



Sri Chakra

The Source of the Cosmos

The Journal of the Sri Rajarajeswari Peetam, Rush, NY



Blossom 11 Petal 2
April 2006

TEMPLE LORE

A Toronto devotee used to perform Sri Sukta puja late into the night on Fridays, sometimes staying in the puja room until 4 a.m. She spent ample time not on the puja itself, but on getting the preparations for the puja just perfect. Because no one in her family was interested in such intense worship, she always executed the entire task alone. Along with cooked food, fruits and flowers, it was her habit each week to offer a coconut to God.

One night, she was engrossed in the puja when she heard a loud crack behind her. It was about 3 a.m. and she was frightened that the sound came from outside. When she examined the area inside the puja room, she noticed water leaking onto the floor. The coconut had cracked open all by itself, and was split perfectly in half.

Upon asking Aiya what had happened, Aiya confirmed that that night, Devi had officially entered the puja room and was there to stay.



A Canadian devotee wanted to perform seva to God by donating blood, and offered to do it at a location near his home. Despite his desire to help others, he was turned away from the bloodbank for bureaucratic reasons. At that time, he was planning a trip to India to visit Puttaparthi Sai Baba, and found himself in Baba's ashram about two weeks later.

During the assembly, there was an announcement that they needed donations of a of an extremely rare blood type at Baba's free hospital. The devotee was overjoyed because that was his blood type! He and some others got on a bus and were taken to the hospital to donate. And for his good intentions, he not only received food after the donation—he received vibhuthi that was materialized by Baba, as well as a special dharshanam.

DID YOU KNOW?

The trees on the temple property came with the property—even the Bartlett pear trees and apple trees weren't specifically planted by Aiya

The only suitable land on which to build a temple is land on which no human has walked before

The garbha griha of the temple was actually a barn that housed cows and horses—and that the shastras say this is one of the best areas on which to construct a temple

For Shaivites, it is extremely auspicious if there is a cemetery in the Northeast direction of the temple property—and the North Rush cemetery is northeast of our temple

When passing a cemetery, you should remain silent, visualize Bhairava standing there, and perform a silent namaskaram to Him in your mind

Kusha grass, which is very sacred to Ganesha, is only suitable if taken from a place where no creature has stepped before

A great way to do puja in the summer is mowing the lawn. Twenty-three acres of grass will give you lots of time to do your japam!

God, in the form of animals, often comes to eat the Bhairava bali. Pairs of dogs, deer and a single fox have been spotted eating the bali

When Devi is pleased with a homam, She will cause a torrential downpour for a very short period of time. It is not uncommon to see a five-minute thunderstorm right after a Chandi homam

Some say that in previous yugas, the Devas used to shower flowers on bhaktas when they were pleased with a puja. In this yuga, the flowers appear as rain

Doing japam by a river or on a hill will yield up to 100 times the benefit of doing japam in ordinary settings

In the Rudram, Lord Shiva is referred to several times as the lord of trees and plantlife

JUST A NOTE:

The editorial will return in the June issue of Sri Chakra.

Also, we would like to give a heartfelt thanks to this month's contributors: Aiya, Kathy Allen, Soumitra Sengupta, Aparna Hasling, Dr. Ravikumar K, Dr. Somaskanda, Devi Suhir, and all the devotees who shared their miracles with us in Temple Lore.

APRIL

NEWSLETTER

Since the last issue...

Aiya returned to Rochester in early February from a three-week trip to New Zealand. Upon his return, he performed a housewarming puja in New York City. In late February, Aiya travelled to Nazareth College to give a joint presentation on Hinduism with Corinne Dempsey, author of *The Goddess Lives in Upstate New York*, a chronicle about the operations of the Rajarajeswari Peetam.

In early March, Aiya went to Muncie, Indiana to consecrate the Mookambika peetam in that area. Also in March, Aiya made a presentation in Rochester to BOCES, a group of administrators, teachers, and social workers. Later in the month, the temple bhajan group participated in an event held by the Center for Interfaith Studies and Dialogue—temple bhajan group

March was very auspicious because it saw two Sani pradoshams, one Soma pradosham and a Sri Chakra puja. During this month, Aiya also held two children's classes/workshops in Toronto.

Aiya will be traveling across the country in April, specifically to Covena, California. There, he will perform the pratishtapana installation ceremony at the Covena Ganesh Temple. Aiya will install the murthis of Muruga, Devayani and Valli.

Past Month's Events

Shivarathri 2006

Shivarathri this year was especially auspicious because it



fell during Sani Pradosham. The festivities began at 6:30 p.m. on Feb. 25 with Pradosham puja and homam. After a quick dinner, Aiya and the 75 devotees present performed the first leg of Shivarathri puja by doing continuous abhishekam to the mula moorthi amidst the chanting of 11 Rudrams. Between each one, devotees carried 11 shankams to the peetam for abhishekam. This continued until the kalasa abhishekam at about 2 a.m.

For a break, however, Aiya conducted a 45-minute bhajan session after the seventh Rudram.

While volunteers dressed the mula moorthi, others took the time for coffee and a snack because the second leg of the night was about to begin: continuous bilva archana and homam with the Shiva and Turiya sahasranamams.



Shivarathri set up in the yajnashala

Devotees and Aiya singing bhajans on Shivarathri

Eleven shivalinga stations were set up throughout the temple and yajnashala with volunteers manning each one to help devotees perform pancha upachara puja at certain intervals. The entire festival concluded at about 7 a.m. with the final karpura arthi.

Homam Workshop

Sunday March 12 saw the first workshop at the temple since Christmas 2004. From 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., Aiya instructed about 50 initiates in the how and why of performing homam. Some of the topics he touched on include the different types of homa kundams, the utensils for performing homam, how homam can be performed within everyday duties and what types of sacrifices one can safely conduct in his/her residence.

Aiya conducted a sample homam to illustrate his points, from setting up to arranging the purnahutis to offering the final mantras into the fire. The dikshitas present received an instructional manual, loose hand-outs and an audio CD.

Upcoming Events

Tamil New Year's

This special day falls on Thursday April 13 this year, and the temple will hold its usual celebrations. Aiya will perform the Dhani Puja, which consists of offering flowers, fruits, gold, rice and other sweets and treats. This puja will last about an hour and will be performed simultaneously with the day's evening puja.

Vibhuti Saivite Camp Meeting

On Saturday April 15, camp counselors and organizers will gather at the temple from 4 p.m. to 7 p.m. to honestly review the good and bad from last year's camp and determine the direction of this year's event. Organizers will go over topics in training, counselor reviews and feedback, and the floor will be open for suggestions on planning the 2006 camp.

The telephone bridge will be open for volunteers who cannot be there in person. Please contact Brihaspati for details on how to call in.

Temple Plantlife session

All are invited and welcome to an informal meeting on Sunday, April 30th at 9 a.m. to learn about how to properly care for the plants and trees on the temple grounds. The session will be led by Aparna Hasling, who has thoroughly studied this topic and has experience and knowledge on how tending to the gifts of nature can increase one's spiritual instinct.

Aparna will show devotees how to plant a tree, how to properly care for the existing trees on the grounds, and how to rid trees of unwanted objects and poisonous growths. See the feature section in the back of this magazine to learn more.

Gurupoornima Meeting

On Saturday April 15, the organizers of this year's Gurupoornima will be holding a meeting in the library room of the temple from 3 p.m. to 4 p.m. All are welcomed and encouraged to come and share their ideas. Among the topics of discussion are activities for Gurupoornima day, division of tasks, dress code, and general format.

May Festival

From Friday May 19 to Sunday May 21, the temple will mark the ninth anniversary of its operation on the current property. The

festivities will include the installation of digdevata kalasa, the making and distribution of an annam pavadai (dress made of rice) for Devi, a Chandi homam, and separate processions around the temple of Ganapathi, Devi and Dattatreya. Like in other years, the Saturday night will also see the procession of a large chariot with Aiya seated within it, performing puja during the procession. All are welcome and encouraged to attend.



All the shivalingams that received abhishekam on Shivarathri

In Two Months

The next issue of the **Sri Chakra Magazine**

Devi willing, the next issue of the *Sri Chakra Magazine* will be up on the temple's website (www.srividya.org) in the beginning of June 2006. The next issue will focus on the topic of the Guru Lineage. Some of topics we will cover include gurus within the parampara, how the lineage is connected, and all things related to the Guru.

If you are interested in writing articles or taking pictures, please e-mail us at sri_chakra_mag@srividya.org.

If you would like to contribute, the deadline for submissions (photographs and/or articles) is Monday, May 15. Please be a part of this effort. We look forward to seeing your contributions and suggestions to help make this magazine the best it can be!

Sri Gurubhyo Namah!

Shiva all decked out in a new veshti, festive jewelry, garlands, and hundreds of Bilva leaves offered by devotees



The pradasha lingam and spatika meru covered in a gold kavacham and adorned with flowers.



Devotees beautifully arranged 121 Shankus for Shivarathri

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ONE DEVOTEE'S EXPERIENCE

MAHA SHIVARATHRI IN MAHA KAILASH

by Ravikumar K

One devotee had a personal visualization of Maha Shivarathri being celebrated in Mahakailash—he saw it come alive at the Sri Rajarajeswari Peetam

To understand how Shivarathri at the Rajarajeswari Peetam could compare to that at Kailash, one should visit the Rajarajeswari peetam during this celebration. To explain it would be like trying to explain the smell of a rose, which one must experience.

I really appreciate Aiya for his efforts, creative mind, hard work, blessed heart and wonderful volunteers who gave themselves to successfully execute this celebration.

I arrived at the temple that morning after a seven-hour drive from Michigan. As I went in, I saw Aiya was getting ready for the homam to perform before Saturday morning abhishekam. I felt very happy that I made it on time for the homam and abhishekam, which Aiya performed with many devotees present.

After the maha deepa arathana and lunch, many people were arranging speakers and musical keyboards in the yajnashala. A musical group called Bharathi Arts from Scarborough, Canada was setting up to perform. The singers and keyboard players are young boys and girls between 10 to 20 years of age who came to the temple via a chartered bus.

Even though I was very tired and sleepy due to my driving and lack of sleep prior, I could not leave the spot without watching the kids performing a wonderful shower of devotional songs. I have no idea how much they would have practiced to perform so well. Mr. and Mrs. Mathivasan are responsible for training them. When they finished the show, Aiya appreciated them by giving them individual gifts.

At 6:30 p.m., Aiya was ready to start the rest of the programme. In the meantime, many devotees were in and out throughout the day.

I thought the most important part of the celebration was the installation of the Maha Shivalinga. Aiya explained each and every step of installing the Maha Shivalinga in a beautiful manner.

There are 1008 spatika linga in the temple, and many of them were used to create a bigger Shivalinga in the center of the yajnashala, on a blue slab of wood. The spatika linga were arranged in the following manner throughout the temple:



Maha lingam outlined by spatika lingams

- | | |
|-----------------------------|-----|
| 1. Ashta Dik Palakas | 008 |
| 2. Trisoolas | 024 |
| 3. Tandaveswaras | 108 |
| 4. Ashta Ganapathi | 008 |
| 5. Ashtamoorthis | 008 |
| 6. Pancha Brahma (5 Places) | 025 |
| 7. Ekadasa Rudras | 011 |
| 8. Shat Taraka Lingas | 006 |
| 9. Dakshina Moorthi | 001 |
| 10. Chandikeswara | 001 |
| 11. Maha Lingam | 160 |

I am sure all of you can see how nicely Aiya planned to perform this.

Many different types of Shivalinga decorated specific spots throughout the temple. At these spots, volunteers helped devotees perform puja with Bilva leaves.

As Aiya said during the puja that each year, it seems a new moorthi arrives in time for Shivarathri. Last year was the Nayanmars and a large Ganapathi. This year a beautiful copper Dakshinamurthi arrived, and He will be seated on the south side of the Maha Meru, facing south. It was an historical event when Aiya led all those present in the prana prathishta, or the "opening the eyes" of Dakshinamurthi.

Aiya led the chanting of the Rudram 11 times, with Devi and Shiva receiving abhishekam via 11 valampuri shankams each time. To extend the worship, Aiya led a 45-minute bhajan session after the seventh Rudram.

As I was thinking about my own idea of Maha Shivarathri in Maha Kailash, I thought a

Shivagana should be offering dance to the divine Lord. Suddenly, a woman started dancing to the bhajans and we were all able to admire the Shivagana's dance.

Even though I do not know Rudram I tried to chant it with everyone. There was a day I was not accepted to participate in learning Rudram. But this day I was chanting it especially during Maha Shivarathri along with my guru Aiya and other devotees.

After completing eleventh Rudram, we carried the main kalasas in procession to complete the Maha Abishekam. Aiya then performed homam while chanting the Shiva and Turiya Sahasranams with alternating names while devotees circumambulated the temple offering Bilva leaves to 11 different Shivalingam stations within the inner temple and around yajnashala. Volunteers happily and continuously supplied the Bilva leaves to all the devotees.

Lastly we chanted several ashtothrams, giving everyone present a chance to sit before a Shivalingam and perform Bilva archana with pancha upachara puja. I was given a chance to sit in front of Sri Nataraja and Sri Sivakami along with Mrs. Bhuvanewari, who, as a volunteer, helped me to do puja.

This is the same Nataraja and Sivakami to whom I was given a chance to perform final abhishekam on Ardhra Dharshana day. At that time, I received the message to give 108 Spatika Shivalinga to Shiva devotees.

I managed to bring 108 spatika Shivalinga and handed them over to Aiya earlier on Shivarathri day. He kept them in front of this same Nataraja and Sivakami for the entire puja. When I sat in front of them for the pancha upachara puja, I was literally frozen and thanked them for giving that message and their blessings.

At about 6:30 a.m., the festival finished successfully and happily.

That was when four devotees volunteered to receive the spatika Shivalingam from Aiya. They are:

Kathy Allen
Mr. and Mrs. Venugopal
Navin Parthasarathy
Mother of Suhir.

Many other Shiva devotees started getting the spatika Shivalinga to worship, and I personally congratulate them all. Others may receive them (depending on supply) by contacting Aiya.



Various lingas surrounded by flowers



Pradosha lingam affixed on the Kamadhenu as part of the Shivarathri set up in the yajnashala



A few of the many bilva leaves sorted and offered by devotees

CD REVIEW

A MUSICAL MASTERPIECE

by Dr. A. Somaskanda

During this year's annual Prathistapana festival in May, the Sri Rajarajeswari Temple of Rush, New York, will release its latest compact disc, featuring a concert by Carnatica brothers Sri Shashikiran and Sri Chitraveena Ganesh, recorded live at the temple during last year's May festival. They were accompanied by Nagai Sriram on violin, Thanjavur Murugaboopathy on mridangam, and Karthik Venkataraman on Kanjira.

The artistes featured in the CD hail from legendary musical families. Shashikiran and Ganesh debuted as child prodigies and have been enthralling audiences ever since. They have both won numerous accolades and awards. Shashikiran's brother is the internationally-acclaimed artiste, Chithraveena Maestro Ravikiran. Shashikiran and Ganesh have performed in all the major cities in India and abroad.

Nagai Sriram is an accomplished Carnatic violinist who has accompanied top notch vocalists like Sowmya, Seshagopalan and Sankaranarayanan. He has won several awards including the 'Best Violinist' Award from Music Academy consecutively for the last six years.

Thanjavur Murugapoopathy is a percussionist of the highest caliber. He has performed all over the globe accompanying leading artistes. He has won several awards from premier musical institutions.

Karthik Venkataraman is a Carnatic music enthusiast who has learnt Kanjira with a passion. He has accompanied many local artistes and visiting Indian artistes. He holds degrees in electrical engineering, computer

science, and business administration.

The Concert

Fittingly, the duo commenced their concert with a flawlessly executed Mallari, traditionally played on Nagaswaram in temple festivals. Pirouetting across the swara scale with effortless ease, the duo weaves melodic rhythms in Gambeera Natai with commanding assurance. They follow this with nine Kritis and compositions culled from their rich repertoire, in popular ragas ranging from Sindhubairavi to Amirthavarshini. These were immortalized by Muthuswamy Dikshithar's famous Kritis, 'Anandamritha Karshini.'

Their rendition of the Shyama Sastri's famous Swarajati, 'Kamakshi,' in Bhairavi is soulful. They capture the essence of Karunya Rasa, permeating the entire Kritis brilliantly. This Kritis, one of the three famous Swarajatis (Ratnathrayam) composed by Shyama Sastri, brings out the duo's volume of vocal variations.

It is gratifying to listen to a new Tamil composition by Suhir on Rajarajeswari, set in Saramathi Raga. This captivating Janya Raga with two Varja swaras in the Avarohanam, is a favorite of Aiyas, who in many of his formal and informal bhajan sessions sings the lilting 'Neelakadalam' set to the same raga. The duo's rapport and harmony are impeccable with their melodious voices blending with effortless aesthetic grace.

Nagai Sriram complements the duo with subtlety and depth. Rasikas would have loved to listen to a solo Raga Sanchara on his violin. Murugapoopathy is outstanding in his deft percussion

support, culminating in a concise, scintillating Thani Avarthanam.

All in all, it was a delectable treat in Raga, Laya and Bhava to connoisseurs of Carnatic music.



Sri Shashikiran



Chitraveena Ganesh

TRAVELS TO A SACRED LAND



Two devotees from the Rajarajeswari Peetam were blessed enough to travel to many holy places in India over the past two months. They have generously shared their experiences with the Sri Chakra and carried the blessings of south India back to Rush.

BRANCHES OF THE RUSH TEMPLE FAMILY TREE

By Kathy Allen

Kathy Allen discovered several branches of the temple's family tree in India... and all of them lead back to Rush.

With the Guru's grace, I recently returned from an enriching three-week trip to India.

While I have traveled to many temples before, this particular trip was full of startling synchronicities and amazing first-time experiences. Although I am not South Asian, my "family tree" based on our Guru lineage and temple community continued to grow and expand during this trip in ways which were truly stunning.

For me, a trip to India is not complete without visiting three key places: Calcutta, Devipuram and Kanchipuram. After a brief trip to Calcutta to offer pranaams to my father-in-law, I headed to Devipuram and was very happy to see a lot of positive new developments. Perhaps most significant was that Guruji had lost a lot of weight and seemed to be in a much healthier condition than I had seen in years.



Guruji, Prathish, and Prasad chatting in Devipuram

As a devoted archivist who tries to always carry a digital recorder and camera in the company of our gurus (a well-known fact to many who often joke "recorder-hastaaya"), I was very excited to see the local devotees recording Guruji's impromptu talks on a new digital recorder. Apparently their goal is to transmit these invaluable teachings over the Devipuram Yahoo groups. I was so happy to see them taking this initiative.

Always a treat in Devipuram, I was thrilled to sit at Guruji's feet under the dark night sky while Guruji spoke in his soft voice and shared mind-blowing insights.

Apart from his morning walk and brief conversations with the daily visitors, Guruji was working non-stop at the computer, manifesting his

meditative visions in multi-media format. When I arrived he had just completed several new programs, including Sri Chakra Puja, shat chakra japam of Saraswati and other advanced pujas.

The big news in Devipuram was the completion of new houses to coincide with the 12-year kumbha abhishekam to take place the following weekend on February 11-13, 2006. Visit www.vi1.org and read Devi's article in this newsletter for details of this historic event.

From Devipuram I traveled to Chennai where I met Swami Satha Sivom, chief priest of the Kalikambal temple, who had recently visited our Rush temple. After eight years of visiting Chennai and staying with the Madhvanaths, whose Tiruvanmiyur home has been my home-away-from-home, this was my first return to Chennai since they had moved to Bangalore. Swamiji's visit to Rush and invitation to stay with his family could not have been better timed.

When I first met Swamiji in Rush, one of his devotees who had been traveling with him warned me that he was an "Energizer bunny" with boundless energy and rarely slowed down. I told Guruji of this with a tinge of



Swami Satha Sivom, his wife Renuka, and Kathy in front of Thirupati

concern and he advised me that the only way to keep pace would be with Guru's grace. I took his advice to heart and chanted my Guru Paduka mantra non-stop, which miraculously carried me through the fast-paced pilgrimage with Swamiji.

Swamiji is incredibly generous and humble and right away I felt like part of his family. Only later would I realize how deep those connections were to our own Rush temple family tree. I was surprised that a pilgrimage with such a well-known priest just involved Swamiji behind the wheel with me and his wife and daughter in their car driving across the countryside from temple to temple. No fancy chauffeurs or large crowd of devotees with pomp and circumstance, but a very family-oriented travel experience.

I told Swamiji that my favorite pilgrimage sites included Kanchipuram, Arunachalam and Chidambaram and let him plan the rest. Immediately we took off for Sri Kalahasti and Thirupati, both of which were firsts for me. At Kalahasti we saw the flames flickering next to the main Shivalingam, a sign of the air element since this is the vayu lingam of the pancha bhuta

lingams. I was also thrilled to see Kanappa's hill temple above Kalahasti, since Aiya has relayed this story so often. In Thirupati I kept remembering the story of Guruji's awakening, when Balaji struck him with a full shaktipat and re-ignited his spiritual practice.

From Thirupati we traveled to Kanipakam Vinayaka and then on to Vellore, (another first for me) where we visited two significant temples, the Jalakanteshwara Shiva temple and the Ratinagiri Murugan temple. At the Shiva temple I met a great upasaka who is the chief priest at this temple, B. Kanaka Shanmuga Sivacharya. I was amazed by the beautiful carvings in granite which reminded me of the carvings at Madurai Meenakshi temple. Twenty minutes down the road, just at sunset, we arrived at the Ratinagiri Murugan temple which was praised as the divine abode of Lord Murugan in a fourteenth-century song by the poet Arunagirinathar. We were very fortunate to meet the 65-year-old Swami Balamurugan Adimai who led the effort to rebuild the ancient temple to its prior glory. Because Adimai has not spoken since 1968 when he had a divine awakening and decided to commit his life to renovating the hill temple, he is also referred to as "Mauna Swami."

Next we drove to Thiruvannamalai where we visited Swamiji's sister and brother-in-law, Siva Sri Halasyanatha Sivachariar, who is the chief priest at the Sree Arunachaleswarar Devasthanam. At 4 a.m. Swamiji and I set off for a Giri Valam. The last time I



Kathy, Swamiji, and B. Kanaka Shanmuga Sivacharya ("Mauna Swami") with other devotees

completed Giri Valam was with Aiya/Amma and a group of devotees during Aiya's Shastiabhdapurti on poornima night, August 10, 2003. This was a blissful occasion, but I honestly recall with equal detail how much my feet had hurt towards the end and how it was only with Guru's grace that I was able to complete the pradakshinam.

So, in anticipation of the Giri Valam, I made a quick phone call to Aiya. Unfortunately I was not able to reach him, but I left a message on the answering machine and felt that my appeal for Guru's blessings would reach him.

Swamiji and I walked very briskly around Arunachalam in darkness and peaceful silence with very few other people in sight. A warm wind seemed to lift us from behind as we walked in silence. When we neared the Varuna lingam, finally the sun began to rise and shine on the serene mountain. From every angle the mountain was so beautiful to behold and the Giri Valam passed effortlessly like a dream. I was amazed that my feet did not hurt despite my earlier concerns and attribute this completely to Guru's grace.

Because it was still too early for most of the directional lingam shrines to be open, we did not make many stops along the way. However we did stop at the Rajarajeswari temple, which I vividly remembered visiting with Aiya and Amma. They were playing a beautiful version of Lalita Sahasranamam and the front hall of the temple had beautiful carvings of the dasa maha vidyas. While I prayed to Devi, Swamiji was content to wait by the Kali.

In the varuna konam of Arunachalam we spent some time taking pictures at a beautiful tank and the water was very refreshing for my feet. Afterwards we visited an interesting Ganapati shrine where Swamiji instructed me to squeeze through a very narrow passage in the



Kathy, Siva Sri Halasyanatha Sivachariar, chief priest at the Sree Arunachaleswarar Devasthanam, and his sons

temple wall and then we stopped one last time at a small pancha lingam shrine under an old tree. The Giri Valam was complete after a darshan at the main temple of Shiva and Devi and then we returned to the head priests' house for idlis. Before leaving town I tried calling Aiya once more and luckily was able to reach him and give him the great news of our Giri Valam which he said he was aware of. What a thrill, Sri Gurubhyo Namah!

The next day we stayed in Chennai and I was grateful to discover that two people from our temple family tree, Sri Yegnarathnam and Sri Mathioli Saraswati, were both in town. I was so surprised when I reached Acca's home to find Charu Chawan sitting by the front door with Pati. What a small world!

The following early morning before sunrise I left with Swamiji and family for Chidambaram. As Swamiji drove through the countryside roads, we chatted away. For some reason I started telling him the story of how Sagar and Santosh amma first received Vishnu Durga. After I finished my story, Swamiji revealed with a smile that he was the priest who had carried Vishnu Durga in his own hands all the way from India to St. Catherines. I was so shocked and a chill ran through my body. I could not believe the connection.

After a wonderful darshan in Chidambaram, we went to Madanam Mariamman, Sirkazhi, Vaideeshwaran Kovil,

Tiruvenkaadu and finally Ananda Tandavapuram, an amazing small village temple where the Nataraja murti is known to sweat from his ecstatic dance. It was the night before Thai Poosam when we reached the remote temple, and a small group of devotees were carrying Nataraja and Shivakamasundari in procession.

I immediately felt at home, relating back to our temple processions when we all get swept away carrying the uttsava murtis. Swamiji told me that the chief priest and his family are great Sri Vidya upasakas. Once again, because Swamiji was so close with the priests, we were able to stay at their home for the night like part of the family.

I could spend pages describing the blissful experience I had during this brief stay, but suffice it to say, the small temple surroundings transported me to another world. Every part of life was so infused with pure devotion. In the early morning, I woke up as the sun was rising over the small lake beside the temple. I watched as one of the sons milked his cow to bring fresh milk for Shiva's morning abhishekam. A woman was drawing a colorful kolam in the entryway to the temple and the young boys were gathering to wake up the gods. The cycle of life seemed so complete and nature's vibration infused everything.

Waking up to my other reality, alas we had to leave Ananda Tandavapuram so that Swamiji could drop me off in Pondicherry for my FabIndia business conference. En route, we were passing through Chidambaram again, so we made one last attempt to find Parameshwari teacher who I had been looking for since Arunachalam. After a bit of running around, we finally found her at a dikshitar's house.

Yet again, the family tree connected in new ways. As I introduced Swamiji and teacher, we were overwhelmed to discover that about 15 years ago they had met at a temple in

Toronto and he had organized her first trip to India. She said that she always felt so connected with Swamiji and they laughed that they were "soul mates" even though it had been so many years since they last met. What an ecstatic reunion.

Parameshwari teacher also shared the wonderful news that a nearby temple for Manikavasaka had just been completed with her inspiration and dedication and the financial support of members of our Rush temple. So before leaving Chidambaram, we had one final darshan at this tucked-away temple which was newly consecrated. Only Devi could have planned such a wonderful experience full of astonishing discoveries of my ever-expanding spiritual family. Sri Gurubhyo Namaha!



Nataraja and Sivakami in Ananda Tandavapuram



J. Thandapaani Shivachariayar, chief priest at the Sri Panchavadishwara Swami temple, in Ananda Tandavapuram

THE LALITA MAHAYAJNAM AT DEVIPURAM

By Devi Suhir

Devi Suhir witnessed a historical event in Devipuram, Andhra Pradesh and felt an eternal connection to the holy place.

In Devipuram, the peetam constructed by our beloved Paramaguru, Sri la Sri Amritananda Saraswathi (or Guruji), and his wife, Sri Annapoornai amba (or Amma), performed the Lalita Mahayajnam in mid-February 2006. One of the Rajarajeswari Peetam's devotees, Devi Suhir, was blessed enough to be present and partake in the festivities. Here is her account.

Nine Devi upasakas including me took the train from Chennai to Devipuram to attend the much awaited Lalita Mahayajnam. Our crew, led by Sri Atmananda, was in charge of conducting the yajnam. After a pleasant journey we were received with warmth and love at Devipuram.

The moment I walked into the temple premises, I felt elated and felt a surge of energy gushing through my system. A growing awareness of oneness with the place was settling in. We took a quick shower and met with Guruji and Amma at the temple house. Other devotees and inhabitants of the temple were eagerly waiting for us.

I made my pranams to Guruji and Amma and as I was gazing at the bright colored kolam in the front of the house, I heard Smt. Lalita auntie, one of Guruji's senior disciples, giving instructions as how to proceed with the welcome ceremony for Sri Atmananda.

Sri Atmananda was led in through the front and was honored with Purna Kumbham and the traditional umbrella. I was surprised to note that Guruji and Amma were walking behind

him. What a man of astounding simplicity! The ceremony was held at the Kamakhya Peetam.

The sun with all its radiance had just set in and a cool breeze was sweeping over us. As I again felt myself blending with nature, I heard Guruji delivering his speech in Telugu—a language that I do not understand. I decided to keep staring at him point blank, with a hope of receiving his energy and purity. Following this, a sumptuous dinner was served at the madapalli.

Sunandhini, one of Guruji's disciples and our crew member from Chennai, was busily arranging things for the following day's events, and I joined her. In the yajnashala, different shaped homakundas for Ganapathi, Bala, Shyama, Varahi, and Lalita were mopped with cow dung and beautiful kolams were drawn on them. It was already past midnight and everyone had gone to sleep.

Sri Atmananda had brought fresh samit for the homam which needed to be pounded. Sunandhini, Prathish (a disciple of Guruji) and I were struggling hard to pound it in the Ural (manual grinder used in villages).

When we were anxious to get the work done, Amma walked by and asked two of the local maids to complete the job. It needs a lot of skill and practice and as I watched them with awe and fascination, the extent of their physical fitness dawned on me. It was 2 a.m. already and Sunandhini and I crashed in the

Sri Sahasrakshi Devi in Devipuram



Devipuram devotees

Sri Meru Nilayam. We barely had anything to sleep on but I did not care. I was inside my mother and that is all I needed.

The next day we all reported at the yajnashala by 6 a.m. The Mahayajnam commenced with Guruji's brief presence and Yaga Mandira Pravesam. I gave aachamaniyam for all the devotees who thronged there and felt guarded about the way I was offering my services, as everyone was new to me.

Ganapathi Kramam included Chaturavathi tharpanam, Ganesa Kalasa Sthapanam, Pathra Sadanam, Ganesh Avaranam, 108/1008 archana, Ganesha Upanishad, Ganapathi homam, Bali and Suvasini puja. This was followed by Bala Kramam. Kumari puja was done to Vanaja, the four-year-old daughter of a local devotee. I felt that Bala, herself, had come there and I could not help but place her on my lap and hug her with all my warmth.

Similarly Lalita Kramam ensued. As a part of Shyama Kramam, I gave a Bharata Natyam performance at the Kamakhya Peetam. I got dressed for the performance and as I was climbing the steps of the peetam, I felt strange. Someone passed a remark that I was a Dakini.

It was an open air stage surrounded by mountains with a cool breeze coming in. For the first time I was a nervous wreck. I had to dance for an unlimited audience, not the usual limited audience. I made my humble pranams to Guruji and Amma and danced for all the ethereal, natural and physical embodiments that ever existed in

Devipuram. All I remember was that I felt very light and I did not feel even the salangai on my feet. I was gradually stepping into an awareness of dancing in the midst of space.

I wanted to express the power of kundalini shakti in the form of a snake dance. I danced for Aadu Pambei, an old time favorite set in Punnagavarali raagam. The loud applause and cheer from the audience made me realize that I had conveyed the message. As I was beginning to collect myself, someone ushered me to go the yajnasala for the Varahi Kramam. Sodasa-upachara puja was offered to me.

I was still in my dance costume and was beginning to drift again because the whole atmosphere was charged with energy so sweet, lovable and expansive.

Meenakshi amma, a senior disciple of Guruji from Hyderabad, did the padha puja for me and a few women started singing. Sri Atmananda gave me vishesha argyam to drink.

Devotees walked in and made their pranams. Suddenly I felt that I was there and then not there. Overwhelming love charged the atmosphere and devotees were hugging me and each other and singing happily. It was as if our heart chakras were completely aligned with the source carrying us into Her consciousness, which seemed so subtle, yet expansive.

Later I helped Sunandhini clean the yajnasala, and we decided to sleep near the homakundam. I wanted the pristine and intoxicating experience to linger on.

The next day Avarana puja was done to Ganapathi, Bala, Shyama, Lalita and Varahi. This was followed by Pathra Udhvasanam and Kalasa Udhvasanam. At the same time Guruji was conducting



Milk abhishekam to Sahasrakshi



Devipuram devotees gathered around a homa kunda



Guruji in a quiet moment with the Mother



Guruji and Guruji Amma

Rudra and Prathingira homams near the Sri Meru Nilayam. Someone told me to go to Sahasrakshi to witness the abhishekam.

The priests were chanting the Rudram with vigor, and gallons of milk was poured on Her. Meanwhile our crew led by Sunandhini walked in with kalasams for the theertha abhishekam. As Sunandhini placed the scared ash (basam) on the Mother, a bunch of flowers placed on Shiva's feet fell down—a sign of acceptance I presumed.

Sri Atmananda performed the theertha abhishekam during which we all chanted Lalitha Sahasranamam. Smt. Lalitha, a senior disciple of Guruji, and I were asked to stay back and do the alankaram for the Devi. Everyone was asked to leave and we closed the doors. We cleaned and mopped the floor, which was flooded with milk. I was a little hesitant to oil and dress her. She was vibrating with energy.

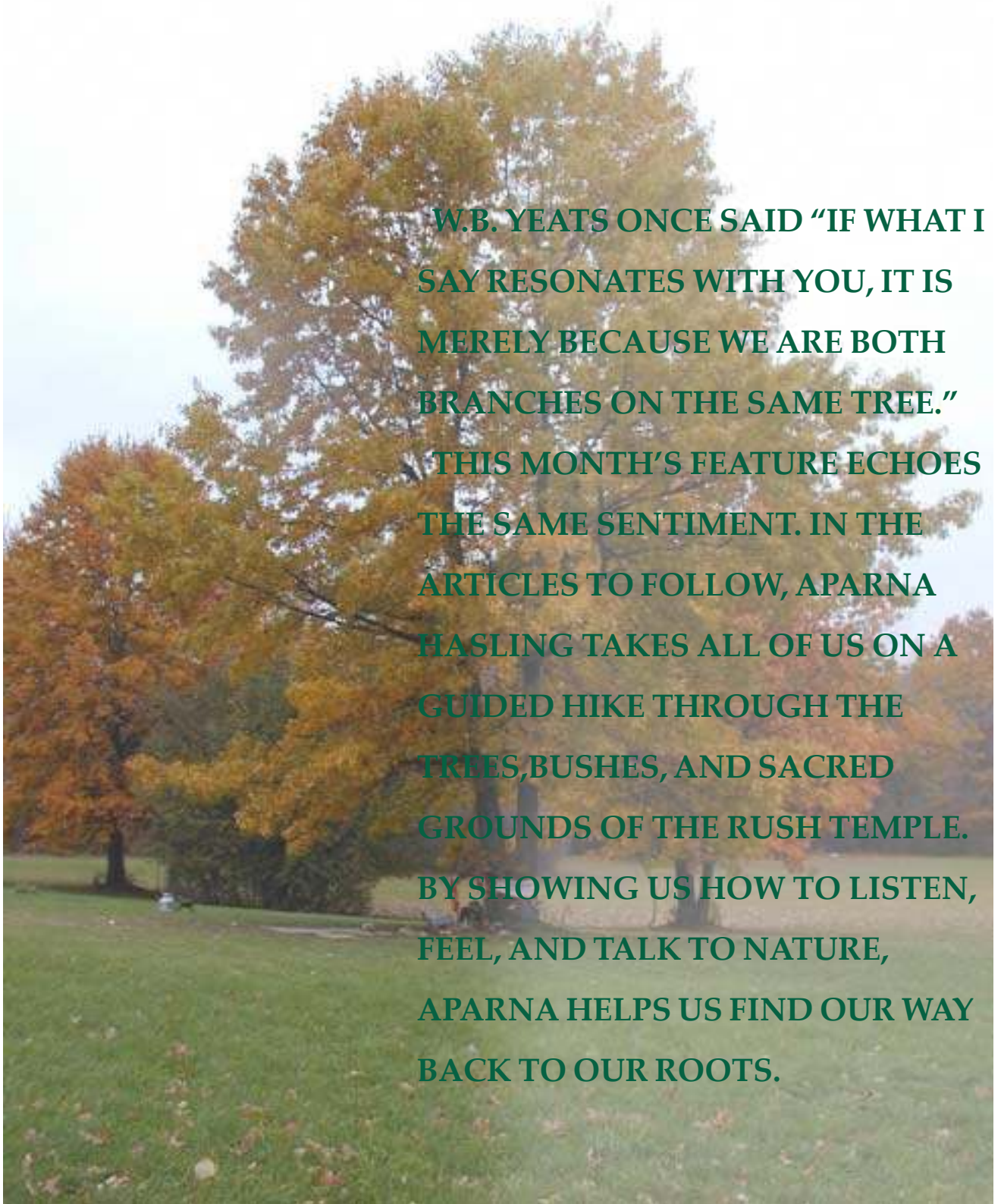
After reminding myself of my similar services to our Devi at the Rajarajeswari Peetam, I proceeded with great devotion and love. As I was in the middle of draping the sari for Her, someone reminded me that I should soon leave to catch the 1 p.m. train back to Chennai. Disappointed, I rushed to the temple house. We ate hastily and after our pranams to Guruji and Amma our crew headed to the station.

As I sat in the train, I realized that the perceived transitory experience I had in Devipuram was going to be one of the cornerstones for my evolving spiritual plane. I thanked Aiya and Guruji for giving me this stupendous experience. I waved away the meal server who approached me to take orders for dinner. I was contented and went to sleep.

THE NATURE OF DEVI

W.B. YEATS ONCE SAID “IF WHAT I SAY RESONATES WITH YOU, IT IS MERELY BECAUSE WE ARE BOTH BRANCHES ON THE SAME TREE.”

THIS MONTH’S FEATURE ECHOES THE SAME SENTIMENT. IN THE ARTICLES TO FOLLOW, APARNA HASLING TAKES ALL OF US ON A GUIDED HIKE THROUGH THE TREES, BUSHES, AND SACRED GROUNDS OF THE RUSH TEMPLE. BY SHOWING US HOW TO LISTEN, FEEL, AND TALK TO NATURE, APARNA HELPS US FIND OUR WAY BACK TO OUR ROOTS.





SEEING GOD IN NATURE

By Aparna Hasling

Walking in nature can be a meditative experience. It is especially nice to take a quiet walk outside in early spring when the sun is bright and the grass is fresh. In that experience, it seems almost auspicious to see something particular in God's creation: a white-tailed deer, a red cardinal bird, a yellow-throated turtle, or a sunset when the sky turns a mystical shade of pink.

The temple property is unusually beautiful. Not only is much of the temple acreage untamed, but there are vast open lands throughout the town of Rush, which make it a magical place to observe the web of nature.

To form a relationship with Mother Earth, who is the embodiment of the web of nature, one must be receptive not only to the idea that each individual is dependent upon the gifts of Her bounty, but also to the fact that every leaf of every tree is pulsating with sacred knowledge. With this in mind, it is possible to enter God's creation of plants, rivers and wildlife as a spiritual journey.

Such efforts are rewarded not only with the experience of oneness, but also an altered conceptual model of the physical world and an extended vocabulary to explain the interconnectivity that binds all creation.

This cosmic perception begins with a seed, a bijam. It is not by chance that the potent syllables

we cherish in Sri Vidya are called bija mantras. Just as our spiritual life is intensified by focusing on bija mantras, so can the bounty of Mother Earth's power manifest from a tiny seed. The physical world is linked to the subtle physical world. By contemplating Mother Earth's potent energy, which transforms a seed into a tree, we more deeply understand how a mantra takes root in the mind to transform a soul.

To really learn how to see God in nature, one must first take time to watch things grow—hold an acorn seed in hand and contemplate Bhairava's mighty oak tree. Plant a marigold seed, tend the plant until it flowers, and offer those lovingly tended flowers to Lord Ganesha. Learn the names of the temple trees and appreciate the differences between the oaks, maples, pines and fruit trees.

Talk to the trees and learn to listen to them too. Once these practices take root, the devotee will naturally want to spend more time outside to experience God in the panchabhutas, and to experience oneself in relation to Mother Earth. And then it begins to be clear why early Hindus of Vedic times worshipped trees rather than temples—their conceptual model of life was so pure they could acknowledge the earth as a living being worthy of worship, rather than an inert substance to be harvested. This is the first step to seeing God in Nature.



APPLE TREES

by Aparna Hasling

New York is one of the country's top apple-producing states. So it is not surprising that when Aiya surveyed the temple property in 1996, he found a few dozen apple trees already growing throughout the land. Apples are one of the earliest cultivated trees, and many cultures have honored the apple tree as a symbol of fertility, love and healing.

The five-pointed star that is revealed when you slice any apple along the horizontal axis is proof of the fruit's mystical significance to some. Yet our primary interest in continuing the tradition of cultivating apple trees is to have apples to offer the Devi as *naivedyam*. The scriptures praise the auspicious act of offering locally grown crops as *Phalam Rtam*, and so cultivating the fruit trees is actually part of the puja.

Unfortunately, the first few years of the temple's young life did not allow much time for devotees to develop any special skills in cultivating trees. A few devotees would venture outside in early summer and pluck a tiny fruit and taste the sour and sometimes deformed fruit.

Again in early fall, when apples are expected to ripen, the apples were tested, but often found to have scab, blister spots, black rot, or fly speck disease that made them look unappealing. Some apples could be offered or made into pickle, but most were left on the trees to the natural process of decay and provided winter food for migrating birds.

Professional tree pruners were consulted, but they discouraged us from putting too much work into our old apple trees. The trees on the property had not been properly pruned and mulched over the years; they were past the

age of 40 and not expected to continue their full fertility.

We were advised to plant new, semi-dwarf trees in their place. But as an experiment, we followed instructions to revive old trees and heavily pruned a few trees to stimulate the growth process. The natural aesthetic forms of these trees were completely lost, though there was an increased yield in fruit. Unfortunately, pruning was not enough to rid the trees of diseases.

The next step considered was to spray the apple trees each spring with sulfur or harsher chemical pesticides. Most commercial growers claim that modern apple cultivation requires pesticides to protect trees from disease and insect infestation.

While it is true that all plants in the rose family are prone to disease (including the apple and pear trees), some devotees who want to worship the earth as their Divine Mother are opposed to using chemicals that poison the body and blood of Bhuma Devi. These devotees want to experiment with organic gardening as a way to worship God.

And so this spring the temple is planting a small batch of semi-dwarf apple trees in the southeast corner of the property, on a slightly raised hill facing Railroad Creek. The soil is prepared with ground limestone to neutralize the PH balance, and amozite and decomposed pine needles are spread to enhance the mineral content.

Organic gardeners are quick to recognize that plants cannot resist disease unless they are grown in healthy soil. To accommodate this need for healthy soil, the temple has been composting vegetable scraps, tea bags, shredded newspaper and leaves, and other organic material

since Navarathri—when the materials have completely decomposed, they will also be used as rich mulch for the trees.

Meanwhile, during the next few years we will need to be patient as we transition from old to young trees. It takes about four years for a newly-planted apple tree to bear fruit. As we care for the young saplings, we will continue to work with the older trees and study the intricacies of pomology, the science of growing apple trees. Eventually we will allow the old trees to die, and perhaps leave them as “snags” on the property to be used for nesting and winter shelter for wildlife.

By engaging in the process of cultivating food, we experience our effort as a link in the chain of worshipping God. Even the most basic *pancha-upachara puja* requires offering fruit as *naivedyam*—it represents the element of water, the river of life.

In addition, more than a few temple priests have explained that many of the *dravyams* and puja offerings mentioned as particular favorites for temple deities actually contain trace mineral elements that human bodies need to maintain health. It is not a coincidence that modern research shows that apples provide an essential trace element called boron which helps harden bones and prevent osteoporosis; or that pectin in apples controls blood sugar by slowly releasing the natural sugars into the bloodstream; or that apples are a natural antidepressant.

Perhaps Devi's love is apparent every time we bite into a *prasadam* apple. Just think how much this experience will be enhanced when every bite of an apple is from a locally-grown, organic apple—offered first to the Divine Mother.

MOTHER EARTH NEEDS YOUR HELP!

by Aparna Hasling

There are many opportunities to volunteer at the temple. Since it is run entirely by devotees, there is an endless list of tasks to do—they usually involve cleaning, decorating, cooking, chanting or serving in some general capacity. In addition to the jobs to do inside the temple, there is a lot of rewarding work to do outside on the temple property.

Some of the guidelines for outdoor work just require common sense. First, pick up the garbage that the wind has blown down the hill towards the creek (i.e. cardboard boxes, coconut shells, paper cups, etc.).

Next, free the trees from the insidious weeds that strangle their root bases. There should be at least a one-foot radius around the trunk of every tree, and it should be free from weeds, grass or shrubs. After the tree base is cleared, appropriate mulch can be put down—this looks nice and also directly feeds the tree roots.

Some of the trees are suffering not only from weeds at the base that suck the nutrients from the soil, but also an invasive vine that covers its branches. The name of the invasive vine is porcelainberry, and it is a hazard all over the state. It overtakes and kills the native plants and trees.

In order to reclaim the natural beauty of the graceful trees and the rambling creek, the invasive plants need to be removed. For those volunteers who have already started on this project, it is a difficult but rewarding task to pull the vines from branches 50 feet high. Digging out the roots is another challenge that will require much more work.

There are a handful of established gardens throughout



Two devotees taking a break after working on the property

the property. While they need to be maintained, it is best to contact the person in charge before contributing to the progress of these gardens: near the front entrance is Ganapati, Bhairava, Kashi and the vegetable garden.

Many of these areas need constant upkeep throughout the summer to keep the plants watered, weeded and mulched. It would be nice if more devotees can establish personal relationships with particular plants, and be available to help them when service is required.

At some point, we would like to plant ornamental trees along the driveway and maybe get a greenhouse to help extend the temple growing season. These are wishes put at the Devi's feet. Before that time comes, we need to train a greater number of volunteers to deepen their relationship with Mother Earth.

To facilitate this, we will start having workdays once a month on Sunday mornings from 9 a.m. to noon. Please bring extra gloves, shovels, pruners, or saws as the temple is sorely lacking in proper outdoor tools. The dates for the workdays will be posted on the website, but the first workday is scheduled for April 30th. Hope to see you there!



A serene shot of one of the property's wooded areas



One of the many trees nestled on the temple's 23 acres



A picture of Ampelopsis Brevipedunculata, otherwise known as the harmful porcelainberry



Sri Gurubhyo Namah
Sri Gurubhyo Namah