

Mother, Father, Guru, God

Hindu dharma is fulfilled when we find and hold a spiritual preceptor in our hearts and lives, then strive to be the spiritual being he would have us be

BY DR. VATSALA SPERLING

HINDU RISHIS SPEAK OF THE FOUR POWERS that guide our lives—*mata, pita, guru, daivam* (mother, father, teacher and God). Parents give us our physical body and bring us to a guru who might enable our spiritual birth and help us realize God. In India, we are taught to love and honor these four beings. I was ok with honoring my parents and Gods but did not like a guru in this list. I said to my mother, "I love you. I don't need anyone else." As a five year old, I was content in my mother's blissful company.

From this childhood, an event stands out. One evening my father took me to a house with a colorful mandala in front. The air was thick with incense. He left me to greet someone. I stood by myself, aware of a majestic person on a chair. I watched the golden rays of the setting sun casting a warm glow on his orange robes and brilliant eyes. He smiled warmly. I smiled back. For a moment, I stood still, gazing on this person. My father and I prostrated before him—Swamiji Bhoomananda Tirtha. When I stood up facing Swamiji, he was looking calmly into my eyes. I felt happy and safe, as if I was with my mother. I felt a connection that, as a five year old, I could not describe in words. I was unaware that this connection would be felt throughout my life. I later saw people asking Swamiji questions. No questions came to my mind. I was busy feeling happy.

I returned home and asked my mother, "Why do I need a guru? Why were people asking him so many questions? Why no questions came to my mind?" Mother answered patiently, "When it is your turn, questions will come. Meanwhile, remember, a guru is a wise person who can be both a mother and a father to you when you seek his guidance. That is why God made a guru. Your guru can be a rock solid support and offer unconditional love when life throws challenges at you..."

In subsequent years, I did not think about a guru or stay in touch with Swamiji. I was determined to get a great education and succeed as a clinical microbiologist, but when I failed to get into a school of my choice, my dreams crashed. I wrote a letter to Swamiji from my heart. Without expecting a reply from him, I entered another school. When I was home for holidays, my father showed me a journal, *Vicharasethu*, from Swamiji's ashram that had published my letter and Swamiji's reply. Swamiji's words gave me a fresh insight into what was happening "now" and helped me stop crying about the past. I felt a renewed purpose and hope.

Years later, I encountered a very abusive professor. When I protested, I was asked to leave. I was now at a crossroad with a destination but no clue how to get there. My path was shrouded in a thick, dark fog. Though I had not seen Swamiji for years, I wrote to him about



my predicament as if he would know how it felt to be in such darkness and how to get out.

Days went by. No reply came. I remained hungry because I did not have money to feed myself and pay bills. Eviction notices were pinned to the door. Friendless and penniless, I wondered if I should drop out of school and return home, but my hometown did not offer comparable educational opportunities. I must hang on, find a way and eventually become a clinical microbiologist.

One morning, someone telephoned and gave me an appointment to meet Swamiji. Though I was meeting Swamiji after several years, he inquired after my parents and siblings by their name. He asked about my problem and what I wanted to do with my life. Then he asked how much money I needed to comfortably live for a couple of months, pay my bills and feed myself. I told him the amount. After a while, Swamiji gave

me an envelope. I looked inside and saw the amount I had mentioned. This unconditional gift was given to me at a time when I was completely down on my luck. That gift made sure that I could tide over the dark times. Five years later, I earned a PhD in clinical microbiology from one of India's most prestigious university medical schools, and went on to lead the department of clinical microbiology in a children's hospital and do research with the World Health Organization. Later I visited Swamiji's ashram with my mother to thank him for his help, but he was not interested in a "thank you." He wanted to hear about my work in the hospital, my research projects and publications—without thinking for a moment that but for his help, none of this could be happening.

I told my mother that I see Swamiji as my mentor. I wondered why he had chosen to help me stay on my path. My mother said, "A true guru can recognize that there are many different paths for people to realize their full potential. He does not force anything, understands the larger scheme of things and allows people to continue on their path and carry out their dharma. He does not expect anything back. He gives selflessly. His dharma is to help the spiritual birth of an individual. That is why our scriptures have asked us to honor our guru. *Spiritual* means that we discharge our duties and dharma with an attitude of dedication and surrender to guru and God. If we do our duties with a clean and devoted heart, that is a form of worship. Spiritual growth is the natural outcome of this form of service. A guru would love to see his disciples live their life truthfully as if it is a form of worship in action. Swamiji has been one such guru for you." She wished that all of us should be so lucky to have such a true guru.

Twenty years went by. I reinvented myself as a mother, author, knitter and a homeopath in the USA. I wrote Swamiji often, thought of him daily but had not seen him in person. One day, I got an email



Having a family guru: (top row, left to right) Maa Guruprya, Swamiji Bhoomananda Tirtha, Swamiji Nirvisheshananda; (seated) Ehud Sperring, son Mahar and author Vatsala

about a forthcoming visit by Swamiji to the US. My husband, Ehud, having heard about Swamiji's role in my life's major struggles, made sure we would visit him.

This reunion after twenty years became a tearful affair for me. We did a namaskar and sat before Swamiji and his successors. I could do nothing but cry. Sensing my son Mahar's awkwardness in the company of three saints, Swamiji stood up facing Mahar and asked him about his school, hobbies, studies and what he wanted to do with his life. Then he said to him, "Relax. It is different, but you will encounter many different things in life. Don't worry, be happy." He thumped Mahar hard on his chest—just as a friend would do. Swamiji asked Ehud about his publishing work and mentioned that having read our book, *For Seven Lifetimes* (which describes how we arranged our own marriage,) he felt as if he had known Ehud all along and their paths had crossed before on the cosmic highway. Swamiji asked Ehud, "How is the marriage?" Ehud said, "Fantastic." Swamiji was delighted with this answer but he also wanted to know from me how this cross-cultural, inter-religious marriage was working. He knew that by conducting an arranged marriage with Ehud, I had acted exactly according to the culture and tradition of India. Ehud had assured that I could keep up with my Hindu faith in my new home. When I had calmed down and stopped crying, Swamiji asked, "Are you happy? Do you have friends? Do you enjoy your work as a homeopath? Do you get along with your in-laws? Tell me, what have you done of merit?" Instinctively, I pointed to Mahar, and by doing so, I meant, "I am continuing to do my duties as a grihasthin—as a service to my guru and God."

Swamiji blessed me, with so much love and warmth, that I felt in my heart as if I was meeting my beloved mother. I did not feel that I was conversing with one of the greatest contemporary Vedantins,

a linguist, author, scholar and a saint, a spiritual teacher who had renounced the world in the prime of his youth, and for almost sixty years had dedicated all his energy to the service and promotion of the spiritual way of life. He sounded more like a protective parent who is concerned about the well-being of his child. I felt surrounded by a permanent, warm ocean of parental love. I simply needed to reach out and tap into this endless source. In the stillness of my mind, I could hear my mother's voice, "a guru can be both a mother a father to you when you seek his wisdom for your spiritual growth..."

On reviewing the years of my occasional contacts with Swamiji, beginning at age five, I realized that he provided unconditional love though I had never really become his disciple. He extended his support to me irrespective of my path. He allowed me the space to be myself, blossom into an individual that I was meant to be, discharge my duties and realize my potentials while following my dharma. Swamiji expected nothing in return. Swamiji's complete selflessness reminded me of the sun that shines, because his intrinsic nature and dharma is to give light and warmth for sustaining life. By adhering to his dharma of giving selfless love, Swamiji has secured his place in the verse "mata, pita, guru, daivam" and honored the sacred tradition of India that recommends a quest for a guru.

All of us are meant to walk our path and fulfill our dharma. We will invariably encounter unforeseen challenges when we can get confused, lose sight of our path, dharma and destination. Our guru can help us tide over the hard times and regain our clarity so that we can carry out our dharma, live the life that we are meant to live, realize our full potential, and undergo the spiritual growth that we are born to experience. To such a guru, with gratitude, I say, "Guru Brahma, Guru Vishnu, Guru devo Maheshwara—Guru is Brahma, Guru is Vishnu and Guru is the Great Lord Siva."

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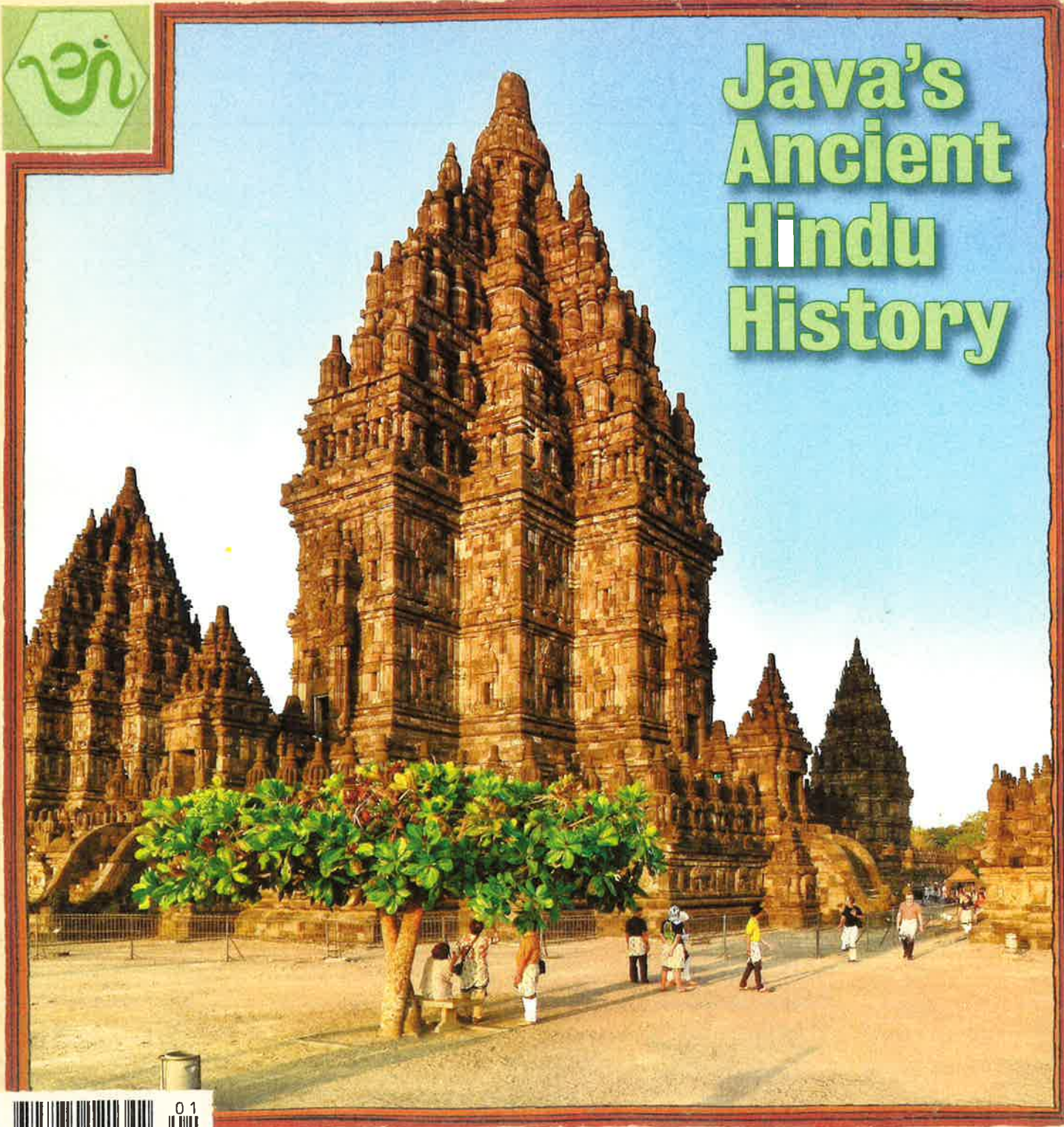
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