

[Culture: Hinduism Is Right Next Door](#)

Category : [January/February/March 2013](#)

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CULTURE

Hinduism Is Right Next Door

My journey toward Hinduism taught me that anyone who is sincere and open-minded can find a place in this most ancient faith

BY PHILLIP MINER

I STUMBLED UPON HINDUISM WHILE TRYING TO FIGURE OUT WHAT was missing from my life. I came from a tolerant religious background, having grown up in the Unitarian Universalist faith, which made me open to the validity of Hinduism. Still, until a few years ago it didn't dawn on me that this would be the religion to give me peace of mind and psychological well-being. As with many Westerners, I struggled to find my path, taking the leap, learning more and planting the seeds of genuine belief and appreciation. It seemed like a daunting task. Too often, for Westerners, the necessary learning and participation in the culture seems alien. As a result, they never get started or even know how to start. Typically, they are filled with misinformation, with ideas like extreme forms of meditation (and self-mortification), with notions of making arduous journeys to plunge themselves in the Ganga.

I eventually discovered that Hinduism is a faith that anyone, regardless of race, social status or background, can embrace if they sincerely want to—and the key word here is sincerity. To be a Hindu, one has to believe in the culture, the practices and the philosophy with their hearts and minds.

When I became deeply interested, it was clear that I would not find everything on

the Internet, or even in books. It dawned on me that the best place to learn was in person from real-world Hindus, and that can be as close as your next-door neighbor. Those who practice Hinduism can be found all over the world these days, and getting to know them should be a key part of one's experience with the faith, especially if one comes from outside. Thanks to the Hindu diaspora, that's easier than ever. A list of Hindu temples in the US can be found on Wikipedia. The highest concentrations are in New York and Texas. The fact that I live in Rochester, New York, made it convenient for me to engage with the local Hindu community.

My discovery started with the Art of Living organization. While the Art of Living doesn't overtly identify itself as Hindu, most of their teachings, I discovered, derive from the Hindu faith, and that was what inspired me to investigate Hinduism more closely. Some of the members of the local Art of Living chapter took me to the Hindu Temple of Rochester. I learned a lot from that short visit, and it definitely aroused a desire inside me to learn more.

Eventually, I had to ask what makes a Hindu a Hindu? How does an outsider, like me, come into the faith? In response, Uma Gupta told me a Hindu is "one who practices tolerance, who takes care of all living beings, sees the divine in everything and pursues righteousness and goodness against all odds." That sounded good to me.



For those who are sufficiently open-minded and genuinely embrace the above creed, the good news is that these days more Hindus than ever before openly welcome Westerners who wish to experience and even adopt the faith.

Exploring deeper, I discovered the three principles that are fundamental to worship, community and service. This led me to get out into the real world, find people who are devoutly Hindu and take part in their community. That did not mean that I was ready to book the next flight to India. There was a more practical path that could

ease me into the faith and culture.

My first step turned out to be as simple as finding a place where puja is practiced. When I started attending services in the Hindu Temple of Rochester, I felt a bit intimidated. All the practices seemed so different from what I was used to that I had feelings of loneliness. I felt like I didn't belong. I even felt fearful, that my presence and my thoughts might be despoiling these holy pujas.

While these feelings may be normal for outsiders, they can only prevent us from taking part in Hindu temple worship if we let them overpower us. If I really wanted to be part of the puja and benefit from this closeness to the heart of Hinduism, all I had to do was overcome my fear and take part, sit down with the crowd and meditate on the puja, chant along with the bhajans, enjoy in the arati. I even found the courage to ring the gong during the temple's Krishna Janmashtami! As long as you genuinely feel that the puja can uplift you, you can partake of it.

It was that realization which convinced me of Hinduism's fit for me. I discovered that it doesn't just teach tolerance for others—it teaches tolerance of oneself, a trait which I was sorely lacking at the time. I had problems with my self-image. Even though I was raised to be tolerant of others, it was Hinduism that finally taught me how to accept myself as well, thanks to its core concept of dharma, which essentially boils down to everyone and everything having a role and place in the universe. There is much more to Hinduism than dharma, of course, but this was the concept that finally convinced me to learn more about how Hinduism as a faith can benefit me.

My path has been immensely rewarding. I may have just started out investigating Hinduism, but then, in a short time, I found myself changing spiritually. As I dive deeper and deeper into my Hindu practices, I find myself happier and more spiritually confident than ever. And I've only been in this process for a little over a year!

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