

Why build an Ashram in Badrinath?

By Durga Ahlund

“Jai Badri Vishal Ki”

The publicity is, “if heaven exists on earth, it is in Uttarakhand.” A galaxy of mountain peaks and glaciers, frozen lakes and towering waterfalls, meandering rivers, verdant forests, rich with rare flora and fauna and vast colorful meadows and valleys make the Himalayan district the go to place for the adventurer, photographer and the spiritual seeker. It was the place where the Mahabharata was written and the Shashtras composed. Uttarkhand is one of India’s newest states, carved out of its second largest: Uttar Pradesh. It includes eight hill districts, from its capital Dehradun in the south west to the sources of the Yamuna and Ganges rivers, Yamunotri, Gangotri in the north west, to the border of Nepal in the north east, and Nainital in the southeast. They are all wondrous place of pilgrimage. It is an area known since ancient times for divinity, austerity, meditation, penance and attainment. Uttarkhand is truly the land of the gods, a place of incredible beauty, simplicity, where only “complete surrender” is required to soar into the highest states of spiritual ecstasy. The temple and towns of Kedarnath, Gangotri, Yamunotri and Badrinath are the *Chota Char Dhaam* the four important pilgrimage sites of Uttarakhand, which are to be visited by all devout Hindus during their lifetime. However, for this non-Hindu self-seeker, there is but one glorious and sacred town to take into the mind and keep in the heart, and that is the small temple town of Badrinath.

Badrinath is situated along the Alaknanda River, the source of which is the glacial lake, Santopanth Tal. Two mountain peaks, the Nar and Narain Parvats stand guard over this temple town. Nilakantan Peak soars into the stars as if to signify its majesty and holiness. Neelakantan is like a shining crystal pyramid which changes hues with rise of the sun and moon. The land we purchased for Babaji’s Kriya Yoga Ashram lies below the base of Neelakanth Peak.

The origin of the boldly colorful and soul-stirring shrine and temple of Badrinath is not clear. It may not be only a Hindu shrine, but may have been Buddhist, and perhaps also Jain. Although references were made to the shrine and the temple in the Vedas, historical records are not available and no one really knows how old the Shrine or the temple is. The Skanda Puranas do credit Adi Shankara with the re-establishment of the Temple as Hindu in the 9th century A.D.. Legend has it that one day, as the Adi Shankara was climbing to a place for meditation near the village of Badrinath, he heard a celestial voice tell him where he would find the temple idol. He was told to dive into the Narada Kund just below the Badrinath Temple, to find and rescue the idol and to enshrine it again in the temple. Precisely where the voice instructed him, Adi Shankara found the murti. It was a statue of a yogi seated in meditation, made from a black stone.

The Temple complex is totally enchanting. A smile arises as you walk the flight of steps that leads to the brightly colored main gate and then onto the Garbhgriha, where the deity is enshrined. The murti of Lord Badri is inspiring and simple, a one-meter tall statue of

the black shaligram stone. The statue is considered by many Hindus to be one of eight self-manifested statues of Vishnu. The murti depicts Vishnu sitting in meditative posture, rather than his far more typical reclining pose. The features of the murti are indistinct but looks very much like the form of the Bodhisatva, or Babaji, to some of us.

There are various legends regarding the origin of the murti and why he landed in the Narad Kund. Perhaps, the meditative murti had been enshrined by Buddhists who took over the temple in the days of King Ashok. At a later time, the murti was tossed into the Kund by Hindus who re-claimed the temple, until Adi Shankara re-enshrined him to his rightful place. According to Hindu belief, Buddha was the ninth incarnation of Lord Vishnu, after all. Today, devotees of all faiths and schools of thought of Hinduism visit the Temple. They pray to Lord Badri Nath as Brahma, Hanuman, Kali or as Guru. Lord Badrinarayan is accepted as the Form of the Almighty, the All Pervading and All in One. In prayer devotees chant "*Jai Badri Vishal Ki*" The word *vishal* means huge, in Hindi and is indicative of the great significance of this Shrine. Many religious heads of various mutts, or monastic orders have their branch/guest houses in Badrinath.

Although Badrinath is located tucked deep into in the Himalayas in Northern India, the head priest, or Rawal is traditionally a Brahmin from the southern district of Kerala, as required by the tradition begun by the Adi Shankara, who was from South India. Badrinath is one of the few temples of Northern India that follow the ancient Tantra Vidhi of Shrouta tradition, more common to South India.

Devotees to the Badrinath Temple also receive darshan (presence and blessings) from the sacred, Akhand Jyoti, the Eternal Flame. Akhand Jyoti is the ancient lamp that remains lit all throughout the year, even though the temple is closed during the winter months. Surely this ever-burning lamp is miraculous. Two thousand years ago, when Adi Shankaracharya re-established this temple, he created a perfect flammable mixture of herbs and ghee from cow's milk, (said today to still be prepared strictly by inhabitants of Mana village near Badrinath). This flammable concoction requires only a small amount of oxygen and gives out no carbon dioxide and keeps the lamp burning during the six long months of winter when the temple and town itself is closed.

The temple is open only six months every year (between the end of April and the beginning of November), due to extreme weather conditions in the Himalyan region.

The endless cold of the town is made more appealing with the presence of a natural thermal hot spring, the Tapt Kund (hot spring), just below the temple and above the Alaknanda River. Here devotees take a holy bath to purify themselves before entering the Temple and paying homage to Lord Badrinarayan. The water in the Tapt Kund is extraordinarily hot. It's medicinal and healing properties lure devotees to linger in the steaming water. There are separate baths for men and for women.

The people of Badrinath are all descendants of rishis. These strong people are predominately subsistence farmers. Mana village is another wonderful place to visit and sit for meditation as the atmosphere there is deeply peaceful and appears otherworldly. It is about four kilometers from Badrinath and is a comfortable walk. Mana is the last Indian village up against the Tibet border.

Mana was known as Manibhadraashram in Hindu scriptures. The cave called Vyasa Gufa is in Mana. This is where Ved Vyasa dictated his famous epic, *The Mahabharata* to his secretary, Ganesh. The cave is tucked underneath a huge slab of stone and enshrined is a marble statue of Vyasa writing with a marble pen on a marble book. There are many ancient caves in the area used for centuries by various sages and yogis. The Saraswati River emerges here from a lateral glacier, which is about 3 kilometers north of Mana near the Tibet border. The Puranas describe the Saraswati as it flows down the Mana village and touches Vyasa Gufa and then loses herself in the Alaknanda. There is an amazing natural bridge, a huge slab of stone, over which one can stand in amazement at the Saraswati as she rushes upward through a sculptured gorge.

Another natural phenomenon to view is at Vasudhara Falls about 5 kilometers from Mana. The walk is a steep and difficult hike after the first 2 to 3 kilometers. The falls itself are 400 feet high and the scenery along the way is spectacular. Inspiring are the mountain vistas of Nilakanth, Chaukambha and Santopanth.

The villagers of Mana are important to the activities of Sri Badrinath Temple and the annual worship of Mata Murti. On the closing day of the temple in early November, the people of Mana offer a choli, a short sweater to the deity to keep Him warm during the winter months. The choli is woven by unmarried girls in the village. Mana village is known for its beautiful spun wool and woven crafts.

The people of Mana live a simple and seemingly ancient lifestyle. These people are charming and look rather more Tibetan than Indian. These villagers may have been Rajputs, but are called Bhotias. Most Bhotias in other parts of India are Buddhist but these villagers are Hindus who live in a rather rigid caste system. The younger generations, now educated, often move away from this subsistence farming village to take jobs mostly in government services. During the winter months, the villagers of Badrinath and Mana, along with a murti of Lord Badrinarayan, move south to Joshimath, (where the Adi Shankara did tapasya and established his first monastery).

Let it be understood that a visit to Badrinath valley is an ethereal experience, situated at more than 10,000 feet, it first appears overwhelming in its beauty and grandeur – the vastness of the mountains and the sky and the remoteness of this place at the top of the world. There are so few thought forms here that one merely has to sit still for a few moments to quiet the mind and drop into a deep and peaceful meditation. The sound and vibration of Aum seems to hum through the air, the wind, your breath. Subtle channels are cleared of negativity and take in the Aum. You seem to acclimate easily to the lessening oxygen content in the air even as you hike higher on the mountain paths. When you practice Yoga you experience it in a way you rarely can elsewhere.

The trip up to Badrinath is never easy, always intense, as the route winds precariously between steep mountain ledges and rocky riverbanks. It is a dangerous route, perilous in rainy weather with landslides that occur without warning. But the travel to reach this place is part of the experience of Badrinath. The journey up prepares you for the sacred and profound. It is a way of surrender, a way of accepting life anew. Badrinath exists as if to spiritualize your existence. The longer you stay in its atmosphere, the deeper is your

transformation and the longer it stays with you after you leave. There is no need to be a Hindu to make the journey here. Badrinath allows for maximum freedom and flexibility in matters of the sacred and profound. It simply is sacred and profound. There is no rigid dogma to adhere to, you don't even have to step into the Temple, you merely have to be willing to let go of any skepticism and rigidity within your ego and allow your soul to step forward into the Presence, that is Badrinath, and let the transformation begin.

On June 17, 2013, monsoon rains 4.5 times greater than ever recorded before caused devastating floods in the upper regions of Uttarkhand, particularly at Kedarnath, Uttarkashi, Pithogarth and Chamoli. These caused the death of more than 10,000 people and left tens of thousands of residents stranded in the upper areas of Uttarkhand without homes, farmland and means of livelihood. More than 60,000 visitors had to be rescued by the army. It seems as though Mother Nature wanted to remove many tourist facilities that have been built in these sacred places in recent years. But the valley of Badrinath was untouched; and there was no damage to our ashram. Only the road to it from Joshimutt, was severely damaged. One might doubt the wisdom of our efforts since 2008 to build a Babaji's Kriya Yoga ashram in Badrinath. But the decision to purchase land and erect an ashram did not seem to come by choice; it came quite spontaneously from coincidence and opportunity, which rarely arises in Badrinath. And so we continue to build so that kriyabans will have an opportunity to do Kriya in Badrinath and experience the transformation that Babaji and Lord Badri Nath affords one and all.

Jai Badri Vishal Ki

Om Kriya Babaji Nama Aum