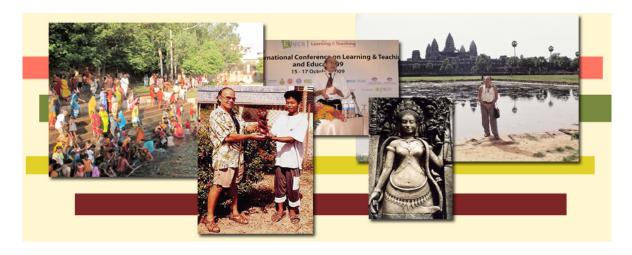
## Pilgrim of 2012: In search of sacred time By Willard G. Van De Bogart



The journey has been a long one with traveling to mountaintops in S. Laos to visiting the central jungles of Cambodia as well as visiting the many temples sequestered in and around Varanasi, India. India provided the final insight that would bring understanding to the quest for sacred time. The search for sacred time began in July of 2002 after having descended from the central tower at Angkor Wat. What ever it was that affected me at that time became a continuous quest to seeking answers on how these temples could have been built in the middle of the South East Asian jungles as well as on many mountain tops. What kind of architectural decisions must have been made to create such grand expressions of devotion to the Hindu gods and the powers in the universe? After making pilgrimages to many of these temples I then found myself sitting on the banks of the Ganges river in Varanasi, India for the second time where I could once again see a visible demonstration of that devotion that has lasted for untold centuries with temples flowing into to the Ganges as a visible expression that could be felt in every crevice and seen around every corner in the way people honored their deities. Varanasi is more than a city; it is a sacred location on earth that has been able to fulfill the inner quest to satisfy the depth of the unknown lurking in human souls seeking answers to how life became what it is today. Kashi, the city of light, is the home of Shiva and that aspect alone gives the Hindu devotee more than enough reason to just be in the city. The age and the timeliness of Kashi is so well

defined that it is able to exude a deep rooted place on earth where our existence can be seen in all its enfoldment in one instance. The birth and tribulations of life ending in death are celebrated, worshiped and understood in Varanasi on levels only a lifetime of study could barely bring an understanding to as its being the most sacred place on earth.

And now with only a little less than a year remaining, the year 2012 is coming and the devotees are participating in the celebration of the goddess Durga, which holds a special place in the hearts and minds of all Hindus. This celebration was of special significance to me on the morning of April 11, 2011 because Durga destroys and creates, and now she has begun her destructive mode which can readily be seen around the world. When I saw the waters of her kund filled with garbage and filth I became aware of how her defined presence was mirrored in these dirty waters. I stepped into the kund and moved the waters, brought them over my head and recognized that under her veil of destruction clarity could be seen. The devotees were so entranced that their movement around her sacred shrine was like a whirl pool of humans with a rainbow of saris flowing in unison as if all the colors of life were blended into a stream of vermillion excitement.

The moment was so overwhelming there was no time to think of how it came to be that I was at the Durga Kund that day. That wasn't important. What was important was it was taking place, and by joining in with fellow Hindus I too became part of their living culture that has brought with it a memory and an act so defined and so much apart of what constitutes life for all Hindu devotees that any analysis would dilute and miss the direct link to the true source of this ritual act of supplicat



Durga Kund and author, Varanasi, India – April 11, 2011

It was the Giant Swing Ceremony, which takes place in Thailand once a year that brought me to India this time. First I arrived in Delhi and then an overnight train to Varanasi. The Giant Swing became a source of curiosity for me for well over a year and although the swing in known by all Hindus as a ceremony that takes place either during the summer solstice, spring equinox or the beginning of the 1<sup>st</sup> moon in January its connection to the celestial realms has been totally lost and removed from any form of subjective involvement. So as I tried to find out why the swing ceremony took place in Thailand I learned that its source was in India. And even though the modern Hindu may not know of any connection of the swing's roots to heaven the ancient act of swinging has still been able to connect with the gods who over time have become more symbolic than real. This sacred recognition of joining with the gods with a swing made me realize that to find the sacred you have to walk out of the secular world and into another world which even though it's the same familiar world it does not have attachments to the everyday things we find so familiar. The whole conception of the swing brought me to realize that this world of otherness is a world found in all the space that's between the objects we are so familiar with. It's not a hidden space either for we are in the midst of it at every moment as I found myself when circling the Durga shrine unable to think but only to be absorbed in the timeless world of the gods.

To compare this other space to memory would be a way to give this sacredness a defining character or some definition. Ancient memory is infused with the rituals of India and within our own memories we can access this sacred time. Memories are fleeting and some are impossible to explore. But memories are full of all those spaces that once defined our place in the world that we interacted with and purposely engaged with. Yet each step we take is added to our memories. Everything we see or hear at each instance is added to our memories. We remember at the same instance we perceive. It's as if we are walking in our own memories. After we have moved through the world and then sit down our memories are the only guide we have if we are to return to a place or a person we are familiar with. Once we lose contact with our memories we forever float in a sea of impressions that have no connection to a time past or even to know that we are in a present time. We plan to return to our memories every minute we leave a place. We think of our time in the future when we will once again reunite with our home or our family and all those images are like projections into the future to reconnect with memories of where we came from. Our memories of the past constitute the sacred time that we are given so we can journey inside all those spaces that holds together a world we are apart of.

This space I am referring to is a space which connects our past, present and future and is a space always present and always connecting everything which exists. We enter this space from what we know as birthing, always birthing, always coming into this space to find that it has been defined by ourselves giving us a way to define the space we are in. Yet the space that gets filled with all those definitions of our existence leaves out the very essence which allows those definitions to come into existence.

Varanasi is a cultural space where the movement in that space has been consecrated and deemed holy or sacred. Every act of living recognizes the most subtle aspects surrounding the definitions placed in it. The geography of space has been sacralized so even the movement in that space has a sacred aspect factored into how one moves and thinks. The secular world occupies this sacred space and in its preponderance of expressions has completely forgotten the very foundation for it reason to exist. The sacred space is defined as the substratum of each thought and action. It's the ether of existence that moves as a wave of presence carrying along the entirety of the secularized world as if it were but another illumination from a distant star. All we have to do is look at those illuminations that gives us our daily recognition which is but a ray of light that covers everything we do and knowing that the secularized world dissolves into this sea of light and instantly the sacred makes its appearance.

The sacred time is then the eternal movement of the plenum of all existence and in India each thought is part of this plenum and the gods and goddesses fill the void of the secular space with representations from the etheric fields which holds together every single action we make in the world.

Sacred time is recognizing the instant fluidity of everything and seeing it avail itself as if seeing it for the first time. Everything is redefined and placed in the world as if they were invisible constructions of our making. The multi-varied aspects to the interaction in this world comprise the sacred time which defies dissection but rather it is an immersion into a quality of existence which enables life to be present.

Eternity is an example of an everlasting state of existence which although may seemingly be unattainable on our earthly plane is in reality a state of being that each and every person participates in. It the truest sense we are eternal beings and are forever cast in the eternal sea of unlimited manifestations. Whether by sound or wind or a combination so wonderfully juxtaposed to enable the spoken word, pushed by our breath, we become realized in all those sense reflections of the eternal arrangement of all eternal creations. And in that eternity of flowing into the everlasting plenum of existence we create for ourselves expressions enabling us to join in this manifestation of unfolding eternality and find ways we can voice our participation.

The sacred is a voice given over to a quality of our manifestation which is beyond our complete understanding yet deserves recognition because our use of these eternal forms which we are imbued with emerges as the sacred. Varanasi is a place on this earth that has maintained a living relationship with these eternal manifestations exhibited each moment on the ghats, in the small temples, within homes and within the large temples where a special place is reserved for those entities and deities who forever populate this vast expanse of eternity and are there as a reminder that in the endless reaches of time the deities reside much as we reside along with them on this earthly plane.

The wedding of the ancient with the timeless out cropping of edifices that populate the city of light in Kashi are humankinds connection to the immediateness of our eternal existence and the sacredness we attribute to that existence by experiencing and recognizing the devotion the devotees exhibit in the morning when the sun shines upon the Ganges. It is this attribution of the sacred that Brahmin priests carried with them when they ventured across the seas and once again shared their eternal

recognition of that sacred connection when the stones were carried through the jungles in South East Asia as an expression of being part of the eternal world experienced daily through out ancient India. The gods too were remembered and brought forth to reside in these temples with the stones reaching to the heavens symbolizing a connection to eternity and the abode of the gods.

And now after all these years in search of sacred time the realization that it comes from the reverence to all that time experienced on this earth and poignantly expressed by the daily activities which make up the landscape of Kashi. Every moment spent on the soil beneath these temples is a holy and sacred experience which pilgrims and everyday people walk to as a representation of the eternal that exists in the heavens. Going to Varanasi is like taking a journey into the everlasting and eternal depth that we see in the evening when looking at the vault of heaven or in the rainbow of colors shed upon the earth reflected through the waters all over the sacred kunds or the river Ganges filled with the colorful saris dripping with melted hues of silken colors. And after all that is experienced we find ourselves in that physical space we define so easily with our ready made interpretations of the world that we have crafted by our own making but in truth they are only reflections of the multi dimensional spaces we experience within our own physical natures. We, in the truest sense, are the sacred time vine emanating and slowly turning and winding our way through space guided by the movement of the heavens which we are scarcely aware of.

Sacred time is that time when we awake into the space that is around us. It's not the space defined by some geographical location but the space we find ourselves in once we realize we are part of the creative energy forming the eternity we behold in front of us. Sacred time once realized is as if we are at some grand symphony which surrounds our entire existence and the players are made manifest by our associations of the senses connected to each and every aspect of that space seen and felt which lies before us. Varanasi provides a constant reminder that the eternal is just a prayer away from the existence we are so attached to. The truth is that reality is seen very quickly and just as the reality is seen it has disappeared into our memory of the eternal and only our sense of the attribution of the sacred can we participate in its full recollection.

Sacred time is not time divided into portions by which we can measure events but time which dissolves our measured relationship to existence. We remove the artifact of time and it its stead the boundaries of measured time provided for our sense of duration are removed and at that moment of realization we become immortal.

Our quest for the immortal is seemingly only attainable by the gods and we devote ourselves to their ability to have overcome what apparently is unattainable by our earthly existence. However, when the space we find ourselves in witnesses eternity as a part of our existence then our existence becomes god like in as much as we perceive the endlessness of space in which we live. It's at that intersection of awareness that sacred time avails itself to us.

The measured time of 2012 is symbolic of the cyclical movement of the heavenly bodies. After a long period each of the asterisms pass in the heavens after completing a circular path and we find ourselves at the completion of this grand cycle and in turn are aware that a repetition of that long journey in the heavens will begin once again.

Realizing this passage in the heavens enables our sense of the sacred to be stimulated because it's this passage that has become the recorded legacy of our ancient ancestors who realized that our place in the universe followed a path that would touch upon seeing the gods construct our universe in which we find ourselves today. This awareness of the eternal is part of the legacy of 2012 as it has been recorded in many ways in all cultures throughout the history of humankind. How it has been recorded has been an on going study by astroarchaeologists and archaeoastronomers over the last century. Remnants of megalithic cultures placing stone markers for recognizing the events in the heavens surely has to be seen as humankinds earliest attempts to connect with that heavenly eternal space above the earth plane. And before those ancient cultures moved stones on the earth or hewn them out of the earth they were finding images of the universe through ingesting plants which opened vistas beyond anything seen before. Those same plants and stones are still here yet far removed from our existence in modern society and the sacred relationship they provided for our ancient ancestors.

The modern world has been reluctant to welcome these portals to other worlds as readily as people living far from modern cities and centers of commerce. So 2012 has become a time marker for many heralding a time of change to another form of existence. Whether that forms comes by natural catastrophic change or an understanding that our universe can provide a cosmogonic appreciation to unveil the sacred time seen ritualized by cultures the world over is to be seen.

In India the time of 2012 is the time of Kali, the destructive deity who changes things by force, or Durga who will destroy the old to bring about the new or Shiva who will dance his dance to cleanse the world of its loss of understanding to the realm of the gods. The realm of the gods as seen through the eyes of the faithful in India is but the many manifestations that appear in the universe which ultimately is one whole macrocosm that is embodied in the microcosm of man. Purusha is the cosmic man who represents every aspect of the eternal and the temples are so designed that his image is faithfully portrayed by the many ways the gates to these heavenly abodes are constructed on the earth. The cosmic man is reflected in the self, in the temples and in the cityscape of Varanasi. The temples reflect the heavens and form one interconnected whole, which when fully infused within the mind, open one to that eternal space composed of sacred time.

Sacred time is not time dependent for it is not part of constructed time as we know it. It is time reserved for the movement of the universe in every conceivable space which it occupies. In those spaces flow designs of the way in which the world is perceived and orchestrated and we become the players within all those spaces. What we find in those spaces where eternity lurks are the memories of our ancient ancestors and of us alike which coexist to form a tapestry made up of reflections and actions and all the thoughts ever conceived. When we touch our world we do so through the air we breath for it's the present that sustains all our abilities to receive and construct our impressions of what it is we are participating in.

Varanasi is this place where a devotional approach to life is recognized each morning to give recognition to the source of our existence. The daily dipping into the Ganges is so much a part of the Hindus in Varanasi it would be impossible to extricate this act of the water ritual from their daily lives. It's the combination of water and sun which

forms a wedding of fire and water and when our beings are placed in this water the experience of an eternal flow of time flows through the mind creating a bond more ancient than records can attest to. Finding ones relationship to sacred time in this eternal flow of water and rays of light from the suns rising presence was particularly significant for me on my return to Varanasi after being present during the full solar eclipse of 2009. I returned to become one with all those natural elements and nearly two years had passed when I once again went into the Ganges to rekindle my own memories of the most auspicious day when millions of Hindus all over India came to see the holy eclipse in the city of light. My curiosity as to what impressions I would have after having seen the solar eclipse was foremost in my mind. The signs in the spaces where the manifest universe was filled with all the actions of creation were either going to be sensed in some way or another or my visit would become just a continuing journey through the passage of my own secular time.

But that all changed on April 12, 2011 when dipping into the Ganges I stepped on a stone in the soft sandy river bed of warm sand under the flowing Ganges in front of the Tulsi Ghat. Reaching down into the water to be sure it was a stone and not something harmful I grabbed the object and brought it to the surface only to find it was a terracotta image of Kala Bhairava an aspect of Shiva who protects the city of light and who is honored with three temples for his coming to Varanasi to drop the skull of Brahma after he had traveled all over India with it as penance for cutting off Brahmas fifth head.

Shiva in his own way gave me a sign that I had returned to Varanasi and although it may only be considered a coincidence that I stepped on Shiva it was a coincidence which brought attention to how we can approach sacred time. For Hindus sacred time is a part of living time. No separation takes place between the world of the gods and our earthly activities. The gods are everywhere in India as signs of the infinite manifestations of the eternal. Varanasi is a place which has a threshold one can cross over and enter the eternal movement of Brahmas creation.

Lord Shiva is for the Hindus much more than a god as he represents all aspects of the manifest universe. Our breathing is none other than Shiva giving us a portion of the eternal so he may be witness to his wonders.



Shiva as Bhairava as found in the Ganges

If by coincidence when submerged beneath the holy river of the Ganges Shiva makes his appearance to me through an object of one of his manifestations I will recognize that as his way of orchestrating his time to briefly coincide with the time he has given me to see his creation unfold before me. Sacred time is not dependent on idols and I am not suggesting that because I stepped on Shiva's image I should exalt his image as a sacred image. What I am saying is a sacred image appeared before me allowing me to be aware of that moment in time that carried with it a sacred form crafted by an eternity of ancestral memories which gives Varanasi the distinction of the place where Shiva lives. The Kala Bhirava temple is one of the most sacred temples in Varanasi and it is here that the "terrible one", as Shiva is known, is enshrined and it is this form of Shiva who is the protector of the city of light and who keeps elements of evil and sin from entering the city. Therefore, to recognize how Shiva made his appearance by quietly sitting in the shallows of the Ganges and interrupting my space was a way in which he manifested himself in order to be recognized. For if I had not been curious to see what I stepped on his presence would not of been seen and I would not of been able to be inspired enough to pay my respects where he is worshipped by countless devotees from all over India each day.

Sacred time then is a break or a portal into the invisible manifest universe which maintains the forms we see before us each day. Those forms change daily because we have changed. We change from inhalation to exhalation. Each breath we take occurs in a moment of this sacred time. In a way we are privileged to witness the manifest universe as we do. We do it in our own time. And in our own time if we become

aware of how sacred time becomes manifest we enter that domain we reserve for all our gods and deities whose forms are as multi-faceted as are the many ways the creation of forms come into view. We see little of all that there is to see and we know we can see but a little but rarely spend any time wanting to see sacred time.

Sacred time is the river of eternal manifestations of the created universe. To witness or become involved in sacred time requires seeing all the space which holds together our perceived world both natural and the many artifacts we have created within it. Varanasi is a city that has created an entire geographical landscape which mirrors sacred time through the placement of the temples and how one moves among them. Thousands of pilgrims visit these sacred spaces daily because it is known that Varanasi is a place of sacred architecture within a geospace where one can find a quality of existence which can redefine the world and how we are to exist in it. Varanasi offers the opportunity to open the doors of perception out of the realm of conceptions that defines the modern world in the  $21^{st}$  century into a world constructed by far more manifestations than we could possibly imagine.

Sacred time allows a new freedom on how experiences can be witnessed from outside our secularized world that does not offer voice to this hidden dimension which is among all the self created forms we have placed on earth. In 2012 the end of secular time has been promoted by many as if our being destroyed was the result of the prophesies of our ancient ancestors. However, 2012 can act like a terminal point for all humanity by watching how the manifest universe moves among the stars because it's within those spaces between the stars all the wisdom of the ages is placed at our doorstep to witness. 2012 is a sacred time simply because it allows a portal of existence to be experienced before we take our next breath. The 26,000 year inhalation is about to be exhaled and all those combined memories will flow into the creation of a new space for another 26,000 years. The stepping down of cycles of motion from the smallest increment to the largest is in perfect synchronization with the manifest universe and our place in the universe is a perfect replica showing us how that manifest universe is created.

The sun at this time of year in Kashi is the hottest and Vaisakhi is celebrated to bring about harmony for all humanity. Each day the same ritual of recognizing the sun as the source of all life can be seen with the morning rituals on the river bank of the Ganges. The sun temples that are in and around Kashi are a legacy to what was once an elaborate recognition of Lord Surya. The rituals now are of devotees standing in the Ganges and recognizing the sun making its morning appearance. Although the rising sun is a visible recognition of a new day it is far more symbolic to the Hindus. It is the creation of existence with that majestic orange orb slowly emerging from a dark grey horizon and with a sliver of gold like thread illuminating the waters of the Ganges it becomes the quintessential image of eternity.

Today, 15th of April 2011, I will be lecturing at the art history department at Banares University on a very ancient Indian ceremony called the swing ceremony known by many names but the most popular is the Dola Yatra. My curiosity about the origins of the Giant Swing, located in front of Wat Suthat in Bangkok, led me to realize that the swing came from a time in the remote past somewhere in India. Legend has it that a swing was brought from ancient Kashi and presented to an early king in the country of Thailand perhaps as early as the 9<sup>th</sup> century.

As I ponder this legend of the swing sitting on the banks of the Ganges the sun begins to make its appearance on the horizon accompanied by ringing bells from the worshippers. The thick grey haze huddling on the horizon emits a hue of faint orange and pink hinting that an orb of crimson brilliance will once again grace the morning sky and Hindus representing every village in India will be there to greet its rays with palms closed in worship as the Ganges slowly surrounds their devotional observance. This is the connection which has defined Varanasi for thousands of years and next to the clay banks of the Asi Ghat begins the long stone steps leading to what can only be described as castles rising into the air with balconies, temples and staircases all hewn from stone contributing to one of earths most sacred landscapes. The gods which populate this transcendent landscape are so numerous it would be a long labor to indicate them all or the sacred pools that mirror the heavens.

Banares is truly a city of light and as pilgrims witness this brilliant star shinning before them, I will be at Banares University projecting an image of the space traveled in the heavens and how we swing across the sea of stars. The swing is also known as the "ship bound for heaven" and it takes one from one end of time at the farthest reaches of our universe to the center whence comes our paradise which is none other than our own center deep within the eye of Brahma: the galactic center.



The eternal holy Ganges River

And as the rays of the sun begin to illuminate the Ganges boats idly pass by filled with morning pilgrims being rowed past an eternity of prayers offered to the gods which is testimony to how eternal this enactment of making passage on the holy waters of the Ganges really is. This is the reminder of our own passage on this earth coming into existence and leaving it as the sun forever casts its light on the holy waters as a reminder of the same passage made across the vast eternal ocean of stars in our Milky Way galaxy. Sacred time is like a ship sailing through the heavens and because I brought the image of the swing to Varanasi, I enabled others to see their own swinging in this eternal sea of stars.

But again there are no coincidences it seems as in contemplating the swing originally coming from Varanasi, I happened to see in a window of an Indian gift shop at Asi Ghat an image of Ganesh who was between two pillars. At first glance it did not strike me as significant but the two pillars were a tell tale sign for an image of a swing. Going into the shop and looking more closely at the Ganesh figure I discovered it was sitting on a swing which could be swung back and forth.



Ganesh on a swing

Ganesh is regarded as a liminal deity as he stands between the human and divine worlds. Not only is this deity known to remove obstacles but as easily as he can remove them he can offer them. He is able to open a door as easily as he can shut it. He sits at the threshold of a sacred world and he can be found on the out skirts of Kashi as well at the entrances of temples. Ganesh then becomes a guardian of sacred time and finding him in Varanasi on a swing was again no coincidence.

Sacred time is like being catapulted beyond time and that is the best way to describe where our attention goes. As we try to give definition to the secular the sacred becomes a time of suspension from things we are most familiar with. Sacred time exists over the threshold of perception into an area where multi-dimensional mindscapes composed of colors, shapes and sounds are all woven together to provide a unique place for thoughts to find a way to make themselves understood but not in the logical sense as when we use our language to communicate ideas. Sacred time is a submersion into that space which provides the cohesion of our world so we can experience it with our senses. The space between our own materiality is integrated and is one with the space of the macro that we see when we are not in sacred space and time. A way to cross this threshold of materiality is to silently release attachment to thoughts and then the space where sacred time can be felt is when one is carried over the threshold of memories and into a free space, empty space, and a sacred space. The swing then is a metaphor for feeling this passage into sacred time and is quite helpful as a reminder for being carried forward and released only to return and feel

the passage once again. The swing is none other than a symbolic reminder of the cosmic breath which allows us to participate in sacred time.

Varanasi, India April 15, 2011