

Vishnu's almonds

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [March 22, 2000](#) issue

This week I am headed to the Hindu Temple in Atlanta so that the students in my World Religions class may see a living faith in action. When they fill out their final evaluation forms, many of them will say that the field trips were the best part of the class, and I will agree with them. While our textbook does a good job of explaining bhakti yoga—the devotional way—it is no substitute for the smell of fresh almond and coconut offerings, or the sight of a hundred sesame oil lamps burning in front of a dazzling Hindu deity.

We are going for Sri Lakshmi Abhishekam, the weekly bathing and dressing of the statue of Lakshmi. Like all other Hindu deities, she is but one visible face of the invisible Brahman, the source of all being, before whom all words recoil. Hindus have no problem with the Christian idea of divine incarnation. Their only problem is with the exclusivity of it. “If God can have children,” Gandhi said, “then we are all God’s children.” The great variety of deities reminds Hindus how many different forms divinity may take.

Along with her husband, Vishnu, Lakshmi is revered as the protector of life, the defender of home and family. In gratitude for her benevolence, the priests treat her as they would treat a most honored guest. First they remove her old clothes, which they will give to her devotees. Then they bathe her, applying yogurt, honey and spices to her skin. Finally they pull a curtain in front of her alcove while they dress her. When the curtain opens again some 30 minutes later, Lakshmi draws gasps from the little children who are present. Clothed as the queen she is, she is resplendent in a new red silk and gold brocade sari, with so many garlands of fresh flowers around her neck that her placid face floats above them like the moon.

Offerings are then placed around her feet—halved coconuts and bananas, oranges and heaps of whole almonds. Once this food has been blessed in Lakshmi’s presence, the priests will offer it back to the people again, along with sips of camphor-scented water. In some times and places, this prasada, or holy food, is the only meal poor worshipers will eat all day, so the priests make sure that no one goes

away empty-handed. They walk around the circle of people who stand near Lakshmi, handing each one a piece of fruit or a spoonful of almonds.

The first time this happened, I was caught by surprise. I had asked a Hindu colleague from the college to go with us on the field trip. She had gladly agreed and had also, apparently, asked for special prayers for our group. When we arrived, we followed her around the central room of the temple as if she were a museum docent, listening intently to her stories about Hanuman, Ganesha and Durga.

When she reached the antechamber of Vishnu's alcove we followed her inside, where she and a priest conversed briefly in a language we did not understand. Then the priest turned to the image of the god before us and began a sonorous chant as he tossed flower petals and pinches of turmeric at the statue's feet. Slowly it dawned on us that we were no longer observers but participants. He was asking Vishnu to protect us—to give us long life and prosperity—while we stood there awkwardly with our hands clasped in front of us.

Then the chant ended and the priest turned toward us. As he started around the circle with the prasad, I watched each student decide how to handle the curveball. Some stuck out their left hands—a terrible blunder, since this hand is considered unclean in Indian culture—but instead of slighting them the priest tried to help them. “Other hand,” he whispered, as he held a spoonful of almonds out in front of them. Although we clearly did not know what we were doing, he went out of his way to offer every person a portion of the holy food. Some students made faces at him and waved him away, while others simply stepped back behind their classmates and dropped their heads.

As the priest rounded the bend toward my side of the circle, I was caught in a cognitive thunderstorm. My students were watching me to see what I would do. I wanted to do the right thing, but what was it? My mind sped from the first commandment to Paul's advice about eating food offered to idols. I tried to imagine what Jesus would do. Meanwhile, the person next to me refused the almonds, and I saw the priest step back as if he had been pushed.

I did not have time to make a carefully considered theological decision, so I made an instinctive one. I bowed to the priest, held out my right hand and received the prasad. As I did it, I thanked the One God, both for the blessing and for the opportunity to pray in another tongue. Then the priest moved past me and returned

to the altar with most of his almonds still in his bowl, while I waited to be struck by lightning.

Now, when I prepare my students for a field trip to the Hindu Temple, I tell them when to bail out if they want to remain observers. I also remind them that there is no barrier from the Hindu side to prevent them from becoming participants. As far as the temple priest is concerned, they can be perfectly good Christians and still eat Vishnu's almonds. The barrier to communion comes from the Christian side, where creedal differences divide not only Christians from Hindus but also Catholics from Orthodox Christians, Catholics from Protestants, and some Protestants from one another. My cognitive thunderstorm is still going on. Is this really what Jesus had in mind?