THE RITES OF SHIVA:
JOY AND REJOICING IN YOUR POSTERITY

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With your [spouse], be obedient to the commandment to multiply and replenish the earth, as your opportunity, your spiritual guidance, your wisdom, and your health allow. You will gain joy and rejoicing in your posterity.

Elder Russell M. Nelson

[Shiva is] the celestial bridegroom...enthroned with his wife...and their dancing child. These images assure happiness within the human condition.

Stell Kramrisch

In an interfaith dialogue, the nature of the work itself suggests the necessity for thinking broadly, outside one’s own paradigm. A broadening of the mind being both the end and the method of the dialogue, discussants can expect a rich experience, the kind of experience described by President Hinckley as a “spirit of affirmative gratitude” toward other faiths and persons of other faiths. Here are principles I have used in the discussion that follows:

The Golden Rule of Interfaith Dialogue: Howsoever you would that others speak of your religion, speak you even so of theirs. If you would like to have others speak respectfully of Mormonism, encourage an atmosphere of mutual respect by first speaking respectfully of their religions. This means taking the other’s religion seriously, or an undertone of condescension or contempt may make its way into the conversation and undermine the spirit of affirmative gratitude.

Krister Stendahl’s Three Rules: These rules, formulated by the onetime Dean of the Harvard School of Divinity, are set out in the Church video, Between Heaven and Earth: First, if you want to know about another religion, ask its believers, not its detractors. Second, compare your “bests” with their “bests.” Don’t compare your “bests” with their “worsts.” Third, cultivate “holy envy.” Identify things in their faith which are virtuous, lovely, or of good report, or praiseworthy, and seek after them.

Allow Other Religions Their Own Voice: Allow them to speak for themselves through their own symbolic languages. In comparing Christian sects one to another, one is really navigating a common set of symbols and vocabulary. However, once the discussion turns to non-Christian faiths, the vocabulary and symbolism may become radically different. If differences are approached without
charity, the religion may be judged offensive. If there is to be a spirit of affirmative gratitude, we must get beyond our cultural apprehensions and be willing to allow considerable latitude in symbolism and language. In the case of Hinduism, the subject of this article, the language and symbolism used lie partially outside the typical Christian or LDS counterparts.

A Note on Hinduism: A fundamental principle of Hinduism is to respect the fundamental moral challenges facing human beings. A core challenge is presented through the tension between sexuality and chastity. Procreation is a power that even the Hindu gods have trouble controlling, as in any number of other mythologies that we all learned as children. But one Hindu god, Shiva, has mastered the tension through marital fidelity, as an example to all Hindu believers.

This paper will discuss the Hindu lessons of marital bliss and procreation as presented through the mythology and rituals of Shiva. The study of mythologies or other religions soon shows that all cultures find ways to idealize that which they consider ideal, that which they consider right or desirable. The myths and rites of Shiva, illustrations from Hindu culture, contain parallels with our own most familiar beliefs.

Scriptural Teachings

Physical intimacy within marriage, as a shared stewardship of love, is indicated in holy writ to produce unity and joy in this life, accomplished when spouses incorporate expressions of love and sharing into their lives through shared stewardship, not by means of domination or demand. Paul teaches:

The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband; and likewise also the husband hath not power of his own body, but the wife.... Depart ye not one from the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency (Joseph Smith Translation, 1 Corinthians 7:4–5).

Paul’s teachings also reflect off the rituals of Shiva, and in them an important and true principle of marital life is reinforced for observers and participants. Likewise, an important and truthful lesson about marital joy and marital fidelity has been taught to Hindus through the ages in the temples of Shiva, a cause for affirmative gratitude. This article will discuss the symbols and language of Shiva, which touch upon the subject of marital sexuality and reinforce its centrality in human happiness.

Marital intimacy is intended not to produce joy only, but, where possible and desirable, also to produce offspring. Elder Russell M. Nelson teaches, “When you marry, you and your eternal companion may then

An important lesson about marital joy and fidelity has been taught to Hindus in the temples of Shiva.
The power of procreation as a core feature of marital bliss is clearly taught in the rites of Shiva at Vishwanath Temple through direct symbols. Although the symbols are not those used by Christians, particularly the LDS, they have nevertheless been effective in teaching generations of illiterate Hindus what, in the Christian world, are considered principles of happiness. The symbols are simple and direct in order to be instructive under such circumstances.

Though the Hindu symbols are new to us, we too can understand them and recognize their positive instructive power if we view them from the stance of affirmative gratitude. Krishna Mohan Shrimal comments that “all primitive [i.e., ancient] religions are grotesque and to some extent unintelligible.” The quality that makes a symbol a symbol is a degree of abstraction, of unintelligibility. A feature of religious symbology, especially ancient symbology, is that sometimes the symbols are quite stark, quite direct in their iconography and associated meaning. The modern Western mind, bombarded with imagery intended pornographically, can have difficulty recognizing the simple cleanliness of symbols that are vivid but contextualized among people deeply grounded in modesty and blissfully free from a prurient worldview. The prophetic lines quoted above are intended, in part, to establish that marital intimacy is wholesome though private, and this article is intended to show how Hindu beliefs and rites, like our own beliefs and rites, exemplify wholesomeness.

My Passage to India

Photo 1: A Hindu pilgrim performing the dawn puja (purifying ablutions) in the Ganges.
On 31 December 2007, I visited the city of Varanasi, India, considered by Hindus to be the subcontinent’s oldest city. It is an important center of religious pilgrimage, drawing believers from all parts of the globe. Some pilgrims come to find meaning in life, and others to find meaning in death: Varanasi has some of the most sacred Hindu temples in India, and is also the locus of two important cremation sites. This city is a “conjunction of sacred geography, sacred performances, and sacred specialists,” a “living sacred geography” that provides a strong spiritual basis for Hindu pilgrimage. That is why, among the multitude of places I could visit in India, I chose Varanasi, even though it is not a place for the typical tourist, or even the casual cultural observer.

Varanasi is located in eastern India, on the northern bank of the Ganges River. Hindu mythology teaches that Vishnu first separated the land from the waters at that very spot, creating the sacred River Ganges as the first discrete body of water. The pervasive belief of the sacredness of this river was apparent when my driver let me out near the Hotel Palace on the Ganges: after he removed the luggage, he solemnly took a formal position at the front of the car, and with a sweep of his hand toward the river, proudly announced, “the Ganga,” the Ganges. The sacred nature of the river is not, however, apparent to the senses. It is among the most polluted of waterways. A thirty-minute boat ride down the Ganges revealed the bodies of two dead cows and a human body wrapped in a saffron-colored death shroud. What makes the river sacred is not what can be seen, but what cannot. The abiding presence of deity sanctified the waters, with purifying powers that cannot be masked by trash or flesh. Belief in this divine presence attracts pilgrims to the sacred waters.

Impressive stairways, called ghats, are arrayed along the riverbank from west to east. Pilgrims descend from the ghats to perform cleansing rituals. Women bathe discreetly while clothed in colorful saris, while others swim, brush teeth, or drink from the holy river. Further downriver is the Manikarnika Ghat, the place of cremation, where the dead undergo a final ritual that separates life from death by means of purifying fire, releasing the soul, or atman, for reincarnation. The Vishwanath Temple, dedicated to the worship of Shiva through fertility rites, is located about a kilometer to the northeast. Thus the sacred nature of death (cremation, the fire symbolic of the Fire at the end of time) and regeneration (fertility) are geographically linked in the sacred city by the Ganges. I took a boat downriver to the Manikarnika Ghat, witnessed a cremation, and then journeyed to Vishwanath and witnessed the fertility rites, a pilgrimage from death to life.
It is also no coincidence that the worship of Shiva is strong in Varanasi. Shiva, misunderstood by most non-Hindus as merely the god of destruction, is really god of both destruction and generation. The geographical axis linking Manikarnika Ghat and Viswanath temple is, for Hindus, the conjunction of both of Shiva’s aspects, where Shiva’s power of destruction (cremation) is joined with his power over generation (fertility). By walking from the cremation ghat to the temple, I was tracing the path of the pilgrim from death back to rebirth. The city thus forms a *mandala*, a sacred path, that a pilgrim follows in search of enlightenment, the search for the Truth of Existence paradoxically presented as two extremes, birth and death. The Truth of Existence is revealed to the Hindu pilgrim at the end of this journey, in the sanctum sanctorum of Vishwanath Temple, in the presence of Shiva himself.

**Shiva**

Religious mystery in Christianity, Mormonism, and Hinduism is customarily presented through paradox. Paradoxical Hindu myth is apparent in the numerous complexities presented by Shiva. A paradox may refer to the combination of two ideas which are apparently contradictory, but which are nevertheless true, or to a person or being that combines contradictory qualities. The paradox of a god who is both generator and destroyer is the very mystery explored by pilgrims at Varanasi. Shiva presents a paradox in two senses: he is both generator and destroyer, and he is sexual yet chaste. The mythology of Shiva consists of a series of ancient stories which form “interlocking motifs [centered] upon…the great ascetic Shiva and his erotic alter ego, Kama, and [which] explain an
enduring dilemma: the conflict between spiritual aspirations and human desires.”9 The paradoxical nature of a god that is both chaste and sexual confounds non-Hindus, but upon examination the contradictions melt, and a rather human persona emerges. The goal of the pilgrim is to resolve the mystery, and apply its truths to oneself, to grasp “truths lying beyond the category of the intellect,” by unraveling paradox through ritual, by means of a “shift into experience, either spiritual, or ascetic.” Pilgrimage to the temple of Shiva provides Hindus with the experience necessary to unravel the paradox of a life that is chaste, yet sexual. Shiva, like every human, is “a composite…who is unquestionably whole.”10

Shiva is the great ascetic god of Hinduism, known for supreme yogic control of both mind and body. He is content in his chastity (which for Hindus means complete abstention, including within marriage). The god Vishnu, jealous of Shiva’s ascetic control, summons Kama, the god of desire, who attacks Shiva during his meditation. Kama, a mythological figure very much akin to the Greek god Eros (known as Cupid by the Romans), is a handsome adolescent boy. He has a bow made of sugar cane, whose bowstring is a line of bees, and who shoots flower-tipped arrows into a person’s heart. Whoever he shoots loses all control, and when he shoots Shiva the attack upon the ascetic god’s self-control is very real. In a near-automatic response, Shiva’s Third Eye, representative of the power of his intellect and his capacity to see eternal truths (symbolic of the power of ascetic abstention) opens. A flame shoots out from the eye, and burns Kama to ashes. Shiva’s ascetic control is unshakable, his chastity complete. However, once disturbed by desire, Shiva becomes restless, and cannot return to meditation or clear thinking. Parvati, a goddess who has loved Shiva from afar, now approaches him, and offers herself to him as wife. Shiva, still trying to regain full control of himself, responds, “I am an ascetic…an ascetic must never have contact with a woman.”11

At this point in the myth, Parvati displays the sort of wisdom sometimes associated with Eve. “What you say is true,” says Parvati, “but, nevertheless, I wish to have a child.” O’Flaherty notes that “the most frequent objection to asceticism is based upon its conflict with the deep-seated Hindu belief in the importance of descendants.”12 Shiva cannot remain chaste (i.e., practice complete abstention) without suppressing, perhaps even destroying, the sacred urge for posterity. Moved by Parvati’s wish, and sensing the deep-seated desire to produce his own descendants, Shiva agrees. But, having defeated Kama, he cannot muster the desire necessary for procreation. Parvati gently closes his Third Eye, and summons the disembodied essence of Kama, who arouses the god, in order to fulfill his wife’s wishes.13 They have a son, and the Shivaic family is complete. Shiva thereafter begins a cycle of ascetic chastity combined with periodic marital union, restoring balance to his soul.
The lessons of the myth are clear to Hindus: It is noble to live the life of the ascetic, to deny full expression to one’s passions. Nevertheless, this is ultimately not possible, or even desirable. Thus, the Hindu scripture teaches that together the husband and wife can direct the energies of Kama toward the establishment of family. Hindu scripture teaches that “Men should unite with their wives. Women should go with their husbands…. We will win the battle [against lust] when we thus unite together as a pair.”

The virtuous wife is thus considered a boon to the chaste husband. The Family of Shiva is considered an ideal family. He is the controlled but indefatigable lover, the chaste husband and proud father. Shiva becomes, thus, a Householder, who, having lived a life of complete and perfect chastity, not only finds the joy of intimacy with his wife but rejoices in posterity.

Shiva, together with his wife and son, is understandably often presented in Hindu art as the lord of the heaven and earth, with the sun and moon in his hair, with the personified River Ganges flowing from his head. The Shivaic connection between the cosmos and the earth, or between eternity and mortality, is made through marital intimacy and fidelity, and through posterity. Shiva is, for Hindus, the very image which “assures happiness within the human condition,” great joy in the mortal interval between birth and cremation. The mythological lessons of complete pre-marital abstention and marital intimacy combine with the rituals of the Vishwanath Temple to unravel for pilgrims, through ritual experience, the mysterious and inexplicable joy that comes from chaste sexual expression within marriage and having children.

Vishwanath Temple: Shared Stewardship over Sexuality and Fertility in Marriage

I walk toward Vishwanath temple having left the cremation ghats behind, to the south. As I approach the temple area, the already-confined streets become even narrower. A line of pilgrims forms, stretching hundreds of feet. As I travel back to the end of the line, the pilgrims tell me that because I am a foreigner I do not have to wait in line, and gently urge me toward the entrance to the temple. I remove my shoes prior to entering the enclosed temple grounds. A priest meets me, and explains the protocols for entrance to the temple. Just as I am about to go in by a silver-plated door under the gold-covered domes of the temple, I am told that I must take offerings inside with me. The priest gives me a long garland of marigolds and a bag of what look liked close-shelled pistachio nuts. All men take the same offerings. I notice that the women take terra cotta cups filled with milk in one hand and sacred bivala leaves in the other.

Once inside, pilgrims approach the inner sanctum, where the most sacred symbols associated with Shiva and Parvati are located. The women
step forward and pour the milk into a basin, filling it almost to overflowing. A priest, kneeling by the basin, gestures for the men to toss the garland to him. The priest immediately submerges it in the milk, and tosses it back. The pilgrims then proceed into the room to the right, containing a statue of Shiva. They place their right hand on Shiva’s left foot, and left hand upon the right foot, and repeat a mantra. The priest then asks the pilgrims, some of whom are foreigners, “Your name? Wife’s Name?” Then he places both his hands on their heads and says in broken English, “Bless husband, good husband; bless wife, happy wife.”

The significance of this portion of the ritual is obvious. The women are given stewardship over the symbol of male fertility, the milk. Likewise, the men carry flowers, symbolic of their wife’s fertility. These rituals clarify the nature of marital intimacy from the Hindu perspective: the husband exercises a responsibility, a stewardship, over his wife’s needs and desires, and the wife exercises an equal responsibility over his, constituting a healthy relationship in which neither dominates, a joint-venture in marital fulfillment and parenthood. The view of marital intimacy and procreation as a shared partnership, a mutual stewardship is extremely rare among ancient religions. In this particular Hindu ritual we find none of what Hugh Nibley considers the natural and unavoidable conflicts of patriarchy versus matriarchy. The marital balance taught in the Vishwanath ritual is praiseworthy. I wonder how well our own marriages measure up to the principles it embodies.

**Vishwanath Temple: Planting and Nourishing our Family Tree**

Amid the intense press of hundreds of persons packed into the small space inside the temple, the pilgrims make their way outside, into the temple courtyard, for the next part of the ceremony, stopping in front of statues of Shiva, with Parvati on the left and their son on the right, representing the ideal family, the Hindu symbolic corollary to the Christian Holy Family. Following the priest’s instructions, the men place their bags of seeds at the feet of the statues, repeating a mantra. The priest then asks the pilgrims, “Your name? Wife’s name? Child’s name? More child’s name? Grandson’s name? Granddaughter’s name?” Placing both hands on the pilgrim’s head, he says, “Bless father. Bless mother. Bless sons. Bless daughters. Bless grandsons. Bless granddaughters. Good parents. Happy children.”

The pilgrims are led five times around an altar, each revolution symbolizing one of the five Hindu elements: earth, water, air, fire, and ether (i.e., the heavens). The symbols of marriage and fertility are bound thereby to the symbols of earth and heaven. I notice that the women who have just performed this part of the ritual return to the statues...
and place their bivala leaves on the altar. When the pilgrims finish and return to the statues, the priest asks them, “Your name? Wife’s name? Father’s name? Mother’s name? Grandfathers’ names? Grandmothers’ names?” He again puts both his hands on the head and says, “Good son, good father, good mother, good grandfathers, good grandmothers. Happy family.” Without removing his hands, he looks each pilgrim in the eyes and says, “Are you happy?” “Yes,” they reply. He repeats, “Are you happy?” “Yes.” Then a third time, “Are you happy?” “Yes,” they reply, and I can see that they truly mean it. “Then God bless you. Happy life,” he concludes. The pilgrims then make their way back to the entrance of the temple compound.

Marriage and parenthood are inseparable in Hinduism, a lesson that has generally been forgotten in the modern Western world, but which is very much in keeping with Mormon theology and practice. The union of husband and wife is the beginning of a “garden” project, the planting and care of the family tree. The husband plants the seeds, the source of children. The wife offers the leaves, the product of seed and soil, the fruits on the branches of the family tree.

My Affirmative Gratitude

The rituals of Vishwanath move from individual chastity and asceticism to marital intimacy, from marital intimacy to fertility, from fertility to posterity, from posterity to ancestry, and finally to joy. The mysterious balance of chastity and marital sexuality personified by Shiva gives Hindus important moral guidance in a world increasingly given to self-fulfillment above all else. Thus, the Truth of Existence revealed by Shiva to the observant pilgrim is this: Men and women are that they might have joy, that they might rejoice, as did Eve after the Fall, in both their posterity and their ancestry, a familial tree of life. Latter-day Saint scripture and ritual, while using different language and symbols, affirm similar marital values. I find myself refreshed by the parallels and grateful for truths I see in Hindu worship.
The unraveling of mystery lies at the heart of religious experience. At the center of mystery, lies Truth; not mere discursive truth which can be categorized and dissected by the intellect alone, or which can be reduced to words, but Truth which is considered eternal by devotees, which forms the core of worship and devotion. Contemplation of the religious mystery itself, the serious attempt to unravel its hidden treasures with the intellect is an important first step toward full understanding. Ultimately, however, action and experience alone can lead to a realization of Truth. Thus, myth, which is symbolic religious narrative, is combined with ritual, guiding the pilgrim from symbol to mystery, and from mystery, to Truth. A pilgrimage is the navigation of sacred geography in search of the deepest Truths of human existence. The great pilgrims of LDS scripture illustrate this: Abraham, and others, were pilgrims and strangers on the earth, searching for a city whose maker and builder was no human, but was God himself (See Hebrews, chapters 11 and 12 generally).


There is a wide variety of Shivaic ritual in Hinduism. Presentation of ritual and its interpretation in this article addresses the ceremony of Vishwanath Temple only.