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ATA Spiritual Committee Report



ATA Spiritual Committee

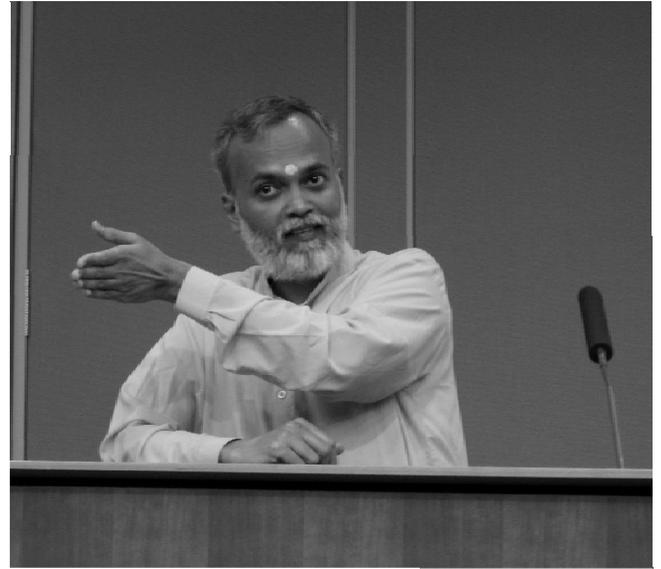
One of the goals of the spiritual wing of ATA is to organize discourses and provide a network for individuals seeking spiritual direction regardless of organizational boundaries, and with the help of Chinmaya Mission, ATA is not far from achieving that goal.

The Fall and winter of 2006 witnessed the abundant grace from the above, manifest in the form of a series of discourses by Pujya Swami Chidatmananda, Regional Head of Chinmaya Mission, Andhra Pradesh. These discourses were jointly organized by the American Telugu Association and Chinmaya Mission West, a non-profit organization. The main purpose of this program was to reach out to the communities across USA, who had not been previously exposed to the teachings and activities of Chinmaya Mission. Swamiji's discourses in different cities like Indianapolis, Phoenix, St. Louis, Augusta, Gainesville, Des Moines, Chicago, Oklahoma City, San Antonio, Denver, Tampa, Orlando, Kansas City, and Omaha were hosted by the local Telugu Associations.

Through this unique program, Swamiji touched many lives with his inspiring message on the topic, ***Learning Through Relationships***. Relationships play a very important role in our lives as they are nothing but our interactions with the world of fellow beings. Every relationship can be seen as a learning experience with the ultimate purpose being our own spiritual development. It is important to understand and recognize that every interaction with others is nothing but a reflection of our own beliefs and the behavior of others is not the cause for our experiences, feelings and emotions. Swamiji told us that all of us are "rough drafts" who can and must grow and evolve as we learn to love, forgive, and serve through different relationships. We can reap many benefits and lead a happy and peaceful life by learning to coexist with others by making the appropriate adjustments in our attitude and behavior.

"Experience is just a thought", was another simple

yet profound truth expounded by Swamiji. When dealing with unpleasant experiences, what causes suffering is not the experience itself, but the thought of that experience still clinging in our mind. If we are able to recognize and learn to just drop the thought, then what is left is only pure, unadulterated HAPPINESS.



Audiences all over the country were intrigued and held spellbound by the breadth and depth of the concept of learning and growing through relationships as presented by Swamiji. Swamiji's powerful message not only brought awareness about integrating spirituality in daily life, but also successfully planted the seeds of ATA and Chinmaya movement in many places. Based on the feedback and responses from people during the tour, it was apparent that the vision to provide maximum happiness to the maximum number of people was accomplished through this program. The people who attended the discourses are eagerly looking forward to Swamiji's inspiring and enlightening talks in the future.



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Swami Chidatmananda
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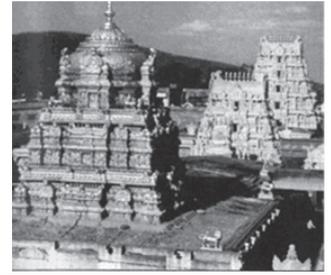
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A HINDU TEMPLE (DEVAALAYA)

M.G. Prasad



Sanathana Dharma, the platform of eternal truth or rule from ancient Indian soil, was based on the teachings of ancient sages and thinkers and the wisdom embedded in the scriptures like The Vedas and Upanishads. This is the platform that taught the way of life which later came to be popularly known as Hinduism. The purpose of Sanathana Dharma or Hinduism, is to guide the human beings through a path of (spiritual) discipline which ultimately leads to God. According to historians, the beginnings of Hinduism can be traced back to more than 5,000 years and it is generally regarded as the oldest religion or oldest organized religion in the history of human civilization.

Rooted in Vedic times and civilization, Hinduism has no known founder and is a conglomerate of diverse beliefs, traditions, expressions and manifestations. It is characterized by a rich variety of ideas and practices leading to the impression that it is a multiplicity of religions under one umbrella. For these reasons, Hinduism is viewed differently by different people around the globe. The observation that multiple deities are worshipped in Hinduism led the West to believe that it is a polytheistic religion. Some view it as a monotheistic religion, because it recognizes only one supreme God: the entire universe is seen as one divine entity who is simultaneously at one with the universe and who transcends it as well. While some others view Hinduism as Trinitarian because supreme God is simultaneously visualized as a trinity or triad - Brahma the Creator who continues to put forth new creations; Vishnu the Preserver, who preserves these new creations; and Shiva, the Destroyer, who completes the cycle. With respect to their functions, the trinity can be described in the acronym GOD as - Generator (Brahma), Organizer (Vishnu) and Destroyer (Shiva). As per the realities of Hinduism, most forms of Hinduism are henotheistic; they recognize a single deity, and recognize other gods and goddesses as facets, forms, manifestations, or aspects of that supreme God.

One important feature of Hinduism is a Temple where Gods and Goddesses are worshipped by devotees. It is a general belief of Hindus that their lives are merely stages in the progression to ultimate enlightenment and that temples act as safe haven where ordinary mortals like them can feel themselves free from the constant vagaries of everyday existence, and communicate personally with god, that is, temples provide an opportunity to reach a state where there is no distinction between man and God. Another viewpoint is that in Hindu Dharma utmost importance has been attached to life force and these temples dedicated to a multitude of deities reflect the secular thought in Hindu religion. Yet another belief is that these temples represent celebration of life. Considering the fact that Temples are an integral part of Hinduism, have you ever wondered how and on what principles they are built? This article by Sri M.G. Prasad succinctly describes some simple but amazing truths behind the construction of Hindu Temples. Several excellent websites exist that provide exhaustive details about Hinduism and the URLs for some of these sites are given at the end.

Introduction:

The origin of the word temple can be traced back to the word "templum" which was used by Roman soothsayers indicating a section of the sky and also a piece of the ground to gaze and mark divine signs for foretelling the future. Eventually, temple referred to a building constructed at the site. A Hindu temple refers in Sanskrit language to Devaalaya consisting of two words namely Deva (God) and Alaya (House).

Purpose:

In Vedic Hindu view, an individual's body is referred as a temple with the indweller as God. The Vedic seers (Rishis) having realized God within themselves gave

designs and functions of temples in scriptures (agama shastras) of Vedic Hinduism (Sanathana Dharma). Its purpose is to enable a devotee to use a physical temple and the ritualistic worship as a reminder to the spiritual journey to be carried out within oneself. In addition, it also serves as a place for celebrations of Hindu religious festivals.

Architecture:

A Vedic Hindu temple's architecture is a divine and yogic representation of a human being as shown in the figure (ref: Agama kosha by S.K. Ramachandra Rao). The feet represent the spire (rajagopura). The hands represent the walkway (prakaara) encompassing all around the temple. The main hall (mandapa) represents



the abdomen. The entrance porch (antaraala) represents the heart. The sanctum sanctorum (garbha griha) represents the head. The deity is consecrated with religious rites in the sanctum sanctorum. There is proportionality between the size of the deity in the sanctum sanctorum and the sizes of the temple construction details.

Worship Rituals:

The ritualistic worship (pooja) of consecrated deities (vigrahas) is carried out by priests on behalf of devotees to remind them of the inward yogic process of approaching the indwelling God. The various steps in a pooja offered to the deity with prayers and mantras (in Sanskrit) include steps such as washing feet and giving sacred bath using milk and water. Then with screen closed the deity is decoratively dressed with special cloths, flowers and ornaments. After the decoration the screen is opened to devotees to signify removal of veil of illusions so that devotees can see the beautifully decorated God. Then fruits and food are offered and incense sticks and lamps are waved to the deity. During the waving of lamp by a priest, devotees need to see with eyes open the radiating face of the fully decorated

deity so that its memory will provide the spiritual joy. Then the priests distribute the sacred water (teertha) and sacred food (prasada) that devotees drink and eat for spiritual blessings. Thus the entire ritualistic worship can also be seen as expressing love, devotion and respect to one's guest of honor. The joyful resonance between the external and internal worship provides the bliss.

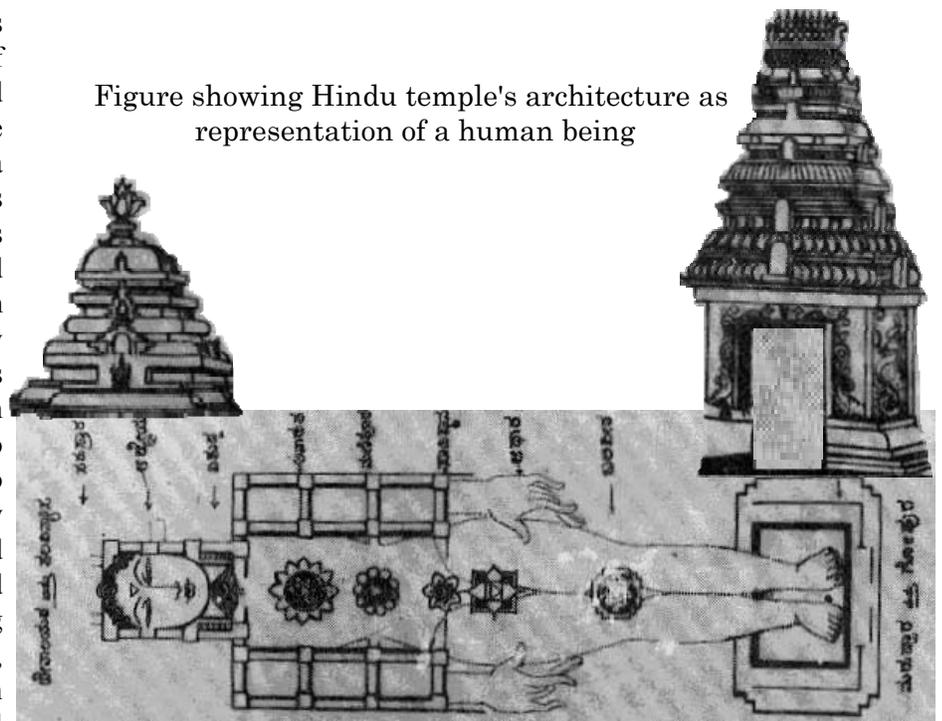
The elaborate worship of consecrated deity along with sacred rituals with Vedic mantras and the materials used in rituals such as water, milk, flower, incense, sandal paste, bells, conch-shell etc is to help devotees to focus their mind on the Supreme Being. The Vedic seers have recommended the temple and rituals so that devotees through sensory experiences can spiritually experience the bliss of God. It is inspiring to remember the words of my Sadguru Sriranga, a seer-yogi, "The worship of deities and rituals in a temple should be carried out with child-like

loving mind by the devotees as little children play with joy using their toys as medium.

Role in Vedic Hinduism:

Vedic Hinduism or Santhana Dharma is based on the Vedas and Vedic literature. Solutions and approaches to all levels of inquiry into the nature of soul, universe and God are provided in Vedic Hinduism. Rituals, Music, Dance, Yoga, Meditation,

Figure showing Hindu temple's architecture as representation of a human being



Vedanta etc. express its many facets. The celebrations of Vedic Hindu festivals bring out the various aspects namely religious, cultural, educational and social. A devotee focusing on the meaning of the Vedic mantras and ritualistic procedures will gain the spiritual knowledge. One focusing on the prayers and feelings in rituals will experience joy of devotion. One focusing on service in a temple will experience the joy of selfless service.

A temple plays an important role in providing a sacred place and means for spiritual development of a seeker.

Concluding Remarks:

A Hindu temple (Devaalaya) has not only religious purpose but also spiritual, educational, social, and cultural objectives. It provides a place for devotees to focus and develop their spiritual insight. A Hindu temple in essence can be recognized in three forms.

The first is oneself with God within. The second one is a dedicated room (with altar and deities) in a home. The third one is the Hindu temple in which devotees participate collectively that reflects the pluralistic nature of Vedic Hinduism or Santhana Dharma. Thus a devotee needs to integrate all the three forms of temples to develop the spiritual insight and enjoy the peace and bliss.

Good resources about Hinduism on the web:

http://www.kashmirgroup.com/pdf/Hindu_Rituals_Routines.pdf

This website describes Hindu Rituals and Routines and why we follow them. It is comprehensive and covers 22 items such as why we light a lamp, why we offer coconut, why we do Arati etc.

<http://www.himalayanacademy.com/basics/tenq/hindu10questions.pdf>

This website has excellent Q/A about Hinduism in article titled '10 Questions people ask about Hinduism'. This also has Hindu Code and Conduct, 5 Yamas and 5 Niyamas (Hinduism version of 10 commandments).

<http://www.hinduwisdom.info/>

This website gives an excellent glimpse of Wisdom of Vedic Scriptures. It covers areas from Basics of Hinduism and its various forms and Symbolism, Art, Culture, Science in Vedas, History of Vedic Culture, Social aspects such as Caste System. It also provides 420 beautifully illustrated quotations from celebrated Western thinkers such as Henry David Thoreau, Emerson etc.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hinduism>

Wikipedia has a thorough and detailed article on what is Hinduism, its different facets with excellent cross references. One of the best compilations on Hinduism.

<http://indiantemples.com/>

Everything one wants to know about temples, abodes of various Gods, various style of temples and about styles of temples in various regions of India.

<http://indiantemples.com/Articles/hintemp.html> a page on this website, is an excellent description the meaning behind temple architecture

<http://www.theuniversalwisdom.org/category/speakers/swami-vivekananda/>

This website gives text and audio of the inspiring speech of Swami Vivekananda in Chicago Parliament of religions

<http://www.ivu.org/news/march2000/hinduism.html>

This article is on Hinduism and Vegetarianism

<http://www.indhistory.com/>

A good site for Indian history, Hinduism and Hindu scriptures.

<http://www.archaeologyonline.net/index.html>

This website has archaeological aspects of Vedic culture 5,000 to 10,000 years. It gives a glimpse into highly developed civilization of this area so many thousand years ago



This article is published with permission from Sri M.G. Prasad of Hindu Temple and Cultural Society, Bridgewater, New Jersey. This and other interesting articles can be found on the web at <http://www.salagram.net/>. We would like to thank Sri Satya Dosapati for submitting the article to America Bharathi and for providing web links on Hinduism for further reading.

Quotable Quotes

When I read the *Bhagavad Gita* and reflect about how God created this universe everything else seems so superfluous. – **Albert Einstein**, German-born physicist & Nobel Prize winner

The Indian way of life provides the vision of the natural, real way of life. We veil ourselves with unnatural masks. On the face of India are the tender expressions which carry the mark of the Creator's hand. – **George Bernard Shaw**, Irish dramatist, Nobel Prize winner

I go into the *Upanishads* to ask questions. – **Niels Bohr**, Danish Physicist & Nobel Prize winner

If there is one place on the face of earth where all the dreams of living men have found a home from the very earliest days when man began the dream of existence, it is India – **Romain Rolland**, French Writer

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