

A spiritual master contemplates the cultural and universal significance of pilgrimage, tracing

# Grace of the Ganga

*Journey to the Kumbha Mela*

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the tradition—and his own memories—across India to the bank of a potently sacred river.



**KUMBHA MELA, 2001** Pilgrims gather at dawn in Allahabad, India, for ritual bathing in the Ganga.

Photography by Art Wolfe

**I was born in India.** Throughout my childhood I absorbed various religiously charged beliefs: India is a spiritual country; Hinduism is the most ancient and tolerant of all religions; we believe in inner truth and inner peace. Later, as a rebellious teenager, I found great pleasure in dismantling these childhood beliefs. What is so spiritual about an India bitterly divided by caste,

creed, language, skin color, and region? Hinduism is tolerant? Because it tolerates the subservient status of women and the oppression of millions living in abject poverty? We believe in inner truth and inner peace? Is that why we care so little about social strife? At the age of 26, I came to the United States, opting for a country and culture which is not ancient, is not particularly spiritual, and which clearly believes in external prosperity.

Only years later did I come to realize that India truly does embody a deep spiritual wisdom. It is the home of an ancient and tolerant civilization whose belief in inner truth and inner peace makes India a distinguished culture. And nowhere is this truth more vivid than at the Kumbha Mela, which occurs every 12 years on the bank of the Ganga at Allahabad.

Since high school, I had spent very little time with my parents, so when they expressed a desire to undertake a traditional pilgrimage in the mid-1980s, I asked if I could join them. This pilgrimage entailed traveling to four major shrines in the four corners of India and visiting hundreds of other shrines en route. The prospect of accompanying my mother and father and serving them throughout this long journey filled me with joy. In those days, my parents lived in the city of Allahabad. I took three months off from my work at the Himalayan Institute and joined them there in mid-April.

My parents began their journey by traveling to Amar Garh, their home village, to take formal vows (*sankalpa*) to undertake the pilgrimage. There, with a grand ritual, they invoked our ancestors and the ancestors of our relatives and

friends. They also invoked the gods and goddesses and the forces of nature that had guided and nurtured them throughout their lives. They held a feast in honor of all these ancestors, gods, goddesses, and nature's forces. Then the pilgrimage began.

The first and most significant destination was Allahabad, the city where they had been living for the past several years. From their village they went directly to the sacred river, Ganga, on the outskirts of the city. There they took their ritual bath, made a love offering to the priests, sought the blessings of the Ganga for the successful completion of their pilgrimage, and filled a vessel with her water. Our next stop was Varanasi, and knowing how inconvenient it would be to carry water from Allahabad, I suggested that my father fill the vessel with Ganga water there. He rejected my suggestion outright. "There is only one *Prayaga Raja* [the Lord of Shrines] and it is here," he said firmly. "All other shrines in the world long to take a bath in the sacred waters of the Ganga at Prayaga Raja." Upon hearing this, my reason surrendered before his faithful heart.



The next morning we set out for Varanasi, 70 miles east of Allahabad. As soon as we arrived, my father fell ill. He had a fever of 104, complete with intense spells of shivering. During the night he became delirious, so in the morning I wanted to take him to the hospital. Again he refused my suggestion. “It takes a lot of good karma to die in Varanasi during a pilgrimage,” he said. “Therefore don’t worry about me.”

“Babuji,” I argued, “medicine will not prevent our pilgrimage; it will expedite it.”

“The ancestors know that once I perform the ancestral rites and do my meditation here, they will attain salvation,” he replied. “Some of our ancestors are heavy sinners. They are so attached to their sins that they do not want to get out of hell. They occupied my body when I invoked them in the village. Their unwillingness to be free from their karmas is causing this fever. Whether they like it or not, as their descendant, it is my *dharm*a to push them out of hell. Take me to Gangaji. As soon as I bathe in her waters and perform my rituals, the ancestors will be free and I will regain my health.”

perform the rites in his stead. Hearing this, my father gave me a fierce look and commanded, “Do what I tell you to do or push me into the Ganga and go back home.”

I apologized for listening to the priests. My mother and I helped him down the steps to the river’s edge. Gasping in pain, he took three dips. When he emerged, the water evaporated from his body as if from a hot griddle. Shivering violently, he sat on the ghat for a few moments gasping for breath. Then, with great effort, he began reciting the mantras to complete the ritual. The priests sat around him awestruck. A score of pilgrims stood in a ring around our little party, watching a man performing the ancestral rites while fighting with death.

The recitation took an hour. As soon as the practice was concluded, the fever vanished and the shivering subsided. My father got up and walked to the river, this time without our support. He offered a portion of the Ganga water he had brought from Allahabad, sang hymns of the Ganga, and made love offerings to the priests. I was happy to see he had recov-



Varanasi is a city. But to a pilgrim, it is *Ananda Vana* [the jungle of joy]. There is a proper way of entering this jungle, reaching the right spots, getting out of the jungle, and resuming the rest of the journey. That is what is called *tirtha yatra* [pilgrimage].”

It took three days for us to complete the pilgrimage of Varanasi. From

## MAHATMA GANDHI WISHED TO HAVE HIS ASHES PUT IN THE GANGA. IN ANCIENT TIMES, PILGRIMS TRAVELED ALL THE WAY FROM CHINA TO TOUCH THE WATER OF THIS RIVER.

I did as he asked. But when my mother and I took him to the bathing ghat, even the most experienced priests—those who had been performing birth, death, and ancestral rites for many years—were horrified when they saw how ill he was. The priests advised me to take a few drops of water from the Ganga and sprinkle them over my father, cover him with blankets, and

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ered so quickly and so completely, but at first I wondered whether his understanding of his ancestors and the ancestral rites was grounded in superstition or in truth-based faith. It was only when I tried to see our ancestors and the ancestral rites through my father’s eyes that I understood the ancestors are real and the values they cherished when they lived among us in the flesh are also real. These time-honored rites enable us to fulfill our obligations to our ancestors, and faith fills our hearts with a sense of belonging.

After he had completed the ancestral rites, my father explained, “To a tourist,

there, we made our way to the other pilgrimage sites, including Puri on the east coast, Rameshwara in the south, Dwarka on the west coast, and Badrinath in the Himalayas. In between these main shrines we stopped at hundreds of other sites, offered our respects, and did our meditation. Two months after we had set out, we returned to the place where we had started our pilgrimage—the bank of the Ganga, just outside Allahabad—and officially concluded our pilgrimage with a bath in the Ganga, a fire offering, a feast, and acts of charity. >>



## What Is the Kumbha Mela?

**ONE OF INDIA'S ANCIENT LEGENDS** tells us that every 12 years in January, during an auspicious astrological configuration of the sun, the moon, and Jupiter, the heavens open and shower divine elixir to the earth at the *sangam*, or confluence, of three rivers—the Ganga, the Yamuna, and the unseen Sarasvati—at Prayaga Raj, near the modern-day city of Allahabad in north-central India.

For thousands of years, the great sages have undertaken intense group ritual practices at this spiritual locus to channel wisdom and elevated awareness into human hearts, and to establish harmony in the physical world. These *yajnas*, or rituals, restore balance in nature and nourish the forces of creation—something we are in dire need of in modern times.

The sages and the divine grace that flows here are celebrated with the Kumbha Mela, a spectacular gathering of millions of seekers: pilgrims and pandits, villagers and yogis, hucksters and hustlers, the skeptical and the merely curious. The 2001 Maha Kumbha Mela, marking an especially significant planetary pattern that happens every 144 years, attracted over 60 million people. The next Kumbha Mela in 2013 is also noteworthy, falling at the end of the Mayan calendar, and building on the shifts in collective consciousness that were initiated in 2001.

The vast sea of humanity converging in one place at one time to undertake intense spiritual practice is in itself a wonder. It's also a unique opportunity to experience the profound potential of collective consciousness and the healing power of the divine realm as a stream of bliss and grace flowing into our own bodies and minds.

—Sandra Anderson

✦ Learn more about the origin and significance of the Kumbha Mela at [YogaInternational.com/mela](http://YogaInternational.com/mela).

I returned to the United States. My parents, however, undertook another pilgrimage, this time to the floodplains of the Ganga a few miles from where they had been living. According to the age-old belief, observing spiritual disciplines from one full moon to the next in the months of January and February, while living on the bank of the Ganga, equals observing spiritual disciplines for an eon (*kalpa*). Thus, this particular pilgrimage practice is known as *kalpavasa*—doing practices for an entire eon. The scriptures also proclaim that if you undertake the practice of *kalpavasa* for 12 consecutive years, your *moksha* (freedom from the pains and miseries that accompany the cycle of birth and death) is assured for eternity. Thus, as part of this pilgrimage, my parents left their home each January and, with appropriate rituals and ceremonies, moved into a tent erected on the floodplain.

A few years after my parents began their *kalpavasa*, my father died. My mother continued the practice. In January of 1999, I set out to visit her in her tent on the bank of the Ganga. I arrived in late afternoon and found the place in turmoil. My mother had been making her chai on a small kerosene stove, as she did every evening. But this time when the chai came to a boil, she accidentally tipped the stove over as she picked up the pot. Fearing the tent would catch on fire, she panicked and dropped the pot, drenching her foot in boiling chai. Righting the stove, she shrieked with pain. By the time pilgrims from the neighboring tents came and pulled off her sock, her foot was badly burned. The people crowding around her made all kinds of suggestions: “Quick, pour some *ghee* [clarified butter] on the burn.” “No—nothing can be better for a severe burn than aloe vera.” “No need to do anything. Through the grace of Mother Ganga she will be healed in no time.”

My car pulled up while these opinions were flying back and forth. I quickly formed my own plan: put my mother in the car and drive straight to the hospital. But to my dismay, she refused. “No, my son,” she said, gasping with pain. “This is my twelfth year here. I must not let this pain—or even death—take me out of this sacred place. This

is just an obstacle. Nothing could have deterred your father from completing his practice. So how can I leave this place?”

Just as it had years earlier in Varanasi, my reason surrendered. I drove to the city and brought a doctor to my mother’s tent. He gave her an injection, put some ointment on the burn, and left her with an ample supply of antibiotics and bandages.

My mother stayed in her tent. I visited her every day and spent as much time with her as possible. Even though she was in great pain, she was happy that she was at the bank of the Ganga and was with the Ganga. At times I felt my presence was a nuisance. She had her God, her Ganga, and her prayers, and the joy of having these was far more fulfilling than anything worldly, including the company of her only son. There was a unique aura around her—one that simultaneously emitted the energy of excruciating pain and deep inner contentment.

Each time I saw her, I found myself wondering: What is the source of inner strength and endurance and indomitable will? Where does the power to rise above all calamities come from? Is it faith? If so, what is the source of this faith? Is it innate or can it be cultivated?

I remembered how, many years earlier, before going to the United States for the first time, I came to this very spot at Prayaga Raja and cried like a baby at the thought of leaving the Ganga. What had made me so emotional? Religious euphoria?

Like millions of people before them, my parents started and concluded their traditional pilgrimage here. When my father died, I performed his funeral here. When my mother burned her foot, she preferred to risk dying here rather than go to a hospital to receive the treatment she needed. What is the mystery of the Ganga and this particular floodplain?

Mahatma Gandhi wished to have his ashes put in the Ganga here. Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, and Sikhs all offer their homage to this particular place. In ancient times, pilgrims such as Fa Hien (405

CE) and Hiuen Tsang (630 CE), traveled all the way from China to touch the water of this river here on this floodplain. There are many rivers mightier than the Ganga. There are many confluences more magnificent than that of the Ganga and the Yamuna rivers. What makes the Ganga—especially the confluence here at this particular place—so exceptional?

This is the land of the Kumbha Mela. Pilgrims in the tens of millions come here every 12 years—and millions more come here every year—to bathe at this confluence and attend the needs of their soul. Is that what makes this place so exceptional? But why did they begin to come here in the first place?

The scriptures tell us that the elixir of immortality was spilled here, filling this land with such sanctity and illumina-

## WHAT IS THE SOURCE OF INNER STRENGTH, ENDURANCE, AND INDOMITABLE WILL? WHERE DOES THE POWER TO RISE ABOVE ALL CALAMITIES COME FROM?

tion that it outshines even the heavenly abode of the gods. For the faith-filled pilgrims, the confluence of the Ganga and the Yamuna, and the land surrounding it, is the vessel (*kumbha*) of elixir here on earth. Gathering (*mela*) around this vessel is called Kumbha Mela. Every 12 years the forces that guide, govern, and nourish our natural world lift the lid of this vessel, making the elixir available to humankind. And every 12 years, pilgrims flock here to partake of this elixir. These periodic events, which are considerably more ancient than the Olympics, generate the biggest gatherings of humanity in recorded history.

For years I lived in Allahabad, the city that hosts the Kumbha Mela. I attended the 1977 and 1989 Kumbha Melas and dozens of the much smaller annual gatherings (*magh melas*) that take place in January and February. To me, in part, the Kumbha Mela was like

a county fair, filled with fun and excitement. In part, it was a time to serve my parents and help them in their *kalpavasa*. These melas also afforded me an opportunity to meet and study with the sadhus and yogis who attend them in great numbers. But until my mother burned her foot, I had never considered looking at the mela through the eyes of the pilgrims or experiencing it through their hearts. This incident was an eye-opener. Not only did it enable me to see and feel the faithful hearts of the pilgrims, it also brought me closer to my own heart.

Two years later, in 2001, the Kumbha Mela returned. I returned too—purely as a pilgrim. This time the Kumbha Mela touched my heart and gave me a clear understanding of my place, both here in this world and beyond. It made me un-

derstand in what respect I am a human being and what my relationship is with other human beings. This understanding gave a new shape to my mind. Since then—in what feels like the blink of an eye—10 years have come and gone.

Now, the next Kumbha Mela, in January 2013, is calling me back. I look forward to taking the journey to this vortex of transformative power as a faithful seeker. Deep in my heart I know that the unique *shakti* of the Kumbha Mela—the divine energy we all need for our own inner healing, as well as for the healing of the planet—will guide me and others to the next step on our spiritual journey. ■

**In upcoming issues, Pandit Rajmani Tigonait will share what he saw and experienced at the 2001 Kumbha Mela and how to prepare to imbibe and assimilate the elixir of the 2013 event.**