You Say You're Ready To Meet the Holy Ones?
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Every Hindu and most seekers after things mystical and Real will eventually come upon a holy man or woman and there will ensue a spiritual transaction which is impossible to describe or define but which is a many layered affair that may be roughly described as a learning, a sharing, an encounter with Self and other-than-self. It may be quite an ordinary happening or, more rarely, it may be a moment of true illumination, a journey to the far side of the mind, an immersion in the Light. I have been asked by readers to speak about how one properly greets a holy person, and I will oblige on one condition - that we all agree there is no one way in Hinduism to do anything. Nor is there any written book of etiquette. Everything is oral; every convention is silently understood. One more disclaimer: what's correct in one region may not be in another. Regional nuances are vast. Before attending to protocol, let's look at some general definitions and demographics.

There are many kinds of Hindu wise men and women. Most are sadhus, yogis or sages - anchorites who are living alone, perhaps in a distant forest, a cave or a small room near a temple. Others are scholars, like Sanskrit pundits or the anthropologist we know at a New York university. There are many saintly married people, usually of advanced age, who have achieved deep wisdom or unsullied devotion and are thought of as holy by those in their community. Of all the above, it is wildly estimated there are over five million, which translates to three-fourths of one percent of all Hindus in the world. Lastly, there are a few saffron-robed swamis and an even fewer number of perfect masters or Sat Gurus. I have never encountered a numerical appraisal of how many swamis there are. It is probably somewhere around ten thousand.

For our left-brained, number-oriented readers, we have assembled some interesting figures of how many swamis there are in the more well-known Hindu and yoga orders that reach outside of India. It is a terribly partial list and most swamis are not so affiliated. But it is interesting anyway:

Ramkrishna Order: ~900

Chinmaya Mission: 12

Saiva Siddhanta Church: 12

Siddha Yoga Dham: 12

Divine Life Society: ~50

Swaminarayana: 450

ISKCON: 84

Integral Yoga Institute: 40

Chunchanagiri Mutt: 13

Vishnudevananda: 16

All of the above holy souls - swamis and others - constitute a living treasure of Hindu dharma. They are vessels of the philosophy and the teachings; they are lamps to light the path.

What makes a truly awakened soul different from others? His mystical experience of God and its subsequent impact on his consciousness. Such a being regards himself as reborn, dead to his old ego and personal self, as a soul, no longer human but somehow divine or truly human. He is different than he was before, and different from those around him. He knows. He is complete. His search is over. He is liberated forever.

We turn at last to how to approach such a being, if you are ready and happen to find one. Preparation, as in all things Asian, is essential if the meeting is to be fruitful. In the most extreme sense, all of one's many lives are but preparation for such an encounter, which is but preparation for knowing God. On a less cosmic scale, one may probe the Hindu sacred calendar for an auspicious time. Having found that, tradition calls for a few days - at least a few hours - of meditation or reading of scriptures followed by a bath in which the entire body, head included, is cleansed with fresh water. One then dresses in fresh clothes. When feasible, this is followed by a visit to a nearby temple to sanctify one's intention, to inform all the worlds of the meeting and appeal for its fulfillment. The above is called sankalpa or intent. All things in consciousness are born in intent.

One should take some small offering to a holy person. The minimum is a fresh lime fruit, which anyone can afford and which is available everywhere. Other gifts may be a basket of fruits (rinsed in water) and flowers (do not smell them) or something hand-made. A few dollars may be folded in a betel leaf (or banana leaf) and tucked under the gifts - he or she may use this to help a devotee in need or to feed his monks or disciples. Having removed your shoes, lay the offering at his feet and either prostrate or namaskar. Some monks have vows which prohibit them from touching another person, so do not shake hands or put the offering directly into his hands.

If he does not know you, offer your name and a brief reason for your visit. He may invite you to sit. Always sit lower than he, with feet pointed away from him. It is not necessary to socialize or talk about the weather but you may of course ask questions, the more high-minded the better. Relax. Be your Self.

Many who visit a great soul will confide important, even intimate, matters of concern. It is not expected that he will respond outwardly. Even if asked a direct question, he may demure. It is considered that the very act of putting the matter into his mind is sufficient to bring about resolution and relief. An external answer is

unnecessary, and may even obstruct the internal process. Devotees consider that the consciousness of a God-Realized soul is a pure, blazing cauldron into which life's puzzles and problems may be placed, thus consigning them to the Light, to superconsciousness, to God Himself. The right response, they trust, is inexorable. That is the law.

There are some don'ts about such meetings:

* Don't ask personal questions about the sage or his past.

* Don't argue with or try to amend his responses.

* If you are a woman, don't go alone or during your period.

* Don't lecture him at length or try to test his learning.

* Don't refuse anything he offers.

One last Do. Take a bathtub when you go - figuratively, of course. There is an old parable of two seekers who went to a saint, one with a thimble and the other with a bucket. The first returned holding his thimble, complaining that this pitiful portion was all the great man had to offer. His companion came away from the same meeting with a bucketful. On the road home they met a third man, who, taking a bathtub, had received an abundance from the sage. We take away from such meetings only as much as we can hold, so take your largest cask, your most open heart and mind. What do we take away? Subtle impressions derived from darshan, which is simply seeing a holy one. Insight contained in his words, called vac. Vac is said to have great powers to change us, to reveal the Real behind the unreal. Devotees can often remember their sacred encounters word-for-word years or even decades later.