



## TO LET YOURSELF FALL

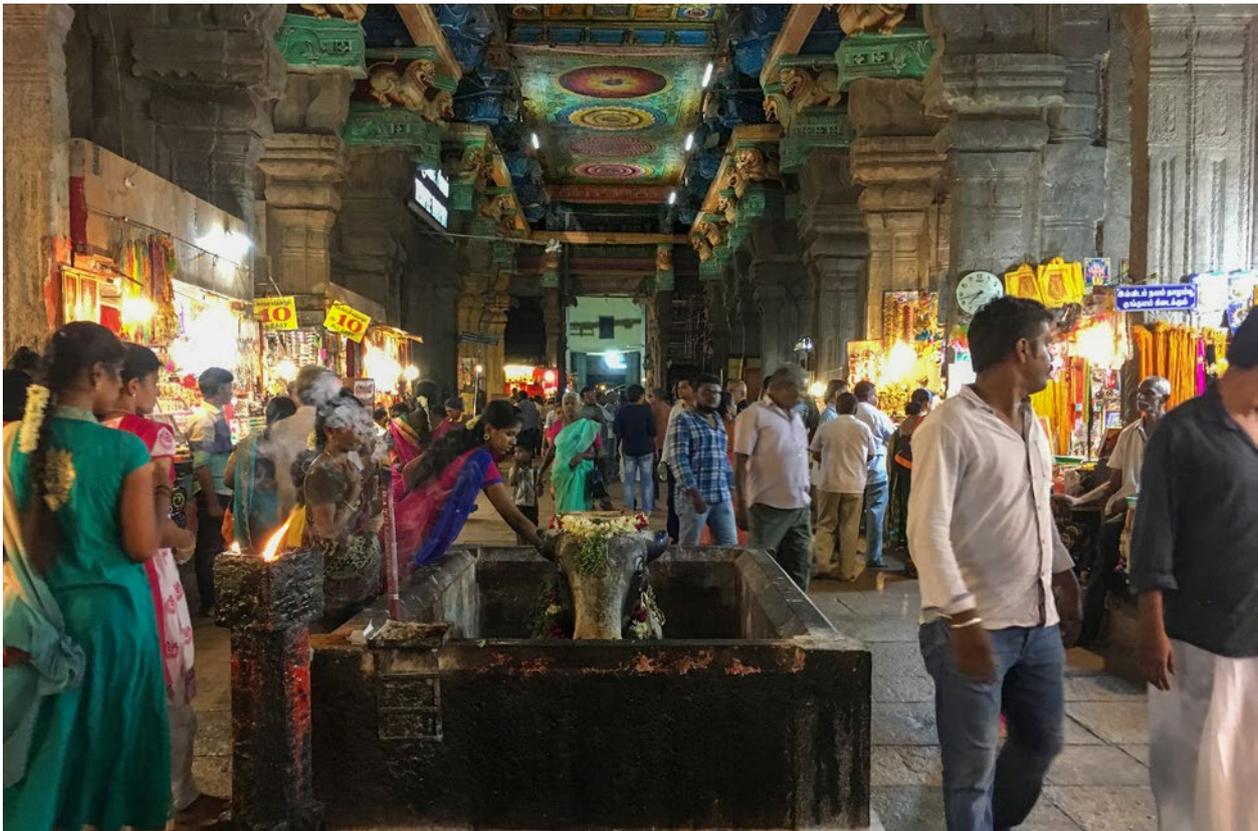
Saturday, 29 July, 2017 – Madurai (India) Meenakshi Temple

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Suddenly, I understand what a temple is. I had entered the sacred Sri Meenakshi Sundareshwara Temple Precinct through the east gate and crossed a long hall in which, apart from sacred and sacrificial offerings and various types of religious bells and whistles, a range of plastic toys were also being sold – mostly weapons ranging from the ancient scimitar to machine guns used by the Indian Army to the futuristic bubble pistol in the form of a half-sunk puffer fish.

I had crossed porticos enclosing the holiest areas. The Holy of Holies, the sanctum of the goddess Meenakshi (an avatar of Parvathi), with her three breasts and her beautiful «fish eyes» (*meen* means *fish* in Tamil), is accessible only to Hindus. So also the shrine that houses her bridegroom, Lord Shiva (called Sundareshwara here), in whose grand cos-

mic dance Meenakshi lost not only her composure but also her «superfluous» breast. I had counted all the lingams standing, warmed by special towels, in small chapels. And gazed at countless images of demons, even while making sure I did not stumble over any of the many believers prostrating in front of the shrines. I had admired the colourfully designed ceilings of the halls, with their patterns painted in near-fluorescent colours, which lent the otherwise gloomy rooms something light, friendly and festive. I'd sensed the heat emanating from a basin swimming with innumerable oil lamps – and the calm of the men meditating in front of the Shiva-lingams. I had also incurred the wrath of a young man for photographing the back of a cow with my mobile phone (cameras are forbidden here). In his opinion, cows should not be photo-



graphed. And four times I had been urged to take «one selfie, please» by young men who had just grazed their hair or rubbed their skulls with whitish powder (the sacred ash called *vibhuti*). Apart from all this, I had greeted a chalk-dusted Ganesh, a grass-hung Ganesh, a black Ganesh in a white robe, and a Ganesh made of gray earth.

Then I had stepped out into an open-to-sky, pillared hall, in the middle of which there was a

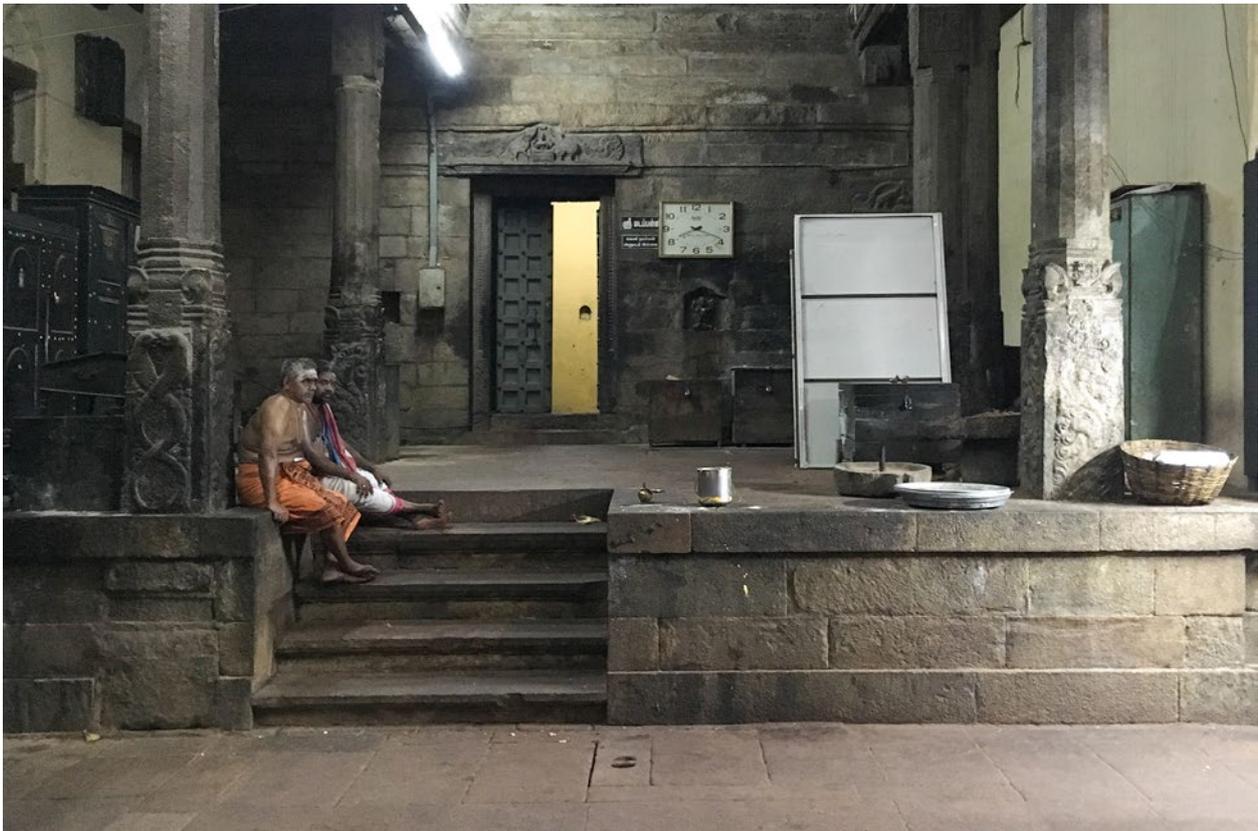
large lotus pond, and suddenly felt raindrops on my skin, and looked upwards. Standing in the sheltering portico I could not tear my gaze away from the skies. For, high over the eastern staircase of the temple, a tremendous thunderstorm had come into play, with masses of clouds of all shades of gray filling up the evening sky – which nonetheless still had some friendly, heat of the day-induced vibrant patches of blue peeping through, albeit smothered by a yellow-red, sulphur-poisonous shimmer. The clouds were such that you could imagine huge halls or even mountainous landscapes in them. And these ballrooms, these kingdoms of haze, were constantly illuminated by lightning that streaked, flashed and whipped through the clouds.

Who does not want to believe that it is majesty that is manifesting itself up there, that celestial battles are being fought, destructive dances being performed, that the rumbling, thundering and roaring is the echo of magical metals being lifted, shaken, swung, beaten, thrown and, astoundingly enough, hurled back.

And suddenly I know what a temple is. A temple is a place where one is safe from the gods, from their arbitrariness that manifests in the unpredictable lightning of fate, from their wrath, from the de-







structive force of their anger, or their exuberance. I also understand why one must feel as though one is inside an organ when one is inside such a shrine: it is dark and warm, the walls are oily and damp, it smells of rot and sweat, of incense and spices and, everywhere, there are tallowy powders and greasy pastes ready to be smeared on the face. Everything sticks together, runs out and into each other, atomises, crumbles, melts, and gives you the slightly oppressive but also reassuring feeling that you will dissolve the very next moment and be sucked into the organism.

What – or who – offers more protection from the wrath of the gods than a maternal super-shot, than a gigantic digestion-sex-organ, within which one is nourished in every nook and cranny with

sacred foods (*prasadam*) that are sweet, greasy, and nourishing and that you can unthinkingly slurp up? She is the temple, after all, She herself has produced the organ. We can therefore allow ourselves to fall, to melt, to be absorbed, as it were.

In reality, though, that is forbidden. For, even if the temple is a female super-organ, even if we crawl back deep into the mother's womb, it is the law of the father that holds sway here – since it is the male priests and their male assistants who tell us what we have to do and what we have to allow, and they are also the ones that finally lead us back to the exit and catapult us into the world where we are not safe from the gods. And that is, naturally, the trick of the whole exercise.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.