass box at the Linga's base. The final puja then began.

The power emanating from those images, particularly the Linga, was inexpressible, and I will never be the same. I was specifically requested by the maharaja that, although I may publish these photographs, I should never say where the puja took place. I will always honor that request, and I ask those who view these images to keep your guesses to yourselves and preserve the sacredness of this phenomenal experience of the Divine.