

7-1-1999

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Recommended Citation

Fadiman, J. (1999). Fadiman, J. (1999). Shiva's spider. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 18(2), 103–107.. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 18 (2). Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.ciis.edu/ijts-transpersonalstudies/vol18/iss2/3>



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Shiva's Spider

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A STATUE OF Shiva stands in a small temple on a hillside above a softly sloping valley in a tiny Indian village, beneath the snow-capped, cloud-shouldered Himalayas. Shiva is dancing inside a ring of flame; his four arms raised high, one foot arched in the air as the other steps lightly on the body of a small and decidedly unhappy demon.

Every morning, with appropriate prayers and gestures, a plate of food is set before his altar, prepared by villagers who try to keep Shiva constantly in their thoughts during both the cooking and serving.

Above the food, a spider, born in the temple, has woven her web. It hangs from the flames, extending itself from Shiva's outstretched hands to his smoothly turned ankle. Flawless, the web furls out like a breath of divine wind about the statue's metal shoulders.

When the offering is fruit—golden papayas, blushing mangos, bunches of tiny bananas, sunbursts of orange sections on platters garlanded with flowers—the spider finds tiny fruit flies in her web. When the food is mounds of rice and vegetables flecked with cardamon or poppyseeds, steaming and spiced, her web catches black-bodied houseflies.

The food presented to Shiva nourishes him in his ceaseless dance of creation and destruction, and reminds him to be kind and generous to those who toil in the little village and maintain the temple. In India, the Gods are offered meals because the people understand that being immortal does not take away one's appetites; indeed, the state of divinity enhances them.

Each day, as the food rests on the altar, a miracle takes place. The God enters his image and consumes the offering, yet no food is eaten. What nourishes Shiva is the sight of the food, artfully placed on platters, the odors arising from the mixture of fruits, vegetables, rice and spices, and the love with which it has been served. As he eats, Shiva blesses the offering, those who cooked it, the farmers who have grown it, and the land from which it has been harvested. The devout villagers return at dusk to take the prashad, or blessed food away. Eating it, they take the blessing into their bodies. These acts of giving and receiving keep the gate open between the worlds of the Gods and that of the village.

One morning, an elderly woman prepared and brought the food. She chanted as she backed and bowed her way out of the temple, her hands held together over her chest, her long gray hair flowing over her left shoulder, covering the highly decorated fold of her sari. Each word she sang was linked to the next like birdsong, exactly as her grandmother had taught her, and exactly as her grandmother's grandmother had been taught:

*My beloved Shiva
Destroyer of ignorance,
He opens my heart,
Loots my flesh,
Claims me as tribute.
My whole being is a gift—
For my Lord, white as jasmine.*

As soon as she had gone, even before the beaded curtain in the temple doorway stopped swaying, a hungry fly flew in and made straight for the altar. With fly's eyes, it saw the plates of food multiplied hundreds of times.

Buzzing between Shiva's bliss-bestowing hands and his raised knee, the fly was about to alight on a mango slice when it struck one of the almost invisible sticky web threads. It twisted and turned, one wing caught fast, the other still whirling. Along with the many plates of food, its lenses now watched a kaleidoscope of spiders emerge from behind Shiva's right ear and slip down the web.

The spider glided to the struggling fly and spoke to it with tenderness. "Welcome to the house of Lord Shiva," she said, beginning to wrap silken threads around the fly. "You are so beautiful. No one ever told you that? A pity. Ah, that wing is sticking. Let me make it safe. A little tight? Such a large and lovely wing. You must be the wonder of wonders among your brothers and sisters. Can you put your head back a little? That's better. Good. Now, are you able to move? No? Well then, rest my beautiful one. Know that for now you have never been more admired."

The spider moved close to the fly's face. "I'm deeply sorry for any discomfort," she said. "But as these villagers often tell Shiva, 'In each incarnation we can suffer as much from joy as from pain.'"

The fly thrashed, its eyes jerked back and forth.

"To struggle against your own karma is unseemly," the spider continued. "If life is transitory, does it not follow that death will be as well?" The spider moved back delicately along a silken strand until she could see the whole fly suspended in her webbing. "If it is true," she said, "that everything given freely to Shiva at his altar becomes prashad, offer yourself. Become a blessing as you begin your final sleep."

The fly stopped moving. Its eyes glazed. As the spider finished her wrapping, she sang one of the many songs she had heard as she sat behind Lord Shiva's ear:

*Lord Shiva, whose many arms
Hold and withhold blessings,
Burning with passion,
I wander
Through worlds uncounted
Loving my Lord, white as jasmine.*

After the spider consumed the fly, she carefully repaired her web. Satisfied, she climbed up the web to the crevice behind Shiva's bronze ear. The blessings descended from the Heaven of the Gods and the offering became prashad.

Every day, the spider protected the offerings. After her own supper, she sang hymns of praise to Shiva. During the hottest part of each afternoon, she napped. At night, when the temple was silent and nothing moved—only the flame from one tiny lamp—she'd curl her legs under her, tuck herself tightly into a tiny fold of Shiva's metal skin, go to sleep and dream spider dreams.

Outside the temple, one season gave way to the next. The last dry winds of winter ended and the soft rains of spring began. The summer was hot, as always, and the villagers worked in a haze of their own sweat in their fields and in the gardens beside their small homes. Shiva's platters were especially bountiful, lined with ripe fruits from the orchards, smooth and rough-skinned vegetables from the gardens, and garnished with flowers of many kinds and colors. In the fall, day after day, the clouds emptied themselves against the edges of the mountains until the paths from the village to the fields were streams of mud, and even the stone steps to the temple were covered with slick wet soil. The flowers were fewer, the fruits smaller. And some days there were none at all.

Then, one day, after the last of the wheat had been harvested and the clouds hung close to the ground, so the mountains, like giant grandfathers sitting together in the distance, could not be seen, the whole village awoke, knowing it was the day to clean Shiva's temple. They assembled before the temple doorway, some carrying mops or small branch brooms, others with buckets of clear water and rags. A few held bundles of fresh-cut rushes to patch the roof, and lengths of wood to replace portions softened by termites. And, of course, some had musical instruments, for this was as much a festival as a cleaning. There were many chants and songs and, from time to time, the men or the women danced. There was much joking and laughing; young boys and girls teased each other, and children played under everyone's feet. Garlands of flowers were hung from every roof beam. The lamps were cleaned and filled with fresh ghee. Everyone ate whenever they wished, dipping their hands into huge platters of steaming spiced rice and taking fruit from great ceramic bowls. The scent of freshly ground cloves and pulverized cardamon mixed with the almost invisible smoke from the sandalwood incense. Young girls sprinkled rose water on the walls and on themselves as well.

Outside, the path was swept and reswept. The steps were scrubbed till each darkened stone was again light brown. The roof was patched outside and in. Everything that clung to the eaves was scraped off; the wood was scrubbed and oiled till it shone. Mops swished back and forth across the stone floor like wind passing through the leaves of the banyan trees.

From her perch, the spider watched it all. She was agitated by the noise, the conflicting odors, and the great number of people. Bits of debris flying into her web set the strands vibrating and startled her. She'd race toward the disturbance, and then, seeing it was only a fleck of dirt she'd settle back down.

A man lifted his small son up onto the altar. He took a faded strip of cloth from his waistband and handed it to the boy. The child's bare feet gripped the edge of the altar as he wrapped the rag loosely around one hand. As he wiped away the dust, he broke strand after strand of the spider's web.

The spider pushed herself deeper into the shadows beneath Shiva's ear lobe. In hushed tones, she chanted the many names of Shiva, folded her legs under her furry body, and watched. He wiped and polished the ring of flames, the dwarf demon under Shiva's feet, the legs of Shiva himself. The dull, blackened metal brightened under his hand. Where the touches of the faithful had worn through, the exposed golden bronze now shone like sunlight on water.

The boy moved to the back of the statue, his little cloth buffing Shiva's tiny waist and broad back. The spider felt the vibrations and trembled. The boy worked his way up to Shiva's necklace and his headdress spread out like curled peacock feathers above his shoulders. The spider pulled in her legs, trying to make herself as small as possible. She felt the heat from the boy's body as his hands moved toward the statue's neck.

Suddenly, unable to control herself, the spider raced from her hiding place and scurried along the exposed polished arm. The boy's head turned and the spider could feel his eyes lock onto her. She dashed ahead onto Shiva's open palm, up to the end of his fingertips, then back again into his palm.

Then, motionless, she looked up into the face of Shiva and recalled her own words, spoken so often to terrified flies: "Unseemly to struggle...in the house of Lord Shiva." As the boy raised his rag-covered hand, she repeated the words of a young man who had asked for Shiva's blessing before going to the army:

*To you, I offer the actions of this life
Wherever I go, the way is blessed.*

She breathed deeply, sighed, and made herself ready for death.

Just as the shadow of the rag moved over her, Shiva's metal fingers, blackened by the centuries, rose up around her like the bars of a cage, and closed, encasing her in total darkness.

How long she lay imprisoned, she never knew. When the hand opened again, it was night. The temple was empty. Every wooden

surface glistened with sandalwood oil. Vases of fresh flowers surrounded the altar, itself covered with new white cotton fabric. The small lamp sent panels of pale light onto the polished walls and ceiling.

She looked up into the face of Shiva. In the center of his forehead, she saw a single open eye and then, she heard a voice:

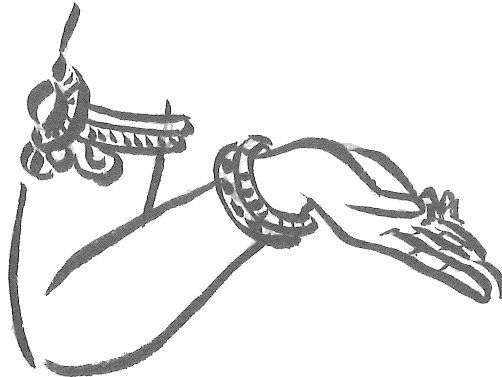
*Surely, my little one, you are no less
than the food and flowers I daily bless.*

For just a moment, the spider looked down at her feet. When she looked again at Shiva's forehead she saw only the dull luster of the ever-present jewel, looking as it always had.

As she climbed back up his arm toward her nesting place, she sang—as loud as a spider can sing:

*Lord of the meeting rivers.
Lord of the caves,
Consort of Shakti,
Lord, white as jasmine.
I am your servant,
Living proof of your grace.*

Back behind his great ear, she chanted his names until she fell deeply asleep. Sleeping, she felt Shiva come to her and hold her in four living arms. Even in sleep, she knew this was no dream.





FARMER BOB CONTEMPLATES HIS NAVELS