Maha Shivaratri

In support of our staff, students, faculty and postdocs, this information is offered as a resource about the Hindu observance of Maha Shivaratri.

MARCH 4, 2019

HISTORY AND MEANING

Maha Shivaratri is a Hindu festival celebrated to honor the god Shiva. The day marks Shiva’s marriage to the goddess Parvati. Shivaratri is the night when Shiva performed “Tandava Nritya”, the dance of primordial creation, preservation and destruction. It is the most holy day of worship and is called a “great convergence.” Legend has that this is also the night that Shiva drank the poison of negativity to protect the world. At a higher level, Shiva represents the energy which is the basis of all creation. This energy that exists everywhere and in everyone is called “Shiva Tatwa”. In Sanskrit, “ratri” means night; on Shivaratri, Hindu devotees take refuge in the “self” via meditation and self-reflection. Many worshippers spend the entire night awake, singing devotional songs and reading scriptures. Shiva is the embodiment of universal peace, beauty, and infinity; these are qualities that Hindus consider paramount. Thus, this festival serves as a way of overcoming darkness and ignorance in life, and in the world.

TYPICAL OBSERVANCES

• There are offerings to Shiva.
• There is an all-day fast and an all-night vigil.
• Penance is performed to reach one’s highest goals and raise spiritual energy.
• Devotees will want to visit a temple.
• Chanting the sacred Panchakshara mantra (“Om Namah Sivaya”) is also done.

TIPS FOR SUPPORTING THE VANDERBILT COMMUNITY

• Ask co-workers how they celebrate and how they can be supported and encouraged.
• Be aware that employees observing Maha Shivaratri may desire to fast during this day.
• While students are not automatically excused from class for this observance, they may work with their faculty members to make accommodations, such as considerations for students who may be fasting. Graduate and professional students must refer to their own school and departmental vacation policies and calendars for more specific information.
• Staff members may request paid time off for this observance. Support their preference to take leave for their religious observance.

RESOURCES FOR MANAGING WELL-BEING AND MENTAL HEALTH

People feel many types of emotions during the holidays—joy, peace, stress and depression, to name a few. Whatever you feel, know you are not alone, and Vanderbilt has resources to help you through these challenges.

Faculty, Staff and Postdocs
Work/Life Connections-EAP
(615) 936-1327
vumc.org/health-wellness/work-life

Students
Office of Student Care Coordination
(615) 343-9355
vanderbilt.edu/carecoordination

RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL OBSERVANCES

This resource is part of a toolkit created by Equity, Diversity and Inclusion to highlight religious and cultural observances that members of our community may practice. This toolkit is not meant to be exhaustive, but instead to provide a general overview of how we can support staff, faculty and students. We continually refine this information and welcome your suggestions.

For more information, please contact Equity, Diversity and Inclusion at edi@vanderbilt.edu. For more information on the university’s policy on religious holy days and observances, contact the Office of the University Chaplain & Religious Life, at religiouslife@vanderbilt.edu or Human Resources at human.resources@vanderbilt.edu.