

VISHNU TATTVA

Understanding Vaiṣṇava Iconography

Icons & Symbology

The language of symbols develops when an attempt is made to represent something that is beyond the normal capacity of the human mind to understand. A transcendent reality is expressed in terms of equivalents known as symbols. All of human interaction is carried out through the use of symbols. To represent a group in terms of quantity we use symbols called numbers. To represent ideas in terms of sound we use symbols known as words. To transmit words to others in a graphic manner we use the symbology of letters of the alphabet. A symbol can be natural or conventional. When we perceive a direct relationship between one order of things with another a natural symbol develops. In the Agamic cosmology symbolism is the expression of reality. It is the expression of the particular points where two worlds meet. The meeting points of

the transcendental world with the material universe. The material world is a reflection of the transcendental world and therefore true symbolism springs from nature and is not invented by mankind. However far back we reach in Indian thought as a whole we find a coherent use of symbols to represent abstractions. The whole of Indian iconography is built up upon a code of symbols based on the assumption that there exists a natural affinity between ideas and forms. This code of symbols has come down from time out of mind, its origins are lost in the remote ages of prehistoric man. Symbols do not speak to the rational mind and cannot be fully understood by logic, they are the subject of inner experience and spiritual realization. Symbols are the inner language of the unconscious mind.

In this Spiritual Realm (*Parama Vyoman*) God resides in the form of Paravāsudeva. He is adorned with the nine chief ornaments and weapons which represent the various cosmic principles of the universe.

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| 1. <i>kaustubha</i> (chest jewel) | — jivas |
| 2. <i>śrīvatsa</i> | — prakṛti |
| 3. <i>gadā</i> (mace) | — mahat (cosmic intelligence). |
| 4. <i>śaṅkha</i> (conch) | — sāttvic ahaṅkāra |
| 5. <i>śārṅga</i> (bow) | — tamasic ahaṅkāra - the mind |
| 6. <i>khadga</i> (sword) | — knowledge |
| 7. <i>cakra</i> (discus) | — universal mind |
| 8. <i>bāṇa</i> (arrows) | — five senses |
| 9. <i>vanamāla</i> (garland) | — elements |

These weapons and ornaments are not regarded as mere symbols but are actually connected with the principles which they represent as the presiding deities. The great authority on this is the *astra bhūṣana adhyaya* of the Vishnu Purana .

The ultimate Reality in the Pancarātra doctrines is Brahman characterised by bliss and devoid of all negative qualities.

"ānanda lakṣaṇam brahma, sarva heya vivarjitam"

(J.S. 4:60 & P.S. 1;5;29 40.)

The word *Brahman* is derived from the root *brh* which means "to expand" or "to grow" and as such indicates the "immensity" which denotes all the manifestations of God in the Transcendental as well as the functional aspects.

This Immensity is beyond comprehension and expression, out of this transcendental Being there issues forth the first form of God known as the Para-Vasudeva in a subtle form with two arms, crystal in complexion and clad in yellow garments. This is identified also as Nārāyaṇa. The Pancarātra does not support the theory of "two Brahman" of

Advaita Vedanta, where the Unmanifest *nirguṇa* Brahman is superior to the Manifest *saguṇa* Brahman; the latter being enveloped and conditioned by Avidya (nescience)!

Everything connected with the icon has a symbolic meaning; the posture, gestures, ornaments, number of arms, weapons, vehicle, consorts and associate deities (*parivara devata*). These descriptions and interpretations are found in the Śrīmad Bhagavatam (S.B.), Vishnu Purana (V.P.), Gopala-uttara-tapini Upanishad (G.U.T.Up), Kṛṣṇa Upanishad (K.U.) Agamas as well as in the Brahmanas and Aranyakas.

*itthaṃ pumān pradhānaṅca buddhyahaṅkāram eva ca |
bhūtāni ca hr̥ṣikeśe manaḥ sarvendriyāṇi ca |
vidyāvidye ca maitreya sarvamatat samāśritam ||
astra bhūṣaṇa saṁsthāna svarūpaṃ rūpa-varjitaḥ |
bibharti māyārūpo 'sau śreyasi prāṇināṃ hariḥ ||*

In this manner Self, nature, intellect, egotism, the elements, the senses, mind, ignorance, and wisdom are all assembled in the person of Kṛṣṇa. Hari in a mystical form, embodies the shapeless elements of the universe as his weapons and ornaments, for the salvation of humankind. V.P. 1;22

*tāntrikāḥ paricaryāyāṃ kevalasya śriyaḥpateḥ |
aṅgopāṅgāyudhākālpaṃ kalpayanti ca yaiḥ ||*

The Tantrik masters for the purpose of contemplation have given physical features, weapons and paraphernalia to the One Supreme Lord the consort of Śrī. (Śrīmad Bhagavatam 12;11;2)

1. Kṣīra-sāgara — Ocean of Milk:

This symbolizes the state of undifferentiated unity of *prakṛiti* (primordial matter) prior to creation of the universe. From liquid milk solid butter is churned — from the undifferentiated Prakṛiti differentiated solid matter arises. The *kṣīra-sāgara* stands for the pure unadulterated state when the three *gunas* [the three cosmic forces; (*rajas*) centrifugal force — expansion, (*tamas*) centripetal force — contraction and (*sattva*) centralizing or harmonizing force] exist in perfect harmony and balance. When this balance is disturbed then the competing forces give rise to the creation of matter in it's five states – solid (earth), liquid (water), gaseous (air), heat (fire) and expansion (space).

It also represents the consciousness, in the myth dealing with the churning of the ocean of milk we have the symbol of churning the mind through devotion in order to produce the essence (butter) in the form of God Consciousness. During this process the 14 jewels are extracted. The ocean is also symbolic of the space or ether or infinity, and Vishnu is identified with the sun whose function of creation, preservation and destruction in our solar system is identical to that of the Supreme Lord in the entire universe.

2. Ananta Śeṣa:

Ananta shesha is the name of the serpent with a thousand heads upon which Vishnu reclines. The serpent is non-different from Vishnu Himself. The word *ananta* means the endless or infinite, and *shesha* means the 'remnant' or 'residue'. When creation is withdrawn it cannot entirely cease to be, there must remain a germ in subtle form of all that has been and will be so that the world can be re-projected when the time comes. It is this remainder of the universe that is embodied by *Ananta śeṣa* floating upon the limitless ocean of the causal waters and forming the couch upon which Vishnu rests. Another meaning of the term *śeṣa* is 'servant' or Subordinate and the master is known as *śeṣi* or the Principle.



3. The Blue Colour;

Vishnu is always represented as being dark blue or black in colour. Darkness is the colour of the limitless and all-pervading ether. The very name Vishnu means 'the all-pervader' and so the colour reinforces this idea of the Infinite, Beyond limitation and the basis of all spatial manifestation.

Black is in fact not a colour it is the sum total of all colours. So too Lord Vishnu is the sum total of the entire cosmos and all its particles. Though Vishnu Himself is depicted as black, the avatars (incarnations) appear in different ages in different colors according to the predominant quality (*guna*) of that age. In the Golden age in which the cohesive-tendency (*sattva*) predominates, the Lord appears in a white form. In the second age in which the expansive-tendency (*rajas*) predominates, he appears as red in colour, in the third age in which there is a mixture of *rajas* and *tamas*, His colour is yellow and in the age of kali in which the disintegrating-tendency (*tamas*) prevails, his colour is black. (Brahma Purana 246).

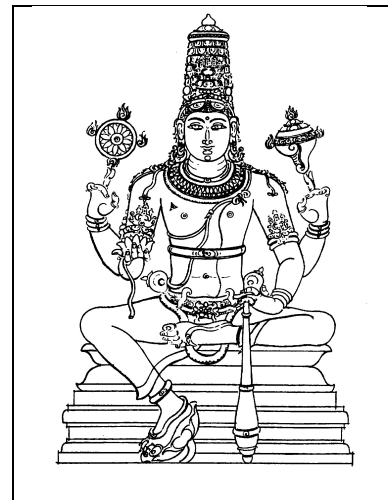
4. The Four Arms:

sattvam rajastama iti ahamkaras caturbhujah G.u.t.Up. 55

The four arms represent the three fundamental qualities (gunas) and the notion of individuality (ahamkara) [from which all existence arises].

Four is the number of the earth, and represents the fulfilment of manifestations in all the spheres of existence. Thus they represent all the following;

- a. The cardinal directions; indicating that the Lord is all pervading and has perfect dominion over all the directions.
- b. The *Yajña kuṇḍa* (fire pit); the Lord is known as Yajña Purusha, he is the sole enjoyer of the sacrifices as well as being the sacrifice itself, and as such his arms represent the four Vedic kuṇḍas (*gārhapatya*, *āhavaniya*, *avasathya*, *sabhya*).
- c. The four Vedas which are the sacred Revelation namely Rik, Yajus, Sama and Atharvana.
- d. The four divisions of society; intellectuals, administrators, entrepreneurs, and workers.
- e. The four stages of life; student, householder, retirement and renunciate.
- f. The four levels of consciousness; waking (*jāgrata*), dream (*svapna*), sub-consciousness (*susupti*) and transcendental consciousness (*turiya*).



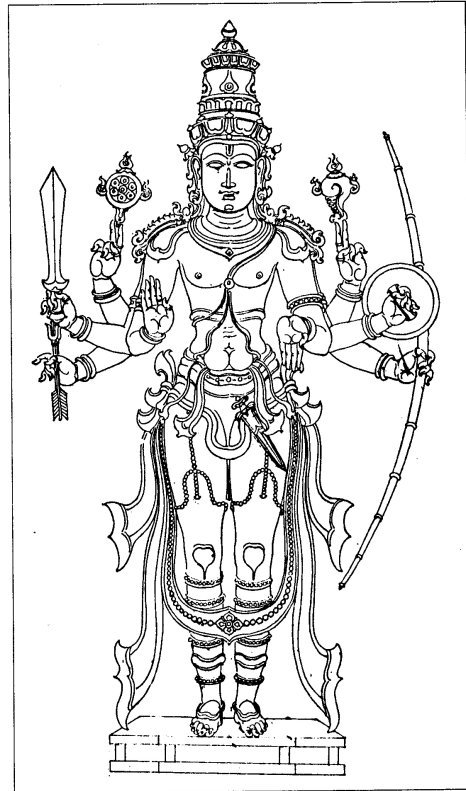
- g. The four types of devotees; distressed, inquirer, the opportunist and the sage.
- h. The four functional manifestations (vyuhas). Vasudeva, Aniruddha, Pradyumna, Sankarshana.
- i. The four essential components of dharma; truth (*satya*), austerity (*tapa*), compassion (*dayā*), and charity (*Dāna*).
- j. The four aims of human endeavor (*purushārthas*); pleasure (*kāma*), prosperity (*artha*), righteousness (*dharma*) and liberation (*mokṣa*).
- k. The four types of liberation (*mukti*), communion (*sāyujya*), association (*sārūpya*), contiguity (*sāmīpya*), collocation (*sālokya*).
- l. The four ages of man. (yugas) *Satya, Treta, Dvapara, Kali*.
- m. four types of birth — gods (*deva*), humans (*manushya*), animals (*tiryak*) and plants (*sthāvaram*).
- n. The four types of Spiritual Paths or Yogas:— *jñāna, karma, bhakti* and *śaranāgati*
- o. The four types of differentiation among all existing things — genus (*jāti*), form (*rūpa*), nature (*svabhāva*) and knowledge (*jñāna*).
- p. The four qualities of all manifested beings category (*jāti*), attributes (*guna*), function (*kriya*), relationship (*sambandha*).

5. The Eight Arms;

Some icons of the Lord or His manifestations are depicted as having 8 arms. This also represents the complete dominion over all the directions, as well as the eight preserving powers (shakti) of the Lord which are;

1. health (*ārogya*),
2. knowledge (*jñāna*),
3. wealth (*dhana*),
4. organization (*sampādanam*),
5. cooperation (*sahodyoga*),
6. fame (*kīrti*),
7. courage (*dhṛti*),
8. truth (*satyam*).

They also symbolize the 8 attributes of the Supreme Being which are;



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|------------------------------|--|
| 1. <i>sarva-jñatva</i> | omniscience of universe, living entities and deeds. (loka, jiva & karma) |
| 2. <i>sarveśvaratva</i> | Supreme Lordship and Dominion over the entire creation. |
| 3. <i>sarva-antaryāmitva</i> | inner rulership and control of all entities. |
| 4. <i>sarva-karaṇatva</i> | Supreme Cause of all causes. |
| 5. <i>sarva-niyantrītvā</i> | Supreme controller of everything. |
| 6. <i>sarva-kartrītvā</i> | the original Performer of all actions. |
| 7. <i>sarva-śaktimatva</i> | omnipotence |
| 8. <i>sva-tantratva</i> | complete and absolute independence. |

THE WEAPONS

6. The Conch (śaṅkha)

The conch represents the first manifestation of articulate language — AUM— *nāda brahman*. This monosyllable contains within itself all language and meaning in a potential state. It is the seed from which speech developed — the nutshell containing the whole of knowledge and wisdom.

All matter is light and vibration. All the forms of the universe are effects of the primeval sonic vibration. Thus the conch is the symbol of the origin of existence.

Its shape is a spiral, starting at one point and evolving into ever increasing spheres. It comes from water, the first compact element. When blown it produces the sound AUM.

The conch is named **pañcajanya** which means 'born-of-five' and it is the representation of the pure-notion-of-individuality, (*sattvika ahamkara*), from which are evolved the principles of the five elements. (Padma Purana 4;79;222). According to the Vedic account of creation, in the beginning Brahman (the Supreme Being) alone existed then a desire arose to create the first ego-sense arose within Him, and from this primeval ego-sense gradually the process of creation was set into motion.

During war in ancient India the conch was blown to signal the commencement of the battle, it was also blown by the victorious parties to announce their victory. The Lord's blowing of the conch therefore indicates that He is always ready to do battle with the forces of evil and for the protection of the devotees.



7. The Discus (cakra)

bala svarūpam atyanta javenāntaritanilam |
cakra svarūpañca mano dhatte viṣṇuḥ kare sthitam ||

*In the form of mighty power, revolving swifter than the winds—
the Universal Mind in the form of a wheel is held in the hand of
Vishnu. (V.P. 1;22; 70.)*



The Cosmic Mind has the unlimited power which creates and destroys all spheres of existence (*lokas*) and forms of the universe, the nature of which is to revolve. According to the Ahirbudhnya Samhita 2;26, the Discus represents the "will-to-multiply". In the beginning the Lord said to Himself *eko'ham bahu syam* — "I am one, may I become many". And thus He projected the manifold universe that we see around us. There is only one center to the wheel but it is said to have a thousand spokes (*sahasrāra*).

The Discus is called **sudarśana** which means 'pleasing-to-see', it is usually shown in iconography with a hexagon in the center.

The six points of the two triangles represent the six seasons in a yearly time cycle, in the center nave is the seed sound (bija) 'hrim', which represents the changeless, motionless center, the Supreme Cause.

The interlocking triangles symbolise the union of the male and female elements of the Universe (*puruṣa = prakṛti*)



The Wheel has eight spokes and 8 wings, which represent the eight syllables of the sacred Aṣṭākṣarī mantra, while the outer circle of the wheel represents 'māya', the divine power of manifestation.

athāṣṭāram-aṣṭapatraṃ cakraṃ bhavatyāṣṭākṣarā vai gāyatrī gāyatrīā
saṃmitaṃ bhavati barhir-māyayā veṣṭitaṃ bhavati kṣetraṃ kṣetraṃ
vai māyaiṣā sampadyate || (N-p-t-Up 5;2.)

In the microcosm the Universal Mind corresponds to the active-notion-of-individual-existence (rajas ahamkara) that is associated with the fiery principle. "The prodigious power of the mind can destroy all forms of ignorance, hence the discus is the fearful weapon which cuts off the heads of all the demons of error ". (Śrī Vishnu tattva sidhanta 5;19 44-45).

8. The Lotus (Padma)

aṣṭadikpālakair-bhūmi padmaṃ vikasitaṃ jagat |
saṃsārārṇava saṃjātaṃ sevitaṃ mama mānase ||

From the Ocean of Creation rises the Universe which appears in My Mind: the regents of the eight directions are its eight opened petals. (G.u.t.Up 51)



The lotus represents the manifested universe, the flower that unfolds in all its glory from the formless and infinite waters of causality.

The pure and unsullied lotus arising from the depth of the waters and far from the shore is associated with the idea of purity and with sattva which arises from the law-of-conduct (dharma) and knowledge (*jñāna*). The Lotus is also symbolic of the enlightened mind. It rises in the mud of material existence gradually growing through the waters until it reaches the surface and then opens up to the sun in all its glory. Water splashed upon a lotus leaf never remains but immediately slips off. In the same way the dirt of worldliness never stain the enlightened being.

9. The Mace (gadā)

buddhirapyāste gadārūpeṇa mādhave ||

The mace which Kṛṣṇa wields is the Intellect. (V.P. 1;22;68.)

The mace is the form of strength or power and the intellect is the highest power, by the power of mind one person can control thousands. The mace is thus the symbol of the intellect (buddhi) or the power of knowledge

It is called **kaumodaki** which means the-stupifier-of-the-mind. The power of knowledge is the essence-of-life (*prāṇa tattva*) from which all physical and mental powers come. Nothing else can conquer time and itself become the power of time.

gadā ca kālikā sāksāt sarvaśatrūnibarhiṇī |

The mace is Kali, the power of time, and it destroys everything that opposes it. (K.U. 23)

The mace can also be interpreted as representing the Law of Karma and the *nigraha śakti* — the power of justice of the Divine.

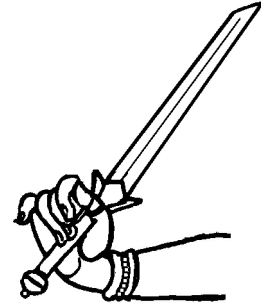


10. The Sword & Scabbard (khaḍga)

bibharti yaccāsiratnam acyuto 'tyanta nirmalam |
vidyomayantu tajjñānam avidyākośa samsthitam ||

The sword which Śrī Kṛṣṇa possess is the sword of Immaculate Wisdom, The sheath in which it is kept is the sheath of Ignorance. (V.P. 1;22;73.)

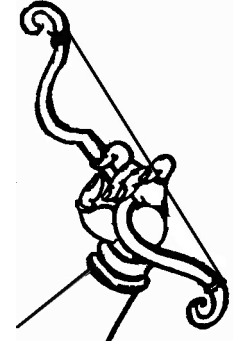
The sword represents Pure Knowledge (*jñāna*) whose substance is wisdom (*vidya*) — It is called **nandaka** which means the ‘source-of-joy.’ This flaming sword is the powerful weapon which destroys ignorance. The sheath represents nescience (*avidya*) which is the fundamental problem of human existence — ignorance not of data and science but of who we really are in essence — pure conscious entities (*jīvas*) having a human experience.



11. Bow & Arrows (cāpa-śara)

bhūtādim indriyādiñca dvidhāhaṁkāram īśvaraḥ |
bibharti śaṅkha-rūpeṇa śārṅga rūpeṇa ca sthitam ||

The Lord supports ahaṅkāra (notion of individuality) in its twofold division — into the material elements and the indriyas (5 organs of knowledge and 5 organs of action) as the emblems of His conch and bow. (V.P. 1;22;69.)



The bow is the destructive aspect of the-notion-of-individuality (*tāmasa ahaṁkāra*). This aspect is associated in the creation of the world with the disintegrating tendency and with the origin of the *indriyas* (sensory and motor faculties) and their fields of activity in the material world.

yānindriyāṅyaśeṣāṇi buddhi-karmātmakāni vai |
śara-rūpāṅyaśeṣāṇi tāni dhatte janārdanaḥ ||

Janardana bears in his numerous shafts the manifold faculties of both action and perception. (V.P. 1;22;72.)

This activity of engaging in sense gratification is symbolized by the arrows, held within the quiver which is the storehouse of actions. The arrows are then shot at objects within the field of our daily experience.

On the path to enlightenment the bow represents the psychological foundation from which spiritual unfoldment takes place. The arrow of the mind is aimed at its target which is the

Supreme Lord, and then with skilful means of spiritual techniques it is released to fly to its ultimate goal, never to return.

THE ORNAMENTS

12. Kaustubha — Chest Jewel:

Upon the chest of Lord Vishnu there is a priceless gem called **kaustubha** which means treasure-of-the-ocean.

yena sūryāgni vāk candra tejasā svasvarūpiṇā |
vartate kaustubhākhyam taṃ pravadantīsamāninaḥ ||

*That by which the Sun, fire, speech and moon shine in their particular forms
That is the form of consciousness known as the gem Kaustubha. (G.u.t.Up 54.)*

ātmānamasya jagato nirlepamaguṇāmalam |
bibharti kaustubhamaṇi svarūpaṃ bhagavān hariḥ ||

*The Glorious Hari wears the pure soul of the world, immaculate and free
of negative qualities as the Kaustubha gem. (V.P. 1;22;67.)*

kaustubha avyapadeśena svātmajyotir bibharyajaḥ |

*What He wears as the jewel Kaustubha is the pure Jiva-consciousness. (S.B.
12.11.10)*

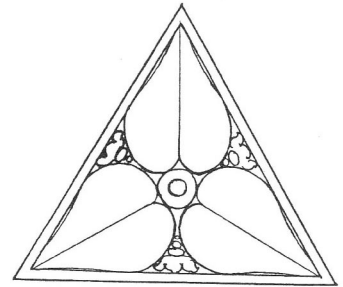
This total consciousness which is the "World-Soul" known in Vedānta as *hiranyagarbha* (golden matrix) pure, subtle and unstained is the chest-jewel named Kaustubha. This gem is comprised of the totality of the consciousness of all living beings, born from the causal ocean, and it is the enjoyer of material creation.

13. Śrīvatsa

śrīvatsa samsthāna dharamanante ca samāśritam pradhānaṃ |

*The First Principle of Manifestation (pradhāna) is seated on
the Eternal, as the Śrīvatsa mark. (V.P. 1;22;69)*

On Vishnu's chest there is a small spiral mark (sometimes a small triangle) called Śrīvatsa which means beloved-of-Fortune (Laksmi).



This represents Primordial Nature (*prakṛti*) — the First Principle of Manifestation or the material energy which is the source of the natural world. This is the symbol of all that is enjoyed; the multifold beings and forms of the manifested world. The three leaves represent the three *gunas* or qualities of matter — active (*rajas*), passive (*tamas*) or balanced (*sattva*).

14. Vaijayanti-mala — Necklace

pañca-rūpā tu yā mālā vaijayantī gadābhṛtaḥ |
sā bhūta hetu saṃghāto bhūtamālā ca vai dvija ||

The necklace of the lord called Vaijayanti comprised of five precious gems, (pearl, ruby, emerald, sapphire and diamond) is the aggregate of the five elemental spheres. (V.P. 1;22;72.)

The garland made of five types of forest flowers (or five jewels) is called the **vaijyanti mala** the garland-of-victory. It symbolizes the five spheres of the senses, the display of manifestation which surrounds the Supreme Being.

15. Pitāmbara — The Yellow Robe

vāsaścandamayam pītam

The yellow robe represents the metres of the Vedas. (S.B. 12.11.11)

Yellow which is the colour of the fire represents **yajña** or Sacrifice which is the principle activity taught in the Vedas. The Lord is known as **yajña-purusha** the One who receives all the oblations offered into the sacred fire. The act of creation is depicted in the Vedas as a cosmic sacrifice in which the Supreme Person Himself becomes the victim, and it is from this primeval sacrifice that the cosmos has its origins.

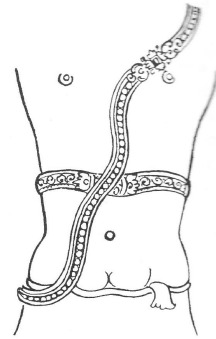
The yellow robe symbolizes fire and the principle of sacrifice which underlies all human transactions with the environment and with other beings. In order to receive we must give, obtaining one thing also requires letting go of another. This ethically managed reciprocity is the foundation of Dharma practice.

16. Yajñopavitam — Sacred Thread

brahma-sūtram trivṛt svaram

The sacred thread (yajñopavitam) symbolizes the syllable AUM, by its three strands. (S.B. 12.11.;2).

All initiated members of the 3 twice-born castes wear the sacred thread draped over the left shoulder and falling upon the right hip. It indicates that the one who wears it is committed to the control of body, speech and mind.



17. Earrings, Armlets & Crown

bibharti sām̐khyam̐ yogam̐ ca devo makara kuṇḍale |

The earrings shaped like sea-monsters (makara) of the Lord represent the two methods of knowledge;— intellectual knowledge (sankhya) and intuitive perception (yoga). (S.B. 12.11.12)



dharma artha kāma keyūrain divya divya mayīritaiḥ |

The armlets represent the aims of worldly life; pleasure, success, righteousness and liberation. (G.u.t.Up 57)

kūṭastham̐ sattvarūpaṁ ca kirīṭam̐ pravadanti mām |

The crown is said to be the Unknowable Reality. (G.u.t.Up 59.)

18. The Whisk, Fan, Flag & Parasol

jayantī saṁbhavo vāyuścāmaro dharma saṁjñitaiḥ ||

The fly-whisk of Vishnu is the Eternal-law (sanātana dharma), the life-breath of the universe which arises at the first moment of manifestation. (Krsna Upanisad 20).

The fly whisk is made from the tail of a yak and when the herd is on the move they follow each other — so the tail of the leader represents the following of Dharma



dharmaṁ yaśāśca bhagavaṁścāmara vyajane'bhajat | (S.B. 12.11.19)

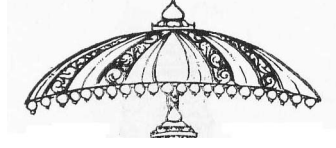
The two ceremonial whisks held on either side represent Dharma and Glory.

Cāmaras or fly-whisks are the symbol of royalty in Hindu society and are only used by members of the high estate.

**candra sūryatviṣo divyā dhvajā merur-hiraṇmayaiḥ |
ātapatraṁ brahmalokamathordhvaṁ caraṇam̐ smṛtam̐ ||**

The fan is the ritual-sacrifice (yajña), and the flag is the glory of the sun and the moon. The axis of the world (Meru) is the pole of the parasol which represents the transcendental realm " (G.u.t.Up 52.)

The parasol which is the emblem of Sovereignty, carried over the heads of Kings and high dignitaries on festive occasions represents the Supreme Abode of Vishnu; Land-of-no-hindrances (*Vaikunta*), the place where there is no fear.

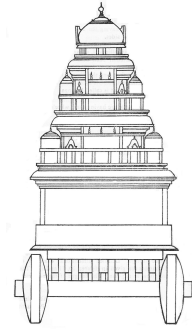


19. The Chariot

akūtirasya syandanam (S.B. 12.11.16)

The chariot represents the body with all its powers of action, drawn by the horses of the senses and directed by the mind as charioteer. The Self is the rider. From it one shoots the arrows of the senses at their respective objects.

Every Agamic temple has a temple chariot and every year during the annual Brahmotsava which last for 10 days, the utsava mūrti (proxy images) are taken out for a ride in the chariot.



THE ATTENDANTS

20. Garuda

trivṛd vedah suparṇākhyo yajñam vahati pūruṣam ||

The Lord who is the embodiment of Sacrifice (yajñam) is borne by Garuda who is an embodiment of the three Vedas. (S.B. 12.11.20)

Lord Visnu's vehicle is Garuda which means 'Wings-of-speech,' in the Vedas he is also known as Garutman. He represents the Vedas which carry the Lord of Sacrifices. Garuda is the mantras of the Veda which travel with the speed of light from one world to another.

Garuda is also taken as the personification of courage (Satapatha Brahmana 6;7;2;6.)



According to the Puranas, Garuda is the son of **Kaśyapa** (vision) and **Vinata** (She-before-whom-knowledge-bows). Vinata quarrelled with her co-wife **Kadru** (chalice-of-immortality) who was the mother of the ever-moving ones — the serpents which are the symbols of the cycles of time. (They also symbolise anger and hostility which are the strongest factors which obstruct the spiritual journey.) From this quarrel originated the enmity between Garuda and the serpents and his quest for the nectar of immortality — the jar of which he holds in his right upper hand.

Garuda's wife is **Unnati** (progress) also called **Vināyakā** (queen-of-knowledge). He has six sons; **Sumukha** (Beautiful-face), **Sunāma** (Beautiful-name), **Sunetra** (Beautiful eyes), **Suvarcas** (Beautiful vigour), **Suruk** (Beautiful brightness) and **Subala** (Beautiful strength).



In order to expound the great spiritual truths contained in the Vedas, the greatest of spiritual masters Veda Vyasa mahamuni composed the Itihasas and Puranas. Our first intimation or concept of Spirituality is through the medium of the scriptures. The existence of a God can be inferred by logic but through the senses and mind it is impossible to know anything about the Godhead.

It is through Shastra alone that we can know the Lord; therefore Shastra is the vehicle of Divinity and as such the Shastra are depicted in iconography as Garuda.

According to the Amara-kosha; Garuda is called as *Garutman* which means the stratosphere which surrounds the earth. When the Lord is identified as Surya Narayana, then Garuda becomes the stratosphere which conveys and modifies the rays of the sun to the earth and thus prevents the destruction of life by the intensity of the heat.

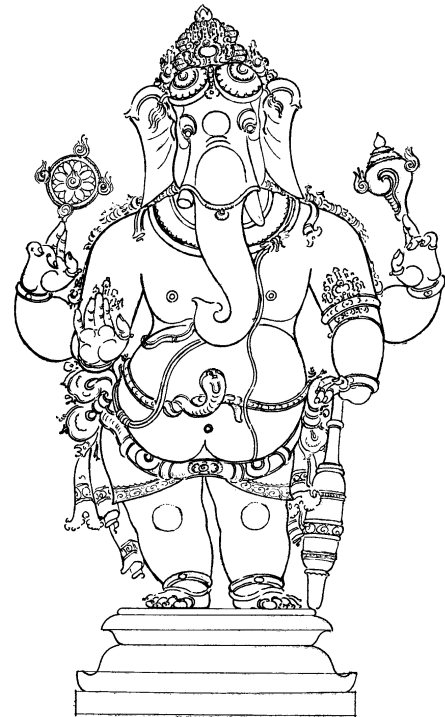
22. Viśvaksena

viśvaksenas-tantra mūrtir-viditaḥ pārśadādhipaḥ |

Vishvaksena the chief of the attendants, is the embodiment of the Tantras. (S.B. 12;11;20)

The chief of the attendants of the Lord is Viśvaksena (The-all-conqueror). He is said to represent the Āgamas which are the scriptures which deal with the ceremonial worship of the lord and all matters pertaining to temples, festivals, icons etc. The True Scriptures consist of the Vedas (*Nigamas*) and the Tantras (*Āgamas*). Whereas Garuda represents the elitist Vedas, Viśvaksena is the populist Tantras.

He is sometimes shown as a “Vaishnava Ganesha” and sometimes in a human form similar to Viṣṇu but displaying the tarjani mudra.

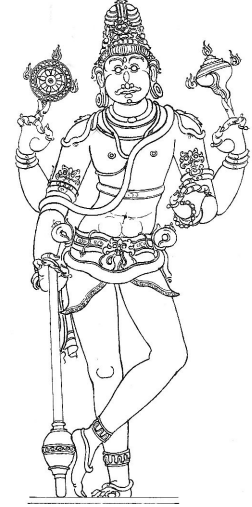


23. Dvāra-pālakas

nandādayo'ṣṭau dvārasthāśca te'ṇimādyā hareraguṇāḥ |

The door-keepers of Vaikunta-the Dvara-palakas represent the 8 yogic powers. (S.B. 12;11;20.)

The eight door-keepers of Vaikuntha are known as *Dhāta & Vidhāta* (East), *Bhadra & Subhadra* (South); *Nanda, Sunanda* (North); *Jaya & Vijaya* (West). Sometimes *Nanda* and *Sunanda* are replaced by *Caṇḍa* and *Pracaṇḍa*.



The Yoga Sutras give the following enumeration of the Siddhis:—

1. **anima** — ability to become infinitely small like an atom
2. **mahima** — ability to become huge
3. **laghima** — ability to become very light
4. **garima** — ability to become very heavy
5. **prāpti** — ability to obtain anything desired
6. **prakāmya** — ability to become irresistible
7. **īśīta** — ability to rule over others
8. **vaśīta** — ability to completely subjugate and control others

Some other texts give a slightly different list:—

1. **ātma siddhi**— power to be completely unattached and unaffected by material nature.
2. **vididha siddhi**— power to control matter, and minds of others.
3. **jñāna siddhi**— ability to remember past incarnations of oneself and of others, and the power to see the future.
4. **tapas siddhi**— perfect control over heat and cold, hunger and thirst, etc.
5. **kṣetra siddhi**— ability to astral travel anywhere in the universe.
6. **deva siddhi**— control over devas, demons, elementals, nature spirits and others.
7. **śarīra siddhi**— attainment of physical perfection, to delay the aging process, have perfect health and to heal others.

8. **vikriya siddhi**— power to accomplish all desires, to change ones appearance into any desired form.

These siddhis are the outcome of intense yogic practice, but they are undesirable as they can possibly be the cause of one's downfall from the spiritual path through distraction of the mind from the Ultimate Reality. Sooner or later every serious yoga practitioner is accosted by one of these gate-keepers, but one should not heed them.

THE ETERNAL CONSORTS OF THE LORD

1. Lakṣmī

The power (*śakti*) of Vishnu is represented as the power of multiplicity, or the Goddess of Fortune called **Lakṣmī** ("she-of-the-hundred-thousands"), she is also known as **Śrī** ("the-beautiful-one").

As the consort of Vishnu she appears with Him in every one of His incarnations. She is the Immaculate mediatrix of all Grace and is the embodiment of Compassion and Forgiveness on an absolute level.

She is the preserving energy, and on the material plane this takes the form of resources and wealth. Without wealth there can be no undertaking of religious activities like yajñas, or any charity. Sickness, decay, disease all follow after poverty. Lakṣmī is therefore the power or śakti inherent in wealth.



Lakṣmī is known as **cañcala** (the-fickle-one) and does not remain long in one place, but in iconography she is depicted as always rendering service by massaging the feet of the Lord, she is totally under His control and He uses her for the welfare of all beings.

Lakṣmī is depicted in three aspects and in each one her vehicle differs;

In *sattva guna*; she accompanies Mahā Viṣṇu upon Garuda.

In *rajo guna*; rides alone upon an elephant or sits upon a lotus.

In *tamo guna*; rides alone upon the owl Uluka.

The owl symbolizes wisdom and intelligence, because of its ability to see in the dark, and to allegedly presage events in the future. When Lakṣmī rides upon uluka the people are blinded by wealth, they forget the true purpose of wealth and destroy themselves with it.

Both Lakṣmī and Śukra (Venus) are the offspring of Bṛghu and are therefore siblings. Śukra is the preceptor of the Daityas who the elder brothers of the gods and are in fact the "anti-gods" — their philosophy is rank materialism. Some the Divine mother Lakṣmī is thus co-opted by materialists to achieve their selfish goals.

Aṣṭha-Lakṣmī — The 8 Forms of Lakṣmī

Lakṣmī takes 8 primary forms:—

Form of Lakshmi	Iconographical variations
1. Ādi-Lakṣmī — “Primeval Lakṣmī ” or Mahā Lakṣmī, lit “The Great Lakṣmī ”: an ancient form of Lakshmi and incarnation of Lakṣmī as daughter of sage Bhrigu.	Four-armed, carries a lotus and a white flag, other two arms in <i>Abhaya mudra</i> and <i>varada mudra</i> .
2. Dhana-Lakṣmī — “Wealth Lakṣmī” presiding over all forms of resources, wealth and prosperity.	Six-armed, garbed in red garments, carries <i>cakra</i> (discus), <i>śaṅkha</i> (conch), <i>Amrita kumbha</i> (a pitcher containing Amrita – nectar of immortality), bow-arrow, a lotus and showing <i>abhaya mudra</i> with gold coins falling from it.
3. Dhānya-Lakṣmī — “Grain Lakṣmī” presiding over all forms of agricultural activities and produce.	Eight-armed, garbed in green garments, carries two lotuses, <i>gadā</i> (mace), paddy crop, sugarcane, bananas, other two hands in <i>abhaya mudra</i> and <i>varada mudra</i> .
4. Gaja-Lakṣmī — “Elephant Lakshmi”: Giver of animal wealth like cattle and elephants also giver of power of royalty. According to Hindu mythology, Gaja Lakshmi restored the wealth and power lost by Indra (king of gods) when she rose from the churning of the ocean.	Four-armed, in red garments, carries two lotuses, other two arms in <i>abhaya</i> and <i>varada mudras</i> , flanked by two elephants bathing her with water pots.
5. Santāna Lakṣmī — “Progeny Lakṣmī”: Bestower of offspring.	Six-armed, carries two <i>kalashas</i> (water pitcher with mango leaves and a coconut on it), sword, shield, a child on her lap, a hand in <i>abhaya mudra</i> and the other holding the child. The child holds a lotus.
6. Vīra-Lakṣmī — “Valourous Lakṣmī ” or Dhairya-Lakṣmī, “Courage Lakṣmī”: Bestower of valour in battles and courage and strength for overcoming difficulties in life.	Eight-armed, garbed in red garments, carries <i>cakra</i> , <i>śaṅkha</i> , bow, arrow, <i>triśūla</i> (or sword), gold bar or book, other two hands in <i>abhaya</i> and <i>varada mudras</i> .
7. Vijaya-Lakṣmī — “Victorious Lakṣmī” or Jaya-Lakṣmī: Giver of victory, not only in battles but also over conquering hurdles in the pursuit of success.	Eight-armed, garbed in red garments, carries <i>cakra</i> , <i>śaṅkha</i> , sword, shield, lotus, <i>pāśa</i> , other two hands in <i>abhaya</i> and <i>varada mudras</i> .
8. Vidyā-Lakṣmī — “Knowledge Lakṣmī ” presiding over the knowledge of arts and sciences.	Four-armed, garbed in white holding 2 lotuses and showing the <i>varada</i> and <i>abhaya mudras</i> .

In some Aṣṭa Lakṣmī lists, other forms of Lakshmi are included:—

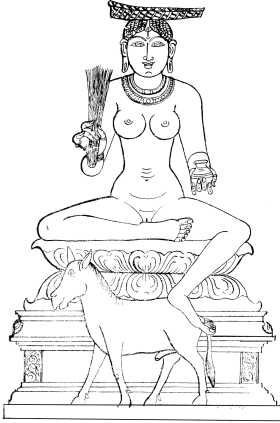
Aiśvarya-Lakṣmī — “Prosperity Lakshmi”: Goddess of riches

Saubhāgya-Lakṣmī — “Giver of good Fortune”: Giver of prosperity in general.

Rājya-Lakṣmī — “Royal Lakshmi”: "She who blesses rulers (with secular power)"

Vara-Lakṣmī — “Generous Lakshmi”: "The lady who bestows Beautiful Boons".

Alakṣmī



Lakṣmī has an elder sister who is her opposite. She is also known as Jyeṣṭha — “The Elder” and represents everything that is the opposite of Lakṣmī but they almost always come together. For example if Lakṣmī is gold then Alakṣmī is the environmental pollution and dross that is generated through the production of gold. When Lakṣmī takes the form of rain then Alakṣmī accompanies her as flooding and drought. If Lakṣmī is grain (dhānya-lakṣmī) then Alakṣmī is the husk as well as the destruction of the environment that goes with it’s production. If Lakṣmī is children (Santāna-lakṣmī) then Alakṣmī is the pain, suffering, filth and illness that accompanies childbirth. When Lakṣmī is victory (vijaya-lakṣmī) the Alakṣmī is the defeat that always accompanies victory. Dhana-lakṣmī (wealth) is always associated with exploitation, corruption or even crime which is Alakṣmī.

Alakṣmī is also identified as the Mahāvidya Dhūmavātī and the goddess of misfortune — Nirṛti. She resides wherever there is dirt, filth, crime, poverty etc. She is depicted as naked, unkempt and rides a donkey. Her offerings consist of chillies and limes.

2. Bhū-devī

Bhū-devī is the personification of the earth and the symbol of Patience and Tolerance. Lakshmi is the embodiment of **Compassion** and Bhu-devi is the embodiment of **Forbearance**. These are the two energy forces which are required in order to pursue His function of preservation of the universal order (*rita*), and for the liberation of all beings. Thus Lord Viṣṇu as the “Preserver” is associated on a material level with the earth and it’s resources and on the ethical level by compassion and forbearance.

In her iconography Bhūdevī is depicted seated under a tree displaying the gesture of fearlessness and holding a globe representing the planet earth. Her left foot rests upon a “nidhi-kumbha” — a pot filled with the treasures and resources of the earth.



3. Nīlā Devī

In most Śrīvaishnava temples Lord Narayana is usually accompanied by 2 consorts — Śrī-devi to His right and Bhū-devi to his left.



A third consort is mentioned but seldom actually depicted – this is **Nīlā** devī. She is said to stand behind the Lord — she is his *ahlāda-śakti* — energy of Bliss. All three Goddesses are manifestations of Lakshmi. Nīlā Devī further incarnated on earth during the Krishna Avatāra to become his wife in Gokula.

Rādha — the most popular companion of Krishna in North India is not known in the Southern Vaishnava tradition — her place is occupied by Nīlā-devī. Radha was always the paramour of Krishna whereas Nīlā was his spouse.

The Other Consorts of the Lord

The lord is said to have 8 consorts all together; they represent the eight channels through which the various preserving energies or faculties of the Lord can display their beneficial activities. Some texts differ from each other in the names of the Goddesses.

List 'A'		List 'B'	
<i>śrī</i>	Prosperity	<i>śrī</i>	Prosperity, wellbeing
<i>kīrti</i>	Fame	<i>kīrti</i>	Fame
<i>śānti</i>	Peace	<i>vijayā</i>	Victory
<i>Tuṣṭi</i>	Pleasure.	<i>śraddhā</i>	Faith
<i>Puṣṭi</i>	Welfare	<i>smṛti</i>	Mindfulness
<i>bhū</i>	Forgiveness	<i>medha</i>	Intelligence
<i>Sarasvati</i>	Knowledge	<i>dhṛti</i>	Endurance, perseverance
<i>Prīti</i>	Love	<i>kṣamā</i>	Forgiveness.

The twelve Shaktis are;

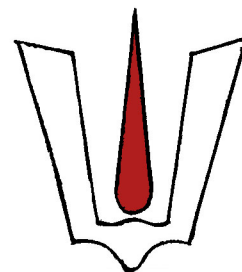
1. <i>Lakṣmī</i>	fortune	7. <i>Sarasvati</i>	Communication & learning
2. <i>Puṣṭī</i>	prosperity	8. <i>Dhṛtī</i>	endurance
3. <i>Dayā</i>	compassion	9. <i>Maitrī</i>	loving kindness, friendliness
4. <i>Nidrā</i>	sleep	10. <i>Ratī</i>	Sexual pleasure
5. <i>Kṣamā</i>	forgiveness	11. <i>Tuṣṭī</i>	satisfaction
6. <i>Kāntī</i>	beauty	12. <i>Matī</i> .	intelligence

Śrīman Narayana manifests in 24 different forms, in each of these forms he is accompanied by Lakshmi. The divine couples are as follows:—

Form of Vishnu		Forms of Lakshmi	
<i>keśava</i>	Having beautiful hair	<i>kīrti</i>	Fame, good report, fame, renown
<i>nārāyaṇa</i>	Ground of Being	<i>kānti</i>	Beauty, loveliness
<i>mādhava</i>	He propounds the true knowledge about himself	<i>tuṣṭi</i>	satisfaction
<i>govinda</i>	Lord of the Earth	<i>puṣṭi</i>	prosperity, nourishment
<i>viṣṇu</i>	All pervading	<i>dhṛti</i>	fortitude, endurance, persistence
<i>madhusūdana</i>	Slayer of the “honey” demon	<i>śānti</i>	peace
<i>trivikrama</i>	He who pervades the 3 vedas	<i>kriyā</i>	activity, endeavor
<i>vāmana</i>	Saviour of Indra, he who produces joy in others.	<i>dayā</i>	compassion
<i>śrīdhara</i>	The bearer of Śrī who-listens-to-prayers.	<i>medhā</i>	intellectual prowess
<i>hṛṣīkeśa</i>	Master of the senses.	<i>harṣā</i>	Joy
<i>padmanābha</i>	The navel which contains the universe	<i>śraddhā</i>	faith
<i>dāmodara</i>	He who contains the universe in his belly	<i>lajjā</i>	modesty
<i>vāsudeva</i>	He who pervades and sports	<i>lakṣmī</i>	observing
<i>saṅkarṣaṇa</i>	He who draws others near him.	<i>saras-vatī</i>	comforting
<i>pradyumna</i>	The illuminator	<i>prīti</i>	love
<i>aniruddha</i>	The irresistible	<i>rati</i>	sexual-pleasure
<i>puruṣottama</i>	The Supreme being	<i>vasudhā</i>	wealth producing
<i>janārdana</i>	The protector from negative forces.	<i>umā</i>	tranquility, quiet
<i>adhokṣaja</i>	The one who is never diminished, or decreased	<i>smṛti</i>	perfect mindfulness or memory
<i>upendra</i>	The younger brother of Indra	<i>kṣamā</i>	forgiveness
<i>nṛsimha</i>	The one who assumes the celestial man-lion form	<i>vidyutā</i>	flashing, glittering
<i>hari</i>	The one who accepts oblations, or the remover of sin.	<i>śuddhi</i>	purity
<i>acyuta</i>	He who never falls from his status.	<i>vijayā</i>	victory, success, achievement
<i>kṛṣṇa</i>	He who is exceedingly delighted with his own Lila.	<i>buddhi</i>	intelligence

24. Urdhva puṇḍram

The urdhva-puṇḍram represents the feet of Vishnu. The footprints of a god or saint are supposed to represent their presence and have been popularly worshipped since time immemorial. The *urdhva-puṇḍram* consists of two vertical white lines in the shape of a Y with a base and a central red line. The two white lines represent the feet of the Lord resting upon a lotus pedestal, while the central red line represents Lakshmi. It is significant that as servants of the Lord — *dasas* or *adiyars* we wear on the highest part of our body the symbol of the lowest part of our Lord Narayana. The shape of the urdhva-puṇḍram as well as the existence of the red central line differ among the various Vaishnava sects.

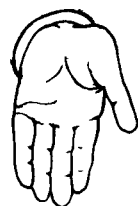


THE GESTURES (MUDRAS)



Abhaya Mudra — The Gesture of Fearlessness

This mudra indicates that we should never entertain feelings of fear vis-à-vis God. Vishnu/Narayana is the ocean of compassion and perfect justice and thus there is nothing to fear from Him. It also reminds us that we should never be the cause of fear to any other living being. Fear is the first obstacle in the path of spiritual development.



Varada Mudra — The Gesture of Generosity

This mudra indicates that God is the personification of generosity — He showers grace and mercy on all alike without requiring anything in return. It also serves to remind us to cultivate the practice of generosity in our own lives and to always be the source of happiness to other sentient beings.



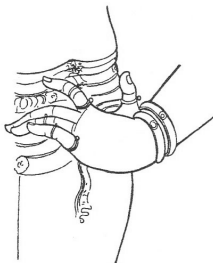
Chin Mudra — The Gesture of Teaching

This mudra indicates that God is the Supreme Guru and repeatedly takes birth in order to teach us the Dharma. In the Incarnation of Krishna he taught the Bhagavad Gita.



Tarjani Mudra — The Gesture of Threat

This mudra is displayed by the guardian deities of the sanctum and serves to remind us to be restrained and to exercise respect and caution when entering into a sacred precinct.



Kaṭi-hasta Mudra — The Gesture of Hand-on-the-hip

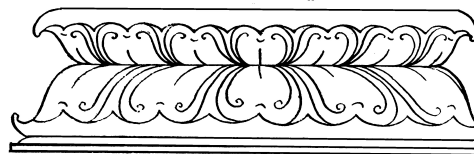
This mudra indicates that surrender to the feet of the God will bring about liberation from Samsāra — the cycle of birth and death.

THE ACCESSORIES

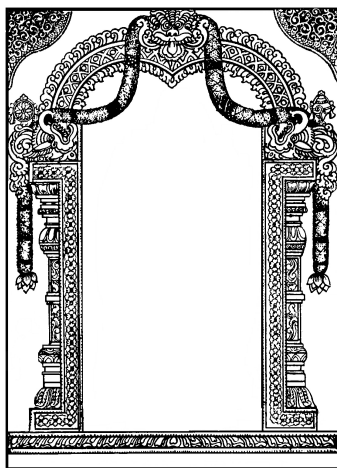
The Lotus Throne

All Hindu deities are either standing or sitting on Lotus Thrones. The lotus is the symbol of the enlightened mind hence indicating that the Gods are all fully manifested in the minds of the enlightened ones.

When we meditate upon Vishnu we visualize a lotus within the heart and upon that pure unsullied lotus we visualize Lord Vishnu in all his glory bedecked in all his paraphernalia.



The Face of Glory



The Kirti-mukha usually forms part of an ornamental doorway in which the deity stands or sits. Above the icon we usually find the “Face-of-Glory” or *Kirti-mukha*. This represents Rāhu — the demon of time that is constantly trying to swallow the sun and moon, and in doing so causes eclipses.

The philosophical significance is to remind us of the impermanence and unsubstantiality of all manifested things — and to discourage us from excessive attachment to things and concepts. All names (*nāma*) and forms (*rūpa*) are subjected to appearance and disappearance, everything in the universe is ephemeral and unsubstantial. Its mocking expression serves to remind us that nothing that

we take seriously is so in the broader picture.



Nitya Suris — the Heavenly Entourage.

These celestial beings are differentiated from other *jīvas* by the fact that they have never been contaminated by material nature and are the eternal coadjutors of the Lord. But from the view point of attributive consciousness they are the same as all other *jīvas*. They comprise the retinue of the Lord (*parīṣada devatā*). The duties that they actually discharge are so mysterious that no attempt has ever been made at defining them. They also have one more trait that other *jīvas* do not have and that is the ability to incarnate at will.

The chief among the Nitya Suris is **Ananta** who is the principle servant of the Lord; acting as His couch, Umbrella etc. **Garuda** who is the vehicle of the Lord and **Viśvaksena** who as the "Lord of Hosts" is the chief minister to the Lord in all affairs Heavenly and mundane.

The other members of the Transcendental entourage are:—

(a) the eight gatekeepers (*Dvārapālakas*) who are said to embody the eight siddhis or yogic powers;

Caṇḍa, Pracaṇḍa, Bhadra, Subhadra, Jaya, Vijaya, Dhātr and Vidhātr.

(b) The eight maid servants of the Lord who stand around Him with fly whisks known as *camaras*;

Vimala, Utkarsi, jñāna, Kriya, Yoga, Prabhvi, Satya, and Isana.

(c) The eight Guardians of Vaikunta Town who are also the generals in the army of the Lord;

Kumuda, Kumudākṣa, Puṇḍarīka, Vāmana, Saṅkhu-karṇa, Sarva-netra, Sumukha, and Su-pratiṣṭha.

THE ĀLVĀRS

The Alvars ('those drowning in the Divine) were Tamil poet saints of south India who lived between sixth and ninth centuries and espoused 'devotion' to Visnu-Krishna in their songs of love, ecstasy and service. These twelve Vaishnava saints who lived during the early medieval period of Tamil History helped revive devotional Hinduism (bhakti) through their hymns to Vishnu and his incarnations. The collection of their hymns is known as *Divya Prabhandham* which is part of the daily liturgy in all Śrīvaishnava temples.

The Bhakti literature these Alvars compiled has contributed to the establishment and sustenance of a culture that broke away from the ritual-oriented Vedic religion and rooted itself in devotion as the only path for salvation. In addition they helped to make the Tamil religious life independent of Sanskrit. They are regarded as the “Rishis” of the South and the Divya Prabandham that they composed is considered on a par with the Sanskrit Vedas. They are referred to as the Dravida Veda.

The one held in greatest esteem among the Alvars is Nammalvar. He lived during the seventh century CE. He contributed a total of 1352 hymns to the four thousand prabandhams. His hymns are considered by the Śrīvaishnavas to contain the essence of the Vedas. His works - Tiru Aasiriyam, Tiru Virudham, Periya Tiruvandadi correspond to the Yajur, Rig and Atharva Vedas respectively. His other work Periya Tirumozhi (Divine words) is the one of the key works of Vaishnavism.

Periyalvar delighted in worshipping Vishnu as mother, nurse, devotee and lady love. Andal, who grew up in Periyalvar's home as his adopted daughter and is the only female Alvar, composed many poems of love to Krishna, the most popular being the Tiruppaavai, a most beautiful collection of 30 verses giving expression to the purest love of God.

The revered Alvars came from all castes, a symbolic notion in Śrīvaishnavism to show that devotion to God transcends caste. Nammalvar, or Satakopan, belonged to the Vellala (sudra) caste. Tirumangai Alvar belonged to the Kallara tribe, Tirumalisai Alvar belonged to Paraiyar “untouchable” caste. Tiruppani Alvar belonged to Panār “untouchable” caste, Kulashekhara was a warrior and Vishnu Chitta, or Periyalvar was a Brahmin. Interesting enough Nammalvar the Sudra, is the head (kula-pati) of the Śrīvaishnava lineage!

The Alvars in Śrīvaishnava Theology are considered to be the incarnations of the various associates and accoutrements of Lord Vishnu.

Ālvār Saint		Associates &
Tamil Name	Sanskrit Name	Accoutrements
Pogai ālvār	Śrī Saro-muni	Pāñcajanya (Conch)
Bhūtat-ālvār	Śrī Bhūta-muni	Kaumodakī (Mace/Club)
Pey-ālvār	Śrī Mahadāhvaya-muni	Nandaka (Sword)
Tirumalisai-ālvār	Śrī Bhaktisāra-muni	Sudarśana (discus)
Nammālvār	Śrī Śatakopan	Viśvaksena (Commander-in-chief)
Madhurakavi-ālvār	Śrī Madhurakavi	Vainateya (Garuda)
Kulaśekhara-ālvār	Śrī Kulaśekhara	Kaustubha (Gem Necklace)
Periyālvār	Śrī Viṣṇucitta	Garuḍa (vehicle)
Andal	Śrī Goda Devi	Bhū-devī (Goddess Earth)
Toṇḍaraḍippodi ālvār	Śrī Bhaktāṅghrireṇu	Vanamāla (Garland)
Tiruppānālvār	Śrī Pāna-suri	Śrīvatsa
Tirumaṅgai ālvār	Śrī Parakāla-suri	Śāraṅga (Bow)



Pogai



Bhūta



Pey



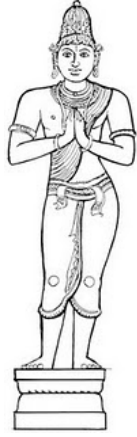
Tirumalisai



Nammalvar



Madhurakavi



Kulasekhara



Periyalvar



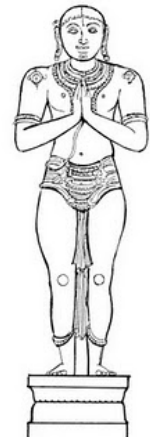
Āṇḍāl



Toṇḍaraḍipōḍi



Tiruppān



Tirumaṅgai

