

The Neem Karoli Baba Ashram and Hanuman Temple *in Taos, NM*



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A religion of ambiguities

Hinduism is a religion replete with ambiguities. There is no central text to underly all beliefs and no foundational institution to establish dogma. Its tenets are free to float across gurus and regions, and for this reason it can be difficult to say exactly what “Hindus believe”. Some say it is a religion of hundreds of million gods, others say it is a religion of one god, and some contest it is a religion of no gods. From one point of view it is the oldest religion still practiced today, from another it is more recent than Christianity. It is thus difficult to say exactly what Hinduism is, but we can say that it exists, and that it became particularly attractive to young Americans in the 1960s and 70s who possessed spiritual bones, a free mind, a penchant for mind altering drugs, and a yearning to embrace a different religion than their parents. They visited India and brought back what they saw, and among these imported items is the Neem Karoli Baba Ashram in Taos New Mexico, a Hindu monastery containing a temple dedicated to the god Hanuman.

Kyle becomes Vishu

The story of the Taos ashram begins with a young American named Kyle who was trying to figure himself out. For three years he had been reading about Buddhism and taking LSD to widen his conscious experiences. Then he met Ram Dass, a popular spiritual teacher who had traveled to India to study under the guru Neem Karoli Baba. Kyle later joined Ram and others in India at the feet of Neem Karoli Baba, who the students lovingly referred to as *Maharajji*, which means “great king”. After learning from the great king, they were sent back to America to spread enlightenment there. Ram Dass wrote the pivotal book *Be Here Now* that introduced many young Americans to yoga and Eastern spirituality, and Kyle—now given the name Vishu Magee by either Ram or Maharajji—moved to Taos. The rest spread out about the country, but they all kept in touch, and missed each others company.

When I got to Taos ... They had just finished the [Hanuman] Chalisas when I arrived. I sat in front of Hanuman and went into a deep meditation. That's when I met Maharajji. My heart burst open and shakti shot through my body and out the top of my head. Maharajji took me on a journey and showed me a movie of my past lives and the reality of other dimensions. My heart was bursting out of my body. I merged with Maharajji, and I've never been away from him since ...

—*Testimony from Mira Lyra Geroy in Whisper in the Heart*

It came from seeing a picture of a guru called Neem Karoli Baba and I was so drawn to the picture of this person and I did not know who he was or what he was about, but felt very strong interest.

—*Actress Julia Roberts when asked about the source of her interest in Hinduism*

Meanwhile Ram had commissioned a statue of the Hindu God Hanuman and imported it into America, but was unsure where to house it. Kyle / Vishu volunteered his property in Taos, New Mexico, and thus began a group that would eventually be called the Neem Karoli Baba Ashram (an ashram is akin to a Hindu monastery), and within the ashram is the Hanuman Temple.

Vishu became the leader of the ashram, which was now a non-profit institution. He would lead singing of the forty-verse poem Hanuman Chalisa (“chalisa” in Hindu means 40), and leading kirtans (a form of yoga with a leader where the others respond to the leaders’ calls). The group grew, becoming a true religious community, with Vishu claiming that one night during the singing he witnessed (or “thought he saw” in his words) tears flowing down the Hanuman statue.

The ashram is obviously named after Neem Karoli Baba / Maharajji, the guru who inspired Ram and Vishu, but its more than that. Hanuman is explicitly a Hindu god, but if eyewitness testimony is believed, Maharajji possessed godly powers himself.

Roughly two thousand stories of testimonies have been documented where Maharajji superseded the laws of physics, including contacting people spiritually, manipulating physical objects after his death, reading people’s minds, and even appearing in two places at once. In short, Maharajji literally worked miracles, and some of these miracles happened at the Taos Ashram. While it is easy to dismiss many of these stories as the manifestation of overzealous spiritual seekers, it

must be noted that Christians (and many other religions) also based their beliefs on similar eyewitness testimony, so let us not arrogantly dismiss the whole Neem Karoli Baba project—though some skepticism is encouraged!

If the miracles are true, this Maharajji had something of a god in him, and some believe him to be an earthly avatar of Hanuman. To better understand this ashram, then, we must better understand Hanuman.

A Guide to the 330 million plus Hindu Gods

The Trimurti (God in three forms, all male)

Brahma—the creator god

- The supreme god of the Trimurti, thought of as the ultimate reality
- Is more abstract than Vishnu and Shiva, and generally does not appear on Earth in avatars
- Usually depicted with four heads
- Was born of a cosmic egg, creating good and evil from his own person
- Created gods, demons, ancestors, men (the first man being Manu) and all living creatures

Vishnu—the preserver god

- Name means “all pervading”
- Responsible for maintaining order in the universe
- When he comes to Earth it is in a human form referred to as an avatar
- One popular avatar is Krishna from the *Mahabharata* and the *Bhagavad Gita*.
- Another is Rama from the *Ramayana*
- Usually depicted as a king with blue skin, holding a lotus (symbol of purity), conch, chakra, and baton in his four arms

Shiva—the destroyer / liberator god

- Name means “auspicious one”
- Destroys illusions so that his worshipers can attain *moksha* (release from the cycle of rebirth)
- Practices yoga and meditation
- Aids Vishnu in saving the world
- Came to Earth as the avator Hanuman in the *Ramayana*
- Usually depicted with grey skin and in meditation, with a snake, skull, crescent moon, third eye, trident, and the drum of creation

The Tridevi (consorts of the Trimurti)

Saraswati—consort to Brahma, goddess of learning, arts, and music

Lakshmi—consort to Vishnu, goddess of fortune and wealth

Parvati—consort to Shiva, goddess of the continuity of life, is a form of Brahma referred to by the name Shakti

330 million gods? Really?

Some say this large number was meant to reflect infinity. Others say it is a mistranslation, and the text really means there are 33 different manifestations of the one true God. Other Hindus are like Buddhists and deny the existence of all gods, yet (again, like the Buddhists) have a specific philosophy of how the world works and how one can free oneself from suffering.



**The Trimurti,
from left to
right:
Brahma,
Vishnu, and
Shiva**



**Hanuman statue in the Hanuman
Temple at the Neem Karoli Baba
Ashram in Taos, New Mexico**

A loyal monkey god

When Hinduism is thought of as polytheistic, the three most important gods tend to be Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. Brahma is the ultimate creator of everything except the cosmic egg from which he hatched. What Brahma did not create, human cannot contact, and everything we see hear, touch, and even the concepts we think about (including good and evil) were are the installations of Brahma. Brahma is rarely anthropomorphized, and tends to be more of an abstract concept.

The gods Vishnu and Shiva work in tandem to ensure the world runs properly. Sometimes the world must remain static, and sometimes the world must change. This requires preservation when change is not desired (the work of Vishnu) and destruction or liberation when the time for change arrives (the work of Shiva). These two gods do not remain aloof in the heavens. They occasionally appear on Earth in the form of humans or animals, what the Hindus call avatars. Just as Shiva and Vishnu cooperate in the heavens they sometimes arrive on earth simultaneously, becoming costars in the Hindu literature.

Neem Karoli Baba / Maharajji is associated with Hanuman, the avatar of Shiva, so much that to worship one is to worship the other. The ultimate metaphysical foundation for the Taos Ashram, then, is Hanuman, so let us visit some of his stories.

Once a king was praying to the gods for children. In appreciation for the king's prayers the gods sent him a heavenly pudding called payasam to give to his three wives, a pudding that would ensure one of his three wives would conceive a son, but just as this was no ordinary pudding the child would become no ordinary man, but Rama, an avatar of Vishnu.

At the same time the king prayed for children a half monkey named Anjana was engaged in worship. The gods appreciated her piety also, so when the payasam descended to earth they sent the wind god to snatch

a teaspoon of it for her. This resulted in the birth of Hanuman, an avatar of Shiva.

Becoming manifested as an avatar was a deliberate choice on the part of Shiva, and was done out of pure devotion to Ram / Vishnu. So that he would not be distracted in his allegiance, Hanuman chose to remain celibate.

At the Taos Ashram devotees sit before a statue of the half-monkey god and recite the Hanuman Chalisa. The idea is to praise the piety of Hanuman to help one become great in their devotion to the gods. No onions or garlic are allowed on the premises, because those visting the ashram are there to attain sattva, and in the process avoid rajas and tamas.

To understand why they avoid onions and garlic, we must move from the *Ramayana* to *The Bhagavad Gita*, arguably the most important text in Hinduism. In this epic poem the character Arjuna must decide whether to participate in a battle. On the one hand, it is his duty to fight, but on the other hand, doing so requires him

to kill family and friends. The poem is essentially a conversation between Arjuna and Krishna, his charioteer who is actually an avatar of the god Vishnu. Krishna persuades Arjuna to fight because that is indeed his duty, and in his speeches Krishna describes the attributes of a great person, one who is not just great in battle but so imbued with true spirituality that forces on earth cannot disturb his tranquility. In this conversation Krishna / Vishnu describes the

three guna (attributes) of nature and the types of food associated with each.

A spiritually powerful person possesses the *sattva* attribute, pertaining to purity and knowledge. Only this person can be free of suffering and eventually break the cycle of reincarnation (the ultimate goal of life in Hinduism is annihilation, which might be seen as returning home to Brahma). One truly is one what eats, and Krishna remarks that one can attain the sattvic attribute by **consuming foods that are flavorful, smooth, firm,**

The three guna (attributes) of nature

Sattva—beingness, purity, and knowledge

Rajas—activity and desire

Tamas—darkness, destruction, and lethargy



Sign posted at the Hanuman Temple / Neem Karoli Baba Ashram prohibiting onions and garlic

and pleasant. Examples of sattvic foods include legumes, wholegrains, milk, and fruits and vegetables grown in the sun (not underground, like onions).

One possessed by the **rajas** attribute is always seeking hedonic pleasures, and so is never fully satisfied. Rajas is associated with positive energy, constantly prodding the individual to move and seek something better (but never finding it). This attribute is intensified by consuming **foods that**

are hot, salty, sour, sharp, burning, rough, and fiery. Examples of rajas foods are chilis, peppers, garlic, onions, spices, caffeine, alcohol, fermented food, and fried food. It is for this reason that the Neem Karoli Baba Ashram prohibits onions and garlic, with its sharp, hot, and burning taste, in addition to the fact that it grows underground.

It is most important not to consume **foods that are leftover, stale, stinking, tasteless, and spoiled,** as it imbues one with the **tamasic** quality: death, destruction, and lethargy. Tamasic foods include onions, mushrooms, meat, leftovers, and frozen foods.

Hanuman, in his devotion to Krishna / Vishnu, would thus never consume onions or garlic, and so neither do those at the Hanuman Temple. Because Hanuman doesn't really appear as a character in *The Bhagavad Gita*, we return to the *Ramayana* where Hanuman is one of the two main characters.

This is the story of Prince Rama (avatar of Vishnu) attempting to rescue his kidnapped wife, Sita. Hanuman emerges as perhaps the true hero, as it is Hanuman who finds Sita on the island of Lanka. (This is modern-day Sri Lanka. The "Sri" means "resplendent" and indirectly refers to Sita.)

Once Sita was found by Hanuman an army was raised and Rama invaded Lanka to rescue her. During this battle Rama's brother was injured so badly that only the herb sanjeevanin (*Selaginella bryopteris*) could heal him. Sometimes spelled sanjeevni, this is a real herb, one used for medicinal purposes. The word

"Food is God. Feeding the hungry is actually worship. God comes before the hungry as food. First bhojan (food) then bhajan (prayer)."

"God Comes to the Hungry in the Form of Food"

—Neem Karoli Baba / Maharajji



Navdhan (meaning nine) in Sanskrit for offering to the nine planets.

"sanjeevanin" means "immortal" in Hindi, and was given to the plant due to its seemingly immortality. A wide array of problems can be treated with the plant, including venereal diseases, spermatorrhoea, fever, constipation, colitis, indigestion, urinary problems, and even unconsciousness. A scientific study has even proven that sanjeevin can treat inflammatory skin diseases in mammals.

The problem for Hanuman was that this plant only grew in the Himalayas, but for a god this was only a trifle. After flying to the Himalayas he found a mountain with many medicinal herbs, but he couldn't figure out which one was sanjeevin, so he simply lifted the entire mountain and carried it back to Lanka.

Feed people

Hanuman dedicated his life to Rama, and in a similar way Maharajji dedicated his life to helping others, so it is not surprising that altruism is a salient feature of his teaching and the Taos Ashram itself. This kindness is often manifested in food. When someone asked Maharajji how to attain enlightenment, his response was, "Feed people."

Today the Taos Ashram feeds over 500 people per week. Some who attend also offer a food sacrifice referred to as *prasad* to Hanuman or Maharajji. A *prasad* can be offered to different gods, and one of the most popular *prasads* is the Navagraha Shanti Puja, where nine different beans / cereals are offered to the nine planets, each of which is considered something of a god. This is an ancient ritual dating back to before Hinduism in its current form took shape. The idea is to ask the gods for kindness, as most cultures in the past believed the stars to play an active role in shaping the future.

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and others just trust me its all correct lol

