

June 2016 - Ayappa/Shakti Pilgrimage June 10 - 22, 2016

For the past ten years our temple pilgrimage of south India has introduced the generous culture and spiritual heart of the Tamil people. Our growth has evolved our experience and opened access to these worlds with extraordinary opportunities.

This June 2016 we will lead a pilgrimage unlike any other we have made, and as a Poonai, we are sending you this email first, before we open the trip up to the greater Rajanaka community. I had always imagined the possibility that both women and men would could make a pilgrimage that would create an extraordinary opportunity for all, where we acknowledge the richness of cultural diversity in ways that take us deeply into Tamil culture and through gateways that would otherwise be closed. Here we will extend the bonds of our community by entering into Tamil communities that offer depth and character in the richness of personal lives and valued spiritual identities.

We will start out our journey for a few days together in Chidambaram exploring the roots and evolution of Tamil pilgrimage. There we will visit the temples of Tillai Kaliyamman, Nataraja, Siva Kama Sundari. We will also visit the temple of the Tamil goddess Maryiamman, who will be the focus of the Shakti Pilgrimage for the women.

After a few days of visiting with the Dancer, the men will embark on a pilgrimage to Sabaramala, Ayyappa's main temple in Kerala, beginning with a sending off ceremony from Tillai Kail Amman. The women will stay in Chidambaram for a few more days learning about and visiting the temple of Mariyamman, the distinctly Tamil goddess who is the epitome of feminine power. Then the ladies will make their own pilgrimage to the most important temples to the Goddess. Each group will, for four days, become *vratyas*, two distinct bands of committed pilgrims each making a special journey. What we can do as distinctive groups would not be possible for the whole and each group will have a remarkable chance to explore cultural and spiritual worlds that are otherwise inaccessible.

Special preparation, clothing and accessories are an important part of these pilgrimages for both men and women. Therefore we will have conference calls with Douglas as preparation so he can explain more about the whole process and purpose of *vratya*. A *vratya* is one who joins into a vow, a commitment to journey inside and outside under agreed circumstances. Such *vratya* journeys are defined by food, dress, defined spiritual practices, special pilgrimage sites and specific rituals shared. The effort means to create something liminal, a threshold experience that defines a sacred journey.

Mariyamman: Exploring the boundaries of Feminine Power.

The women will embark on Shakti Pilgrimage to explore the world of the goddess, with special focus on the Great Mother, the Kali form known as Mariyamman who

for Tamil women becomes the mirror and prism of life's rich experience. Our own Bharathi Rathi and Vishali will lead the group to Mariyamman's temples, opening to the world of Her distinctive and evocative story and puja. Bharathi has been a devotee of Mariyamman for her entire life, and she is looking forward to sharing her experience and stories of the power of the goddess. In addition, we will spend time learning Tamil devotional songs of Durga, Mariyamman and the goddess's stories. With so many personal contacts now established, we'll also enter into the lives of Tamil women in the home, hearing their stories, learning about their lives, and we'll enter into the sanctum of the home and food. A day of cooking with Bharathi and her mother and sisters, will create an extraordinary chance to delight in Tamil cooking and how to make kollum, the welcoming rice flour art that beautifies every Tamil doorstep.

Ayyappa Vratya. For their part, the men of Ayyappa will take journey with Douglas Brooks and Jagannath Babu to top of the pilgrim's mountain, to Sabaramala in Kerala to visit the shrine of the Son who is Harihara, born of Vishnu and Shiva, the One Who Bears the Jewel. It's an arduous journey, with real challenges worth the effort: the simplest of food, the black dhoti and mala ceremony, the carrying of the *irumudi* on our heads, river bathing, and a long walk for days without shoes. In addition we will also see important shrines of Murugan in both Swami Malai and up the 600 steps to Palani,

We will then reconvene as a whole group together in Babu's village for a treat of camping together on the banks of the Kaveri where Douglas will tell Ghost stories around a bonfire. We'll finish the trip in the company of Natarajar with a rudrahoma in the temple before we head back home.

Honestly, these are the kinds of pilgrimage I had never thought possible for either women or men. But now we have the experience, the resources, and the access. This pilgrimage is forty years in the making and what we can accomplish now will change your life.

Twelve days total, and the experience of lifetime. I'm betting once you take *this* journey, you will return to do it again with us. Join us. We are creating something like nothing else you've experienced.

Preparation:

Vishali coordinates all the preparation and will start sending you information as soon as you register. Conference Calls with me and Vishali will help you prepare for this extraordinary trip.

Cost:

The cost of the trip is \$3695

Includes: This price includes, accommodations, bus transportation, breakfasts, and entrance fees. Additional costs for clothing, taxis, tips, food and discretionary

spending will be detailed upon registration. This price does NOT include airfare. You will need to get yourself to Chennai (Madras - MAA) by June 11th.

Accommodations: Hotels will be double occupancy. If you need a roommate we will match you with someone. All rooms for the ladies have air conditioning and private western bath. These luxuries cannot be promised to the men, nor for the night we are camping on the banks of the Cauvery River!

Application:

Please send Vishali an email answering the questions below. She will send you details on how to complete your registration, an outline of instructions for payment, logistics, preparation and cancellation policy.

Payment Plan: A deposit of \$795 will hold your place. Send a check to Vishali at the address below, or contact her to pay by credit card, wire or ChaseQuickpay.

Questions:

If you have any questions at all, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Application:

- 1) Name:
- 2) Home Address:
- 3) Email Address:
- 4) Cell Phone #:
- 5) Time, Place & Date of Birth:
- 6) Is there someone you would like to room with who is also applying?
- 7) Approx. how many hours have you studied with Professor Brooks?
- 8) Do you have ANY medical or physical issues, or have you had any in the past 5 years?
- 9) Do you have any dietary issues?
- 10) Have you ever traveled in a developing country? If yes, where and for what purpose?
- 11) Have you been to India before? If yes where and for what purpose?