

Sri Rāmānujācārya (I)

(In Honour of His 1,000th Birth Anniversary)

PRAVRAJIKA SHUDDHATMAPRANA

With exceeding benevolence, compassion, and moon-like tranquil patience, Ramanuja gave refuge to the world and taught the truth and wisdom of the Vedas. Come to think [of it], other than contemplating his feet, I have no desire. *Ramanuja Nutrandadi*, v. 73, by Tiruvarangattamudanar¹

I take refuge at the feet of my illustrious preceptor Ramanuja, the sole ocean of compassion who, because of passionate attachment to the gold of Acyuta's lotus-feet, eternally considers all else as straw! *Srivaikuntha Stava*, v. 1, by Kuresha²

In her poem *Tiruppavāi*, Āndāl imagines herself to be the leader of a group of gopis who have taken a vow to get up early in the morning during the month of Margoli (December-January) and go to Krishna's house to waken him. In the last verse the girls tell Krishna:

At break of dawn
we rise to serve you,
worship at your feet.
Great indeed is our fortune.
Born in our cowherd clan
you cannot deny us,
you are bound to accept
our little services.

O Govinda we have not come
to ask for the ritual drum.
We are your slaves,
we serve only you.
Forever and a day
we shall be connected
with you.

Make all our desires
flow to you alone.

Fulfill, O song of our vow.³

Here, as in the *Bhāgavata Purāna*, the gopis' sole desire is to serve Krishna 'forever and a day'. They know that Krishna is the Lord himself and can grant them any boon, including *moksha*—liberation from the round of birth and rebirth. But to them, *moksha* (however blissful a state it might be) is trivial compared to the bliss of an eternal, loving relationship with Krishna. They want Krishna himself—forever and ever. As Sri Krishnaprem says, '... even the possibility of finding Krishna is better than the certainty of *moksha*.'⁴

This is the state of mind of a devotee who loves nothing but God in His Personal aspect. Like the gopis, Āndāl had been totally bewitched by Krishna, and could not think of anything or anyone else.

When Shankarāchārya established his system of Advaita Vedānta in the 9th century, he revived people's faith in the teachings of the Vedas after the spread of Buddhism had cast doubts in their minds. Through his brilliant writings, commentaries, and discourses, all based on the Upanishads and the *Bhagavad Gītā*, he proved that there is, in truth, an Ultimate Reality, which the Upanishads call Brahman. This Ultimate Reality is all-pervading pure Consciousness—Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute. Moreover,

according to Shankara, this world with its living beings is transitory, and therefore ultimately unreal. Everything and everyone is one with that infinite, waveless ocean of Consciousness.

Shankara himself was a great devotee, and wrote some of the most beautiful hymns to Shiva, Vishnu, and the Divine Mother. Yet, to him, God was the Impersonal Absolute Brahman. The Personal God was ultimately unreal, just as the devotees were. As Ramakrishna described it:

Do you know how it is? Brahman, Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute, is like a shoreless ocean. In the ocean visible blocks of ice are formed here and there by intense cold. Similarly, under the cooling influence, so to speak, of the bhakti of Its worshippers, the Infinite transforms Itself into the finite and appears before the worshipper as God with form. That is to say, God reveals Himself to His bhaktas as an embodied Person. Again, as, on the rising of the sun, the ice in the ocean melts away, so, on the awakening of jñāna, the embodied God melts back into the infinite and formless Brahman.⁵

To devotees like Āndāl, this is unbearable. But Ramakrishna was not one-sided. For him there was more. Thus he could also reassure the lovers of God, saying: ‘But you may say that for certain devotees God assumes eternal forms. There are places in the ocean where the ice doesn’t melt at all. It assumes the form of quartz.’⁶ Shankara, however, had no such reassurance. Though not everyone agreed with him, in the 9th century it was Shankara’s voice that was being heard.

Āndāl was one of a group of saints living in what is now Tamil Nadu between the 6th and 9th centuries. These saints are known collectively as the Ālvārs. All of them composed exquisite songs in Tamil describing their love and longing for God in

the aspect of Vishnu. In fact, these songs were loved and honoured so highly that they were considered to be equal to the Vedas. And all of the Ālvārs wanted nothing more than to live in an eternal relationship with the Lord, serving Him forever.

The Ālvārs especially loved to sing about the Lord in the various Vishnu temples in South India, and of these temples, Srirangam was the most popular—with the Ālvārs and with devotees in general. Kulashekhara Ālvār described in one of his songs how the devotees would sing and dance for the Lord there. The last of the Ālvārs, Tirumangai Ālvār, did extensive renovation work on the temple at Srirangam, and also introduced the ritual singing of the Ālvār songs there for the Lord—especially Nammālvār’s songs. In fact, a whole festival was dedicated to the singing of Nammālvār’s *Tiruvaimoli*, with the singer dancing and enacting the part of Nammālvār. The image of Nammālvār was also brought for the occasion every year in a grand procession from his temple in Ālvār Tirunagari. But after the passing away of Tirumangai Ālvār these rituals gradually stopped. Years went by, and it seemed that the Ālvār songs had been forgotten.

If it had not been for Nāthamuni these songs might have been lost forever. One day, by chance, he overheard a group of brahmins singing a stanza from Nammālvār’s *Tiruvaimoli*, and he became entranced. But as those brahmins knew only that one verse, Nāthamuni became desperate to find more. Gradually, by travelling to various pilgrimage places—and also, it is said, with the help of divine intervention from Nammālvār—he was able to recover these songs. He then organized them into a collection called the *Nālāyira Divya Prabandham*, and also set them to music, with some of them being enacted through

dance, as in the days of Tirumangai Ālvār. Nāthamuni soon became the leader of the group of Srivaishnavas in Srirangam and was put in charge of the temple of Lord Ranganātha there. He was then able to reestablish the arrangements for the ritual performance of these songs in the temple by training two of his nephews in this art. He also asked them to pass on this tradition in their family so that it would not be lost again.

In his *History of the Srirangam Temple*, V. N. Hari Rao wrote:

Referring to the activities of Nathamuni in Srirangam the *Koil Olugu* [the chronicle of the Srirangam temple] says that he organised regular classes in which he expounded the import of the *Prabandhas* and asked his pupils to propagate them in turn. To him goes the credit of having made the verses of the *Nalayiraprabandham* a living force among the Srivaishnavas by incorporating them into the daily routine of an orthodox Vaisnava as well as that of a Vaisnava temple. As a result these verses, though of considerable antiquity, have come to stay more as a religious institution being recited in *gostis* in Vaisnava temples by successive generations of *Bhattas* than as a piece of classical literature surviving only in books and known only to antiquarians or historians. . . . The practices regarding the recitations of the *Prabandhas* started by Nathamuni in the Srirangam temple were followed in other Vaisnava temples. Srirangam was rapidly becoming the accredited headquarters of the Vaisnava movement in South India.⁷

As Hari Rao said, this tradition of temple and personal recitations of the Prabandhas continues even now. In fact, it is still common to hear the complete *Tiruppavai* of Āndāl recited over loudspeakers and on the radio in Tamil Nadu during the month of Margoli (December-January).

Nāthamuni and Yāmuna

Nāthamuni's own son had died at an early age, but not before marrying and having a son himself. So Nāthamuni put all his hopes for passing on the devotional message of the Ālvārs in this grandson, Yāmuna. After his son's death, Nāthamuni took vows of sannyāsa and left his family. Later, when he knew he did not have much longer to live, he asked a devoted disciple, Pundarikāksha (Uyyakondar), to make sure that Yāmuna would come to Srirangam and acquire his divine inheritance. Pundarikāksha sent his disciple Rama Misra (Manakkal Nambi) to get Yāmuna, who was then immersed in the worldly life and duties of a king.

Yāmuna is said to have been born in 953 AD in Madurai. He was just a child when his father died and his grandfather renounced the world, so he was brought up by his mother and grandmother. He soon began his studies under a learned scholar named Bhāshyācārya. The teacher and student both had high regard for each other, and Yāmuna quickly mastered all the texts that he was studying. When the boy was just twelve years old, he defeated the vain pandit of the Pāndya court in a debate, and as per the wager, won half of the king's kingdom. He then also became known as Alavandar ('one who has come to conquer'), and he gradually lost himself in his royal duties and pleasures.

Rama Misra knew it would not be easy to meet Yāmuna, but he finally devised a trick to get the king's attention. He began bringing to the palace a special vegetable for him every day that the king enjoyed very much. But then suddenly Rama Misra stopped bringing it. Naturally Yāmuna became curious as to who was bringing the vegetable, and why, and why it was not being brought anymore. When Rama Misra

returned a few days later, Yāmuna asked to meet him. Rama Misra then admitted to the king that his real purpose in coming was to turn over to Yāmuna a great treasure left for him by his grandfather Nāthamuni. However, in order for the king to claim this treasure, he had to go with Rama Misra to a certain place, as it was being guarded by a huge serpent and could be seen only with the help of a certain mantra.

Yāmuna's innate devotional temperament had already become awakened, just by meeting Rama Misra, so he gladly agreed to go with him. Along the way, Rama Misra began reading from and expounding on the *Bhagavad Gitā*, and this further roused a devotional mood in Yāmuna. It was not long before he lost all interest in his kingdom, and took initiation from Rama Misra. When they finally reached their destination, Srirangam, Rama Misra took Yāmuna inside the huge temple, where Yāmuna gazed at the exquisite form of Vishnu who reclines on the serpent Ananta. Rama Misra then told Yāmuna: 'Here is the treasure left by your grandfather. This is your inheritance.' Falling before the Lord, Yāmuna gladly accepted his inheritance. He then renounced everything, took monastic vows, and remained in Srirangam to look after the Lord's worship.

Though Yāmuna did not have much contact with his grandfather, he was, as we have seen, a brilliant student when he was young, and after coming to Srirangam he quickly immersed himself in the traditions and teachings of the Ālvārs and, through Rama Misra, of his grandfather. He understood that their teachings differed from Shankara in certain respects:

First, according to the Ālvārs and Nāthamuni, though the Lord is all-pervading, and within and without His creation, the Lord also has a very real Personal form and aspect; second, the creation and the living beings are also real in

the sense that they are parts of the Lord and are the Lord's body; and third, the goal of human life is to realize the Lord as the *Sesi*, the Owner, and oneself to be the *sesa*, the slave—that is, the being that is owned by the Lord. In other words, the reality that the Lord gives to the human beings is not for the sake of their egos, or for them to be immersed in the world. Rather, it is for them to realize their relationship with Him and to serve Him. Though this relationship of *Sesi-sesa* may seem very formal, aloof, and distant, it is actually a relationship of pure love, as the individual soul is also part of the Lord's own being. And in the words of the Ālvārs, the Lord is the Master, Beloved, Friend, and Father all at the same time. He is one's all-in-all.

In order to put the Ālvār teachings into practice in the ritualistic worship of the Lord in the temples, Yāmuna instituted a worship system that was based on the Pancharātra āgamas. The Vaishnava Pancharātra philosophy is quite elaborate and is too large of a topic to be discussed here. But regarding the worship system in the temple, it can be said that the Lord is treated as a very real and living Presence. The divine image (*murti*) of Vishnu in the temple is, in fact, considered an actual *avatār*—an *Arcāvatār* (the descent of Vishnu in the image), and is worshipped and adored as such.

Yāmuna also wrote several beautiful Sanskrit works in which he expounded the philosophy of Vishishtā-advaita—Qualified Non-dualism (as opposed to Shankara's Advaita—Non-dualism). In all of these works Yāmuna based his teachings not only on the Ālvār poetry, but also on the teachings of the epics, Puranas, and Pancharātra texts.

Though Yāmuna wrote a short work giving the essence of the *Bhagavad Gitā* (*Gītārtha-sangraha*), he was never able to write a full commentary on it, or

commentaries on the Upanishads and the *Brahma-sutras*. Commentaries on these scriptures that could stand the test of philosophical debate—which was so much in vogue in those days—were essential, he felt. This deficiency greatly worried him.

One of Yāmuna’s foremost disciples was Sri Shailapurna (Periyatirumalai Nambi). After living as a householder for some years, he took sannyāsa from Yāmuna and began to live with his guru in Srirangam. But before leaving home, he decided to arrange the marriage of his two sisters, Kantimati (Bhumi Piratti) and Dyutimati (Periya Piratti). He first arranged the marriage of Kantimati to a brahmin named Asuri Keshavācārya, who lived in Sriperumbudur, a village about thirty miles from Chennai. Keshavācārya was well known in the area for his performance of *yajnas*, traditional Vedic fire rituals. Dyutimati was then married to Kamalanayana Bhatta, from the nearby village of Aharam.

A few years went by, but no child was born to Kantimati, so Keshavācārya decided to perform some rituals with Kantimati at the Pārthasārathy temple on the sea coast, in what is now known as the Triplicane district of Chennai. Soon after the rituals were over, Keshavācārya had a dream in which Pārthasārathy (Vishnu) appeared to him and assured him that his desire for a child would be fulfilled. Moreover, the Lord told him that He Himself would take birth as his son in order to teach people the true import of the scriptures.

Birth of Rāmānuja

About a year later, in what is believed to be the year 1017 AD, Kantimati gave birth to a beautiful son. Soon after, a son was also born to her younger sister, Dyutimati. Hearing the news, Shailapurna came from Srirangam to bless the two babies. Shailapurna was overjoyed to see divine

features on these babies, especially on Kantimati’s son, and he was also thrilled to hear about Keshavācārya’s divine dream. After checking the baby’s horoscope, he became convinced that Kantimati’s son was an incarnation of Lakshmana, Rāma’s younger brother. Shailapurna thus decided to give him the name Rāmānuja, which means ‘the younger brother of Rāma’. Dyutimati’s son was given the name Govinda.

From his childhood Rāmānuja loved to study the scriptures, and as he grew up, he became an outstanding student. At the age of sixteen his parents arranged his marriage, according to the custom then, to a young woman named Tanjamma (or Raksakambal), but shortly afterwards Rāmānuja’s father became ill and died. Kantimati was plunged in grief, and thinking that a change of location might be good for her, Rāmānuja decided to move the family to the larger town of Kanchi, or Kanchipuram. Another reason for the move was that a well-known scholar named Yādavaprakāsha was then teaching in Kanchi, and Rāmānuja very much wanted to study under him.

Yādavaprakāsha upheld the philosophy of an extreme form of Advaita. Even Shankara’s philosophy was not that extreme. Whereas Shankara believed that a mysterious power, which he called Māyā, made the world and living beings appear to be real, Yādavaprakāsha did not even believe in Māyā. To him, the world was totally unreal—not even as real as a mirage. However, as he was a brilliant teacher, students flocked to him from all over the area. Soon after Rāmānuja joined his classes, his cousin Govinda also did the same.

Because of Rāmānuja’s sweet nature and sharp intellect, he soon became a favourite student of his teacher, but this situation could not last for long. Though, out of deep respect for his teacher, Rāmānuja for a long time refrained from questioning

Yādava's interpretations of the scriptures, he finally could not remain silent. One day the teacher was explaining the phrase from the *Taittiriya Upanishad*, '*Satyam-jnānam-anantam brahma*', as absolute identity. 'Ramanuja immediately refuted this by saying that these were only the attributes of Brahman, and that they could co-exist without mutual contradiction. It was like redness, softness and fragrance co-existing in a flower without contradicting one another.'⁸ Yādava immediately became angry and suggested that Rāmānuja leave, but the student just remained silent.

Another day Rāmānuja was massaging oil on Yādavaprakāsha's body when another student came and asked the teacher about his interpretation of the word *kapyāsam* in the sentence *Tasya yathā kapyāsam pundarikamevamakshini*, from the *Chāndogya Upanishad* (1.6.7). Yādava said that *kapyāsam* meant the buttocks of a monkey ('... of that Person the two eyes are like the lotus whose colour is like the seat of a monkey'.⁹) This had been Shankara's interpretation on this verse also. Hearing this, tears fell from Rāmānuja's eyes, attracting the notice of his teacher. Yādava looked at Rāmānuja and understood that his words had offended him. He then challenged his student to give a different interpretation. With great humility, Rāmānuja replied: 'Sir, "kapyāsam" means "blossomed by the sun", "pundarika" is the lotus. So the passage will only mean that the eyes of the Lord are like the lotus which blooms before the morning sun.'¹⁰ Yādava was furious and again asked his student to leave. This time Rāmānuja complied, but only until his teacher's anger had cooled off.

Yādava became worried now that this brilliant student of his might provoke questions in other students' minds, or even start his own school to refute Advaita. So he decided to get rid of him permanently with the help of some of his other students. On

the pretext of making a pilgrimage to the north to bathe in the Ganga, he left with his students, including Rāmānuja, with the intention of killing him on the way. Govinda had not been informed about the plot to kill Rāmānuja, but he suspected something was wrong, so he also went. After the party had been travelling for many days, Govinda became more and more anxious, and decided to warn Rāmānuja and tell him to run away.

Rāmānuja was, of course, shocked. With great sorrow, he headed back south through the woods. After a short time, Yādava and the other students noticed that Rāmānuja was not with them. While Govinda feigned ignorance, the others began searching for Rāmānuja, and eventually decided he must have been killed by a wild animal. Rejoicing that their purpose had been so easily accomplished, they continued on with their pilgrimage.

Meanwhile, Rāmānuja was running for his life. He neither ate nor stopped for rest for many hours. But at last, out of exhaustion, he sat down under a tree and immediately fell asleep. When he finally woke up, he was startled to find a fowler couple standing before him, looking very concerned. 'Are you lost? Where is your home?' they enquired. Rāmānuja replied that he was from Kanchipuram, and they told him that they were also heading there on a pilgrimage to Rameswaram. With great kindness, they told Rāmānuja that they would look after him and take him to Kanchi.

Rāmānuja was at first alarmed by their formidable appearance, but their gentle voices and behaviour touched his heart, and he agreed to go with them. That night they stopped near a river. The couple cleaned a place for him to sleep, and then they lay down nearby. Rāmānuja could hear the fowler's wife say that she was thirsty, but her husband discouraged her from getting up then to get water, as it was dark. But

Rāmānuja, out of gratitude to them, resolved to bring the fowler's wife some water first thing in the morning.

Accordingly, Rāmānuja got up early and went to fetch some water. When he returned, however, the couple had disappeared. As he was searching for them, he noticed some familiar-looking temple towers nearby, and he suddenly realized that this was a temple in Kanchi. 'How could this be?' he wondered. It was impossible for them to have reached Kanchipuram in one day. But as he entered the town, he realized that he was indeed there. Suddenly Rāmānuja understood that the fowler couple had been Lakshmi and Nārāyana, who had themselves come to rescue him.

After several months Yādava and his students returned from their pilgrimage, but without Govinda. Yādava was alarmed to see Rāmānuja, but as Rāmānuja did not show any sign of being aware of a plot against him and was respectful and friendly as usual, Yādava assumed that Rāmānuja had been ignorant of the whole plot, and he welcomed his student back to his classes. He also told him that Govinda had found a *bāna lingam* (a symbol of Shiva) when he bathed in the Ganga, and had decided to remain in Kalahasti and dedicate his life to the worship of Shiva. Rāmānuja returned to Yādava's classes, but continued to differ with his teacher in his interpretation of the scriptures.

One day Yāmunācārya happened to come to Kanchi on a pilgrimage, and noticed Yādava with a group of students. One of his own disciples pointed out Rāmānuja to him, and told Yāmuna that the young man had written the brilliant commentary on the '*Satyam-jnānam-anantam brahma*' mantra, which Yāmuna had heard about. Yāmuna was greatly impressed by Rāmānuja's appearance and behaviour, and prayed to the Lord to bring Rāmānuja to him. But he did

not want to personally approach Yādava and his students, so he returned to Srirangam without meeting Rāmānuja.

Soon after Yādava's return to Kanchi, another incident occurred in which Rāmānuja was able to cure the daughter of the king of Kanchi who was suffering from a serious affliction, which Yādava, with all his knowledge of mantras and spells, could not cure. This incident again provoked a jealous rage from Yādava, and it finally severed their student-teacher relationship.

Rāmānuja had, for many years, been devoted to an elderly Srivaishnava named Kānchipurna (Tirukacci Nambi), who was a disciple of Yāmunācārya. He used to visit Rāmānuja's house now and then. Though not a brahmin, Kānchipurna was highly revered by the people of Kanchi for his humility, devotion, wisdom, and other exceptional qualities. He lived a simple life in a small hut just outside of the town, and served Lord Varadārāja in the temple. The local people, in fact, believed that he was able to converse with the Lord directly. But on his part, Kānchipurna had great faith in Rāmānuja, and believed that this young man would eventually bring greatness to the Vaishnava faith.

Now that his ties with Yādava were broken, Rāmānuja decided to take refuge in Kānchipurna, and he asked to become his disciple. But Kānchipurna refused, saying that he was a shudra¹¹ and an ignorant person, and that he could not be a teacher to a brahmin and scholar like Rāmānuja. Rāmānuja entreated him again and again, but Kānchipurna merely consoled him, saying that Lord Varadārāja would soon fulfill his desire for initiation. He also asked Rāmānuja to serve Lord Varadārāja in the temple by bringing some water every day from a nearby well for the Lord's bath. Rāmānuja gladly agreed.

Yāmunācārya was delighted when he

heard the news from some pilgrims that Rāmānuja had left Yādavaprakāsha, and was serving Lord Varadārāja under the guidance of his disciple Kānchipurna. Yāmuna knew that he did not have much longer to live, and he was anxious to have Rāmānuja brought to Srirangam. So he asked his main disciple, Mahāpurna (Periya Nambi), to bring Rāmānuja from Kanchi. Mahāpurna set out immediately on foot and reached Kanchi in a few days. Going straight to the temple, he first had *darshan* of Lord Varadārāja, and then found Kānchipurna outside the temple. Kānchipurna was pleased to hear of Mahāpurna's reason for coming, and invited him to spend the night with him.

The next morning the two went to the well where Rāmānuja came every day to collect water for the temple. Seeing Rāmānuja from a distance with the pitcher on his shoulder, Kānchipurna pointed him out to Mahāpurna, and then left to go to the temple. Mahāpurna was so struck by Rāmānuja's radiant appearance that he began to sing in praise of the Lord verses from Yāmunācārya's hymn *Stotraratna*. Now it was Rāmānuja's turn to be struck by the beauty of the hymn, and when Mahāpurna had finished singing, he asked him who had composed it. When Rāmānuja heard that its author, Yāmunācārya, had asked to see him, he was overwhelmed with love and gratitude, for he himself had been wanting to meet this great saint. He immediately agreed to leave for Srirangam, after bringing the water to the temple.

As Mahāpurna and Rāmānuja were approaching Srirangam, they noticed a large crowd near the temple, and when they came near they learned that Yāmuna had just passed away and people had gathered to see his body before it was interred. Both Mahāpurna and Rāmānuja were devastated. Filled with grief, they approached Yāmuna's body to pay their respects to the saint. As

they stood gazing at the body, Rāmānuja noticed that three fingers of his right hand were turned in, and when he asked about it, no one could explain why. Rāmānuja suspected that Yāmuna had three wishes that he wanted fulfilled, and he asked one of the disciples who was standing nearby about it. The disciple replied that Yāmuna had three unfulfilled wishes: 'one, to perpetuate the memory of Vyāsa and Parāshara [the authors of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Vishnu Purāna* respectively]; two, to offer a tribute of love to Nammālvār, the great Tamil poet; and three, to write a *vishishtādvaitic* commentary on the *Brahma Sutras*.'¹² When Rāmānuja vowed right there to fulfil each of these wishes, the three fingers of Yāmuna's hand became straight.

Yāmuna's disciples then understood that Rāmānuja was indeed the true successor and heir of Yāmuna, and they asked him to remain in Srirangam. But Rāmānuja was hurt that the Lord had taken Yāmuna away before he could get to Srirangam, so he refused to stay even one night. In fact, he was so aggrieved that he left for Kanchi without even going to the temple and having *darshan* of Lord Ranganātha. Regarding Rāmānuja's great regard for Yāmunācārya, he would later tell his devotees 'that if it had been given to him to be in the living company of Sri Yāmuna but for a single day he would have constructed a staircase to heaven and procured free admission to all thereto.'¹³

As soon as Rāmānuja returned to Kanchi, he again begged Kānchipurna for initiation, but Kānchipurna was firm in his refusal. Rāmānuja then requested Kānchipurna to at least take his meal at his house, and the saint agreed. Rāmānuja's mother had passed away earlier, and his wife, Tanjamma, was now the mistress of the household. Though she was devoted to her husband, she did not share Rāmānuja's

liberality on caste issues. But she agreed to cook for Kānchipurna the next day.

Kānchipurna understood that Rāmānuja wanted to take the remnants of his food, and he could not bear this. So the next day, when Rāmānuja left to bring Kānchipurna to their house, the elderly saint arrived early by another route and requested Tanjamma to feed him quickly, as he had to get back to his duties at the temple. Though Tanjamma tried to get him to wait until Rāmānuja returned, Kānchipurna insisted on eating immediately. After Kānchipurna had finished his food, he himself cleaned the spot where he had eaten and then left. Then Tanjamma gave the leftover food to a shudra, took another bath, and started cooking fresh food for her husband. When Rāmānuja returned and found out what had happened, he was deeply disturbed, as this was not a proper way to treat a holy person like Kānchipurna. Moreover, his desire to purify himself by taking Kānchipurna's leftovers had also been frustrated. He immediately left to apologize to the saint.

One day, at Rāmānuja's request, Kānchipurna agreed to pray to Lord Varadārāja for some instructions for him that would answer some questions he had. The next day, Kānchipurna gave Rāmānuja the Lord's message, containing six statements:

1. I am the absolute Brahman, the cause of *Prakriti* which is the cause of the universe.
2. O large-minded one, the distinction between *Jiva* and *Ishvara* is axiomatic.
3. Self-surrender (at the lotus feet of God) is the only cause of liberation of those who strive after final beatitude.
4. The liberation of My devotees, even though they fail to remember Me at the last moment of their life, is sure to take place.

5. As soon as My devotees give up their bodies, they attain the Supreme Object.

6. Take refuge in Mahātmā Mahāpurna who is endowed with all virtues! [Then, to Kānchipurna,] Go soon to Rāmānuja and tell him what I have told you.¹⁴

Rāmānuja was overjoyed to hear these instructions. He had not told even Kānchipurna what these questions were that he had, but now the Lord graciously answered them Himself. After prostrating for a long time at the feet of Kānchipurna, he left for Srirangam to receive initiation from Mahāpurna.

Meanwhile, at Srirangam, the disciples of Yāmuna greatly felt the need of having someone there who could expound the scriptures the way Yāmuna had done. After discussing the matter among themselves, they decided to send Mahāpurna to Kanchi to give Rāmānuja initiation and also, if possible, to bring him to Srirangam. Mahāpurna gladly agreed to go, and he immediately set out with his wife for Kanchi.

Not far from Kanchipuram there is a small town named Madurantakam that has a beautiful temple to Rāma, and also a large temple tank. Mahāpurna and his wife decided to sit down at the tank to rest, but they soon noticed that Rāmānuja was approaching them. All were thrilled at this unexpected encounter. At Rāmānuja's earnest request, Mahāpurna performed the initiation ceremony right there.¹⁵ Afterwards they all proceeded to Rāmānuja's house in Kanchi.

Mahāpurna and his wife lived there for six months while Rāmānuja studied the hymns of the Ālvārs and other scriptures under the guidance of his guru. Rāmānuja was extremely devoted to them and looked after their comfort with great attention.

SRI RĀMĀNUJĀCĀRYA (I)
(IN HONOUR OF HIS 1,000TH BIRTH ANNIVERSARY)

Unfortunately, however, Rāmānuja's wife could not give up her petty caste prejudices. Though they were all brahmins, Tanjamma had a slightly higher caste status, and one day she badly insulted Mahāpurna's wife over this issue. Rāmānuja happened to be away from the house when this was reported to Mahāpurna. Nevertheless, the guru decided to leave immediately for Srirangam with his wife, without even waiting for Rāmānuja to return.

Rāmānuja was devastated when he

heard what had happened. He decided then that his wife's caste pettiness was too much of a hindrance to his spiritual life, and he requested her to return to her parents' home. After she had left, Rāmānuja went to the temple and asked Lord Varadārāja to accept him as a monk. He then performed all the sacred rites for sannyāsa, and put on the ochre cloth of a monk. Varadārāja Himself, through Kānchīpurna, gave Rāmānuja the name Yatirāja, the king of renouncers. ■

(To be continued)

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 from *The Sacred Book of Four Thousand* (Nalayira Divya Prabandham), tr. by Srirama Bharati (Chennai: Sri Sadagopan Tirunarayanawami Divya Prabandha Pathasala, 2000), p. 754.
- 2 from *Praise-Poems to Visnu and Sri: The Stotras of Ramanuja's Immediate Disciples*, trans. by Nancy Ann Nayar (Bombay: Ananthacharya Indological Research Institute, 1994), p. 18.
- 3 verse 29, from *Antal and Her Path of Love*, by Vidya Dehejia (Albany: State University of New York, 1990), p. 60.
- 4 *Yogi Sri Krishnaprem*, by Dilip Kumar Roy (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1992), p. 234; in a letter to Govindagopal Mukhopadhyay, dated 19th November 1944.
- 5 *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, by M., trans. by Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1986), p. 859.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 191.
- 7 *History of the Srirangam Temple*, by V.N. Hari Rao (Tirupati: Sri Venkateswara University, 1976), p. 52.
- 8 *Ramanujacharya*, by R. Parthasarathy (New Delhi: National Book Trust, India, 1991), p. 11.
- 9 *Chāndogya Upanishad*, trans. by Swami

Gambhirananda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1992), p. 53.

10 Parthasarathy, p. 11.

11 According to R. Parthasarathy, Kānchīpurna was 'born in the merchant community', but in those days it was often the custom that all non-brahmins were referred to as shudras.

12 Parthasarathy, p. 18.

13 *Ramanuja's Teachings in His Own Words*, by M. Yamunacharya (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1988), p. 10.

14 *Life of Sri Ramanuja*, by Swami Ramakrishnananda, trans. by Swami Budhananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1992), p. 127.

15 It is said that some of the worship utensils Mahāpurna used for the initiation are still preserved at the temple. The temple has another interesting story in that it was also the site where a British Collector, Lionel Place, had a vision of Rāma and Lakshmana protecting the bund on the temple tank from collapsing during a heavy monsoon rain. Mr Place had worked very devotedly to have the tank repaired, and out of gratitude, Rāma gave him this vision. For that reason, Rāma is called here Kodanda Rāma, Rāma the guard.

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