

श्रीमते रामाणुजाय नमः

# the handbook of इगोचवाइहनवरोइल

by

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## *Introduction*

### **Hinduism**

“Hinduism” is a general term encompassing numerous beliefs, customs, traditions and rituals. It was originally a term coined by foreign invaders to describe the religion practised in the sub-continent of India. The name originated from the river Indus. India was called ‘Ind’ or ‘Hind’ in Arabic and so the religion of the ‘Indians’ became known as Hinduism. This is not a term which is found anywhere in the Vedas (the Revealed Scriptures) or in any of the classical literature of ancient India. By Hindus, Hinduism is simply called **Sanatana Dharma** meaning the *Eternal Path*. Sanatana Dharma can be divided into two categories.

- a. The heterodox religion of the masses comprised predominantly of superstition, animism and placatory rituals to various gods and goddesses to ward off disease and disaster without any theological or philosophical base. These customs and beliefs differ widely from place to place and social group to social group within the sub-continent of India.
- b. The orthodox religion, often called *Brahmanism* which is based upon the Vedic Texts with a sound philosophical and theological base known as *Vedanta*. Although the various sects within the fold of Brahmanism hold variant theological doctrines; the practice is more or less uniform in the whole of the Hindu world.

### **Brahmanism**

The orthodox Brahmanical establishment can further be divided into three groups; The *Smartas*, *Saivites* and the *Vaishnavas*

**The Smartas** who form the majority, are those who follow the Ecclesiastical Canons known as the *Smritis* and adhere predominantly to the Non-dual (*Advaita*) Impersonalist philosophy of the great reformer of the 8th century - Shankaracharya They worship all the five forms of the Godhead;- Siva, Vishnu, Ganesha, Shakti and Surya with preference for one particular deity which is known as an *ishta-devata* a tutelary deity.

**The Saivites** and the **Vaishnavas** are Personalists (those who hold the doctrine that God is personal) who follow their respective Sacred Scriptures - the 14 Saiva Agamas and the 108 Vaishnava Agamas (Pancharatra) respectively. These Agama texts deal with the worship of Icons, the construction of temples and the method of celebrating the periodical and daily festivals and ceremonies, as well as the conduct and personal spiritual development of the devotees.

The Vaishnava Community is further sub-divided into four lineages (sampradaya); Srivaishnava, Madhva, Vallabhacharya, and Nimbarka. Although differing from each other in some theological and ritualistic points they are all similar in their theistic approach, that is, they all believe in a Personal God and adhere to devotion as the principle means to Moksha or Liberation from the cycle of rebirth. Of these four lineages the oldest and the largest is the Srivaishnava sect, followed by the Madhvas who are found mainly in Karnataka state; the

Vallabhacharya sect is confined mainly to small pockets in Rajasthan and Gujerat and the Nimbarkas are scattered throughout North India with the largest communities being around Mathura and in Nepal.

## **The Indian concept of “philosophy”.**

There is no precise term in Sanskrit to convey the western idea of ‘philosophy’ or ‘theology’. The term used for a particular model of philosophical speculation is ‘*Darshana*’ which means a ‘view’ a way of perceiving the Ultimate Truth; or a way in which a particular aspect of the Divine Nature is revealed. The term used for theology is ‘*Brahma-vada*’ which means ‘discussion of the Ultimate Truth’. *Siddhanta* - means a philosophical conclusion which has been established by means of logical reasoning and Scriptural revelation.

Vedanta or ‘Indian Philosophy’ is a *Darshana* - a way or methodology for perceiving the Absolute Reality, using systematic logic, scientific observation and Scriptural revelation (Vedas, Upanishads and Brahma Sutras). It has produced three schools of thought, each claiming to be a *Siddhanta* or soundly established conclusion.

**Dualism (Dvaita)** - the metaphysical system of Madhvacharya. In this system Reality is conceived of as being a permanent duality.

**Non-dualism (Advaita)** - the metaphysical system of Shankaracharya. In this system the universe is seen from a twofold point of view - practical and ultimate. From a practical point of view the universe is said to be real but it is ultimately considered to be *unreal* (Maya). The Ultimate Reality (Brahman) is Pure Being which is of the nature of *Pure consciousness* devoid of all attributes (nirguna). The individual Self (Atma) is identical with Brahman but has somehow become enmeshed in the cosmic illusion of worldly existence and through the delusive identification with the body/mind complex is subjected to an endless cycle of rebirths. Individuality exists due to the super-imposition of an erroneous idea upon ultimate reality - the analogy of the snake and the rope is used. When seen in dim light the rope is mistaken for the snake and one becomes terrified, but in the clear light it is seen to be a delusion and all fear disappears. The way! to liberation (Moksha) from rebirth in this system is *Self-realisation* in which the individual Self realises its true identity as being Brahman (*aham brahmasmi* - I am Brahman) and this subsequently leads to an absorption of the individual consciousness back into the Cosmic consciousness resulting in the negation of individuality. The pot and the ether analogy is used to describe this state. The space in the pot is seen to be different from the external space, but once the pot is broken the inner and outer space become one

The Godhead is also viewed from the twofold point of view. There is the practical aspect of a Personal God with attributes (saguna Brahman) and the Ultimate Reality which is devoid of all attributes (nirguna-Brahman) and is pure being, consciousness and bliss absolute (sat-cit-anand). Worship of the Personal God with form and qualities (saguna Brahman) is tolerated by the Advaita system of Philosophy only as a concession to ignorance, or as a preparatory aid to meditation on the Self (Atman). This basic Non-dual philosophical paradigm is taught in various modified forms by almost all the schools of Yoga and New Age Spiritual Movements in the West.

## Qualified Non-dualism (Visishtha-advaita)

Srivaishnavism is another ‘View-of-Truth’ and like all the orthodox Darshana systems within Hinduism, claims the Vedas as its authority. (Although many orthodox Srivaishnavas like many followers of other faiths would assert that it is the **only correct view** - I take the neutral stand, recognizing and encouraging diversity.) The Vedas are the oldest literary compilations known to mankind, and are considered as Divine Revelation by all Hindus. They have been handed down in the Sanskrit language since time immemorial, and are considered to be eternal.

The Srivaishnavas also accept the canon of the Pancharatra (Scriptures dealing with the practical aspects of spiritual life and ritualism) as authoritative along with the *Divya-Prabandham* - a collection of hymns of the Tamil saints (the Alvars). Because of the recognition of the authority of both the vernacular Tamil revelation and the Sanskrit revelation Srivaishnavism is often known as *Ubhaya Vedanta* - the Dual Vedanta. There are other Scriptures which are also accepted as canonical such as the Vishnu Purana, Padma Purana, Srimad Bhagavatam etc.

## The Alvars & the Disciplic Succession (Acharya Parampara)

There are two categories of people who mediate knowledge and wisdom in Srivaishnavism; the *Saints* and the *preceptors*. The 12 Saints are known as the **Alvars** — a Tamil term meaning those who are “drowning in the bliss of God-realisation”. The first and the most prolific in writing was Nammalvar (Shatakopan). These Alvars all composed hymns of great poetic beauty in the Tamil pouring out their love and devotion to God and describing the divine visions they experienced. After the Alvars came the succession of **acharyas** or Spiritual Preceptors. Of these the most prominent was Nathamuni who collected these hymns and compiled a canon called the *Nalayira Divya Prabandham* (or Dravida Veda) consisting of 4000 couplets. These revelations are not opposed to, but are consistent with the Sanskrit Vedic revelation. The only difference is that the study of these vernacular texts is not restricted to any group, caste or gender, and everyone is entitled to study them. (Some of the Alvars themselves were born into the Sudra caste, and one of them, Andal was a woman.)

The doctrines of the Srivaishnava faith, according to popular belief originated with the Supreme Person, Sriman Narayana, who taught them to His eternal consort Lakshmi; She in turn revealed them to Vishvaksena Martial of the entourage of the Lord. He in turn revealed them to Nammalvar (Shatakopan) the first of the Alvars, all of whom had direct experience of the Divine. The Acharyas then received the teachings and handed them down to us through a succession of Spiritual Masters known as *guru-parampara*. The three greatest of them being Nathamuni, Yamunacharya and Ramanuja.

## Ramanuja

Srivaishnavism in its present form was structured by Ramanuja Acharya (1017 - 1137). The system of theology/philosophy known as *Visishtadvaita* (Qualified non-dualism) which has come to be associated with his name was not originated by him. He repeatedly states in his works that he is not teaching something new but is merely expounding the teachings of previous acharyas such as Tanka, Dramida and others. Ramanuja is highly esteemed all over India, but his direct followers are prominent mainly in South India in the areas comprising of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. There are also many centres scattered throughout North India.

At the end of his life Ramanuja acharya entrusted the care of the Srivaishnava community to 74 pontiffs (simhasana-adhipatis). Their function was to continue the great work of proselytising, initiating and teaching. These pontiffs established the 74 Matts or monasteries all over South India which are attached to one or other of the 108 principle Vishnu temples. One of Ramanuja's disciples named Ramananda went to the North to establish the Faith. Most of the Northern schools of Vaishnavism are affiliated to the Sri Sampradaya through Ramananda. The Swami Narayana sect of Gujerat is also affiliated to the Sri Sampradaya through its founder who claims to have been initiated in a dream by Ramanuja himself.

## The Schism

After Ramanuja there were two exceptionally great acharyas; Vedanta Desikan (c 1268) & Pillai Lokacharya (c 1213). In the 14th century there was a schism between the disciples of these two teachers which resulted in the formation of two factions; the *Vadagalais* (Northerners) following the teachings of Vedanta Desikan with their centre at Kanchipuram, and the *Tengalais* (Southerners) with their centre at Srirangam. The Kanchi acharyas were constantly defending their theological position against the Advaitins, Buddhists, Jains and exponents of other philosophical systems and so they had to rely more heavily upon the universally accepted Vedic Scriptures and rules of logic and debate to establish their position. Whereas the Srirangam acharyas were more interested in practicing and propagating the devotional teachings of Ramanuja and the Alvars to the common folk and so utilised the Tamil vernacular literature more than the Sanskrit in their discourses and were more liberal in their interpretation of orthopraxy and orthodoxy.

## Doctrinal Differences

There are 18 points of doctrinal difference between the two sects called the *Ashta-dasha bhedas* - (see appendix for a detailed account). These differences which began as a purely philosophical dispute, spilled over into the sociological field as well. Consequently the two camps often differ with each other on various issues ranging from temple management to dressing arrangements and are not infrequently hostile. The doctrinal differences and disagreements have led to the creation of a controversial body of literature. The one school producing a work to support their position and the other producing a treatise to refute it!

Both quote extensively from the Upanishads and the Divya Prabandham in support of their respective positions. Both are thoroughly convinced of the validity of their own position and the error of their opponents.

## The Vaishnava Community

The daily life and customs of the Srivaishnava are almost uniform in all places except for a few local variations. All observe the study and recitation of the Hymns of the Alvars and all temple rituals are conducted according to the Pancharatra Canon (except Tirupati where the liturgy is according to the Vaikhanasa Canon, and the Puri and Ananta-padmanabha Temples where they have their own institutes and customs)

While the three other Vaishnava Lineages propagate devotion (*bhakti*) as the means to attain God, the emphasis in Srivaishnavism is on total self-surrender (*Prapatti*) and worshipping of the Lord in the attitude of servants (*dasya bhava*). This is done through temple ritual and festivals governed by the ordinances of the Pancharatra. Most orthodox Srivaishnavas will live near a temple dedicated to Lord Vishnu and will pass their lives in devotional service.

The main pontifical seats of the Srivaishnavas are:-

1. Srirangam also known as Periya Koil or 'the great Temple'
2. Tirupati
3. Kanchipuram
4. Melkote
5. Sriperumbudur the birthplace of Ramanuja acharya.
6. Ahobhila Math.
7. Vanamamalai Math

All together there are about 700 Srivaishnava monasteries or Matts throughout India.





## About This Book

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The purpose of this book is to outline in a concise and systematic form, the principal doctrines of the Srivaishnava faith, balancing the views of both the sects. It is meant either as a handbook for those who are practising Srivaishnavas or as an introduction to those who are interested in knowing more about the doctrines and beliefs of the faith. It will be appreciated by the reader that each of these topics that is briefly touched upon here, can be dilated upon to the extent of many volumes. Elaboration of these topics would produce a 10 volume encyclopaedia and not a handbook. The interested reader is advised to consult the bibliography given at the end of the book for extending his or her knowledge in this field. I have tried to take an unbiased stance balancing between the two factions as well as reconciling with the rest of the Hindu world and western society in which so many of us are living. Therefore many of the views expressed in this publication are my own **personal** views and not those of the orthodox teachers or even of my own beloved Acharya! If the reader has a doubt it would be best to clarify it with one's own acharya and accept their point of view rather than mine.

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# The Starting Point

## The Human Condition

All beings are striving for the maximum amount of happiness and trying to avoid suffering. But eventually the realisation dawns, that however hard one may strive for material happiness there is always something missing, a feeling of emptiness, dissatisfaction and unease. Everything is in a constant state of change; pleasure alternating with sorrow, hope alternating with disappointment, meetings ending in partings and permanent peace and happiness are always elusive. The greatest crisis that those living in a modern world experience is the lack of meaning in life. In the third world struggling for existence is meaning enough. In a situation where physical needs are taken care of more complex forms of happiness and more subtle forms of meaning are sought. In the affluent west, "Consumerism" is the great provider of meaning and pleasure. *Having* things, and *being* something, provide some temporary meaning and satisfaction to millions! of bored middle class yuppies all over the world. The low level sense of anxiety and inner emptiness which is part of the un-enlightened human condition is one of the main forces that the advertising industry uses to manipulate us so skilfully. So we purchase an endless series of products and services all intended to give us some sense of fullness and value and meaning to life. Modern life takes on a normative form of low-level anxiety and quite desperation.

According to Vedanta Desikan, all forms of material pleasure and happiness and all material goals have seven defects known as *Sapta-dosha* these are:-

1. *alpa* - their end results are trivial
2. *asthira* - they are transient and impermanent,
3. *asukara* - not easily obtained, they require much effort and are time consuming.
4. *asukhavasana* - ultimately ending in grief and disappointments.
5. *dukhanvita* - accompanied by disappointments and supported only by struggle.
6. *anucitam* - incompatible with our essential being.
7. *abhimana-mula* - they're based upon a false sense of self and lead to further perpetuation of this delusive sense of identity.

To give true and ultimate meaning to life is the function of **Dharma** of the Spiritual Life. The decision to investigate the spiritual option usually comes from the realisation of the unsatisfactory nature of human existence with all its shortcomings, and the apparent meaninglessness of a life of vegetating and consumerism. When one becomes disenchanted with life as one lives it, questions begin to arise in the mind, due to previous merit and the Grace of God. Questions about who we are, what is the purpose of life and how do we achieve permanent happiness. Earnestly seeking the answer to these questions leads to introspection and the examination of one's real nature, one's position in society and in the universe.

Eventually one attains the realisation that life is predominantly characterised by three states; *suffering (duhkha)* and *confusion (bhrama)* both of which are based upon *spiritual ignorance (ajñanam)*! *One then begins the Spiritual Quest - a journey in search of enlightenment and the Supreme Happiness or Beatitude.*

*Physical suffering manifests in six forms known as the shat-kleshas:-*

1. The process of birth
2. Transformation and change
3. Sickness and physical infirmity
4. Hunger and thirst.
5. Old age
6. The process of dying.

Mental suffering arising from confusion and ignorance manifests itself in five ways:-

1. Identity crisis.
2. Confusion about the purpose of life.
3. Frustration in achieving one's goals and the craving for permanence.
4. Rejection of, or questioning the existence of God.
5. Despairing of life and desiring to end it all.

The knowledge which dispels these five manifestations of ignorance are formulated in the operative model or paradigm known as the *artha panchaka* which means the "Five Required Things" or the Five matters which need to be investigated. This paradigm is the basis for the methodology of Spiritual development, the achievement of abiding happiness and the structure of the Srivaishnava belief system.



# Part 1

## Artha Panchaka — The Five Requirements

There are the five categories of spiritual knowledge which one needs to study, reflect upon, realise and practice in order to progress spiritually. These are:-

- |  |                             |
|--|-----------------------------|
| 1. The nature of the Godhead.          | <i>para-svarupam</i>        |
| 2. The nature of the Self.             | <i>sva-svarupam</i>         |
| 3. The nature of life's goal.          | <i>purushartha svarupam</i> |
| 4. The means to attain that goal.      | <i>upaya svarupam</i>       |
| 5. The obstacles on the spiritual path | <i>virodhi svarupam</i>     |

## Chapter 1



### The Nature of the Godhead *(Para-svarupam)*

The universe around us is seen to be a constantly changing highly complex phenomena which is impermanent. Behind this transitory phenomena lies an unchanging eternal substratum (noumenon) upon which these effects take place. This can be likened to a movie which is projected upon a screen. The screen is the unchanging substratum upon which the great drama is played out. Similarly this universe with all its myriad of effects takes place upon a screen which is the Absolute Ultimate Reality. The term “Absolute” is derived from the Latin and means free from any limiting conditions or restraints. According to Vedanta, the Absolute Ultimate Reality which is the cause and the basis of the universe is called *Brahman* which means the “The Immensity” in Sanskrit. Through a process of logical reasoning the existence of an intelligent Supreme Reality behind the transient ephemeral universe can be reached. But the actual existence of the Godhead (the Divine Nature) cannot be demonstrated, and nothing affirmative can be said about it which is subject to scientific investigation and proof.

It must be stressed that the Ultimate Truth cannot be known by the human mind which functions through duality and antithetical comparison. The Absolute which by definition is beyond all our conceptions and ideas and transcends the limitations of time, space and causation, cannot be contained and limited by our thought processes. All attempts to verbally describe anything result in varying degrees of ambiguity, but do not convey the essential meaning. In the same

way all attempts to describe the Divine are metaphors and symbols indicating the way - we should follow the signs and not argue about their form.

Ramanuja declares that the existence of a Supreme Godhead cannot even be inferred because inference is based upon a perceived and demonstrable coexistence between cause and effect (such as the connection between smoke and fire). God and the world cannot be demonstrated to have a concomitance and therefore cannot be inferred through reason. It is only through Divine Revelation - the Vedas, Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita etc. that anything at all can be known about the Supreme Being.

According to Vedanta, the Absolute Reality or Godhead is known as Brahman is the unitary source from which all manifestation proceeds. Brahman is a *Personal Being* in terms of being characterised by infinite and expansive auspicious qualities and devoid of all imperfections. His nature consists of *consciousness, existence, eternity, purity and bliss absolute*. This Supreme Being or Brahman is referred to in the Vedas by many names but the most prominent of them is *Narayana* an epithet which embodies all the essential qualities of the Godhead. It means “The Ground of all Being”. Various definitions of the name Narayana are given such as:—

The Super-Self, the Support and repository of all Selves.  
The Prompter of the actions of all beings from within their hearts.  
The Witness (Observer) of the entire universe.

In the Bhagavad Gita the Lord shows His comic form to Arjuna and this theophany appears primarily as an all-expansive cosmic light - refulgent as a thousand suns.

11:12. If a thousand suns were to rise at once in the sky, the resulting magnificence may be (somewhat) like the effulgence of that mighty One.

Again and again we find statements in the Scriptures which declare the nature of the Supreme Being to be inconceivable and inexpressible. Ramanuja in his preamble to the Gita affirms:-

“God has a divine form, which is both pleasing and appropriate. His form is inconceivable, indescribable, divine, eternal and immaculate.”

So whenever we use anthropomorphic terms to describe and to communicate information about the Divine we must do so with the understanding that words are all totally inadequate to serve as vehicles of the Truth; they are merely flimsy pointers, concessions to our human limitations. All human cognition is dependant upon fixed reference points - pairs of opposites, and therefore, that which is beyond the pairs of opposites cannot be comprehended. A paper cup is not a fit vessel in which to contain that Supreme Expansive Light of Truth - the brilliance of a thousand suns! We need to avoid the folly of thinking about the Supreme Being and the transcendental realms as a Spiritual “Disney Land”!

## 1:1 Essential Nature of the Godhead

In the Upanishads which are the concluding portions of the Vedas, five attributes are revealed which define the essential nature of the Supreme known as **Brahman** or “that which expands ad infinitum”; they are known as the five metaphysical qualities called *svarupa-nirupaka-*

*dharma*. These are the ‘incommunicable’ attributes which emphasise the absolute Being of the Godhead, they are:-

- *satyam* - **Truth** - this is the attribute of absolute non-conditioned self-existence. The Godhead exists by Itself and for Itself. It is not subjected to any form of change or modification, nor is It dependant upon anything whatsoever. There is nothing in the Universe which the Godhead requires for Its existence, It is entirely self-fulfilled and self-content.
- *cit* - **Omniscience** - The omniscience which the Godhead possesses is *archetypal*, which means that It knows the universe as it exists in Its own mind as an *Idea* before it came into being as a finite reality conditioned by time and space. Its knowledge is not obtained like human knowledge from sources outside - it comes from within. It is absolute omniscience; perfect and unobstructed knowledge of everything as it is - past present and future.
- *anantam* - **Infinitude** - the Supreme Being is not subjected to any limitations of time or space, It is omnipresent or present everywhere at once. This definition refers both to Its essential Being and Its attributes; both of which are all-pervading.
- *anandam* - **Beatitude** - the Godhead possesses unsurpassable indescribable bliss and is also the *essence* of bliss. Any joy or sensation of bliss which we may experience as human beings is like a drop in the ocean of bliss which is God’s.
- *amalam* - **Purity** - the Godhead is pure and immaculate and eternally free from all taints and imperfections. The term ‘*amalam*’ has a moral connotation in that the Divine Nature is the embodiment of moral and ethical perfection - It is never bound by karma.

The other group of attributes of the Godhead namely the “communicable” attributes which emphasise moral perfection and personability will be discussed under the section on redemption.

Although we mostly talk of the Godhead in masculine terms, Vedantic theology conceives of a duality of gender in the essential unity of the Godhead. God is always conceived of as being accompanied by His eternal and inseparable consort Lakshmi. This topic is also taken up for discussion in the section on redemption.

## 1:2 The Five Facets of the Divine

The Divine Nature, is both immanent and transcendent. By *immanent* we mean that It is present within the world. It is all-pervading and is the ground of all finite existence and activity. *Transcendent* means that the Divine Nature is not limited to dwelling within the manifest universe but also encompasses it. The metaphor often used to describe these two aspects is the fish in the sea - the sea is immanent in the fish and transcendent as the ocean in which the fish has its existence. The Divine Nature is not normally perceptible to the senses, but theologically manifests Itself in five forms;

1. The transcendental form.	<i>para</i>
2. Functional manifestation.	<i>vyuha</i>
3. Incarnations.	<i>avatara</i>
4. Iconic descent.	<i>arca</i>
5. Indwelling witness	<i>antaryamin</i>

## The Transcendant Form - *Para-vasudeva*

This transcendental form of the Divine Nature is absolute, unconditioned and unlimited. It is self-existent and is not the effect of anything else. The transcendence of the Godhead is impossible for any human being to understand. It is stated that even the devas (gods) do not know it!

The Blessed Lord said:

It is extremely difficult to behold this form of Mine which you have seen. Even the gods ever long to behold this form. Gita 11:52

It is impossible to describe this transcendent nature of the Godhead. The nearest description we can give is to refer to the Godhead as “*an ocean of perfection and bliss.*” This form is located in a supreme transcendental realm called *Parama-pada* (‘the Supreme Abode’) or *Vaikuntha* (‘the unobstructed state’). While discussing “realms” (lokas) it is important to understand that location in space only has relevance to the physical universe. God transcends both space and time, the realm of Vaikuntha (‘the unobstructed state’) also transcends space and time and therefore it is futile to even try to imagine a location for this realm in the physical universe or one of the galaxies! The mystic tradition described realms as inner states of our own being rather than external places.

The Transcendental Divine Nature is distinguished by 6 attributes which have given It the title of *Bhagavan*;

NB It is very difficult to translate Sanskrit theological terminology into English. The translations are the nearest approximations and so at times may appear quite quaint!

**jñanam** (Knowledge) - This term connotes omniscience or perfect knowledge of everything in the universe, past, present and future. (See the discussion in the section 1.2.)

**aisvaryam** (Sovereignty) - This refers to that perfection of the Divine Nature by which It is the absolute and highest cause and therefore Supreme Ruler of the universe. The activity of the Supreme Being is based



upon total and absolute independence (svatantriya) and Self-determination (satya-sankalpa).

**sakti** (Energy) The Divine Nature is the ‘efficient’ cause as well as the ‘material’ cause of the universe. In the example of the potter; He is the potter (efficient cause) as well as the clay (material cause) from which the pots are made. The universe is thus a Self-projection by the Divine Nature from within. It is illogical to assume that the Supreme Being creates the world from nothing. (*Ex-nihilo* - The predominant theory of the Semitic religions; Judaism, Christianity & Islam)

**bala** (Power) This refers to the omnipotence of the Godhead which has the power to project, sustain and dissolve the entire cosmos and re-project it, without ever becoming fatigued. (The possibility of God becoming tired or needing rest even in a figurative sense is totally rejected.)

**virya** (Creative Potency) This term indicates that although the Godhead is the *cause* of the universe It, Itself remains *changeless* and unaffected by the activities of cosmic projection, sustentation and transformation. The ocean remains unchanged in spite of the rising and falling of the waves, the formation of froth, whirlpools and currents etc, which are all in reality non-different from the ocean - being only its modifications.

**tejas** (Splendour) This means that the Godhead is totally Self-sufficient and complete in Itself and has no competitors. It does not need to rely on any other being for anything whatsoever. It is complete and perfect.

In their totality, these 6 above mentioned qualities make up the Essential Nature of God and His eternal Consort Lakshmi. (*sad-gunam-vigraham-devam*).

## Functional Manifestations - *vyuha*

From this totality of perfect being, four “emanations” proceed. The operative word being; *proceed* - one does not create the other. Each emanation proceeds from the one before, just as a series of candles are lit, one from the other. Another example would be the modern multi-media montage technique where one person is transformed into another using the facial features of the previous person. These are known as the four *Hypostatic Emanations* and are named **Vasudeva**, **Sankarshana**, **Pradyumna** and **Aniruddha**. They are not four separate entities but are forms assumed by the one Supreme Being for the purpose of the cosmic functions of projecting, maintaining and withdrawing the Universe.

Cosmic projection in Vedanta is viewed as cyclic and not linear as in the Semitic Religions. The basic components of Universal Matter - the atoms, are eternal and are constantly forming compounds and again dissolving. When this process applies to the Universe as a whole it is termed as *srishti* (projection/evolution) and *pralaya* (dissolution/ involution). This cycle is perpetual and continues forever.



The term 'vyuha' literally means *splitting* and refers to the splitting of the 6 attributes into three pairs. This can be likened to the process of mitosis by which cells undergo multiplication by a special process of self-division. This means that each of the *Emanations* has two particular qualities which are active and the other four remaining dormant.

Each of these Vyuhās has two functions; a cosmic creative one, and a moral one. The creative function is connected with the origination of beings (ontology) and the moral function is connected with their ethical and spiritual progress in the world.

The creative activities of the Vyuhās come into play one after the other, thus marking out three successive stages in the process of evolution of the Universe. In the pre-creational phase, the duality of all material matter and conscious Selves exist in a state of undifferentiated unity like the presence of curds and whey in milk. Everything is absorbed and dissolved at the end of a cycle, into the Godhead which alone remains. The sentient Selves and insentient matter exist in a unity with the Godhead but remain individually separate. In Mythological terms the Lord Narayana (The Ground of Being) lies upon the couch of eternity; represented by the thousand headed snake Ananta, floating on the ocean of Milk (Undifferentiated Unity) - the original state of matter in its potential form. The Lord mythologically contains the entire universe within His belly.

## Description of the Vyuhās and the stages of Cosmic Evolution

*Sankarshana* - with this *vyuha* the entire future universe comprised of *energy* (spirit or purusha) and *matter* (prakrti) is compressed into a tiny point of space (bindu) without internal distinctions. It is in a state of 'potentiality' and the attribute (Guna) concerned with developing this potential is *Bala* (omnipotence).

*Pradyumna* - with this *vyuha* the compressed embryonic mass of the Universe bursts forth into a duality consisting of Spirit (Purusha) and Matter (Prakrti). The attribute which is involved in this separation is *Aishvarya* (Absolute Independence) Pradyumna in turn, causes the manifestation of three things;-

1. the 'group Self' (manava sarga) - all the individual Selves or jivas exist together in a conglomeration known as *the purusha* or *hiranyagarbha*.
2. Primordial Matter (pradhana or prakrti) the basic pre-molecular substance from which the universe is created.
3. Subtle Time (kala) which is the *potency of change* before it becomes divided into the measurements of gross time consisting of years, seasons, months, weeks, days etc. which are determined by the movements of the spheres.

*Aniruddha* - by the means of the attribute called *shakti* (energy), Aniruddha causes the evolution of the gross atoms out of the Primordial Matter (pradhana) and the development of gross time from subtle time. Thus the evolution of *Matter* and *Spirit* under the influence of Time, produces the Mixed Creation (mishra srshti) during which the pre-existent

Selves become differentiated. Aniruddha becomes the ruler of the various galaxies and their contents. From Aniruddha emanate Brahma and Siva - personifications of his Grace and Wrath.

## The Ethical Activities of the Vyuhās through Revelation.

The ethical activities of the Vyuhās are accomplished through the means of Scriptural Revelation. Revelation is defined as a process of self-disclosure by the Divine Nature through its intimate presence in the depths of the human mind and psyche (antaryamin). Receptivity to Revelation (God-realisation) causes one to reach a higher level of consciousness as one is attracted to an increased sharing in the divine activity of creation. Revelation is universal and is not confined to any “elect” group. Every nation on this planet has had revelations from the Divine in accordance with its own ‘effect images’, traditions, customs, mores etc.

They are all valid and bonafide for the people to whom they were revealed. Some of these revelations are universal such as love, compassion, tolerance, charity etc. and some are specific such as dietary guidelines, social conventions, methods of religious practice etc. Unfortunately one wonders how many of these alleged revelations were the concoctions of selfish priests for their own personal or group ends. Therefore when discussing ethics and spiritual paradigms we need to focus on the universal rather than the specific. The three foremost qualities of Dharma or universal ethical living are: Absence of all prejudice, compassion and charity to all beings wherever they may be.

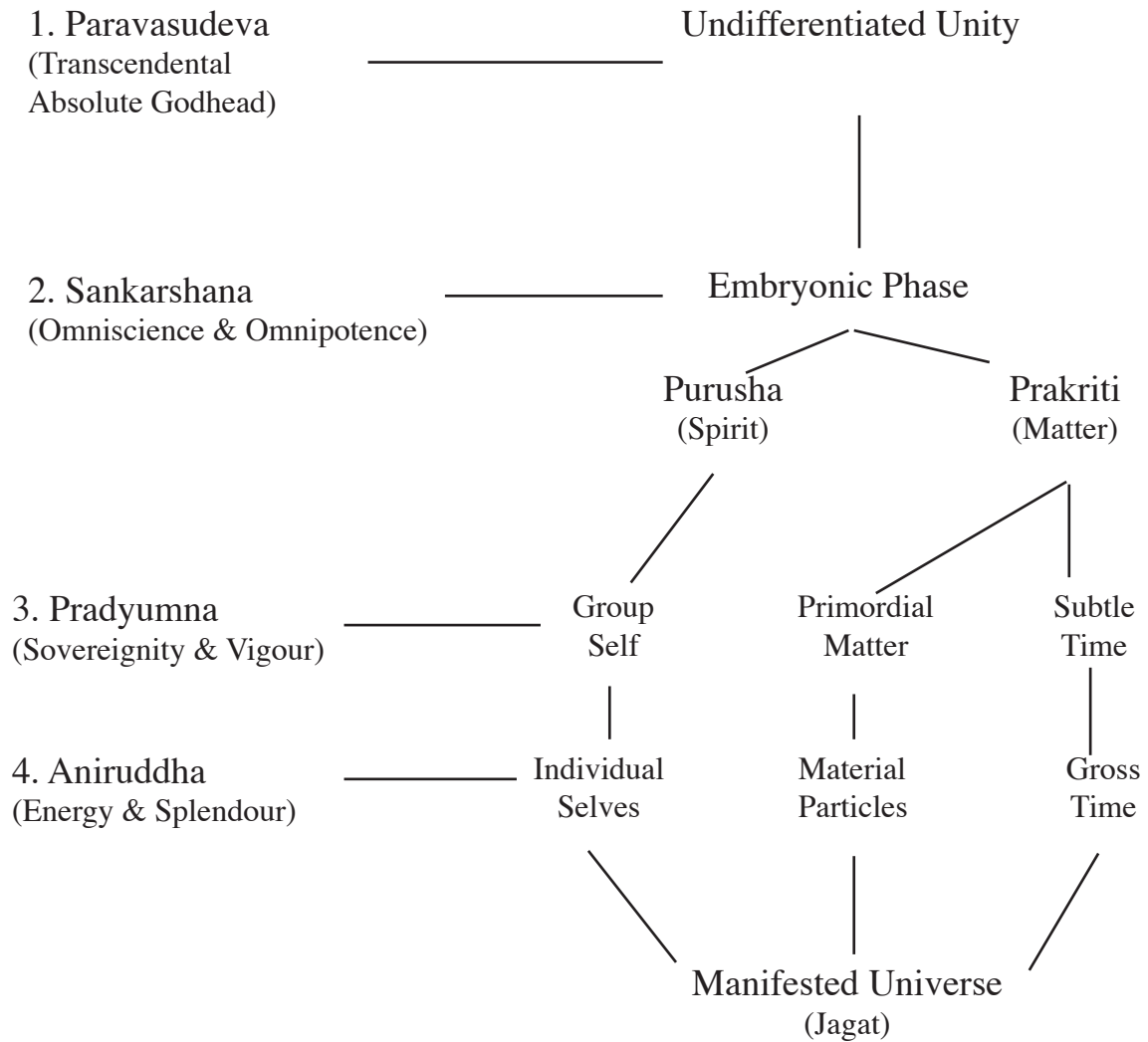
1. **Sankarshana** superintends the progress and development of the individual selves (jivas) and brings about the revelation of the *unity of the Godhead* to all people, through the means of the Guna called *jñāna* (omniscience).
2. **Pradyumna** superintends the *archetypal-mind* and reveals the *practical application* (tat-kriya) of the realisation of the unity of the Godhead through the virya Guna (potency). Practical application here refers to the practice of Dharma (right living) and pursuit of the spiritual goal (*prapya*) which is accompanied by the realisation of one’s identity in relation to God - a relation of complete subordination and dependency.
3. **Aniruddha** superintends the *ego-sense* (*ahamkara*) in all beings and causes the *actualisation of the result* (*kriya phala*) of the spiritual practice through the tejas Guna (splendour). The actualisation occurs when one surrenders completely to the Divine, and abandons the false notion of independence.

## Incarnations - *Avatara*

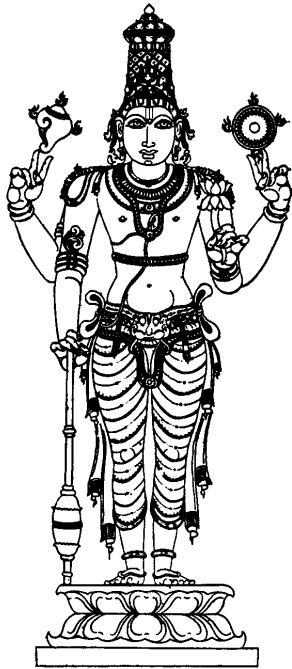
Narayana plays an active part in the maintenance of the World Order by periodically incarnating in human form. This voluntary ‘descent’ into the world out of boundless compassion for all creatures is called *avatara* and has 4 basic purposes;

## Vyuhās

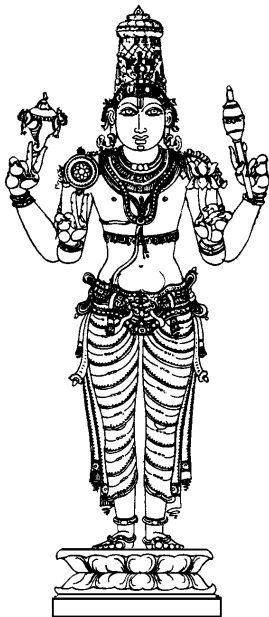
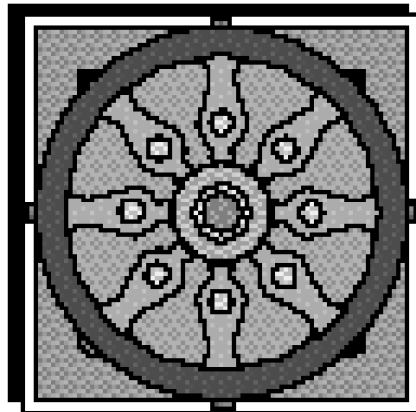
## Stages of Emanation of the Universe



Vasudeva



Sankarshana



Pradyumna



Aniruddha

Protection of the righteous  
 Elimination of the wicked  
 Re-establishment of Dharma (righteousness)  
 Bestowing of Grace.

These Incarnations are of two types;

§ **Primary** (*mukhya*) - a manifestation (or epiphany) of the Divine with a non-material body eg. Krishna, whose body did not consist of flesh and blood like other bodies but was a spiritual body consisting of pure Consciousness, Bliss and Existence absolute.

§ **Secondary** (*gauna*) - these are exceptionally elevated beings (jivas) who are chosen to act as vessels for the Divine activity. Their bodies are pervaded by the energy of the Lord for fulfilling a particular mission. eg. Vyasa, Parasurama, Buddha etc.

In addition to these Incarnations there are other manifestations known as

§ **Pradurbhavantaras** - these are Divine Beings (devas or gods) which are rays of the Lord's energy (shakti) and are manifested for some cosmic function. They are the administrating gods like Indra, Agni, Yama etc.

## Iconic Embodiment - *Archa*

It is impossible for the human to worship, meditate or praise a deity without form.  
 Therefore the Divine should be worship through form.

Parama Samhita 3 ; 7

When an inanimate object like a statue (icon) is constructed and consecrated correctly, according to the dictates of the Agamas which are the Sacred Scriptures dealing with ritual worship; then the Supreme Being by dint of His omnipotence and omnipresence, and prompted by His boundless compassion for all beings manifests in the icon. The Godhead is indeed omnipresent, and all material nature is pervaded by Divine Consciousness, but with a tiny portion of His Spiritual Energy (Shakti) He *particularises* His being and His presence in the sanctified icon for the purpose of receiving the devotion and worship of the devotees and for bestowing His Grace and compassion upon them.

The Icon is thus not merely a symbol or a representation of a subtle idea, neither is it simply an aid to concentration. It is in actual fact the *material manifestation* of the Divine - it is the divine-auspicious-form (*divya-mangala-svarupa*). It is important to understand that it only becomes such when it has been consecrated, and the Divine Presence has been invoked into it by the priests at the elaborate rites of consecration (*pratishta*). This doctrine can be compared to the doctrine of transubstantiation of the Eucharist in the Catholic belief.

Prior to the rites of consecration the statue is a mere image or symbol of the deity but it is through the invocations and prayers of the devotees that the image is infused and empowered with the Divine Presence and becomes a sacred Icon or *Presence* worthy of being worshipped. The Presence (sannidhyam) of the Lord is invoked from within the heart of the worshipper at

the beginning of the rites (avahana) and is then requested to depart (visarjana) once the rite has ended. The Iconic manifestation is the response of a Perfect God to the earnest supplication of His devotees.

Communion with the other theological manifestations of God and all-pervading perception of the Divine can only be attained by certain highly evolved beings and at certain times and places only, whereas the Iconic form is accessible to all beings at all times.

In Srivaishnava religious practice the Archa form is given the *utmost* importance and emphasis, along with the temple rituals and festivals. In fact all devout Srivaishnavas are encouraged to live in the vicinity of a temple, and regular attendance at the temple functions is recommended for spiritual advancement together with some form of service (kainkarya) which can take the form of either physical labour or cleaning, renovating, making garlands or rendering verbal service in the form of chanting the hymns or simply by gazing upon the sacred forms. The iconic form is known by several names such as *vigraha*, *bera*, *murti*, *pratima*, *bimba* & *rupa*.

## Indweller - *antaryamin*

Within all living beings the Lord dwells along with the individual Self (jiva) as the Over-Self (paramatman). He is the witness of all the actions of the jiva. The jiva alone acts and reaps the fruits of its actions in the form of sorrow (duhkha) and happiness (sukha). The question can be raised as to why the Lord allows the Self to act in a contradictory way if He is the Indweller, support and constant companion of the jiva, why does He not restrain it? The answer is that the Lord has given the jiva free-will. He therefore *permits* the jiva to act according to its desires, and He observes and rewards it accordingly. The jiva initiates the activity and the Lord either sanctions it or vetoes it in accordance with the jiva's karma. Like two partners who jointly begin a business venture; one senior and one junior. The junior cannot do anything without the permission of the senior partner. The senior partner may even allow the junior partner to sometimes !make the wrong decisions to enable him to learn by his mistakes.

As the Indweller, the Lord pervades all the creation within and without. The Lord is thus referred to as *Vasudeva* - that which pervades all beings from within, and *Vishnu* - that which pervades all beings from without.



## Chapter 2.



### The Nature of Self



### (*Sva-svarupam*)

The basic tenet of all schools of Vedanta is that every living entity consists of two components; (a) the insentient (non-thinking) material (physical) component and (b) the sentient (thinking) conscious component. The Self (jiva) is not the body/mind complex but the conscious entity which animates the body and uses it as a vehicle. There are varying views in each school of Vedanta about the ultimate nature of this unique spiritual entity which is referred to by several synonymous names; jiva, atman, jivatman or pratyag-atman.

The Srivaishnava doctrines concerning the nature of the jiva/Self are as follows;

- The Self is not the physical body nor the cognitive mind, but an *atomic* Spiritual Entity. This entity which is eternal resides within the body using it as a vehicle and controlling it from within. The Self is pre-existent and eternal and can never be destroyed.
- The Self is that which is referred to as “I” by the individual; it is the *subject* of knowledge which perceives the body and mind as *objects* - it is not manifest to, and cannot be grasped by the external senses and is devoid of all parts.
- The essential five attributes of the Self in its original state are *Consciousness* (chit), *Bliss* (ananda) and *Truth* (sat) *Purity* (amalam) and *Eternality* (anantam). These attributes are shared with the Godhead, the difference being in quantity not in quality.

The individual Self (jiva) is a ‘particle’ or ‘expression’ or ‘mode’ (*prakara*) of Brahman and stands in dynamic relation to Brahman as *a body to the Self*. The two are different, but inseparable, and together form an *aggregate of being*; like the Sun and its rays, or water and its wetness. Without the Self, the body is merely a conglomeration of chemicals, and without the body the Self has no means of self-expression. The individual Self is a *scintilla* (*amsha*) of the *totality* (*amshin*) which is God. The jiva is *totally* dependent upon Brahman for its existence but the defects of the jivas do not affect Brahman.

All jivas are subjected to reincarnation through a myriad of births. The origin of the cycle of re-birth is a very vexed philosophical issue and all attempts to reconcile why the jiva enters into the world of matter is purely speculative as the Scriptures do not give any clear answer to the problem. One of the theories is that the jiva originally lies dormant and inactive within the Divine Nature. The Lord longing to be re-united with the jiva awakens it from its sleep and projects it into the world of matter to begin its career of creative activity. At first the jiva manifests in the lower life forms and gradually evolves and ascends through higher and higher life forms until it eventually incarnates as a human being. Traditionally it is taught that

a jiva passes through 8,400,000 births in the lower species before attaining birth as a human being. It is only in the human world that one can respond to the call of the divine, strive for perfection in devotional service and attain liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth. In order to attain a birth as a spiritual seeker one undergoes about 200,000 births in various male, female and cross-gender bodies (the jiva itself is sexless).

The main and outstanding attribute of the jiva is *consciousness*. (jñāna svarupam) This consciousness or knowledge is the evidence of its existence. One does not need to have one's own existence demonstrated to oneself. It is self-evident even to the most retarded individual. In its natural state of freedom, this attribute of consciousness expands and contracts freely without limitation. In the state of transmigratory existence or bondage, this consciousness becomes contracted in various degrees according to the evolutionary development of the individual jiva. In animals it is more contracted than in humans and the higher evolved a person is the more expanded the consciousness becomes.

All embodied jivas are constrained by four limitation or fetters (*pasha*);

- |  |                     |
|--|---------------------|
| 1. They become confined and limited by space.                | <i>alpa kshetra</i> |
| 2. Their intelligence becomes limited.                       | <i>alpa buddhi</i>  |
| 3. They are limited in their ability to achieve their goals. | <i>alpa siddhi</i>  |
| 4. The duration of physical body itself is limited by time.  | <i>alpa-ayuh</i>    |

These four fetters which are the result of karma can only be removed by the compassion and Grace (*anugraha Shakti*) of God.

## 2:1 The 9 Relationships Between Godhead and the Jiva

The best way to understand the true nature of Self is to reflect upon it according to its relationship to the Supreme Being. According to Pillai Lokacharya there are nine different ways in which the individual jiva is related to the Supreme Being:-

§ 1. *Pitra-putra sambandha* - The relationship between father and the son - this is not an emotional relationship but rather one of cause and effect. It is sometimes referred to as 'the relationship between an object and its attribute'. (*visheshana-visheshya sambandha*). This is an eternal and inseparable relationship which can be illustrated by the rose and its perfume. The rose being the substantive and the fragrance being different from but dependant upon it and inseparable from it. In the same manner the jiva is a mode or attribute of the Supreme Lord and is different from but completely dependant upon Him.

§ *rakshaka-rakshya sambandha* - The relationship between the Saviour and the Saved. The essential nature of the Saviour or Protector is omnipotence, complete



independence and activity whereas the nature of the one saved is dependence, complete vulnerability and passivity. This relationship gets cancelled if the jiva tries to assume personal responsibility for its liberation from Samsara and acts independently of the Lord.

§ 3. *Shesha-sheshi sambandha* - The relationship between the Principle and the Subsidiary. In other words it is the bond between and owner and the thing owned. The jiva belongs to God and exists for His purpose alone, it can only be evaluated in terms of its relationship to the Lord. It is therefore the duty and function of the Lord to care for the jiva, which by its very nature cannot exist apart from and independent of the Lord.

4. *bhartru-bharya sambandha* - The relationship between husband and wife. This can also be considered in terms of the supporter and the supported. In this dynamic we see that the chaste couple belong to each other and cannot have any reference to a third party - the bond between them is irrevocable and permanent. Again there is a bond of exclusive mutual dependence and purpose.

5. *jñatru-jñeya sambandha*- The relationship between the Knower and the object of Knowledge. The essential nature of the jiva is knowledge or consciousness. The jiva therefore can “know” itself, its Lord and the relationship between them. It can also rationally assess its relationship to the external material world. The knowledge of the jiva attains its fulfilment only when it is directed at knowing its true objective - the Supreme Being with all His attributes and towards its personal constitutional state as totally subservient and dependant upon the Lord.

6. *sva-svami sambandha* - The relationship between the Property and Proprietor. The dynamic of this relationship is the realisation that oneself and all the faculties that one possess in fact all belong to the Supreme Lord. One has therefore to renounce all idea of possession in regard to one’s ego and actions, as well as the idea of agency itself and the expectations of rewards for one’s actions. One erroneously thinks that one is personally the doer of actions and the reaper of rewards, but when seen in true perspective one realises that the Lord is the Supreme Agent, and that the jiva is dependant upon the Lord for any abilities that it has.

7. *sharira-shariri sambandha* - The relationship of the Self to the Body. Just as the body is pervaded by the individual Self, all the universe and all Selves are pervaded by the Divine Nature. This clarifies that the relationship between the Self and its body or between the Godhead and the universe is intimate and co-dependant unlike the relationship between a person and his property which is purely superficial and one-sided.

8. *adhara-adheya sambandha* - The relationship between the Supporter and the Supported. The chief characteristics of a body are “belonging” (*sheshatva*), “dependence” (*adharatva*) and “subject to control” (*vidheyatva*). The corresponding qualities of the Self are “ownership”, “sustainer-ship” and “control”. Of these three the most important dynamic is that of the supporter /supported or the dependant/sustainer (*adhara-adheya*) because the other two are dependant upon this dynamic. The

Scriptures declare that the Lord creates the universe and then enters into it. Just as the Self owns the body supports the life-force of the body and directs it at will, in the same manner the Lord enters into the individual Self, owns, it supports it and governs it. The Sustainer is eternal and therefore it follows that that which is sustained ie.! the universe and the Selves are also eternal.

9. *bhoktru-bhogya sambandha* - The relationship between the Enjoyer and the Enjoyed. This can also be described as the relationship between the experiencer and the experienced. As indicated earlier, ultimate agency of action and power to experience really belong to the Supreme Principle (*sheshin*) - the Supreme Godhead. Srīman Narayana receives the service rendered by the jiva which exists purely for the pleasure of the Lord. The jiva is an object of enjoyment for the Lord, and the Lord experiences the universe through the jiva.

The purpose of studying and understanding these nine types of relationship is to clarify one's essential ontological (state of being) position vis-a-vis the Supreme Being and to remove the general conceptual errors that:-

- a. something or someone other than God can grant us security,
- b. there is a Supreme Principle other than God,
- c. the jiva exists for some one other than God,
- d. there is an object of knowledge apart from God,
- e. one is independent or separate from God,
- f. the individual Self is identical to God,
- g. there is some other supporter of the Universe other than God,
- h. the individual is the enjoyer or experiencer of the universe.

The Divine is the sustainer (*adhara*) and the jiva is the sustained (*adheya*). The jiva is an "expression" of the Divine and thus cannot exist without the Divine, but the Divine is a substantive and can exist without expressing Itself through the jiva. The jiva is the subordinate (*shesha*) and God is the Principle (*sheshin*)

The Divine is the controller (*niyantra*) and the jiva is the controlled (*niyamyā*). The Divine controls everything that happens within the entire universe. His control is not whimsical but in accordance with the Universal Law (*ṛta*) which He Himself has established. In this sense the jiva is controlled. The jiva is subjected to limitations of its own previous actions (*karma*) but is free to initiate action as it pleases.

And above all God is the Saviour (*Rakshaka*) and the jiva is the subject of salvation (*rakshya*). Greater is the Saviour's desire to liberate each and every jiva than is the jiva's desire to be liberated!

## 2:2 Types of Jivas.

There are three categories of jivas:-

1. *nitya suri* - These are the members of the Divine Ministering Assembly which, although being jivas, have never been subjected to transmigration. They are the eternal servants who make up the entourage of the Lord. (eg. Ananta, Garuda, Vishvakshena and others.)
2. *mukta* - Those jivas that have finally been liberated from the cycle of reincarnation after going through a myriad of births and which are now residing in the Supreme Realm (*paramapada*) in eternal communion with Sriman Narayana enjoying the fullness of Grace and the divine bliss.
3. *baddha* - Those jivas that are temporarily bound by karma which causes them to transmigrate through different bodies in the various realms of existence of which there are seven. These realms of existence are called *Lokas* and for the purpose of working through their Karma, the jivas incarnate in 6 types of bodies;

a. animal	<i>tiryak</i>
b. human	<i>manushya</i>
c. gods	<i>deva</i>
d. antigods	<i>asura</i>
e. hungry ghost	<i>preta</i>
f. Hell-being	<i>naraki</i>

There are six principle negative emotions associated with embodiment. Each one of these categories of sentient beings is dominated by one of these negative emotions. Animals are characterised by *ignorance* (*moha*), humans are characterised by *desire* (*kama*). The gods are characterised by *pride* (*mada*). The antigods are characterised by *jealousy* (*matsarya*), the hungry ghosts are characterised by *greed* (*lobha*) and the hell-beings are characterised by *anger or resentment* (*krodha*). Although these are taught to be actual physical incarnated states we can perceive their existence in the realm of human psychology.

Although it is popularly believed and taught that after a human birth one can regress and incarnate in an animal body, this is not necessarily the case. The animals do not have a moral sense of right and wrong and are governed by their instincts. The spiritual progress of animals is a passive not an active one and therefore they cannot actively participate in the achievement of Liberation (*Moksha*). They simply have a natural evolution from a lower to a higher life form. Whereas in the human form one has the ability to think and to undertake the entire responsibility for one's own spiritual evolution. Virtuous and pious action (*punya*) and spiritual study & wisdom (*jñanam*) lead to progression and evolution but sinful action (*papam*) and spiritual ignorance (*ajñanam*) lead to rebirth in lower human species, and certainly one can see that there are certain human beings that are very much on a par with or lower than animals in their condition and behaviour!!

Those *baddhas* who have begun the journey back to Godhead can further be divided into another two groups:

*Kevalas* - or the super jñanis (wise-ones) who are the yogis who pursue the path of self-realisation/enlightenment alone and seek total isolation of the Self such as the Jains or the transcending of Self, such as the Theravadan Buddhists; as their ultimate goal through the practice of meditation.

*Mumukshus* - those jivas who have taken to the spiritual path and are seeking communion with the Lord either through Bhakti - devotion or *sharanagati* - the path of self surrender.

## 2:3 The Nature of Bondage

Embodied jivas are said to be in a state of bondage to the material world, and this bondage comes about through the conjunction of the jiva with a mind/body complex. The jiva identifies itself with this mind/body complex forgetting its true nature as an expression of the Divine - this is known as nescience or ignorance (*avidya*). The conjunction with a material body is brought about by beginningless Karma.

## 2:4 Karma & Sin

Karma is the doctrine of *the economy of action*. The word *karma* means “action” and refers both to the action and its consequences. Every action produces a moral consequence which manifests as either joy or sorrow. All positive actions produce happiness and all negative actions result in suffering. There are three types of actions; mental, verbal and physical and every word, deed or thought has an effect. Although certain actions can be classified as “neutral” because they do not have an effect upon others and since they are entirely concerned with oneself, yet they affect the mind through the creation of subtle impressions (*vasanas*). Our thoughts affect us directly through the creation of behavioural patterns, while our speech and physical actions affect others and our environment. Although the concept of *sin* is linked to Karma one must understand that the Hindu concept of sin is quite different to the Judeo-Christian concept. Sin can be defined as those acts which obstruct our spiritual progress and hinder our return to the Divine Source. The Sanskrit synonyms for “sin” are quite revealing:

*Papa* = an act which causes suffering to others.

*Pataka* = an act which causes loss of social status.

*Kilbisha* = an unjust deed.

*Enasam* = a mischievous act which leads to personal suffering.

*Papa* is defined in the Mahabharata as follows;

*Paropakara punyaya papaya para pidanam*

Virtue is that which benefits other beings; sin is that which causes pain to others.

The entire moral theology of Sanatana Dharma rests upon the concept of “benefit of all beings” (*loka-sangraha*). Motivation or intention is the deciding factor of the moral nature of an action. Motivation which centres on the welfare of others (*parartha*) is of the nature of holiness, goodness and purity whereas motivation which centres upon the oneself (*svartha*)

is negative and leads to suffering.

Sin in the Vedantic context is an *un-skilled* use of action, a lack of spiritual understanding which causes one to transgress the Cosmic Order (*Rita*). Sin is not an affront against God nor is it something congenital. The means of committing unskilful acts are;- the mind, the speech and actions and there are 10 major categories of unskilful action which need to be guarded against.

The unskilful use of thought is manifest in:-

- (1) thinking harmful thoughts directed towards others
- (2) clinging to irrational and erroneous doctrines.

The unskilful use of speech is detected in un-beneficial speech such as -

- (3) lying,
- (4) slandering,
- (5) gossiping, and
- (6) abusing others and
- (7) giving false teachings.

The unskilful use of action is -

- (8) causing physical injury to other living beings,
- (9) sexual misconduct and
- (10) not rendering assistance in time of need.

All well-directed virtuous actions leads to spiritual development and happiness, all unskilful actions slow spiritual growth and produce unhappiness

There are three types of Karma including both negative and positive;

- § 1. *Sanchita Karma*; the mass of accumulated results of acts which have been committed in a myriad past lives and are stored in the sub-conscious mind waiting to come to fruition in the future.
- § 2. *Prarabdha Karma*; “operative” karma being acts done in the past which have resulted in the circumstances of the present incarnation and are causing all the joys and sorrows which we are now experiencing.
- § 3. *Kriyamana Karma*; All the actions which are now being performed; the results of which will be experienced at a later date and will condition the circumstances of the next incarnation.

The Scriptures declare that the Lord liberates His devotees from all karmic reactions, This is understood to refer to the accumulated potential effects.

*Prarabdha* or “operative” Karma is in actual fact for Vaishnavas, of two kinds;

*abhyupagata* - accepted - that is, the results of past karmas that have been accepted by the individual to be experienced. A spiritual aspirant (*prapanna*) resigns himself or herself to continue life and to accept the balance of merit and demerit of previous

actions until the end of this present life span. A sincere aspirant does not entertain any desires to avoid the consequences of one's previous actions, be they happiness or sorrow. One accepts them with fortitude because they are in fact the requiting of spiritual bills!

*anabhyupagata* - unaccepted - karmic consequences that have not yet come to fruition and will probably lead to future births unless one takes refuge in the Spiritual Preceptor and in God. The act of surrendering to Sriman Narayana destroys these accumulated reactions.

*Prarabdha karma* is beyond the control of the individual and the results which have produced our present conditions have to be born with patience. It is like the seed which has been planted in the past and is now flowering. *Sancita karma* is like seed which has been stored and can be remitted through the Grace of the Guru or God. The *kriyamana karma* or the present actions are entirely under the control of the individual and must be performed with the utmost awareness that each individual is the author of his/her own destiny and each and every action, no matter how trivial, will have an effect, unless all actions and their consequences are surrendered unto God, (*karma phala tyaga*). Once surrendered, all actions are purified and everything is done as service to God alone and thus even mundane actions become the vehicle of Liberation in that surrendered actions performed without motivation for rewards does not produce any further karma.

*Sancita karma* can be compared to a mango shoot, *anabhyupagata karma* is like a green fruit and *abhyupagata karma* is like a fruit ready for eating.

The doctrine of karma explains the dynamic of suffering. There are three factors in suffering;- the person who is suffering, an agent of suffering such as a person, thing, condition etc., and the degree of suffering. Once we have understood the nature of the Self as it really is and understood the dynamic of actions and their consequences, then the agent of suffering becomes incidental and secondary. We no longer bear any anger or resentment towards the person or thing that is seen to be causing our suffering because they are merely agents of our own karma. It is on this basis and this basis alone that we can truly love our "enemy" and return love for hurt, compassion for thoughtlessness. When the experience of suffering is thus understood it becomes an opportunity for self-development and spiritual transformation and its emotional and psychological intensity is greatly diminished.

## 2:5 The Three Causes of Negative Karma

There are three things which cause us to perform negative actions which lead to demerit and suffering; they are Selfish-Desire (kama), Anger (krodha) and greed (lobha). These three are known as the three poisons of mind which retard spiritual growth and are the three gateways to further suffering. All three have their source in delusion (moha) which is the notion that the body/mind complex is the Self and that one is a unique and separate entity from all others. This conviction is the very nexus of the cycle of reincarnation. Until we attain insight and realise our true spiritual identity as sparks of divinity, dependant upon and subservient to the Supreme Being then we will continue indefinitely in bondage to the material nature.

§ *Selfish-Desire* (Kama) primarily and generally refers to the libido which is the strongest drive we have. In specific terms it is the desire which is self-centred and directed purely at self-gratification. It is wrongly directed desire which is unhelpful to spiritual progress, and thus prolongs one's existence in Samsara.

§ *Anger* (Krodha) is the psychological and emotional reaction towards the unfulfilled desires and failed expectations one has of others, or the reaction to being thwarted in one's attempts to achieve or gain something. This leads to causing injury and hurt to others who are seen as the obstructing factors, which in turn results in negative karma and further suffering. Our sages teach us that a moment's outburst of anger destroys heaps of merit, painstakingly accumulated over long periods of time.

§ *Greed* (Lobha) is defined as the inability to part with our resources. The pursuit of wealth is not a problem - the problem is the refusal (or neglect) to use that wealth for the common good. All resources are aspects of the Divine Mother and are intended for the use of the entire world. Philanthropy therefore is an extremely important component of the spiritual life.

## 2:6 Karma and Grace

The question which will invariably be asked is what part does God have in this system of Karma. The Lord is known as **Karma-Phala-Data** the "*Dispenser-of-the-fruit-of-action*" - He dispenses the fruit of action with perfect justice and impartiality. The Lord is not responsible for the suffering or the happiness of anyone, it is oneself alone that creates and carries out one's destiny. The effects of karma are considered to be beginningless and it is almost impossible to free oneself from the tangle of actions and reactions - it is only through the Grace of Srīman Narayana that Liberation from the fetters of karma can be achieved. God is ready to forgive and remit all our transgressions - we need only request.

In Srīvaishnavism an important distinction is drawn between the aspirant that follows the Path of Devotion (*bhakta*) and the one who renounces the fruit of all action and takes refuge in the Lord (*prapanna*). Devotion (*bhakti*) destroys the residue of *sanchita karma* but the one who follows the path of Devotion as taught in the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads will have to take one or two more births in order to rid oneself completely of the effects of *Prarabdha karma*. In the case of the *prapanna* who has renounced the fruit of all actions and taken refuge in the Lord alone, no future births will occur because the *anabhyupagata* portion of the *prarabdha karma* is destroyed by the Grace of the Lord along with the *sancita karma*.

## 2:7 The Goal of the Jiva - Liberation

Although God is perfectly just, His infinite perfections are dominated by the redemptive motive of compassion (*daya*). His mercy, which is limitless, endures forever and rains alike

on all beings. The Lord blesses those who follow the way of right action (*dharma*) and who follow His universal prescriptions (*dharma upadesha*) which are revealed through the Vedas. He also saves the deluded ones that transgress the universal laws and do wrong by causing suffering to others through commission or omission. Although the Lord administers the Law of Karma with perfect justice ensuring that each and every jiva obtains the full fruit of every act, but as the Deliverer impelled by His infinite loving kindness, He actively seeks out the erring jivas to forgive and redeem them from the negative results of their actions which is suffering. Deliverance works in many ways and because of His overwhelming mercy and redemptive Grace and the strong desire to be united with the jiva - His inseparable vesture and mode, several attributes are manifested in the Godhead. These are the *communicable attributes* which emphasise the Personal nature of God (*svabhava dharmas*) and His relationship to the jivas which are His rays. It is in these communicable attributes that Sriman Narayana stands out as a conscious, intelligent, loving moral Being, Personal in the highest sense of the word. The predominant communicable attributes are as follows:-

*sarva-bhuta-suhrt* - the Friend of all beings.

*parama-udara* - the All-Bountiful One.

*sulabha* - easily accessible to all beings.

*gambhira* - His attribute of mercy cannot be quantitatively assessed.

*saumya* - God is approachable by all beings irrespective of their socio-psycho-physical differences or stages of evolution.

*saulabhya* - He allows an intimacy to develop between Himself - the infinitely great and the jiva which is infinitesimally small.

*ashrita para tantra* - He actually *depends* as it were, on His devotees, in a playful mood He allows Himself to be bound by them. For example; by manifesting Himself in an icon and becoming dependant upon the devotees for His maintenance.

*vatsalya* - His tenderness and affection are so great that it overpowers His omniscience and makes Him 'forget' or 'turn a blind eye' as it were, to the transgressions of the errant jivas.

*mardava* - the tenderness of the Divine Love cannot bear the separation from the beloved jiva.

*sthairya* - the will to save the deluded ones in spite of their incorrigibility.

*karunya* - the infinite compassion which impels the Redeemer to seek out and to save the afflicted jiva.

*madhurya* - the boundless sweetness of the Saviour who conquers evil by His seductive beauty and love and imparts bliss to the jiva.

*audarya* - generosity which is so great that He is never satisfied with the Grace which He bestows upon the postulant jiva.

*arjava* - is the free and full dispensing of Grace to all beings without reservation.

*sauharda* - the burning desire on His part to help all beings and to redeem them from the results of their actions.



## 2:8 Lakshmi - The Mediatrix

In Srivaishnava theology, the One Divine Nature expresses Its will to redeem by assuming a dual Spiritual Form - Narayana & Sri - these two aspects are philosophically inseparable but functionally distinct. Sri (or *Lakshmi*) is related to Narayana as the fragrance is to a flower, or the rays of the sun to the Sun. Narayana with perfect justice rules the universe as Father, but Sri His Eternal Consort resides within His heart as the embodiment of Saving Grace - the Universal Mother. She ensures that the reign of righteousness is tempered by redemptive mercy. The Lord dispenses justice in accordance with the merit and demerit of the jiva and Lakshmi is entirely dependent upon the Lord, but through her Beauty and Grace she captivates the Lord and transforms his desire for justice (*nigraha-shakti*) into redemptive Grace (*anugraha-shakti*), she acts as the Mediatrix between the Lord and the jivas.

The Lord Narayana too is innately gracious, but His Grace is an “initial” Grace called *kripa* which is common to all higher beings. By virtue of this Grace, one is impelled to seek refuge in the Lord and become a *prapanna* (one who seeks refuge). But the Grace of the Divine Mother is a specific Grace called *prasada*. It is the *saving Grace*; the response of ‘condescension’ of the Divine into the realm of being which permits the jiva to be liberated from Samsara. The great theologian Vedanta Desikan (13<sup>th</sup> century) finds all this potential for salvation implicit in the very name of the Divine Mother itself. He derives six different meanings from the name Sri:-

1. *sriyate* - she who is resorted to by the jivas
2. *srayate* - she who resorts to the Lord
3. *srnoti* - she who listens to prayers
4. *sravayati* - she who causes the Lord to listen
5. *srnati* - she who removes the past karma, faults and hindrances in the way of the spiritual aspirant.
6. *srinati* - she who prepares the jivas for liberation.

The Divine Mother accompanies the Lord during all His incarnations and is constantly mediating with the Lord on behalf of the erring jivas. The Ramayana is considered the Scripture of Redemption par excellence. There are countless examples of how Mother Sita (*Lakshmi*) remonstrates with the Lord (*Rama*) for the welfare of some sentient being or other. This doctrine of Lakshmi as the Mediatrix is one of the central doctrines of Srivaishnava theology.

## Manifestations of Lakshmi

Lakshmi manifests herself in countless forms but her three primary forms are as Sri-devi, Bhu-devi and Nila-devi. In the temples there are usually two Icons on each side of the Lord. The one on the Lord’s right hand side is Sri-devi and the one on the left is Bhu-devi, Nila-devi is

usually imagined as occupying the space behind the Lord and is not usually represented by an Icon as such.

Sri-devi is the Dynamic Potency of the Lord - *kriya-shakti*, Bhu-devi is the Manifesting Potency (identified with the physical universe) *bhuti-shakti* and Nila-devi is the Volitional Potency or *iccha shakti* which manifests as a desire to liberate the jivas from the bonds of transmigration and functions obscure its faults so that the Lord can be joyfully reunited with it.



Vira Lakshmi

## Chapter 3



# The Purpose of Life

(*Purushartha svarupam*)

The earthly plane is known as *karma bhumi* or the realm of action. According to the Vedic cosmology in addition to this world there are other realms called *bhoga lokas* or places of enjoyment where aims, goals and striving have no meaning as they are transcendental states of pure bliss where nothing is lacking. The jiva that attains these realms simply enjoys the results of accumulated merit until the stocks are depleted - it then returns to the *karma bhumi* to continue its spiritual evolution.

The Vedas teach that all human endeavour to find happiness is generally motivated by one or more of four essential goals which are technically called *purusharthas*:-

*Dharma* - right living, ethics or duty.

*Artha* - money and power

*Kama* - pleasure/recreation/artistic expression

*Moksha* - Liberation, freedom, self-determination

These fundamental goals of human endeavour are pursued by everyone in various degrees. In the modern western world money and power (*artha*) and sensual enjoyment (*kama*) are the predominant obsessions. There is very little regard for Duty or right living (*dharma*) and even less for true Liberation from the state of bondage to sense gratification. On the contrary; there is a bizarre idea that physical immortality is achievable and in fact desirable! Everything possible is done to prolong physical life and to find the elixir of immortality! When one reflects upon these four goals we see that there is an innate flaw in each one of them.

No matter how hard we try to practice our *dharma* and do what is right by others, they will never be happy. No matter what one does, one cannot please everyone - even Krishna and Rama, as perfect as they were, could not please everyone.

The problem with *artha* - the pursuit of wealth and power; no matter how much one earns or achieves it is never sufficient - there will always be a desire for more and more. Having and achieving become ends in themselves, and whatever one gains one will eventually lose.

Recreation, food and sex are all highly desirable in their absence, but once obtained and enjoyed they very quickly turn to objects of disgust, boredom or frustration.

And as for Moksha or liberation, all our self-initiated efforts at bringing about our own personal freedom and self-determination in the material sense are like straw in the wind - how

much more so in the spiritual sense! In order to achieve enlightenment one has to meditate regularly for many many years and this is almost impossible for the average human being, so the likelihood of liberating ourselves from Samsara is a very rare indeed.

The doctrine of the Four Goals of Human Aspiration (*purusha-arthas*) is inseparably linked with the doctrine of the Social Divisions & Stages of Life (*varna-ashrama dharma*). So bearing in mind that ultimate and abiding happiness cannot be achieved by the pursuit of these goals as goals in themselves - we are encouraged to pursue them in accordance with the *varna-ashrama dharma* as service to the Lord.

### 3:1 Varna-ashrama Dharma

In Srivaishnavism this Vedic system of the Goals of life, Social divisions and Stages of life are taken for granted and one is encouraged to strive for a balance and harmony of all the four goals and not to neglect one in favour of the others. This is the basis for the ideal *varna-ashrama dharma* system of life in which the society is divided into four social groups (*varna*) according to one's natural talents & propensities. The intelligentsia (*brahmanas*), the administrators (*kshatriyas*), the entrepreneurs (*vaishyas*) and the proletariat (*sudras*). The ideal life span of the individual is divided into four stages; student (*brahmacarin*), householder (*grihasta*), retiree (*vanaprastha*) and a renunciate (*sannyasi*).

The Brahmins are expected to pass through all four stages. Kshatriyas pass through the first three, Vaishyas have the first two and the Sudras have only one stage - that of marriage. These are the general recommendations but in practice there are many exceptions.

During the stage of studentship one learns the principles of Dharma - spiritual wisdom, religious duties as well as secular knowledge. During the stage of the householder this sacred and secular knowledge is put into practice. One then indulges in sensual pleasures & procreation (*kama*) and accumulates wealth (*artha*) in accordance with religious principles (*dharma*) to support one's family and distributes the surplus in philanthropic acts. In the stage of retirement a process of preparing for eventual renunciation is begun and one gradually abandons one's profession and sense-enjoyment, and concentrates on dharma with a view to achieving Liberation (*Moksha*) from the cycle of birth and death. When one finally renounces (*sannyasa*) then one's complete focus is on obtaining Liberation (*Moksha*) to the exclusion of all else.

### 3:2 Srivaishnavism and Caste

In Srivaishnavism the *varna-ashrama* social system of the Vedic tradition is taken for granted, but it is recognised that there is difference between social caste and spiritual caste. It is stressed that *spiritual caste* is not automatically attained upon birth. A person born in the brahmin social group is not automatically entitled to the privileges of a brahmin. Amongst the Vaishnavas caste differences should not arise, as all are equal in the sight of God and all are servants of God. The principle preceptor in the line of Srivaishnava preceptors was Nammalvar a Sudra! Pillai Lokacharya one of the great Srivaishnava Preceptors has said that

when meeting another Vaishnava one should never inquire about his caste, to do so would be tantamount to inquiring about the genitals of one's mother. Both queries are equally repulsive and distasteful!

What matters in social relationships is not one's class but whether one has been initiated into spiritual life or not.

“As bell metal is turned into gold through the application of an alchemical process, so one who is properly initiated attains to the status of a brahmana.”

Vaishnava Tantra

The great preceptor Ramanuja was a great social reformer and he himself rejected social caste differences when it came to other Vaishnavas. He had the highest regard and devotion for the devotee Kanchi-purna who was a Sudra. It was the offence of caste consciousness (practiced by his wife) that eventually led to his abandoning her and taking sannyasa (renunciation). Devotees are to be honoured for their learning, devotion and humility not for the social group into which they were born. The Lord Himself as declared His love for His devotees and has demanded that others serve them. The verse most often quoted in this connection is from the Garuda Purana 219:6-11.

One in whom the eight kinds of devotion are found, even if he be a westerner (mleccha), is the best of brahmins, a sage, illustrious, an ascetic, a pandit. But I do not respect a Vedic scholar who worships Me without devotion. One who is devoted to Me, even if he is a dog-eater (chandala) is one whom I respect. He is to be given to and received from; indeed he is to be worshipped as Myself.

The Srirangam acharyas regard offending Prapannas by disparaging their birth as the worst of offences. In his commentary on the *Srivachana Bhushana* (The Ornament of auspicious Teachings) of Pillai Lokacharya, the great teacher Manavalamamuni quotes passages from the Mahabharata to substantiate this:-

Those who have devotion to the Lord are not Sudras; all devotees are known as brahmins. In all castes those without devotion to Krishna are Sudras. One who looks upon a devotee of the Lord as a Sudra, aborigine or outcaste because of their birth, will go to hell.

In his work *Srivachana Bhushana*, Pillai Lokacharya presents an elaborate argument to establish that birth in a lower caste is preferable to birth in a higher one. One born in a low caste has natural feelings of humility, unworthiness and subservience - all of which are most conducive to Prapatti and more appropriate to expressing the natural qualities of the jiva. Whereas birth in a higher caste carries with it feelings of superiority, pride and egoism, making it difficult to adopt Prapatti and foster the proper attitude of subservience to the Lord and other devotees.

Although this is true in theory, with a regard for honesty one has to admit that this is not always so in practice amongst the Srivaishnava community. The Kanchi acharyas supported the caste system (see appendix for the theological disputes), and members of the Srivaishnava community range from being extremely liberal to highly conservative and caste-conscious. In fact Ramananda (1300-1411) a member of the Srivaishnava community and a dedicated anti-caste activist went to North India and spent several years on pilgrimage, preaching and initiating everyone. When he returned to South India, the caste-ridden Srivaishnavas

excommunicated him and refused to eat in his company! He then returned to North India and is today recognised as the founder of the Vaishnava movement of the North. Among his spiritual descendants were Ravi-dasa a cobbler who became the spiritual preceptor of the celebrated mystic Mira Bai. Sena a barber by caste became a guru who converted the raja of Bandhogarh to Vaishnavism.

### The sattadars

Those Srivaishnavas who do not wear the sacred thread are technically known as *sattadars*. This term covers all non-brahmin Srivaishnavas. They are also known as bhagavatas, nambis, dasanambis and prapanna Vaishnavas. Members of this group traditionally have the privilege of attending to certain duties within the temple economical structure, but only those who wear the sacred thread are permitted to learn the rituals and sacraments and to perform them for others.

### Varna-ashrama System Today

Varna-ashrama is an “ideal” system but has become redundant in the world in which we live - a democratic, multicultural, global society with the values of equality and equal opportunities for all, the right to education, liberty, the dignity of the individual and participation in governance etc. There are many who would like to see the varna-ashrama system reinstated - but this is like wishing for *Rama-rajya* - a nice idea but actually a fantasy. In order to compete in the political, intellectual and spiritual milieu of today it would be best for Srivaishnavas to relegate the system to the glass cases of cultural museums or to use it merely as a framework for teaching ideals.

## 3:3 Dharma - Right Action

The word *dharmā* is derived from the root *dhṛ* which means to support or to maintain, that which is the essential nature of a being and the means of its moral and material support is called its *dharmā*. The source of dharma is fourfold;

“The Veda, tradition, the conduct or virtuous people and one’s own conscience, This is declared to be the four-fold mark of dharma, right before one’s eyes”.

Manu 2;12

According to the Padma Purana (Bhumi Khanda) Dharma has 12 components:-

1. *ijya* (yajña) - worship of God through the rituals that are prescribed in the Vedas and the agamas.
2. *adhyayana* - study of the Scriptures such as the Vedas, Upanishads, Mahabharata and Ramayana. For Srivaishnavas this includes the study of the Tamil Hymns of the Alvars (Divya-Prabandham).
3. *danam* - this term has a twofold reference; one is the giving of charity to the needy

as well as doing social works for the benefit of society as a whole, and the other reference is to the *gift of fearlessness* to all creatures (abhaya pradanam) - not being the cause of fear to any living being.

4. *tapah* - the common meaning of this term is *self-discipline* which in the Srivaishnava faith refers to simple living and constant mindfulness of God as well as purposive meditation as well as control of the body, mind and speech.
5. *satyam* - practice of truth and harmony in speech and action at all times; one should speak only that which is true and agreeable and beneficial to others, one should not needlessly say things that are hurtful even though they may be the truth. The practice of truth includes in it such virtues as straightforwardness, frankness, absence of deviousness and malice etc.
6. *kshama* - forgiveness and forbearance which come from loving kindness and compassion to all beings which is based on the awareness of the presence of the jiva in all beings.
7. *damah* - self restraint; one should impose restrictions on one's desires and behaviour and should avoid excesses and cultivate self-discipline.
8. *asteya* - not taking anything which is not given
9. *shaucam* - purity of both the body by regularly bathing and maintaining hygiene, and mental purity through practice of virtue and compassion.
10. *ahimsa* - the cultivation of an attitude of non-injury to any being in word, deed, or thought.
11. *shanti* - the cultivation of personal and environmental peace and contentment.
12. *gurusevanam* - respecting and honouring elders and parents and caring for them.

The term Dharma refers generally to all our moral, ethical and social duties and obligations to the society in which we live and the world around us. The idea of 'individuality' is offensive to Dharma. Everyone exists as part of a social group and each member of the group has certain duties and obligations towards every other member of the group - if these are neglected then disharmony and conflict will arise. The whole universe of animate and inanimate entities all comprise the "body" of God, everything therefore is related to everything else and as such the welfare of the whole depends on the wellbeing of the parts. Dharma is therefore based on this understanding that our personal wellbeing must be based upon and include the wellbeing of each and every component of the Universe and this then becomes the context of our social duties and obligations. Once these duties are fulfilled then that which is our Right will come to us. In modern materialistic society the emphasis is on *rights* and little if anything is ever heard about *duties*.

Dharma can be summed up in the following three virtues:-

"The Eternal Duty (Sanatana Dharma) towards all creatures is the absence of malevolence towards them in thought, deed or word, and to practice compassion and charity towards them".

MB Vana Parva 297;35

*Adroha* is the absence of all negative feelings which result from being judgemental. All judgement must be suspended before one can begin the practice of unconditional love and

compassion - *anugraha*. The presence of sincere compassion will naturally lead to charity in the form of self-giving and service - *danam*.

### 3:4 Artha - Economics

This refers to the procurement of wealth through legitimate means and according to the guidelines of the dharma. Wealth should be accumulated with the idea that all property belongs to God alone. Wealth is given to us for the purpose of helping others and not merely for our own selfish use. *Artha* is the basis of dharma and without it no religious activities are possible, no temples could be built or maintained, no ceremonies of festivals could be celebrated and no social work undertaken. Wealth has to be sanctified through its utilisation for the benefit of others.

### 3:5 Kama - Sex & Recreation

This term primarily refers to sexual pleasure which is considered to be the highest form of physical enjoyment, and secondarily it refers to sense pleasures of all sorts - such as Art, Dance, Music and all other cultural activities which bring pleasure. All these activities are also governed by Dharma, and should be done as religious activities. The acharyas have taught that *vairagya* or dispassion for the pleasures of the senses is the highest ideal, and that the jiva should fulfil its essential function which is to find its highest pleasure in being subservient to God. But they have also recognised that *vairagya* arises from three causes -

- a natural and spontaneous love for God which arises within the individual and is stronger than any sensual attractions
- by the Grace of God, one develops a distaste for sensual pleasures in the course of one's spiritual practice, and
- through the practice of mindfulness on the transitory and unsatisfactory nature of all sense-gratification.

Srivaishnavism, while acknowledging that unrestrained indulgence in recreation can lead one away from the spiritual path, generally adopts the mainstream Vedic attitude that sex can be indulged in as a pleasure in itself but only with one's own spouse and promiscuity is to be avoided. All other forms of entertainment, sport and recreational pursuits are sanctioned as long as they do not distract one from devotional service. Srivaishnavism is a pragmatic religion and acknowledges that it is essential to maintain a healthy body in order to fulfil one's religious duties, hence exercise, yoga and sport are to be encouraged. Ultimately one's sexual practices are a matter for oneself to regulate, the acharyas do not deliver discourses on the subject.



## Homosexuality

On the subject of sex and life styles it needs to be mentioned that homosexuality which is a major obsession with the “Abrahamic coalition” (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) and the focus of many social and politico-religious agendas in the West and which attracts endless invective and hatred is a non-event in Srivaishnavism. None of the acharyas have ever considered the topic important enough to discuss. So for a Srivaishnava position on the subject we need to take another look at the Scriptures which inform us that there are three types of births;-

The jiva is blinded by ignorance; sometimes it is embodied as a man, sometimes as a woman, sometimes as a homosexual. According to its deeds and the nature it acquires thereby, it may be born as a deva, a human or a beast.

Srimad Bhagavatam 4.29.29.

According to the Dharma, homosexuals (both male and female) are born as such and cannot be “converted” from heterosexuality. There is no conscious choice in the matter of sexuality - it is determined by one’s Karma. The question of evil or wickedness does not arise in the case of natural disposition. The victimisation, discrimination or ostracization of homosexuals is wrong and contradicts the teachings of the dharma. The acharyas have never addressed this issue, and none of the law givers have made a big deal about it. In fact there is no mention of homosexuality in any of the catalogues of sins that one finds in the Puranas. It is a matter of no consequence and not worthy of any serious mental expenditure. The general guidelines of the Dharma regulating relationships and social activities apply to homosexuals as well.

## 3:6 Moksha - Liberation

Liberation is *Liberation* from the cycle of births and death to which beings are subjected from time immemorial. This human birth is attained after millions of rebirths in lower species (8,400,000) and after much travail and is therefore extremely precious. One should be encouraged not to waste this valuable opportunity in vain pursuit of sense-gratification but should use this opportunity for striving for *Moksha*.

According to Srivaishnava theology - Liberation which is also known as *Nirvana*, *Mukti*, Emancipation, Release or Salvation is of two categories; -

- § 1. **atma-anubhavam** - *Self-realisation* which is the result of the practice of abstract meditation on the Formless Absolute (Brahman). This spiritual practice which is taught in Advaita Vedanta and in the Patanjali Yoga Sutras leads one to experience a unique state of cosmic awareness, of total isolation and freedom called *kaivalya*. Only a few very exceptional mystics have ever attained this state of *Self-realisation*. It is not recommended as a goal for average people, who are incapable of developing the discipline of non-attachment (*vairagya*) which is a prerequisite for the practice of this type of meditation.
- § 2. **bhagavat-anubhavam** - *God-realisation* which is the development of knowledge of, experience of, surrender to, and consequent service to the Supreme Being. It is

a development of pure love and devotion to God without the motivation of selfish rewards either here or in a heavenly world after death.

With the development of devotional service to God, there gradually arises a distaste for the material world with its transient pleasures and perishable commodities. Through the Grace of the Lord, one attains after death, a transcendental form (*aprakrta-divya-shariram*) and enjoys eternal communion with the Lord in His Supreme Abode known as *Vaikunta* or *Parama Vyoman* (Spiritual Realm).

Liberation as experience of the Divine has four stages:-

Constant and unbroken awareness of the Divine Presence. *salokya*

Assumption of a Divine form. *sarupya*

Proximity to the Divine. *samipya*

Unification with the Divine. *sayujya*

Although these forms of liberation are all taught in the Upanishads, Srivaishnavas accept Liberation as being a state of eternal devotional service (*kainkaryam*) to the Lord. If such service is available in the embodied state it is more acceptable than some static existence in a blissful realm! The hedonistic incentive of worshipping the Lord in order to obtain limitless pleasure in some heaven is totally rejected by Srivaishnavism. The worship and service to God is an end in itself and under no circumstances is one to bargain with God - practicing religion for the sake of heaven! Ramanuja was prepared to accept hell as his lot, if it meant that others could attain liberation! This is the greatest ideal of Srivaishnavism! If others will be saved through our eternal suffering, so be it, let us welcome that suffering with open arms!

In Srivaishnavism it is taught that the Highest realm is "*Vaikunta*" which means "the unimpeded state" - a state which is beyond the material world and described as comprised of *Shuddha Sattva* - which means "Pure Being" uncontaminated by association with anything material. It is not a place in terms of location somewhere in the universe because it transcends space and time - it is rather a transcendental state of *being*.

Some discussion does certainly take place among Vaishnavas about the nature of Liberation and questions are asked like; is the jiva aware of other jivas or only of the Bhagavan? Is there social interaction between jivas in Vaikunta or not? But all these are merely speculative intellectual pastimes and are irrelevant to the practice of Dharma. It is impossible in fact to conceptualise the state of Liberation with our limited mental faculties. Sri Krishna states in the Gita;

To act alone is your right, and never to the fruits thereof. Do not regard yourself as the cause of action and its fruit, nor become attached to inaction.

Bhagavad Gita 2;47

Theologically it is important to have a concept of the universe and one's place and goal within it but ultimately Dharma is practiced simply as service to the Supreme Being and not for the attainment of some blissful realm.

## Chapter 4



### The Means to God-realisation



### (Upaya Svarupam)

The process by which one works towards a spiritual goal is known as *yoga*, which means *to yoke* or *to join*. It indicates the unification of the seeker with the sought. The Veda declares *tat tvam asi* - “Thou art that which you seek”. So Yoga should not be thought of as a process whereby the remote becomes attainable but rather as a process whereby obstacles and hindrances to the revelation of our true and natural state of being are removed. This process of self-realisation is also called *upaya* - which means “a methodology”. Yoga is the procedure whereby one achieves insight, wisdom and enlightenment. The Bhagavad Gita is the handbook par excellence of Yoga in which the three principle processes of Yoga (*upayas*) are taught. They are;-

1. *karma yoga* - yoga of action done without interest in rewards.
2. *jñana yoga* - yoga of knowledge and meditation.
3. *bhakti yoga* - yoga of devotion

These three apply to the perfection of action, intellect and emotion respectively. To these the Srivaishnava acharyas add another one;

4. *shadanga yoga* (sharanagati) - the path of self-surrender.

The Tengalais place even greater emphasis on:

5. *acharya abhimana* - taking refuge in a Spiritual Preceptor.

### 4:1 Karma Yoga - The Way of Action

Karma Yoga is defined by Ramanuja as the dutiful performance of those actions (**Dharma**) both of a daily and periodic nature that are prescribed by the Scriptures with reference to one's social status and marital state such as. These prescribed activities are centered around the key concepts of *yajna* - sacrifice, *dana* - charity, *tapa* - self-discipline, *anashah* - periodic fasting and more specifically; the five Great Sacrifices known as *Panca-maha yajna*. These are to be performed by the aspirant until death and are never to be abandoned, because according to the Gita they are the purifiers of the wise, they destroy past karma in the form of *samskaras* (sub-limina activators) which is an obstacle to the spiritual path. This purification is achieved in two ways:

1. Purity of Diet: from purity of food arises purity of mind; from purity of mind steady remembrance. Pure food is defined as only those edible things which have first been offered to the God.

2. Performance of *yajna*, *tapa dana* with the right attitude serves to detach the mind from sense-objects and turns it towards the Atman within.

The distinguishing factor between spiritually uplifting action - Karma Yoga and ordinary action, is the wisdom aspect - **jñanakara**. Mentally one renounces the desire for the results of the act, the idea of agency and the act itself - the ability to do this skilfully is based upon the knowledge of the true nature of the Self. This ability to act with renunciation is developed in two stages:

1. The first stage consists in analysing and reflecting upon the distinction between the Self [atman] and Matter [prakrti] gives rise to the understanding that action is not the essential nature of the Self, it arises due to the conjunction of the Self with a material body. By constantly practicing acting without personal interest one is not deceived into identifying Self with non-Self - that is material nature.
2. First stage realisation leads to an even deeper and more mature understanding of the nature of action - knowing that the Selves [jivas] and Matter [prakrti] constitute the 'body' as it were, of Brahman, and are activated and empowered by Him, one realizes that the agency in every action and the act itself belong to the Supreme Person. The atman is dependant [**shesha**] upon the Lord and ensouled by Him, as well as ruled by Him - in every act it is the Lord Himself who is the ultimate agent acting and experiencing through us who are merely his manifold "expressions" or "modes".

Thus the performance of action itself becomes a recognition of one's, **sheshatva**; one's complete dependence upon the Lord. Every act thus becomes an act of worship, a note in the cosmic symphony.

Karma Yoga purifies the mind in two ways:-

1. As an act of worship it pleases the Supreme Person who then erases the impurities - the *samskaras* - impressions/sub-liminal activators left upon the mind by past karmas.
2. As mental renunciation - it removes the ego-sense [**ahamkara**] and turns the mind away from attachment and identification with the objects of the senses.

The ultimate purposes of Karma Yoga is to prepare the mind for Dhyana Yoga.

Karma Yoga in short is the performance of one's chosen personal, professional and social duties unconditionally and as duty only, without being motivated by the personal, material, social or spiritual rewards. The Yogi worships God through various acts of philanthropy, social work, and by simply doing one's chosen job and even the activities of daily living, to the best of one's ability in accordance with Dharma. In this practice there is no motivation other than service to God, and no concern with rewards, be they emotional gratification, esteem, fame, honour or wealth. In this way the focus is entirely on the practice which is in the here and now. One's every action is done with precision, efficiency, attention to detail and of course beauty.

In Srivaishnavism Karma Yoga also takes on the particular form of rendering some practical service to the iconic form of the Lord. The Karma-Yogi contributes to the upkeep of temples, helps to subsidise festivals and teaching programs and takes part in the choral chanting of hymns in the temple and also performs some manual work such as cleaning temples or assisting in the daily chores of the temple compound. This service is technically known as *kainkaryam*, and is the paramount duty of every sincere Vaishnava. Even standing in front of the deity exchanging glances (darshana) is considered to be *kainkaryam*.

## 4:2 Jñana Yoga - The Way of Knowledge

For Ramanuja jñana yoga is the path of introversion or renunciation. He discusses this Yoga as an alternative to or a supplement to Karma Yoga in preparing the mind for meditation - **Dhyana Yoga**, but he does not recommend this path to those who are desirous of liberation.

The Way of Knowledge is an actionless, entirely mental discipline based on the traditional idea of complete renunciation of action. Its main aim is diminish sensory input so as to focus the mind entirely upon the Atman. **Jñana Yoga** has 4 stages of maturity:

- Renunciation of all worldly activities, and practicing withdrawal of the senses from contact with the sense-objects, and focussing of the mind upon the Self.
- Developing complete indifference to pleasure and pain.
- Practicing constant reflection, undisturbed by feelings of love, fear, anger, joy etc.
- Establishing of the mind exclusively upon the Atman, having renounced the desire for anything else. (sthita-prajna),

Ramanuja explains that **Jñana Yoga** cannot be practiced without first disciplining oneself by Karma-Yoga. This mental preparation for Dhyana-Yoga can be achieved by engaging actively in the world in a constructive but non-attached manner through the discipline of Karma-Yoga alone, and therefore **Jñana Yoga** with all its attendant difficulties and pitfalls should not be practised as a discipline in itself.

### **Pitfalls of Jñana Yoga:**

1. The senses are extremely difficult to control; craving and desire only cease; upon the vision of the Atman, and this vision cannot be achieved unless craving and desire have been conquered - this leads to an endless circle of striving and frustration.
2. Total renunciation of action is impossible for any but the very few.
3. Control of the senses requires that the mind be centred on the Supreme Person in meditation, it also requires that one practice Karma-Yoga as a preparatory discipline to such meditation. The binding factor in terms of our suffering in Samsara is not action per se, it is rather the craving and attachment from which such action arises. Even by

the renunciation of all action one would not rid oneself of the desire which is a very deep rooted *samskara* - this is the root problem of the jñana yogi.

What is necessary for the practitioner is to renounce the attachment to the material world, and not the material world itself. The physical body and the material world are provided by the Lord as the instruments whereby the jiva may worship Him, and thereby attain release. It is in and through the world that one obtains divine Grace and the opportunity to achieve Moksha, the world therefore should not be renounced.

Pursuing liberation as a householder is easy and without dangers and pitfalls involved in becoming a renunciate; it is a natural state for the embodied being and for Ramanuja it is the preferred one.

### 4:3 Bhakti Yoga - The Way of Devotion

Ramanuja opines that a realisation of the Atman is a preparatory requisite to the Higher Meditation - *paravidya* or meditation upon the Supreme Person.

Through the consistent practice of Karma-Yoga the mind becomes pure - freed from the mental contaminants such as selfishness (*kama*), anger (*krodha*) and greed (*lobha*). It becomes calmer and unruffled by the distraction of the senses - once this state has been achieved, the practice of meditation or Dhyana-Yoga may be commenced. But it is also necessary to realize that any attempt to control the senses by self-mastery alone is ineffective and unacceptable - it can only be done with the complete recognition of, and reliance upon the God. So any attempt to control the mind by one's own effort without relying upon the divine is bound to end in failure.

Ramanuja distinguishes 4 stages of accomplishment in the process of "Self-realisation".

- After having realised that the Self is distinct from Matter [*prakrti*], one sees that all beings have the same essential nature as one's own Self, ie. the essence of all beings is the same when they are viewed as distinct from *prakrti* - to know one atman is to know them all. This understanding is called **sama-darshana**
- Thereafter the "sameness" or "equality" of the individual essence and the Supreme essence is perceived. The Divine having been thus perceived, ever remains fixed in the vision of the practitioner.
- Such a vision of the Divine essence pervading all things matures into seeing God as abiding everywhere at all times, being all things - the devotee sees nothing but God where previously he had seen only the variegated differences of the material conditioning.
- This state ultimately matures into a complete indifference to the joys and sorrows which afflict the material bodies and a complete freedom from suffering.

## Para-vidya

Meditation (dhyana, upasana) according to Ramanuja is *smruti* - a perpetual mindfulness of the Divine qualities, a continuous stream of thought directed towards the Lord. God according to his interpretation of the Vedanta is to be obtained only by devotion which takes the form of incessant meditation - in which the practitioner is aware of no other object other than the Divine Presence - it is the mystical state of perpetual vivid perception of the all-pervading Divine Nature.

These forms of meditation known as the *Para-vidya* or “Supreme Teaching” are prescribed and taught in the Shruti and Vedanta texts, e.g.;

1. *sad-vidya* - Chandogya upanisad 6:2:1
2. *bhuma-vidya* - Chandogya upanisad 7:1
3. *dahara-vidya* - Chandogya upanisad 8:1
4. *upakosala-vidya* - Chandogya upanisad 4:10
5. *shandilya-vidya* - Brhadaranyaka upanisad 5:4:5
6. *vaishvanara vidya* - Chandogya upanisad 5:11
7. *anandamaya-vidya* - Taittiriya upanisad 2:5
8. *aksharavi-vidya* - Mundaka upanisad 1:1

The meditator need practice only one of these several meditations: each being capable in itself to bring about the desired result.

An essential awareness maintained during all these meditations is of the Divine Qualities of **satyam** - true being, **jñānam** - absolute knowledge, **anandam** - infinite bliss, **amalatvam** - purity, and **anantatvam** - infinity, inherent in God’s nature.

Meditation upon Brahman performed thus only once is of no significance, for meditation *per se* does not result in the attainment of Brahman; its purpose is to be just a means of expressing and actualising devotion towards God, and of generating ever more intense devotion. Thus the devotee ideally never goes beyond the practice of Dhyana; Ramanuja never speaks of the attainment of absorption [samadhi], mystical powers [siddhis] or Self-liberation [kaivalya].

The problem with Bhakti Yoga as thus conceived is its practicability and accessibility. In order to practice these meditations one needs a long and arduous process of preparation through Karma Yoga. The actual para-vidya practices are to be learned from a competent guru through the study of the Vedas. In order to be qualified for this form of study one needs to be a male of the upper three castes. It is thus not within the purview of the majority of people - and is the reserve of a tiny minority.

The alternative is found in the Pancharatra Tantric teaching. The Upanishadic *para-vidyas* are substituted by meditation upon one of the many images of the Divine described in the

Pancharatra texts. In this form of meditation, a chosen form of the deity is envisioned to be seated above one's head, one then focuses all one's attention flow on that image while repeating the specific mantra of that deity.

## 4:4 Shadanga Yoga - The Way of Resignation

The Gita is considered to be the Yoga Text par excellence. Lord Krishna gives clear and explicit instructions regarding the three paths of Yoga. After expounding upon them in great detail, and acknowledging their difficulties, in the 18th Chapter Verse 66 the Lord makes the Ultimate Statement (*Charama Sloka*);

Abandoning all other means (dharmas) take refuge in me alone;  
I will liberate thee from the effect of all sins, grieve not.

This is the highest path and the Supreme Means to God - called *Sharanagati* or "the way of surrender". It is not actually a *Yoga* or a *process* as such, but a total resignation of oneself to Srīman Narayana, and reliance upon His Grace alone. It is greater than all the other 'Means' and includes within it all the three.

Taking refuge in the Divine (Prapatti) is the easiest way to God-realisation and Liberation. In fact it is the *means par excellence*. In the Scriptures we find the anecdotes of *Prapatti* performed by animals such as Gajendra, Hanuman, Jatayu and Jambavan and women such as Draupadi and Kunti. Arjuna and his brothers performed *Prapatti* as did low-born characters like Sabari and Guha and myriads of other beings. It is a means open to everyone and has no restrictions of any kind. There are no restrictions as to time - Gajendra the King of the elephants performed Prapatti as he was about to expire. There are no restrictions as to place - Arjuna performed Prapatti on the field of battle, and not even restrictions as regards states of purity - Draupadi performed Prapatti when she was menstruating!

So in this present age, when life is so short and filled with all kinds of responsibilities, difficulties and limitations; *Sharanagati* is the path of choice. It consists of taking *refuge* in the Supreme Person; an act of total *self-dedication*. Even *ONE* sincere act of self-surrender is enough to elicit the Grace of the Lord. It is taught that Divine Grace is given to those whom the Lord chooses, but this does not mean that the Lord is capricious or partial - Divine Grace is given to those who surrender to it and accept it.

The only qualification is that the postulant (*Prapanna*) should understand and realise his/her intimate relationship with God. A relationship of complete dependency and subjugation. The only prerequisite for Prapatti is a feeling of total helplessness (*akinchīna*) and an understanding that there is no other refuge than the Lord (*na-anya-gati*). The prospective Prapanna should have a sincere change of heart or contrition, and absolute confidence in the saving Grace of the Narayana.

It is not merit (*punya*) which is the operative cause of Grace (*daya*) but the sense of one's unworthiness (*akinchīna*), one's deep entanglement in materialism and the inability to follow



the three conventional Yogas. The Lord Himself is the way, the means (*upaya*) as well as the goal (*upeya*) and Prapatti is the act of self-surrender to His Grace. There is an intimate relationship between the act of self-surrender to Narayana and the flow of Divine Grace. The act of sincere surrender opens the flood gates of Grace. Although taking refuge means essentially Liberation through Grace it also includes works because surrender requires the resolve to perfect one's act as well.

## The Three Components of Taking Refuge

The procedure of taking refuge consists of three components:-

*Phala-samarpana* - Abandonment of the hedonistic motive that self-satisfaction in some heavenly realm is the supreme end of religious practice, and the rejection of the concept that surrendering to God is a *means* to achieve this end. The true Prapannas realise their complete dependency on the Lord and recognise that the jiva proceeds from, depends upon, and exists for the pleasure of the Lord alone. They then give up all forms of egoism and spiritual self-gratification. One should understand that one is nothing to oneself, owns nothing, and does nothing independently of the Lord. One should renounce the ideas of agency (*kartrtva*), proprietorship (*mamata*) and self-interest (*svārtha*).

*Bhara-samarpana* - Renunciation of the sense of personal responsibility in the act of Liberation. Liberation is effected by the Lord Himself who is the Way and the Goal. It does not come by the will or desire of the individual. Prapatti or the Way of Surrender obviates the burden of guilt, self-effort and the consequences of error.

*Svarupa-samarpanam* - The actual surrender of oneself to God with the mindfulness of one's true nature (*svārūpa*) - being a mode or ray of the Divine, essentially pure and perfect and accepting that existential fact.

## The act of Taking Refuge

The actual act of taking refuge (*Saranagati* or *Prapatti*) consists of 6 components enumerated in the following verse:-

*anukulya sankalapah prati-kulasya varjanam |*  
*rakshishyati iti vishvaso goptrtva varanam tatha |*  
*atma-nikshepa karpanya sad vidha saranagati ||*

1. *anukulya-sankalpah* - The resolve to act in harmony with the Divine Nature. It includes the abandonment of ego (*ahamkara*) and entails vowing to be benevolently disposed towards all beings (*sarva-bhuta-anukulya*) based on the firm conviction that the Lord dwells within all beings. The qualities of a Prapanna that please the Lord are enumerated in detail in the 12th Chapter of the Bhagavad Gita entitled "Bhakti Yoga" (The Yoga of Devotion):-

13. Not hating any living being, friendly and compassionate to all, free from the notions of 'I' and 'mine', and regarding all pain and pleasure with equanimity, and forbearing;
  14. contented, constantly contemplating, self-restrained and firm in one's convictions, dedicating the mind and intellect to Me - such a devotee is dear to Me.
  15. He by whom the world is not disturbed, and who is not disturbed by the world, who is free from joy and jealousy, fear and repulsion - he is dear to me.
  16. One who is free from expectations, who is uncontaminated, skilled, impartial and free from anxiety, who has renounced every undertaking - is dear to Me.
  17. One who is full of devotion to Me, who rejoices not, nor hates, nor grieves, nor desires, and who renounces both merit and demerit - such a devotee is dear to me.
  18. He who is impartial to both foe and friend, honour and dishonour, who is indifferent to both cold and heat, pleasure and pain and who is free from all attachments;
  19. to whom both censure and praise are equal, who is silent (when praised or abused) and content with any condition, who has no home, who is steady of mind, and who is devoted to Me - dear to Me is such a person.
  20. But those devotees who adopt this ambrosial virtuous conduct (dharma) as taught above, who are full of faith and who regard Me as the Supreme - they are exceedingly dear to Me.
2. *pratikulya-varjanam* - is the resolve to abstain from acts which are not in harmony with the Divine Nature, these are the opposites of all the above virtues and also such prohibited acts which are mentioned in the Dharma Shastras such as intoxication, injuring other beings, despoiling the environment, lying, cheating, stealing, exploiting others etc.
  3. *karpanya* - the realisation of, and acceptance of the absolute impossibility to achieve Liberation from the cycle of reincarnation through one's own personal efforts in practicing the three *Yogas* - *karma*, *jñana* and *bhakti*. It is a feeling of complete helplessness.
  4. *maha-vishvasa* - complete faith in the saving Grace of God. It is the faith that He *alone* has the ability to liberate and that He *will* fulfil His promise to liberate those who take refuge in Him. *Maha-vishvasa* is the absolutely clear and distinct recognition of the omnipotence of Mercy and this is the central pivot and ruling motive of Prapatti Dharma. The Yoga of Devotion is the arduous building up of devotion from below, whereas Prapatti is the descent of Divine Grace into the realm of action.
  5. *goptrva-varanam* - the sincere request by the prapanna for the Grace and protection of the Lord, abandoning all other *self-initiated* means to achieve Liberation.
  6. *atma-nikshepa* - the governing factor of taking refuge is the offering of oneself to the Lord with the conviction that the opportunity for such self-dedication is in itself the result of Divine Grace. The postulant is fully aware of negative Karma; its causes and its results, but there is no act in the entire universe so evil as to exhaust the redemptive compassion of God!!

The forgiveness of the Redeemer presupposes the quality of *being forgiven* in the jiva, and a *change of heart* as well. The bestowal of Grace may be *unreserved*, but it cannot be accepted *undeserved*. The theory of “pretext” (*vyaja*) for granting Grace reconciles the ‘justification by works’ with the “justification by faith”, on the principle that a trivial cause can precipitate a mighty effect. The pulling of a lever can cause a dam to flood an entire valley. Similarly a sincere display of remorse, no matter how small, is enough to open the flood gates of Grace and Divine Mercy. The seed can only sprout in suitable soil and so too, Grace needs an pretext or an *excuse* to manifest itself. Even an act of unintentional merit is enough to elicit the flow of Grace.

## 4:5 Acharya-abhimanam - Resorting to a Preceptor

The Spiritual Preceptor - *acharya* - has an essential place in all the great Wisdom Traditions of the world. Taking refuge in an abstract and seemingly distant Divine Being is somewhat troublesome, but taking refuge in a learned, compassion, caring and wise person is much easier, as such a person is present and approachable. In this age of consumerism and “shopping” how does one know if a “guru” is genuine or not. There are many people who go from one spiritual teacher to another - shopping around for one who will tell them what they want to hear. There is also no lack of “Spiritual Teachers” who are quite willing to tell their disciples whatever they think they want to hear in order to enjoy some economic benefits and thrill of power.

According to the orthodox Vedic tradition the credentials of the acharya are established from the lineage or *sampradaya*. to which he/she belongs. No knowledge is considered as valid unless it comes from a Preceptor who belongs to an authorised lineage and actually practices the teaching and lives a spiritual life. The greatest of all spiritual masters in the Srivaishnava Sampradaya was Ramanuja. There is nothing that can be added to or subtracted from his teachings. Therefore all contemporary acharyas must confine themselves to re-interpreting the teachings of Ramanuja to suit changing social circumstances - not inventing new doctrines. Taking refuge in a bonafide acharya is an integral part of Saranagati. One cannot learn about the Ultimate Truth from the Scriptures through personal reading and self-interpretation - the teaching must come from an authority. In matters of health one does not consult a doctor who is self taught, one goes to a specialist who has studied in a recognised school of medicine. In the same manner in order to understand the Ultimate Truth as it really is, one goes to a properly qualified acharya.

Prior to his death Ramanuja acharya nominated 75 disciples to act as acharyas for the Vaishnava community that he had organised. Their function was to administer the sacrament of initiation (*pancha-samskara*) to all who requested it. Most of the chosen acharyas were householders and there are still many of their descendants today who continue the tradition. The descendants of the original 75 acharyas are known as *svayam-acharyas*.

Nowadays it is customary to take initiation from one of the Abbots (*matadhipati*) of the numerous monasteries (*maths*) that are found attached to all the main Vaishnava temples in the South.

## Definition of an acharya

The term acharya means *one-who-teaches-by-example* and according to the Agamas all acharyas - must be possessed of the following qualities.

1. They must be strict followers of the Vedic tradition and therefore faultless in conduct. *vaidika-agresar*
2. They must have unflinching faith in God. *sraddhalu*
3. They must be free of egotism. *nirahamkara*
4. They must understand the three sacred mantras along with the esoteric meaning. *mantravit*
5. They must be able to explain the meaning of the Scriptures to others in a skilful manner. *pravacana-nipuna*
6. They can be living as a householder pursuing the Four Aims but should be free of attachment. *nissangha*

The acharyas must be of unimpeachable conduct and above all, compassionate. The prospective disciple should observe and test them until convinced of their noble character, learning and compassion. The function of an acharya is to interpret and explain the teachings of the Scriptures in harmony with the teachings of the previous acharyas in the lineage (*Sampradaya*). The acharya is not permitted to formulate and transmit personal theories and indulge in arbitrary self-interpretation and speculation. All new commentaries (*bhashyas*) on the Scriptures are backed up with copious quotations from previous acharyas to prove that the present rendering is true, in spirit, to the original.

The acharya once chosen and accepted should not be treated as an ordinary person, but as a manifestation of the *Mercy of God*. The acharya is presumably a selfless person dedicated to helping others without any selfish motivation other than altruistic compassion for sentient beings. The acharya is a direct link between the Prapanna and the Lord, and as such deserves the highest respect and adoration. One should surrender completely to such an acharya because it is only in a spirit of humility that one can learn anything from another. As long as pride and ego have control over the mind one can never absorb or assimilate and practice the teachings. With self-discipline obtained from the service of the acharya one becomes fit for the practice of the dharma.

It is important to note that the Advaitic concept of the acharya taking on the balance of the disciple's karma has no place Srivaishnavism. In the philosophy of Advaita it is taught that there is no difference between the Guru and the disciple - they are one in essence - the difference is only imagined, but the Guru is more enlightened than the disciple. By initiating disciples the Guru takes on personal responsibility for their spiritual advancement. If the disciple succeeds the Guru is benefited, if the disciple fails the Guru is detrimented.

In Srivaishnavism the Guru and the disciple are separate entities united only in the service of the Divine. The Guru acts as an intermediary between the Prapanna and God, the Guru links them together, the relationship is essentially between the Prapanna and Bhagavan. The

disciple surrenders to God through the Guru, but the surrender is not to the person of the Guru but to the Guru as the personification of the Grace of God. God himself accepts the Prapannas and showers his Grace upon them and grants them Salvation. The Guru has no personal advantage or disadvantage in the spiritual progress of the disciple, nor should he ever think that is actually contributing to the emancipation of the disciple. Any such feelings on the part of an acharya are a violation of the three components of Prapatti (*phala-samarpanam*, *bhara-arpanam* and *svarupa-samarpanam*). Some of the Tegalai acharyas have taught that Ramanuja has performed Prapatti for all successive generations of Prapannas and therefore one need only surrender to Ramanuja who will then carry us across to the feet of the Lord.

## Categories of acharyas

The acharyas are described as belonging to one of two categories:-

1. *anuvrtti-prasanna-acharya* - those who have to be sought out and persuaded with much perseverance to impart their knowledge. It is only after rigorous testing of the prospective disciples that they consent to teach. Most of the acharyas prior to Ramanuja were of this category.
2. *kripa-matra-prasanna-acharya* - these acharyas teach their disciples out of compassion for their plight as ignorant and lost Selves, and are constantly seeking an opportunity to impart their knowledge, and are willing to teach anyone who will but listen. Ramanuja and most of the acharyas who came after him are of this class.

## The Reprehensible Delusions of Preceptorship

Pillai Lokacharya has described in *Srivachana Bhushan* (308 - 310) the three reprehensible delusions of preceptorship which must be avoided by the acharya at all costs. These are:-

1. The delusions of 'preceptorship' - thinking of oneself as *the* preceptor - an acharya should think of himself as simply a *conduit* of the Lord's Grace and not as a teacher of sacred lore, this awareness prevents the acharya from developing the egotistical notion of being a great and learned person and having custodianship of spiritual knowledge.
2. The delusions about the role of the disciple - thinking of the disciple as *one's* own personal adherent - the disciple should rather be thought of as a *co-disciple* of the same acharya. Thus the acharya avoids the potential for exploitation inherent in the relationship.
3. The delusions arising from the process of instruction are of four categories:-
  - a. seeking to gain financially from the tuition fees.
  - b. the delusion that one is actually facilitating the liberation of the disciple.
  - c. the delusion that one is assisting the Lord in his salvific agenda.
  - d. seeking or expecting social companionship or service from disciples.

## Finding an Acharya.

In the wisdom tradition of the East it is axiomatic that the acharya will only come when the disciple is ready. In order to obtain such an acharya, the following 6 factors must be present in the aspirant:

1. Love of God	<i>isvara sauhardam</i>
2. Freedom from animosity	<i>adveshah</i>
3. Perpetual advancement towards the goal	<i>abhimukhyam</i>
4. Providential merit (good karma)	<i>yadrccha sukrtam</i>
5. Frequent association with the devotees.	<i>sattvikaih sambhasanam</i>
6. Divine Grace	<i>bhagavad kataksa</i>

When these factor are present then the acharya certainly appears in order to mediate the act of Prapatti. The acharya then delivers the teachings by means of the three wisdom tools.

## The three Wisdom Tools.

1. *sravana* - listening attentively to the teaching. One must attend lectures and discourses (*upanyasams, kala-kshepams*) and listen attentively to the teachings of the Alvars and Acharyas. Fifteen minutes of attentive listening can be more valuable than reading stacks of books!
2. *manana* - reflecting upon the doctrines. One must reflect at great length upon the teachings using reason and logic to understand them from all angles. Any teaching which one does not understand should immediately be clarified from the acharya, repeated questioning is the way to understanding and wisdom.
3. *nididhyasana* - meditation upon the teaching, assimilating it and making it part of one's life. This is the difference between knowledge (jñana) and realisation (vijñana). Knowing all the facts is not sufficient, one must *realise* and *apply* the teachings in every aspect of one's daily life. Knowledge without practice is useless and a burden, like a donkey carrying a load of sandal wood. The donkey can appreciate the weight but not the fragrance!

The Law-giver Manu has said;-

arṣam dharmopadeśam ca veda-śāstra avirodhena |  
yas tarkena anusandatte sa dharma veda netaraḥ ||

The man who uses reason & logic; which does not contradict the Veda, to investigate the teachings of the sages on Dharma - he alone and no one else truly knows.

Manu 12;06

There should be no passive learning or blind acceptance of teachings and doctrines. In the Vedic tradition the student who constantly questions, inquires, argues logically and thinks deeply is the one who is praised. Ramanuja himself often differed in opinion from his teachers

and debated with them on many issues. Learning is stressed above all else and the greatest gift is the gift of knowledge. Learning is the cause of brahminhood and even Manu says that a brahmin devoid of learning is not a brahmin.

## 4:6 Ashtanga Yoga - The Eightfold Yoga

It would not be proper to complete this section on the Spiritual Process without referring to the most commonly known process in the west - *Ashtanga Yoga*. Natha-muni one of our principle acharyas was said to have been the last great yogi.

The Srivaishnava version differs slightly from the method systematised in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE by Patanjali. The paradigm is that which is taught in the Pancharatra texts. Although not an integral part of the teaching of Ramanuja it can nevertheless be a useful framework for one's spiritual practice as it incorporates a physical training program which is essential for health and well-being. The following is the format given in the *Naradiya Samhita* chapter 30.

### **Yama - self-restraint;**

1. *anrshamsyam* - absence of vindictiveness or prejudice, 2. *kshama* - forgiveness, 3. *satyam* - truth, 4. *ahimsa* - non-injury to any living thing, 5. *damah* - self-control, 6. *arjavam* - directness, simplicity, 7. *danam* - generosity, 8. *prasadah* - eating only that which has first been offered to God. 9. *madhuryam* - sweetness, gracefulness, 10. *mardavam* - gentleness.

### **2. Niyama - self-regulation;**

1. *shaucah* - purity; environmental, physical and mental, 2. *ijya* - worship of God, 3. *tapah* - self-discipline, 4. *svadhyaya* - study of the Scriptures and teachings of the acharyas and self-contemplation and assessment, 5. *upastha-nigraha* - sexual restraint, 6. *vrata* - seasonal religious observances, retreats etc. 7. *upavasah* - periodic fasting, 8. *maunam* - practising noble silence.

**3. Asana** - practicing of yogic postures (hatha yoga) the purpose of which is to develop and maintain health and condition the body for the practice of meditation (dhyana).

**4. Pranayama** - regulation of breath - exercises for controlling the breathing which exerts a purificatory effect upon the mind and the psychic nerve centres (chakras).

**5. Pratyahara** - practicing the withdrawal of the mind from the objects of the senses - the process of taming the mind - a preliminary exercise as preparation for concentration.

**6. Dharana** - practice of concentration - in Srivaishnavism this takes the form of contemplation upon one of the iconic manifestations of Lord Vishnu, with the use of the sacred mantras appropriate to that form.

**7. Dhyana** - meditation proper; this is understood as a state of continuous visualisation of the Divine Form of the Supreme Lord. Ramanuja describes this as thought-flow likened to an unbroken flow of oil into oil. It is a state which arises naturally after one becomes proficient in concentration. Meditation is not a “doing” it is a state of “being”. Technically speaking, one cannot *actively* meditate, the process of contemplation leads one into a meditative state which is spontaneous. As long as one is *trying* to meditate nothing will happen.

**8. Samadhi** - a state of transcendental consciousness in which one is totally absorbed in the object of contemplation to the exclusion of all else. The subject - object awareness disappears.

It can take many years of contemplation before a serious state of meditation is achieved - remember there is no goal beyond the process itself! The practitioner who expects immediate results is likely to become frustrated and disillusioned and renounce spirituality altogether. As a means to self-liberation it is not recommended but as a basis for one’s personal spiritual practice it can be very useful. So this practice of *ashtanga yoga* and specifically meditation can serve as an adjunct to one’s practice.





## Chapter 5



### The Obstacles to Spiritual Practice



### (*Virodhi Svarupam*)

The spiritual path is metaphorically described in the Upanishads as “the edge of a razor” (kshurasya dhara) because of all the dangers inherent upon it. The spiritual path is beset with difficulties, obscurations and obstructions and as such is traversable only by those with courage, determination and insight. There are five categories of obstacles upon the spiritual path which have to be recognised and avoided by the aspirant. These hindrances arise from various misconceptions that we have accumulated over lifetimes of misinformation and indoctrination.

- |  |                            |
|--|----------------------------|
| 1. Mistaken identity.                        | <i>svarupa-virodhi</i>     |
| 2. Theological misconceptions.               | <i>paratva-virodhi</i>     |
| 3. Misconceptions about the purpose of life. | <i>purushartha-virodhi</i> |
| 4. Ignorance of the means to Liberation.     | <i>upaya-virodhi</i>       |
| 5. Offences of commission and omission.      | <i>prapatti-virodhi</i>    |

#### 5:1 Mistaken Identity

When we are asked the question “who are you?” we immediately reply by giving our name. But the name is merely a device that differentiates between members of the same family and between members of the society, it does not answer the real question of who we really are. Every other attempt at answering this question produces similar inadequate replies. We may identify ourselves with our family, city of origin, with our nationalities, race, religion, interests, sexual preferences, profession and a thousand other props. All of which are essentially functional identities - we identify ourselves by what we are in relation to others. Every way we try to define ourselves is to further perpetuate difference - “them and us.” None of these props can possibly describe the *real* Self and they are all aspects of *spiritual ignorance* manifesting in five ways;-

1. Not having any inkling as to one’s true nature. *tamas*
2. The association of the sense of “I” (the Self) with the body/mind complex. *moha*
3. A keen desire for sense-gratification. *Maha-moha*
4. The experience of frustration and resentment at the obstruction to personal gratification. *tamisra*
5. The feeling of the loss of part of oneself in the loss of the objects of enjoyment that are dear to one. *andha-tamisra*

These forms of ignorance which all arise from a mistaken identification of the *Self* with the *body -mind* vehicle, lead to the following states which are the causes of suffering and perpetuate the cycle of births and deaths.

- Identification of the Self with the body/mind complex (*dehatma-abhimana*) leads to stress, mental agitation, mood swings and depression.
- Delusion that one is completely autonomous (*svatantrya*) leads to frustration and anger at not being able to achieve one's goals or matching up to the ideal that one has set for oneself, or meeting the expectations of others - family, friends, society, peers, colleagues etc. against whom we identify ourselves.
- A physical identification leads to perpetual servitude to others (*anya-sheshatva*) such as spouse, children, friends, boss, pets etc instead of God. Everyone in the world stands in the relation of server to someone else and reluctant, begrudging service to others is fraught with disappointments, disenchantment and frustration.
- Imagining that one can bring about Liberation through one's own efforts (*vishaya-pravanya*) leads to spiritual egoism, pride, feelings of superiority and self-complacency, as well as the negative experiences of frustration, doubt, depression and disenchantment with spiritual life because of the failure to progress, all of which are obstructive to real spiritual development.

## 5:2 Theological Misconceptions.

Misconceptions about the nature of God are hindrances to Prapatti, they are;-

- The belief that some God created the world and set it in motion but takes no interest in it - a theory known as *Deism*.
- Considering that any of the administering devas of the universe are equal to the Supreme Godhead in granting *Moksha*.
- Considering the Incarnations (*Avataras*) to be mere human beings.
- Thinking that the Icons (*arca-avatara*) in a temple are mere objects of stone or wood whose purpose is either decorative or simply to act as a focus for supplicatory prayer.
- Considering that the Grace of God is irrelevant or unnecessary for liberation which can be achieved through works and personal effort.

There are two views of the Ultimate Reality (Brahman). The way in which we view the Godhead and the actual nature of the Godhead itself. The nature of the illimitable Godhead is a great mystery and essentially incomprehensible to us limited human beings. Therefore all discussion about God within any spiritual tradition is from the subjective, limited, conditioned individual perspective and never from the understanding of the objective, unconditioned Absolute Godhead.

Ramanuja declares in the Gita Bhashya that the positive theological conviction for a Srivaishnava is as follows:

1. Whenever the abstract term *Para-Brahman* (the Supreme Being) is used, it should be taken to refer to the Personal God.
2. God is devoid of even the slightest trace of negativity,
3. He possesses an inestimable abundance of auspicious and excellent attributes such as omniscience, power etc., boundless and essential to Him.
4. The sole purpose of the whole of the Vedas and the Vedanta is to reveal Him.
5. He is the sole cause of the universe
6. He is the ground (substratum) of the entire universe.
7. He is the essential actuator of all.
8. All works [secular and religious] enjoined in the Vedas are to be done as sacred acts which are service to God.
9. When propitiated in this manner the Lord confers the results of the practice of *Dharma* (Right living), *Artha* (Financial advancement), *Kama* (Pleasure) and *Moksha* (Liberation). (Please note that He “confers the results” - which are due to one’s own actions. God is not capricious in awarding joy to some and sorrow to others. Please see the discussion on Karma.)

### **The Siva-Vishnu conflict**

The Acharyas teach, and many Srivaishnavas believe in the exclusive nature of devotion to a personal God named Vishnu/Narayana, the One and Only. They deny both Ultimate Divinity and salvific power to other Divinities mentioned in the Vedas and Shastras such as Siva, Ganesha, Subrahmanya, Durga etc. They aver that liberation from Samsara comes only through the grace of Vishnu/Narayana and His incarnations - Krishna and Rama. This has historically led to many outright conflicts with the devotees of other aspects of the Godhead. Both camps denouncing each other and denigrating the form of Deity worshipped by each.

This, in my opinion (and I stress that this is *my personal opinion* and not that of the sampradaya) is a parochial sectarian view and cannot be consistently supported by the Vedas or by reason. The Puranas when taken in a limited sense have fuelled this conflict by their very methodology. In the Saiva Puranas the Supreme Being is identified with Siva; Vishnu and Brahma are made subordinate to him. In the Vaishnava Puranas on



the other hand Vishnu/Narayana is identified as the Supreme Being and Siva is demoted to being his servant! Each sect quotes only its own Puranas and denounces the texts of the antagonists. Both sects quote extensively from the Vedas, Upanishads, and other literature to support their respective dogmatic and parochial claims to exclusivity. When the Sacred texts are read as a complete whole, the pattern that one sees emerging is that each and every aspect of the Divine is taken up, elevated to the post of Supreme Being and praised as such. All other “devas” are declared to be manifestations of the same deva that has been exalted. The logical conclusions that one reaches is that **all** are in fact aspects of the One and Only Godhead viewed from different angles, according to the devotion of the individual, and so all are equally the Godhead!

It is impossible to ignore the fact that Saivism is indeed as dogmatic in its claims of exclusiveness and as vibrant and passionate in its single-minded devotion to Lord Siva as any sect of Vaishnavism; and if numbers counted, the Saivites would win hands down!

In chapter 3 of the Svetasvatara Upanishad the Supreme Being is unequivocally identified with Siva/Rudra. In the Gita (10;23) Krishna declares that he himself is Siva. The Narada Purana 1:6:48 declares:- *The person who differentiates between Vishnu, Shiva and Brahma, goes to an exceedingly terrible hell!*

The Narayana Upanishad declares that Brahma and Siva proceed from Narayana and then later declare that Siva is indeed Narayana, it goes on to state that:-

*narayana evedam sarvam* - “Narayana is all this”

Mahanarayana Upanishad 24:1 declares - *sarvo vai rudrah* - “Everything is Rudra”

According to logic if  $A = X$  and  $B = X$  then  $A = B$ .

In the Mahabharata (Santi Parva 341) Krishna expounds the connection between Himself and Siva and declares that they are one and the same Being appearing in different forms. Ramanuja propounds the concept that names refer not to the external form but to the essential nature of a thing. So when the Vedas invoke the Godhead through different names they do not refer to different ontological entities but to the Unitary Godhead of which they are all embodiments. So when hymns are addressed to Agni, Indra, Siva, Ganesha etc they all refer ultimately to *Narayana* - the Ground of all Being. If we accept this teaching in its broadest sense as referring to the Absolute Reality and not cult deities, we can then achieve spiritual harmony, and avoid sectarianism and exclusivity which both end in spiritual arrogance, intolerance and conflict.

The reason why the sages have elevated each aspect of the Godhead to the position of the One and Only God is to foster personal devotion to that form alone. All names and forms are of the same Supreme Reality - to praise and elevate one is not to depreciate the others. So one may choose any form one wishes. As long as one realises the unity of the Godhead manifesting through all names and forms and does not think of them as separate and competing divinities.

*Tiru Vai-moli 10.10.4*

O you who are exquisite fertile cosmic matter  
 O you who mingled inseparably within it!  
 O glorious flame of the skies!  
 You are Brahma and Siva within [this domain],  
 O sage who created the divine ones and human beings!  
 How could you abandon me with my burden  
 and let me stay here?

Nammalvar is cast into a dilemma: What to call God if He is One. God is not Two; He is not Three; if He is One. How to address Him?

Knowing that You are One God, and wanting to praise You, Krishna O  
 Mysterious Lord, how shall I address you?

Shall I call You as The Colourful Effulgent Pleasing God?  
 Or, shall I address you The Lord with Matted Locks,  
 Who has the Delicate Pleasing Moon on His Head?  
 Or, shall I just say, The Four-Faced Lord?  
 [All I know is that] all created beings praise You and worship You with  
 gladdened hearts like hovering bees making joyous sounds.  
 O, Our Dear Lord known as The One Pleased by tulasi flowers.  
 You are verily Inscrutable *Mayon*, The Mysterious Lord.

I stress again that this is MY PERSONAL opinion .

### 5:3 Misconceptions about Life's Goals

These are obstacles which arise due to a misunderstanding of the Four Goals of life or their incorrect application.

Engaging in self-gratification and unrestrained sense-indulgence as an end in itself without adhering to the guidance of the Dharma is a serious obstacle to Spiritual life.

Pursuance of money and economical prosperity as an end in itself without being philanthropic, and the squandering of precious resources in contradiction to the Sacred Laws is a hindrance to Prapatti.

Even the practice of Dharma itself can prove to be an obstacle if it is done with the idea of obtaining rewards in this life or in the hereafter. All the obligatory daily rituals (*nitya-karma*) and periodical duties (*naimittika-karma*) which are laid down in the Dharma Shastras are to

be meticulously followed with the idea that they are Service (*kainkaryam*) to God, and not for any rewards that they may produce. These daily rituals intended only for the twice-born (dvijas) like sandhya-vandana, brahma-yajña, tarpanam etc are never to be abandoned, even by renunciates (*jiyar*).

Common devotees are under no obligation to follow any of the rituals and practices laid down in the Dharma Shastra. The only duty is to make offerings and chant the holy mantras whenever possible. But what they should do is consider that their chosen occupation is their *svadharma* and act accordingly.

## 5:4 Misconceptions about the Means

In order to foster firm and unadulterated and single-minded devotion, the aspirant should avoid:-

- considering that his/her liberation can be brought about by supplicating any other form of God other than Sriman Narayana.
- Considering that it is possible to attain Liberation from Samsara through one's personal efforts in study, meditation and mystical practices or through works, rituals and pilgrimages is self-delusion.
- Considering that the personal pursuit of self-realisation (*kaivalya*) is equal to surrender to the Lord. (It is in fact an advanced form of spiritual egoism and as such is also a serious obstacle).

## 5:5 Offences in Prapatti Dharma

These are offences that one may commit after being initiated and making a commitment to the Srivaishnava spiritual path and should be avoided by those who are trying to perfect their *sadhana*. They fall into three categories;-

### **Offences against the Lord (bhagavad-apacara).**

- Considering that the divine incarnations:- Rama and Krishna were simply ordinary men with some extraordinary power.
- Speculating about the material from which the sacred icons are made instead of being mindful of the Divine Nature pervading them.
- Stealing the temple's property or personally utilising anything that was dedicated to the Lord. Stealing the temple property oneself, aiding and abetting the theft, or receiving these stolen goods, whether solicited or unsolicited.
- Considering that the Self is separate from the Godhead. Non-perception of the essential

interconnectedness of all beings in the Divine leads to Pride which is the delusion of Self-importance. This attitude then develops feelings of separateness and otherness between oneself and others; and between oneself and God. This dynamic is said to be the offence of *atma-apaharana* - stealing of the Self from the Lord to whom it actually belongs.

### **Offences against the Devotees (bhagavata-apacara)**

These offences can be committed either by devotees themselves or by non-devotees;

- Confiscating or appropriating the property of a devotee.
- Wrongfully accusing a devotee of a crime.
- Abusing a devotee.
- Assaulting a devotee.
- Neglecting or showing disrespect to another devotee.
- Inquiring into the caste or social status of a devotee.
- Treating non-brahmin devotees as socially and spiritually inferior to brahmin devotees.

The offences against the devotees are considered to be worse than the offences against the Lord Himself.

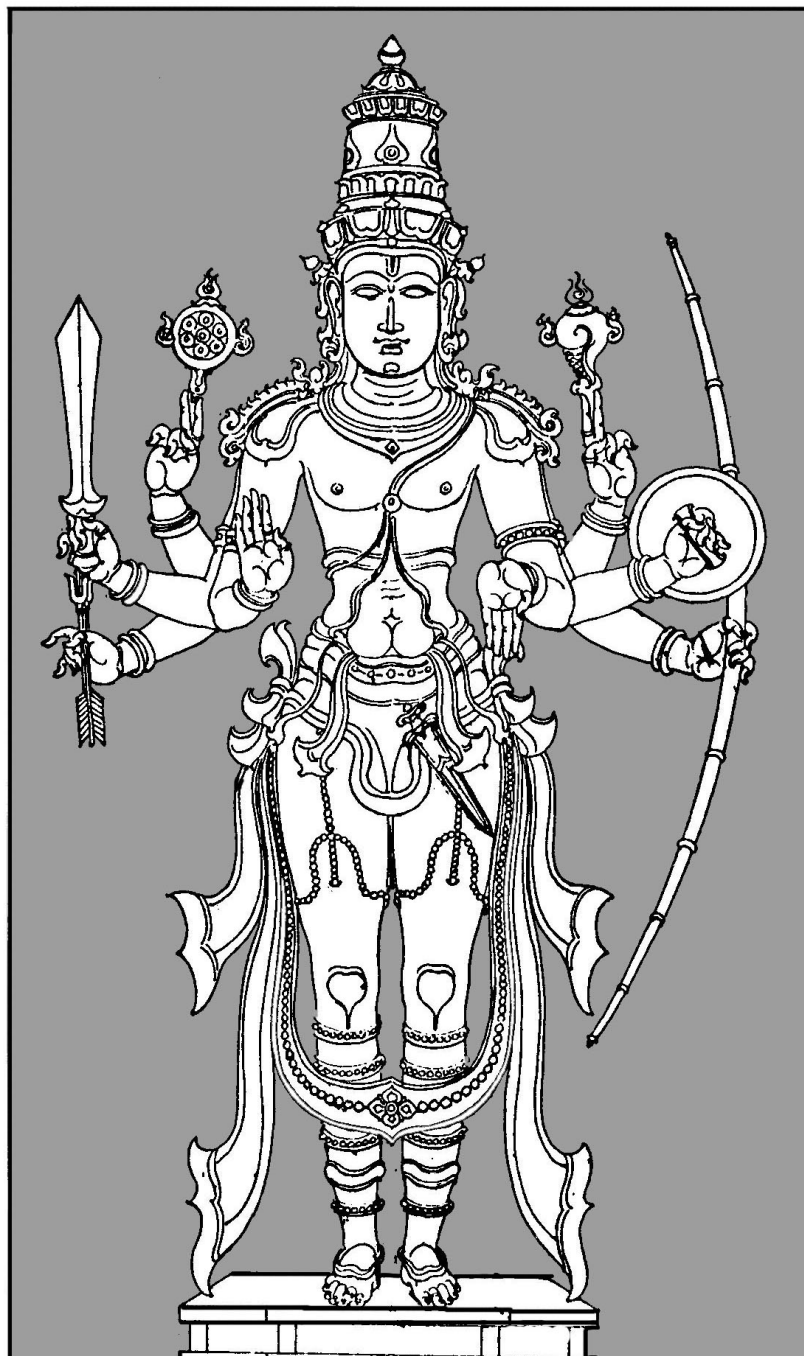
### **Offences against the acharyas (asahya-apachara)**

Any offence committed against the spiritual Preceptor is considered the worst of all offences. They are known as *asahya-apachara* which means an offence which is unbearable to the Lord. They are the hardest of all to forgive because the acharyas have abandoned everything and dedicated their lives for alleviating the sufferings of others. These offences which are enumerated in the Dharma-Shastras are;-

- Addressing the acharyas by their personal name, issuing instructions to them, requesting service of them or treating them as equals.
- Wearing an upper garment in their presence.
- Speaking to them whilst reclining on a bed, eating or with the face turned away.
- Sitting on a seat higher than that of the acharya.
- Using the acharya's seat, bed, books or other implements without permission.
- Mimicking their walk, speech or deportment.
- Saluting them from a seat or carriage without having descended.
- Greeting the acharya while holding implements in one's hands.
- Stretching out the feet towards them, holding one's knees, or clasping the hands behind the back in their presence.
- Breathing on them or spraying spittle on them while talking to them in close proximity.

(The hand or hem of the garment should be held over the mouth when talking to the acharya from close quarters).

- Rendering service to the son or the wife of the Preceptor by massaging them, assisting them in their bath, washing or anointing their feet or arranging their hair.
- Laughing in the presence of the acharya without putting the hand over the mouth.





# Part 2

## Miscellany

### 1. The Filters of Comprehension

It can be seen that our perception of the world and our place in it and the way in which the teachings will be received and applied in daily life through the chosen framework of our spiritual practice, depends upon three essential subjective factors:-

1. Individual disposition (*svabhava*)
2. The level of intellectual and spiritual development (*bhumika*)
3. The ability or competency to understand, digest and respond. (*adhikara*)

Each person is a conditioned individual and each is at a different level of development with a different capacity to comprehend abstract teachings and respond to them in terms of integrating them into one's life - and it is this recognition of *fundamental difference* and *individuality* which is the parameter of the spiritual teaching of Sanatana Dharma. The Divine responds to us not *collectively* but individually, so that each person's experience of the Divine is different because each and every being is a ray of the Divine and is thus directly and intimately related to the Godhead. The union with the lover, which is the highest form of worldly pleasure is experienced by each person differently. In the same way each person will have their own way of approaching and relating to God.

The overriding principle in spiritual teaching is for the acharya to individualise all teachings and instructions to the *sadhakas* (practitioners) with reference to these three filters.

These three factors differ from individual to individual and there not all teachings and sadhanas are suitable to be adopted by everyone. Just as medicine is meant for specific conditions one does not self-medicate but approaches a qualified medical practitioner to receive diagnosis and guidance, in the same manner, in order to overcome the "illness of Samsara" (suffering), the aspirant should approach a competent spiritual preceptor in order to receive a program of "rehabilitation".

### 2. Initiation - samashrayanam

The formal process by which one performs *sharanagati* or takes refuge is known as *samashrayanam* and is a *sine qua non* for all members of the Srivaishnava community. It is similar to confirmation of the Christians or Bar-mitzvah of the Jews, and one is not accepted as a fully fledged member of the community until the ceremony has been performed.

The prospective *Prapanna* approaches an acharya and requests to be accepted as a Srivaishnava. The acharya after satisfying himself as to the sincerity of the aspirant, sets a

time for the ceremony of the Five Sacraments (pañca-samskara). According to the Scriptures these sacraments should be conferred upon all who sincerely request them, and the supplicant should not be examined too closely for faults since in fact there are strictly no qualifications for taking refuge!

*striyah sudras ca anulomah kalyana guna samyutah |  
yadi tani shishyatve grhniyat krpaya guruh ||*

If a woman, or Sudra or outcaste applies for initiation and is possessed of good qualities, then he/she should gladly be accepted by the guru.

Vishvamitra Samhita 3:27.

The Five Sacraments which are administered are as follows;-

1. *tapanam* - the emblems of Lord Vishnu viz. the conch and discus, are branded on the left and the right shoulder respectively. This is intended to purify one from negative Karma, and render the body fit for devotional service. It marks one for life as a servant and the property of the Lord.
2. *pundram* - the sectarian mark (*namam*) which is a representation of the feet of the Lord is marked with white clay (*tiruman*) upon the forehead and eleven other parts of the body. The line in the centre is drawn in red (*sricurna*) and symbolises Lakshmi.
3. *dasya-nama* - the disciple is given a new name which indicates one's eternal status as the servant of God. It is usually one of the names of Vishnu with the suffix **dasa** (m) or **dasi** (f) added - *servant of*. The new name among Tegalais is usually accompanied by **Ramanuja dasan**, because Ramanuja is accepted as the primary servant (*mula-dasa*) and all others accept the status of the *servant of the servant* of the Lord (*dasanudasan*). According to the Tegalais, Ramanuja has already done Prapatti for all subsequent generations of his followers and therefore one should take refuge in him.

All Vaishnavas are on an equal level in the eyes of the Lord, and there are no differences based on caste or social status. In the Vedic social arrangement Dasa is the suffix added to the names of the Sudras, so among Vaishnavas even the Brahmins are called servants and thus the entire Vaishnava society is on an equal level.

4. *mantra-upadesha* - the disciple is taught the three sacred mantras (*rahasya-trayam*) which, from today onwards he/she is required to recite daily.
5. *yaga* - the disciple is given an Icon of the Lord and is instructed in the proper method of worship. For the common initiates it takes the form of an actual act of worship only.

### 3. Disciples - Shishyas

According to the Pancharatra Agama disciples are divided into four categories;

1. *samanya shishyas* - ordinary disciples who receive the five sacraments (pañca-samskara) and have suitable faith in the Lord and the acharya and render some sort of service when called upon to do so, but do not study the philosophy or doctrines of the faith - usually due to lack of ability to do so. These form the bulk of society and for them basic rules and regulations are given and simplified devotional practices.
2. *putrakas* - spiritual aspirants who after being initiated apply themselves to the study of the philosophy and teachings of the acharyas and the Alvars. They usually remain with the acharya and are like his sons.
3. *sadhakas* - These are disciples that have undergone the Tantric initiation and are actively engaged in meditation and the worship of a particular deity. They are entitled to officiate at all kinds of ceremonies and rituals including temple worship.
4. *acharyas* - These are very advanced disciples who are qualified to teach and interpret the sacred literature and the mantras. They are the elders of the Sampradaya and are entitled to initiate others.

#### Characteristics of a Disciple (SVB 321)

The characteristics of a sincere and worthy disciple are as follows;-

- Desists from all aims other than spiritual practice and devotional service.
- Is eager to adopt spiritual practice and discipline.
- Feels oppressed by Samsara and is eager to be liberated from it.
- Is humble and respectful.
- Is free from envy.

#### The Principles of Discipleship

The general principles of discipline which all disciples should try to practice are as follows;-  
They should:-

- follow the way of the previous acharyas.
- not discuss the merits or demerits of others.
- take no interest whatsoever in assessing and judging the defects and errors of others.
- constantly reflect upon their personal imperfections and shortcomings.
- do everything possible to remain free of confusion, and should apply themselves vigorously to further study.
- constantly be aware of and acknowledge the quality of the Lord's protection.
- never show disrespect to the acharya, to the sacred mantras or to the sacred icons.

### The Disciple Contract (SVB 326 - 346)

According to Pillai Lokacharya the acharya and shishya must demonstrate a mutual beneficial and affectionate relationship.

- The shishya should be committed to ensuring the physical and material wellbeing of the acharya.
- The acharya should be committed to teaching, instructing and guiding the shishyas in their spiritual practice and the unfolding of the inherent spiritual qualities which are - knowledge, firm resolve, universal compassion, good conduct and service.
- The acharya should never display anger towards the disciples, the disciples should never offend the acharya.
- Both acharya and shishya have the right to mutually reprimand each other at any time. But this criticism must be constructive and done in private - the faults of either should never be revealed in public to others.
- The disciple should never give personal property to the acharya neither should the acharya request such property.

## 4. Spiritual Practice - Sadhana

After initiation the sincere Prapanna undertakes a program of spiritual practice and development. This process is known as sadhana which means that whereby one achieves perfection or success (siddhi). This spiritual practice or *sadhana* consists in achieving the two excellences - **sama** = internal control over the mind, intellect and ego and **dama** = control over the five sensory organs and the five organs of action - which are the partial expressions of the natural attributive consciousness of the jiva; through the harmonious development of thought, feeling and will. By the cultivation of these expressions the jiva gradually reveals its true nature. The basic principle is that every jiva is essentially pure, divine, fully enlightened and already liberated, the problem is that this natural state of perfection has been enshrouded by negative states of mind, identification with personal shortcomings, presence of afflictive emotions and ignorance. The purpose! of *sadhana* is to remove the negativity and ignorance and to reveal the true nature of the Self - not to obtain a new or different state of consciousness.

There are two levels of Spiritual Practice or *Sadhana*. The threefold minimum requirement is elaborated upon in the Gita Chapter 17. The threefold focus of spiritual practice is: *Yajna* - sacrifice, *Tapa* - self-discipline and *Dana* - generosity. Krishna says in the Gita;

18;5. The acts of sacrifice, generosity and self-discipline should not be relinquished; but should be performed. For sacrifice, philanthropy and self-discipline are the purifiers of the wise.

And Ramanuja comments:- Why? Because these three practices performed consistently and perpetually until death are an aid to the erasure of previous Karmas which stand in the way of the fulfilment of one's spiritual development.

## The Threefold Practice

This is a basic framework of spiritual practice as taught by Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita. He also declares that whatever one's personal circumstances may be these three should be unfailingly practiced by every one until death and should never be abandoned. All those who call themselves practicing "Hindus" should adhere to this spiritual regime. This program is universal in its application without reference to one's social standing.

### 1. Yajña - Sacrifice.

*Yajna* in its narrow primary sense refers to the ancient Vedic Sacrifices that are now redundant. In its secondary and applied sense it refers to the Five Great Sacrifices which are:-

*pitru- yajña* - the sacrifice to the parents and ancestors.

*deva- yajña* - the sacrifice to the gods.

*brahma- yajña* - the sacrifice to the sages.

*bhuta- yajña* - the sacrifice to the animals.

*manushya-yajña* - the sacrifice to human beings.

Every person is born with a debt to these five categories of beings and throughout one's life these debts must be discharged.

The two dynamic factors of Yajna are:- 1. A sincere feeling of gratitude and 2. the demonstration of that heartfelt gratitude.

- The gratitude to our parents is expressed through honouring them, caring for them while they live and making offerings for their well being (*sraddha*) once they die.
- The gratitude to the gods is expressed through the periodic making of offerings.
- The gratitude to the sages and preceptors who, renouncing personal interest, dedicated their lives for guiding humankind is expressed through the study of the sacred teachings and passing them on to others or at the very least being cultural informed.
- The gratitude to the animals and eco-systems is expressed through feeding birds and other animals and also through active support of environmental issues and ensuring the preservation of the natural habitat.
- The gratitude to society without which we could not exist is expressed through ensuring that other members of the society are cared for. In our own lives we can express this through offering hospitality to guests and to strangers. There are three minimal requirements which must be offered to a guest; a seat, water to drink, and kind words.

## 2. Tapas - self-discipline

Gita 17;15 - 17 expounds the threefold discipline of body speech and mind as follows:-

*Kayika Tapas* - physical self-discipline

- The adoration of the gods, the initiated ones, spiritual teachers and enlightened beings;
- Personal hygiene and cleanliness of environment.
- Integrity - harmony of thought and action;
- Sexual-restraint - avoidance of sexual misconduct and exploitation of others through considering them to be objects of self-gratification.
- Non-injury - avoidance of causing pain to any being.

*Vachika Tapas* - Discipline (Tapas) of speech consists in -

- using words that do not disturb others,
- which are true,
- agreeable and are
- directed at the benefit of the other,
- the practice of the recitation and study of Scriptural texts.

*Manasika Tapas* - Discipline of mind consists of -

- Peace of mind - the absence of anger, desire, delusion, pride, greed;
- benevolence - being devoted to the good of others;
- silence - control of expression;
- self-restraint - focusing one's thought flow on the object of contemplation;
- perfect mindfulness - being constantly aware of the Spiritual dimension of life, the underlying Cosmic Force.

Ramanuja says that this threefold self-discipline (Tapas) should be practised with the utmost faith through deed, speech and thought, having no consideration of any reward and with the conviction that it is to be done simply as adoration of the Supreme Person.

## 3. Dana - generosity

Generosity is compassion in action; the practice of philanthropy arises from the perception of the same Divine Principle in all beings. When one realises "sameness" with others, one develops not only empathy with their needs and suffering but also a desire to alleviate that suffering to the extent possible. *Dana* is service - the giving of one's resources and self to help others whenever and wherever possible.

The person who renders service to the world even at the risk of his life, and is devoid of rivalry and jealousy, is said to be an excellent man both here and hereafter. Narada Purana 1:4:74

## The Seventhfold Practice Sadhana Saptaka

**1. viveka** (discrimination) - apart from the general connotation of this word which is discriminating between the material and the spiritual, the beneficial and the harmful etc., for Srivaishnavas this term refers to more particularly to discrimination in relation to one's eating habits. The mind and body are the instruments of spiritual knowledge and devotional service respectively. They are comprised of the food we eat, and must therefore be kept healthy and pure by regulating the type of food that is consumed. Purity of diet is considered as essential for the purity of mind and subsequent spiritual practice. There are three defects (dosha) associated with food which should be avoided.

*jati-dosha* - food which is of unsuitable origin eg. meat, fish, onions, garlic, alcohol, fermented food and drink, drugs, tobacco etc.

*ashraya-dosha* - defective source - meaning food which is prepared and offered by an unknown person, an intoxicated person, a sick person, degenerate person, a menstruating woman or a person in a state of ritual impurity, or an immoral person.

*nimitta-dosha* - a contingent defect arising from the presence of an impure thing like a hair in the food, or the food having come in contact with an impure thing, such as the hem of a garment, being touched by someone's foot or food that was left uncovered overnight. Food that was tasted during the cooking process or smelt, and the leavings off the plate of another, or food or drink that has touched the lips of another person are all considered as impure and unsuitable for consumption by a Vaishnava.

(The rules regarding food and eating are quite complex and one should inquire of a practicing Srivaishnava for more details regarding actual practice.)

**2. vimoka** (non-attachment) - All resources are regarded as belonging to the Supreme Person and intended for the use of all beings on the planet. Whatever we accumulate for personal use should be regarded as a *borrowed article* of which we are merely the custodians. In this manner one should remain unattached to family, possessions, desires etc. Every effort should be made to care well for them but attachment should be discouraged. Everything we own and do should be offered up to the Lord.

**3. abhyasa** (practice) - Constant Dharma practice which includes the chanting of the names of the Lord, recitation of the sacred mantras, remembrance and retelling of His pastimes and glories, meditating upon Him, mindfulness of the Divine Presence pervading all beings and all things and practicing the teachings of the acharyas.

**4. kriya** (ritual) - the daily rituals are; worship of the Lord - *bhagavad aradhanam* - according to one's ability, the recitation of the three jewels (ratna trayam) and the Five Great Sacrifices (pancha-maha-yajña).

**5. kalyana** (virtues) - These are divided into two categories of moral and intellectual virtues. The moral virtues are;

*satyam* - Truthfulness.

*arjavam* - Straightforwardness, integrity and honesty.

*daya* - Compassion to all living beings.

*dana* - philanthropy - the active form of compassion where an attempt is made to alleviate the sufferings of others with whatever resources we may have.

*ahimsa* - Non-violence in word, deed or thought to any living being.

*indriya nigraha* - Control of the senses.

*kshama* - Forgiveness.

*tapas* - Self-discipline.

The intellectual virtues which should be cultivated are;

*grahana* - A quick grasp of Vedantic truths.

*dharana* - Retentiveness and recollection of lessons learnt.

*smarana* - A constant mindfulness and contemplation of the spiritual truths.

*pratipadana* - Exposition of the doctrines to others in a lucid manner.

*uha* - Cultivating the practice of inferring the unknown from the known.

*apoha* - Developing a competency for analogising ie. developing analogies and metaphors and drawing comparisons in order to illustrate difficult concepts.

*vivarana* - Cultivating a keenness for perceiving distinctions ie. between the true and the false.

*tattva-jñanam* - Developing a sincere interest in obtaining knowledge of all the facts relating to any subject.

**6. an-avasadhana** (cheerfulness) - Freedom from dejection and despondency owing to unfavourable circumstances, frustration of desires, or unfavourable conditions of time and place. One should also avoid the recollection or brooding over past sufferings and sorrows as this type of mental activity is unhelpful to spiritual progress.

**7. an-uddharshana** (non-exultation). - One should avoid over-excitement and rejoicing at any success one may achieve, but should rather cultivate inner-tranquillity and equanimity.



## 5. Daily Duties

The classical daily life of the orthodox Srivaishnava according to the pancharatra Agama is arranged into five activities called *pancha-kala-kriya*. These activities constitute the devotional service (kainkaryam) which is rendered to the Lord.

§ 1. *Abhigamanam* - The daily visit to the temple to pay one's respects to the Lord. Nowadays due to urban living it is not always possible to fulfil this duty, so the tradition is maintained by taking a few symbolic steps in the direction of the nearest temple or at least mentally recalling the sacred shrines.

§ 2. *Upadhanam* - Collecting the items required for the daily worship offered to the Lord eg. flowers, tulasi leaves, fruit, sacred grass etc.

§ 3. *Ijya* - The ritual worship of the Lord at the family altar. It consists of offering services to the Lord in the framework of what is known as the "five thrones" (*pancha-asana*);

*mantra-asana* - invocation and welcoming offerings.

*snana-asana* - ceremonial bath (abhishekam).

*alankara-asanam* - dressing and decorating the Icon.

*bhojya-asana* - offering of foodstuffs.

*punar-mantra-asana* - chanting of hymns in Sanskrit and Tamil.

*paryankasanam* - (at night) when the Lord is laid to rest.

The food that is offered to the Lord becomes *prasadam* (Grace) and the eating of it is called *amyaga*.

§ 4. *Svadhyaaya* - Daily study of the Scriptures and the Tamil hymns of the Alvar saints which are contained in the collection of 4000 hymns known as the Nalayira divya-prabandham. One should study a portion of them every day and spend some time teaching them to others and having discussions on these topics.

§ 5. *Yoga* - before retiring at night one should spend some time in contemplating the Form and qualities of the Lord.

Now that most of us live in a busy western, modern world, with the ever increasing demands, responsibilities and commitments to family and profession, it is well nigh impossible to practice any of the above duties. Nammalvar has given us an hint of the minimum offering required:-

O ye seekers of liberation, rise to your full stature, singing the praises of our griefless God; Serve Him with water pure, seeking no personal gain, burn incense before Him and offer flowers.

Tiruvaymoli 1:6:1

One who wishes to conduct some form of daily puja program can adopt a simplified format in which some flowers a vessel of water and some incense is offered daily - either in the morning or evening or at both times.

It is a good idea to spend at least half an hour a day in reading from the scriptures as well as meditating and repeating the Jewel Mantras.

## 6. Personal Conduct

The practising Srivaishnava must at all times and places remain dignified and humble and should refrain from improper conduct. The general guidelines for one's social conduct are as follows;

One should always try to act in accordance with time, place, circumstance bearing in mind one's essential status as a 'server' (kinkara) and the status of those with whom one is associating.

One should be aware at all times of maintaining one's own dignity and that of one's associates - even when having a disagreement one should always maintain the dignity of the person with whom one is disputing.

Music has a very powerful effect on the sub-conscious as well as the conscious mind. One should therefore avoid music which does not contribute to peace and the generation of a tranquil and loving state of mind.

Peer association and pressure is another important factor in one's development. One should assiduously avoid the company of those who are antagonistic to spiritual topics, hypocrites and rank materialists.

One should avoid all forms of public display of piety. All spiritual and religious exercises must be done in private. The simple chanting (japa) of the Sacred Names is the highest form of spiritual practice and should be done in private. While chanting the Holy Names one should not use a Japa-mala (rosary) in public places, while walking about, sitting or riding in a vehicle. The chanting should be done slowly and clearly in a whisper, and with full concentration. If interrupted during the chanting with a Japa-mala one should start again at the beginning. One should not prostrate more than twice in a temple.

One should avoid excessive and prolonged meditation; one good short meditation session of even 10 minutes with sincerity and concentration is better than ten years of half-hearted practice.

One should avoid requesting service or resources from others, but should always be ready to offer assistance and service whenever and wherever the need arises.

All superstitions, false beliefs and taking of vows are to be discouraged. A sincere Prapanna must not resort to Astrological remedial measures such as the use of gems, talismans and amulets for achieving well-being and prosperity - all of which are devices for avoiding one's Karma.

One must avoid and discourage all forms of extreme asceticism such as wearing matted locks, putting ashes on the body, fasting, piercing the body with needles, fire-walking and the rest.

Over anxiety about the future life and death should be avoided.

One should never pray for any material gain for oneself. One should pray only for knowledge (jñanam), devotion (bhakti) and dispassion (vairagya) and for the welfare of all beings.

All religious rites involving injury to living beings must be abjured and actively discouraged.

One should try as hard as possible to preserve the integrity of the family unit which is the basis of an ordered society. Couples should treat each other with respect, affection, love and compassion and work together in equal, mutual cooperation and harmony for the benefit of the entire society. Spouse and offspring should not be exploited or used as servants.

Any kind of adulterous dalliance with a married person is to be avoided. One should not touch their hair, body, clothes or ornaments. One should avoid joking with them in private, and one should not sit next to or on the same seat as a married person. Receiving or giving gifts to a married person is also to be discouraged.

## 7. Livelihood

A Srivaishnava should try to earn a living according to the principles of Karma Yoga as taught in the Bhagavad Gita. One's chosen profession or trade must be discharged with the idea that it is service to God (kainkaryam). All work is sacred and dignified. Whatever work is done should be done with perfect attention to detail and without being motivated solely by profit. In whatever way a Srivaishnava chooses to earn an living the following means are strictly forbidden;-

1. Begging or living on social security.
2. Living on the interest of money loaned.
3. Taking bribes.
4. Living by a profession or industry which directly or indirectly causes suffering to other beings such as the meat and leather industries, munitions industries, or brewing and selling of alcohol or drugs.
5. Superintending mines and factories is also forbidden because it can lead to corruption, harshness and exploitation of the poor and vulnerable. It also leads to depredation of the environment through deforestation and pollution which are considered as sinful activities by the Shastras.

According to the Lakshmi Tantra chapter 28;25. there are only seven legitimate ways for a Srivaishnava to make money:-

1. *daya* - inheritance
2. *labha* - profit from honest commerce and trade.
3. *kraya* - purchase of land and assets for the purpose of speculation.
4. *jaya* - winning of prizes or money in a competition
5. *prayoga* - through the application of sacred learning and performing of rituals ie.,

teaching and sacrificing for others in the case of brahmins and teaching in general and counselling for those who are not brahmins.

6. *karma yoga* - through a profession or a vocational job serving others.

7. *satpratigraha* - the lawful acceptance of gifts - that is, unsolicited donations.

## 8. Tadiya-aradhanam

There is a verse in the Padma Purana -

*aradhanam sarvesham vishnor-aradhanam param |*  
*tasmat parataram devi tadiyanam samarcanam ||*

(Lord Siva said) Of all forms of ritual worship the foremost is that which is offered to Vishnu. But higher even than that O Parvati, is service rendered to His own.

This teaching is most often taken in a very narrow sectarian sense as meaning feeding and offering *dashina* (gratuity) to Srivaishnavas or more generally as some form of service to Vaishnavas. But the higher teachings of the acharyas stress that life should be lived for the universal altruistic motive. The more encompassing the altruism the more precious, beneficial and in harmony with the Divine Will the life lived. In the Bhagavad Gita Krishna states that one who sees all beings in Him and Him in all beings truly sees. He also states that a devotee should be constantly engaged in the welfare of all beings (*sarva-bhuta-hite-ratah*). Rather than reinforce a closed sectarian bias we need to rid ourselves of all sense of divisiveness and separateness from others and base ourselves in spacious awareness of the Divine Principle pervading all beings. The acharyas teach us that we should live for the welfare of the world (*loka-sangraha*). Nanjiyar used to say that a Vaishnava is one who identifies with the suffering of other sentient beings. The entire Universe and all jivas form the “body” of the Supreme Lord. Therefore, from this cosmic perspective every entity is a scintilla of God, everything moving and immobile is *tadiya* - His own. Therefore every sentient and insentient being should be regarded as a part and parcel of God and treated as such. The welfare of the totality depends upon the harmonious working of each and every tiny part. Our service or *Kainkaryam* should be directed to the entire universe (*Vasudhaiva kutumbham*) and we should serve all sentient beings as if they were Narayana Himself.

There is a delightful story from the biography of Ramanuja which illustrates this point. A Muslim princess, Lachimar Bibi and her soldier companion by the name of Kubera were converted to Srivaishnavism by Ramanuja while he was residing in Melkote. After the death of Lachimar Bibi, Kubera renounced everything went to Srirangam and took shelter under Ramanuja. It is said that once a dog stole his bread as he was baking it, he ran after it calling out “Narayana! Wait let me smear a little ghee on it, so that you will enjoy it more!” Such was his capacity to see the Lord everywhere and in all things. This is the highest ideal of the concept of *tadiyaradhanam*, which should be striven for by serious Prapannas.

## 9. The Community.

The Srivaishnava community is divided into two sects known as *kalais*. The *Vadakkalais* ('northerners' - centred at Kanchi) who follow the teachings of the great acharya Vedanta Desikan, and the *Tenkkalais* ('southerners' - centred at Srirangam) who follow Manavalamamuni. Between these two sects there are 18 points of doctrinal dispute (*ashtadasha-bhedas* - see the appendix for detailed discussion).

Kanchi was the great academic centre of ancient India and base for all the various Hindu philosophical schools, as well as for Jains and Buddhists. The Kanchi Srivaishnava scholars were under pressure to defend their doctrines from the polemics of the other philosophical schools, they therefore became more conservative in theology, academia and ritual practice in order to be acceptable to the other orthodox schools. The Srirangam scholars were in an home environment and therefore all their preaching was to the converted with no need to rigorously defend their doctrinal positions. In this congenial atmosphere they developed along more liberal and informal lines. The principal difference between these two schools is that the Vadagalais place more stress on the Sanskrit Scriptural tradition and the Varna-ashrama Dharma system with its preservation of the social status quo. They are also more inclined to believe in justification by works rather than by faith - in accordance with Scriptural injunctions. The Tengalais on the other hand, lay greater stress on the vernacular Tamil tradition and are less concerned with preserving the caste status quo. The emphasis is more on Divine Grace than on works. The Vadagalai approach is that of the baby monkey that clings desperately to its mother (*markata-nyaya*). The Tengalai approach is that of the kitten that simply sits and cries for its mother, who then comes and carries it away by the scruff of the neck. (*marjara-nyaya*).

The principle acharyas of these two schools - Vedanta Desikan for the Vadakkalais and Manavalamamuni for the Tenkkalais represent the two extreme interpretations of the teachings of Ramanuja, but there are many acharyas of both schools who are more moderate and balanced in their views and more sympathetic to one or more doctrines of the opposing school. All the commentaries, hymns and discourses of all the acharyas are used by the Srivaishnava community as a whole.

Outwardly members of the two sects differ only in the application of the sectarian mark (namam) on the forehead. The Vadakkalais are distinguished by a white U with a yellow central line, whereas the Tenkkalais are distinguished by a white Y with a red central line. The vast majority of Srivaishnavas do not concern themselves with the details and subtleties of the theological controversies and are merely aware of some basic social differences. But even these are no obstacle to integration and harmony; inter-marriage between the two groups is quite common.

In addition to the 18 major points of doctrinal dispute, there are several minor differences. According to the Tenkkalais a sannyasi (monk) can pay and receive obeisance from all Vaishnavas even householders, he need not beg for his food and is allowed the use of metallic vessels. In the Vadagalai community the sannyasis are regarded as holier than ordinary Vaishnavas and therefore can *receive* obeisance but cannot do it in return to others. They can only accept meals offered by orthodox Srivaishnava Brahmins and are forbidden the use of all metallic objects.

In domestic worship the Vadakalais use a bell whereas the Tenkalais do not. Both communities use Sanskrit and Tamil with the former predominant amongst the Vadakalais and Tamil amongst the later.

If the annual Sraddha ceremony (death anniversary) falls on the Ekadasi day (the 11<sup>th</sup> day after the full moon and the new moon) the Tenkalais postpone it to the next day. The Vadakalais perform it on that day regardless. During the Sraddha the Tenkalais offer food to God first, then to the Nityas and the acharyas thereafter to the invited Brahmins. The Vadakalais offer the food to God only and not to the Nityas and acharyas.

The widows of the Tenkalai persuasion do not shave their heads or wear white garments or remove the tokens of marriage (Tali), while those of the Vadakalais like the Smarta women shave their heads and wear only white clothes after the death of their husbands. Some of the Tenkalai women wear the sari over their right shoulders, the Vadakalai women wear it over the left shoulder only.

In the matter of obeisance to the Lord enshrined in the temple, the Tenkalais do it only once, and mutual prostrations are allowed between Vaishnavas irrespective of age, caste or sex. Both the guru and the disciple can prostrate to each other. Among the Vadakalais prostration is permitted only by the younger to the older and never to a woman except the mother, elder sisters and the wife of the acharya. Only the disciple prostrates and the guru does not return his obeisance.

On the subject of prostration it is important to note that when one accompanies one's acharya to a temple one does not prostrate to God. If one meets one's acharya in a temple compound one does not prostrate because no prostration is done to anyone other than God in the temple compound.

In modern urban life the members of the Srivaishnava community can be classified as being either extrovert (*bahyam*) or introvert (*antaram*). The extroverts are the openly practising Vaishnavas and can be seen wearing the sectarian mark (*namam*) on their foreheads at all times, with tulasi beads around their necks, using their initiated name (*dasya-nama*) and speaking in the familiar humble phraseology referring to themselves as "*adiyen*" which means "I am a servant". The introverts who form the majority do not have any external signs of their faith and at the most may wear a single red line down the centre of the forehead.

Srivaishnavism is a proselytising faith and the community therefore consists of Brahmins and non-Brahmins who are usually known as *nambis*. Even non-Brahmins who are learned and highly spiritually advanced can become acharyas in the Tengelai tradition but in the Vadakalai tradition only those who are Brahmins by birth are entitled to become acharyas.

The Srivaishnavas recognise six stages in the development of devotional service and social communion:-

§ 1. *Advishi* - this is a passive state in which there is simply no ill-will towards the Vaishnavas or Lord Vishnu, but also no great attraction either.

§ 2. *Anukulan* - A stage in which one is sympathetic to the Vaishnavas and their doctrines,

visits Vishnu temples, experiences joy and personal upliftment during the festivals, and makes contributions to Vishnu temples.

§ 3. *Namadhari* - One who applies for and receives the Five-Sacraments and thus joins the community but does not necessarily study the doctrines or practice regularly and sincerely.

§ 4. *Mantra-pathi* - In this stage one begins sincere spiritual practice, studies the teachings of the acharyas and Alvars and chants the mantras regularly and tries to work on oneself to spiritually improve.

§ 5. *Ekanti* - One who devotes most of his time to spiritual practice, devotional service and the study and propagation of the teachings of the acharyas and Alvars.

§ 6. *Parama-ekanti* - the final stage in which one renounces everything and devotes his life entirely to spiritual practice and devotional service.



## 10. Women

A book on a Hindu sect would not be complete without some reference to the status of women. Westerners in general have a very negative impression about the treatment of women in India. And even expatriate Indians themselves (as well as those born within the Sampradaya) are very poorly informed about what the Scriptures have to say about women. Anyone who has spent time in South India will always remark how much more liberal and free the women of the South are compared to their sisters in the North. The simple reason is that in the North the Muslims ruled for 600 years and so their reprehensible attitude to women made quite an impact upon Hindu society as well. In the South the Hindus remained unaffected by their pernicious attitudes.

In Srivaishnava Society the women enjoy a large degree of freedom. They are responsible for the running of the household (and by extension- of society!) They are not obligated to perform any rituals other than helping the husband with his daily religious duties.

Women undergo the Pancha-samskara Initiation - usually with the husband or soon after marriage, but there are provisions for having it done alone. They are encouraged to read, study and chant the Divya Prabandhas and to do japa of the three holy mantras.

The following are a selection of verses from the Lakshmi Tantra (Chapter 43. 61- 72) on the subject of women and their status in the Pancharatra Tradition, how far it conforms to the prevailing attitude in society is a matter of serious concern.

A man of piety free from sin, consistently adhering to the precepts of the sacred Scriptures, performs those deeds that are not condemned by women and that please them.

A yogi should never abuse a woman, either in deed, speech or thought. Wherever I (Lakshmi) am, the realities are, wherever I am the gods too are.

Wherever I (Lakshmi) exist, merits too exist, wherever I dwell Krishna too dwells. I am the womanhood pervading the entire universe and inherent in all women.

He who abuses women, abuses Lakshmi herself, He who abuses Lakshmi abuses the entire three worlds.

He who bears ill-will against any woman, is ill-disposed towards Lakshmi herself. He who is ill-disposed towards Lakshmi is ill-disposed towards the entire universe.

He whose heart is gladdened by the sight of women - like moonlight, and who never entertains evil thoughts about them, he is most dear to me (Lakshmi)

Just as there is no sin whatsoever in Narayana or myself O Indra, neither in a cow, a brahmin nor a scholar of Vedanta.

In the same manner no inauspiciousness whatsoever exists in women O Indra.

Just as the Ganga and Sarasvati (rivers) are free of impurity & evil.

As also the Aruna river, so too are all women revered as being sinless. The fact that I, the Mother of the three Worlds, am the basis of womanhood, makes my power manifest in women. Thus a woman is the mother of the three worlds, a goddess full of abundance.

Knowing women as my direct manifestation, how can a yogi refrain from revering them? One should never hurt women, and should never even think of wronging women.

A yogi who wishes to attain the fulfilment of yoga, should always act to please women. He should regard all women as mothers, as goddesses as my very self.

Lakshmi Tantra Chap 43.

## Menstruation

Menstruation is a rather vexed subject among western educated women in particular. Often questions are raised as to why there are restrictions on a woman's activities during her period when it is a perfectly natural biological process and an integral part of womanhood etc. etc. etc.

Well, the simple answer lies in the matter of *Ritual Purity*, which does not conform to concepts of microbiology and infection and is not the subject of negotiation based on the latest social politics!

The presence of any exudate on the body is a disqualification for any ritual act, both in males and in females. In the presence of spittle, pus, urine, faeces, blood etc no-one is permitted to cook food for others or to enter a temple, or perform any ritual act whatsoever. So in the presence of the active flow of menstrual blood, women are relieved of the burden of cooking, cleaning or exerting themselves in any way.

In Indian society the entire burden of caring for the family and guests falls on the women. Mothers in general, and in the West in particular, do not get days off! So one of the aspects of this system of restriction is to give women three to four days of rest per month. In the extended family system there would always be someone else (like grandma) to maintain the household, but in the modern single family units it would be great to see the men doing the cooking, cleaning, caring for the children and serving their wives hand and foot during the



three days of their period!

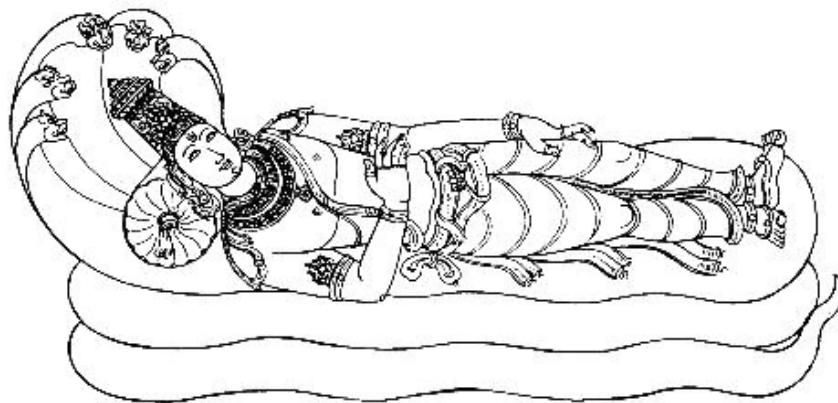
The activities which are restricted to menstruating women by tradition are;

1. Undertaking long journeys - for the obvious reason of discomfort, inconvenience in changing sanitary products etc.
2. Spinning, knitting or doing needle work - due to the belief that a negative mental state imparted to one's handiwork can negatively affect others that use it.
3. Handling food or cooking utensils for the same reason - transmitting negative energies.
4. Sleeping on a bed or using furniture, cushions etc. - the reason being that there is the possibility of these objects becoming stained with blood and thus making them unfit for use by others.

In the past and even in rural India today the women are often sent to a separate room outside the compound during their periods but this is no longer practised in modern society.

Women are permitted during this period to concentrate upon their personal spiritual practice and to meditate and do japa (without the use of a japa-mala). Actually there is a rather remarkable verse in the Varaha Purana spoken by Lord Krishna Himself which says:-

Those men and women who rightly perform all the activities pertaining to my worship everyday, intent on Me (Krishna) are dear to Me and certainly attain Me, even if they (the women) happen to be defiled by menstruation. (Varaha Purana 142.48)



## 11. The 82 Conclusive Precepts of Ramanuja

Tradition has it that when death was drawing close Bhagavad Ramanuja delivered a final sermon in which 74 precepts were given. They are as follows:

1. The glories of preceptors and great devotees should be remembered before any other work is begun.
2. A part of the day should be set aside for praising and contemplating upon the glory of one's own preceptor.
3. A part of the day should also be set aside for reciting, studying and contemplating the works of Nammalvar and the other Alvars.
4. Service to one's own acharya and any other devotee (bhagavata) should be on a par. One should serve every devotee as one would serve the personal acharya.
5. One should have faith and reverence for the teachings of all the previous Acharyas.
6. Having come in contact with an acharya due to one's previous good Karma one should not revert to mundane affairs.
7. Upon waking one should recall to mind the discipic succession (guru-parampara).
8. When approaching the Lord in a temple or an assembly of Vaishnavas a prapanna should chant the dvaya mantra while prostrating to them.
9. When a learned person is recounting the glories of the Lord, pay due respect and do not leave in the middle of the discourse.
10. One should avoid becoming engrossed in the persistent enjoyment of sensual pleasures.
11. One should not waste time in reading books about worldly things, unrelated to any knowledge about the Ultimate Truth.
12. In the matter of sensual pleasures one should be cautious and restrained.
13. Attachment to the use of perfumes, flowers and similar decorative items is not recommended.
14. One should not cultivate an interest and relish for hearing about mundane affairs.
15. One should always be studying about the Lord (Bhagavad-vishaya) - about His incarnations, pastimes and salvific activity.
16. Association with those who identify themselves with the mind/body complex should be avoided.
17. Even Vaishnavas who are enchanted by the passions of the body and mind should be avoided.
18. Avoid associating with those who repeatedly talk ill of others.
19. To compensate for the inevitable association with materialists one should frequently have spiritual conversations with other Vaishnavas.
20. All contact, even by sight or conversation with those who deprecate the devotees and

who habitually obstruct the preceptors should be totally shunned.

21. Always cultivate the association of those devotees who regularly are mindful of their surrender to the Lord (by chanting the dvaya mantra.)
22. Avoiding those who follow other paths one should always nurture the association of devotees who know the right means to the Goal.
23. Always associate with those who know the three secrets and the three principles.
24. Do not mingle with those who are dedicated to the pursuit of material possessions and pleasures, but rather associate with people who are more beneficial.
25. Practice the repetition of the name of a devotee you do the name of the Lord Himself.
26. When addressing Vaishnavas or naming them one should always be humble and reverential and should use the plural form of address (considered polite in Tamil).
27. When one sees another Vaishnava, they should approach each other and salute in all reverence.
28. When Vaishnavas approach one should go forward to meet them and when they depart one should walk a short distance with them and then request permission to return.
29. When a Vaishnava greets you respond immediately and reciprocate, failure to do so is unbecoming and offensive.
30. Never consider yourself equal to any other Vaishnava.
31. Do not even show disrespect to the shadow of a Vaishnava.
32. Do not cast your shadow on Vaishnavas.
33. Having been in contact with non-devotees one should not then contact devotees (without having bathed).
34. One must refrain from self-congratulation and self-glorification in front of other Vaishnavas - be constantly mindful of your insignificance.
35. No one should ever be insulted or injured in the presence of Vaishnavas.
36. Do not neglect or look down on Vaishnavas even if they are financially deprived.
37. The Physical and the mental bodies of devotees who are endowed with devotion, knowledge and dispassion should be treated with particular reverence.
38. Devotees endowed with knowledge, devotion and dispassion must be honoured irrespective of the social class or caste into which they were born.
39. Even if the faults of a Vaishnava are brought to your notice such as low birth, neglect of duties, vices, engagement in sense gratification etc. do not mention them to others. Talk only about their positive qualities and good deeds.
40. In the presence of the Lord, devotees or acharyas one should even sit in a decent and respectful manner.
41. While sleeping take care that the feet do not point towards temples, or residences of devotees and acharyas.
42. To develop closer association with the Lord one should follow the teachings of the devotees (bhagavatas) and earnestly follow their directives and advice.

43. Service to the devotees is the sole purpose of life, affront to devotees will lead to self-destruction.
44. Without service to both Bhagavan (God) and Bhagavatas (devotees) one can never attain liberation but only degeneration.
45. The worship of the devotees (bhagavata) is superior to the worship of the Lord (Bhagavan). The tirtha and prasadam of the devotee are superior to that of the Lord Himself.
46. Bearing rancour towards devotees who are learned in the three principles and constantly intent upon them is very spiritually harmful to oneself and results in self-destruction. Revering such scholars and acting so as to please them is a sure means to Liberation.
47. When passing a temple or other structure indicating the presence of the Lord you should bow reverentially before them.
48. One should avoid glorifying the palatial buildings of governments.
49. The practice of the precepts is not a means to an end.
50. Practice of the precepts is in itself the goal.
51. Follow the precepts of the gurus and adhere to your religious conduct, avoid pursuing people who are worldly and irreligious.
52. When the divine qualities are being praised or retold, listen attentively and avoid commenting on them adversely.
53. The water of the Lord's sacrament (tirtha) should not be taken in the presence of non-believers.
54. Do not accept the *Sri-pada-tirtha* (sacramental washing of the feet) from those who do not know the three secrets (tattva, hita and purushartha) and the three principles (cit, acit and ishvara)
55. The water from the feet of the guru (*Sri-pada-tirtha*) and learned and devout Vaishnavas should be taken every day.
56. If you should be in contact with non-believers even by accident you should have a bath and take the *Sri-pada-tirtha* of the preceptor.
57. The sacramental water (tirtha) offered in the houses of non-devotees should not be accepted.
58. But if in the presence of the Lord in a Vishnu temple the tirtha and prasada can be taken even if non-devotees are around.
59. Tirtha and prasada must under no circumstances be rejected in a holy place.
60. In temples tirtha and prasada should never be refused even if one is fasting.
61. Icons in the houses of non-devotees should not be worshipped.
62. Even when insulted a Vaishnava should not attempt to retort or to confront.
63. Vaishnavas who are keen on obtaining everlasting joy should strive for the welfare of all devotees.
64. Once one has surrendered to the Lord one should not act against the Divine Will even if certain comforts are attained thereby.

65. All food consumed should first be offered to the Lord. Even flowers, fruit, scents and similar things should not be accepted if they are not at first dedicated to the Lord.
66. An offering to the Lord should not be selected according to one's personal preference.
67. The offering should be pure, fresh and unsullied.
68. All offerings should be distributed as a sacramental meal, it should not be consumed in gluttony.
69. A devotees should not consume food seen or tasted by others.
70. Money and valuables donated by those dis-inclined towards devotional service should not be accepted even if they are given unasked.
71. All the rites & ceremonies prescribed by the Shastras must be performed with the utmost dedication and spirit of surrender.
72. To consider an icon of the Lord to be a mere statue, to consider the preceptor to be like any other person, to grade Vaishnavas into categories, treat tirtha and prasada as mere water and food, to regard Sriman Narayana as one of many gods - will lead to backsliding and retardation of spiritual progress.

Upon realising that this was in fact the last sermon the distressed disciples the Acharya then gave one the last sermon in which he stressed 10 points;-

1. Those who have surrendered to the Lord (prapannas) should consider that everything that happens to them is ordained by the Lord, and therefore should never complain no matter how much misery or suffering is involved. Lamenting would indicate conduct that is inconsistent with the doctrine of Surrender (Prapatti) which has been done. The Surrender should be total and irrevocable and should not even for an instant be suspended or treated in a casual way.
2. The mosaic of occurrences in a person's life is due to past karma consisting of actions, emotions and thoughts which are done by the individual alone. This being the case there is no cause for lament - lamenting and whingeing makes one a disbeliever in the Law of Karma - all the vicissitudes of life should be faced with undaunted courage.
3. Work should not be done as a means to an end.
4. All work should be done merely as service to the Lord.
5. Serve the great devotees (*bhagavata uttamas*) with sincerity and study and understand the *Sri Bhashya* from them. These higher ideals are to be propagated everywhere for the benefit of humanity.
6. If the *Sri Bhashya* cannot be studied and propagated then one should at least study the teachings of the Alvars (*Divya Prabandham*) and propagate them in public places.
7. If even this cannot be done then attend to the cleanliness and upkeep of the temples, and ensure that offerings of flowers and decorations etc are made.
8. If even this cannot be done then build a retreat at Tiru-narayana-puram (Melkote) and simply live there.

9. If even this cannot be done then simply remain where you are and chant the dvaya mantra with full concentration and faith.
10. If this too is considered beyond your capabilities then simply resort to the service of a spiritual preceptor who is endowed with knowledge, devotion and dispassion; with humility and devoid of egoism - There is no other short-cut for leading a spiritual life.

## 12. Offences in Icon Worship.

There are 34 offences which have been enumerated in the Varaha Purana they are as follows;

1. Approaching the Icon of the Lord without brushing the teeth.
2. Touching an Icon after having sex (without bathing).
3. Entering the temple after touching a menstruating woman.
4. Touching the Icon without having washed the hands after seeing a corpse.
5. Touching the Icon after having touched a corpse without having bathed.
6. Entering a temple directly after visiting the cemetery (without having bathed).
7. Interrupting the liturgical proceedings to answer calls of nature.
8. Entering a temple wrapped in a blanket.
9. Lying, gossiping, praising or deprecating another deity or person in the presence of the Lord.
10. Touching the Icon against the procedural rites - in other words when unauthorised to do so.
11. Performing ritual functions in an angry mood.
12. Using forbidden flowers in the worship.
13. Touching the Icon in the dark without having lit a lamp.
14. Worshipping the Lord wearing unwashed garments. (Silk or woollen garments need not be washed everyday but only as the need arises whereas cotton garments must be washed every day.)
15. Worshipping the Lord wearing the garments borrowed from others.
16. Wearing shoes during worship.
17. Tasting the food or smelling the flowers before they are offered.
18. Combing the hair, or clipping nails or spitting in the vicinity of the temple.
19. Eating meat prior to worship.
20. Drinking alcohol prior to worship.
21. Engaging in the rituals with an upset stomach.

22. Carrying an umbrella while circumambulating the temple.
23. Weeping or lamenting in the temple.
24. Entering a temple after having anointed and massaged the body with oil.
25. Offering incense without offering flowers.
26. Opening the gates of the temple without sounding the kettle-drums.
27. Stretching the feet towards the Icon or turning the back towards it.
28. Sitting with one leg across the other during worship.
29. Wearing an upper garment while saluting the Lord.
30. Not prostrating to the Lord in the temple or saluting with one hand.
31. Sleeping or eating in the temple.
32. Sitting upon an elevated seat in front of the Lord.
33. Stealing or using the temple vessels or paraphernalia for oneself.
34. Observing untouchability during festival processions.
35. Stealing the jiva (*atma-apaharanam*). The jiva is considered to be the thing most precious to the Lord, therefore pride is considered to be theft of the property of the Lord and as such is a grave offence.

## The Eighteen Points of Doctrinal Dispute

### *Ashtha-dasha Bhedas*

The classical eighteen points of doctrinal dispute became codified during the 18th Century. The Vadagalai scholars base their arguments on the works of Vedanta Desikan and the Tungalais consolidate their position on the basis of the teachings of Pillai Lokacharya and Manavallamamuni. I personally being a Westerner affiliated with the Tungalai Sampradaya but free from all sectarian scruples follow the middle path taught by our teacher Ramanuja and therefore accept some of the Vadagalai and some of the Tungalai arguments. While presenting the various arguments I have taken the liberty of commenting on these arguments under the heading “*Metgalai*” meaning “Westerner”.

### 1. The Nature of God’s All-Pervasion

**Vadagalai** Everything in the universe is comprised of *anus* (atoms) which are the smallest particles of matter. What we mean by God being omnipresent or “all-pervasive” is that God pervades everything in the entire Universe *except* the jiva. The jiva is atomic in that it is the smallest particle of consciousness and subtle and as such cannot be permeated by God. If it were so, the jiva would no longer be subtle and would pertain to the category of a gross object.

**Tengalai** Not so! God’s ability to permeate and pervade surpasses the human ability to conceptualise and to understand. God is the *greatest of the great* and therefore pervades the entire universe. He is also the *subtlest of the subtle* and can therefore inter-penetrate even the jiva. The power of pervasion is like that of *genera* which co-inheres in every individual of a particular species. For example “cowness” is present in every member of the species.

**Metgalai** We accept the Tengalai position as being more reasonable.

## 2. The Nature of Lakshmi (Sri).

**Vadagalai** Sri has *essential pervasion (svarupa vyapti)*, the same as Narayana. They are coeval in that they both share the same essential nature and together they form a *dual* entity with a *co-operative* identity. Lakshmi is completely Divine as per the teachings of Lakshmi Tantra, and the personification of the Mercy of Narayana.

**Tengalai** Sri has *attributive pervasion (guna-vyapti)* and *corporeal pervasion (vigraha-vyapti)* — in other words she shares the same qualities or attributes as Narayana and shares the same manifest iconic form and pervades the universe. She does **not** have *essential* pervasion (*sva-rupa vyapti*). This means that Sri does not have essential divinity by nature as she is a jiva, but has the divine function of Mediatrix as a gift from God.

The *Mother-hood* differs from the *Father-hood* and again differs from the *child-hood*. The jiva is the child who has *attributive* pervasion only; this means that the jiva shares the qualities of bliss, consciousness, existence, purity and eternity with Sriman Narayana. Sri is the mother who has *attributive* pervasion as well as *corporeal* pervasion — which is physical pervasion of the universe. The father is Narayana who has *attributive, corporeal* and *essential* pervasion — which means that everything in the cosmos is a projection of Sriman Narayana and as such is pervaded by Him from within and without. It is this pervasive character which differentiates between these three principles. The function of Sri is to mediate (purushakara) between the jivas and God. She is of the same nature as the other jivas but is Immaculate and without Karma, she is not subjected to Ignorance (avidya) and being such she is in a perfect position to act as the Mediatrix.

**Metgalai** We accept the Vadagalai position as being more in accordance with Scripture (The Pancharatra Lakshmi Tantra). It is very hard to find Scriptural support for the Tengalai position on Lakshmi. There is a Puranic account of the birth of Lakshmi from the ocean of milk — being a descendant of the Bhrigu clan which would indicate her being merely a jiva who was accepted as consort by Narayana. But there is also abundant textual evidence of her being the Supreme Goddess, the Mother of the Universe the Primordial Being etc. The Tengalai position leads to “Spiritual Chauvanism” denying the inherently female aspect of the Divine. The Vadagalai position retains the concept of the Divine being a combination of both male and female principles which is more in accordance with common sense.



### 3. Powers of Sri.

**Vadagalai** Lakshmi has equal power with Sriman Narayana to grant liberation. In other words she too can serve as the Goal and the Means, one can therefore surrender to Sri only.

**Tengalai** Sriman Narayana alone has the power to grant liberation. Sri is the Universal Reconciler, the Mediatrix between the jivas and Sriman Narayana. She is not fully divine and therefore being a jiva herself, she has a natural affinity and compassion for the jiva. She also has an intimate relationship with the Lord and therefore is in a position to influence Him to grant liberation but she herself cannot do it.

**Metgalai** We again lean more towards the Vadagalai position on this. Perhaps Sri chooses not to act on her own behalf, but the Tengalai position is hard to support from Scripture.

### 4. Concerning God's Grace (Prasada).

**Vadagalai** Divine Grace is *co-operative*, that is; it is earned through the performance of acts of merit (punya), it comes as a reward for the self-initiated efforts made by the spiritual aspirant. Sriman Narayana can use any excuse He chooses for bestowing Grace, but it does not come completely freely without some good deed on the part of the individual, however slight it may be.

**Tengalai** Divine Grace is *irresistible* it is the free gift from Sriman Narayana given to whomsoever He may choose. It cannot be *earned* in anyway through any form of spiritual or worldly practice such as good works, charity, sacrifice, worship, study etc. But we do agree that Sriman Narayana does use *yadrcha sukrta* (accidental good works\*) as an excuse for bestowing Grace.

\*Accidental good works are deeds that have unintentional positive effects. For example weary travellers may use one's veranda without permission for a rest. Or a man chasing a cow around a temple in order to catch it, is considered to have piously undertaken to circumambulate the shrine.

**Metgalai** We agree with the Tengalai position.

### 5. Concerning God's "Maternal" Love (vatsalya).

The term "vatsalya" which describes one of the qualities of the Lord, conveys the idea of the love of a cow for its calf. The cow in the stall bellows for its calf and out of natural love and concern allows the milk to ooze out even though the calf may not yet be sucking.

**Vadagalai** Sriman Narayana's maternal love (*vatsalya*) for the jiva means that He turns a blind eye to one's faults and ignores the transgressions one has committed (*dosha-adarshitvam*). Although He also continues to ignore all the transgressions committed after Prapatti, He still requires some atonement and administers some form of light punishment to the errant Prapanna.

**Tengalai** The maternal love of Sriman Narayana is so overpowering that He actually *relishes* (as it were) the faults and errors of the jiva (*dosha-bhogyatvam*), because they present Him with a *pretext* (*vyaja*) for showing more compassion and forgiveness. There is no need for atonement for transgressions committed after Prapatti.

**Metgalai** We agree with the Tengalai position but caution against neglect of one's spiritual practice and socio-religious duties (anti-nomianism) which is a possibility inherent in the Tengalai position.

## 6. Concerning God's Compassion (*daya*).

**Vadagalai** Sriman Narayana's compassion is such that it produces in Him a desire to *relieve* the suffering of the creatures (*para-dukha-nicakshire*).

**Tengalai** Sriman Narayana's compassion is such that He cannot bear to see suffering and it actually causes a *vicarious suffering* in Him.

**Metgalai** We agree with the Vadagalai position, because the idea of God experiencing any kind of suffering is anathema to his inherent perfection.

## 7. Works (*karma yoga*) and Gnosis (*jñana yoga*).

**Vadagalai** These two paths taught in the Bhagavad Gita are *not* a direct means (*upaya*) to God, they are ancillary to the path of Devotion (*bhakti yoga*), which is the principle means to Liberation. They are integral accessories to Bhakti Yoga.

**Tengalai** Any of these three means (*karma yoga*, *jñana yoga* or *bhakti yoga*) may lead directly to liberation if done in the spirit of Self-surrender (*Prapatti*). In each case it is the motivation and mind-set of the individual which is the determining factor.

**Metgalai** We agree with the Tengalai position as this is more in accordance with the teaching of the Bhagavad Gita.

## 8. Taking Refuge in God. (*Prapatti*).

**Vadagalai** Prapatti is a self-initiated act (*upaya*) like bhakti, jñana and karma Yogas and is therefore one among four ways or returning to Godhead, although it is the best.

**Tengalai** Prapatti is the method *par-excellence* and the only valid means. It is the means and the end and therefore not a 'method' like other Yogas (*upayas*).

**Metgalai** We agree with the Vadagalai position as again being more in accordance with the general spirit of the Gita.

## 9. Who should resort to Prapatti?

**Vadagalai** Those who are incapable of following Bhakti Yoga and other means because of caste restrictions or gender (women), or sheer helplessness or despair should resort to Prapatti.

**Tengalai** Prapatti is for *everyone*, be they capable or incapable of other means. Prapatti is the *sine-qua-non* of Salvation. To attempt to qualify it as better or worse and to compare it to the other means derogates from its greatness.

**Metgalai** Both positions are equally defensible.

### (11) Conditions for taking Refuge — Bhagavad Gita chap 18; 66.

*Sarva dharmam parityajya mamekam saranam vraja |  
aham tva sarva-papebhyo mokshayishyami ma suca` ||*

**Vadagalai** This verse means; —

“If you are *incapable* of following other paths (dharma) as ordained by the Scriptures (Sastra), then give them up and surrender to me, I shall liberate you from the effects of all sins (Karma), fear not.”

**Tengalai** Not so! It means;—

“If you are capable of following other paths (dharma) try as hard as you can. It is not capability alone that will save you. So why not lean on Me, rather than depend upon your own strength, deficient as it is.

The former is an attitude of self-assertion and self-perpetuation, the latter is one of self-effacement and self-sacrifice.

**Metgalai** We agree with the Tengalai position because the term used is *sarva dharman parityajya* — an injunction to abandon **all** self initiated attempts to achieve liberation

## 11. Qualifications of Prapatti

*Question:*— Does the development of qualifications (virtues)\* required for the other paths of Jñana, Karma & Bhakti Yogas also apply to Prapatti?

\* These virtues or characteristics to be developed are enumerated in Gita chapters 12 and 13.

**Vadagalai** Yes indeed.

**Tengalai** No! In fact they disqualify. The only qualification that is required is the feeling of complete helplessness and despair and the realisation of the jiva's natural and essential intimate relationship with Srīman Narayana (Lakshmi Tantra chap 17; 70). This spiritual relationship is one of dependency on the part of the jiva and paramouncy on the part of Srīman Narayana.

**Metgalai** We agree with the Tengalai position.

## 12. The Components of Prapatti

**Vadagalai** The sixfold components of Prapatti are *preliminaries* for the reception of Divine Grace. They are; —

1. A vow to live in harmony with the will of God.
2. Avoidance of unfavourable actions.
3. Implicit faith in the providence of God.
4. Supplicatory attitude.
5. Self-surrender.
6. Humility (destitution of means).

**Tengalai** Genuine Prapatti stands in no need of any prelude. It is the substantive *per-se* which engenders the afore mentioned six components. They are therefore not postulates but corollaries of Prapatti — in other words they follow Prapatti, they do not come before. The mere fact that one even considers taking refuge is indicative of the Grace of God.

**Metgalai** We agree with the Tengalai position, the desire to surrender comes first, prompted by feelings of dejection and helplessness, and this can be done by anyone at any time or place without any regulation whatsoever. The Prapanna then undertakes to live in harmony with the will of God and to avoid all unfavourable actions etc. Over time one's faith naturally increases.

## 13. Does Prapatti earn Grace?

**Vadagalai** Yes! In Karma Mimamsa portion of the Vedas, all actions are taught as having an imperceptible residual seed (*apurva*). So in the path of Knowledge (*jñāna yoga*), Prapatti being the “seed” corresponds to *apurva* and matures to produce fruit in the form of Liberation. The Prapanna requests the Lord's Grace through the act of Prapatti and Srīman Narayana accepts and responds to that request (*svagata-svikara*).

**Tengalai** Regarding Prapatti as a means of *compelling* Grace is tantamount to bartering with God! (“I will surrender to you if you will Liberate me!”) Prapatti is an act of complete and unconditional surrender and resignation which leaves God the master of the situation. Srīman Narayana accepts the Prapanna of His own free will, uncompelled and unasked (*paragata-svikara*). The so-called seed of *Apurva* is none other than the Grace of God.

**Metgalai** We agree with the Tengalai position.

## 14. Penalty for a lapsed Prapanna.

**Vadagalai** If a Prapanna, subsequent to the act of Taking Refuge, lapses into error, the atonement consists of repeating the act of Prapatti again and again, as often as one backslides. Or one may also perform one of the several forms of atonement that are mentioned in the Dharma Sastras in order to propitiate the Lord and elicit His forgiveness.

**Tengalai** Not so! Prapatti is the act of Taking Refuge and freely and completely surrendering oneself to Sriman Narayana. It is done once and for all. This one act contains all the potential for redemption and therefore cannot be cancelled by a moral lapse, or subsequent acts of folly! The atonement for lapses consists of recalling to mind the saving Grace of the first efficacious act of Prapatti. This contrite repentance is enough, and the act of Prapatti remains in tact and unabrogated. There is no need for penances or atonement.

“**Metgalai** We agree with the Tengalai position.

## 15. Varna-asrama — Caste and Social Duties

**Vadagalai** The duties and vocations (*karma*) prescribed in the Dharma Sastras and Agamas for each of the four castes (*varna*) and four stages of life (*ashrama*) are to be followed by the Prapanna in accordance with his or her birth in order to *please* Sriman Narayana and should therefore be strictly adhered to with that end in mind.

**Tengalai** It is presumptuous to think that the activities of the Prapanna such as caste or social duties actually *please* Sriman Narayana. They may or they may not, it is not for us to judge the effects on Sriman Narayana of actions initiated by ourselves. Prescribed caste duties and Dharma should be done as a way of setting an example to others and simply as *service* to God! Philanthropy — the welfare of all sentient beings (Loka-sangraha) should be the motive behind our actions and not the pleasing of God, which is audacity on the part of the Prapanna.

“**Metgalai** We agree with the Tengalai position.

## 16. Concerning Caste Status and the Prapanna.

**Vadagalai** Even after Prapatti, the caste distinctions as per the Dharma Sastras are to be retained in respect of all Prapannas. A low caste Prapanna is to be given only verbal respect by Prapannas of the higher castes and they should never actually be treated like Brahmins. Sudras who become Vaishnavas are to be treated with greater respect than non-Vaishnava Sudras but never on a par with brahmin Vaishnavas.

**Tengalai** All distinctions of caste are to be *disregarded* after Prapatti and *all* Prapannas are to be given equal respect and treated with complete equality. There are no divisions of caste or status amongst the Prapannas — all are to be treated with equality.

**Metgalai** We most strongly agree with the Tengalai position on this one!

## 17. Concerning Grades of Bliss in Liberation (Moksha).

**Vadagalai**     There are no grades of bliss whatsoever in Moksha.

**Tengalai**     Some variation does exist, but it is not qualitative or quantitative. The variation arises in respect of the duties assigned to various Liberated Jivas (muktas).

**Metgalai**     We agree with the Vadagalai position.

## 18. The Nature of Kaivalya Moksha

**Vadagalai**     This state of isolated Self-Realisation or state of Solipsistic Bliss achieved by the Yogis who follow the doctrines of Advaita and other impersonalist schools such as the Jains and Buddhists is temporary and can be a stage on the way to Final Beatitude consisting of dwelling in the Vision of the Divine.

**Tengalai**     Not so! It is a permanent state. The individual yogi considered it, desired it, strove for it and actualised it. It is also accepted as a form of Final Liberation and there is no more rebirth for one who has attained Kaivalya Moksha be they Jain, Buddhist or Advaiti.

**Metgalai**     We agree with the Tengalai position.

### Some Minor Points of Contention.

#### 1. Who gains by the act of Prapatti, the Jiva or Narayana?

**Vadagalai**     Attaining and being reunited with Sriman Narayana is gain to the jiva.

**Tengalai**     The jiva is gain to Sriman Narayana because He has been reunited with His most precious possession.

#### 2. Definition of Pervasion (*vyapti*).

**Vadagalai**     Pervasion (*vyapti*) is a spatial relation.

**Tengalai**     It is not merely a spatial relation, but an internal and external presence of God which is inscrutable and inconceivable by the human mind.

#### 3. Usage of The Sacred Mantram (Ashthakshari).

**Vadagalai**     When the sacred mantra (tiru-mantram) *Om namo narayanaya* is taught to non-Brahmins and women and recited by them, the Om is to be omitted.

**Tengalai** Not so! To be efficacious and remain complete the mantra has to be taught and recited by all as it is, without any modifications.

**Metgalai** We strongly agree with the Tengalai position.

#### 4. The power of Celestial Beings (Nityas and Muktas).

**Vadagalai** These two categories of beings have no power to *create* anything.  
**Tengalai** By the *command* of God they can do anything.

#### 5. Location of Kaivalya.

**Vadagalai** It is located in some realm of the *material* universe.  
**Tengalai** It is per se a *transcendental* state, hence it must be located in some realm of the *Spiritual* Universe.

#### 6. The acharya as mediator

**Vadagalai** Salvation is effected through the act of surrendering to the Lord under the guidance of the qualified acharya. The function of the acharya is to see that all the components of Prapatti are adhered to and to guide the Prapanna in the performance of proper service (*kainkaryam*).

**Tengalai** Love for the acharya is paramount and surrendering to a qualified acharya can substitute for Prapatti to the Lord. The wise and enlightened acharya is especially loved by the Lord and is to be considered as a partial manifestation of God. Therefore surrendering to a wise, skilful and compassionate acharya (*acharya-abhimana*) is actually better than surrendering to the Lord Himself.

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