

Sri Siddhi Vinayaka Cultural Center

Dear Lloyd Christmas,

I attended the Sri Siddhi Vinayaka Cultural Center. The cultural center is a Hindu temple in East Sacramento. As I pulled up to the temple only 10 minutes prior to the scheduled service, I noticed that my car was the only one in the parking lot. I thought that maybe there had been a mix up with the time or maybe that they all walked to the temple. I entered the temple and found only a priest preparing for a ritual. I quietly snooped around the temple observing about a dozen statues that were well decorated with cloths and flowers. The priest greeted me kindly, but kept working on decorating the last of the statues. I patiently waited to see if others would come.

The outside of the temple was well kept, but not fancy. The inside wasn't the lavish setting I expected from the Hindu texts I had read either. However, the statues were very well decorated and shiny. It was very peaceful standing inside the temple with near silence surrounded by these extravagantly decorated statues and a priest in traditional robe preparing the statues for worship.

Finally, right at the scheduled service time, a Hindu man entered with a bag full of apples and a gallon of milk. He placed the food on a table and went through a routine where he prayed to Ganesha, Vishnu, and Shiva, the three highest and most popular Hindu gods. Shortly after he finished, the priest began a ritual devoted to one of the other statues. The man approached the statue and sat down to observe, participating at certain instances, but mostly sitting quietly and listening to the priest chanting the Veda, the Hindu version of the Bible. The priest poured milk over a small statue next to the larger statue and followed that with holy water. These are "gifts" to the gods. He then came out and splashed holy water on both the man and I. Later he would pour holy water in the palm of our right hands, which we were to drink. Eventually he lit incense and waved it in front of the statue to wake up the god inside. He kept chanting the Veda all this time, which was an impressive display of endurance. Next, he dressed the small statue in fancy cloths and flowers. Concluding the ritual, the priest brought an apple and a bag of trail mix to each of us. It was important to grab the food with the right hand and not the left, so not to contaminate it with our "dirty" hand.

The other man left following that ritual, but more people were arriving. They smiled politely with food-in-hand and engaged in the same greeting to Ganesha, Vishnu, and Shiva as the first man had done. Many people arrived, followed suit, and sat down on rugs scattered around the room. We

waited approximately an hour for the next ritual to start, which was an offering to Ganesha. That offering followed a similar format, but involved two priests and seemed to be more important based on the amount of food offered to Ganesha, the larger group of worshippers, the incorporation of drums, and a more theatrical performance by the priests.

I interviewed a man named Dattatreya days after witnessing the offerings. He is a religious scholar, a lawyer (in India), an IT specialist for the U.S. federal government, a volunteer for the Hindu temple, a “reservist” for disasters such as hurricane Katrina, and has devoted his life to the service of God. He kept telling me “In God we trust”, and that is how he lives his life. He says God is everywhere and in everything, even an ant, because God created everything. He also said, “Time is God”, in contrast to the usual “Time is money” that most of us recognize. That means that he spends all of his time honoring and worshipping God. His ancestors are also very important to him because they are also responsible for creating him. He wants to play the lottery just once, even though it goes against his religion, but if he won he would give all of the money to homeless people and build a great temple in honor of his ancestors. The way that he lives his life is very inspirational, how his only concerns are worshipping God, having enough food to sustain his body, and helping the less fortunate. After worshipping God and eating blessed food, all other energy is spent on his community and helping others. After interviewing Dattatreya, I realized that Hindus are not so different from everyone else. They try to live their lives to the fullest with the same morals, the same jobs, and the same concerns.

Looking deeper into the worshippers’ themselves lead me to many new insights. Several objects and actions seemed to inspire worshippers’ thoughts and feelings about religion. I noticed that the high repetition of these rituals appeared to affect not only the worshippers, but also the priests. Their facial expressions and body language showed that they were doing something more routine rather than an important task or an exciting worship. The repetition seemed to bring about a more casual feeling toward the gods than a submissive one. The food items that they brought were usually apples and milk. That seemed to be the standard, but one family brought a coconut. The coconut seemed to have some sort of higher value than the apples, and the two halves of the coconut were important offerings to Ganesha. The man who brought the coconut looked like he was carrying a trophy as he marched outside to break it and then back inside to present the halves to the priests for inclusion in the offering. It was as though he expected a better blessing for having offered the coconut. Any food that is offered and then eaten afterward is known as prasada, and is considered blessed. A woman told me that prasada is very highly valued and that it is a blessing to be able to eat it. As the offering

progressed, more and more people showed up. It was as if there was no specific time to attend. While most people did not seem to mind, one family who showed up prior to the beginning of the ritual was obviously annoyed at the other worshippers' tardiness. I think their thoughts and feelings of their religion were much stricter than many of the other worshippers. At one point, the priest walked around with burning incense and several people gathered around at once and wafted the smoke into their faces. Their body language and facial expression showed that they were inspired by a wave of calm and ease received from the gods through the smoke. They relaxed their bodies and allowed their head to fall back in complete relaxation.

The worshippers seemed to feed off each other in order to inspire thoughts and feelings towards the gods. As worshippers began sitting on the ground closer together due to lack of space, the room became much more cohesive and vibrant. People were smiling at one another and seemed to be united in their worship and inspired to connect better with the gods as the priests led them through the ritual. Prior to having a "full house", people seemed much less connected and even slightly frustrated towards one another. This seemed to negatively impact their ability to connect with the gods. The highly decorated statues and their spaces were off-limits to the common worshippers, which gave them sacred status. Only the priests could touch the statues. By having statues that are not to be touched inspires thoughts and feelings of the gods as identities of higher status compared to the common man.

The worshippers and priests also seemed to intentionally cultivate certain thoughts and feelings in order to heighten their engagement in the ritual. According to Dattatreya, when the priests are chanting the Veda, worshippers are intentionally inviting the gods to come over them and bless them. Then they are feeling that blessing provided to them. However, much of the time the worshippers are simply sitting patiently on the floor, often squirming around in order to stay comfortable. A few of them were even stretching out their legs. I was surprised to see this, but according to the *Hindu Worship* (RDR Pg 20) the ritual is not supposed to be a very formal event for the worshippers, only for the priests. Squirming around and even a little bit of talking here and there is permitted. Towards the end of the rituals, the priests pour holy water into the worshippers' right hands. Dattatreya says that as they drink the holy water, they are imagining the gods blessing them and fixing their problems.

When the priest is either sprinkling holy water on the worshippers' heads or pouring it in their palms, the priest is intentionally cultivating thoughts of blessings coming from the gods inside the statues to

the worshippers. His job is as liaison from God to worshipper, as mentioned in *Hindu Worship*. The priest wakes the gods with incense and loud drumming, and envisions the god waking up to delightful smells and chants that are enjoyable for the god according to *Hindu Worship* (RDR pg 18).

I wondered how the worshippers regarded authoritative texts and authoritative people, such as the priests. Dattatreya told me that Hindus are not familiar with texts such as *The Law Code of Manu* and that only religious scholars and priests read the Veda, their version of the Bible. The Veda is something that only scholars and priests learn, and is not intended for common worshippers to read. This does not detract from the ability of the worshippers to have a full religious experience though because their role is more observational and reactive as described in *Hindu Worship* (RDR pg 18). Another difference I found is that Hindu priests do not hold the same roles as a Christian priest does. They are not involved with worshippers outside of the ritual. Their role is simply as mediators during religious services according to Dattatreya.

After the ritual, I wondered about the worshippers' choice in which food items to bring and how much of a financial burden it is on them. I was also curious about how the priests regarded their position. Dattatreya explained that "Time is God, not time is money", and that is how people view money and devotion. The people have no problem buying food for the offering because in return they are blessed through their devotion to God. It is more like an investment than an expense. According to Dattatreya, the priests consider themselves very lucky to be able to serve the worshippers. This shows again the Hindu peoples' devotion to one another and sense of community that runs very deep.

When I visited the temple, I tried to have a very open mind. I really had to focus on being neutral and accepting, without judgement, what was about to occur. I needed to block out what I considered "normal" religious practice, based on my childhood of Christianity. I thought that they may do something that I thought to be humorous or silly and that I would have to stifle my laughter. However, it never occurred and I became very comfortable just being in the temple alongside the Hindus. As I became more at home, I wanted to participate in the rituals to see what it is like, but I didn't want to be disrespectful to the people there. At first, I felt very awkward and I was very concerned about how my actions would affect the worshippers' ability to worship and the priests' ability to carry out their roles. I kept to the side, out of the way of things and just observed, but after a while the priest began including me in the ritual. I felt much better that he wanted to include me and I realized how

welcoming these people really are. In the end, I was able to view Hinduism as a separate but equal and worthy alternative religion to my own.

As the rituals went on, I found myself trying to compare my expectations of Hindu worship, based on a few texts I had read, to what was actually happening in front of me. I felt like I could follow what was happening pretty well despite some minor exceptions. Much of the offering seemed to follow Fuller's description in *Hindu Worship* (RDR pg 57-58) regarding statues, the meaning of the offering practice, and what processes would occur. Although the offering went mostly how I expected, and I was able to follow most of it, I didn't have a lot of personal interaction with Hindu people. I had this idea that they were very strict based on readings from *The Law Code of Manu* (RDR pg 54-55) because in that text, Manu lists all of these rules of the religion regarding "unfit invitees", people who should be barred from certain religious practices. However, when I interviewed Dattatreya, I quickly realized that he did not reflect what I thought a Hindu would act like at all. Instead, he is a very casual man and very easy to talk with. None of the judgements of Manu were evident in Dattatreya.

The building was also different from what I expected based on reading Schipper's *Everyday Religion*. Although Schipper was describing Tao temples, there seemed to be many similarities between Taoism and Hinduism, so I expected similar architecture as well. Schipper describes this magnificent looking temple made of gold, silver, and ivory. Instead, what I saw was an old converted pink house with a banner that read Sri Siddhi Vinayaka Cultural Center, but the lawn was very well kept and full of flowering bushes. The people are also able to keep much of their Hindu tradition despite living in a Western nation and living as a minority group. Although their religion differs from most Americans, they drive cars, hold the same jobs, and portray the same values as any other "moral" person. Despite these outward similarities, they are able to maintain a strong identity with the Hindu faith.

I strongly recommend that you have this experience for yourself. It is a very eye-opening experience and it will do wonders for your understanding of Hindu people.

Sincerely,

