

Daddy, Do We Get Toys for Christmas, too?

Yuletide is not a Hindu holiday, but we have our own December gift-giving festival called Pancha Ganapati

BY SATGURU SIVAYA SUBRAMUNIYASWAMI

DADDY, WHY DON'T WE have Christmas? What do we do? Don't we get presents, too?" That question was heard in so many Hindu homes some 15 years ago that it inspired us to create a new holiday based on time-honored traditions. In cooperation with swamis, scholars and elders, an alternative for Christmas was conceived and put into action. Pancha Ganapati, a five-day festival celebrated from December 21 through 25, has since become a favorite in homes all over the world. The winter solstice has always been a festive time of year in all countries, religions and among Hindus especially, for it is a traditional season for the worship of Lord Ganesha, the elephant-headed Lord of Culture and the Arts.



In the Sri Lankan tradition, for example, thirty days are dedicated to Ganesha worship during December-January in the festival called Markali Pillaiyar. In Vedic astrology this time of year marks the end of the sun's southward movement and the beginning of its movement north. Since most Hindus do not celebrate Christmas, they often find it difficult to relate in a meaningful way to those who do. Their children are often embarrassed when asked why they don't receive gifts like their friends. Adults feel the need to give gifts and mail greeting cards as well as accept them from relatives, neighbors, friends and business associates. The five days of Pancha Ganapati offer a Hindu expression of this natural season of worship, gift-giving and celebration.

December 25 and the days that precede and follow it have truly become a special time of year for people of many religions, and for the nonreligious as well. In fact, this season has become so universally popular that it has virtually become a secular cultural holiday in addition to its special observance by certain religions. Recognizing this fact, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled Christmas a secular, social holiday. This is because it has become a time for everyone to rejoice, give and share their abundance, each in his own way.

During each of the five days of Pancha Ganapati, a special *sadhana*, spiritual discipline, is focused upon by the entire family. Because of the festival's importance as a new beginning and mending of all past mistakes, a shrine is created in the main living room of the home and decorated in the spirit of this festive occasion. At the center is placed a large wooden or bronze five-faced statue of Lord Pancha Ganapati. If this is not available, any large picture or statue of Lord Ganesha will do. Lord Ganesha is often depicted as coming from the forest; therefore, pine boughs (or banana leaves)

may be used. Flashing lights, tinsel and colorful hanging ornaments may also be added. Each morning the children dress or decorate Ganesha anew in a different color: golden yellow on December 21, then royal blue, ruby red, emerald green and finally brilliant orange. These are the colors of His five powers, or *shaktis*.

Each day a tray of sweets, fruits and incense is offered to Lord Ganapati, often prepared and presented by the children. Chants, songs and *bhajanas* are sung in His praise. After *puja*, the abundant, diverse sweets are shared by one and all as *prasada*. Each day gifts are given to the children, who place them before Pancha Ganapati to open only on the fifth day. Gifts need not be extravagant or expensive; they should be within the means of each family. Handmade presents are by far the most precious. Ganesha does not want gift-giving to promote Western commercialism but to further the great Hindu culture. Clearly, killer games should never be given. Greeting cards, ideally made by the children, offer Hindu art and wisdom, such as verses from the *Vedas*. Now let me explain how the five-day celebration is observed.

December 21, yellow: The family *sadhana* for the first day of Pancha Ganapati is to create a vibration of love and harmony among immediate family members. The day begins early, and the entire family works together to design and decorate the shrine with traditional symbols, *rangoli*, lamps and more. Then a grand *puja* is performed invoking the spirit of Pancha Ganapati in the home. The *sadhana* of the day now begins. The family sits together for the purpose of easing any strained relationships that have arisen during the year. They make amends one with another for misdeeds performed, insults given, mental





A happy holiday: The children are celebrating Pancha Ganapati in gala fashion with a real, live five-faced Ganesha, Lord of culture and upliftment. The five-segmented sky, each with its own sun and distinct color, represents His five powers.

and presenting them with heartfelt gifts. The *sadhana* of the day is to offer apologies and clear up any misunderstandings that exist. Relatives and friends in far-off places are written to or called, forgiveness is sought, apologies made and tensions released. Gifts received are placed unopened before Pancha Ganapati.

December 23, red: The *sadhana* for the third day is to create a vibration of love and harmony among business associates, the casual merchant and the public at large. This is the day for presenting gifts to fellow workers and customers and to honor employers and employees with gifts and appreciation. The *sadhana* today is the settling of all debts and disputes. Gifts received are placed unopened before the Deity.

December 24, green: The *sadhana* of day four is to draw forth the vibration of joy and harmony that comes from music, art, drama and the dance. Family, relatives and friends gather for satsang to share and enjoy their artistic gifts. Then all sit together before Ganesha, Patron of Arts and Guardian of Culture, discussing Hindu Dharma and making plans to bring more cultural refinements into the home. More gifts are placed before Pancha Ganapati.

December 25, orange: The family *sadhana* for the final day is to bring forth love and harmony within all three worlds. Because of *sadhanas* well performed during the first four days, the family is now more open and aware of Ganesha's grace, and their love for Him is now overflowing. On this day the entire family experiences an outpouring of love and tranquility from the great God Himself. His blessings fill the home and the hearts of everyone within it, inspiring them anew for the coming year.

Quite honestly, however, many Hindus do celebrate Christmas and would ask, "What's wrong with that?" My answer is that it dilutes and weakens our noble tradition and leads children astray. Each religion educates its young in a sectarian way, for religionists believe that to learn one specific path is sufficient and necessary. Therefore, education should not be diluted by taking in all religions under one banner.

Religions are one in their movement toward God, some offering knowledge, others service, others love, attainment and direct experience. At the same time, they are different in their practices and attainments, and most assuredly distinct in their beliefs, the foundation of the attitudes of their members. It is good to love and respect all religions; that is a necessary condition of individual spiritual unfoldment. Following the path given by our religion leads one onward through religious practices and *sadhana* into Divine Realization.

The success of any person on the spiritual path is reliant upon the depth and strength of his religious roots. A great tree with roots well wrapped around boulders and sunk deep into the Earth can withstand any storm. High winds are nothing more to it than the cleansing of its branches. The individual on the path must be just as firm in his religious foundation in order to withstand raging emotions, depression and elation, confusion and despair. To him, such disturbances will be nothing more than a cleansing of false concepts as he dives deeper into his religion and philosophy.

We can clearly see that religion and tradition are interlocked in the annals of time back many thousands of years, and how tradition moves forward from one generation to the next, setting the patterns for humanity. Every time-honored tradition loyally serves mankind, and by following it through the context of one of the great religions of the world, one cannot go astray. Jai Ganapati! May He lead us always along the right path.

pain and injuries caused and suffered. When forgiveness is offered to all by one and all, they speak of each other's good qualities and resolve that in the days ahead they will remember the futility of trying to change others and the practicality of changing one's self to be the silent example for all to witness. Gifts are then exchanged and placed unopened before Pancha Ganapati. As family harmony is important to all Hindus, this *sadhana* must be taken very, very seriously.

December 22, blue: Day two is devoted to creating a vibration of love and harmony among neighbors, relatives and close friends