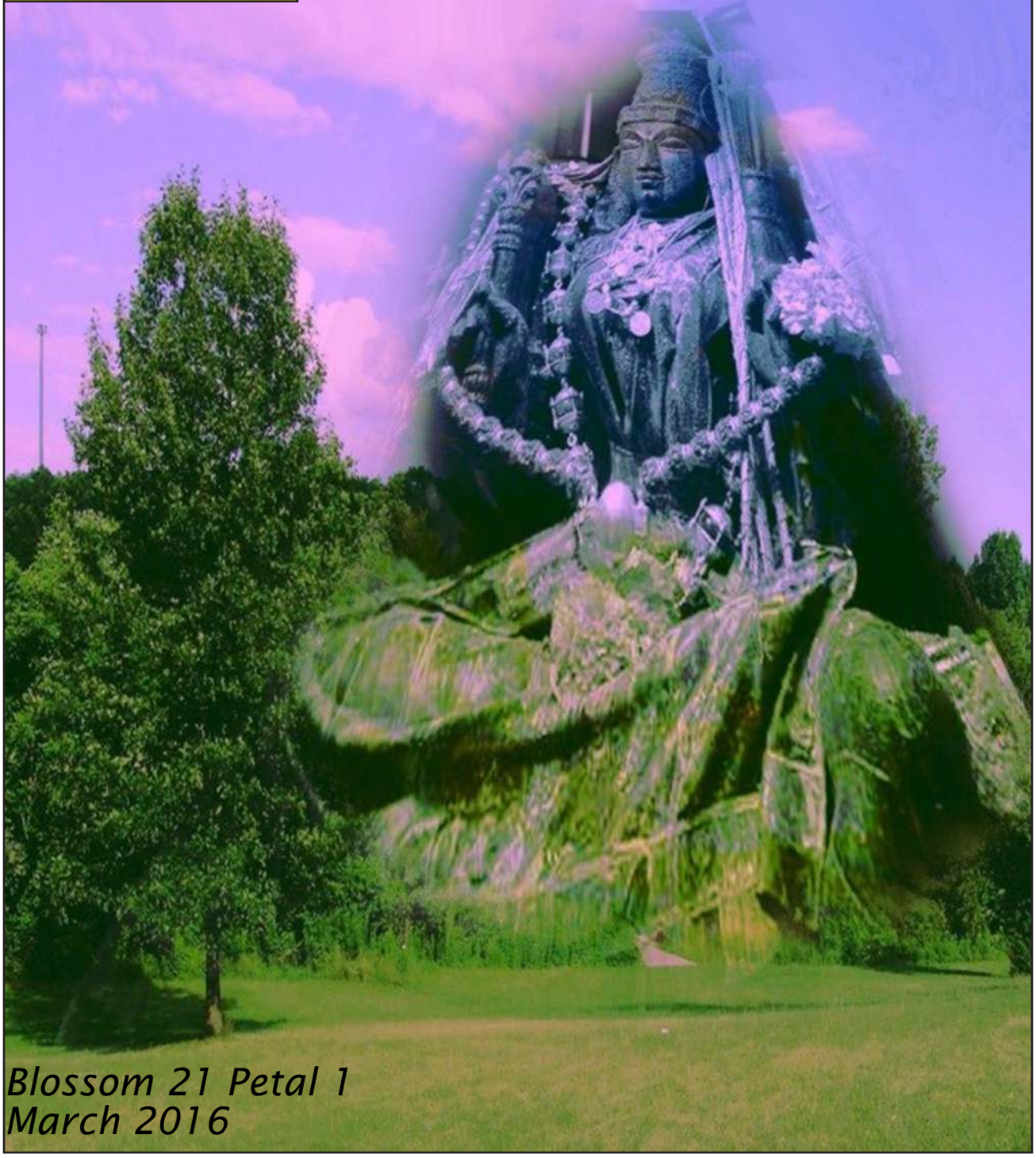
Sri Chakra

The Source of the Cosmos

The Journal of the Sri Rajarajeswari Peetam, Rush, NY



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March 2016

March Newsletter

Since the last issue...

Aiya was present at the temple for Karthikai Deepam festival at the end of November 2015.

At the beginning of December Aiya went to North Carolina for the weekend of Nov. 29-30, and then flew to California for an event on the weekend of Dec. 6-7.

In mid-December Aiya left for India ahead of the temple's annual Yatra. There were only about 20 people participating in the Yatra this year, which made the group much more mobile. They were able to embark on several trips and visit several holy kshetrams:

Trip 1 - Sri Manikka Vinayagar, Uchi Pillayar, Thayumanavar, Jaya Veera Anjaneyar, Naganathar Swamy

Trip 2 - Viralimalai Sri Murugan

Trip 3 - Thirunedungalanathar, Appakudathan temple koviladi, Anbil Sundararajar

Trip 4 - Perumal Malai, Thiruvellarai, Boominathan Temple

Trip 5 - Siruvachur Madura Kali, Tirupattur Brahma templ, Tirupattur Siva/Kasi Viswanathar

Trip 6 - Madura Kali Thottiyam, Maragathaleshwaraswami, Gunaseelam Prasanna Venkatachala

Trip 7 - Samayapuram Mariamman, Thirupainjeeli Sivan temple, Uttamar kovil

On Dec. 25th Aiya went to a function run by Sri Amma's (Pujyashri Mathioli Saraswathy) Nandalala Mission in Chennai. On the 26th, he went to Devipuram for the wedding of Guruji's granddaughter, which happened on the 30th.

Aiya commissioned a chariot fashioned out of neem wood for Devipuram, which was delivered at that same time. After the wedding in Devipuram, he went back to Chennai on Dec. 31st.

The neem wood chariot presented by Aiya to Devipuram

Jan. 1st was Sri Amma's New Year message (see page 8) in Chennai and Aiya was present.

Sri Amma participated in the temple Yatra from Jan. 6-9; her birthday function was on the 10th. After all these events concluded, Aiya travelled around Chennai and came back from India on Feb. 10th.

He was in Rochester for the rest of the month, simply being present at the temple ahead of Mahashivarathri on March 7-8.

In mid-February, Aiya announced that there would be an additional three members added to the temple Board from the six who were named this time last year. The Board members are:

- Ambalavanar Somaskanda
- Anupama Ashwin
- Kandiah Pathmanathan
- Karuppiah Natarajan
- Roopa Hathwar
- Sankara Devarakonda
- Savitri Venkatesh
- Sriganesh Madhvanath
- Vimalan Sothinathan

Past Events

All event articles by Kamya Ramaswamy

Thiruvempavai & Ardhra Darshanam, Dec. 16-25

This festival is traditionally celebrated before daybreak each day for 10 days during Margazhi maasam. The final day, Ardhra Darshanam, celebrates Lord Nataraja and his consort, Sri Shivakami, of the holy town of Chidambaram.

At the temple, about 50 volunteers and devotees were present at the beginning of the Ardhra Darshanam celebrations at 4 a.m., but that number gradually grew. Everyone had a chance to participate in the worship, with Shankar aiya leading the puja and Mangai amma leading the singing of the Thirupalliyezhuchi verses.

After the initial puja, abhishekam and later alankaram took place in the yajnashala. Finally, all those assembled were treated to a traditional dance performance.

Purvaja as Shivakami and Anitha as Lord Nataraja, performing their own special puja to the holy couple

Raja Mathangi homam, Dec. 27

Several edible items went into recreating Matangi Devi sitting in the center of her yantra.

About 75-100 kids and teenagers participated in the annual homam run by kids, for kids. It took place as usual on the last Sunday morning of the calendar year, and was run by Shankar aiya and a team of experienced volunteers who, at one time, were avid participants in the homam themselves.

From assembling their own purnahutis to putting offerings into the fire with their own hands, the kids ran the show. The event took a good three hours to complete and was followed by a complete bali puja (including pumpkin smashing) at the Bhairava tree.

Afterwards, everyone was given mahaprasadam in the form of a sumptuous lunch.

Thai Pongal, Jan. 15

This traditional Tamil festival celebrates the beginning of the Sun's journey northward, as well as the ensuing harvest season.

As it fell on a Friday this year and many temple regulars were still in India on the Yatra, Shankar aiya took the reins in performing the short but sweet puja.

All those present were given the chance to add grains to the pongal patram with their own hands, and everyone was given *sakkarai pongal* (sweet jaggery rice) prasadam upon conclusion of the puja.

The earth's riches were on display to symbolize the wealth of the harvest

Upcoming Events

Event	Date/time	Location
Maha Shivarathri	March 7-8	Sri Rajarajeswari Peetam, indoors
Tamil New Year	April 13	Sri Rajarajeswari Peetam, yajnashala
Maha Pratyangira homam	April 24	Sri Rajarajeswari Peetam, yajnashala
Chitra Purnima (mother's tarpanam)	April 21	Sri Rajarajeswari Peetam, indoors

In Three Months

Devi willing, the next issue of the Sri Chakra will be up on the temple's website at the beginning of June 2016.

This magazine cannot keep publishing without contributions! Articles, poems, stories and photos about any spiritual topic are welcomed.

The next deadline for article submission is May 9, 2016. Please e-mail us with your contributions or feedback about this issue at sri_chakra_mag@srividya.org or talk to Kamya or Abhi at the temple.

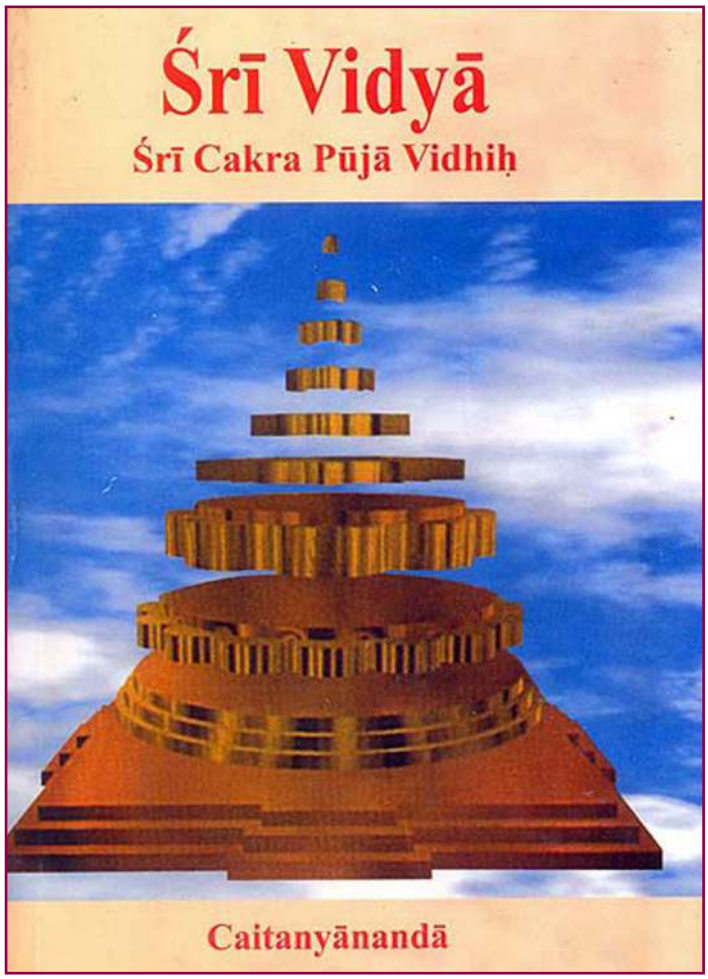
Sri Gurubhyo Namaha!

Our special thanks and gratitude to this issue's volunteers: Aiya, Kathy Allen, Vilas Ankolekar, Sundhara and Ahalya Arasaratnam, Aparna Hasling, U. Madhvanath, The Nandalala Mission, Bhuvana Subramanian, and Vimalan Sothinathan.

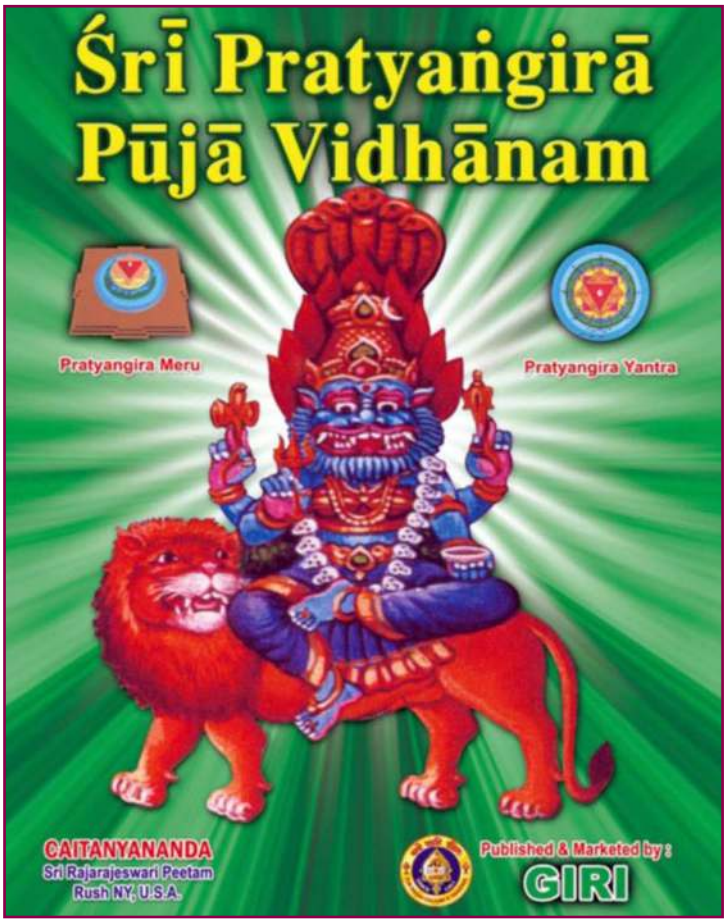
Sri Vidya Temple Society Publications from 1995 to 2014

Below is the itemized list of almost all of the temple's publications, including Navarathri malars, puja manuals, and special editions. Thanks to Mr. U. Madhvanath for submitting this comprehensive list. Please contact the temple's bookstore if you wish to acquire any of these items.

Year	Title / Author
1995	Sri Chakra 19th Navarathri Malar (i) Narayana Sukta Vidhana Lakshmi Narayana Puja (ii) Sri Sukta Vidhana Devi (Suvasini) Puja (iii) Khadgamala stotra (Tamil, Sanskrit, English) - Spiral bound A4 pp 36
	Sri Vidya Sri Chakra Puja Vidhi: (Tamil) 20th Navarathri Malar Chaitanyananda - Hardbound Crown Size pp 627 + viii
1996	Sri Chakra 21st Navarathri Malar (i) Sri Nagara Vimarshana (ii) Sri Lalita stava ratnam (Tamil, Sanskrit, English) - Spiral bound A4 pp 139
	Sri Vidya Sri Chakra Puja Vidhi (English) Chaitanyananda - Hardbound Crown Size pp 649 + xii
1997	Sri Chakra 22nd Navarathri Malar Tithi Nitya Puja (Nityakala devi) (English) Anandanandanatha (A Srinivasa Sharma) - Spiral bound A4 pp 97 + ix & 19 Pictures
1998	Sri Chakra 23rd Navarathri Malar Rush Temple Nitya Utsava (Daily Pujas) to all deities (Tamil, English, Sanskrit) - Spiral bound A4 pp 44
	Sri Lalita Yoga Vaibhavam (Tamil) Smt Lakshmi Halasyam - Paperback Crown Size pp 286 + xvii
	Nadopasanaiyil Sri Vidya (Tamil) Sri Kollegal R Subramanyam Paper back A4 pp 120 + x
1999	Sri Chakra 24th Navarathri Malar Tithi Nitya Puja Vidhanam (Tamil) Anandanandanatha (A Srinivasa Sharma) Paperback A4 pp 98 + ix (Printed by Giri Trading in 2000)
	Tenalai (Soundarayalahariyin Lavanya Cintanai) Smt Lakshmi Halasyam - Paperback Crown Size pp 219 + xx



2000 Sri Chakra 25th Navarathri Malar
Sri Pratyangira Puja Vidhanam (Tamil)
Anandanandanatha (A Srinivasa Sharma) Paperback A4 pp 102 + vi & 4 Pictures



2001 Sri Chakra 26th Navarathri Malar
(i) Sri Dattatreya Puja Vidhanam
(ii) Shadanvaya Shambhavi Puja (Tamil)
Atmanandanatha (K Ramesh) - Spi ral bound A4 pp 90 + iii

2002 Sri Chakra 27th Navarathri Malar
Sri Pratyangira Puja Vidhanam (English)
Anandanandanatha (A Srinivasa Sharma) Paperback A4 pp 106 + vii & 3 Pictures

2003 Sri Vidya Sri Chakra Puja Vidhi (Sanskrit) 28th Navarathri Malar
Chaitanyananda - Hardbound Crown Size pp 639 + xxii

2004 Sri Vidya Sri Chakra Puja Vidhi (Telugu) 29th Navarathri Malar
Chaitanyananda - Hardbound Crown Size pp 627 + vi

2005 Nivasatu Hrdi Bala (Tamil) 30th Navarathri Malar
Atmanandanatha (K Ramesh) - Paperback Crown Size pp 174 + xii

2006 Nivasatu Hrdi Bala (English) 31st Navarathri Malar
Atmanandanatha (K Ramesh) - Paperback Crown Size pp 162 + xi

Muruganadiyargalin Varalaru (Tamil) V.C. Sasivalli. 1/8 Demi size. pp 267 + xiii

2007 Villum Ambum – Sri Shyamala Sri Varahi Puja Vidhanam (Tamil) 32nd Navarathri Malar
Atmanandanatha (K Ramesh) - Paperback A4 pp 165 + x

2008 Sri Kamakshi (Tamil) 33rd Navarathri Malar
Chaitanyananda - Paper back Crown size pp 127 + vi

Sri Pratyangira Puja Vidhanam (English)
Anandanandanatha (A Srinivasa Sharma)
Paperback A4 pp 106 + vii & 3 Pictures- Marketed by Giri Trading

2009 Sri Sharabha Saluva Kalpam (Tamil, Sanskrit) 34th Navarathri Malar
S Sangaranarayanan - Paperback A4 pp 167 + vii

Sri Vidya Sri Chakra Puja Vidhi: (English) - 2nd Print
Chaitanyananda - Hardbound Crown Size pp 653 + xxii

2010 Punaruddharuna Kumbhabhishekam (English - Tamil/Telugu)
Alankara utsava release - Paperback A4 pp 333 + xxx

Sri Chakra 35th Navarathri Malar
Sri Shulini Durga Parameshvari Puja Paddhati (Tamil)
Atmanandanatha (K Ramesh) - Spiral bound A4 pp 42 + 43

Sri Vidya Sri Chakra Puja Vidhi: (Tamil) - 3rd Edition
Chaitanyananda - Hardbound Crown Size pp 852 + xxiii & 32 Colour Pictures

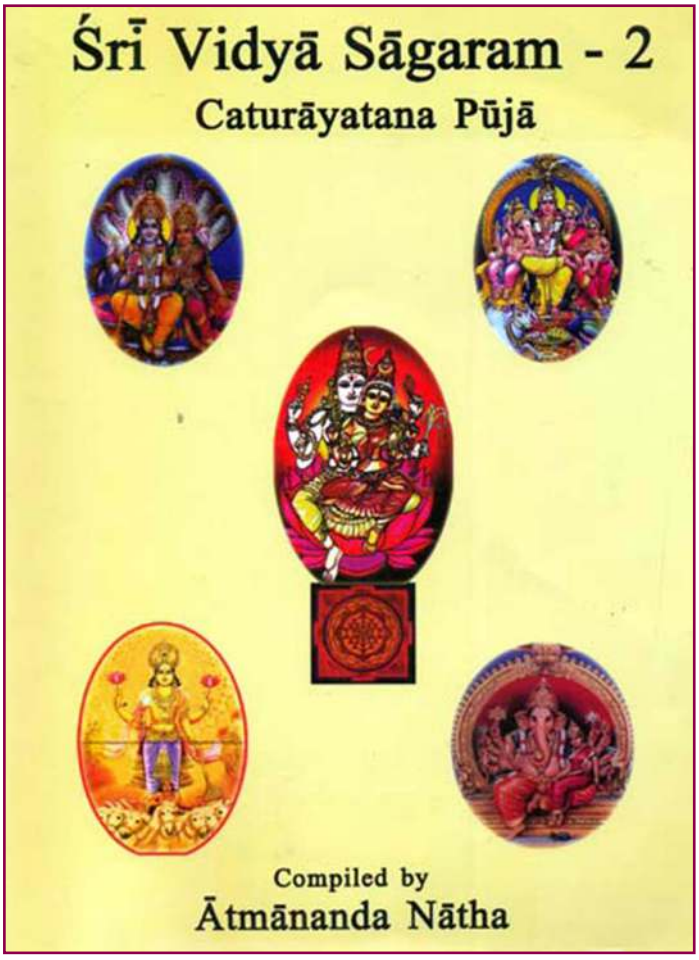
2011 Sri Vidya Sagaram (Tamil) 36th Navarathri Malar
Atmanandanatha (K Ramesh) - Paperback A4 pp 159 + ix

Enlightenment (English) - Translation of Tamil book - 'Veliccham'
Pujyashri Mathioli Saraswathy Paperback 1/8" - demi size pp128 + viii

2012 Sri Vidya Sagaram -2 Chaturayatana Puja (Tamil) 37th Navarathri Malar
Atmanandanatha (K Ramesh) - Paperback A4 pp 327 + ix

2013 Sri Chakra 38th Navarathri Malar
Sri Vidya Sagaram (English)
Atmanandanatha (K Ramesh) - Paperback A4 pp 327 + ix

Sri Vidya Sri Chakra Puja Vidhi: (English) - 2nd Edition
Chaitanyananda - Hardbound
Crown Size pp 831 + xxxii & 32 Colour Pictures



2014 Sri Vidya Sagaram - 2
Chaturayatana Puja (English)
Atmanandanatha (K Ramesh) - Paper back A4 pp 341 + ix

Sri Subrahmanya Puja Vidhanam (Tamil)
39th Navarathri Malar
Atmanandanatha (K Ramesh) - Paper back A4 pp 254 + x

Sri Akka's New Year Satsang

***On January 1, 2016, Pujyashri Mathioli Saraswathy (also lovingly known as Sri Amma or Sri Akka), gave her new year's speech at the Kanthimathi Kalyana Mandapam in Chennai, India. The Nandalala Mission later put together some major points from Her speech, which was originally given in Tamil. Below is an edited version of that copy. Thanks to the Nandalala Mission for their transliteration into English, and Bhuvana Subramanian and Kathy Allen for passing it along to the* Sri Chakra.**

[The number] 2016 adds up to the number 9, which is the *aadhikkam* (influence) of Sevvai (Mars), and the color Red is special this year. We will hear news of girl children being born, and also the news of inter-caste marriages [will] be common.

This year, people will feel more *paraparappu* (tension and stress). This is because of the greater influence of the Moon (Chandran). Our minds [may] be wavering and things may not work out according to our plans. This does not mean that things won't happen. Rather, it may not happen the way we would have planned it. For instance, it may get delayed or it may happen earlier than what we had planned.

We will have many small desires, many of which may not [come into fruition]. Having such desires is not wrong, but we need to make sure it doesn't turn into greed (*peraasai*).

This year people [may] be prone to breathing problems, ear aches, eye problems and conditions relating to the ear, throat and breathing. Some simple measures to prevent these issues may include:

- The regular practice of *pranaayamam* to help in avoid breathing problems
- Sundakkai (either fresh or dried), *Kandankaththiri and Thoodhuvalai*. All these three may be consumed, either as part of food or as a powder, to help prevent health problems
- Growing a Thulasi plant, as both a thulasi maadam and in pots, helps purify the air and will give the benefits of doing pranaayamam. These pots may be placed inside the house in the following four locations: southwest, northeast, at the centre of the western portion and at the centre of the southern portion. Keeping thulasi plants in any of the above mentioned directions is as good as doing a homam. But make sure that it is maintained properly and remains green.

We tend to ignore these simple home remedies that have been a part of our traditional knowledge. It is only when we fall ill that we remember that we should have taken these preventive remedies.

Avoid fixing nails to walls this year. This is to avoid diseases and illness (*vyaadi*). The more nails we fix, the more illness we are likely to have.

Parents are eager to know about their children's studies this year. For *vidyashakti, gnanashakthi* and memory power, the following are the ideal days to start studies and learning (*padippikku ugandathu*):

- Wednesdays

• days with the star Hastam or Punarvasu (Punarpoosam)
• Navami thithi

Even elders, if they want to learn something, can start on any of these days for successful completion.

Keeping a picture or an idol of a seahorse will assist in higher education and will definitely help one to go and study abroad. It is also good to keep it in libraries, stationery shops and photocopy shops.

[The] chanting of *Abhirami Andhaadhi*, Hayagriva shlokas, *Adithya Hridayam*, Dakshinamoorthy shlokas and *Saraswathy Sakalakalavalli Maalai* are good this year.

To reduce the burden of debt and property mortgage, you may keep *surakudukkai* (a hollow, wood pot, as seen in some musical instruments) in the house and put coins in it. Keep coins inside it and place it in any place in your house. You will definitely come out of mortgage/loan issues. Periodically, these coins may be taken out and used for charity purposes.

Surakudukkai is kept by siddha purushas, who generally drink water from it and keep coins in it. This is a reason why they don't have an attachment and desire for money.

While all temples may be visited this year, one temple is special. Near Mayiladuthurai, there is a place called Natham which has a temple for Tripurasundari sametha Thiru Menishwarar. This is on the Thirunandriyur-Vydheeswaran Kovil Road. There is a Nandhavanam in the temple, which houses a special tree called the *Raamadhari*. Just as the bilvam is special for Lord Shiva, this Raamadhari is special for Lord Rama (Mahavishnu).

We must plan our visit to the temple and collect authentic information so that we are able to visit the nandhavanam and have darshan of the Raamadhari tree. In case we find it difficult to visit the temple now, we may pray and keep a one rupee coin in our puja area. This is equivalent to visiting the temple. We may then offer this to the Hundi when we get the opportunity to visit this temple.

[Please] share the message of the New Year Satsang to friends and family. Hearing them say that they benefitted from [this] message will make you happier.

Though there may be problems like of the ear, eye etc. this year, you will set them right. With determination and complete faith in God, try to overcome impediments and successfully complete all your work this year. Blessings are always there with [you]. All will have blessings for a happy, healthy and prosperous New Year.

Jai Nandalala!

Q & Aiya

We all love hanging out with Aiya, drinking tea, and sometimes getting some guidance on how to travel down our own paths to the Devi. Here, he addresses questions that were asked to him at a workshop abroad.

Q: Should we have the shruti box on when we are chanting every day at home?

Aiya: I have a weakness, Amma—I like the sound. When you play the tambura shruti, you can keep hearing, "Om, om, om" and you cannot hear any outside sounds that would

otherwise come in and disturb you. For me, that works.

When the shruti is on in our temple, it's played over the public address system. Even if someone is in the temple and has nothing to do with the puja going on, it will still calm their nerves. If I were you, I would keep it on while chanting.

Q: Can the pujas be done in Tamil? If so, how?

Aiya: Yes, it can be done in Tamil. Learn the *Thirumurais and Thevarams*. Imagine if I served lunch for you and you saw there were five curries and you took just one and then wanted to go back for more, how would you feel if I yanked the plate away then and said that was enough?

If you sing just the first verse of *Manthira Maavadu Niru*, for example, you have sung just one-tenth of it. If you're going to do it in Tamil and do it properly, you have to sing the whole *padikam*. And you can't do a rush job—you sing it exactly according to the meter and *thaalam*. And then you can do pujas in Tamil.

Q: Why do you use your left hand to offer flowers and do puja?

Aiya: My friend, I'm a natural left-hander. If I use my right hand, the flowers will land on your head and not Ganapathi's. Let me ask you this—why has the left side of the body suddenly become untouchable?

If you think of Shiva as Ardhanareeshwara, the entire left side of his body is the Devi. Who's to say she's not pleased when I do puja using my left hand as the dominant hand?

One thing we all have to get over is the conventions which we have been conditioned into holding. It's not about which hand you use; it's the attitude with which you offer the flowers.

Q: Why are our rituals so long? It demotivates the youngsters. How do we motivate them to do more?

Aiya: Let me tell you something. Even if you are a seasoned pro at meditation and you sit down early in the morning without any disturbances to meditate, it will still take your body at least 25 to 30 minutes to physically settle down. And only after that will your mind settle down.

You think it can happen in 5 minutes? No way. When there's chanting going on and it's 1000 names long, what should you be focusing on? Only the sound. Nothing else.

The rituals are long, and that's the nature of it. Just because the youngsters don't have the patience in a world where everything is instant, it doesn't mean the practices should change. Maybe they should learn the rituals to develop that patience.

When I was small and my mother took me to the temple, she would tell me I had to sit in one place until we left—if she saw me running around, I would pay for it when we got home. That's not how it is now. Children run wild in the temple and the parents do nothing.

The only way to motivate the children is for the parents to

become involved in it first. You must show them by example. I see especially with Sri Lankan Jaffna Tamils that when they come into our temple, they only want to have archana done. And they have no idea why they want it!

In our temple, no ritual is done without explanation, and a typical archana will take about 30 minutes whether I'm doing it or whether any other volunteer is doing it. And you can see after about 10 minutes, the fellows in the back are getting restless and they just leave.

So when the older folks don't have the patience, how do you expect the kids growing up in this communication age to do it?

When we move to the West, what do we practice? For every occasion there's a party—birthday party, anniversary party, graduation party… and whether they know the words or not, they're singing and chopping a cake.

Whose culture is this? The shastras tell you that on your birthday, you have to light a lamp and you have to give. Not blow out the candles and think three weeks ahead, "What will my uncles give me? What will my cousins give me?"

Don't think the children won't follow your example. In Canada, I taught regular classes of about 60 children who couldn't cross the border to come to the temple. And they talked to me very freely.

One time, a child told me she went to her cousin's birthday and they had fun, and lots of food, and soft drinks, and that "the big people had their own soda in the back." You think the kids don't know you're drinking? After the age of 10 or 12, they come to think it's normal and they'll follow your example.

Is this why we left home? I left Sri Lanka almost 45 years ago and I haven't forgotten what was given to me. We absorb all the rotten things from the western culture; why haven't we absorbed the good things?

Do you ever thank God or the Devi for the meal that is in front of you, or do you walk into the kitchen, ask what's cooking, and then smell it instead of doing *naivedyam*?

The best motivation for the youngsters is seeing their parents do what they are asking the kids to do. Shortening the pujas won't do it.

Golden Clips from Guruji

An explanation by Sri la Sri Amritanandanatha Saraswati

It was after the memorable Satha Abhishekam inauguration for Guruji at the end of December 2014 when many disciples would sit in the front patio at Guruji's ashram and ask him questions. He answered them all very lovingly, catering to everyone's questions without discrimination, and responding to every question with simple answers. He embroidered each answer to address the true meanings and guide the audience to understand the existence of the divine as an ocean of awareness.

This content was transcribed from one of Guruji's informal talks, on Jan 01, 2015, to a group of devotees after the Satha Abhishekam celebration Thanks to Sundhara and Ahalya Arasaratnam for transcribing and submitting this piece to the Sri Chakra.

Awareness, consciousness, spiritual state and physical state

We are conscious and able to focus only those parts within us that we are aware of. What we are not aware of we cannot focus on. Generally our awareness is fragmented. Freshness comes from being aware of all parts of our body.

When you have a bath or shower the freshness comes from being able to be aware of all parts your body as the water flows over the whole body. When you are fully awake you are in partial "anesthesia". You are aware only of the "un-anesthetized" parts; your awareness or consciousness is fragmented and not unified.

When you go from fragmented consciousness to unified awareness it gives one freshness. Again, one could concentrate on something outside one's body and have a fragmented consciousness though you cannot be conscious of a part in your body that you are not aware of. So there is a distinct difference between your conscious on yourself and outside of yourself.

The spiritual sadhana takes you beyond your own individual consciousness to unified consciousness. This is why the Ganapathi Tarpanam works best in achieving this unified consciousness. In doing Ganapathi Tarpanam the Kundalini energy moves from the Muladhara, solid state, with a defined shape to the Swadhistana, liquid state, with no defined shape. When few people are seated and do

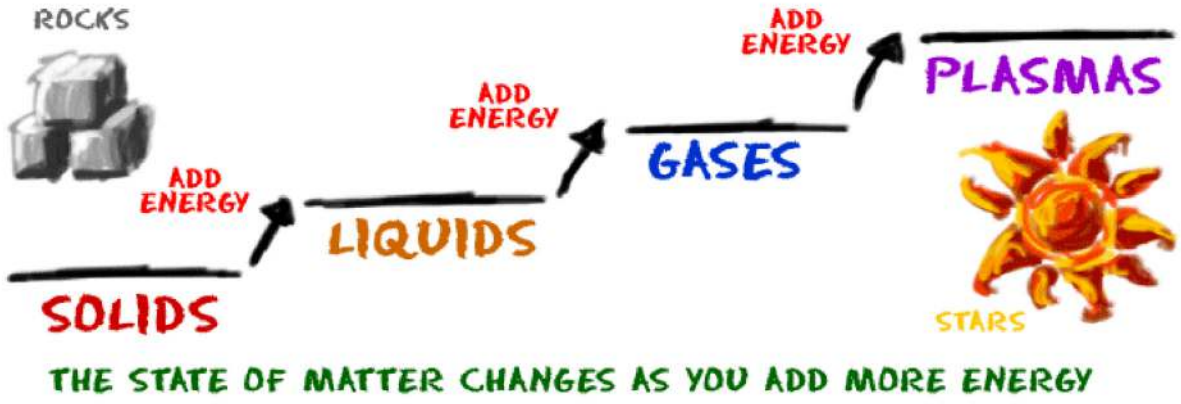
the Ganapathi Tarpanam together, they gradually all merge into one form as the solid state rises to the liquid state.

When doing Ganapathi Tarpanam the individual state of consciousness merges into a collective state of consciousness. Typically you lose your ego, individuality and feel free and light. It is the movement from heaviness to lightness viz the application of heat to a solid that makes it a liquid with no shape. The solid shape disappears and loses its identification. It is the first step of realization or becoming conscious to "I'm the universe".

It is the first transition; you are getting light and free. At this stage the "partial anesthesia" is partly removed. It is still partial because you still need to evaporate the liquid form to vapour state to mix with other. Further "heating" will transform you into merging with space and then to time etc. to be in fully unified consciousness.

Spirits could be unified or partially unified consciousness. What governs the difference between spirit and material things is the speed of light. Any material particle cannot exceed the speed of light. Anything physical is limited by the speed of light. The particles that are travelling higher than the speed of light are imaginary particles. A particle above the speed of light cannot enter the region below the speed of light and vice versa.

The same can be said of the spiritual realm and physical realm. If you are at the border i.e. (just) at the speed of light you have the potential to experience either or both; you can experience the spiritual state and the physical state or become fully unified.



Mother Nature's Cosmic Web

by Aparna Hasling

Amma, Tharuman, and Natarajan uncle approaching the Vanadevata Trail

Blazing the Vanadevata Trail at the Sri Vidya Temple continues to teach me lessons about nature, society and existence. I have learned to see traits of individual plants akin to human beings and ecosystems as complex spiritual communities. The spiritual experience we call LIFE is a dance of *Shiva/Shakti* (akin to flora/fauna) reciprocally influenced by the subtle energies of stored *samskaras* (akin to soil), and it continuously repeats in infinite variations throughout the cycles of time.

As maya refracts infinite consciousness, individuals are blinded to most of the electromagnetic spectrum and ignorant of the microcosmic ecosystem beneath their feet. Yet embracing the power of *anima-siddha*, it is possible to hold a single teaspoon of healthy soil and commune with half a billion tiny life forms. Soil is a dynamic community of microorganisms with diverse populations of predators and prey. They have complex survival strategies, and winners of these underground battles determine the level of nutrients available to plant roots. Among the most sacred are the *mycorrhizal fungi*, a cooperative network of organisms which carpet forest floors.

The temple woods and wetlands, a place I call Shakambhari's Sanctuary, has nurtured my unique spiritual perspective. After Aiya announced that Devi would show me Herself in the trees, in 2005 I began exploring this uncharted land. Alone and oblivious to my own vulnerability, I walked through thicket, marsh, and meadow without map, compass or GPS. Getting lost was part of the experience, as I slowly awakened to the consciousness of nature. For me, it was a place to worship without murthis and heal without words. A mystical link developed such that when I lay on the ground, I could feel Devi's embrace. And as I learned to make friends with the trees, my devotion to guru magnified.

In 2014, I offered the trail and trail guide to Aiya. It was the culmination of an intense sadhana, and I hoped it would evolve into an actual environmental center linking spirituality and science ecology. Unfortunately, comments from devotees were discouraging and I feared some would unknowingly desecrate land. I had to explain to visitors that every turn of the trail was designed to bring attention to a particular tree, or divert attention away from a sensitive habitat. I felt protective of the land and prayed that others would respect the trail as sacred ground, rather than an opportunity to further subjugate nature or construct according to their desires. Yet my attention shifted when I saw a more immediate threat on the horizon.

In early spring and late fall the honeysuckle bush dominates the understory. Before I understood the plant was invasive, I admired its capacity to defy winter by leafing out early and holding leaves through late fall. Yet just as wealth is no longer beautiful upon learning about a corrupt source of funds, so does honeysuckle monopolize the soil's and sun's energy, offering nothing in return to local insects or wild-

life. Caterpillars cannot munch the leaves, birds cannot eat the caterpillars and foxes cannot eat the birds. This plant should be given a different name because the only things it attracts are ticks and mosquitos.

For years I knew that the temple land suffered from invasive plant species: buckthorn, honeysuckle, garlic mustard (and many more). At first, the wild grape vines seemed most destructive, since I could see them use trees as giant trellises and eventually kill our trees by blocking light from above. Then I learned that invasive buckthorn trees lead their attack underground by emitting a toxic compound called *emodin* through its roots, overpowering adjacent root structures. In partnership, garlic mustard groundcover emits a phytotoxin, thus killing the sacred mychorrhizal fungi. My studies were overwhelming as I learned that buckthorn also interferes in the embryonic development of frogs and garlic mustard also suppresses butterflies eggs.

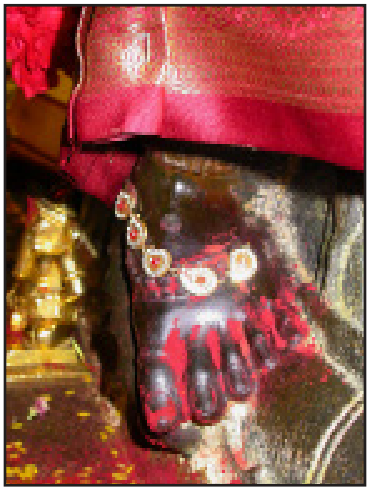
The overall impact of these non-native plants have cascading effects on the biodiversity of nature's web, yet only those devoted to Mother Nature conceive the consequences.

The spread of invasive species kicks nature's balance off kilter; it causes some creatures to perish which stimulates others to overpopulate. For example, the extermination of wolves led to a 10-fold proliferation in white-tail deer. Simultaneously, human populations increased, shrinking forest habitat. As a result, deer have become a destructive force in the forest; they overgraze native plants and allow unsavory invasive plants to spread further. Today, deer are blamed for the disappearance of regenerating trees as well as vertebrate and invertebrate fauna. Land managers respond by caging/protecting young trees. Yet their bias toward particular plants continues to disrupt nature's web; even though poison ivy is a native species relished by deer, it is routinely removed from public lands.

For millions of years the animal kingdom (*Shakti*) lived in harmony with the plant kingdom (*Shiva*). Each was part of a chain, and the bounty of food was enough for all. Now, just as our spiritual culture is being depleted by worldly influences, the environment is also experiencing collapse. The reciprocal influence between plants, animal and soil is no longer sustainable and the intricate food-chains are broken. Modern society disavowed the sacred circle by converting forests into farmland, fertilizing soil with toxic chemicals, hunting animals to extinction, and cultivating exotic tastes. Attempting to become *civilized*, the human race has become an invasive species, destroying without cause and amassing resources without providing for the community.

Chaos is expected in Kali Yuga, yet some devotees are compelled (by duty, remembrance or compassion) to strive for an ancient balance. The Vedas deify Mother Earth, and therefore service to Her is divine seva. For me, the work of land restoration is equal to the task of re-identifying the tiny self with infinite consciousness. Removing invasive plants, I imagine my own negative tendencies. Chipping the dead plants to bits, I invoke Kali's energy of transformation. And nurturing new native plants to thrive, I awaken my consciousness to God. While the manual labor is intense, it is a contemplative path and slowly the echo of Shiva's drumbeat calls me home.

Sri Gurubhyo Namah!



Sri Gurubhyo Namaha