Sri Chakra

The Source of the Cosmos

The Journal of the Sri Rajarajeswari Peetam, Rush, NY

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June 2014

June Newsletter

Since the last issue...

On March 1, Aiya went to Australia for two weeks, where he did several homams and workshops. From there, he went to Singapore to honour his obligations there, including pujas, workshops, and homam.

Upon returning to North America in April, he performed a wedding in Toronto and a couple of house pujas in the Toronto area during the first weekend of April.

He was at the temple for Tamil New Year's April 13, as well as Chitra Poornima April 14. The following weekend was the Maha Pratyangira homam on April 20th, over which he also presided.

On April 30, a university class of about 15 students and a professor came to the temple, and Aiya explained Hindu customs and answered their questions.

May 5 and 6, he was in Atlanta for just two days of an Ati Rudram presided over by Karunamayi Amma. He came to the Ottawa Sivan Temple on the 10th and 11th for a workshop. May 14th, Pujyashri Mathioli Saraswathy (also known as Sri Amma) came to Rochester, where Aiya performed Sri Chakra puja to her. She also presided over the Vancha Kalpa Ganapathi homam on May 17th.

Then Aiya was in Toronto the next weekend, taking part in Sri Amma's various programs. There was a sumangali puja hosted by the local Nandalala chapter on May 24, a dharsan and satsang at the Gurmandir in Etobicoke on the 25th, as well as a Saneeshwara Jayanthi puja at the Jai Durga temple in Markham on the 28th.

Because Sri Amma was still in Canada at the end of May, Aiya also remained in Canada. He performed a vilakku puja to her on June 1st in Ottawa.

Past Events

All event articles by Abhi Somaskanda

Tamil New Year's, April 14

As in years past, Tamil New Year's was celebrated in grand fashion. Volunteers decorated a large pot dedicated to making pongal with vibhuthi, kumkumam, and mango leaves. Several different grains surrounded the pot, as well as a silver tray with many mangala items, such as turmeric, saffron, jiggery and rock candy. A collection of sattvic vegetables and fruits were also offered during the puja.

Aiya and Amma at the annual Tamil New Year's puja.

Chitra Poornima, April 14

This festival is performed by devotees who have lost their mothers, and is dedicated to the memory of those departed ladies. Held on poornima day in the month of Chitra, this ceremony involves making small balls, or pindams, made from banana, white rice flour, ghee, jaggery, and black sesame. These pindams are offered individually by the devotee to his or her deceased mother, and several extra pindams are also made to cover other spirits in the area that have not had this ritual done for them.

Maha Pratyangira homam, April 20

Volunteers hand out offerings for guests to put into the fire

Because New Year's fell on a Sunday evening this year, the annual Maha Pratyangira homam was held the following weekend. Devotees sat around the homam, chanting the Maha Pratyangira mantra as the sponsors and Aiya offered copious amounts of dried red chillis into the fire. As usual, everyone was given the chance to prepare sweet, spicy, or savory bakshanam in the temple kitchen, and devotees present for the homam lined up to offer a handful of sweets and savory items into the fire.

Sri Akka's visit, May 14-17

On Wednesday, May 14th, Pujyashri Matholi Saraswathy, also known as Sri Amma or Sri Akka, graced the temple with her presence once again. Volunteers lined the yajnashala and inner sanctum with a red carpet, flanked by brightly colored flowers on either side. After Sri Amma was ushered in by the crowd, she sat and watched Aiya perform a Navavarana homam. Afterward, Sri Amma spoke about the importance of Poornima puja, and the moon.

A few days later on Saturday the

Sri Amma receives ghee aarthi upon her arrival at the temple on Wednesday May 14th.

Sri Amma and Sri Rajarajeswari Devi spend a moment together as part of the temple's welcoming ceremony

17th, she presided over a Ganapathi homam led by Aiya. Devotees made 1008 modakas to offer into the fire and everyone present was given a few modakas to put into the fire as the Vancha Kalpa Maha Ganapathi mantra was chanted.

Following the homam, Sri Amma spoke briefly about the importance of Ganapathi worship, and continued her talk later in the evening, offering detailed information about some of Ganapathi's favorite offerings. Devotees also had a chance to sponsor coral, silver, and pearl Ganapathis that Sri Amma handed out after her speech.

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Upcoming Events

Event	Date/time	Location
Guru Poornima	July 11	Sri Rajarajeswari Peetam, indoors
Aadi Amavasya	July 26	Sri Rajarajeswari Peetam, outdoors
Aadi Puram	July 30	Sri Rajarajeswari Peetam, yajnashala
Viboothi Saivaite Immersion (camp)	July 30-August 3	Sri Rajarajeswari Peetam, full property
Varalakshmi vratham	August 6	Sri Rajarajeswari Peetam, yajnashala
Ganapathi Chaturthi	August 29	Sri Rajarajeswari Peetam, full property

In Three Months

Devi willing, the next issue of the Sri Chakra will be up on the temple's website at the beginning of September 2014.

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 August 10, 2014. 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, Vilas Ankolekar, Subashini Jeyaratnam, Smt. Geeta and Sri Ramesh Kutticad, Sriganesh Madhvanath, Smt. Raji Hariharan and The Nandalala Mission, Abhi Somaskanda, Vimalan Sothinathan, and Michael Steinberg.

***Guruji's story*, Chidagni, *will return*

An Illustrious Life

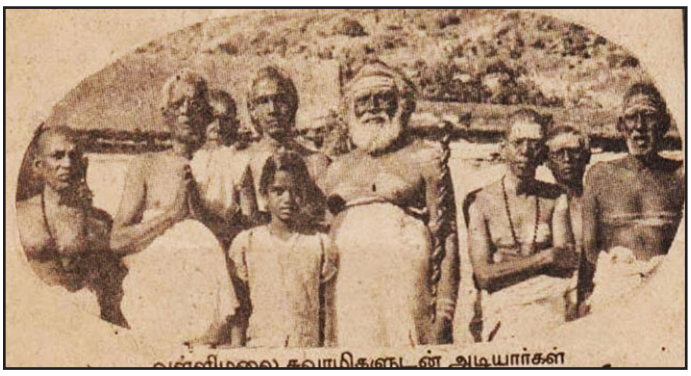
In memory of Sri Gnanapurani amma

by Sriganesh Madhvanath

The following article about this brilliant lady is reprinted from http://srigamma.wordpress.com./. *Aiya has described her loss as "a crushing blow to the temple."*

Smt. Gnanapurani Madhvanath (also known to her friends as Gnana and to many as SriG Amma) was born in Chennai on October 23rd, 1934 to Sri V.S. Chengalvarayan and Smt. Saradha, into a large joint family steeped in Tamil traditions of Saivite and Murugan worship. Her father Sri V.S. Chengalvarayan and grandfather Sri. V.T. Subramaniam had played a pivotal role in the revival of Tiruppugazh, so much so that their family was known as the "Tiruppugazh Kudumbam."

Their family home on Lingichetti Street was a place for various saints and devotees to congregate, and she spent her childhood growing up in the company of visiting ascetics such as Vallimalai Swamigal and Mouna Guru Swamigal, and had occasion to meet



Gnanapurani at about age 9 with Vallimalai Swamigal and her father, among others.

Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi (as a 9-year old) and Kanchi Periyaval,

As a Masters student in Radiation Biophysics at Kansas University in 1961

amongst others. Another frequent visitor during this time was a young Pithukuli Murugadas, he would in later years refer to Gnanapurani as the "scientist amma."

A brilliant student with an independent streak, she opted to pursue Physics rather than Tamil, and went on to do a B.Sc. and MA in Physics at Presidency College, Chennai. Upon postgraduation she joined the Alagappa Chettiar College for Women in Karaikkudi as a lecturer in Physics. After a year she left to join the recently created Atomic Energy Establishment (later known as the Bhabha Atomic Research Center or BARC) in 1957 as one of their first women researchers.

In 1961, she was deputed by BARC to Kansas University (KU) at Lawrence, Kansas, USA, to pursue a Masters in Biophysics. At a time when students from the Indian subcontinent were generally scarce in the USA, and it was extremely rare for single Indian women to travel abroad, she travelled to the USA on her own with her father's blessings and encouragement.

Her academic success at university paved the way for many of her juniors at BARC to travel to KU for higher education.

In 1963, she returned to BARC and continued to work on applications of radiation in medicine and industry. In 1966, she married Madhvanath, her BARC colleague

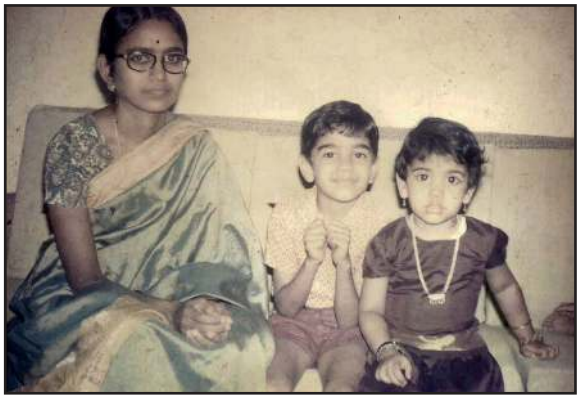
With Madhvanath and other friends at the graduate student housing at UC Berkeley.

and classmate from her B.Sc. days. The same year she took a leave of absence from BARC to join her husband at University of California at Berkeley, where he had enrolled in the PhD program.

At Berkeley, she conducted research studies at Lawrence Berkeley Research Laboratory on the effect of radiation on plant cells.

With Madhvanath and little Sriganesh in Chennai, 1971

In 1969, a son, Sriganesh, was born to them. In 1971 they returned to India and rejoined BARC. Forced to choose between her career and the increasing demands of motherhood, she left BARC to become a full-time homemaker. In 1972, a daughter, Vaishnavi, was born. She took her duties as a mother very seriously, and focused her energies on ensuring that her children excelled in both academics and the Indian fine arts.



With Sriganesh and Vaishnavi at home in Mumbai, circa 1975

In 1988, she suffered a great personal tragedy when her daughter Vaishnavi, then 16 and a first-year student of economics at SIES College, lost her life in a drowning accident during the torrential Bombay monsoon. In 1992, she decided to visit Buffalo, NY, USA, to spend some time with her son, who was by then a PhD student at the University of Buffalo. Madhvanath joined them shortly thereafter, following his retirement from BARC. Their home in Buffalo soon became a popular hangout for Indian graduate students looking for home-cooked Indian food.

During this time she came in contact with Haran Aiya (Chaitanyananda), an ardent worshipper of the Divine Mother in the ancient Sri Vidya tradition, who had set up a Devi shrine in the garage of his home at 33 Park Circle, Rochester, NY. The introduction to Aiya and Sri Vidya came as a soothing balm to the grief of losing her daughter. She soon became a regular visitor to the temple, and was initiated into the Sri Vidya tradition by Aiya.

She also met Aiya's guru, Sri Amritananda of Devipuram (fondly called Guruji) when he visited Buffalo and Rochester. Interestingly, they had been acquainted with each other from their earlier days at sister organizations BARC and TIFR.

In 1992, she was requested by Aiya to help with bringing out a revised and expanded edition of Sri Vidya, a comprehensive manual for worship of the Sri Chakra that he had compiled over the years and transliterated into Tamil. After returning to Chennai in 1994, she took up this monumental task, and the book Sri Vidya: Sri Chakra Puja Vidhih was published in 1995.

Being the first manual of its kind for Sri Vidya, it drew the attention of scores of Sri Vidya upasakas in South India, and many travelled to Amma's home in Tiruvanmiyur in Chennai to get a copy of the book, which was distributed at no cost. This brought her into contact with the community of Sri Vidya upasakas in Chennai, and many of these upasakas became firm friends.

Over the next 20+ years, she continued to work on various book projects for the Rajarajeswari temple of Rochester, including Sanskrit and English versions of Sri Vidya, and additional puja manuals that the temple brought out every Navarathri. The work often involved long hours transliterating original Sanskrit texts into Tamil and Roman scripts with diacritical marks to indicate the correct pronunciation, and then doing several rounds of manual corrections to the hardcopy proofs generated after typesetting.

With Guruji in Devipuram, in the 1990s

It was painstaking work requiring enormous attention to detail and knowledge of Sanskrit, Tamil and English, which she carried out with characteristic dedication. During this time, their home in Chennai became the default landing point and lodging for Aiya, Guruji and scores of other visitors to Chennai from Rochester and elsewhere, and she and Madhvanath frequently travelled with them on various temple tours of South India.

Working on the Sri Vidya book at home in Thiruvanmayur

While her work on Sri Vidya literature was her primary sadhana, she recited the Lalita Sahasranamam daily and served the devotees of the Mother in every capacity. Adept at English, Sanskrit and Tamil, she had also picked up Kannada and Telugu to be able to converse with her husband's family, and some Marathi by virtue of living in Bombay. When Aiya started to introduce Vedic suktams into his pujas at the temple, she took to learning and reciting suktams such as Sri Rudram with great enthusiasm. In 1996, she was given purnadiksha (complete initiation) into Sri Vidya by Aiya, and the name of "Guruguhamba," a reference to Murugan, her family deity.

Gnanapurani was also a lifelong student of Carnatic music. While in Bombay she learned music from Pallavur Mani Iyer, a student of Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavathar and a composer in his own right. She also learned several rare Purandara Dasa Kritis from the vainika Sri C.K. Sankaranarayana Rao, and compositions of Annamacharya, bhajans and abhangs from various teachers at every opportunity. She also taught music to anyone who came seeking it, in Bombay, Buffalo, Rochester, and in Chennai, but as a matter of principle, never charged any fees for this service.

In 2005, she and Madhvanath moved to Bangalore to be closer to their son who had relocated to Bangalore from the US. She dedicated herself to being an active grandmother to her two grandchildren Sashwathi and Skanda, and taught them music and bhajans from an early age. Her home also served as the local Sai center and they hosted Sai bhajans every Thursday. She also taught the Lalita Sahasranamam to those interested, and hosted its chanting at her home every Friday. She continued to teach music to interested students.

In 2013, she fulfilled a lifelong dream to visit the famed Murugan temple of Kathirgamam in Sri Lanka. She also had occasion to visit all her favorite temples – Kanchipuram, Tiruttani, Devipuram and Chidambaram (for Aiya's 70th birthday) the same year.

On April 9th, 2014, in her 80th year, Gnanapurani left the mortal plane. It was the day after Ramanavami and the tenth day of Vasantha Navarathri, and she had just spent the last week of her life serving Guruji and Guruji Amma from Devipuram who were visiting Bangalore and staying with her.

The last book she worked on was the 2014 Navarathri publication for the Rajarajeswari temple, which, fittingly, was dedicated to her family deity Subrahmanya. She made numerous friends of various ages and from all walks of life over the years, such was her genuine interest in getting to know people.

With grandchildren Sashwathi and Skanda around 2003.

She touched various lives in countless ways, and will be fondly remembered for her humor and lively conversation, her ever smiling and gentle demeanor, her unassuming nature and humility, her selfless acceptance of every request made of her with no regard for personal cost or inconvenience, her work ethic, her hospitality and generosity.

May her soul forever rest in peace at the divine feet of Mother Lalita.

With Madhvanath and Aiya at the Rajarajeswari Peetam Punaruthadhana Kumbhabhishekam in 2010.

Performing in Mumbai during her early years at BARC (1958) at the annual celebrations of her music guru, Pallavur Mani Iyer

Jaya Varusham Satsang

***At the India Club in Dubai on the evening of April 14, 2014, Pujyashri Mathioli Saraswathy (Sri Amma or Sri Akka) gave a speech on how she foresees the new year of Jaya varusham. Thanks to the Nandalala Mission for its English translation of the original speech given in Tamil and Mrs. Raji Hariharan for sending it to the* Sri Chakra.**

We are all gathered here this in the land of Goddess Mahalakshmi! I am sure that most of you agree with me. There may be worries or issues for some but they will turn out to be very insignificant. The ruler of this country seems to look after his people very well.

Jaya varusham (14th April 2014 to 14th April 2015) is the 28th year in the 60-year cycle. It falls on Hastha Nakshatram, Kanni Rasi, Siddha Yogam.

Jaya is derived from the names of one of the Dwarapalakas (the sentries stationed outside the main sanctum sanctorum in Vishnu temples), Jaya and Vijaya. Even though the appearances of these two sentries are fearsome, there is a tinge of tenderness in their eyes.

Eye problems:
Look at Jaya and Vijaya's wide open eyes on your next visit to a Vishnu temple. All eye-related problems will be resolved. The Raja and Manthri for this year is the Moon and Senadhipathy/Menadhipathy is Suriyan (Sun). Flowers to be offered at the temple for Lord Chandran are: white lotus, thumbai poovu, white jasmine or any white color flowers. Wear Pearls on Mondays.

Pournami night:
Place a few pearls in a cup filled with milk and leave it closed with muslin cloth overnight in a terrace. The rays of the moon penetrate the pearls and energize it. Give the milk to children the next day. The benefits are a steadfast, peaceful, and focused mind.

Temples to visit:
Thirupati, Thingaloor.

Pujas and chanting:
Chant Vishnu Sahasranamam and welcome Lord Hanuman into your homes by chanting the Hanuman Chalisa. Write Rama nama in a japa book and hand it over to any temple when you complete it. There are 4 Peyarchis this year: Guru, Shani, Rahu, and Kethu.

You can perform simple puja at home during the respected Peyarchis (e.g., During Shani peyarchi, light an earthen lamp filled with sesame oil and a few black sesame seeds, prepare sesame rice for naivedyam and distribute it.

Annadhanam/Mathru seva:
This year anger will be predominant in all. What is the cause for anger? Is it due to something lacking in us? Intolerance? Work pressure? Ignorance? Hunger? Hunger is the main cause for anger.

How do we deal with this emotion? Food is the only solution. Hunger and anger vanishes the moment food enters the stomach. Offering food to family, relatives, birds and animals will keep anger in check. Always remember that annadhanam should be offered with utmost humility.

Here is an incident from Mahaperiava (Sage of Kanchi) on

Priya and Sri Akka place a garland upon the temple's Ganapathi mula murthi, during Sri Akka's May 2014 visit

humility. A popular and successful cook aspired to meet Mahaperiava. He eventually did when Periava was camping in the vicinity of Kanchipuram. The cook extolled his virtues and during the course of their conversation, he proudly mentioned serving free food to 50 students learning the Vedas.

Suddenly Mahaperiava beckoned a middle-aged lady, who was a regular visitor to the mattam. He told the cook that she served food for over 1000 people. Both of them were taken by surprise. To the cook, the lady did not seem to look wealthy enough to serve 1000 people, and the lady was puzzled as to how Periava arrived at that figure while she only served 50 people! She remained silent.

He asked her yet again and she remained silent. He then gently reminded her about her habit of offering a handful of raw rice to a tiny ant hill in the corner of her kitchen soon after she finished her cooking which she did not recall until He mentioned it. He said that it amounted to feeding a thousand ants! A lesson in humility indeed. Most importantly, do not keep track of your donations you give.

In Tamil there is a saying, *"valadhu kai koduppadhu edathu kai ku theriya koodadhu!"* (The left hand should not know about the donation done through the right hand). Discretion is appreciated.

Food should always be served with love and humility. Accept donations from donors who do not crave recognition. The value of such donations are invaluable. To perform annadhanam on Akshaya Tritiya is considered auspicious. It is only the good deeds that remain with us like a shadow.

Be Selfless:
The bee sips honey from the flowers without hurting it and accumulates it for others to savour. Be selfless and harmless like the bee. Be sweet like honey when you speak.

A gardener tends to his garden with utmost care. He knows the right time to pluck fruits or flowers. A promising yield is what he is interested in. He treasures the plants and trees he grows and abides by the law of nature. You should be like him and tend to your inner garden. Shower love on your friends, families and foes. Be helpful to all.

Ambal Puja:
To receive the benefit of visiting a temple on a full-moon day (if you are unable to visit) keep a framed picture of any Ambal (Meenakshi, Kamakshi, Rajarajeshwari or any Ishta Devi) in a peetam. Light a lamp in front of her, chant any Devi slokha, and offer naivedyam.

Nature:
There will copious rains, no floods or calamities this year.

Children:
This year there will be a spike in the birth of girl children. On the flip side there will be an increase in children born with abnormal brain development.

New:
New Airports will be built.

Charity:
Set aside 5 percent of your earnings for annadhanam. The amount can be donated to meet expenses for a day/month or a year.

Political regime:
According to this year Tamil Almanac, only religious-minded politicians will come into power.
This year, good health and prosperity will prevail.

On Tamil New Year's day, it is considered auspicious to donate fans (visiri) made of palm leaves or cloth to help keep cool during peak summer. Jaya varusham promises a year filled with goodness, health and prosperity for all. My blessings to all of you! Jai Nandalala!

Aiya and Amma prostrate before Sri Akka during her visit to the temple in May 2014.

Jagat Janani—Sri Sarada Devi

by Subashini Jeyaratnam

The love a mother feels for her children is indescribable.

After giving birth to my second daughter, I began wondering how this motherly love I feel towards my children can be extended to everyone universally. How are there those few souls who can feel the same love and compassion a mother feels for her children ultimately to everyone one with no discrimination? No judgment? Just pure love.

The notion of the Universal Mother is embodied by the phrase "Jagat Janani." Jagat Janani, meaning Universal Mother, can be interpreted in many ways. As a mother, I see the role as a combination of love and power. I have the power to shape so many aspects of my daughters' lives and have this indescribable feeling of love which I have never felt towards anyone else.

The Universal Mother also has love and power. She so compassionately comes on this earth from time to time to help shape and define who we are. She is nurturing; shows kindness, tenderness, compassion, and encouragement, to everyone. The Universal Mother takes form as a balanced blend of power and modesty, strength and humility, detachment and compassion, purity and practicality.

One of those few souls that touched this earth with her grace was Sri Sarada Devi. Referred to as "Sree Ma" or "The Holy Mother," her spiritual sadhana is relatively less known. I wanted to share a brief biography of her as she embodies the Universal Mother.

"I can never refuse anyone who addresses me as Mother."

- Sarada Devi

Sri Sarada Devi was born on December 22, 1854 to a Brahmin family in Jayrambati, Kamarpukur in West Bengal. Born as Saradamani Mukhopadhyaya, she was the spiritual consort of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa. Disciples of Ramakrishna viewed Sarada Devi as their own mother, and after their guru's death looked to her for guidance and direction. Many regarded Sarada Devi as an incarnation of the Divine Mother.

Marriage to Ramakrishna

As a child Sarada was devoted to God, and spent her time helping her mother with household chores. She had no formal education, but was fluent in Bengali.

In May 1859, when she was nearly six years old, she was married to Sri Ramakrishna. Ramakrishna was 23 at that time. However, after the marriage, she continued to live with her parents while Sri Ramakrishna lived as a priest at the Dakshineswar Kali Temple.

Sarada next met Ramakrishna when she was 14 years old, and she spent three months with him at Kamakampur. There, Ramakrishna taught Sarada how to live a spiritual life and gave her instructions on meditation. Ramakrishna's frequent samadhi and unorthodox ways of worship led some to doubt his mental stability, while others regarded him as a great saint. Sarada left her village and joined Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar Kali Temple in 1872 on her own accord when she was 18, after hearing these rumors about his mental health.

Ramakrishna received Sarada Devi with great affection, and allowed her to stay with him. They led absolutely pure lives, and Sarada Devi served Sri Ramakrishna as his devoted wife and first disciple, while remaining a virgin nun and following the spiritual path.

Life at Dakshineshwar Kali Temple

Sri Ramakrishna looked upon Sarada Devi as a manifestation of Divine Mother.

He would perform Shodasi Puja where Sarada Devi was made to sit in the seat of the Goddess

Kali, and be worshiped as the Divine Mother Tripurasundari. Both attained a very deep spiritual consciousness in which Sarada Devi became identified with the spiritual devotion of Ramakrishna and became absorbed in the consciousness of the Divine Mother.

Ramakrishna's passing

After Sri Ramakrishna's passing away in 1886, Sarada Devi went on a pilgrimage to Vrindavan, a place associated with the life of Sri Krishna. Here she had several spiritual experiences. However, despite her spiritual consciousness she was living a life of suffering and hardship.

Ramakrishna's disciples soon became aware of this and brought her to Kolkata. This move changed her life. She now began to accept spiritual seekers as her disciples, and became a Guru and Mother to all those who visited her. Her great universal mother heart, invested with boundless love and compassion, embraced all people without any distinction.

When North American disciples of Swami Vivekananda came to Kolkata, the Holy Mother accepted them with open arms as her daughters and sons, ignoring the restrictions of the orthodox Brahmin society of those days.

"I am the mother of the wicked, as I am the mother of the virtuous. Never fear. Whenever you are in distress, say to yourself, 'I have a mother."

- Sarada Devi

Although she had grown up in a conservative rural society without any access to modern education, she held contemporary views and supported all those that visited her. She spent her life partly in Kolkata and partly in her native village Jayrambati.

During the early years of her stay in Kolkata, her needs were looked after by Swami Yogananda, a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. In later years her needs were looked after by another disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Saradananda, who built a new house for her in Kolkata.

"You have not yet understood the wonderful significance of Mother's life - none of you. But gradually you will know. Without Shakti (Power) there is no regeneration for the world... Mother has been born to revive that wonderful Shakti in India..."

- Swami Vivekananda

Passing

Sarada Devi took on the sins of her disciples and her body suffered as a consequence. She used to get up at 2 a.m. so that she could do sadhana, not for her benefit, but for the disciples she had accepted and whom she looked upon as a son or daughter.

Sarada Devi died on July 21st, 1920, at 1.30 a.m. due to old age and malaria. The next day her body was taken to Belur Math and cremated on the bank of the Ganga. Sri Sarada Devi is one of many Universal Mothers that have taken a human form to teach and guide us. She embodied divinity, compassion and love for everyone.

The meaning of "Jagat Janani" is best captured in her final words.

"The Whole World Is Your Own
I tell you one thing –
If you want peace of mind,
do not find fault with others.
Rather learn to see your own faults.
Learn to make the whole world your own.
No one is a stranger, my child;
this whole world is your own."

- Sarada Devi

Train to Kanchipuram

part 2

by Michael Steinberg

In the previous issue of the Sri Chakra, author Michael Steinberg wrote about waking up in Chennai, travelling by train to Kanchipuram, and visiting the holy shrines in that ancient temple town. After leaving the Kanchi Kamakshi temple, he made his way to Kailasanathar.

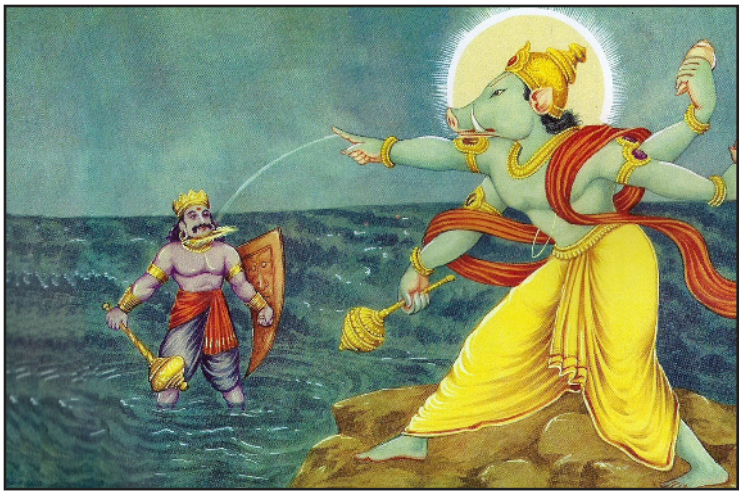
It is small but perfectly balanced in its massing; its unpretentious beauty seems like an expression not just of its unknown architects but its cultivated and gifted patron, the Pallava king Narasimhavarman II, who was a poet and dramatist as well as a warrior. The South Indian pattern of tall gopurams and a low-slung sanctuary had not yet evolved, and Kailasanathar thus resembled the mountain from which it took its name. It is a single, shapely tower flanked by subsidiary towers, extended in front to join up with another, much lower tower, a kind of gopuram-to-be.

The temple itself is surrounded on all four sides by a wall, and the inner wall and the outside of the temple are chock-a-block with shrines and sculpture. And what sculpture it is! Snarling, stylized lions and minor deities frame figures of Shiva, Parvati, and other gods, set in deep niches. The figures are intensely alive and yet monumental; not naturalistic like Greek sculpture but deeply communicative, they are both filled with emotion and completely at peace with the emotions they feel. They seem to convey the sense that the world is nothing but the play of the divine, its incessant activity only the surface manifestation of a deep calm. The sculptures are so magnificent and its figures are so rich in self-possession that they survive the hideous restoration work that tries to fill in what 1400 years of weathering have done to the original stone.

Kailasanathar is a Shiva temple, and most of the imagery relates to the god of Kailash. Yet it is a royal temple, too, and like all other royal temples in India its art draws parallels between the king's career and the exploits of the gods. It's no surprise, then, to find a shrine to Narasimha, one of Vishnu's avatars, in this temple, because Narasimhavarman must have wanted his namesake to receive his due. Vishnu, in any case, provides more of a role model for royalty than Shiva; when things go awry it's Vishnu that takes birth to set things right, not Shiva, and setting things right is what kings most often claim to be doing.

This is what the Narasimha story is about. It starts with an asura named Hiranyakasipu. Asuras are something like anti-gods; the word is often translated as "demon," but asuras are not necessarily evil. They are the gods' rivals, often quite as capable of justice and benevolence as the gods themselves, but most of them have a fatal flaw of one sort or another. In particular, it seems, the asuras handle power less responsibly than the gods. It tends to go to their heads.

Hiranyakasipu was an enemy of Vishnu's, because Vishnu had killed his brother, Hiranyaksha, in order to rescue Bhu Devi, the Earth goddess. Taking on a major god is a big undertaking, and to get



the boons he needed to triumph, Hiranyakasipu spent decades in austerities and penance. Finally, as a reward for his sacrifices, the creator god Brahma appeared before him. Brahma was small for a god. He sat on a floating lotus and had four faces, each one of them bearded.

"I have come," said the god. "What is your wish?"

"Make me immortal," Hiranyakasipu asked.

"You know I can't do that," replied Brahma, shaking all four heads at once. "It's against the rules. Besides, you know very well that I too must die one day. All I can do is put conditions on your death."

"Well, then," said the clever asura, "protect me from death by day and by night. Let me not be killed on earth or in the sky, indoors or outdoors. May none of your creatures kill me, neither man nor beast, nor any of the gods themselves. And let me be invulnerable to all weapons."

"Very well," said Brahma. "It is done." And with that he returned to his home in devaloka and Hiranyakasipu set out to conquer not just this world but the three worlds, that above this one and that below.

Soon the gods were dispossessed and deprived of the fruits of sacrifice. All wealth and all honor was going to the asura instead, and the gods begged Vishnu to put the universe back the way it is supposed to be. But Vishnu wanted to wait. He had his eye on Hiranyakasipu's son, Prahlada.

Prahlada was one of the good asuras, a devotee of Vishnu's, and his father—who by now saw himself as equal to the highest gods—was incensed that his own child refused to acknowledge his supremacy.

"This Vishnu you worship," he yelled late one afternoon, "where is he?"

"Everywhere, father," said Prahlada. "He is the soul and substance and mover of everything."

"Is he in this pillar, then?" challenged Hiranyakasipu, pointing to one of the palace's great columns.

"He is in the pillar and he is in the twig," replied the son. Furious, Hiranyakasipu grabbed his mace and smashed the pillar in two, ready to do the same to his own son.

There was a terrible sound and a frightening being appeared from the heart of the pillar. From the waist down it was a man, but its head, chest, and arms were the head, chest, and front paws of a lion. It was Vishnu as Narasimha. He grabbed Hiranyakasipu and dragged him to the threshold. The sun was just setting, and in the dimming twilight Narasimha placed the asura on his thigh and clawed him to death. No boon could save him. He died at a moment which was neither day nor night, at a location that was neither indoors nor outdoors, and was placed neither on the ground nor in the air. His killer was not a god, a man, or an animal, and he was not killed by a weapon. The terms of his agreement with Brahma were observed to the letter, but it did him no good. He was succeeded by Prahlada, who ruled in virtue throughout his life.

There are at least two morals you can draw from this story. The first is that it doesn't pay to try to outwit the gods. That one is obvious. But the other moral is a more interesting one. It's that you can't rely on all those nice distinctions and oppositions that make it possible to classify and think about the world. Day and night, human and animal, indoors or outdoors, all the structures through which we make sense of life—all of them will fail us. Reality is always more than our ways of thinking about it.

It is easy to spend a couple of hours at Kailasanathar, and I was still there at four o'clock, when the gods wake up from their daily nap. The temple pandit arrived with a small retinue and opened the locks with keys that looked like the ones you often see in children's books. I walked in after half a dozen local people and was headed towards the

sanctuary antechamber when an officious but otherwise very ordinary man told me I could not go in.

He said this in Tamil but his meaning was clear enough. For the second time today I was simply not Hindu enough. I protested, quietly, but I am sure he understood me less than I understood him. He did his devotions to Ganesh and I followed him, hoping this would mollify him. It did not. He told me I could get a little closer. Then he told me I had to sit farther back.

I sat, meditating, repeating the final long verse in the first section of the Rudram that sums up Shiva's attributes, which begins, "Namaste astu bhagavan." It is a passage that often seems to open things up within me, but it did not work this time. I kept interrupting myself with my annoyance. Hadn't Lonely Planet said that non-Hindus were allowed here? (It had, but only in the previous edition; the current one says that non-Hindus could come within eight feet of the lingam.)

Then, after not too long, I noticed that almost everyone had left. So had my nemesis. I looked around a few times, as subtly as I could, which probably wasn't very subtle. Was he really gone? A young couple walked into the anteroom to the sanctum bringing a little bag of puja offerings, and I stealthily followed behind. Every sound made me wonder if I had been found out but the priest must have seen me and he kept on as if nothing horrible was going on.

The priest made flower-offerings to the big, sixteen-faceted lingam, broke the coconut that the young couple had brought, offered light to Shiva and brought the light out for the couple to share. They then went off to the left to do the pradakshanam, after paying the ten-rupee charge for this privilege. There was said to be something special about the pradakshanam here. I had read that it was a dark, womb-like passage that could be managed by only one person at a time. I wanted to follow them, and I hoped the priest would let me.

Now I was in front of the priest and he still seemed unperturbed by my white face. I waved my hands through the fire, paid my ten rupees, started off and realized that I could not take my bag through, heard the priest tell me where to put it, started again, realized I might lose my hotel key if it was not in the bag and went back to fix that worry, and finally started to wriggle into a tiny tunnel that looked as if it went all around the sanctuary.

It didn't. At the end of the passage there was nothing. It was black beyond black, a void. Space. There had to be something there, but I had no idea what it might be. Did the floor drop? Was I was supposed to pull myself over a chasm? Was there safety somewhere, or was I going to miss my footing and fall into a pit?

I did not know what to do, whether it was best to go head first or feet first. I tried the latter and that seemed just as bad. I could not back out. I could not give up. So I went in head first again and pulled a leg out and dropped it into the void.

"Namaste astu bhagavan," I repeated, wondering how far it would go.

There was a step. A totally invisible step, but a step. I was not going to fall. I was not going to die. Shaking with fear and relief, sweating already, I felt my way down to another step, then another, until I found the passage floor. "Namaste astu bhagavan," I repeated, and turned the corner into pale gray light.

The rest was stumbling forward in gratitude, wondering what would come next. What there was a tunnel as tiny as the first one with steps up and over it. It seemed obvious I was meant to get down to the lowest level and crawl back to the living world.

There was a crowd of women to watch my return. The priest was looking at me with acceptance and, priests being priests, with an eye to a donation that in no way made his acceptance less sincere. And it turned out that his English was excellent, far better than the handful of phrases that the ASI guide could manage.

Did I know Mount Kailash in the Himalaya? I nodded. The abode of Lord Shiva? Every devotee longs to circumambulate the home of the great god, but to do the pradakshanam at Kailasanathar is of equal benefit, he told me. It is a passage through death to rebirth, he explained—though he did not need to tell me this. My bones already knew.

So I had no problem making a more sizable offering, putting my name and contact information in his book, and giving him all the names he needed to pray for my wife Loret and our children. He led me word by word in a Sanskrit chant, the women watching with both devotion and curiosity. Then he did the first of the offerings for me and my loved ones, as I stood filled with something I can only call awe.

He draped a garland over my shoulders, handed me an apple and flowers, vibhuti ash and sandalwood powder. He made sure I knew that I could bring my family here to worship along with me. I thanked him for letting me do this, backed out so as not to show disrespect, did a circuit of the temple itself and prostrated.

As I left I saw the officious guy chatting with the guide. I didn't know what he would have thought if he knew that I had disobeyed him and I didn't care. Everything on the way back to the hotel was beautiful.

Meditative Experience in Navavarana Puja

part 1

by Smt. Geeta and Sri Ramesh Kutticad (Yogamba sahita Atmaanandanaatha)

A. Bhūta shuddhi

Śrī vidyā upāsanā is a practical integration of all rituals being performed physically and mentally. Initial practice advised to aspirant, which is of physical in nature is pūjā and that of mental in nature is Japā. The highest practice among rituals is bhāvanā, which is a merger of both pūjā and japā at the most mature level.

This philosophy recognizes 'Jivā' as Śiva clothed with five sheaths (Kañcuka), resulting in 'Mala' or impurities, of three types. They are āṇava, māyika and kārmika mala. The individual ego centric impurity is āṇava- aṇu tara- atomic form. The differential knowledge of the self and Divine is māyika. The stain (impurities) accumulated on action in all births, which carries over births, is kārmika.

Cleaning (śodhana) of these impurities is the first integral part in this sādhana. This is seen even from the start of any activity, like sipping of ceremonial water (ācamana), involving cleaning of three stains -'mala śodhana'. They are: ātma tattvena āṇava malam śodhayami svāhā, vidyā tattvena māyika malam Śodhayāmi svāhā, śiva tattvena kārmika malam śodhayāmi svāhā.

Further, in the last part of saparyā, a more elaborate cleansing (tattva śodhana) is performed with a detailed analysis of these stains and their removal, as ātma tattvena āṇava mala śodhanārtham sthūla deham pariśodhayāmi svāhā, vidyā tattvena māyika mala śodhanārtham sūkṣma deham pariśodhayāmi svāhā, śiva tattvena kārmika mala śodhanārtham kāraṇa deham pariśodhayāmi svāhā.

Looking into these, do we actually clean the gross body (sthūla deha) or subtle (sūkṣma deha) or most subtle (Kāraṇa deha) in any process of this ritual? We just (partake) do havan of the visheṣārghya into chidagni (Internal fire). So clearly this points to a richer and deeper philosophy, to be seen mentally.

The ritual bhūta śuddhi is familiar to all upāsakas. Imagining that the aspirant is in a self-death like state, drying and burning of the saṅkoca śarīra (gross body), then imagining raining of amrta on ashes to emerge a new śāmbhava śarīra. This imagery is done with breath control (pranayama). Re-establishing the self in the new body concluded this ritual. Here all activities center on the 'gross' body, which is represented by the twenty four ātma tattva.

Thus first said mantra in tattva śodhana now makes a lot of impact on performing this ritual. Realizing this, we can leave yesterday'Ss unwanted 'clutter' of memories from our mind; emerge 'afresh' every day, as a sage said 'be here and now'- 'in the Present'. This is the first step in acquiring 'bhāvanā'. It is suggested to perform this ritual on a daily basis during the sandhyā.

B. Nyāsa

The next essential ritual to acquire bhāvana is nyāsā, which literally means 'to place'. 'To Place' the divine energy in the form of mātṛka or mantra akṣarā on the physical body is action done in this part of ritual. These akṣarā are placed on certain specific parts, of physical body. Although it looks like that these are parts of the aspirant's physical body, they indeed represent subtle body which is being tuned by placement of these mantra akṣarā.

Hence we can infer that the subtle (sūkṣma) body will become mantra maya or attain a devata maya. Earlier the gross body in bhūta śuddhi was meditated as being made divine; now subtle body is also made so and identified with

deity through mantra akṣarā. We can see the removal of māyika mala, the notion of duality by the vidyā tattvas, by which our own subtle body becomes the mantra maya svarūpa of the adored deity.

Bhagavān Paraśurāma in his Kalpasūtra says 'nyāsam vajra

kavacam' – That this ritual shall confer the benefit of wearing a diamond armor. Diamond being the hardest substance, an armor made out of it shall endure all hardships and protect the wearer. Śrī Bhāskarāya has pointed out in his Bāhya Saparyā that these nyāsās can be done apart from nitya saparyā (daily ritual) in night, hence note his stress on doing these procedures daily. They are:

(1) Mātṛkā – bahir and antar
(2) samhāra
(3) sṛṣṭi
(4) sthiti
(5) daśavidha mātṛkā nyāsā
(6) Śrī KaŃTādi
(7) keśavādi
(8) prapanca yaga
(9) Tripurā -51
(10) Kāmarati
(11) mūlamantra ṛṣyādi
(12) Karaśuddhi
(13) ātma Rakṣa
(14) ātma Rakṣa (ṣadaṅga rūpa)
(15) Caturāsana
(16) ṣadāsana
(17) navāsana
(18) Bālā yoga Sadaṅga
(19) ṣadaṅga yuvati
(20) Vākdevata
(21) Bahir ṇavayoni
(22) āntar navayoni
(23) śṛṅkhala
(24) Catuṣpīta
(25) ṇava Yogini
(26) Kāmeśvaryādi
(27) Tattvādhidevata
(28) Tattva
(29) Pañcadaśi kalā nyāsa
(30) Mūlavidyā (samhāra/ sṛṣṭi/sthiti for Pañcadaśi) – (also daśa vidha nyāsā per datta samhitā)
(31) āyuda
(32) Kāmakalā
(33) ṇityā devi Laghu ṣoda nyāsa – gaṇesa
(34) graha
(35) nakṣatra
(36) yogini
(37) rāśi
(38) pīta
(39) (Pūjā) Yoga pīta. Śrī chakra nyāsā
(40) samhāra
(41) sṛṣṭi
(42) sthiti

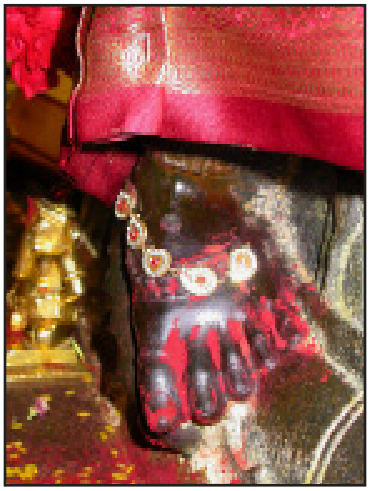
Śrī ṣodaśākṣarī Upāsakās Pūrṇābhiṣikta sādhakās have to perform further nyāsas:

(1)Mālini nyāsā
(2) ṣodaśī kalā nyāsā
(3) Saubhāgya
(4) sammohana
(5) samhāra
(6) sṛṣṭi
(7) sthiti
(8) aparā saubhāgya
(9) mukha kara
(10) mukha pada
(11) vaktra
(12) mahā saubhāgya
(13) Śrī ṣodaśākṣari pUraṇa nyāsā.
(14) śāmbhavi kalā
(15) śiva kalā
(16) śakti kalā, Mahā ṣoda nyāsa –
(17) Prapañca,
(18) bhuvana,
(19) mūrti,
(20) mantra,
(21) devata and (22) mātṛkā
(23) aṣṭāṣtaka nyāsā
(24) Mahā śakti nyāsā

The nyāsās mentioned above S. No 1 to 24 have to be done after S. No. 38 above i.e before (pūjā) Yoga pīta nyāsā.

Thus we will always end up in the sthiti Śrī Chakra nyāsā, then we are directed to do japā of the upadeśa mantra (pañchadaśi or ṣodaśākṣarī) with purvāṅga and uttarāṅga mantras before proceeding to the patrāsadhana, we can proceed further to antar yāga and then to āvaraṇa pūja.

Watch for part 2 of this article in the next issue of the Sri Chakra.



Sri Gurubhyo Namaha