

## A Pilgrimage is an Adventure in Consciousness

By M. G. Satchidananda

Pilgrimages have been among the most significant activities of my life over the past forty-seven years, ever since my first one to South India in 1972. Unlike tourists, pilgrims are not looking for new experiences *out there*; they are not seeking diversion, entertainment, or amusement. On a pilgrimage, we should seek to know the truth of our Self, the Divine, the ineffable, beyond names and forms.

**Pilgrimages are found in all spiritual and religious traditions.** For two thousand years, Christians of all denominations have made pilgrimages to Bethlehem and the River Jordan. Roman Catholics also go to the Vatican in Rome, Lourdes in France, and St. Joseph's Oratory in Montreal. Catholics and many others also walk hundreds of miles to the Cathedral of St. James at Santiago de Compostela in northwest Spain.

Jews make pilgrimages to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Buddhists go to Bodh Gaya in Bihar, India. Muslims go on the *Hajj* in Mecca. Hindu devotees of Shiva go on pilgrimages to Varanasi, Kedarnath, and Amarnath in the north of India, and to Chidambaram, Arunachala, and Sabari Malae in the south. Devotees of Ram travel to Ayodhya, devotees of Krishna to Brindavan, Puri, and Srirangam, and devotees of Muruga to his six major shrines, including Katargama, Palani, and Tiruchendur. Hindus of all traditions make pilgrimages to Rameswaram in South India and to Badrinath in its northern-most point, the Garwhal Himalayas. Hindus and Buddhists make pilgrimages to Mt. Kailash in Tibet. In the American Indian tradition, pilgrimages take the form of a vision quest or visits to sacred places such as Sedona, Arizona, or Mount Shasta in northern California. There are hundreds of other pilgrimage destinations around the world, many of which are associated with saints, sages, and gurus.

**The universal and ancient nature of the pilgrimage is compelling evidence that it is not limited to a single religious teaching.** A pilgrimage is a spiritual exercise in self-transcendence. As with any spiritual exercise, our purpose is *letting go* of the mundane pre-occupations of our lives and cultivating the aspiration for the sublime, that which cannot be limited by time, space, thought, or emotion. In other words, we are *going away from* that which has become tiresome, troubling, and ordinary, and we are *going toward* the unknown, uplifting, and ineffable. A pilgrimage is therefore a spiritual adventure, an adventure in consciousness.

Unlike desire, which the ego imagines will bring some experience of happiness, however fleeting, in the vital body, aspiration is the call of the soul for the True, the Good, the Beautiful, the Infinite, and the Eternal. Aspiration seeks to move away from the ego's game of liking and disliking and the ensuing suffering. Aspiration is the soul's quest for union with the One. Aspiration is the soul's desire to triumph over all limitations and divisions born of the mind and emotions.

Consciousness is the greatest mystery of life. It is that which simply observes. It is individualized in every living creature. At the same time, a universal consciousness is observing every individualized consciousness. It is That which the pilgrim is ultimately seeking. At the pilgrimage destination, we find the mystical Presence of the Lord. In the *Yoga Sutras*, verses I.24 and 25, Patanjali describes It this way.

*Ishvara is the special Self, untouched by any afflictions, actions, fruits of actions, or any inner impressions of desire. There (in the Supreme) the seed of the manifestation of complete omniscience is unsurpassed.*

The pilgrim maintains an inward focus, by cultivating choice-less awareness. Tourists seek happiness in the passing show of new sensory experiences *out there*, grasping at likes and avoiding dislikes. But pilgrims try to maintain calm equanimity and presence in the face of any challenge.

Getting to places of pilgrimage typically involves hardship, which causes resistance. Resistance tests our capacity to persevere and maintain the perspective of the Witness soul, and to avoid succumbing to the perspective of the ego, with all of its attachments and aversions. Experiences during a pilgrimage may also push our buttons, provoking memories of unresolved conflicts, dreams, or hopes, known in classical Yoga as *vasanas* (tendencies), or in today's body–mind literature as *blockages*. By cultivating choice-less awareness, the pilgrim practices letting go of these, and so finds liberation from the suffering that such memories always contain.

**What makes a pilgrimage destination worthy of our aspiration?** The profound spiritual experience of a saint or the founder of a spiritual tradition or religion impregnates such sacred pilgrimage destinations with a sublime energy, or seeds, which empower pilgrims to access or at least glimpse their spiritual experiences, realizations, and higher states of consciousness. As those who venerate such saints or sacred places deposit the seeds of their own aspiration, love, and devotion, they increase their power to uplift the consciousness of all who will visit after them. Sacred places thus become dynamos of spiritual energy, where the devout add to and take away spiritual energy.

Quantum physics and Yoga Siddhantha both tell us that the fundamental building block of the universe is conscious energy, Shiva-Shakti. Nothing exists except conscious energy. In the eyes of the pilgrims, the apparent laws of Newtonian physics, the *gunas* (modes of Nature), and the agents of *maya* (delusion), including time, partial knowledge, partial power, passion, and destiny, all dissolve into That. All limitations are transcended as the pilgrims draw close to the sacred space of conscious energy at the destination. Having arrived and having purified themselves of all manner of resistance, memory, and mental distraction, they will remain there indefinitely, enjoying the bliss of spiritual fulfillment.

**The pilgrimage begins the moment we form the intention, the *sankalpa*, to go.** This intention is not a wish or a hope. It is a commitment. "I am going...." Often, when we make the commitment, we realize that we may need years before we can amass the resources necessary to go and before we can end or suspend our other commitments, for example, to family or employers. We may have to overcome our own specific limitations, for example, those involving our health, education, physical conditioning, and even legal problems. However, the very commitment to go provides the essential and powerful means to overcome every obstacle and every manner of emotional resistance.

During the pilgrimage, the pilgrim will maintain this commitment to spiritual aspiration by avoiding familiar distractions, indulgence in sensory pleasures, sources of entertainment, family responsibilities, and in the digital age, work conducted via cell phone and email. Depending on the spiritual tradition or religion, the pilgrim will also practice continuously or regularly certain spiritual practices, including

prayer, mantras, breath awareness, and meditation. *Vairagya* (detachment) is therefore to be cultivated both inwardly as desirelessness and outwardly by avoiding activities that distract from the inner focus. *Vairagya* is Patanjali's main method of attaining Self-Realization. In the *Yoga Sutras*, verse I.12, he tells us: *abhyasa vairagyaabhyam tan-nirodhah*.

*By constant practice, and with detachment, arises the cessation of identifying with the fluctuations arising within consciousness.*

The goal of a yogic or spiritual pilgrimage – liberation from the suffering born of the ego's perspective that I am the body and the mind – is only realized to the extent that the pilgrim succeeds in maintaining such a constant practice of detached witnessing. This is the *sattvic* approach, which seeks to maintain calm equanimity no matter what transpires during the pilgrimage.

Unfortunately, in today's materialistic culture, which has become universal, many pilgrims often make the fulfilment of a lesser need their purpose: conceiving a child, getting a good job, or obtaining some other material boon. As with petitions communicated in prayer, such pilgrims before departing promise God to complete the pilgrimage in exchange for their fervently expressed desire. This approach is adopted by those in the grip of *rajas*, Nature's mode of action, dispersion, and passion. Others undertake pilgrimages as a penance, hoping to expiate the consequences of bad karma or sinful actions, guilt, and fear. They are in the grip of *tamas*, Nature's mode of inertia, doubt, and confusion. In India, astrologers often prescribe pilgrimages for such *rajasic* and *tamasic* purposes.

**Why is Badrinath the most important place of pilgrimage in Babaji's Kriya Yoga?** There are many places of pilgrimage associated with Babaji and the tradition of the eighteen siddhas. The most important are associated with Babaji's birth, Parangipettai, and where he was initiated and did *tapas*, Katargama in Sri Lanka and Courtrallam in Tamil Nadu. But Badrinath, where he realized the ultimate state of *soruba samadhi*, is the most important. As Babaji continues to maintain his divine form here on the physical plane, Badrinath is the place where his devotees and disciples can experience him most intimately, depending on the degree to which they have surrendered. Complete surrender is the ultimate means of the yogic process on all five planes. In the *Yoga Sutras*, verse I.23, Patanjali tells us: *ishvara-pranidhanad-va*.

*Or because of one's surrender to the Lord one achieves cognitive absorption (samadhi).*

As a Guru yoga, where the Lord is most highly revered in the form of the Guru and not in the names or forms of deities, Babaji's Kriya Yoga seeks to realize ultimately the universal vision of love. *Anbu Shivam*, "Love is God," says the Siddhar Tirumular in the *Tirumandiram*.

For this reason, an ashram has been under construction in Badrinath since 2008. As I write this, the ashram's twelve apartments are being occupied by the first group of Kriya Yoga pilgrims, eighteen blessed souls, led by four members of Babaji's Kriya Yoga Order of Acharyas. It has been designed with the primary purpose of supporting Kriya Yoga initiates who aspire to do intensive practice. In contrast, almost all Hindu pilgrims who go to Badrinath to worship in the sacred and ancient temple of Sri Badrinarayan spend only two days there.

Babaji's guru Agastyar told Babaji to go and do tapas in Badrinath. The Pandavas, the ancient royal leaders in the civil war described in the epic *Mahabharata*, also attained liberation after the war by performing *tapas* in Badrinath. So have countless other yogis. Yogi Ramaiah my teacher was initiated into the 144 Kriyas of Babaji's Kriya Yoga there. And on two occasions in 1999, I had darshan of Babaji at Santopanth Tal, above Badrinath.

Although the *Guru tattva* (the principle of Nature that reveals Truth, unconditional Love, Beauty, and Bliss) can be accessed anywhere, the intensity of pilgrimages and yogic practice performed at Badrinath is unsurpassed for sadhaks of Kriya Yoga. Situated at an elevation of 3,000 meters (10,000 feet), surrounded by towering mountains rising to 7,000 meters (23,000 feet), and closed by snow to the outside world from November to May, Badrinath provides a pristine and highly charged spiritual environment, ideal for the practice of Kriya Yoga.

**Our offering to you, as a pilgrim.** The new ashram in Badrinath was designed to fulfil the particular needs of Kriya Yoga sadhaks who wish to remain there for prolonged periods of intensive practice, from a single week to four months. Members of the Order of Acharyas will be present at the new ashram to support visiting sadhaks and visitors for much of May and June each year, the most popular pilgrimage season. July and August is less popular because the monsoon season occurs during these months.

Seventeen-day pilgrimages to Badrinath led by Acharya members of the Order will be organized in September and October every year. Pilgrimages to sacred places associated with the eighteen Siddhas in South India and Sri Lanka will be held during the cooler months of January and February each year. The Acharyas will lead group practice of Babaji's five-fold path of Kriya Yoga twice daily; they will deepen your understanding of Kriya Yoga with lectures and satsang meetings. Our Badrinath ashram manager will accompany the pilgrimage groups and will make all of the logistical arrangements involving transportation and accommodations. These organized pilgrimages will usually include only seven or eight days in Badrinath itself. The other days will be spent on the journey to and from Badrinath, on a spectacular, 330-kilometer, cliff-hugging road; in Rishikesh, where the Ganges River exits from the Himalaya mountains; and in nearby Haridwar. These are two major sites of pilgrimage, *tapas*, and *kumba melas*.

Applications to stay in the new Badrinath ashram during the recommended months of May and June, or possibly even July or August, or to participate in one of the pilgrimages led by an Acharya in September or October, or participate in a pilgrimage to South India and Sri Lanka, may be sent to the author at [satchidananda@babajiskriyayoga.net](mailto:satchidananda@babajiskriyayoga.net). Make your dream a reality today by forming a clear, firm intention to become a pilgrim to Badrinath or to participate in our pilgrimages to South India and Sri Lanka during the coming years. Plan, save, and visualize it. Cultivate action with awareness from this moment onward to overcome all obstacles and in so doing liberate yourself from all suffering. May your life's pilgrimage result in enlightenment.