

EDUCATIONAL INSIGHT

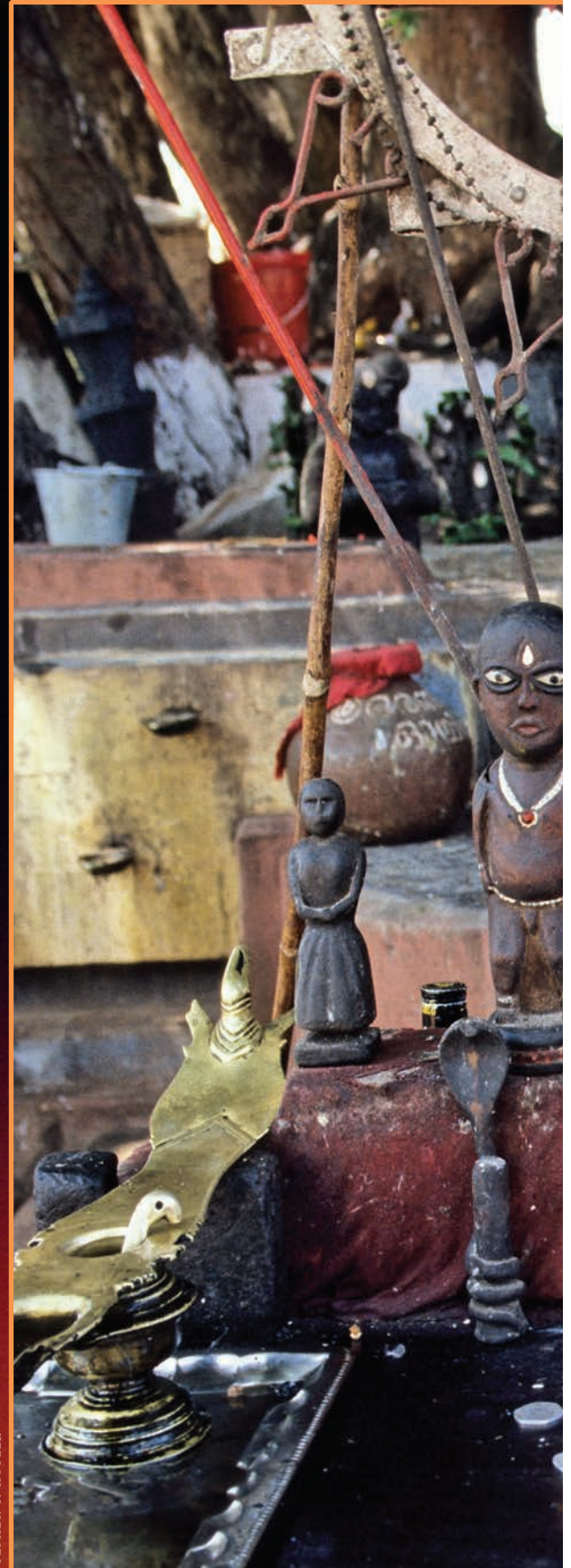
Healing, Sacred Vows and Trance Possession

Vital Facets of the
Hindu Devotee's
Relationship with
the Deities

Excerpted from Stephen
P. Huyler's *Classic Work:
Meeting God, Elements
of Hindu Devotion*

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Ochira, Alappuzha District, Kerala: Offerings of
money are placed by grateful devotees in front of
votive wooden objects used as aids for healing.



STEPHEN P. HUYLER



The Healing of Aditi

The news alarmed Kamala. Her little granddaughter was so young, so beautiful. She had known from the moment she was born that she would be the pride of the family, that she would succeed in life. And now they had just been told that there was nothing to be done. Little Aditi, only fourteen months old, was dying of this new strain of cholera, and the doctors were at their wits' end. The family had rushed the delirious, feverish baby to the hospital four days before in a high fever; yet despite all the care of the medical team, the strong medicines, the intravenous and oxygen, her condition had grown steadily worse.

Kamala prayed with all her concentration focused on Siva, saying his name again and again, chanting the mantra she had been given when she had come of age, asking the God for His help in this dire emergency. And then, suddenly, she knew what to do. She pushed through all the other family members: her son Pradeep, his wife Geeta, her two older sons and their wives. She went directly to the bedside, pulled out the needles and tubes from Aditi's tiny arm, took the oxygen mask from her face and cradled her in her arms. Geeta cried out in protest, reaching for her daughter as, behind her, the nurse stormed in to stop this action; but Kamala did not relinquish the girl. She firmly told her plan to everyone there. She was taking Aditi to be healed by the Goddess. Parvati would save their child. They were going to the temple at Ochira.

Everyone hurried out of the hospital and down the street towards the bus station. The next bus to Ochira was not for five hours, and they did not have enough money for a taxi. One of the girl's uncles talked a motor rickshaw into taking Kamala, Pradeep, Geeta, the baby and himself. The others would come later by bus. By pooling all their resources, they would just have enough to pay. Even by this transportation it would take almost two hours to reach the temple. They crammed themselves into the little vehicle and took off. Together they sang the praises of the Goddess, over and over calling out her name. Little Aditi stayed on Kamala's lap the whole time, her mother constantly applying fresh cloths soaked in cool water to her feverish skin. The highway was crowded and the driver had to swerve often onto the dirt siding to avoid a collision with a bus or truck. But finally they pulled up to the temple at Ochira and dismounted from the rickshaw.

Ochira is unique among all Hindu temples. Even though it has been famous throughout the area for centuries for the innumerable miracles that have taken place there, the temple itself is open air. It has the



STEPHEN P. HUYLER

The Power of Faith

FROM THE TEACHINGS OF SATGURU SIVAYA SUBRAMUNIASWAMI

Faith, *astikya*, is the fourth *niyama* [spiritual observance]. Faith is a substance, a collection of molecules, mind molecules, emotion molecules—and some are even physical—collected together, charged with the energies of the Divine and the anxieties of the undivine, made into an astral form of shape, color and sound. Being a creation built up over time, faith can just as readily be destroyed, as the following phrases indicate: crisis of faith, loss of faith, dark night of the soul, and just plain confused disappointment leading to depression. Because of faith, groups of people are drawn together, cling together, remain together, intermarry and give birth, raising their children together in the substance of faith

that their collective group is subconsciously committed to uphold.

Anyone can strengthen another's faith, through encouragement, personal example, good natured humoring, praise, flattery, adulation, or take it away by the opposite methods. Many people with more faith than intellect are pawns in the hands of those who hold great faith, or of those who have little faith, or of those who have no faith at all. Therefore, we can see that a clear intellectual understanding of the philosophy is the bedrock to sustaining faith. Faith is on many levels and of many facets. We have faith in a person, a family, a system of government, science, astronomy, astrology. Faith in philosophy, religion, is the most tenuous and delicate kind and, we must say, the most



rewarding of all faiths, because once it is sustained in unbroken continuity, the pure soul of the individual begins to shine forth.

Faith has eyes. It has three eyes. The seer who is looking at the world from the perspective of monistic Saiva Siddhanta and sees clearly the final conclusions for all mankind has faith in his perception, because what he sees and has seen becomes stronger in his mind as the years go by. We have the faith of those who have two eyes upraised. They look at the seer as Dakshinamurti, God Himself, and gain strength from His every word. There is also the faith of those who have two eyes lowered. They are reading the scriptures, the teachings of all the seers, and building the aura of faith within their inner psyche. Then there are those who have faith with their eyes closed, blind faith. They know not, read not and are not thinking, but are entranced by the spiritual leader in whom they have faith as a personality. They are nodding their head up and down on his every word and when questioned are not able to adequately explain even one or two of his profound thoughts.

And then we have the others, who make up much of the world pop-

Ochira, Alappuzha District, Kerala: *A baby girl, delirious with the critical fever of cholera, is placed by her grandmother in front of the image of Paratai. Within seconds her fever has abated and she is entirely healed of the disease.*

ulation today. They are also with eyes closed, but with heads down, shaking left and right, left and right. They see mostly the darker side of life. They are those who have no faith at all or suffer a semi-permanent loss of faith, who are disappointed in people, governments, systems, philosophies, religions. Their leaders they condemn. This is a sorry lot. Their home is the halls of depression, discouragement and confusion. Their upliftment is jealousy and anger.

Faith extends to another level, too, of pleasure for the sake of pleasure. Here we have the jet-set, the hedonists, the sensualists, the pornographers and their customers. All these groups have developed their own individual mindset and mix and interrelate among themselves, as the astral molecules of this amorphous substance of thought,

towering gateway common in this South Indian state of Kerala, and its grounds include a marriage hall and an assembly hall. The large field that constitutes the center of the complex contains two sacred trees and a sacred grove. Local legend states that the trees represent the Absolute Divine, Parabrahman: God without form, unmanifested in any image. It is a place like Lourdes in France, to which the faithful come to be healed.

Kamala knows right where she is going: directly to the back of the first tree. A three-foot-high cement platform surrounds and contains a peepul and a kadamba tree entwined with long gnarly roots at their base. Small open shrines on both sides are facilitated by non-brahmana priests, who conduct special pujas in the morning and evening and remain throughout the day to receive offerings, give prashad, and advise devotees in the appropriate procedures for approaching Parabrahman. Even though Ochira is maintained as a temple to the unformed Absolute, a wooden image of the Goddess Parvati stands at the rear shrine, installed by a grateful past recipient of healing. Devotees claim that many miracles have occurred here with the aid of the Goddess. It is this image that Kamala saw in her prayers in the hospital. It is here that she has brought her granddaughter to be healed.

First, at the priest's instruction, she pours fresh vermilion and sandalwood powder over the image, placing coins at Parvati's feet. Then she lowers Aditi to the sand beneath the tree. The baby is still delirious, faintly moaning as she feverishly thrashes her head back and forth. Kamala opens her heart and her mind to the Goddess, loudly calling out Her name and vowing to undergo arduous annual fasting and penance if the child is cured. Other women, strangers who

have been touched by these desperate prayers, crowd around Geeta to ululate in high-pitched rolling cries intended to keep away death. Pradeep and his brother prostrate themselves on the ground, their hands stretched out toward Parvati. The priest chants with his eyes closed. For several minutes all attention is vibrantly focused on the Goddess, all beseeching Her intervention, all requesting Her aid.

And then Aditi stops twisting her little body and lies still, her breathing regular and her eyes clear. Kamala feels her forehead, loudly proclaims that the fever is gone, and then collapses to the ground, rolling back and forth and chanting: "Amma, Amma, Amma, Amma" ("Mother, Mother, Mother, Mother!"). She is overcome with gratitude to the Goddess. Geeta and Pradeep rush forward and scoop up the little girl in their arms, tears streaming down their cheeks as they realize that she looks changed, tired and pale but no longer ill. They cry out vows to Parvati to honor Her for the rest of their lives.

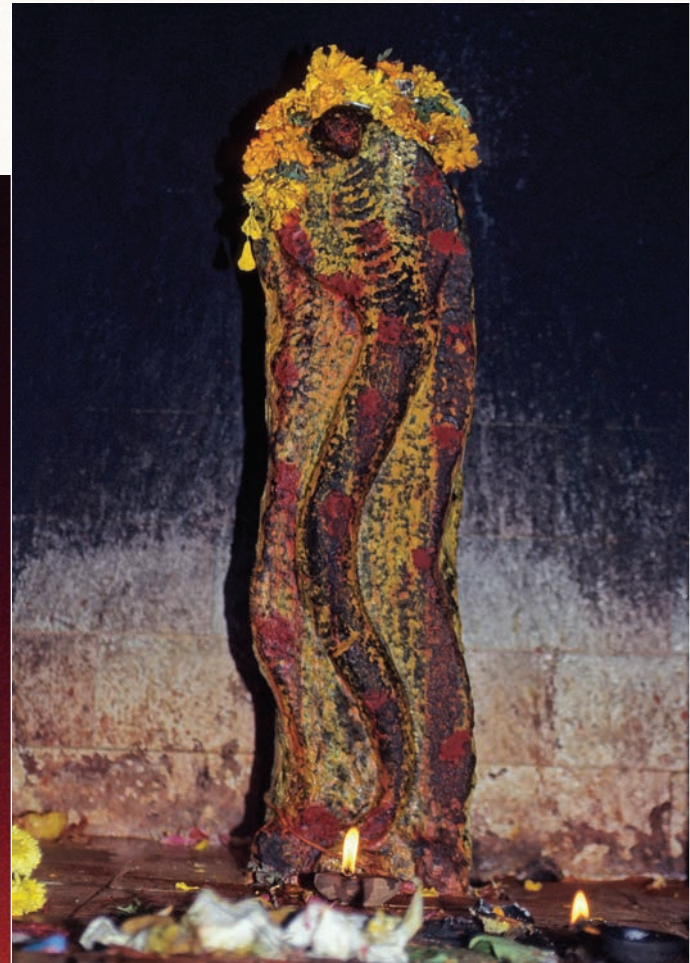
When the family has recovered, they all sit alongside the tree, each alternately picking up the small girl to stroke and kiss her. They wait for the evening puja to join the hundreds of other devotees in prayers to Parabrahman and the extraordinary sacred power manifest in this place. When the rest of their relatives arrive by bus late that night, they all share in adulation for the miracle that has taken place.

emotion and belief that we call faith creates their attitudes toward the world, other people and their possessions.


The Hindu, therefore, is admonished by the *sapta rishis* themselves to believe firmly in God, Gods, guru and the path to enlightenment, lest he stray from the path of dharma—for faith is a powerful force. It can be given; it can be taken away. It is a national force, a community force, a group force, a family force. And it is more than that, as far as the Sanatana Dharma is concerned, which can be translated as the "eternal faith," the most strengthening and illuminating of all, for it gives courage to all to apply the twenty *yamas* and *niyamas* [restraints and observances], which represent the final conclusions of the deepest deliverers of eternal wisdom who ever resided on this planet.

Some people have faith only when things are going right and lose faith when things go wrong. These are the ones who are looking up at their leaders, whom they really do not know, who are looking up at the scriptures, which they really do not understand. Because their eyes are closed, they are seeking to be sustained and constantly uplifted by others. "Do my *sadhana* for me" is their plea. And when some inconsistency arises or some expectation, unbeknownst to their leader and maybe never even recorded in the scriptures, does not manifest, a crisis of faith occurs. Then, more than often, they are off to another leader, another philosophy, to inevitably repeat the same experience. Devotees of this kind, who are called "groupies" in rock and roll, go from group to group, teacher to teacher, philosophy to philosophy. Fortunately for them, the rent is not expensive, the bhajanas are long and the food is good. The only embarrassing situation, which has to be manipulated, is the tactic of leaving one group without totally closing the door, and manipulatively opening the door of another group.


When that uplifted face with eyes closed has the spiritual experience of the eyes opening, the third eye flashing, he or she would have then found at last his or her *sampradaya*, traditional lineage of verbal teaching, and now be on the unshakable path. The molecules of faith have been converted and secured. They shall never turn back, because they have seen through the third eye the beginning and ending of the



path, the traditional lineage ordained to carry them forth generation after generation. These souls become the articulate ones, masters of the philosophy. Their faith is so strong, they can share their molecules with others and mold others' faith molecules into traditional standards of the whys and wherefores that we all need on this planet, of how we should believe and think, where we go when we die, and all the eternal truths of the ultimate attainments of mankind.



Mylapore, Chennai, Tamil Nadu: (Left) Throughout India the cobra is viewed as a Deity of healing. Numerous shrines, particularly in the Northeast and the South, are associated with the mounds or trees under which cobras live. Women worship at these shrines for successful childbirth and the health of family members.



Ochira, Alappuzha District, Kerala: (Below) Beneath the lateral roots of these ancient entwined trees, wooden votive healing sculptures surround the image of Parvati. When a devotee prays for healing, he or she will pick up one of the votive sculptures and, with it, circle the part of the body that needs healing. For the people of this region, Ochira is like Lourdes, and many miraculous healings take place here.

Healing

One of the underlying popular tenets of Hinduism is the acceptance of miracles. Most Hindus believe that direct appeal for aid from a Deity often results in divine intervention. The Gods and Goddesses are approachable and, when properly beseeched, will change the course of events. Prayers for intercession may be made to any Deity, the choice entirely dependent upon the beliefs and inclinations of the devotee. Stories in every neighborhood revolve around ancestors or acquaintances whose sincere devotion resulted in the prevention of misfortune and disaster. Elements of nature such as trees or rocks are believed to possess powerful healing energy. Just touching such an object may result in a miracle.

Innumerable examples of such healings exist. For instance, at the Bedla Mataji temple just outside the city of Udaipur in Rajasthan, as many as twenty thousand devotees come for healing during the ten-day Navaratri festival each year. While making a wish to the Goddess Durga, they crawl through a short U-shaped arch of stone and clay believed to be vibrant with sacred energy. If the individual's prayer is answered, he or she will promise to return to crawl seven more times through the arch before giving substantial offerings to the Goddess. Many devotees claim that this action has resulted in miracles. At the roots of the sacred trees in Ochira, described in the story of Aditi, groupings of ancient wooden sculptures represent legs, arms and complete human figures. Years ago they were placed there to remind Parabrahman of the specific healing requested. When the miracles occurred, the objects were left behind. Devotees believe that these sculptures are now imbued with sacred healing energy. The afflicted will pick up one that pertains to that part of the body that needs attention and revolve it around the spot, accordingly absorbing divine healing.

Physical conditions in the Indian subcontinent are generally much more severe than those of Europe or North America. Disasters such as floods, famines and earthquakes are common; the climate makes it a breeding ground for contagious diseases; and overpopulation often makes living conditions oppressive. Hinduism, unlike Western religions, does not separate God from the devil. Both good and evil are viewed as divine. Both are essential parts of existence, their deeper purposes unfathomable to mankind. Siva is described as both the creator and destroyer of the universe. The wrath of His consort, Parvati, in Her form as Kali, is said to cause calamities; Her anger must be appeased through pujas. She is, however, also viewed as the nurturing mother who lovingly cares for Her devotees. Some Deities are particularly associated with disease and healing. Sitala is worshiped in North India as the Goddess of Smallpox, the Provider of Good Fortune and the Protector of Children, while Her counterpart in South India is known as Mariamman. Each of these Goddesses is believed to be both the cause and the cure of illness. A sick person will be said to be possessed by the Goddess, and special rituals must be enacted to please Her, to cool Her anger and make Her benign. The Goddess within the patient will be offered special foods believed to be Her favorites, foods that consequently ease the fever and help to heal the disease.

The first time that newborn babies are taken out of their homes in central Tamil Nadu, usually at three or six months, will be to be blessed by the Goddess. Many babies are brought by their parents to be laid in front of the image of the Goddess in Mariamman's temple in Punalur, near Thanjavur, to ensure that they are protected from harm. So many healing miracles are claimed to have occurred in this temple that it has become remarkably popular. The priests found that the congestion of milling devotees prevented them from being able to conduct normal pujas, so they relegated the more elaborate


personal rituals to a side shrine. In a courtyard, the women of each family gather to sing praises to the Goddess as they mix and roll out special sweetened rice and lentil flour balls to be given as part of their offerings for the health of their babies. Other women make special rice cakes mixed with ghee and turmeric that will be placed over the diseased part of a family member's body. A small wick in the center of the cake is lighted as an invocation to Mariamman, who is said to draw out the negative energy from the ill person and heal him or her. Many diseases, including tuberculosis, cholera and cancer, are believed to be healed in this manner.

Cobras, the most poisonous of snakes, are revered as divine agents of healing. A home inhabited by a *naga* (cobra) is believed to be lucky. The snake that is regularly prayed to and fed is said to never harm family members. Many shrines and temples have grown up around the mounds or tree roots where Nagas live, and the snakes there are given daily offerings of milk and eggs. Stone sculptures depicting hooded Nagas, sometimes with a human form beneath the hood, stand beneath many sacred trees, particularly in south India. Occasionally the image will portray two entwined snakes identical in form to the caduceus, the common symbol of western medicine. Women more commonly worship at Naga shrines than men. They make special pujas to the Nagas to pray for fertility and successful childbirth and for the health of their family members. In North India, particularly in the areas of the eastern Gangetic Plain where poisonous vipers abound, Manasa is worshiped as the Goddess of Snakes. Closely connected with the earth, fertility and marriage, She is usually depicted in human form surrounded by vipers. When someone is bitten by a snake, Manasa is worshiped to draw out the venom.

A divine image, particularly one that has been worshiped for years, may be considered to be so imbued with sacred energy that simply being in its proximity may heal disease and reverse misfortune. The longer it has been the object of worship, the more powerful it is believed to be. Many miracles, for example, are cited by pilgrims who have made the long journey to the famous temple of Srinathji (a name for Krishna) in Nathdwara, Rajasthan. They believe that the preparation for such a pilgrimage, the voyage itself, and preliminary rituals after arrival at the temple act as a means of cleansing and readying oneself for being filled with God's grace. In the course of darshan with Srinathji during puja, the undiluted power of God is viewed as purifying, healing any imperfection or misfortune.

The growth of small shrines into large temples is largely based upon the response of grateful devotees to the specific blessings received from the Deity associated with that spot. The largest temples in India, such as that of Jagannatha in Puri and Meenakshi in Madurai among hundreds of others, have gained their popularity purely through their records of achievement which include innumerable healing miracles. Many devotees returning from pujas in these places claim that their prayers have been answered. Tirumalai, the temple of Vishnu that is the richest pilgrimage center in the world, has gained all of its wealth from donations by grateful devotees. Hundreds of thousands of smaller temples, those in little communities throughout the Indian subcontinent, have their own stories of miracles that have happened in the past as well as in the present.

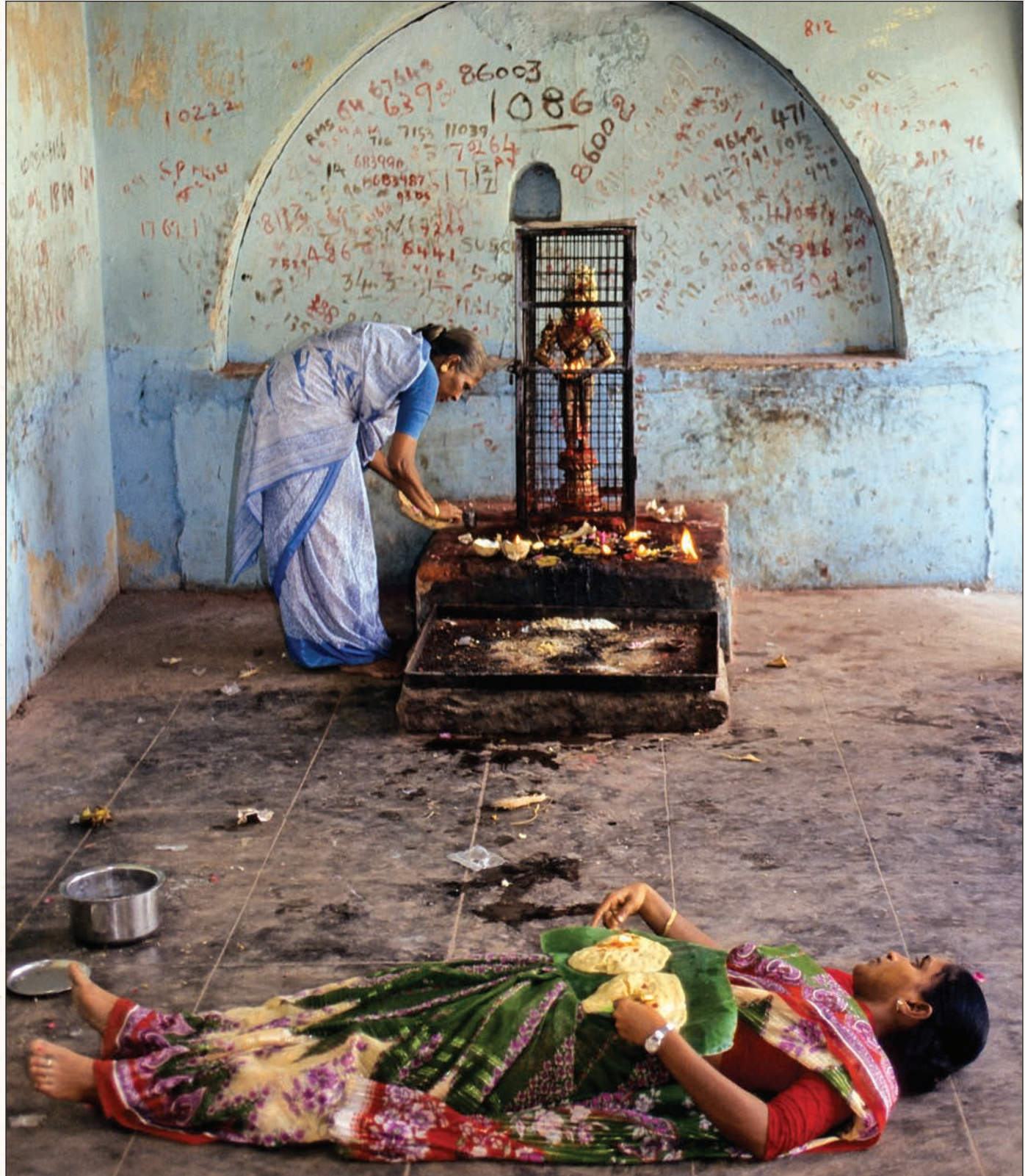
In general, healing is believed to come to those that deserve it. Disrespectful or inappropriate behavior (for example, the seeking of self-satisfaction at the expense of one's family or friends) is considered to demean the individual character and to create bad karma. Karma, it may be remembered, is based upon the absolute law of cause and effect, of total responsibility for one's actions. Karma is the sum of the entire character, the tally of all the good and bad acts in this life and all previous lives. Social or material inequalities are viewed, in part, as



Bedla, Udaipur District, Rajasthan: *In an ancient ritual that has been conducted on this spot for centuries, devotees in need of healing crawl through an arch of stone and clay at the Bedla Mataji Temple. Many claim efficacious cures.*

the natural product of past-life karma. Each individual is ultimately accountable for every choice, every action and even every thought. Selfless dedication to the duties in life—to the responsibilities undertaken by being born into this body, this family and this occupation—is considered to be a virtue, to create good karma. Countless Hindu

treatises, legends and stories extol the virtuous life. Clear-sighted commitment to the fulfillment of duty to family and Deity are the highest possible human achievement. Acts of virtue are believed to attract the positive attention and beneficence of the Gods and, when necessary, to clear a path for healing energy.



ALL PHOTOS: STEPHEN F. HUYLER

Punalur, Thanjavur District, Tamil Nadu: (Left) In a temple to the Goddess Mariamman, a ritual to heal a woman diagnosed with severe cervical cancer includes specially made rice cakes that are placed over the afflicted area and lighted with wicks. The disease, viewed as contamination, is believed to be drawn out through the flames. The numbers of lottery tickets have been scrawled on the back wall for good luck by other devotees.

Patna Bihar: (Below) The flames of lamps illuminate the sides and back of a terracotta elephant placed in a temporary shrine of sugarcane stalks inside the courtyard of an urban home. Behind the shrine, a woman arranges offerings to the Sun God, Surya, as part of her rituals to fulfill a vow for the health of a family member.



Sacred Vows

The purpose of many Hindu rituals is to improve the balance of karma. The properly conscientious Hindu conducts regular pujas, in which the Gods are honored and extolled, as well as samskaras, in which the events of the life cycle (birth, betrothal, marriage and death, to name a few) are appropriately celebrated. Another common means of clearing the negative karma created by past mistakes in action or judgment is through the fulfillment of a *vrata*, a specific vow, to a God or Goddess. A devotee promises the Deity that he or she will regularly undergo a certain action that will help to purify body and mind and demonstrate piety.

Many *vratas* are relatively undemanding, usually involving a fast accompanied by intense prayers. A vow will be made that on the one day each week considered auspicious to that particular Deity: the devotee will go without solid food from sunrise to sunset. Regional cultures differ in the traditional attributes of each day. In North India, Monday is the day dedicated to Siva and Lakshmi, Tuesday to Hanuman, Ganesha and Kali, Wednesday to Vishnu, Thursday to personal Deities or to one's guru, Friday to the Goddess in Her many forms, Saturday to the Divine in its most powerful aspect (Siva as the De-

stroyer or Durga as the All Conquering), and Sunday to Surya. Most Hindus would make a *vrata* to fast for only one day in the week, although some might make special concessions upon another day as part of a second vow (for example, a person who regularly eats meat might vow to Vishnu to eat solely vegetarian food on Saturdays).

Any *vrata*, simple or complex, is a serious commitment to the Divine and must be enacted exactly as it was promised. Failure to do so may result in disaster. Stories abound of dishonored vows and the divine retribution that followed. If someone is incapable of honoring a sacred vow through physical impairment or death, the responsibility may be assumed by another member of the family. Although anyone may commit to a *vrata*, most are made by women. As has been stated, shakti (feminine strength) is revered in India. Women are believed to be much stronger in character and resolution than men. They are given the responsibility to keep the karmic balance of the household. The knowledge of most of the sacred traditions of home and family is passed down through the women. Although men are often involved in household pujas, it is the women who conduct almost all of the many other rituals that take place throughout each year, including



the *vratas*, fasts and other ascetic observances. A primary purpose of most of these is to lessen the burden of the family's bad karma, its toxicity, and thereby improve the status quo.

A *vrata* is a personal choice that does not require the services of a priest, Brahmana or otherwise. The rituals have been handed down in Hindu households from mother to daughter and from mothers-in-law to daughters-in-law for centuries. They are conducted by every class and community, and in every region, although they vary in form and demand according to the individual traditions of each family. Their strictures may be severe; but the rituals nevertheless encourage a freedom of artistic expression in music, dance, storytelling and poetry, artistry and craftsmanship.

During the Chhattha festival in Bihar, celebrated twice each year in February–March and October–November, women make vows to the Sun God, Surya, that if the condition of family members is improved (perhaps a disabled child will be healed or a long-unemployed husband will get a job) they will undertake annual fasts, intense prayers and physical ordeals. The honoring of such a *vrata* may require days or even weeks of intense preparation. After dark on the evening before the festival day, a votary in a typical situation will create a temporary shrine of sugarcane stalks in the courtyard of her home. Beneath it she will place a terracotta elephant, representing a gift of honor to the God. Around the sculpture she arranges baskets of offerings: co-

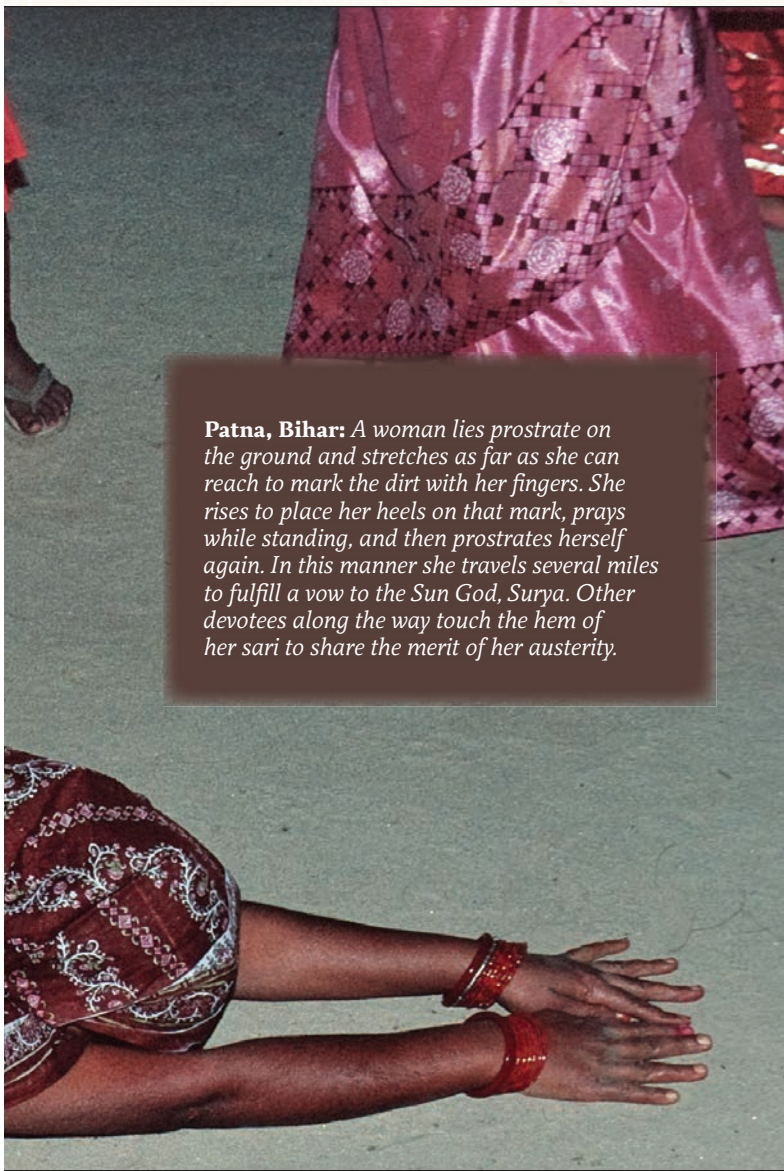
conuts, fruits, special leaves, cooked sweets, incense and rice. On the back of the elephant are small lamps that she fills with ghee and then lights. She will then pray to Surya, thanking Him for His blessings. For the rest of the night until just before dawn, she and all the other women in her household, will sing songs to Surya, praising Him and relating stories of all the many boons that He has granted His devotees. When the sky first begins to lighten, the family members will disassemble the shrine and carry the sugarcane, elephant and all the baskets of offerings to the river. There, they set up the shrine in the shallow waters near the river bank, with the lighted elephant partially submerged. The woman who has made the vow will enter the river to her waist holding up the offerings to be blessed by the rising sun. Once her prayers are finished, she clambers ashore and the food is divided to be eaten by all of the family members. Her actions are a means for showing her gratitude to Surya, while at the same time contributing to the karmic balance of the entire family.

An individual who has suffered a misfortune may decide to make a more exacting vow requiring an action that is particularly arduous and difficult to perform. Such a *vrata* exemplifies the humility and deep respect of the devotee and should thereby bring a needed balance to negative karma and improve the situation. These vows will be made only in dire circumstances: as part of prayers for healing an incurable disease or recovery from a personal or family disaster. For example, a farmer in Bihar might pray to Surya for the successful impregnation of his wife after years of impotence and infertility. He may vow that if his prayers are answered and his wife delivers a healthy son, he will perform the following humbling task during each annual Chhattha festival for the next ten years.

First, he will stand outside his house with his hands folded in prayer and his heels touching the doorstep. Then he will prostrate himself upon the ground, stretch out his hands towards the river, pray, mark with his fingers the furthest point he can reach, stand again, and step to place his heels on that mark. He will then prostrate himself and repeat the process again and again—until he has reached the river's edge ten miles away! He will have planned so that he left the house at such a time to reach the river just at sunrise to make the appropriate puja to Surya on the day of Chhattha.

The performance of this difficult task is considered to create such positive sacred energy in the devotee that other Hindus who pass him while he is prostrate will reach to touch the hem of his clothes, thereby having his darshan and gaining some of his merit for themselves. Vows of such intensity are not rare. Many devotees to Surya in Bihar, both men and women, may be observed enacting this same ritual during the Chhattha festival. Other demanding *vratas* elsewhere might include, for example, climbing on one's knees the two thousand steps to the temple of Amba Mata on Mount Girnar in Gujarat, or annually walking barefoot for four days up a jungle path to have darshan with the God Ayyappa in Sabarimala, Kerala, or making the painstaking pilgrimage to the 15,000-foot-high sacred lake at the base of Mount Kailasa in Tibet, the legendary Himalayan abode of Siva and Parvati.

Vows may include demonstrations of piety that require body piercing or fire walking. Some Hindus prepare with long periods of fasting and prayer, while for others the act may be spontaneous. In either case, the individual is usually overcome by trance, believing that he or she is imbued with the spirit of the Deity. These devotees are compelled to show their intense devotion by, for example, piercing the tongue with a metal trident, or the back and limbs with metal spikes. Bleeding is rare: blood is a sign of impure faith. When the intrusive objects are removed, there is often no wound, no sign of a puncture. Similarly, worshippers, particularly in South India, may vow to demonstrate their abiding faith by walking barefoot across a bed of red-hot coals. Those few that are burnt by this action are considered inappropriately prepared and not graced by the Deity's spirit.



Patna, Bihar: A woman lies prostrate on the ground and stretches as far as she can reach to mark the dirt with her fingers. She rises to place her heels on that mark, prays while standing, and then prostrates herself again. In this manner she travels several miles to fulfill a vow to the Sun God, Surya. Other devotees along the way touch the hem of her sari to share the merit of her austerity.

STEPHEN P. HUYLER



Manarashala, Alappuzha District, Kerala: *(Above)* A devotee who is possessed by the spirit of the God Subramaniam is encircled by close friends who keep him from falling while he dances in oblivion. This experience is for him the fulfillment of a vow, something that he must undertake only once during his life.

(Right) Possession by a Deity is a profoundly transformative experience. Not only is the devotee changed by his or her trance, but others who witness the possession often claim deep spiritual epiphanies.

Trance Possession

Possession by a Deity is not uncommon in India. Many festivals include members of the community that regularly become possessed to dance erratically through the crowds and to speak as oracles, giving direct messages to individuals, deciding disputes and dispensing justice. However, this intensity of belief does not necessarily exemplify zealotry. A mainstream Hindu, conservative or liberal, from any walk of life (farmer or professor, princess or sweeper, rich or poor) may be possessed by a Deity. Although this condition does not affect every Hindu, almost all families can recall at least one member who has been overcome by a spiritual trance. A trance may occur in the middle of a puja, or while singing bhajanas (devotional hymns), or in having darshan with a Deity during its procession on the street. The time and place are unpredictable. Typically, the devotee is overcome by a trance and begins to shake or roll on the ground or dance uncontrollably. He or she may mumble incoherently, or cry out the name of the Deity again and again, or deliver divine messages, often very wise, in an unaccustomed voice. The trance may last minutes, or hours, or even days. When it is over, the person is often exhausted, but elated. People who are possessed usually claim great insights and deep inner peace. Those that witness this transformation feel that they are in the presence of the Divine and that their lives are enhanced by the experience.

In some cases, possession by a Deity may be a planned and anticipated act, part of the fulfillment of a vow. Women may make vows to the Goddess Mariamman to be possessed by her spirit during her annual festival. Similarly, devotees of Subramaniam (also known as Murugan or Karttikeya, the son of Siva and Parvati and brother of Ganesha) may vow that in return for a specific request (healing or the improvement of an oppressive situation), they will become possessed by the God at least once during their lives. If the wish is granted, the devotee will honor his part of the bargain during one of Subramaniam's three annual festivals, either in the following year or on any year thereafter. Some may choose to wait decades before fulfilling their vows.

During one such festival, a group of votaries assembles at a specified spot three miles from a temple dedicated to Subramaniam. Among them is a dentist, a farmer, a computer salesman, a shopkeeper and a fisherman. Each votary brings a *kavadi*, a small domed palanquin made of sticks and brightly colored paper. The *kavadi*, symbolizing the legendary mountain of sins that the God carries on His shoulders in behalf of mankind, is placed with those of other devotees in the center of a sanctified area. Brahmana priests then conduct a puja to Subramaniam and purification rites on behalf of the devotees, tying vessels of water and offerings of food and flowers to the edges of each *kavadi*. Aside from prayers and mental readiness, the only preparation that the votary makes is to take no solid food from early morning. No mind-altering drugs are employed. Once these first rituals are finished, the chief Brahmana rings a bell to signify readiness. The devotees then loudly call out the name of the God as they line up before the priest. The first man bows before him, touching the priest's feet and taking from him the newly blessed *kavadi* and a bunch of peacock feathers. At the moment he receives these two objects, he staggers back in trance, possessed by the God. His friends surge forward to catch him before he falls and guide him away from the line of other devotees. As they leave, another votary approaches the priest, bows to receive his *kavadi* and feathers, and collapses in trance to be supported by friends. And then the next and the next until the entire group of votaries is in trance. Each votary is surrounded by a tight ring of close friends who hold hands around him throughout the period of possession. They make sure that he does not fall as he dances completely unaware of his surroundings. The votary, his friends, family and observers all believe he is possessed by the energy of the God Subramaniam. For the next several hours he dances while carrying the *kavadi* and peacock feathers as the entire group moves three miles in slow procession to the God's temple. Spectators believe that having darshan with these devotees is meritorious. When the parade of the possessed finally reaches the temple, they dance through the compound and into the sanctum. Once there, a final puja is made to Subramaniam and the Deity is asked to leave His human vehicles to once more inhabit the central image. The vow is complete, the votaries blessed with vibrant sacred energy, and all return to their homes.

Relationships with the Divine in India are believed to be reciprocal. By giving, you receive; and when receiving, it is essential that you acknowledge the source and give something in return. Health and good fortune are the natural products of a symbiotic relationship with the Gods. Misfortune and calamity are the result of imbalance, of inappropriate behavior and misguided thoughts and actions. Balance is regained through good deeds, proper conduct, abiding faith and the appropriate honoring of one's Deities. Occasionally a devotee might be required to conduct intense rituals to demonstrate devotion and to reestablish the karmic equilibrium. In this process, miracles are viewed as common occurrences, blessings bestowed by the Gods upon faithful devotees.

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The Strength of a Vow

FROM THE TEACHINGS OF SATGURU SIVAYA SUBRAMUNIASWAMI

Vrata, taking of sacred vows, is the eighth *niyama* and something every Hindu must do at one time or another during his lifetime. The *brahmacharya vrata* is the first, pledging to maintain virginity until marriage. The *vivaha vrata*, marriage vows, would generally be the next. Taking a vow, a *vrata*, is a sacred trust between yourself, your outer self, your inner self, your loved ones and closest friends. Even though they may not know of the vow you may have taken, it would be difficult to look them straight in the eye if you yourself know you have let yourself down. A vow is a sacred trust between you and your guardian devas, the devas that surround the temple you most frequent and the Mahadevas, who live within the Third World—which you live in, too, in your deep, innermost mind, in the radiant, self-luminous body of your soul.

Many people make little promises and break them. This is not a *vrata*, a sacred trust. A *vrata* is a sacred trust with God, Gods and guru made at a most auspicious time in one's life. *Vrata* is a binding force, binding the external mind to the soul and the soul to the Divine, though *vrata* is sometimes defined generally as following religious virtues or observances, following the principles of the Vedas, of the Hindu Dharma. There are *vratas* of many kinds, on many different levels, from the simple promise we make to ourself and our religious community and guru to perform the basic spiritual obligations, to the most specific religious vows.

Vratas give the strength to withstand the temptations of the instinctive forces that naturally come up as one goes on through life—not to suppress them but to rechannel them into a lifestyle fully in accord with the *yamas* and *niyamas*.

There are certain simple vows in Hinduism which are easy to take and often are taken, such as, "If I'm successful in this business dealing, I will give twenty percent of the profits to my temple." Or, "If my spouse comes back to me, I shall always obey the *stri* dharma principles (or *purusha* dharma), be dedicated and devoted always." "If my dear mother, who is so devoted to my children, lives through her cancer operation (and Lord Ganesha, the doctors have said the chances are not good), you will see me at the temple every Friday without fail. This is my *vrata*, Lord Ganesha, and I say no more." We take vows to change our ways, vows to meditate daily, vows to desist from lying, vows to not eat meat, vows to remain celibate, vows to obey the guru and his tradition, vows to follow these *yamas* and *niyamas*.

Perhaps the most obvious and important vow, which can be taken most readily and renewed once a year on a day which you consider your most sacred day—such as Sivaratri, Ganesha Chaturthi, Skanda Shashthi or Dipavali—is the *yama* and *niyama vrata*. These twenty restraints and practices are easy to memorize. Commit them to memory. The *vrata* should go like this: "O Lord Ganesha, open the portals of my wisdom that I might take this *vrata* with open heart and clear mind.

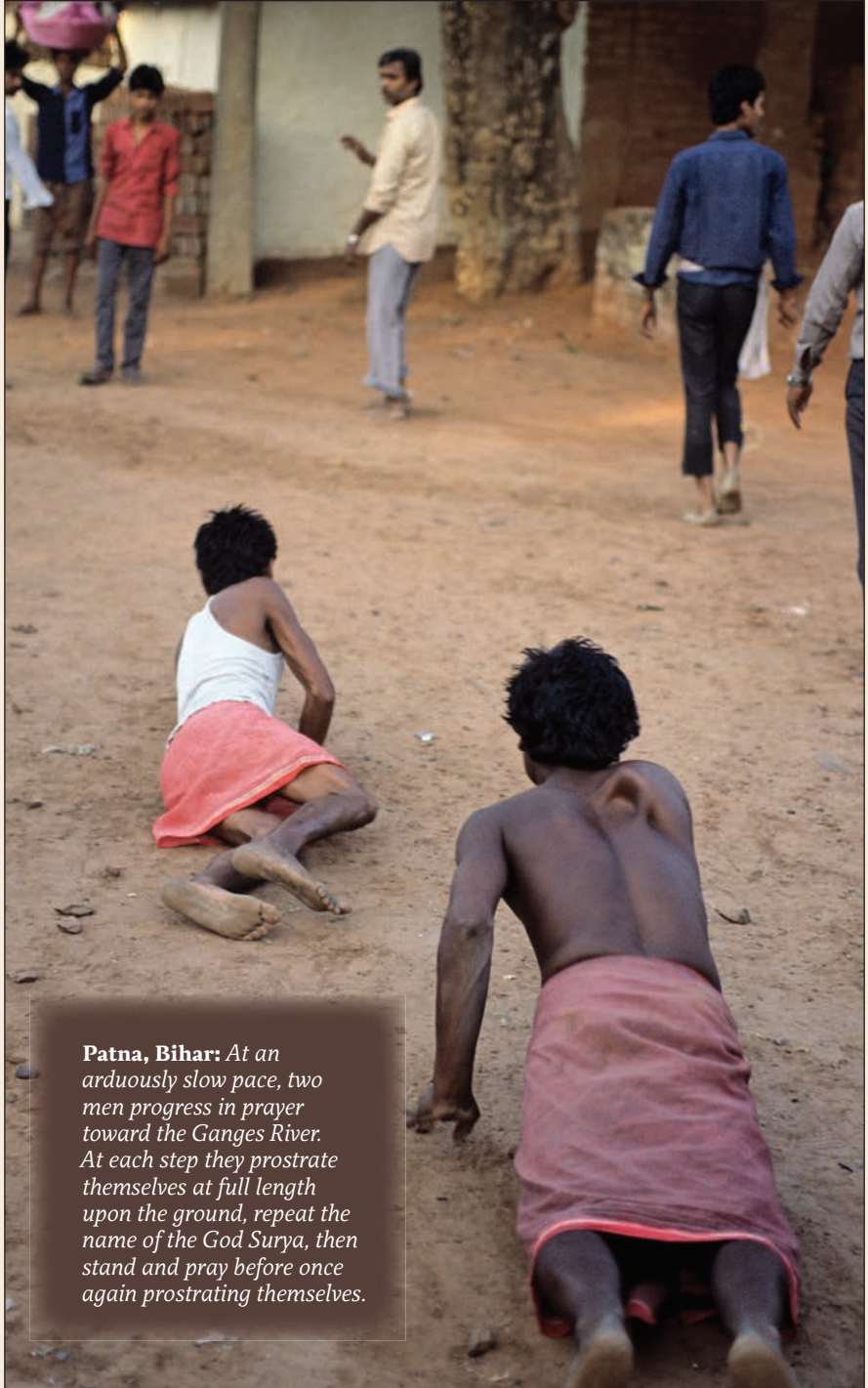


Calcutta, West Bengal: A driver offers lighted incense to the Goddess Kali as a part of daily prayers to protect his vehicle.

O Lord Murugan, give me the will, fortitude and renewed strength every step of the way to fulfill the *vrata* that I am taking. O Lord Siva, forgive me if I fail, for these twenty restraints and practices are truly beyond my ability to perfectly uphold. So, this first year, Lord Siva, I vow to fulfill these lofty ideals, to the best of my ability, at least fifty percent. I know I am weak. You know I am weak. I know you will make me strong. I know that you are drawing me ever patiently toward your holy feet. But, Lord Siva, next year I will faithfully renew this *vrata*, this sacred vow, to these rules, these observances. And if I have succeeded in fulfilling my meager fifty percent according to my conscience, that shall increase my dedication and devotion to you, Lord Siva, and I shall determine to fulfill the *yamas* and *niyamas* in my life and soul seventy-five percent or more."

Many people feel that when they don't fulfill their *vrata* they have failed. One practical example to the contrary is Mahatma Gandhi, who took a vow to be celibate but broke it many times, yet continued the effort and ultimately conquered his instinctive nature. In taking a *vrata*, at the moment it is heard by priests, elders and all community members, when one hears oneself taking it, and all three worlds rejoice, a balanced scale has been created. Success is on one side, failure on the other. One or the other will win out. This is where the unreserved worship of Lord Murugan will help overbalance the scale on the success side. But if the scale teeters and wavers, the blessings and knowledge of the elders of the community should be sought: the mothers and

fathers, the old aunties and uncles, the priests, the pandits and sages, the rishis and gurus. This and this alone will steady the balance. But if actual failure occurs, Lord Ganesha Himself will catch the fall in His four arms and trunk. He will hold the devotee from going into the abyss of remorse of the darkness of the lower worlds. He will speak softly into the right ear and encourage that the *vrata* be immediately renewed, lest time elapse and the asura of depression take over mind, body and emotion. Yes, the only failure is that experienced by the one who quits, gives up, turns his back on the path and walks the other way, into the realms of darkness, beyond even the reach of the Gods. As Tiruvalluvar said, it is better to strive to fulfill great aspirations, even if you fail, than to achieve minor goals in life. Yes, this is very true.



Patna, Bihar: At an arduously slow pace, two men progress in prayer toward the Ganges River. At each step they prostrate themselves at full length upon the ground, repeat the name of the God Surya, then stand and pray before once again prostrating themselves.

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