

The Life of Ramanujacarya

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PREFACE

Great saints and devotees of the Lord give purpose to this material world and its history by their presence; their

absence renders this world useless and its history a chronological record of nonsense. By providing another glimpse into the ways that pure devotees transform the lives of materialistic people and alter the course of history, Naimisaranya Prabhu has done great service to all English readers, especially Vaisnavas and aspiring Vaisnavas. Without such information, people tend to doubt or forget that another plane, beyond the mundane, exists and even controls the destiny of that mundane plane. In the examples they set in their lives, however, saintly persons help us to see the path to Krsna consciousness. "Example is better than precept" The philosophy of Krsna consciousness remains inaccessible except by the mercy of the pure devotees whose behavior gives three dimensions to such philosophy.

Only the hearts of unfortunate persons will not melt upon reading or hearing this moving depletion of the life of Srila Ramanujacarya. The nectarean subject matter and the competent rendering by Naimisaranya Prabhu combine to produce genuine spiritual effects within the mind. I hope Naimisaranya Prabhu will continue producing such illuminating accounts of the lives of great devotees.

-Jagadisa Gosvami

FOREWORD

It is the desire of all teachers working in our gurukulas to give the children an acute awareness of the great Vaisnava tradition that they will inherit when initiated into our sampradaya. We hear frequently that the Krsna Consciousness movement is propounding the highest form of religion found anywhere in the world, but, living in the western culture, we sometimes find it hard to be constantly aware of the true position of Vaisnavism. In the West Vaisnavas are frequently looked upon as strange fanatics enacting bizarre rituals or some residual leftover from the hippy days of the sixties and early seventies. Therefore it is very important that all devotees, and the children in particular, become conversant with the centuries old religious tradition that our movement today represents.

It was for these reasons I felt it imperative to start a course on the history of Vaisnavism when I began teaching a class of older boys at the Bhaktivedanta Village Gurukula in California. From studying Srila Prabhupada's books I was aware that Ramanuja was one of the great Vaisnava acaryas, but I knew little of his life and teachings. Therefore I set about researching the subject, using various books that I was able to obtain from India and the university libraries in Los Angeles. At this point I

began to learn the wonderfully instructive stories contained in this book. As I recounted them to my students, 'History of Vaisnavism' quickly came to be our most popular class.

From this point, with the encouragement of other devotees working in gurukula, it seemed natural to begin writing down the subject matter as I was teaching it. There is, of course, a great need at the present time to provide suitable reading material for the hungry young minds eager to employ the reading skills we have taught them in their early years in gurukula. It is therefore my hope and expectation that this book will be the first of many as we build up a full library of books for our older students, in addition to the publications for younger children that have been provided by Bala Books.

Although this book was originally written for our older gurukula students-and for this reason the emphasis is on pastimes rather than philosophy - I am confident that all devotees will like to read about the life of this great acarya and gain inspiration from the wonderful example he set. In addition, I think that parents of younger children, for whom the style of writing may be too advanced, will find that their sons and daughters will relish these stories if they are read aloud to them.

The main source for the life of Ramanuja is a book called the *Prapannamrta*, written in Sanskrit by Anantacarya, a descendant of Andhrapurna. There is some controversy about the date of this work. Some scholars have tried to show that it was written as late as the seventeenth century, but most authorities agree the author was a junior contemporary of Ramanuja's and therefore able to compile the material from first-hand sources. There are 126 chapters in the *Prapannamrta*, the first 68 of which describe the life of Yamunacarya. The remaining 58 chapters deal with the lives of Yamunacarya, Nathamuni, and other south Indian Vaisnavas. It is this book to which Srila Prabhupada refers when he mentions the life of Ramanuja in his purports to the *Caitanya Caritamrta*.

Another important work on the life of Ramanuja is the *Divya-suri-charitai*, a book written in Tamil by Garudavaha, who was also probably a contemporary of Ramanuja, although again this fact is disputed by some authorities. In addition, there is the *Guru-parampara-prabhavam* by Perumal Jiyar, written in the early part of the fourteenth century and Lokam Jiyar's *Ramanujanacarya-divya-charitai*.

The main pastimes are the same in all these works, but it is frequently found that they vary quite considerably in the detail. For this reason I have occasionally had to use my own discretion in choosing between the different versions. The names of the various characters described also vary, depending mainly on whether they are given in Tamil or the Sanskrit equivalent. By and large I have used the Sanskrit form of the names where I could find them, as I

considered that these might sound more familiar to the reader.

One further point that I feel should be mentioned at this stage is the debt that all Vaisnavas owe to Ramanujacarya, whether they be within or outside of his direct disciplic succession. As Gaudiya Vaisnavas, most of our philosophical doctrines come from the writings of the six gosvamis of Vrindavana, in which they transcribed the teachings that had been given orally by Caitanya Mahaprabhu Himself. However, any devotee who studies the philosophical teachings of Ramanuja, and Yamunacarya also, will quickly realize how much we have inherited from him in our basic philosophical conclusions. Particularly in the refutation of the mayavada ideas of Sankara, the works of Ramanuja play a key role. As Srila Prabhupada explains: "The statements of the Sankara philosophy, which are the teeth of the mayavadi philosopher, are always broken by the strong arguments of the Vaisnava philosophers such as the great acaryas, especially Ramanujacarya."

Finally I would like to offer my most humble obeisances at the feet of His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, without whose mercy the glories of the Vaisnava acaryas would still be a closed subject to the Western world. I would also like to thank all the devotees who have helped and encouraged me in devotional service over the years. I am well aware that there are many discrepancies and shortcomings in this presentation, but I am praying that all the Vaisnavas will display their characteristic generosity towards me and try to overlook these deficiencies.

- Naimisaranya dasa,
Los Angeles,
January 1986.

INTRODUCTION

RAMANUJA'S PHILOSOPHY OF VISISTADVAITA

Ramanuja is well-known as the great philosopher and acarya of the Sri Vaisnava sampradaya. However, it should not be misunderstood that he was the founder of the Sri Vaisnavas. Originally started by Laksmidevi Herself, the Sri sampradaya contained many exalted devotees prior to Ramanuja's appearance to whom he admits his debt in his writings. In their expressions of devotion to the Supreme Lord, all South Indian devotees were influenced by the nine Alvars, who lived several hundred years before the birth of

Ramanuja. Despite some minor philosophical differences, it is plain that the themes of devotion and surrender to God, which are essential to Ramanuja's teachings, are based to a large extent on the writings of the Alvars.

In terms of philosophy also Ramanuja was undoubtedly influenced by the teachings of previous Vaisnava acaryas, most notably Yamunacarya and Bodhayana, the commentator on the Vedanta sutras. In many ways the major achievement of Ramanuja as an acarya was to establish a solid philosophical basis for the devotional sentiments that had been expressed in the hymns of the Alvars. In order to do this it was first essential that he refute the impersonalist teachings of Sankara's *advaita-vada* and large sections of his philosophical writings are dedicated to this task. To combat the teachings of the nondevotional monists, Ramanuja attacked them on their own ground, rarely expressing devotional sentiment and for the most part citing the Upanisads and Vedanta-sutras as scriptural evidence, rather than the overtly Vaisnava sastras. It is for this reason that Ramanuja, unlike Madhva, does not use the Srimad-Bhagavatam to support his teachings. The main philosophical works of Ramanuja are his commentary on Vedanta-sutra (Sri Bhasya), the Vedartha-samgraha, the Vedanta-sara and his commentary on the Bhagavad-gita.

Three hundred years before Ramanuja, Sankaracarya had attempted to establish his doctrine of absolute oneness, a concept bearing many similarities to the Buddhist philosophy. According to Sankara, nothing exists anywhere except Brahman, which is formless, changeless, eternal, and devoid of all attributes. Therefore the variety that we perceive in this world is simply an illusion and does not in reality have any existence. Because the living being is covered by ignorance (avidya or maya) he perceives variety and changes; but when enlightened by pure knowledge, he will realize that everything is in fact Brahman and that his previous perceptions were simply illusion. Obviously, in such a philosophy devotion is also ultimately meaningless because the distinction between God and His devotee is also illusory.

In his commentary on Vedanta-sutra, Ramanuja strongly attacks Sankara's ideas. He states that the concept of Brahman as being indeterminate, without qualities or changes, is meaningless. Any reality that cannot be perceived, known, thought of, or even spoken about is simply fiction. The cosmic manifestation with all of its varieties may be temporary, but that does not mean it is unreal. Illusion is to perceive something as different from its real nature and not, as Sankara states, to perceive something that does not in fact exist. When one mistakes a shell for silver, both the silver and the shell are real, but the illusion is mistaking one thing for the other. Therefore the universe is real, but the illusion is to accept it as the

all in all, and not consider the underlying basis of existence, which is God.

In commenting on the the second aphorism of the Vedanta-sutra, *janmady asya yatah*, Ramanuja establishes that all manifestations from the Supreme Reality must also be real. The sutra states that Brahman is that from which everything else has come into being. Because it does not state that Brahman is that from which the illusion of manifestation arises, it must be accepted that the manifestation are not illusory.

The philosophy Ramanuja presented as a logical alternative to that of Sankara is called Visistadvaita-vada, or qualified oneness. It is accepted that there is an underlying unity to all existence, but this oneness of Brahman is qualified by variety. Three categories are recognized , which are distinct from one another , but together comprise a unity. These are *cit* , the individual living beings, *acit*, inert matter and Isvara, the controller-God. *Cit* and *acit* are seen as the body of God and thus are dependent upon Him, just as the body is dependent on the soul and cannot exist without it. This idea of matter and living beings comprising the body of God is essential for understanding the relationship between them. There is unity between the body and soul, yet a real distinction is recognized.

Transformation takes place within the world, and this cannot be dismissed as illusion. Sankara tried to established that nothing exists except for the one undifferentiated, changeless Brahman. Transformation is real, but it pertains only to the *cit* and *acit*; Isvara remains eternally changeless. Just as transformation affects the body although the soul is unaffected, so the universe and the living beings, the body of God, are subject to various transformations; He remains eternally changeless. The distinctions between the three categories are real; but, because the *cit* and *acit* are dependent on Isvara, they cannot be looked upon as being separate from Him. The living beings are inseparable from Brahman, though they are substantive realities and thus qualify Brahman as the body qualifies the soul. This is the meaning of Visistadvaita, or qualified oneness.

In describing the individual soul, Ramanuja followed closely the teachings given by Yamunacarya in the Siddhitraya. Although atomic in size, the soul spreads the consciousness throughout the body, like the rays coming from the lamp. As the body of God, the individual living beings are totally dependent on Him, but He allows them the free will to act as they desire. In fact He creates the facility that enables them to enact their various desires. Thus complete dependence on God does not interfere with the free will of the individual. The only exception to this general rule are with regard to those who are particularly devoted to God and those particularly inimical towards Him.

For the devotees, He manifests His grace by generating within them such desires that they adopt actions by which they may easily win Him. Within those who are particularly opposed to Him, He generates desires that lead to actions that take the individual further away from Him. Though originally pure, the self becomes afflicted with worldly desires through contact with matter. Ignorance of one's real nature, which gives rise to so many material desires, is a result of association with matter. When this ignorance is removed, then the soul can be liberated from the bondage of material existence.

Sankara had contended that all religious duties are dependent upon a perception of variety and, therefore, ultimately illusory. Ramanuja refuted this argument by stressing that devotion is the only true path to liberation. All religious duties should be seen as a means to increase one's devotion to God; they are never to be given up. In the state of liberation, the individuality of the self is not negated as Sankara had contended. What is negated is the false sense of independence from God, which is the essence of the individual's illusion. This can be achieved only by the grace of God, which is realized by the practice of bhakti, or devotion. Knowledge alone, without devotion, is insufficient to free the soul from material bondage. The state of pure devotion is one in which the mind is fixed constantly on the Lord in a mood of profound love. Surrender to the will of God (prapatti) is essential for the achievement of His grace. In the context of devotion and surrender to the will of God, considerations of caste and social status are irrelevant; devotion is enacted from the platform of the soul.

Ramanuja differed from Yamunacarya by stating that the existence of God cannot be demonstrated by inference in observing the cosmic manifestation. Although the universe must certainly have a cause, it cannot be presumed that the cause is God. It could equally be accepted that the universe was created in different parts at different times by different personalities. When we see a large number of pots, it is certain they have a creator; it cannot be presumed they were generated simultaneously by a single personality. From observing the universe one can conclude it is a product of intelligence, but there is nothing to show whether it was brought about by one creator or many. As God is by nature transcendent and beyond the range of the senses, it is impossible to find proof of His existence through the method of observation.

Having thus disposed of the ascending processes of acquiring knowledge of God, Ramanuja concludes that the existence of God can be known by the testimony of the scriptures alone. All other proofs of the existence of God may be countered by opposing logical arguments. Because the scriptures are of divine origin, their version must be accepted as absolute. On this basis Ramanuja states that

Isvara is Lord Visnu, the Supreme Personality of Godhead, as is revealed in the Vedic scriptures. The descriptions of God contained therein are factual and authentic and must be accepted as being beyond the range of mundane argument.

Anyone who is familiar with the Gaudiya-Vaisnava tradition will surely recognize the vast amount of common ground that exists between *visistadvaita* and the *acintya-bhedabheda* philosophy of simultaneous, inconceivable oneness and difference expounded by Caitanya Mahaprabhu. In fact it has been pointed out by some commentators that *acintya-bhedabheda* is the natural conclusion that resolves the difficulties inherent in some of the ideas of *visistadvaita*.

The major problem with Ramanuja's philosophy arises when he attempts to define the exact relationship between the living beings, the universe, and God. The idea of qualified oneness gives only a vague explanation how the unity of all beings with God is reconciled with the eternal differences between them. The concept of oneness also leads one to question how God remains changeless and free from the contamination that affects His integral elements in the form of the individual souls.

To overcome this difficulty Ramanuja uses the soul/body analogy to explain the relationship of qualified oneness. However, there are shortcomings in this analogy, for the body is completely inert and is controlled absolutely by the soul. Therefore, just as the soul is responsible for the actions of the body-if the analogy were followed to its logical conclusion - it would appear that God would be held responsible for the actions of all beings, who would be completely devoid of free will.

Philosophically, the relationship between the living entities and God is indescribable. This understanding is signified in the Gaudiya Vaisnava philosophy by the word *acintya*, inconceivable. From certain of his statements it would appear that Ramanuja accepts the idea of oneness and difference, while at the same time stating that he feels it to be inadequate as an explanation of the relationship between God and the individual souls. Because it is impossible to define the idea of oneness and difference in terms of pure logic, Ramanuja attempted to employ the soul/body analogy to more accurately explain this relationship. However, because of the difficulties we have noted in completely accepting this definition, a study of the philosophy of Ramanuja inevitably draws one to the conclusion of inconceivable oneness and difference - *acintya-bhedabheda-tattva*.

CHAPTER ONE

YAMUNACARYA

In the south of India many great devotees have appeared to spread the glories of the Lord. Of all these devotees, perhaps the most famous is Sri Ramanujacarya, whose life is the subject of this book. However, just before Ramanuja there lived another great Vaisnava whose life and teachings had a tremendous influence on Ramanuja, although in fact the two of them never met. This was Sri Yamunacarya, also known as Alabandara - "The Conqueror." It is appropriate in considering the life of Ramanujacarya that we should first look briefly at this great soul, the illustrious writer of the famous *Stotra-ratna*.

Yamunacarya was born around AD 918 in the city of Madurai in south India, which was then the capital of the mighty Pandya kings. His grandfather was a well-known scholar and devotee known as Nathamuni, who was also famous for his mystic abilities and expertise in the practice of astanga yoga. It was Nathamuni who first compiled the songs of Nammalvara, a famous south Indian devotee, and had them set to music.

Nathamuni's son was a handsome, intelligent young man named Isvaramuni, who married a beautiful young wife. Shortly after the wedding, Isvaramuni traveled with his wife and parents to visit the holy places of pilgrimage in northern India, including Vrndavana, the birthplace of Lord Krsna. Just a few months after their return from this pilgrimage, Isvaramuni's wife gave birth to a baby boy, and, in memory of the sacred river which flows through Vrndavana, Nathamuni named him Yamuna.

However, the joy of the young couple was but short-lived, for just a few years after the birth of the child Isvaramuni passed from this world, leaving his young wife a widow.

Nathamuni was so distressed by the untimely death of his son that he decided to have no more to do with the affairs of this world. He left his wife and relatives to take up the life of a renounced sannyasi, totally dedicating himself to the worship of Lord Visnu. Thus at a very young age Yamunacarya was left to be brought up by his mother and aged grandmother, living a life of great poverty.

THE CHALLENGE

When he was five years old, Yamunacarya went to study at the school of Bhasyacarya and quickly won his teacher's affection, both for his sweet nature and his ability to learn quickly. He studied hard, and by the time he was twelve years old he was Bhasyacarya's best student.

In those days in India, great scholars used to challenge one another to see who was the more learned in Vedic scriptures and more skilled in the science of logic. While Yamunacarya was studying at the school of Bhasyacarya, there was a great scholar who lived at the court of the Pandya king. His name was Kolahala, and he was a great favorite of the king because he could defeat any other scholar in a debate. In fact, the king had passed a law decreeing that every scholar who had been defeated by Kolahala must pay a tax to him every year - if anyone refused he would be put to death.

Now Yamunacarya's teacher, Bhasyacarya, had also been defeated by Kolahala, and so he too was obliged to pay this tax. However, because he was a very poor man, he had not been able to pay for the past two years. One day, when Bhasyacarya was away on business and all the other students had gone home, Yamunacarya was left alone in the school. At that time one of Kolahala's disciples came there to collect the overdue tax from Bhasyacarya.

"Where is your teacher?" he demanded in imperious tones when he saw that Yamunacarya was alone in the school.

"Might I know, sir, who has sent you here?" replied Yamunacarya in a very gentle voice, anxious not to give any offense.

"What!" exclaimed the disciple, "do you not know that I am a disciple of the greatest and most erudite scholar in all of India? Kolahala is the terror of all other scholars, and even the great Pandya king is his obedient servant. All those scholars defeated by the great Kolahala must pay a yearly tax or else forfeit their lives. Has your teacher become insane that he dares to withhold payment for two years? Or is it that he intends to challenge my master again, just as a moth rushes into a blazing fire."

Yamunacarya was by nature very kindhearted, and he hardly ever quarreled with his fellow students. However, he also had great love and respect for his teacher. Therefore, when he heard Bhasyacarya being spoken of in that contemptuous manner, he felt such pain at heart that he could not restrain himself and replied very strongly to Kolahala's messenger. "How foolish you are and how foolish your teacher is as well, for who but the greatest fool would train his disciple to possess such monumental pride, instead of removing such qualities from his heart. Why should my noble teacher waste his time debating with such a man? Go and tell your master that the lowest disciple of the great Bhasyacarya challenges him to a debate. If he dares to face me, let him send his reply at once."

PREPARATIONS FOR THE DEBATE

Kolahala's disciple was so astonished and indignant that he could not think of anything to say, but left in a

furious rage to inform his teacher of this insult. When Kolahala heard what had happened, he could not help but laugh on hearing the age of his rival. The Pandya king decided to send another messenger to the boy to see whether he was insane, and, if he was serious about the debate, to bring him immediately. When the royal messenger came and told Yamunacarya of the king's command, the boy replied, "I will certainly obey the command of his majesty the king; but if I am to be accepted as a proper opponent of the great Kolahala, then surely a conveyance should be sent to bring me to the palace"

After discussing Yamunacarya's reply, the king and his courtiers agreed that the boy's statement was fitting and sent a costly palanquin and one-hundred soldiers to conduct him to the palace. In the meantime news of these events had spread all over the city of Madurai, and Bhasyacarya heard the whole story as he was returning home. He was very unhappy to learn of the danger his favorite student was facing, for though the king was generous by nature, it was well known that he dealt very severely with anyone who insulted the court pandita.

Yamunacarya, however, was not in the least concerned. "There is no reason, revered sir, for you to be alarmed," he consoled his teacher when he returned to the school, "for you can be certain that, by your grace, I will smash the pride of Kolahala."

While they were thus talking, the king's men arrived at the school with the palanquin. Yamunacarya worshipped the feet of his guru and calmly climbed into the palanquin, preparing himself for the great debate that was about to take place. A large crowd of people had gathered along the way, for it was unheard of that a twelve-year-old boy should challenge the court pandita and everyone wanted to catch a glimpse of the wonderful child. The brahmanas, many of whom had already been defeated by Kolahala, offered him blessings, saying, "May you defeat this insolent pandita, just as Visnu in the form of a dwarf brahmana displaced Bali Maharaja, the king of the asuras."

Meanwhile, in the royal court a difference of opinion arose between the king and queen about Yamunacarya. The king said, "Just as a cat plays with a mouse, so will Kolahala defeat and destroy the boy". But the queen was more thoughtful, realizing that Yamunacarya was no ordinary child. "Just as a small spark," she said, "can turn a mountain of cloth to ashes, so will this boy destroy the mountain-like pride of Kolahala."

"How can you really believe that this is possible?" exclaimed the king in amazement. "If you truly have faith in the child, then you must make a wager to back your words". "Very well," replied the queen, "I will make a wager. If the boy does not defeat and humble the proud Kolahala, I will become the servant of your maidservant."

"This is certainly a mighty wager," said the king, "but I will match it. If the boy defeats Kolahala, as you say, then I will give him half of my kingdom." While the king and queen were thus exchanging wagers, the palanquin arrived and Yamunacarya entered the palace. When Kolahala saw him, he looked at the queen and smiled sarcastically. "Ala-bandara," he said, meaning, "Is this the boy who will conquer me?"

"Yes," replied the queen quietly, "Ala-bandara. This is he who has come to conquer you."

THE CONTEST

When the contestants were seated, Kolahala began the debate by putting simple questions on Sanskrit grammar to Yamunacarya. When, however, he found the boy could answer them with ease, he began to pose really difficult grammatical problems; but still, Yamunacarya replied to them all without difficulty.

He then spoke to the great pandita with a playful smile on his lips. "Because I am just a boy, you are insulting me by asking these simple questions. Remember that Astavakra was no older than myself when he defeated Bandi at the court of King Janaka. If you judge a person's learning by his size, then surely it follows that the water buffalo will be a greater scholar than yourself."

Although Kolahala winced at these words, he controlled his anger and replied smilingly, "Well answered. Now it is your turn to put questions to me".

"Very well," Yamunacarya responded, "I will put three propositions before you, and, if you can refute them, I shall accept defeat." Kolahala agreed and prepared to refute Yamunacarya's statements. "My first proposition is this," Yamunacarya spoke out clearly and boldly, "that your mother is not a barren woman. Refute this if you can."

Hearing this, Kolahala remained silent. "Had my mother been barren, my birth would not have been possible," he thought. "How can I refute his statement" Seeing Kolahala as silent as a dumb man, all the courtiers were astonished. Although the great pandita tried to conceal his anxiety, he could not prevent a flush from crossing his cheeks.

Yamunacarya spoke again, "Sir, if in spite of your all-conquering intelligence you are unable to refute my first proposition, then please hear my second. It is this, that the Pandya king is supremely righteous. Refute this if you can." On hearing this Kolahala, was deeply disturbed, sensing his imminent defeat. With the king seated there in front of him, how could he deny the boy's statement? Again he remained silent, the color draining from his face as he was scarcely able to control his anger.

Yamunacarya spoke again, "Here is my third proposition-that the queen of the Pandya king is as chaste

and faithful to her husband as was Savitri. Refute this if you can."

Seeing how he had once again been trapped by the intelligent boy, Kolahala could no longer restrain his anger. "You rascal," he screamed, "how can any loyal subject say that his king is unrighteous or his queen unfaithful to her husband? It is true I have not replied to your statements, but that does not mean I am defeated. First you must refute your own propositions, and, if you cannot, you should be put to death, for the implications of your words are treason against your king and queen."

When Kolahala shouted out these words, all his disciples and supporters cheered; but all those who favored Yamunacarya cried, "No, Kolahala is defeated. He is simply letting forth his anger, because he could not refute the statements of Yamunacarya as he promised to do."

Thus an argument broke out in the palace, but in the midst of the contention Yamunacarya quieted them all by saying, "Please stop this argument, for it is unnecessary. I shall refute all my propositions one by one. Please hear me" At this everyone fell silent and turned their attention to Yamunacarya, wondering how he could possibly do this and yet not offend the king and queen.

"My first statement," he continued, "was that our great pandita's mother was not a barren woman. However, it is stated in the Manusamhita that a woman who has only one child is to be considered barren. As your mother gave birth to only one son, even though he is a man of such merit as yourself, according to the sastra, she must be considered barren. Secondly, I stated that the king of the Pandyas is a most righteous man. However, the Manu' samhita states that a king enjoys the benefit of one sixth of the religious acts of his subjects, but also has to bear the burden of one sixth of their sinful deeds. Because in the present age of Kali men are more prone toward sinfulness than piety, it must follow that our king, although flawless in his own character, is bearing a heavy burden of unrighteousness. And now to my third proposition, which stated that our queen is as chaste and faithful as was Savitri. But again, if we consult the laws of Manu, it is said that the king is the representative of Agni, Vayu, Surya, Candra, Yama, Kuvera, Varuna, and Indra. Therefore, the queen is married not just to one man, but to these eight demigods as well. So how can it be said that she is chaste?"

On hearing these wonderful answers, all the people were filled with amazement and the queen joyfully cried out, "Alabandara! Alabandara!- He has conquered! He has conquered!"

The king immediately came forward and embraced Yamunacarya. "Just as on the rising of the sun," he said, "all the insignificant stars fade away, so you, O learned Alabandara, have conquered the proud Kolahala by your learning and skill. This fellow just a short while ago was

demanding your death, now you may deal with him as you see fit. I have also promised to give you half my kingdom as a prize for this victory, and that promise I will certainly fulfill."

Of course, Yamunacarya forgave Kolahala, and, although he was but a boy of twelve years, he began at once to rule the kingdom he had won. Thus his days of poverty were over.

YAMUNACARYA AS A KING

When Yamunacarya became the ruler of half the kingdom of the Pandyas, some of the neighboring kings saw this as a fine opportunity to invade and plunder his lands. When he learned of this from his spies, the boy king marched against them with a strong army before they were prepared, and they were all forced to surrender to him.

In this way he enlarged his domain and began to rule the kingdom. Unfortunately, although he was a shrewd and righteous monarch, he became distracted from his spiritual understanding by political dealings and the sense pleasures that go along with a high position. He forgot that this life is but a temporary stage in our eternal existence and gradually gave up his acts of devotion to Lord Visnu.

RAMA MISRA'S SCHEME

Meanwhile, Nathamuni, Yamunacarya's grand-father, passed from this world to return to the lotus feet of the Lord. He had always loved Yamunacarya very dearly, and he was filled with sorrow to hear how his grandson had abandoned the path of devotion for the sake of enjoying sensual pleasures. Therefore, when he was on his deathbed, he called for his chief disciple, Rama Misra, and made a last request of him: "My dear grandson, Yamunacarya, who is known as Alabandara, has forgotten the greatness and glory of Lord Visnu, being attracted by the temporary pleasures of this material world. Now I am preparing to give up my life, and I can do nothing more to deliver him. Therefore my last request to you is that you save my grandson from the darkness of nescience in which he is now sunk. I leave him to your care."

Rama Misra, being a dutiful disciple, never forgot this last instruction of his guru-maharaja. Therefore, several years later when Yamunacarya was thirty-five years old, he went to his palace seeking an interview. However, when he arrived there, he saw that the gateway to the palace was crowded with the chariots and soldiers of different kings. Even powerful noblemen had to wait for a long time before they were able to gain an audience with the mighty Alabandara. As a poor sannyasi beggar, Rama Misra realized

that there was little chance of his ever getting to see Yamunacarya and that he would have to think of a plan by which to accomplish his mission.

As well as being a great devotee and preacher, Rama Misra was also learned in the science of Ayur-veda. There is a certain type of spinach, known as tuduvalai, that grows in South India. This tuduvalai is famous for developing the qualities of goodness in a man, making his mind peaceful and serene. Rama Misra found some of these plants growing near the palace. Collecting the green leaves, he brought them to the chief cook in the royal kitchen.

When the cook came to see him, Rama Misra addressed him as follows, "May Lord Narayana bless you. I beg you to please serve these tuduvalai leaves to the king every day, for it is well known that he is a pious man. By eating this herb he will be able to develop his qualities of goodness and also increase the duration of his life. Every day I will bring some here to you." As it happened the cook was a pious man who knew the value of the tuduvalai plant and he happily agreed to Rama Misra's proposal.

Thus, every day for two months Rama Misra brought the green leaves of the tuduvalai plant to the royal kitchen, and every day they were served to Yamunacarya, who very much appreciated them. When Rama Misra heard this, he deliberately stayed away one day; when the king found that the tuduvalai preparation was absent from his plate, he called for the cook. "Why did you not cook that spinach preparation for me today?" he asked.

"Your majesty," the cook replied, "the sadhu who usually brings the spinach did not come today."

"Who is this sadhu and what price does he ask for his service?" asked Yamunacarya.

"My Lord," replied the cook, "I do not know the name or dwelling place of that sadhu. He will accept no payment at all for his service and renders it only out of love and regard for your majesty."

On hearing this Alabandara told the cook, "If this man comes again, show him due respect and bring him to me."

The next day Rama Misra again brought tuduvalai leaves to the kitchen door, and the cook at once brought him to Yamunacarya. Seeing that pious brahmana before him, the king was delighted and said, "Holy sage, I am your servant. Please accept my obeisances at your feet. I have heard that every day you gather and bring tuduvalai for me and will accept no payment for this service. Is there anything that I can do for you?"

Hearing this Rama Misra said, "I have something very important to tell you, but it must be in private". When the cook had been dismissed, he went on. "Some years back your grandfather, the renowned Nathamuni, left this world and returned to Vaikuntha. Before he departed, however, he left in my care a great treasure to be given to you at the right time. Now I am asking you to accept this treasure."

Yamunacarya was very pleased to hear these words, for at that time he was preparing a campaign against a rebellious king and was in great need of money. Knowing what a wonderful person his grandfather had been, he readily believed the sadhus words. In great delight he said to Rama Misra, "Sir, you are certainly a most saintly person, being so renounced that you have not kept this treasure for yourself. Now please tell me where it is to be found."

Rama Misra answered, "If you follow me I will take you there. It is kept within seven walls, between two rivers, guarded by a great serpent. Every twelve years a demon from the south goes to inspect the treasure, which is guarded by mantra. Through the power of mantra the treasure will be revealed to you."

In fact the treasure that Rama Misra was describing was the beauty of Lord Ranganatha, the Deity who resides within a seven-walled temple on an island in the Kaveri River. The serpent is the bed of Ananta-Sesa, on whom the Lord is reclining. It is said that this Deity was first installed by Vibhisana, the brother of Ravana, and that every twelve years he goes to Rangaksetra to worship the Lord. The powerful mantra is the holy name of the Lord, for by chanting the holy name one is able to gain the transcendental vision by which one can appreciate that the Deity is non-different from the Lord Himself.

YAMUNACARYA' S CONVERSION

However, Alabandara could not understand the real meaning of Rama Misra's words, and, being anxious to acquire the treasure, he said, "I am ready to go there immediately along with four divisions of my army. Please be our guide"

"It is better if we go alone," replied Rama Misra, "for it is not advisable for many people to assemble there."

The king accepted this proposal, and, having made arrangements for the management of the kingdom in his absence, he prepared to set out with the sadhu. Leaving the city of Madurai behind them, they traveled in a northerly direction. At noon, while they were resting from the heat of the sun, Rama Misra began to chant the verses of the Bhagavad-gita.

It was many years since Yamunacarya had read and studied this great scripture, and while he had ruled as a king the sublime teachings of the Gita had been far from his heart. But now, as he listened to Rama Misra's sweet voice bringing forth the words of Sri Krsna, he began to realize the illusory nature of his position as a king and to see how he was neglecting the real goal of life. When Rama Misra had finished chanting all the eighteen chapters, Yamunacarya fell down at his feet and begged, "Please accept me as your servant, so that I may be able to continually relish the sweet nectar of Sri Krsna's words. Now, as I hear from you,

all the pleasures of my worldly life seem pale and insignificant."

At this Rama Misra smiled and said, "If you have the time to spare, then why not stay here for a few days and study the Gita with me."

Now that a taste of the real value of life had begun to reawaken in the heart of the king, his concern over material affairs was diminished. "Whatever duties I may have in this world," he replied, "certainly the most important duty for every man is to understand the true meaning of the Bhagavad-gita. "

Thus, the two of them remained in that solitary place for almost a week, and every day Rama Misra spoke on the sublime teachings of the Gita, while Yamunacarya listened with rapt attention. With every word that the sadhu spoke, the king's attachment for his material opulence was diminished. This is natural, for once one becomes truly aware of the glory and sweetness of the Supreme Lord, Sri Krsna, the pleasures of this world seem worthless in comparison. When Rama Misra reached the eighth verse of the twelfth chapter, he sang in a voice choked with tears,

*mayy eva mana adhatsva
mayi buddhim nivesaya
nivasisyasi mayy eva
ata urdhvam na samsayah*

"Just fix your mind upon Me, the Personality of Godhead, and engage all of your intelligence in Me. Thus you will live in Me always without a doubt."

When he heard this wonderful verse, Yamunacarya was filled with remorse and cried out, "Alas! Alas! All these years I have wasted my life, with my mind and intelligence absorbed only in thoughts of lust and wealth. When will that day come when I will be able to remove such useless things from my heart and fix my mind completely on the lotus feet of Sri Krsna?"

Hearing this pure sentiment, Rama Misra consoled the king, saying, "Your majesty, your pure mind rests always on the lotus feet of the Lord. Just for a short time it has been captivated by worldly desires, as a small cloud obscures the sun's rays for a short time. Now that cloud has almost gone, and the sun will shine again and dispel the darkness from your heart."

At this point Alabandara decided that he wanted no more to do with material life, and so he told Rama Misra, "Now, all I desire is to become your disciple, and so I have no need of the wealth left by my grandfather."

"But I gave my word to Sri Nathamuni," replied Rama Misra, "and so I must deliver the treasure to you to keep my vow intact. Now let us continue our journey together."

After walking for four days, they reached the banks of the Kaveri River and the next day crossed over to the

island on which stands the sacred temple of Sri Ranganatha. Rama Misra led Yamunacarya through the six outer gates, until they stood before the doors of the temple room itself. Then Rama Misra said, "In front of us lying on the bed of Ananta-Sesa is the treasure that was your grandfather's only property - Sri Ranganatha, the Lord of Laksmidevi, the most beautiful of all personalities."

Hearing these words, Yamunacarya ran forward and fell unconscious at the feet of the Deity. From that day he had no desire to resume his royal position. He took initiation from Rama Misra and spent the rest of his days totally absorbed in service to Sri Ranganatha. Part of his kingdom was returned to the Pandya kings, and a part of it he gave for the service of Lord Ranganatha. He received from his guru the mantra of eight syllables - *om namo narayanaya* and by chanting this mantra he attained the topmost platform of loving devotion to the Lord. On the order of Rama Misra he learned the art of mystic yoga and meditation from Sri Kurakanatha, who had been instructed in that science by Nathamuni himself.

After the disappearance of his guru, Alabandara was accepted as the head of the Vaisnava community. Whilst he was the acarya at Sri Rangam, he wrote four books of Vaisnava philosophy, as well as many prayers in glorification of the Supreme Lord. In particular he was devoted to the writings of his ancestor Nammalvara, which he recited constantly and taught to all of his disciples. Eventually the king of the Cholas and his queen were also converted, and they dedicated themselves to the worship of Lord Visnu. All the devotees in south India adored Yamunacarya for his renunciation, learning, humility, and steadfast devotion.

CHAPTER TWO

RAMANUJA'S STUDENT LIFE

One of Yamunacarya's chief sannyasi disciples was Sri Sailapurna. He had two sisters, the elder named Kantimati and the younger named Diptimati. Kantimati was married to a very pious brahmana known as Asuri Kesavacarya. Because of his expertise in the performance of all five kinds of fire sacrifice, he was also known as Sarvakratu.

Years passed by, and the couple lived happily in the village of Bhutapuri, but, because they still had no children, Kesavacarya became disturbed at heart. He decided to perform a fire sacrifice to please the Lord and thus beg Him for the gift of a son. For this purpose he journeyed

with his wife to the temple of Sri Partha-sarathi on the shores of the ocean, in what is now the city of Madras. There they performed sacrifices together, begging the Lord to be merciful to them and grant them the benediction of a son.

Certainly Lord Visnu was pleased by their prayers, for about one year later Kantimati gave birth to a baby boy, who bore all auspicious marks on his body. This was in the year AD 1017, and it was this child who grew up to be renowned all over the world as Sri Ramanujacarya, the great devotee of Lord Narayana.

At about the same time, Kantimati's younger sister, Diptimati, also gave birth to a son. On hearing the news of the births of his two nephews, Saila-purna, the intimate disciple of Yamunacarya, came to visit them. He was astonished to see all the auspicious marks on the body of Kantimati's son, and he gave him the name Ramanuja, a name of Laksmana which means the younger brother of Rama. To Diptimati's son he gave the name Govinda.

MEETING WITH KANCIPURNA

As Ramanuja grew, the brilliance of his intellect soon became apparent. When he began to attend school, he could easily remember anything he was taught, even after hearing it only once. All the teachers in the school loved the boy, not only because he was a brilliant scholar, but also because of his gentle, courteous nature.

At that time there was a famous devotee of the Lord named Kancipurna, who lived in the nearby city of Kancipuram. He was a disciple of Yamunacarya, and, although he was born in a sudra family, his intense devotion to the Lord was so apparent that even strict brahmanas would offer him all respect. Every day he would travel from the city of Kanci to the village of Poonamalle to worship the Deity there. As Bhutapuri was midway between the two places, he would daily pass by Ramanuja's house.

One evening as Ramanuja was returning home from school, he met Kancipurna face to face and was immediately attracted by the demeanor of this holy man. With great humility Ramanuja invited Kancipurna to come to his house for a meal, and the great devotee readily agreed, being very much attracted to this gentle brahmana boy.

After his guest had finished his meal, Ramanuja began to massage his feet. At this Kancipurna protested, "I am nothing but a low-born sudra and am thus your servant. It is not proper for a brahmana like you to deal with me in such a way."

Ramanuja replied, "If my position as a brahmana prevents me from worshipping a great soul such as yourself, then I consider my birth to be the most inauspicious. Is it just the wearing of a cheap thread that makes one a

brahmana? Only that person who is fully devoted to Lord Visnu is a real brahmana, no one else."

Kancipurna was filled with wonder and delight to hear the boy's firm faith in devotional service. Long into the night the two of them sat up discussing topics about the Lord and the ways of devotion. That night Kancipurna stayed at Ramanuja's house and proceeded on his journey the next morning. From that day forth both of these great devotees were bound together by the love that each bore for the other.

MOVING TO KANCIPURAM

When Ramanuja was only sixteen years old, his father, Asuri Kesavacarya, wanted to get him married. Accordingly, he selected a beautiful young girl to be his son's bride and made all the arrangements for the wedding celebration. The festivities lasted for an entire week and all the poor people of the neighborhood were satisfied by the distribution of large amounts of prasadam. After the couple had been married for only one month, however, tragedy struck the family - Kesavacarya left this world. Kantimati was afflicted with terrible grief, and for Ramanuja also it was a time of great sorrow. Now that Kesavacarya had left them, Bhutapuri was no longer a happy place for the family, and they decided to move to the city of Kanci. Ramanuja went first to construct a residence for them, and when it was completed they all moved there.

AT THE SCHOOL OF YADAVAPRAKASA

At that time a very learned scholar was living at Kanci. His name was Yadavaprakasa, and the fame of scholarship had attracted a large group of disciples to him. Being desirous of understanding the Vedic literatures, Ramanuja also became his student, and his pleasant nature and quick intelligence soon endeared him to the great pandita. However, this relationship did not last for very long, for despite his learning and knowledge of the scriptures, Yadavaprakasa was a firm adherent of the mayavada philosophy of absolute oneness. He taught that the all-pervading Brahman was the Absolute Truth and that the personal God, Lord Visnu, was illusory. Ramanuja was a pure devotee of the Lord, and so he was pained to hear the statements of Yadavaprakasa, that denied the supremacy of his beloved Lord. Out of humility and respect for his guru, Ramanuja would not point out the defects in these impersonalist teachings, but the situation gradually became impossible to tolerate.

THE FIRST CONFRONTATION

One day when the other students had gone home to take lunch, Yadavaprakasa asked Ramanuja to massage his body with oil. At that time one of the other students returned to the school to discuss with his teacher a passage from the *Chandogya Upanisad* they had been studying that morning. In particular he inquired about the word *kapyasam*, which occurs in the first chapter, part six, verse seven. Therein it is stated, *kapyasam pundarikam evam aksini*.

Following Sankaracarya's interpretation, Yadavaprakasa began to explain that *kapyasam* referred to the rear-end of a monkey and that the whole passage meant that the Supreme Lord had eyes like lotuses as red as a monkey's rear-end.

On hearing this horrible explanation of the appearance of his beloved Lord, Ramanuja, who was still massaging his guru, was filled with such intense grief that hot tears immediately began to pour from his eyes. When Yadavaprakasa felt the touch of these tears, he looked up in surprise. Seeing Ramanuja's distress, he asked what was causing him such pain. To this inquiry Ramanuja replied, "O master, it causes me such suffering to hear this terrible explanation from a great soul like yourself. How sinful it is to compare the beautiful lotus eyes of the Lord to the posterior of a monkey. I never expected to hear such a thing from my teacher."

Yadavaprakasa was angered by this challenge from one of his own students, and he replied sharply, "I also am very aggrieved. Impudent words from an inferior are never praiseworthy. If you have become so proud that you think yourself a better teacher than me, then let us hear your explanation of the passage."

"By your mercy everything is possible" replied Ramanuja.

Yadavaprakasa smiled derisively. "Now we are going to see this boy outdo the great Sankaracarya," he said.

Ramanuja remained peaceful, and when he spoke it was in a very humble way. "Instead of understanding the posterior of a monkey from the word *kapyasam*, " he said, "another meaning is possible. *Ka-pi* can be taken as *kam jalam pibati*, that which drinks up the water, or, in other words, the sun. The word *asam* also means to blossom, so the whole word *kapi-asam* can be understood as that which blossoms under the sun, or, in other words, the lotus flower. Thus we can understand the mantra of the Upanisad to mean that the Lord has eyes as beautiful as the lotus flower."

Yadavaprakasa was very surprised to hear such a clever explanation from one of his own students and he realized that Ramanuja was a staunch adherent of the devotional philosophy of dualism. The devotees understand that the perfection of life is to worship Lord Visnu without

any personal desire, and so they never aspire for oneness as the mayavadis do. This philosophy was directly opposed to the teachings of Yadavaprakasa and after this incident his affection for Ramanuja began to wane.

MORE CONFLICTS AT SCHOOL

A few days later when Yadavaprakasa was instructing his students from the Taittiriya Upanisad, he made the statement that the Supreme Brahman is Truth, Knowledge, and Infinity. On hearing this impersonal idea of God, Ramanuja could not contain himself. He immediately objected to his teacher's explanation, saying, "No, this verse means that the Supreme possesses Truth, Knowledge, and Infinity, but still He has His own existence beyond these attributes."

Angered by this unexpected interruption, Yadavaprakasa replied, "You presumptuous child, if you won't accept my explanations, then why do you come here? Why not go home and start a school of your own?" When he had composed himself somewhat, he went on more quietly, "Your explanation is not in accordance with Sankaracarya or any of the previous acaryas, so kindly keep your impertinence to yourself."

By nature Ramanuja was humble and meek, and so he tried to avoid such confrontations with his teacher. However, he was also absolutely devoted to knowledge of the truth: thus, when he heard the misleading monist interpretations being put forward by Yadavaprakasa, he was sometimes unable to contain himself. In the presence of the other students Yadavaprakasa used to make light of these challenges, but in his heart there began to arise a growing fear and hatred for the boy. "As he grows older," he contemplated, "this boy will strongly establish the dualistic philosophy of devotion. This must not be allowed to happen. I will do whatever is necessary to protect the doctrine of monism, even if it means that I have to kill him."

YADAVAPRAKASA'S PLOT

Actually, Yadavaprakasa was very envious of Ramanuja, seeing in him both a purer heart and a greater intellect than his own. One day, therefore, he called all his other students to a secret meeting. There he addressed them, "My dear children, none of you has ever found fault with my teachings, but this impudent Ramanuja has repeatedly challenged my explanations. He may be an intelligent boy, but all his ideas are based on the false doctrine of dualism, seeing a difference between the self and God. He is a complete heretic who will cause havoc in society through his teachings. We must find some way to be rid of him."

"Sir, surely you could just forbid him from coming to the school," suggested one student.

"But then our master's worst fears would be realized," responded another, "for he would open his own school and go on propagating his falsehoods all the more. Already he has written a commentary on the mantra: *satyam jnanam anantam brahma*, which contradicts everything we have learned from our teacher." This was true, for Ramanuja had effectively refuted Sankara's explanations: and his writing had been widely read and appreciated by Vaisnavas in south India, including Yamunacarya at Rangaksetra.

After discussing the matter for some time, they all agreed the only way to stop Ramanuja was to kill him. They then began to consider how this could be done secretly without anyone discovering their crime. Eventually Yadavaprakasa made a proposal, "Let us all go on pilgrimage to bathe in the Ganges. On the way there are many remote areas, where we can put an end to this heretic without anyone knowing anything about it. By bathing in the sacred Ganges we will free ourselves from the sin of killing a brahmana and when we return we will simply say he felt sick and died on the journey."

All the disciples readily accepted their teacher's suggestion and set out to induce Ramanuja to accompany them on their journey. Ramanuja was delighted at the idea of bathing in the Ganges and happily accepted their invitation. Govinda, Ramanuja's cousin, was living with his aunt in Kancipuram at this time, and he also studied at the school of Yadavaprakasa. When Ramanuja announced that he was going on pilgrimage to North India, Govinda immediately decided to go with his beloved friend and relative.

DANGER IN THE FOREST

Kantimati was unhappy at the prospect of being separated from her son for so many months, but, understanding the meritorious nature of such a venture, she gave him her permission to go. So it was that, at an auspicious moment, the band of disciples, headed by Yadavaprakasa, started out on the pilgrimage. After a few days traveling they came to a desolate region near the Vindhya Hills. Yadavaprakasa considered that this would be a suitable place to put his evil plan into operation, and he told his disciples to prepare themselves. However, while they were discussing the final preparations, Govinda was in the forest nearby, and he heard everything they said. As soon as he had the opportunity, he informed Ramanuja of the great danger he was in.

When he understood the wicked intentions of his teacher and fellow students, Ramanuja left the party and fled into the forest. When his absence was noticed, Yadavaprakasa sent some of the boys into the forest to

search for him, but when no one replied to their calls, they concluded that Ramanuja must have been killed by some wild beast. Although secretly very pleased by this apparent turn of events, because of Govinda's presence, they all pretended to be very much aggrieved. Yadavaprakasa spoke to Govinda, instructing him about the temporary nature of the body and bodily relationships, thus revealing his cunning and treacherous nature.

MEETING WITH THE HUNTER

When Ramanuja heard from Govinda of the plot that was threatening his life, he was at first stunned and completely bewildered, it was just half an hour before nightfall: he was a young man of only eighteen years, alone and friendless in a land far from his home. Then suddenly he felt great strength and courage enter his body. "Why should I be afraid?" he considered, "Is Lord Narayana not the protector of His devotees? Therefore what have I to fear from the darkness of the forest?" Thinking like this, he turned his face resolutely towards the south and began walking quickly through the forest. Sometimes he thought he could hear faint voices calling him in the distance, but he never hesitated and continued on his course.

He travelled for most of the night, until eventually, exhausted by hunger and fatigue, he rested beneath a large tree. He awoke the following day, refreshed and vigorous once more. Already it was afternoon, and so he prepared to continue on his journey. While he was considering which direction he should take, he saw a fowler couple approaching him. The hunter's wife said to him, "Is it because you have lost your way that you are sitting here alone in the forest? You look like the son of a brahmana. Where is your home?"

"My home is far from here," replied Ramanuja, "way to the south. Have you heard of a place called Kancipuram?"

"How is it that you are so bold as to journey alone through this dense forest, which is infested with robbers and wild animals?" asked the hunter. "I know Kancipuram very well, and, as it happens, we are also going in that direction" Ramanuja was very surprised to hear this, and so he asked, "Where are you from and for what reason are you going to Kanci?"

"We are forest dwellers," came the reply, "and live in a small village near the Vindhya Mountains. Because we have made our livelihood by catching birds, we are now going on pilgrimage to Ramesvaram and Kancipuram to free ourselves from the reactions to so many sinful activities. It seems that the Supreme Lord, who gives shelter to everyone, has brought you to us for protection."

At first Ramanuja was a little afraid of the tall, dark-skinned stranger, but there was something about the affection in his face and the sweetness of his words that

quickly dispelled all the misgivings from the young brahmanas mind. As it was by now almost evening time, the fowler said, "Let us go quickly through this forest region, and then we can camp for the night near an underground river that is not too far from here"

They set off at once and about an hour later came to the banks of the river. The fowler collected some pieces of wood and lit a fire. Then he prepared a camp site, so that they could spend the night there. Just before he fell asleep, Ramanuja heard the fowler's wife say to her husband, "My dear, I am feeling very thirsty. Can you look for some water for me?"

"Now the night has come," said the fowler, "and it would be foolish to leave the shelter of the firelight. Tomorrow you will be able to quench your thirst with the cool waters of a well that is just near here."

THE LORD PROTECTS HIS DEVOTEE

Early the next morning they rose and continued on their journey. Soon they came to the well the fowler had spoken of, and Ramanuja went down the steps to collect water for the wife of the fowler. Three times he brought water to her, but still her thirst was not satisfied. When he came back for the fourth time, there was no trace of the couple to be seen. They had completely disappeared. It was only then he realized They were in fact Laksmi and Narayana, who had taken the forms of a fowler and his wife just to protect Their devotee and guide him through the dangerous forest.

Seeing the towers of temples and a cluster of houses nearby, Ramanuja asked a passerby, "Sir, what is the name of this town?"

The man looked at him in amazement. "Can't you recognize the reputed city of Kancipuram?" he replied. "Why are you speaking like a stranger? I know that you are one of Yadavaprakasa's students, and I have seen you many times in the city."

Saying this the man continued on his way without waiting for a reply. At first Ramanuja was taken completely by surprise at this unbelievable news, but gradually he began to realize how Laksmidevi and Lord Narayana had bestowed their mercy upon him. Then his heart became filled with the ecstasy of divine love, and with tears rolling down his cheeks he began to offer prayers:

*namo brahmanya-devaya
go-brahmana hitaya ca
jagad-dhitdya krsnaya
govindaya namo namah*

RAMANUJA'S RETURN

For over an hour Ramanuja remained at the well, rapt in ecstasy, reciting Queen Kunti's prayers from the Srimad-Bhagavatam in glorification of the Supreme Personality of Godhead. Eventually three women carrying water pitchers approached the well, and, upon seeing them, Ramanuja controlled his emotions and proceeded on towards Kancipuram.

Ever since her son had set off on the pilgrimage to northern India, Ramanuja's mother, Kantimati, had been in a state of constant lamentation, shedding tears of separation. Thus, when he suddenly appeared at the doorway of the house, she could not at first believe it was actually him. Only when he paid obeisances and spoke to her was she fully convinced. Then she was filled with happiness and began to inquire from him, "My dear child, how is it that you have returned so soon? Where is Govinda? I thought that it would be at least six months before you returned from your pilgrimage to the holy Ganges"

When the whole story had been related to her, Kantimati was horrified by the evil intentions of Yadavaprakasa, but also delighted to hear of the great mercy the Lord had shown her son. At that moment Ramanuja's aunt, Diptimati, the mother of Govinda, came to the house along with Ramanuja's young wife. They were also overjoyed to see he had returned safely. They then began to cook offerings for Lord Narayana, and, just as they were serving prasadam, Kancipurna, who had heard of Ramanuja's arrival, came there. The two devotees warmly embraced one another, and Ramanuja invited Kancipurna to take prasadam as their honored guest. That night the feelings of joy in that small house were practically unlimited.

STUDIES RESUMED

Ramanuja continued to study the scriptures at home, and he asked his mother and aunt to tell no one about Yadavaprakasa's treacherous dealings. Some months later the acarya returned to Kancipuram along with all his disciples, except for Govinda. When Diptimati asked Yadavaprakasa about her son, he told her that after Ramanuja's disappearance they had journeyed to Benares, where they took darsana of Lord Visvanatha and bathed in the Ganges. They had stayed there for two weeks. One day whilst taking bath in the river, Govinda had discovered a Siva linga in the water. Seeing this as the will of the Lord, Govinda had immediately begun to worship Lord Siva in this form.

As he continued his worship, day by day his devotion to Lord Siva had become more and more fixed. Thus, when they arrived at Kalahasti on the return journey, he told his teacher and the other students that he no longer wanted to return to Kancipuram. He had decided to stay in that holy

shrine of the Saivites and dedicate his life to the worship of Lord Sankara.

Diptimati was not an ordinary woman, and, rather than feeling distress at hearing this news, she became completely joyful, considering herself blessed to have such a saintly son. Soon after this she went to Kalahasti to visit Govinda, and, on seeing how he was completely absorbed in worship of Lord Siva and freed from material hankering, her happiness increased many times over.

At first Yadavaprakasa was fearful when he saw that Ramanuja was still living, but he thought the young man must be unaware of the plot he had made to kill him. In the presence of Kantimati he pretended to be overwhelmed with joy at finding her son safe and sound. "You cannot imagine," he told her, "the suffering and anguish all of us underwent when we were unable to find him in the forest."

In actuality the teacher was feeling very ashamed of his wickedness now that he saw Ramanuja's humble behavior. Turning to the young man, he spoke affectionately, "My child, from this day you should come once more to study with me. May the Lord continue to shower His blessings upon you." From that day on Ramanuja resumed his studies with Yadavaprakasa.

YAMUNACARYA'S PRAYERS FOR RAMANUJA

A few days later the venerable Alabandara, accompanied by many disciples, came to Kancipuram to see Lord Varadaraja. While he was returning from the temple, Yamunacarya saw Yadavaprakasa walking with his disciples, his hand resting on Ramanuja's shoulder. Seeing this handsome, effulgent young man, the Vaisnava saint became curious and inquired from his followers as to his identity. When he learned this was the same Ramanuja who had written the wonderful commentary on the Upanisadic mantra, *satyam jnanam anantam brahma*, he was very pleased. But at the same time he was disturbed to see him under the guidance of such an ardent mayavadi as Yadavaprakasa. He then prayed to Lord Varadaraja for Ramanuja's deliverance from such unfortunate association:

"I take shelter of the Supreme Personality of Godhead, by whose mercy the deaf may hear, the lame may arise and walk, the dumb may speak, the blind may see, and barren women may bring forth children.

"O lotus-eyed one, husband of Laksmi, please bestow your full mercy upon Ramanuja, so that he will be able to worship you fully, without any hindrance."

Yamunacarya longed to approach Ramanuja and converse with him, but he was unwilling to associate with a nondevotee like Yadavaprakasa. At this time Alabandara was over one hundred years old and was the leading acarya among all the Vaisnavas in south India. He realized that, if Krsna

desired it, he would one day have the chance to meet with Ramanuja alone. Thinking like this, he returned to Sri Rangam.

DELIVERANCE OF THE PRINCESS

Apart from his great learning in the science of Vedanta, Yadavaprakasa was also expert in magical arts, particularly in driving out ghosts and evil spirits. Once it so happened that the princess of Kancipuram came to be possessed by a fearful brahma-raksasa ghost. As Yadavaprakasa's expertise in dealing with such situations was widely known, he was at once summoned to the palace.

However, despite all his mantras, the ghost that was possessing the girl remained completely unmoved. Laughing in a hideous shrill voice, the ghost within the princess called out, "Yadavaprakasa, of what use are all your mantras You are wasting your time. Go back home" Determined not to be defeated, Yadavaprakasa continued with his attempts to exorcise the evil spirit, but to no avail. Again the brahma-raksasa spoke. 'Why do you waste your strength in vain? Your power is much inferior to mine. The only way that you will be able to force me to leave the body of this beautiful princess is by bringing here your youngest disciple, the devoted Ramanuja. His purity is the only force that can overcome my potency".

Yadavaprakasa then sent word for Ramanuja to come to the palace without delay. When that great devotee of Lord Visnu arrived there and understood the situation, he spoke to the evil spirit, asking it to leave the body of the princess. The brahma-raksasa replied, speaking through the girl, "I will leave this body if you kindly place your lotus feet on my head." Such was the purity of Ramanuja's devotion that even this evil fiend could understand the benefit of taking shelter of such a great soul.

With the permission of his teacher, Ramanuja placed both of his feet on the girl's head, saying, "Now leave this place at once and give us some sign by which we may know in truth that you have departed."

The ghost replied, "Look now, I am leaving this beautiful body, and as a sign I shall break the topmost branch of the nearest banyan tree." At once the highest branch of the banyan tree cracked and fell to the ground, while the princess began to look around her in amazement, like one who has just awakened from sleep. When she was informed by her maidservant of all that had taken place, she hung her head in shame and hurried away to the inner apartments of the palace.

When the King of Kanci heard of his daughter's complete recovery, he hurried to worship the lotus feet of Ramanuja and express his gratitude. From that day on Ramanuja's fame spread throughout the kingdom, and his name

was on everyone's lips. Yadavaprakasa, however, was not at all pleased by the turn of events, seeing that his position had been minimized by one of his own students. Now everyone was aware that Ramanuja was far greater in spiritual potency than Yadavaprakasa, and this was not at all to the liking of the proud mayavadi.

In addition, Ramanuja's intense devotion to Lord Visnu was completely incompatible with the dry monistic doctrines expounded by his teacher. Therefore, it seemed that conflict between the two was inevitable.

RAMANUJA'S EXPULSION FROM SCHOOL

The final confrontation was not long in coming. Only a few weeks after Ramanuja's deliverance of the princess, all the students were assembled to hear Yadavaprakasa lecture on the mantras, *sarvam khalv idam brahma* - 'everything is brahman' and, *neha nanasti kincana* - 'there is nothing else in this world'. He was presenting the impersonalist philosophy in such an expert way that all his students were captivated by his explanations of the oneness of the *jiva* soul and the Supreme Brahman. Only Ramanuja showed any signs of unhappiness at the acaryas statements.

At the end of the class he spoke up, saying, "The words *sarvam khalv idam brahma* do not mean that the Supreme Absolute Truth is nothing but the sum total of all creation. Rather, it is seen that the universe comes from the Supreme as His energy, is maintained by Him and, in the end it dissolves back into Him. He maintains His own separate identity, although everything is indeed a part of His expanded energy. The words *neha nanasti kincana* do not mean that there is no variety at all in this world. Rather, we should understand that all the varieties of creation are held as one, just as separate pearls are held on one thread, although they are still individual entities. Thus, we can see how everything is both one and separate at the same time."

On hearing his teachings nullified by Ramanuja in this way, Yadavaprakasa became very angry and he spoke harshly, "If you do not like my explanations of the scriptures, then do not come to me any more".

"As you wish, sir" Ramanuja replied. He then worshipped the feet of his teacher and left the school, never to return again.

KANCIPURNA

The next day as Ramanuja was sitting at home studying the scriptures by himself, Kancipurna came to visit him. As we have heard before, Kancipurna was a pure devotee of the

Lord, who was respected by the most aristocratic brahmanas, though he himself took birth in a sudra family. From his very childhood he had absorbed himself in devotional service to the Deity of Sri Varadaraja. On hot summer days he would serve the Lord by providing cooling breezes with fans dipped in water, and he was always anxious to obtain the very best fruits and flowers to offer to the Lord.

All the people of Kanci loved him for his simple devotion and gentle behavior. Wherever he went all bad feelings and misunderstandings seemed to vanish. Sometimes he would stop in the middle of the road as if stunned, staring into the distance with an expression of great happiness on his face. It was said that he conversed with Lord Varadaraja Himself and that the Lord made His intentions known through the words of Kancipurna. Despite his birth in a sudra family, most of the brahmanas in Kancipuram recognized his exalted devotional qualities and offered him all respects. Only a few, who were very proud of their high birth and knowledge of the scriptures, said he was insane or an imposter. One of these, as you might imagine, was Yadavaprakasa.

INSTRUCTIONS FROM KANCIPURNA

Thus, it was with great happiness that Ramanuja received this wonderful devotee as a guest in his house. Offering him a nice sitting place, he said, "Your coming here is my great good fortune and can only be seen as part of the limitless mercy of Lord Varadaraja, who has sent you here to guide me. You must have heard of my expulsion from the school of Yadavaprakasa. Now I can see that this is not to be regretted, for I will accept you as my guru and teacher."

"Ramanuja, this cannot be," replied Kancipurna gently, "for I am a sudra and an ignorant man, with no knowledge of the scriptures. I simply pass my life rendering a little service to Lord Varadaraja. As a brahmana you are my master, and I am your servant".

"Sir, you are the wisest man I have ever known," said Ramanuja, "and if knowledge of the scriptures brings only pride instead of devotion, then what is its value? By your humble service to the Lord, I can see that you know perfectly the conclusions of all the scriptures."

On saying this Ramanuja fell down to pay his obeisances at the feet of the devoted Kancipurna. That saintly person instantly raised Ramanuja to his feet and told him, "I feel blessed to have seen your deep devotion for the Lord. Every day you should bring a jar of water to the temple for the service of Sri Varadaraja. In this way you will quickly receive His mercy, and all of your desires will be fulfilled."

Having given this advice to the young devotee, Kancipurna left to go and worship Lord Varadaraja. Ramanuja, accepting his instruction, engaged in the service of the Lord by bringing water to the temple of Lord Varadaraja from the sacred well where he had seen the Lord in the form of a fowler.

YAMUNACARYA'S ILLNESS

Ever since the day he had seen Ramanuja in Kancipuram, the aged Yamunacarya had been thinking of him and praying to Lord Visnu for his deliverance. He longed for the day on which Ramanuja would give up the association of Yadavaprakasa and take full shelter of the Vaisnavas. It was with this hope in mind that he composed his wonderful prayer known as the *Stotra-ratna*, which is adored by devotees even to this day.

A few days after the composition of the *Stotra-ratna*, Yamunacarya fell gravely ill and was unable to rise from his bed. However, even in this precarious position, hovering between life and death, he continued to preach the glories of the Lord. Fearing the imminent departure of their guru, various disciples put questions before him. Tiruvaranga asked, "If Lord Narayana is beyond mind and speech, how is it possible to serve Him?"

Yamunacarya replied, "The best way to serve Lord Narayana is to serve His pure devotees. In addition you should serve the Deity form of the Lord, even as the blessed Kancipurna serves Lord Varadaraja. All problems are resolved by the statement of the *Mahabharata*, *mahajano yena gatah sa panthah* - 'Just follow the example set by the great devotees'." Looking into the eyes of his dear disciple, Alabandara continued, "For myself, my only refuge now is the lotus feet of Tirumangai, that noble *mahatma* who served Lord Ranganatha so perfectly in ancient times."

On hearing these words from his guru, Tiruvaranga's eyes filled with tears and he spoke again in a voice choked with grief, "Have you decided without doubt to leave this world now?"

Alabandara smiled slightly and replied softly, "How is it that such a wise man as yourself is to be seen lamenting for that which is inevitable? Do you not yet understand that everything happens only by the will of Lord Narayana. Our position is to simply accept whatever mercy He bestows upon us, giving up the dualities of happiness and distress."

At that moment two other disciples decided they would commit suicide as soon as Yamunacarya left this world. These two were Mahapurna and Tirukkotiurpurna.

Another disciple came forward shedding tears and crying out, "Where will any of us go for shelter after your

disappearance? Whose sweet words will inspire us to acts of greater devotion?"

Yamunacarya placed his hand on the disciple's head, saying, "My child, there is no need for anxiety, for Lord Ranganatha is there. He has given you shelter in the past, He is giving you shelter now and will continue to protect you in the future. Always go and pray before Lord Ranganatha and sometimes go to see Venkatesa at Tirupati and Varadaraja at Kanci. In this way how will you be without shelter?"

When Tiruvaranga asked whether the body should be buried or cremated, Alabandara gave no reply, for his mind was fixed on the lotus feet of Lord Narayana.

LORD RANGANATHA SAVES HIS DEVOTEES

The next day there was a special procession in Rangaksetra, and the Deity of Lord Ranganatha was carried from the temple on a palanquin. Huge crowds of people had gathered from all the surrounding villages to see the Lord as He passed along the road. The disciples of Yamunacarya were also in attendance. Suddenly one of the pujaris serving the Lord seemed to go into a trance, as if possessed. He spoke out, clearly addressing Mahapurna and Tirukkotiypurna, "Give up your resolution to commit suicide. It is not approved by Me."

After this wonderful event, all the disciples quickly returned to the bedside of Yamunacarya to tell him what had happened. He then gave them further instructions. "To commit suicide is a great sin, and to save you from such an act Lord Ranganatha Himself has spoken to you. Such is His boundless mercy." Alabandara then fell silent, and his eyes closed as he seemed to go deep into meditation. After a while he spoke again. "This is my final instruction to all of you. Offer flowers at the lotus feet of the Lord and always try to follow your gurus order. Destroy all false ego by serving the Vaisnavas". Then he gave all his disciples over to the care of Tiruvaranga and fell silent once more.

MAHAPURNA IS SENT TO KANCI

However, Yamunacarya did not depart from the world at this time, and a few days later, to everyone's surprise, he seemed to recover from his illness. He left his asrama and took darsana of Lord Ranganatha, just as he had done previously. Everyone was inspired to hear him talk again about the glories of Lord Visnu.

One day two brahmanas from Kancipuram arrived to see Yamunacarya, having heard of his imminent departure from the world. They were surprised to find the great acarya sitting up and discussing the scriptures, apparently fully recovered from his sickness. When Yamunacarya learned the two

brahmanas were from Kancipuram, he immediately inquired from them about the welfare of Ramanuja. They told him he had now given up hearing from Yadavaprakasa and was studying the scriptures alone. Yamunacarya was very pleased to hear that the young devotee was now freed from the dangers of hearing mayavada philosophy, and there and then he composed eight verses glorifying the mercy of the Lord upon His devotees.

He then instructed Mahapurna, one of his senior disciples, "Please go to Kanci and bring Ramanuja here, for I long to see him in the midst of our company of Vaisnavas." Mahapurna offered obeisances at the feet of his guru, and that same day he departed to carry out his order.

DISAPPEARANCE OF YAMUNACARYA

A few days after the departure of Mahapurna, Alabandara's body was afflicted with sickness once more. Despite the intense pain he had to undergo, he still took his bath and went to the temple to see Lord Ranganatha, the Lord of his heart. He took a little *maha-prasada* and then returned to the asrama, where he called for all of his householder disciples to come to him.

First of all, in a mood of great humility, he begged them to forgive any offense that he might have made towards them. He then asked them to take care of the brahmacari and sannyasi disciples who were living at the asrama. Finally, Yamunacarya gave his last instruction to his householder disciples. "Every day you should rise early and go to the temple to worship Lord Ranganatha, smelling the flowers that have been offered to His lotus feet. In this way your mind and intelligence will become purified, and you will become fixed in your devotion to Lord Narayana. In addition you should always be devoted to your spiritual master and be attentive in serving guests."

When the householder disciples had left, Alabandara sat in a lotus position and concentrated his mind on the feet of Lord Hari. The remaining disciples began to chant the holy name of Lord Narayana in congregation, accompanied by the sweet sounds of the flute and other instruments. As Yamunacarya became even more deeply immersed in thoughts of the Supreme Personality of Godhead, tears of ecstasy ran down his cheeks and his body began to tremble. In this ecstatic state of devotional love the great acarya gave up his body and returned to the lotus feet of the Supreme Lord, his eternal, beloved master.

Immediately the kirtana stopped, and many of the disciples began to cry aloud in lamentation, while others fainted and fell unconscious to the ground. After some time the sannyasis and Yamunacarya's son, Purna, collected themselves and began to make preparations for the funeral ceremony. The body was washed and dressed in new clothes before being placed on a decorated palanquin. Then, in slow

procession, they carried the palanquin down to the banks of the Kaveri River, followed by almost all the inhabitants of Sri Rangam. There, amidst great lamentation, the body of the pure devotee was buried, as is the custom for those who have achieved the perfectional stage of devotional service.

MEETING WITH MAHAPURNA

Meanwhile, on the order of his guru, Mahapurna journeyed to Kancipuram and arrived there after travelling steadily for four days. He immediately went to the temple to see Lord Varadaraja, and as he was leaving he happened to meet Kancipurna, who invited him to spend the night at his asrama. The two devotees passed the evening in discussing topics about the Lord.

Early the next morning they set out together for the holy well and, as they approached, saw Ramanuja coming with a water jug on his shoulder to perform his daily service for Lord Varadaraja. Kancipurna said, "I must leave you now to worship the Lord in the temple. Here is Ramanuja; go and tell him of your intentions."

Mahapurna was very happy to see the effulgent young devotee coming towards him, appearing so pure and free from the vices of this world. Instinctively he began to chant prayers from Yamunacarya's *Stotra-ratna*. Hearing these beautiful hymns in praise of Lord Narayana being sung in such a sweet voice, Ramanuja stood silently, listening intently to the verses. Then he approached Mahapurna and inquired, "Sir, who has composed these wonderful verses, that so sweetly praise the qualities of the Supreme Lord? Just by your singing this morning my heart has been uplifted."

"These hymns were composed by my spiritual master, the venerable Yamunacarya," Mahapurna replied.

Ramanuja was very pleased to hear the name of the famous devotee, but he inquired in a concerned voice, "I had heard that the great Alabandara was afflicted by illness. Is he now recovered? How long is it since you were in his presence?"

"It is but five days since I left the side of my guru-maharaja," replied Mahapurna, "and at that time he had just recovered from his sickness."

Ramanuja was relieved to hear this news, and, being anxious to associate further with the saintly Mahapurna, he invited him to stay at his house. Then Mahapurna explained the purpose of his coming to Kancipuram. "I have come to this holy city at the request of the great soul Yamunacarya, simply to meet with you and invite you, on his behalf, to come to Rangaksetra, so that we may have your association."

Ramanuja could hardly believe such an exalted devotee was even aware of his existence, let alone being desirous of his association. However, Mahapurna reassured him by saying,

"My master wishes to see you, and it is for this purpose alone that I have come here. His health has been much impaired by repeated illness, and, although he now seems a little better, I think that we should start immediately if you wish to fulfill his desire."

Ramanuja was so pleased by this unexpected news that he could only ascribe his good fortune to the mercy of Lord Varadaraja. Excitedly he said to Mahapurna, "Please wait here for a short while until I have delivered this water to the temple and taken the Lord's permission to leave."

Saying this he hurried off towards the temple. Just a short time later he returned, all ready to start on the journey. Mahapurna asked, "What about your family? Should you not first inform them of your intentions?"

"Obedience to the order of the guru is more important than any considerations of household life," replied Ramanuja. "Let us depart at once, for I am eager to see Sri Yamunacarya."

ARRIVAL IN SRI RANGAM

Thus, they set out on their journey southwards towards the holy city of Sri Rangam. Each evening they would stop for the night at the home of some pious brahmana devotee, and during the day they would travel with all possible haste. In this way they arrived at the banks of the Kaveri River in four days and immediately crossed over to Sri Rangam. They had intended to go straight away to the asrama of Yamunacarya, which was close to the temple of Lord Ranganatha, but they found the road blocked by a large crowd of people. When Mahapurna asked the reason for this great assembly, one man replied, "Sir, what can I say? The earth is now bereft of its most beautiful gem, for Mahatma Alabandara has returned to the abode of the Lord."

When he heard these words, Ramanuja immediately fainted and fell to the ground unconscious, while Mahapurna cried aloud in anguish, beating his forehead with the palms of his hands. After some time, Mahapurna composed himself, and, seeing Ramanuja still lying unconscious on the ground, he fetched some water and sprinkled it over the young man's face. When Ramanuja slowly opened his eyes, he heard these words of consolation, "Do not be overwhelmed by grief, for we can be sure that everything is taking place by the will of Lord Narayana. Now let us go and see that pure form before it is interred."

RAMANUJA'S THREE VOWS

Ramanuja followed Mahapurna to the banks of the Kaveri. When they saw the body of Yamunacarya, Mahapurna fell at his feet, bathing them with tears, while Ramanuja

stood still, looking at the great Vaisnava. Although the life air had passed from the body, Alabandara's face was still serene and untouched by the shadow of death. Ramanuja stood there transfixed, just gazing, as if in a trance, at the face of that great devotee. Suddenly the crowds fell silent and turned to look at Ramanuja, for it seemed that somehow he was able to transcend the barrier of death and be fully in the presence of Sri Yamunacarya.

After a while Ramanuja said, "I see that three fingers of Alabandara's right hand are folded and clenched tight. Were they like that during his lifetime?"

The disciples who were close by replied, "No, his fingers used to remain straight. We cannot guess why they are like this now."

Ramanuja then declared aloud, "Remaining fixed in devotion to Lord Visnu, I shall free the people from illusion by spreading the glories of the Lord throughout the land" As these words were spoken, one of the fingers relaxed and became straight.

Ramanuja spoke again, saying, "To establish that there is no truth beyond Lord Visnu, I shall write the *Sri-bhasya* commentary on the *Vedanta-sutra*." At this the second of Yamunacarya's fingers became straight.

Ramanuja declared again, "In order to show respect to the sage Parasara, who has so wonderfully described the glories of the Lord in the Visnu Purana, I shall name one learned Vaisnava after him." With this final statement, the last of Alabandara's fingers relaxed and became straight.

When they saw this wonderful occurrence, everyone there was filled with amazement. They could now understand that Yamunacarya's three tightly held fingers represented his three unfulfilled desires, namely, to preach the glories of the Lord all over India, to compile a complete Vaisnava commentary on the *Vedanta-sutra*, which would nullify the atheistic doctrines of the impersonalists, and to honor the sage Parasara by naming a disciple after him. Now, Ramanuja's statements confirmed that he would complete the work Alabandara had begun.

RETURN TO KANCI

Before the body was buried in the samadhi tomb on the banks of the Kaveri, Ramanuja had left Sri Rangam to return to Kancipuram. Yamunacarya's disciples had asked him to take darsan of Lord Ranganatha, but he had refused, saying, "I do not wish to see this cruel form of the Lord, who would not grant my most cherished desire and who has taken away the lord of my heart." Then, he had departed without speaking another word to anyone.

From that day on Ramanuja's personality changed and he became much more grave and serious. He was now even more reluctant to spend time in the company of nondevotees. For

long periods he would remain alone, studying the scriptures, and he found true happiness only in the company of Kancipurna.

CHAPTER THREE

SANNYASA

About six months before the disappearance of Yamunacarya, Ramanuja's mother, Kantimati, had left this world. Now, Raksakambal, the wife of Ramanuja, was the mistress of the house. She was as beautiful as an apsara, devoted to her husband and very strict in her cleanliness and observance of ritual. Unfortunately, she had been unable to imbibe her husband's pure love of God and was more attached to the external features of religious ritual. She was unhappy to see her husband becoming more and more absorbed in devotional sentiments after his return from Sri Rangam, though she tried to conceal her inner feelings.

Ramanuja now passed a lot of his time in the company of Kancipurna. Ramanuja was generally in a serious mood and still unhappy at heart due to feelings of separation from Yamunacarya. Understanding his mind, Kancipurna told him one day, "You should not be troubled at heart. Just remain fixed in your devotion to Lord Varadaraja and continue to serve him in every possible way. Alabandara has now returned to the abode of Lord Narayana, and it is your duty to fulfill the promises you made before Him"

When he heard these words of instruction, Ramanuja bowed before Kancipurna and said, "Please allow me to be your disciple. Please allow me take shelter of your lotus feet"

Immediately, Kancipurna raised Ramanuja, saying, "You are a brahmana and I am sudra. How can I initiate and receive obeisances from one who is my master? Just have faith in the Lord, and sooner or later He will surely send someone who is fit to be your guru."

Having said this, Kancipurna left to worship Lord Varadaraja. Ramanuja thought to himself, "He is refusing to accept me because he knows how my heart is devoid of all devotional sentiments. How can birth or caste affect a person who is the intimate associate of Lord Varadaraja? Merely by his merciful glance, Kancipurna can elevate a dog-eater to the level of a brahmana. Therefore, if I am able to taste the remnants of his food only once, then I will gain immeasurable benefit."

RAKSAKAMBAL'S FOLLY

Later that day, Ramanuja went to persuade Kancipurna to take lunch at his house the next day. Eventually Kancipurna agreed, saying, "Tomorrow I shall break free from the modes of nature by receiving food at the house of a pure devotee."

The next morning, Ramanuja instructed his wife, Raksakambal, that she should cook the very best preparations to honor their exalted guest, Sri Kancipurna. At once she began to cook and before noon had prepared many different types of food. Seeing this Ramanuja was very pleased, and he set out for Kancipurna's asrama to bring him to take prasadam.

Kancipurna could understand all Ramanuja's intentions, and so he came by another way to his friend's house. When he arrived, he said to Raksakambal, "Mother, today I have to go to the temple very quickly. Please serve me with whatever is immediately available, for I cannot stay here for more than a few minutes."

"My husband has gone to your house to bring you here," Raksakambal replied. "If you wait for a short time he will soon return."

"I am afraid I cannot wait here for a moment," said Kancipurna. "How can I neglect my service of Lord Varadaraja just for the sake of my stomach?"

So Raksakambal arranged a sitting place for Kancipurna and then with great attention served him all the different preparations she had cooked. As soon as he had finished eating, Kancipurna stood up and cleaned the place where he had been eating with water mixed with cow dung. He offered his obeisances to Raksakambal and then quickly left the house, taking his leaf plate with him to discard at a distant place. Raksakambal gave away all the remaining prasadam to a sudra woman and then, after taking a bath, began to cook again for her husband.

In the meantime Ramanuja returned home and was very surprised to find his wife still cooking. "Did Kancipurna not come here?" he asked. "Why are you cooking again? Where is all the prasadam that you prepared this morning?"

"Mahatma Kancipurna came here" replied Raksakambal, "but he said that he could not wait for you, as he had service to perform in the temple. Therefore, I served him his lunch and then gave whatever was left to a sudra woman. How could I serve you with the remnants of a sudras meal?"

Ramanuja was very disturbed to hear his wife speak in such a way. "You foolish woman!" he exclaimed. "How can you think of Kancipurna as no more than a sudra. Because of you I am now unable to take the prasada of that pure-hearted devotee, and this is my great misfortune" Having said this, he sat down unhappily with his head in his hands.

KANCIPURNA'S VISIT TO TIRUPATI

Meanwhile, Kancipurna was praying to Lord Varadaraja while fanning Him, "My Lord, what are You trying to do to me? My only desire is to pass my life peacefully in Your service and the service of Your devotees, but now You are trying to make me into a famous acarya. Even Your pure devotee, Ramanuja, now bows down before me. I do not want to become an object of worship, so please give me permission to leave Kanci and go to Tirupati, where I can worship You in the form of Balaji."

Lord Varadaraja gave His permission, and so Kancipurna went to Tirupati. He stayed there for six months, fully absorbed in the service of Sri Balaji, the form of Lord Visnu who resides in the temple there. Then one night Lord Varadaraja appeared to him in a dream, saying, "I am suffering from the severe heat here in Kancipuram. Why don't you come back and fan me again?"

LORD VARADARAJA'S INSTRUCTIONS TO RAMANUJA

The next day Kancipurna arose and set off at once to return to Kanci. When Ramanuja heard of his return, he went to visit his friend. The two devotees felt great pleasure in regaining one another's association after such a long period of time. After they had been talking for several hours, Ramanuja fully revealed his mind to Kancipurna. "Since I left the school of Yadavaprakasa" he told him, "I have continued to study the scriptures alone. But there are certain points I cannot understand, and this is causing a great disturbance to my mind. Please beg the Lord to enlighten me, for I know Sri Varadaraja will never deny any request that comes from your lips." Kancipurna agreed to Ramanuja's request.

The next day when the young brahmana came to visit him, he spoke very confidentially, "Last night Lord Varadaraja spoke to me and told me I should reveal the following six truths to you. These are the four verses the Lord spoke to me:

*aham eva param brahma jagat-karana-karanam
ksetrajnesvaror bhedah siddha eva mahamate*

*moksopayo nyasa eva jananam muktim icchatam
mad-bhaktanam jananam ca nantim asmritir isyate*

*dehavasane bhaktanam dadami paramam padam
purnacaryam mahatmanam samasraya gunasrayam*

iti ramanujarya mayoktam vada satvaram

"Firstly, I am the Supreme Brahman, the cause of material nature, from which this universe has come into being. Second, the separate existence of the jiva souls and the Supreme Lord is an eternal truth. Third, surrendering to the lotus feet of the Supreme Lord is the only true path for those who desire liberation. Fourth, devotees will certainly be liberated even if by chance they fail to remember Me at the time of death. Fifth, as soon as My devotees give up their present bodies, I bring them to My supreme abode. Sixth, you should immediately take shelter of Mahatma Mahapurna, the reservoir of all good qualities. These are My instructions for Ramanuja."

When Ramanuja heard these words, he began to dance in ecstasy. He had not revealed his six doubts even to Kancipurna, but now the Lord had supplied the answers to all of them. Having offered obeisances to Sri Varadaraja and to Kancipurna, he returned home and prepared to depart for Sri Rangam. There he hoped to find Mahapurna, one of Yamunacarya's disciples, and take initiation from him.

MAHAPURNA IS SENT TO KANCI AGAIN

After the disappearance of Sri Yamunacarya, none of his disciples was able to discourse on the scriptures in the same wonderful way that he had done. Tiruvaranga was now in charge of the asrama, but he lacked the ability to expound the meaning of the scriptures as his master had done. Everyone admired his devotional qualities and noted the fact that he spent so much of his time worshipping the Lord, but still the atmosphere in the asrama was not what it had been before.

At that time both the married and unmarried devotees used to live together in the asrama, while the wives would live in separate quarters outside in the city. Their time was passed for the most part in worship of the Deity and the chanting of bhajans glorifying the Lord.

In this way a year passed by uneventfully. On the anniversary of Alabandara's disappearance all his disciples gathered together, and Tiruvaranga addressed the assembly. 'It is now one year', he began, 'since our *guru-maharaja*, Sri Yamunacarya, left us to return to the abode of Lord Narayana. While he was with us it was our great fortune that every day we were able to hear his nectarean words. However, since his disappearance no one has been able to describe the glories of the Lord in such an exquisite manner or expound all the subtle points of the scriptures as he was able to do. Although he instructed that I should take over his position at the asrama, I have to admit that I am incapable of properly executing this duty.'

'All of you may recall how, just prior to his departure, our master desired to see Sri Ramanuja of Kancipuram and sent Mahapurna there to fetch him. It is that great soul alone, the intimate friend of Kancipurna, who, having been chosen by Sriman Alabandara himself, is competent to take on the responsibility as acarya for this asrama. Therefore, let one of us go to Kancipuram and, after initiating him, bring him here to Sri Rangam. He will spread the teachings of Yamunacarya all over the India, as he promised to do whilst looking at the body of our preceptor.'

All the assembled devotees unanimously accepted Tiruvaranga's proposal, and Mahapurna was chosen to go to Kancipuram to initiate Ramanuja and bring him to Sri Rangam. He was told, 'If at present he is reluctant to abandon the association of Kancipurna, then do not press the matter. You may remain in Kanci for one year, instructing him in all the *bhakti-sastras*. He need not to be told that your purpose is to bring him to Sri Rangam.'

RAMANUJA'S INITIATION

Being thus instructed, Mahapurna, along with his wife, set off for Kancipuram. After four days they reached the town of Madurantakam, where there is a Visnu temple with a lake in front of it. While Mahapurna and his wife were resting beside that lake, Ramanuja suddenly appeared there offering obeisances at his feet. Mahapurna was both surprised and delighted by this unexpected turn of events, and he immediately rose to embrace Ramanuja.

'This is certainly a surprise,' he said. 'Anything can be accomplished by the grace of Lord Narayana. For what reason have you come here?'

'This must certainly be the plan of Lord Narayana,' Ramanuja replied, 'for it was only to find you that I left Kancipuram. Varadaraja Himself has instructed me to accept you as my guru. Please bestow your mercy upon me by initiating me at once.'

Mahapurna agreed to this request, saying, 'Let us go to Kancipuram so that the ceremony can be performed before Lord Varadaraja.'

However, Ramanuja was insistent. 'You know that death makes no distinction between the timely and the untimely,' he said. 'Do you not recall with what high expectations I went with you to meet Sri Yamunacarya? Providence cheated me then, so why should I trust him now by allowing any delay? Please give me shelter at your lotus feet right at this very moment'

Mahapurna was pleased by Ramanuja's words, and there on the banks of the lake in the shade of a flowering bakula tree he lit a sacrificial fire. In that fire he placed two metal discs, one bearing the sign of Lord Visnu's cakra and

the other that of His conch. When the two discs were hot, Mahapurna pressed them onto Ramanuja's right and left arms, thus marking them with the signs of Lord Visnu. Finally, meditating on the lotus feet of Yamunacarya, Mahapurna whispered the Vaisnava mantra into Ramanuja's ear. When the initiation was thus completed, Ramanuja returned to Kancipuram, accompanied by his guru and his guru's wife.

When they arrived, they were welcomed by Kancipurna, who took great pleasure in associating with Mahapurna. At Ramanuja's request, Mahapurna then also initiated Raksakambal. Half the house was given over to Mahapurna and his wife, and every day Ramanuja would study the Vaisnava scriptures in his association.

RAKSAKAMBAL'S PRIDE

Six months passed by quickly, while Ramanuja felt great satisfaction in hearing all the truths of Vaisnava philosophy from Mahapurna. One day, while both Ramanuja and Mahapurna were away from home, Raksakambal went to the well to get water. It so happened that Mahapurna's wife was drawing water at the same time, and while so doing a few drops from her pitcher fell into that of Raksakambal, who immediately flew into a rage. "Are you blind?" she shouted. "Look what you have done! By your carelessness a whole pitcher of water is wasted. Do you think that you can sit on my shoulders just because you are the guru's wife? Just remember that my father's family is of a superior lineage to yours, so how can I use water that has been touched by you? But why should I blame you, for having fallen into the hands of this husband of mine all my caste and position is lost."

When she heard these harsh words, Mahapurna's wife, who was by nature calm and modest, begged forgiveness from Raksakambal. However, being very disturbed by the woman's anger, she set down her pitcher and began to weep quietly.

When Mahapurna returned and found his wife in that distressed condition, he asked her what was the cause of her unhappiness. When he learned of everything that had taken place at the well, Mahapurna became thoughtful. Eventually he said, "It is no longer the will of Lord Narayana that we should remain here, and for this reason he has caused you to hear these unkind words from the mouth of Raksakambal. Do not be sorry over this matter, for whatever the Lord ordains is for our good. Because we have not worshipped the lotus feet of Lord Ranganatha for a long time, He now desires that we go back to Him."

DEPARTURE OF MAHAPURNA

Without waiting for Ramanuja to return, Mahapurna and his wife then collected together their few possessions and

departed for Sri Rangam. While Mahapurna was staying with him in Kancipuram, Ramanuja had been very happy, looking upon his guru as the representative of Lord Narayana. During those six months they spent together, Ramanuja had studied about four thousand verses composed by the great Vaisnavas of south India. That morning he had gone out to purchase fruit, flowers, and new cloth with which to make an offering to his guru, but, when he returned to his house, he found Mahapurna's quarters deserted.

After searching all over the house, he inquired from a neighbor, who told him that Mahapurna and his wife had left Kanci to return to Sri Rangam. Anxious to discover what could have caused his guru's abrupt departure, Ramanuja went to speak to Raksakambal. She told him, "I had a quarrel with the wife of your guru when we went to fetch water from the well this morning. I hardly spoke any harsh words to her at all, but the great man was so enraged that he left here almost immediately. I had heard that a sadhu is supposed to have given up all feelings of anger, but it must be that he is a new sort of sadhu. I offer millions of obeisances at the feet of your sadhu."

Ramanuja could hardly believe his ears when he heard his wife speak in such a contemptuous and sarcastic way about Mahapurna, and he could not restrain his feelings. "O sinful woman," he cried out, "it is a great sin even to look at your face" Having said this, he left the house and went to the temple to offer the fruits and flowers he had purchased to Lord Varadaraja.

RAMANUJA'S PLAN

A short time later, a lean and hungry brahmana came to Ramanuja's house to beg for something to eat. Raksakambal was still shocked by her husband's words, and, when the brahmana disturbed her, she immediately became angry and shouted at him in a shrill voice, "Get out of here. Go somewhere else. Who do you think will give you rice here?"

Hurt by these harsh words, the brahmana turned away and began to walk slowly towards the temple of Lord Varadaraja. On the way he met Ramanuja, who was returning home, having made his offering to the Lord. Seeing the brahmanas dejected features and undernourished body, Ramanuja felt compassion and said to him, "O brahmana, it seems that you have not eaten today."

"I went to your house to ask for a little prasadam, but your wife became angry and turned me away," replied the brahmana.

Ramanuja was shocked to hear that a guest had been so badly mistreated at his house. He was thoughtful for a few moments, and then he said, "Please go back to my house. I will give you a letter, and I want you to tell my wife that you have been sent by her father to deliver it to me."

When she hears this, you can be certain she will feed you with great attention."

Ramanuja then wrote out a letter as follows:-

My Dear Son,

My second daughter is to be married soon. Therefore please send Raksakambal to my house with this man. If you have no pressing business at present, I would be very pleased if you could come as well. However, it is very important that Raksakambal comes here as soon as possible, as it will be very difficult for your mother-in-law to cater for all the guests alone.

Promising that he would be well rewarded for his services, Ramanuja sent the brahmana to his house with this letter. When he arrived there, the brahmana told Raksakambal, "Your father sent me here."

She was delighted to hear this and received the brahmana with great courtesy, feeding him and offering him water for bathing. In the meantime, Ramanuja returned home. "My father has sent this letter for you," Raksakambal said modestly and gave it to him.

Ramanuja read the letter out loud and then said to her, "I have some urgent business to attend to at present, so you must go alone. If I get finished quickly, then I will try to come later on. Please convey my greetings to your father and mother." Raksakambal accepted his words, and, after preparing herself for the journey, she offered obeisances to her husband and set out for her father's house, escorted by the brahmana.

TAKING SANNYASA

When she had left, Ramanuja walked back to the temple of Lord Varadaraja, praying constantly to the Lord within his mind, "O Lord Narayana, please allow this servant of yours to take full shelter at Your lotus feet." When he reached the temple, he bowed down before the Deity and prayed, "My dear Lord, from this day I am Yours in every way. Please accept me."

Then he obtained saffron-colored cloth and a staff that had been touched by the lotus feet of Sri Varadaraja. He went outside the temple and, after bathing, lit a sacrificial fire on the banks of the lake there. At that time Kancipurna, being inspired by Lord Varadaraja, approached him and gave him the name Yatiraja. Ramanuja then accepted the tridanda of Vaisnava sannyasa, which symbolizes, the surrender of thoughts, words, and deeds to the service of the Supreme Personality of Godhead. When the ceremony was completed, Yatiraja, in his saffron robes, appeared as effulgent as the rising sun.

RAMANUJA BEGINS HIS TEACHING

All the people of Kancipuram were very surprised to hear that Ramanuja had taken sannyasa. He was still a young man, and his wife was extremely beautiful. Some considered him insane, but many others began to compare him to great devotees of the past; from all around people came to see him. The Vaisnavas who stayed at the asrama at Kanci made him their acarya, for his good qualities and understanding of the scriptures were well known.

Gradually, by ones and twos, disciples began to gather around him. His first disciple was Dasarathi, his nephew, who was famous for his knowledge of the Vedas. The second was a young man named Kuresa, who had a wonderful memory.

YADAVAPRAKASA BECOMES A VAISNAVA

One day, when the elderly mother of Yadavaprakasa came to the temple to see Lord Varadaraja, she noticed Ramanuja instructing his disciples outside the asrama. Being captivated by his gracefulness and scholarship, she considered that if her son were to become the disciple of such a wonderful personality, then his life would be perfect. Ever since his mistreatment of Ramanuja, Yadavaprakasa had been very disturbed at heart, and his mother knew this. She considered that the best thing for her son would be to take shelter at the feet of this effulgent young sannyasi.

When she returned home, she begged her son to go and become a disciple of Ramanuja, but Yadavaprakasa would not hear of surrendering to one who had previously been his own student. Still, however, his mind remained disturbed. Once he happened to meet with Kancipurna and he inquired from him, "Sir, I am very troubled at heart and can find no peace. As you are well known as the one through whom Lord Varadaraja gives instructions, please tell me what I must do."

"Go home now," replied Kancipurna. "Tonight I will pray to Lord Varadaraja. If you come to me tomorrow, I will tell you His instructions."

When they met the following day, Kancipurna immediately began to describe the greatness of Ramanuja and the benefits one might derive from becoming his disciple. On hearing this, Yadavaprakasa decided he would go to visit Ramanuja at the asrama and discuss the scriptures with him.

That night Yadavaprakasa found it hard to sleep. He lay awake for several hours, considering the different points over and over again. Eventually he dozed into a light sleep, and while he slept, he had a wonderful dream. It

seemed that an effulgent person appeared before him and began to give him instructions. Again and again he told Yadavaprakasa that he should become the disciple of Yatiraja.

When Yadavaprakasa awoke, the effects of the dream were still with him, and he was struck with wonder. However, he was never a man to act solely on the basis of his emotions, and in his mind there still lingered doubts about Ramanuja's philosophy.

That afternoon he went to the asrama and, as soon as he saw Yatiraja, he was struck by the young acaryas purity and effulgence. Ramanuja received his former teacher with courtesy, offering him an elevated sitting place. After they had exchanged greetings, Yadavaprakasa began to express his doubts about the Vaisnava philosophy that Ramanuja was so expertly presenting. "My child," he said gently, "I am very pleased by your scholarship and humble behavior. I can see from the markings of tilaka and the emblems of the lotus and cakra on your body that you are a devotee of Lord Visnu and consider the path of bhakti alone to be proper. But what evidence can be found in the scriptures to support such a point of view?"

To this inquiry Yatiraja replied, "Here is Kuresa, who is most learned in all of the revealed scriptures. Place your question before him."

Thereupon, as Yadavaprakasa looked towards Kuresa, the young disciple of Ramanuja began to speak. He cited numerous verses from many different scriptures - the Vedas, Upanisads, Puranas, etc. - which confirmed that loving devotional service to the Supreme Personality of Godhead is the perfection of spiritual life.

On hearing this torrent of evidence from the scriptures, Yadavaprakasa was dumbfounded and fell silent. Different thoughts passed quickly through his mind - his previous outrageous behavior, the words of his mother, and the advice that had been given to him by Kancipurna. Suddenly he threw himself down at the feet of his former disciple, crying out, "O Ramanuja, blinded by pride, I could not see your true qualities. Please forgive all my offenses and become my guide to deliver me from the miseries of this material world. I take shelter of you alone."

Yatiraja then raised Yadavaprakasa to his feet and embraced him with warm affection. With his mother's blessings, that same day Yadavaprakasa accepted sannyasa from Ramanuja and considered himself greatly fortunate. He was given the name Govinda dasa, and from that day on he was like a different person. He now fully embraced the Vaisnava philosophy and gave up all pride in his scholarship. Tears of humility now decorated his eyes as he engaged in acts of devotion to the Supreme Lord. On hearing of this extraordinary transformation, everyone praised the influence of Ramanuja, and his fame spread far and wide.

Seeing the devotional sentiments in his former guru, Yatiraja once addressed him, saying, "Now your mind has become free from all contamination. To remove the sins of the past, you should write a book delineating the duties of a true Vaisnava. By rendering this service you will attain full perfection."

Accordingly Yadavaprakasa wrote a wonderful book called *Yati-dharma-samuccaya*, which he offered at the feet of his guru. At this time Yadavaprakasa, or Govinda dasa as he was now known, was over eighty years old. A short time after the completion of the book, he passed from this world.

CHAPTER FOUR

ACARYA AT SRI RANGAM

While all these events were taking place in Kancipuram, the devotees in Sri Rangam were still feeling the lack of an acarya to guide them. The ardent desire of all of them was that Ramanujacarya come there and be their preceptor. Mahapurna had stayed for some time in Kanci with the intention of bringing Ramanuja to Sri Rangam, but, because he had left so abruptly, he was unable to do so.

When the news reached Sri Rangam that Ramanuja had taken sannyasa, Mahapurna was very pleased and went into the temple of Lord Ranganatha. There, before the lotus-eyed Lord who reclines on His bed of Ananta-Sesa, Mahapurna began to offer fervent prayers, begging the Lord to bring Ramanuja to Rangaksetra. Hearing this impassioned plea from His pure devotee, Lord Ranganatha became compassionate and instructed Mahapurna, "My child, you must send Vararanga, the most sweet singer, to Lord Varadaraja in Kancipuram. When Lord Varadaraja is pleased by Vararanga's bhajans and offers him a benediction, then he should ask that Ramanuja be allowed to come here. Without Varadaraja's permission, Ramanuja will never leave His shelter."

DEPARTURE FOR SRI RANGAM

Vararanga was the son of Yamunacarya. He was a renowned singer and had set to music the beautiful verses known as the *Sahasra-giti*. Having received these instructions, Mahapurna sent Vararanga to Kancipuram after instructing him as to how he should accomplish his mission. Every day in the temple of Varadaraja Vararanga would sing bhajans before the Lord in such an exquisite way that anyone who heard him would become struck with wonder and filled

with ecstasy. Eventually Lord Varadaraja became so pleased with Vararanga that He offered him a benediction in return for his services. Of course, Vararanga requested the Lord's permission for Ramanuja to come to Sri Rangam to be the acarya of the Vaisnavas there.

Ramanuja was sorry to leave Kancipuram, particularly as this meant losing the association of Kancipurna. But, at the same time, he was pleased at the prospect of being with the disciples of Alabandara. Thus it was with mixed feelings that he set off with Vararanga a few days later to make the journey from Kancipuram to Sri Rangam.

All the people of Rangaksetra were delighted when Yatiraja arrived in their city, and the assembly of Vaisnavas immediately installed him as the acarya. Lord Ranganatha was also very pleased to see this pure-hearted devotee in His temple, and He bestowed upon him two mystic powers - the ability to cure the sick and the strength to protect the devotees from illusion. On hearing the news of Ramanujacarya's coming to Sri Rangam, many Vaisnavas from the surrounding area came to see him; all were thrilled to hear his wonderful explanations of Vaisnava philosophy.

DELIVERANCE OF GOVINDA

A short time after his coming to Sri Rangam, Ramanuja began to consider the position of his dear cousin, Govinda, who years before had saved him from Yadavaprakasa's murderous plot. He recalled Govinda's simplicity and affection and how he had always been a dear friend to all living entities. While thinking of these things, a desire arose in Ramanuja's heart to bring Govinda to the shelter of Lord Visnu's lotus feet.

As we have heard, ever since the fateful pilgrimage to Varanasi, Govinda had been a devout follower of Lord Siva, residing at the holy place known as Kalahasti, which is a place of pilgrimage for all Saivites. Ramanuja's uncle, Sailapurna, a disciple of Yamunacarya, was now living at Sri Saila, just a short distance from Kalahasti. Therefore, Yatiraja decided to write him a letter, requesting him to somehow or other make Govinda into a devotee of Lord Visnu. When he received this letter, Sailapurna went to Kalahasti with his disciples and made his camp near a large lake there.

Every morning Govinda would come to that lake to bathe and gather flowers for his worship. When he came one morning and found a venerable Vaisnava acarya seated nearby discussing the scriptures with his disciples, he was intrigued. Being desirous of hearing all that was said, Govinda climbed up a nearby patali tree to pick some flowers. As he listened to Sailapurna's words of devotion, Govinda's mind became more and more attracted to that saintly Vaisnava.

When the discourse was completed and Govinda was walking away to take his bath, Sailapurna called out to him, "O holy man, may I know for whose worship you have picked those flowers." On being told that they were an offering for Lord Siva, he went on, "But how could flowers such as these be desirable for one who has earned the name Vibhuti-Bhusana by smearing himself with the ashes of material desires, which he has burned up knowing them to be the causes of material miseries. Lord Siva dances in the crematorium, being mad for the mercy of Lord Narayana. These flowers should properly be offered to the Supreme Lord Visnu, who is the reservoir of all auspicious qualities and from whom all this universe has come into being. I am surprised to find an intelligent person such as yourself gathering flowers for the worship of Lord Siva."

"Revered sir," replied Govinda, "in one sense I can see that your words are true, for no offering to the Lord ever benefits that Supreme Person, who is already the possessor of all things. What can I do for the great Lord Sankara, who is so powerful that he saved the entire universe by drinking an ocean of poison? Yet still there is some purpose in making such offerings, for by so doing we are able to express our devotion to the Lord. It is the devotion that the Lord appreciates, beyond the meager offering itself."

"O Mahatma," said Sailapurna, "I am pleased by your devotion and humility. What you have said is true. What can we offer except self-surrender to that Personality, who in the form of a dwarf-brahmana took away all the possessions of the mighty demon king? This complete surrender is the highest form of worship, and by the strength of such surrender Bali Maharaja was able to captivate Lord Vamanadeva. Just try to understand something of the sweetness of the Lord's loving dealings with His devotees, of which you are depriving yourself by abandoning His worship for the sake of Lord Siva."

"But why are you making a distinction between Visnu and Siva?" said Govinda. "Are they not both aspects of the one Godhead?" When Sailapurna heard this statement of Govinda's, he realized that the young man was not only engaging in demigod worship, but was also influenced by the philosophy of the impersonalists.

Every morning Govinda and Sailapurna would meet by the lake and exchange words in a similar vein. Gradually, by hearing the pure theistic philosophy from such a great saint as Sailapurna, Govinda's heart began to change and the desire arose within him to take shelter of the lotus feet of Lord Narayana. One morning he fell down like a rod in front of Sailapurna and begged him for initiation. So it was that Govinda gave up his worship of Lord Siva and took to the path of undeviating devotion to the Supreme Lord, Sri Visnu.

After the initiation was performed, Sailapurna instructed Govinda to go to Sri Rangam to reside with his

renowned cousin, Ramanujacarya. However, Govinda's devotion to his guru was so great that he was unable to tolerate the feelings of separation that he was undergoing. Therefore, he soon returned to the city of Sri Saila to render personal service to his spiritual master.

INITIATION FROM GOSTHIPURNA

After coming to Sri Rangam, Ramanuja was very pleased to resume his role as the disciple of Mahapurna: through this relationship he felt relief from the sadness that had afflicted him since the disappearance of Yamunacarya. By his behavior toward Mahapurna, he set the example for all disciples to follow in rendering service to their spiritual master. Under the expert guidance of Mahapurna, he resumed his study of the revealed scriptures. Mahapurna was so impressed by the incomparable genius and Vaisnava qualities of his disciple that he gave his son, Pundarikaksa, to be the disciple of Ramanuja.

One evening, when they had completed their studies for the day, Mahapurna said to Ramanuja, "Not far from here is a prosperous town known as Tirukkotiyur. Living there is a great scholar and devotee, Gosthipurna by name, who was born in the Pandya country. It is no exaggeration to say that there is no other Vaisnava like him in this part of the country. If you desire to fully learn the meaning and significance of the Vedic mantras, then there is none but he who is qualified to teach you. I advise you to go to Tirukkotiyur without delay and receive the mantra from Gosthipurna."

Having received this instruction from his guru, Ramanuja went to Tirukkotiyur a few days later to see Gosthipurna. In the presence of that famous devotee, he offered his prostrated obeisances and begged for the Vaisnava mantra to be bestowed upon him. Gosthipurna, however, was very reluctant to impart the secret of the mantra and replied, "You may come here some other day, and I will consider your request." Ramanuja felt very dejected at this reply, and with a heavy heart he returned to Sri Rangam.

A few days later a big festival was held in honor of Lord Ranganatha, and Gosthipurna came there to take part in the worship. At that time one of the priests in the temple was inspired by Lord Ranganatha, and he spoke as follows to Gosthipurna, "You should bestow the mantra on My devotee, Ramanuja, who is most worthy to receive it."

Realizing that the Lord was speaking to him through His servant, Gosthipurna replied, "But my Lord, is it not true that the mantra may only be given to one who has completely purified his mind by long austerities? How can the mantra, which is nondifferent from Yourself, reside in the mind of one who is not pure?"

To this the priest replied, "You do not understand the purity of this devotee. He is able to deliver all of humanity."

After this incident, Gosthipurna began to consider the matter deeply, but still he was unwilling to give the mantra to any other person. Time and again Ramanuja approached him, but repeatedly Gosthipurna refused his request. When his appeals had been denied on eighteen separate occasions, Ramanuja began to feel that there must be some great impurity in his heart and that it was for this reason that Gosthipurna would not bestow his mercy upon him. In this state of dejection, Ramanuja began to shed tears of despair.

When some people informed Gosthipurna of Ramanuja's condition, he was moved by pity for the young devotee. Therefore, when Ramanuja came before him again, he spoke to him in a kind way. "Only Lord Visnu Himself is aware of the glories of this mantra. Now I know that you are worthy to receive it, for you are pure and firmly fixed in devotion to the lotus feet of the Lord. At the present time I can find no one but yourself who is fit to receive the mantra, for whoever chants it is certain to go to Vaikuntha at the time of death. Because this mantra is so pure and sacred, it must not be touched by the lips of anyone who has material desires. Therefore, you must not disclose the mantra to any other person"

Having thus instructed Ramanuja, Gosthipurna initiated him into the chanting of the mantra of eight syllables. Ramanuja was filled with ecstasy to chant this wonderful vibration, and his face began to glow with spiritual effulgence. He considered himself the most blessed of all beings and bowed again and again at the feet of his guru.

REVEALING THE SECRET MANTRA

Having taken leave of Sri Gosthipurna, Ramanuja, in a joyful mood, began to return to Sri Rangam. But as he was walking, he began to think about the potency of the mantra that had been given to him. While thinking in this way, he became filled with feelings of compassion for the sufferings of all living beings in this material world. Then, as he was walking near the walls of the Visnu temple in Tirukkotiur, he began to call out to all the people who were passing by, "Please, all of you, come near to Lord Visnu's temple, and I will give you a priceless jewel!"

Attracted by his pure expression and unusual words, a large crowd of men, women, and children began to follow him. A rumor began to spread all over the town that a prophet had appeared who could fulfill all of one's desires. Within a short time a huge crowd had assembled outside of the temple. On seeing this mass of humanity, Yatiraja's heart swelled

with joy. He embraced the two disciples who had accompanied him, Dasarathi and Kuresa, and then climbed up the tower of the temple.

In a loud voice he began to address the gathering: "All of you are more dear to me than my own life. Therefore I have a strong desire to deliver you from the torments and sufferings all of us must undergo in this temporary world. Please recite this mantra which I have obtained for you. Do this, and the Lord's mercy will be upon you."

When they heard Ramanuja's words, all the people in the crowd called out, "Please tell us the mantra. Shower the Lord's blessings upon us!"

Then Yatiraja called out in a deep resounding voice the mantra he had just received from Gosthipurna; *om namo narayanaya*. Immediately the crowd responded, everyone calling out the sacred words together, producing a sound like thunder. Twice more Ramanuja called out the mantra, and twice more the thunderous response resounded from the crowd.

Every person became silent and looked at one another with feelings of deep ecstasy in their hearts. At that time it seemed that the earth had become Vaikuntha. The faces of the men, women and children were flushed with joy and it seemed that all miseries were gone from the earth. Those who had come running to the temple hoping to receive gold or jewels, immediately forgot their worldly desires, feeling as if they had been given a diamond in place of a piece of broken glass.

As the joyful crowd melted away, men and women came and prostrated themselves before Yatiraja, considering themselves most blessed to have received such a benediction from that great soul. Ramanuja then climbed down from the tower and began walking towards Gosthipurna's residence to worship the feet of his guru.

GOSTHIPURNA'S ANGER

By this time Gosthipurna had come to hear in detail of everything that had taken place outside the temple and was extremely angry, feeling Ramanuja had betrayed his trust. When Ramanuja approached him with his two disciples, the aged acarya addressed him in a voice that trembled with rage. 'Get out of my sight, O lowest of men! I have committed a great sin by entrusting the most precious gem to such an untrustworthily person as yourself. Why have you come here again, forcing me to commit the sin of looking at your face? Surely you are destined to live in hell for countless lifetimes.'

Without any sign of remorse, Ramanuja replied to his guru in a most humble manner, saying, 'It was only because I am prepared to suffer in hell that I dared to go against your order. You told me that whoever chanted the mantra of eight syllables was certain to be liberated. Thus, according

to your words, so many people are now destined to find shelter at Lord Narayana's lotus feet. If an insignificant person like me has to go to hell, it is of no great importance if so many others thereby attain the mercy of Lord Narayana.''

On hearing these words, which fully revealed the depth of the devotee's compassion, Gosthipurna was completely stunned and filled with great wonder. All his fierce anger disappeared in an instant, like the passing of a violent storm, and he embraced Ramanuja with profound affection. Everyone who was able to witness this transformation was filled with joy and astonishment.

Gosthipurna then addressed Ramanuja with folded palms, 'My child, I have never known anyone so magnanimous as yourself. From this day you are my guru, and I am your disciple. There is no doubt that you are a most intimate associate of the Lord, whereas I am nothing but a common man. How can I comprehend your greatness? Please forgive all of my offenses.''

Ramanuja fell to his knees and clasped the feet of his guru. With his head bowed in humility, he said, 'You are my eternal guru. The perfect mantra has become even more potent because it has emanated from your lips. Thus today it has burnt to ashes the miseries of so many thousands of people. Although I committed the offense of transgressing the order of my guru, I have become eternally fortunate by receiving your embrace, which is desired even by the gods. My prayer is that, regarding me as your son and servant, you will eternally bestow your mercy upon me.''

Being highly pleased by Ramanuja's humility and gentle behaviour, Gosthipurna asked him to accept his son, Saumya-narayana, as his disciple. Then, with permission of his spiritual master, Ramanuja returned to Sri Rangam. After this incident Yatiraja's fame expanded even further, and for several weeks it seemed the local people could speak of nothing but this great devotee who had come into their midst.

INSTRUCTIONS TO KURESA

Residing once more in Sri Rangam, Yatiraja began to instruct the growing number of disciples who had taken shelter of him. One day his disciple Kuresa approached him and asked him to reveal the full meaning of the supreme verse of Bhagavad-gita :-

*sarva-dharman parityaja
mam ekam saranam vraja
aham tvam sarva-papebhyo
moksayisyami ma sucah*

"Abandon all varieties of religion and just surrender unto Me. I will deliver you from all sinful reactions. Do not fear."

Ramanuja replied, "A person who gives up all independent desires and serves his guru absolutely for an entire year can fully understand the meaning of this verse, and no one else."

"But life is so uncertain," said Kuresa, "how can I know whether or not I will live for another year? Please bestow your mercy upon me by making the meaning of the verse manifest in my heart even now"

Yatiraja considered this request for a while and then replied, "If you live for one month by begging alms from door to door, without knowing where your next meal will come from, then you will begin to realize the meaning of full surrender. At that time I will instruct you on all the meanings of this glorious verse."

For one month Kuresa lived as his guru had instructed. When the month had passed, he learned from Yatiraja all about the nature of surrender to Lord Krsna.

DASARATHI'S REQUEST

A tittle while later, Dasarathi, Ramanuja's second disciple, approached him with the same request as Kuresa. To him Yatiraja replied, "You are my relative, and therefore it is my desire that you understand the verse by hearing from Gosthipurna. Even though there may be some fault in you, I will tend to overlook it because you are my family member. The duty of the guru is to remove all taints from the heart of the disciple. Therefore it is better that you take instruction from Sri Gosthipurna." Dasarathi was famous as a great scholar and still a little proud of his learning. It was for this reason that Ramanuja directed him to approach Gosthipurna.

As instructed by his guru, Dasarathi went to reside in Tirukkotiur and for six months he sat at the feet of Mahatma Gosthipurna. However, even at the end of this time, the acarya had still not explained to him the meaning of that sublime verse spoken by Lord Krsna.

Eventually, taking pity on the young man, Gosthipurna told Dasarathi, "You are certainly a most brilliant scholar; I know that well. However, you must understand that education, wealth, and birth in an aristocratic family can cause pride to arise in the heart of a small-minded man. In those who are virtuous, great learning brings self-control and thus gives rise to good qualities, not blemishes. Understanding these instructions, now return to your own guru; he will reveal the meaning of the verse as you desire."

DASARATHI'S HUMILITY

Dasarathi then returned to Sri Rangam and reported to Ramanuja all that had taken place in Tirukkotiur. At that same time, Attulai, the daughter of Mahapurna, came there, obviously in some distress. When Yatiraja inquired from her as to the cause of her unhappiness, she replied, "Dear brother, my father has sent me to you. I live at the house of my father-in-law and every day, both morning and evening, I have to bring water from a lake which is over two miles from the house. The road there is lonely and difficult to traverse and as a result I have become overwhelmed by fear and physical exertion. When I told my mother-in-law of these difficulties, rather than sympathizing with my plight, she flew into a rage, saying, 'Why did you not bring a cook from your father's house? Can I afford to employ a servant while you sit idly at home?' Being very unhappy at this treatment, I returned to my father's house and he has instructed me to come to you for help with this problem."

To this request Ramanuja immediately responded, "Dear sister, do not worry. Here I have one brahmana whom I will send with you. He will do the work of fetching water from the lake and the cooking as well."

So saying he glanced at Dasarathi, the great scholar. Although working as a servant in the kitchen was an occupation he might have considered unbecoming for a renowned pandit such as himself, Dasarathi understood the desire of his guru and gladly followed Attulai to her father-in-law's house. There he began to do all the work in the kitchen with great care and devotion. In this way six months passed.

One day a Vaisnava came to the village and was explaining a verse before an assembly of people. Dasarathi was among the crowd and when he heard the speaker's presentation tinged with impersonalist misconceptions, he could not restrain himself from pointing out these errors. At this the man was very irritated and shouted out, "Stop, you fool! Where is a jackal and where is heaven! Whoever heard of a cook explaining the scriptures? Go back to the kitchen and display your talents there."

Without showing the least sign of annoyance at these harsh words, Dasarathi calmly went on with his explanation of the verse. His presentation, based on many different scriptures, was made so perfectly that everyone who heard his speech was captivated. Even the original speaker begged pardon from him by touching his feet and asking, "How is it that such a sincere devotee and learned scholar as yourself is engaged in doing menial work in the kitchen?"

To this Dasarathi replied that he was simply acting in accordance with the order of his guru, which was his life and soul. When all the people learned he was Dasarathi, the famous devotee-scholar, they went in a group to Sri Rangam. Before Ramanuja all of them presented their petition,

saying, "O Mahatma, it is not proper that your worthy disciple should be engaged as a cook any longer. He has not a trace of pride in his heart and is certainly an exalted paramahansa. Please give orders so that in great honor we may bring him to your feet once more."

Yatiraja was so pleased to hear the people describing his disciple in such a way that he himself returned with them. When they met, Ramanuja embraced Dasarathi and blessed him. After returning to Sri Rangam he explained to him the full significance of Lord Krsna's final instruction to Arjuna in the Bhagavad-gita, which reveals the essence of a devotee's surrender to the Supreme Personality of Godhead. Because Dasarathi had fulfilled his desire by rendering service to the devotees, from that day he was known as Vaisnava dasa.

LEARNING FROM MALADHARA

After this, at Mahapurna's request, Ramanuja again studied the writings of the south Indian devotees, this time under the direction of Vararanga. When this study was complete, Gosthipurna approached him with another devotee, saying, "This great soul, Sri Maladhara, comes from the city of Srimadhura in the land of the Pandyas where I was born. He is a learned scholar and one of the foremost disciples of Yamunacarya. He has fully understood the Sathari-sukta, the thousand songs composed by the great devotee Sathari. Learn all of this from him, and you will surely be blessed by Lord Narayana."

Following the order of his guru, Ramanuja began to study at the feet of Maladhara. One day, however, the teacher gave an explanation of one of the verses which seemed improper to Ramanuja, who put forward a different understanding. Being offended at what he saw as his student's great audacity, Maladhara immediately left Sri Rangam and returned to his home.

When Gosthipurna heard what had happened, he went to visit his godbrother and asked, "Could Ramanuja absorb the full meaning of the Thousand Songs?" To this inquiry Maladhara replied by explaining everything that had taken place in Sri Rangam.

"My dear brother," said Gosthipurna, "do not judge him as you would an ordinary man. None of us can understand Yamunacarya's intimate thoughts and desires to the extent that he can. Therefore, when he gives some explanation of the verses, you should hear him as if our beloved guru, Alabandara himself, were speaking."

Acting on this advice from Gosthipurna, Maladhara returned to Sri Rangam and resumed his teaching to Ramanuja. A few days later Ramanuja again spoke out to give some different explanation of a particular verse, but this time, instead of being annoyed, Maladhara listened to him with

great attention. When he heard Ramanuja's explanation of the verse, Maladhara was amazed to see the young sannyasi's profound and inspired understanding of Vaisnava philosophy. In a mood of great reverence, he circumambulated Ramanuja and then brought forward his son to be his disciple.

LEARNING THE SCIENCE OF DHARMA

After completing his study of the Sathari-sukta, Ramanuja next wanted to learn about dharma from Sri Vararanga, the son of Yamunacarya. Every day Vararanga would go before Lord Ranganatha and sing bhajans in a most beautiful voice. Sometimes he would dance in ecstasy, and, when he became fatigued, Ramanuja would bring him relief by massaging his legs and rubbing turmeric powder on his body. Every evening he would prepare condensed milk for Vararanga and bring it to him like a menial servant.

For six months this continued, and then Vararanga said to Ramanuja, "I know of your desire to learn from me about dharma and because I am very pleased by the service that you have rendered to me, I will fully instruct you as far as my intelligence allows. Everything about dharma is fully understood by one who has realized the meaning of this verse:-

*gurur eva param brahma
gurur eva param-dhanam
gurur eva parah kamo
gurur eva parayanam*

"That person who sees his spiritual master as the personification of the Lord Himself and who serves his guru perfectly with no other desire, just as you have served me, he is the greatest knower of dharma. This is the limit of my understanding."

Ramanuja was very pleased to receive this instruction from his teacher and offered prostrated obeisances at his feet. Sri Vararanga had no children, but he had a younger brother named Chotanambi who was very dear to him. Now he brought this young man forward to become the disciple of Ramanuja.

In this way Ramanuja was instructed by Yamunacarya's five most intimate disciples: Kancipurna, Mahapurna, Gosthipuma, Maladhara, and Vararanga - each of whom embodied a different aspect of the great acarya. Now it appeared that Alabandara was present again on earth in the form of the pure devotee, Sri Ramanujacarya. When Yatiraja spoke, explaining the Vaisnava philosophy, everyone became struck with wonder to hear such beautiful descriptions. When he spoke about the glories of the Lord, the unhappiness and material desires of all those who heard him immediately went to a distant place.

THE GREAT DEVOTEE TIRUMANGAI

Of all the temples in India, that of Lord Ranganatha, situated on an island in the Kaveri River, is certainly the largest. The story of how this temple came to be built is very interesting.

About three hundred years before the birth of Ramanujacarya, which was in AD 1017, there lived in south India a devotee named Tirumangai. His heart was always filled with devotion for Lord Visnu, and in this mood of pure love he would compose beautiful poetic prayers.

From the time of his youth he was in the habit of travelling throughout the country to visit the various holy places of pilgrimage. In the course of his travels four great mystics had become attracted by his exalted nature and had become his disciples. Each of these disciples had a particular ability that set him apart from ordinary men.

The first disciple was named Tola Vazhakkan, and he was famous for his ability to vanquish any opponent in a debate. The second disciple was named Taluduvan, and he had the ability to open any lock without the need of a key. The third and fourth disciples both possessed most unusual talents. The third, Nizhalai Mithippan, could force any man to remain still simply by stepping on his shadow, while the fourth, Nirmal Nadappan, had developed the laghima siddhi, which enabled him to walk on water.

TIRUMANGAI'S VISIT TO SRI RANGAM

After touring many holy places of pilgrimage, Tirumangai at last came to the temple of Lord Ranganatha. The Deity of Ranganatha had originally been installed by Vibhisana, the brother of Ravana, but at the time of Tirumangai the temple was completely dilapidated and filled with bats. Once a day a priest would come there to offer a few flowers and a little water to the Deity before hurrying away out of fear of the wild animals that dwelt in the surrounding forest.

When he saw this unhappy state of affairs, a strong desire arose in the mind of Tirumangai to build a beautiful, opulent temple for Lord Ranganatha. However, he did not have a penny to his name and no more did any of his disciples. After consulting together they decided to approach every rich man they could find and beg him to give money for the building of a temple. Unfortunately, the effects of Kali-yuga having set in, not one of these rich men would give even a small coin and they frequently blasphemed the devotees by calling them rogues or thieves.

ADOPTING THE WAYS OF ROBBERS

Being a humble devotee, Tirumangai was not disturbed by this treatment, but the thought of the Supreme Lord standing uncared for in a wild forest full of jackals and hyenas caused him great pain. At last he could tolerate the situation no longer and exclaimed in front of his four disciples, "We have wasted enough time trying to persuade these rascals to serve the Lord. They will always remain atheists and unbelievers. Which is better - to beg from these villains while Lord Ranganatha remains in this sorry condition, or to humble them by building a temple for the Lord so magnificent that it will force them to bow down at his feet?"

The disciples answered, "The service of the Lord is our duty, not acting as the servants of these rogues."

"Then prepare yourselves," continued Tirumangai, "for from this day we will see to it that the wealth of these greedy men is spent for building a temple. These wealthy landowners, who are cruel by nature, have passed their lives taking from the poor, hard-working people and leaving them without enough to eat. Now then, let us rob these rascals and use their money for building a temple and feeding the poor."

The four disciples readily agreed to this proposal, and each of them spoke in turn. Tola Vazhakkan said, "No one can defeat me in argument. So, while I engage some rich man and his attendants in a debate, they will forget everything else and you will easily be able to carry off their wealth."

Taludhuvan said, "I have the ability to open any lock without a key. Therefore, no treasury door will ever be closed to us."

Nizhalai Mithippan said, "Anyone whose shadow is touched by my feet loses all power of movement. Therefore, it will be easy for us to stop rich travellers along the roads."

Nirmal Nadappan said, "The big houses of rich landowners, which are surrounded by moats of water, are always open to me, for I can easily walk over water. Therefore from today, all the treasure of kings is yours"

CONSTRUCTION OF THE RANGANATHA TEMPLE

With the assistance of his four disciples, Tirumangai soon became the leader of a large gang of robbers. Together they accumulated a great hoard of riches that was kept concealed in a secret place on Lord Ranganatha's island. Spending large sums of money, Tirumangai brought the best architects in the land to design a huge temple for the Lord and at an auspicious moment he laid the foundation stone.

The inner temple room, encircled by the first ring of walls and crowned with a high tower, was completed in two years. Thousands of builders were engaged to take part in the construction, but even so it took four years to complete the next ring of walls and apartments, six years for the second, eight years for the third, ten years for the fourth, twelve years for the fifth, and eighteen years for the sixth. In all it took sixty years to complete the construction of the temple, and by this time Tirumangai was over eighty years old.

After the construction of the inner temple, kings began to send money to Tirumangai of their own accord, convinced now that he was a genuine devotee. Moreover, he was now the leader of a gang of over one thousand robbers and other wealthy landowners gave money liberally to assist with the work, fearing that all of their property would otherwise be plundered. Despite all this, Tirumangai still lived the simple life of a devotee, eating only once a day prasadam cooked by his own hand and prepared from food he obtained by begging. He would also ensure that all the people in that area never suffered for want of food -only the rich lived in fear of the sage Tirumangai.

THE ROBBERS' ANGER

Now that all seven walls of the temple were completed, Tirumangai generously rewarded all the architects. After making this payment there was not a penny left in the treasury. At that time the host of robbers, who had been his accomplices, came to him to demand their share of the wealth they had plundered. Tirumangai thought for some time about the robbers' demands, and, finding no way he could pay them, he consulted with his disciple Nirmal Nadappan in a secluded place.

In the meantime all the robbers, believing that Tirumangai had cheated them by spending all the money for construction of the temple, made a conspiracy to kill their leader. Just as they were about to put their plans into effect, however, Nirmal Nadappan stepped amongst them, saying, "My dear brothers, somewhere hidden along the northern bank of the Kaveri there is a large amount of treasure belonging to our master. Look, here is a boat; I will take you to that place where the treasure is hidden, and then we can divide it among ourselves."

The robbers happily agreed to this proposal, and all got aboard a large boat that had been used to carry blocks of stone for the temple. It was the rainy season, and the monsoon had swollen the Kaveri into a mighty flow over a mile wide. The day was drawing to a close, and dark clouds began to blot out the light of the setting sun. As Tirumangai and his three other disciples stood on the island of Sri Rangam, they could only faintly discern the outline

of the huge boat as it moved slowly towards the distant shore.

Suddenly, above the roar of the water and the sound of the wind, they heard a horrible cry of distress that seemed to come from within the Kaveri itself. Then there was silence, and the boat could be seen no more. In the roaring waves of the Kaveri nothing else was noticed.

After a short while one man walking with steady strides over the water came near Tirumangai and bowed down at his feet. This man was none other than Nirmal Nadappan, the fourth disciple. Tirumangai raised him up and said, "Do not feel concerned for these men. After all the service they have rendered, surely Lord Ranganatha will protect them. Is it not better for them to leave the world at this time than to continue living as robbers? Now let us all pass the remaining days of our lives in the service of Lord Ranganatha, for our purpose in adopting the robbers' lifestyle has been fulfilled."

So Tirumangai and his four disciples then absorbed themselves in rendering service to the Deity of Ranganatha. A few years later they passed from this world and returned to the shelter of Lord Visnu's lotus feet.

THE HIGH PRIEST OF THE TEMPLE

In this way the temple of Lord Ranganatha came to be built and was famous as the largest temple in all of India. At the time of Ramanuja, however, the high priest of the temple was not at all a devoted or pious man. He had used his position to amass a fortune for himself, and he was willing to remove any person who became an obstacle to his ambition. Ramanujacarya now proved himself to be just such an obstacle.

The high priest-observed how people would offer respect and veneration to Yatiraja and that his own position was now being overlooked. That envious person could not tolerate this threat to his prestige and status, and so he immediately began to consider ways by which he might be rid of this dangerous rival. After formulating a plan, he went to Ramanuja one day and invited him to take alms at his house. Then he quickly returned home and instructed his wife, "Today I have invited Ramanuja to take alms here. This is our opportunity to be rid of the scoundrel once and for all. You know where the poison is to be found. Need I say more?"

The priest's wife was a woman of similar disposition to her husband, and she gladly agreed to his proposal. The high priest then went back to the temple, and at noon Yatiraja arrived at the house to take alms as he had been invited. The wife of the priest received him with great courtesy, washing his feet and offering him a nice sitting place. Although this woman was known to be hard-hearted by

nature, when she beheld the transcendental appearance of the great devotee with his pure, guileless expression, feelings of compassion began to arise within her.

When she brought the poisoned dish forward, she was unable to restrain herself and, shedding tears, addressed Ramanuja, "My child, if you want to save yourself, then go elsewhere to take your meal. If you take this food you will die"

Yatiraja was shocked to hear these words, and he sat silently for some time wondering what he might have done to bring out such hatred in the priest. Eventually he rose and, leaving the house, walked slowly towards the Kaveri. Seeing Gosthipurna there by the banks of the river, he ran towards him and fell down at his feet. Gosthipurna raised him up and inquired as to the cause of his distress.

Ramanuja narrated to him the whole story and then asked his spiritual master, "I am so unhappy at the thought of his mental condition. How can he be freed from such a great sin?"

"My child," Gosthipurna replied, "when you desire the Lord's mercy for this sinful soul, there is no need to fear for him. Very soon he will give up his evil ways and become a righteous man."

When he had left his guru, Ramanuja returned to the asrama, where he found a brahmana waiting with various types of prasadam. He took a little and distributed the rest to his disciples without telling anyone what had befallen him at the house of the high priest. Sitting alone, he continued to contemplate how the priest's sinful nature might be reformed.

In the meantime the high priest had returned to his residence and discovered that his plot had been unsuccessful. He was extremely angry, but, considering that a woman's heart is naturally soft, he excused his wife and immediately began to devise another scheme to do away with his imagined rival.

Every evening Yatiraja would visit the temple to see Lord Ranganatha. That evening, when he was standing before the Lord, the high priest came towards him, offering him caranamrta. Ramanuja gratefully accepted and drank the caranamrta, even though he knew that it was mixed with poison. Then he offered prayers to Lord Ranganatha, "O ocean of mercy, how great is your affection for your devotee. I am not worthy to accept such nectar from Your lotus feet. Your mercy is causeless and unlimited."

When he had finished offering prayers, Ramanuja left the temple, his body trembling in ecstasy. Seeing these emotions, the high priest mistook them for signs that the poison was taking effect and was very pleased, thinking that his mission was accomplished. He was convinced that the next morning he would see the smoke of Yatiraja's funeral pyre, for he had put in the caranamrta enough poison to kill ten men.

THE PRIEST'S REPENTENCE

However, in this he was to be disappointed. The next morning, as he was going to the temple as usual, he heard the sound of many voices singing joyful songs in praise of Ramanuja. The priest hurried to the place the sound was coming from and saw there that all the people of Sri Ranganam were singing and dancing around Yatiraja, offering flowers at his feet. The acarya himself was sitting on a low seat in a trance of ecstasy, his mind fixed on the Supreme Personality of Godhead. His pure features were more radiant than ever, with tears of jubilation flowing from his eyes. As he beheld that wonderful sight, even the stone-like heart of that evil priest began to soften.

In an instant the high priest realized the folly of his envy towards this great mahatma and rushed through the crowd towards him. Weeping bitterly, he fell down at Ramanuja's feet praying, "You have descended to enact the desires of Lord Visnu by destroying sinful men like me. Delay no longer, my lord. Send me at once to the abode of Yamaraja. I am not fit even to touch your feet, so please punish me immediately for all my sins. Only then may I achieve relief from their reactions. Delay no longer! Throw me at once under the feet of an elephant or into a blazing fire. I do not desire to live for a moment more."

Having said this, the priest began to strike his head on the ground so hard that the place became soaked with blood. The people all around tried to restrain him, but he was so agitated that he began to strike his chest until his whole body became covered with blood. Then Yatiraja returned to external consciousness and pacified the priest by placing his hand upon his head and saying, "Do not act in such a terrible way. Lord Ranganatha has certainly forgiven all of your sins."

"How can you look with such kindness on a man as abominable as myself!" exclaimed the priest.

"O savior of the fallen, this glory of yours will be proclaimed by men for all time to come."

Ramanuja then blessed the high priest and bestowed his full mercy upon him. From that day on, the priest was like a different person. He cast far away all the enviousness which had polluted his heart and became a humble servant of the Lord, completely devoted to his savior and guru, Ramanujacarya.

THE DEBATE WITH YAJNAMURTI

At that time there lived a great scholar and pandita named Yajnamurti, who by dint of his learning and keen intelligence had become unconquerable in debate. Although

born in south India, he had travelled throughout the northern regions of the country without finding anyone who could rival his abilities in argument. On returning to south India he heard of the fame of Ramanujacarya, the renowned Vaisnava who was so expert at refuting impersonalist philosophy. Therefore he hastened to Sri Rangam, followed by a cart filled with the books he always took with him.

Appearing before Ramanuja, Yajnamurti immediately challenged him to a debate. At this Yatiraja merely smiled, saying, "O Mahatma, what is the value of this mental wrangling? I will accept defeat at your hands, for you are a scholar without second. Victory follows you everywhere."

"If you acknowledge your defeat," rejoined Yajnamurti, "then you must accept the flawless doctrine of monism and give up forever the false ideas of the Vaisnavas".

Of course this was something that Ramanuja could never accept, and so he protested, "It is mayavadis such as yourself who are filled with illusion. According to such speculators all arguments and reasonings of the mind are simply aspects of maya, so how is your own doctrine free from illusion?"

"Whatever exists in time and space is illusion," said Yajnamurti, "and both of these must be transcended before one can reach the real truth. You accept a form of God as truth, but actually all forms are nothing but illusion."

In this way the great debate began and for seventeen days it continued, as neither of the two scholars seemed able to finally defeat the other. At the end of the seventeenth day, when Yatiraja still found it impossible to nullify all of his opponent's clever arguments and establish the supremacy of Lord Visnu, he felt very disappointed at heart.

Returning to the asrama that evening, he went before the Deity and began to pray with folded hands, "O Lord, the truth that is revealed in all the scriptures has become covered by the cloud of mayavada arguments. By cleverly juggling words these impersonalist present arguments which are bewildering even to great mahatmas. O Supreme One, for how long will You allow Your children to be thus kept from the shade of Your lotus feet?"

When he had finished his prayer, Ramanuja began to shed tears. That night the Lord appeared to him in a dream and told him, "Do not be anxious. Before long the full glory of devotional service will be revealed to the world through you."

YAJNAMURTI'S CONVERSION

The next morning when he arose and recalled the instructions the Lord had given him in the dream, Yatiraja felt great joy. When he had finished all his morning duties,

he walked over to the monastery where Yajnamurti was staying. On seeing the blissful effulgence in Ramanuja's face the impersonalist was completely amazed, thinking to himself, "Yesterday, Ramanuja returned to his asrama greatly disappointed and on the verge of defeat. But today he returns looking like one of the gods. I can see that he is divinely inspired, and thus it is futile to argue with him any longer. This man has indeed attained full perfection. Anger and pride never approach him, and his face glows with a transcendent beauty. I shall atone for my sinfulness by becoming his disciple and thus destroy the root of my false pride."

Having made this decision, Yajnamurti fell down to offer obeisances to Ramanuja, who then addressed him, "O Yajnamurti, such behavior is not proper for a great man like yourself. Why this delay in resuming the debate?"

"O great soul," replied the scholar, "I am no longer the same wrangler who has tried to overcome you with clever arguments for so many days. I will argue no longer with a pure devotee such as yourself. I stand before you not as a rival, but as your eternal servant. Please fill up my darkened heart with the light of your purity."

Yatiraja was not surprised by the transformation that had taken place in Yajnamurti, for he clearly recalled the words spoken to him by Sri Devaraja, the Deity installed in the asrama. He realized that it was only through the mercy of the Lord that the proud pandita had gained the jewel of humility. Then, speaking in a gentle voice, Ramanuja said to the scholar, "May the name of Sri Devaraja be ever glorified, for his grace can melt even the stones. To give up pride in one's learning is all but impossible for any man, but by His mercy it has been made possible. You are supremely fortunate."

"When I have been given the chance to meet a pure devotee such as yourself, then I am indeed fortunate," said Yajnamurti. "Now please instruct me. Show me how to become a devotee of the Lord."

On receiving this surrender from the famous pandita, Yatiraja at once prepared to initiate him into the Vaisnava sampradaya. Yajnamurti anointed his body with tilaka and then accepted the symbols of Lord Visnu: the conchshell, disc, club and lotus. Because he had been delivered by the mercy of Sri Devaraja, Ramanujacarya gave Yajnamurti the name Devaraja-muni and instructed him, "Now that your learning has been freed from the contamination of pride, it can shine forth upon the world. You should engage yourself in writing books which perfectly explain the behavior and philosophy of the Vaisnavas." It was in accordance with this order from his guru that Devaraja-muni later wrote two wonderful devotional literatures, *Jnana-sara* and *Prameya-sara*.

THE HUMILITY OF DEVARAJA-MUNI

A few days later, four intelligent, devoted young men approached Ramanuja and begged for initiation from him. When he had heard their request, Yatiraja considered the matter for a little while and then told them, "Go to Devaraja-muni and become his disciples. He is not only a great pandita, but also a most advanced devotee of Lord Narayana."

Accepting this order with great respect, the four young men duly became disciples of Devaraja-muni. That previously arrogant scholar, however, was not at all pleased to find himself in a position where he had to accept worship and veneration from disciples. "What a disturbance this is to me," he thought, "I have been endeavoring with all my strength to rid myself of vanity, but now I am forced to become a guru and listen to my praises being sung."

In bewilderment he approached Ramanuja and humbly submitted, "O master, I am your surrendered servant. Why do you behave so cruelly towards me? By your grace I have endeavored to shake off the demon of false pride, so why do you hurl me once more into the arms of vanity by ordering me to become a guru? I am not detached enough to accept such a position, so please allow me to remain here as your menial servant. For me, to be in such a position would be the supreme perfection."

Highly pleased by his disciple's words, Yatiraja embraced Devaraja-muni and said warmly, "I did all this simply to test whether you had truly overcome your pride. Now that you have passed the test, you should remain here with me and Lord Devaraja." Devaraja-muni was very satisfied to receive this order from his guru. He passed the remaining years of his life absorbed in rendering service to the lotus feet of his spiritual master and Lord Devaraja.

INSTRUCTIONS TO DISCIPLES

Now that Ramanujacarya had accepted a number of disciples, he began to give them formal instructions on the Vaisnava scriptures. First he studied with them the *Sahasragiti*, the thousand hymns praising Lord Visnu which had been composed by Nammalvar, a famous devotee from south India. All the disciples were entranced to hear the wonderful way that Yatiraja explained these verses, revealing to them the glories of Lord Visnu.

One day they came to a verse which described the holy dhama of Sri Saila, which is also known as Tirupati: "This Sri Saila is like Vaikuntha on earth. One who spends his life in that holy place does in truth live in Vaikuntha and at the end of his life will attain the lotus feet of Lord Narayana."

When they had read that verse, Ramanuja asked his disciples, "Who among you is willing to go to Sri Saila,

make a flower garden and serve Lord Srinivasa there until the end of his life?"

It was Anantacarya, a very quiet disciple, who replied, "O master, if you will permit me, I shall go to that sacred hill and there achieve the mercy of the Lord."

"You are indeed blessed," said Yatiraja, "and by your devotion you have delivered fourteen generations of your ancestors. I consider myself most fortunate to have a disciple such as yourself." Then, after worshipping the feet of his guru, Anantacarya departed for Tirupati.

CHAPTER FIVE

TRAVELLING AND PREACHING

Three times over Ramanuja studied the *Sahasra-giti* with his disciples. At the conclusion of the third reading a desire arose within his heart to see for himself the holy shrine of Sri Saila. Thus a few days later he set off on the journey from Sri Rangam accompanied by his disciples, all chanting the holy name of Lord Hari together.

At the end of the first day of the journey, they stopped for the night in the town of Dehali. On the next day they walked as far as the village of Astasa-hasra. Here there lived two of Ramanuja's disciples, Yajnesa and Varadacarya. Intending to pass the night at the house of Yajnesa, who was a wealthy merchant, Yatiraja sent two of his followers ahead to convey the news of his imminent arrival.

When he learned of this from them, Yajnesa was delighted and immediately began to see to all the arrangements necessary for receiving the party of pilgrims. However, so absorbed was he in all these activities that Yajnesa completely neglected to see to the comfort of the two tired messengers, who were left alone without being offered so much as a glass of water. Becoming unhappy at this mistreatment, they returned to Ramanujacarya and reported to him everything that had taken place.

Being most displeased to hear how his disciple had failed to show proper respect to Vaisnava guests, Yatiraja decided he would go instead to the house of Varadacarya. This second disciple was an extremely poor man but was noted for his pure heart and great devotion to Lord Visnu. Every morning he would set out to beg alms, returning at noon to present whatever he had received as an offering to the Lord. Thus he passed his life in great contentment along with Laksmi, his chaste and extremely beautiful wife.

LAKSMI 'S DILEMMA

When Ramanuja and his party arrived at the house, Varadacarya was still out begging and they were all received with great respect by Laksmi. Paying obeisances at the feet of her guru, she said, "My husband is still out begging alms. All of you please sit here and be merciful to me by accepting this water to wash your feet. Just nearby there is a lake where you may bathe, and in the meantime I will prepare the offering for Lord Narayana."

Having said this she entered the kitchen. However, there was not a single grain of rice in the store. So poor were this couple that they had nothing at all in the house. In great anxiety Laksmi began to consider how she could properly serve her guru.

In that same village there lived a rich businessman who had become attracted by Laksmi's beauty. He had tried many times to tempt her through female messengers, offering her money and jewels, but she would never even speak to the rascal. Now, however, she began to consider that this might be the only way that she and her husband would be able to render proper service to their spiritual master. Eventually she concluded that, as service to one's guru transcends all other principles, she would surrender herself to that man in return for whatever was required to serve her guests.

Accordingly, she slipped out the back door of her house and ran quickly to the house of the businessman, which was not far from there. When she came into his presence, she said, "This evening I shall fulfill your desires. My guru and many of his disciples have come to my house as guests. Send to our house without delay all things necessary to receive them properly."

The merchant was surprised to hear this, for he had by now resigned himself to the fact that this chaste lady would never be allured by the things he offered. Greatly pleased by this unexpected turn of events, he quickly arranged for the most opulent foods to be sent to his neighbor's house.

Quickly then Laksmidevi busied herself in preparing offerings for Lord Visnu from the different things that were brought to her. When everything was completed and the offering made, she invited Ramanujacarya and his disciples to sit down and take prasadam. They were all most surprised to find such opulent foodstuffs available in a poor man's house and ate with great relish, praising the good lady for her excellent hospitality.

THE POTENCY OF MAHA-PRASADA

When he returned home, Varadacarya was filled with happiness to see his guru actually in his own house.

However, when he heard about the wonderful prasadam they had all been offered, he was astonished, knowing only too well the poverty-stricken condition in which they were living. When he inquired from his wife as to how she had been able to serve their guests in a manner so befitting, Laksmidevi bowed her head in shame and narrated to him all the arrangements she had made with the merchant.

Far from being angry, however, Varadacarya began to dance with joy when he heard what had happened and he cried out, "O, I am blessed! I am blessed!" Addressing his wife, he said, "Today you have shown the highest degree of chastity. Narayana, who is represented by Sri Guru, is the only purusa and thus he is the enjoyer of prakrti. Only a great soul can fully realize this knowledge of devotional service. How fortunate I am to be married to such a lady who is the embodiment of religious principles."

Taking his wife with him, Varadacarya then went into the presence of Yatiraja and explained to his guru everything that had taken place. By Ramanuja's order they sat down and took prasadam in his presence. When they had finished eating, he told them to go to the businessman's house together and take all the remaining prasadam to offer to him.

When they arrived at the large mansion, Varadacarya waited outside while Laksmidevi was admitted to the merchant's rooms. She immediately offered him the prasadam they had brought, and he accepted it with pleasure. Prasadam is not ordinary food, and particularly the remnants left by pure devotees possess great spiritual potency. This prasadam began to affect the merchant at once and by the time he had finished eating he was a changed man.

All the sensual desires having been purged from his heart, he looked upon Laksmi as he would his mother and spoke to her with tears in his eyes, "How sinful I am! My fate would have been the same as that of the hunter who was burned to ashes when he attempted to touch the chaste Damayanti. Only by your great compassion have I been saved. O mother, please forgive all of my offenses and have mercy upon me by showing me the feet of your guru. "

In great happiness Laksmidevi and Varadacarya returned to their house along with the merchant. In the presence of Ramanujacarya all three of them bowed down to the ground to offer their prostrated obeisances. When Yatiraja touched the merchant with his hand, all of the man's miseries were removed and he begged for initiation from that great soul.

Desiring to make life easier for the devoted brahmana couple, Ramanuja requested them to accept the large sum of money the merchant had offered. At this Varadacarya spoke to his spiritual master with folded palms, "O master, by your mercy everything that we require is provided for us. Money is the root of all evil, for it distracts the senses and

thus drags the mind away from service to the Supreme Lord. Please do not order me to become a wealthy man."

Ramanuja was satisfied by these words, and he embraced the pure-hearted devotee, saying, "Today I have become purified by the association of such a great mahatma as yourself, devoid of all material desires."

YAJNESA'S REPENTANCE

At that moment Yajnesa, Yatiraja's wealthy disciple, entered the house and fell down at the feet of his guru. Having waited expectantly for Ramanuja's arrival, he had eventually learned that the party of pilgrims had gone instead to the house of the poor brahmana, Varadacarya. Thinking that he must have committed some grave offense and displeased his guru, he had gone there feeling depressed at heart.

Gently and with affection, Yatiraja raised Yajnesa to his feet and said, "Is this unhappiness due to my not coming to your house? The reason for this was the offense that you made to two exalted Vaisnavas by neglecting them. There is no higher dharma than rendering service to the Vaisnavas, and in this you have failed."

Being humbled by this chastisement from his spiritual master, Yajnesa replied in a voice choked with tears, "This thoughtless behavior of mine was not due to the vanity of wealth. Rather it was my exultation and eagerness to serve you that made me so neglectful". Ramanuja then consoled this repentant and simple-hearted devotee by promising to be his guest when he returned from Sri Saila.

ARRIVAL IN SRI SAILA

Early the next morning Ramanujacarya and his party left Astasahasra and set off for the city of Kancipuram. At noon they arrived there and went immediately to pay their obeisances to Lord Varadaraja. They met with the renowned Vaisnava saint, Sri Kancipurna, and joyfully passed three days in his association. They then travelled to the holy place known as Kapila Tirtha and on the same day arrived at the foot of the sacred hill known as Sri Saila.

Yatiraja became filled with ecstasy there, thinking, "This is the holy place where Sri Hari Himself is residing along with His consort Lakshmi. It would be a great offense for me to touch the Lord's holy abode with my feet, therefore I will remain here at the foot of the hill." Thus he remained with his followers at the foot of Sri Saila, offering constant prayers to Lord Narayana.

In the meantime all the sadhus and devotees who lived at Sri Saila came to see Ramanuja. When they heard of his resolution not to climb the hill for fear of committing an

offense, they all submitted a petition. "O pure one, if great souls such as yourself are unwilling to walk upon the sacred hill of Sri Saila, then all the common people will act in the same way and even the priests will be afraid to go up to the temple. Therefore please change your decision and agree to climb the hill. The hearts of pure devotees are the real temples of Sri Hari, for He is always present where pure devotion is manifest. The places of pilgrimage become even more sanctified because they are visited by the great devotees."

MEETING WITH SAILAPURNA

Accepting the appeals of these holy men, Yatiraja changed his decision and set off with all his disciples to climb the hill. The ascent is long and steep, and after some time Ramanuja became fatigued due to hunger and thirst. While they were resting by the side of the path, Ramanuja's uncle, the Vaisnava acarya Sri Sailapurna, appeared there, having come to bring mama-prasada and caranamrita from the temple at the top of the hill. Seeing this saintly devotee performing such menial service on his behalf, Ramanuja was a little disturbed and hesaid, "Why are you behaving in this way? Why should such a learned acarya as yourself take such trouble for a lowly person like me? Surely a boy could have been engaged to perform this service."

"I was thinking in this way, too," replied Sailapurna, "but after searching for someone suitable I could find no one less respectable than myself. For this reason I have come to you personally." Ramanuja was very satisfied to hear this reply from his uncle, for he could understand that humility is one of the Vaisnava's most essential qualities. He then offered obeisances at the feet of Sri Sailapurna and happily honored the prasada along with his disciples. Being relieved from their fatigue, the party then continued up the hill until they reached the famous temple of Venkatesvara.

Having circumambulated the temple, Ramanuja went before the Deity to offer prayers and obeisances. On seeing the beauty of the Lord his heart became filled with devotional ecstasy, and tears began to flow down his cheeks. Quickly the symptoms of love of God overwhelmed him, and he passed from external consciousness, falling to the ground in a faint. When he eventually regained his senses, the priests of the temple brought large quantities of maha-prasada both for Yatiraja and all of his disciples. All the devotees felt great happiness in seeing that holy shrine and remained at the temple for three days.

During this time Govinda, Ramanuja's cousin, who was a disciple of Sailapurna, came there to join the party. The two devotees were delighted to see one another again and embraced each other in great happiness. At the request of Sailapurna, Ramanujacarya remained at Sri Saila for the next

year, and every day the aged acarya would recite the Ramayana to him, adding his own inspired explanations to the verses. At the end of one year their study of the Ramayana was complete and Ramanuja considered himself highly fortunate to have been able to hear this scripture from such a learned devotee.

GOVINDA'S UNUSUAL BEHAVIOR

While he was staying at Sailapurna's asrama, Yatiraja was astonished by the behavior of his cousin on a number of occasions. One day he saw Govinda preparing his guru's bed, but he was shocked to see his cousin lie down himself upon the same bed. Ramanuja was disturbed to see such apparently disrespectful behavior and went at once to inform Sailapurna, who immediately summoned his disciple to his presence.

"Do you know what happens," he asked Govinda, "to one who sees fit to lie down on his guru's bed?"

"One who lies down on the bed of his guru is certainly destined for hell," replied Govinda calmly.

"If you are aware of the consequences, then why do you act in such a way?" Sailapurna then inquired.

To this Govinda replied, "Every day I lie down on your bed just to make sure that it is comfortable and that your rest will be undisturbed. If it ensures your comfort, then I am certainly willing to remain eternally in hell." When Yatiraja heard his cousin's humble submission, he felt ashamed of his ignorance in misjudging Govinda and begged his forgiveness.

On another occasion Ramanuja saw his cousin behaving in a manner that was totally bewildering. He saw Govinda holding a snake in his left hand and repeatedly thrusting the finger of his right hand into the creature's mouth, causing it almost to die from pain. After taking his bath, Govinda came to Ramanuja, who inquired from him, "Why were you acting in such a strange way with that snake? It was sheer madness, and only due to good fortune were you not bitten. By acting like a cruel child you not only placed yourself in great danger, but also caused needless suffering to the poor creature, which is now lying there almost dead."

"But my dear brother," replied Govinda, "while eating something that snake had got a thorn stuck in its throat and was writhing in pain when I found it. I was putting my finger into its mouth only to remove that thorn. Now it appears lifeless only because of exhaustion and will soon be fully recovered." Yatiraja was both surprised and gratified to see Govinda's compassion on his fellow living beings, and after this incident his love for his cousin became even more profound.

RETURNING TO KANCI

After thus passing one year at Sri Saila, hearing the Ramayana from Acarya Sailapurna, Ramanuja decided to return to Sri Rangam. When he came, before Sailapurna to offer his respects before departing, that elderly disciple of Yamunacarya said to him, "My son, having you with me here for this last year has given me great pleasure. Now if there is anything that you desire from me, just ask, and, if it is within my power, I will give it to you."

To this Ramanuja replied, "O Mahatma, please give me your disciple Govinda. That is my only request."

Sailapurna assented at once, and so it was with great happiness that Yatiraja set off for Sri Rangam in the association of his beloved cousin. After travelling for several days they came to the city of Kancipuram, where Ramanuja and Govinda had grown up together.

SAILAPURNA'S DEALINGS WITH GOVINDA

They first went to see Lord Varadaraja and then on to visit Kancipurna, the great devotee and old friend of Ramanuja. After describing to him Govinda's wonderful devotion to his guru, Ramanuja finally begged Kancipurna, "Please bless my cousin and make him even more devoted to his guru and even more merciful toward all living entities."

On hearing this Kancipurna smiled and said, "The Lord always fulfills your desires. No harm can ever befall one who has your blessings." But having observed a disconsolate look on Govinda's face, he added, "Your cousin is suffering greatly due to feelings of separation from his beloved guru. Why don't you send him back to Sri Saila, so that he can resume his service to Sailapurna, which is the delight of his life?"

Ramanuja considered Kancipurna's words for some time. Then he went over to Govinda and instructed him to leave immediately and return to the shelter of his spiritual master. Govinda was very pleased to receive this instruction and travelled quickly back to Sri Saila by the shortest possible route.

However, when Sailapurna heard of Govinda's return, he did not so much as glance at him or call him to take prasada. Eventually the acaryas wife, a kind-hearted lady, said to her husband, "You may or may not speak to Govinda, but you must at least feed him"

"It is not my duty to feed a horse that has been sold," replied Sailapurna. "He should take shelter of his new master alone."

When he heard these words, Govinda, who was standing at the door, understood his gurus mind and left at once to rejoin his cousin. On arriving at Kancipuram, he went before Ramanuja and bowed down at his feet, saying, "From this day

on you should never again address me as 'brother', for I have heard from the lips of Sailapurna that you are now my master."

RETURN TO SRI RANGAM

Seeing Govinda's fatigue from his travels, Yatiraja had him bathe and then take prasada. From that time on, Govinda rendered service to his cousin in the same meticulous way he had done for Sailapurna. The party of Vaisnavas remained for three more nights in Kancipuram and then travelled on to Astasahasra. There they stayed for the night with Yajnesa, Yatiraja's wealthy disciple who had previously been so disappointed. The next day they continued on to Sri Rangam and were warmly welcomed by all the inhabitants of that city.

GOVINDA'S SERVICE

Now realizing that his gurus intention had been to entrust him completely to the care of Ramanuja, Govinda served his cousin with a contented heart. Within a few days he had discovered all of his new master's requirements and rendered service to him so perfectly that all the other disciples were struck with wonder. One day, while they were talking with Govinda, some of them elaborately praised the quality of his service. On hearing this, Govinda surprised them by saying, "Yes, my good qualities are certainly worthy of praise."

Shocked at hearing such proud words from a Vaisnava, they reported the incident to Yatiraja, who called Govinda to him, saying, "Although it is true that all the good qualities of a devotee are seen in your person, you should never allow this to make you feel arrogant or conceited."

To this Govinda replied, "After many thousands of births, I obtained this human form of life, but even then I was going astray and falling from the path of true perfection. It was your mercy alone that saved me from the darkness of delusion and therefore whatever good qualities others may see in me are due to you alone, for I am by nature fallen and low-minded. Thus whenever anyone offers me words of praise, it is in actuality praise of yourself. For this reason I fully approve of such statements."

On another occasion, when several of Yatiraja's disciples were walking to the asrama, they were shocked to see Govinda, who had not even finished his morning duties, sitting down outside the house of a prostitute. Again Yatiraja summoned his cousin to ask him about his unusual behavior. "Why were you sitting at the door of a prostitute's house instead of attending to your morning duties," he inquired.

"That woman was singing the tales of the Ramayana in such a sweet voice," came the reply, "and I was so captivated by hearing the pastimes of Sri Ramacandra that I could not bring myself to leave. For this reason my morning duties have been neglected" On hearing this, everyone was filled with wonder to understand Govinda's simplicity and natural devotion.

GOVINDA'S SANNYASA

A few days later Govinda's mother, Diptimati, came to Ramanujacarya. "My child," she said, "Govinda's wife is now grown up and of a suitable age to bear children. Please ask him to perform his duty by perpetuating our family, for he will not listen to me. When I raised the matter with him previously, he told me, 'You may bring my wife to me when I have completed my service to Yatiraja and have some free time.' But up until this day he has never had any free time, being always absorbed in his service."

Ramanuja then called for Govinda and instructed him that, as a householder, it was his duty to have children who could be trained as pure devotees. "Purify your mind of the lower modes of nature," he told him, "and then live with your wife and raise a family." Govinda, as always, accepted his cousin's order and went away to carry out his instructions.

However, a few days later Ramanuja's aunt came to him again, complaining that Govinda still had not adopted the life of a grhastha. When he was called to come before Yatiraja, Govinda explained the situation. "O Master, you instructed me to purify my mind of the lower modes of nature and then to live with my wife and beget children. However, I find that when my devotion to the Lord is completely pure, I cannot even think of family life or begetting children. Therefore it has now become very difficult for me to follow your instructions."

When he had listened to Govinda's submission, Ramanujacarya was silent for some time. Then he said, "Govinda, now that I understand the state of your mind, I consider that it is your duty to take sannyasa immediately, for a person must accept the regulations of the status of life that is most suitable for him. This is the injunction of the scriptures. As you have attained complete mastery over the senses, you are quite fit to be a sannyasi." Govinda was very pleased to hear his cousin's words and bowed down at his feet.

With the permission of Diptimati, Yatiraja began to arrange for the ceremony without delay. In the presence of the sacred fire, Govinda was offered the danda and kamandalu and thus became a Vaisnava sannyasi. With effulgent features and tears of ecstasy in his eyes, his pure appearance attracted the minds of all those present at the ceremony.

Out of great affection, Yatiraja gave his cousin the name Mananatha, meaning the controller of the mind, a name used by his own disciples to address him. Thinking himself unworthy to bear the same name as his preceptor, Govinda refused to accept this name. So Ramanuja translated it into the Tamil equivalent, 'Emperumanan', or Embar for short. Later on when Ramanuja founded an asrama in Jagannatha Puri, he called it the Embar Math in honor of his cousin.

JOURNEY TO KASHMIR

While Ramanujacarya was teaching his disciples at Sri Rangam, he frequently recalled the promise he had made before the body of Yamunacarya to present an authentic Vaisnava commentary on the Vedanta-sutras, which would nullify the misleading mayavadi interpretations.

One day, recalling his vow, he said to the assembly of disciples, "I have made a promise to Yamunacarya that I would write the Sri-bhasya commentary, but until now I have done nothing to keep my vow. Before attempting such a task, it is essential that I study the Bodhayana-vrvti, written by the sage Bodhayana, but this is such a rare book that I have been unable to locate a single copy of it anywhere in this part of the country. However, I have heard that one copy of this work is preserved with great care at Sarada-pitha in Kashmir. Therefore I am proposing to go there, taking with me only Kuresa, so that I can make a study of Bodhayana's teachings and then present a true explanation of the Vedanta-sutras.

Thus it was that a few days later Ramanuja and Kuresa set off for the far north of India. After travelling for three months, they arrived at Sarada-pitha in Kashmir. There Yatiraja held long philosophical discussions with the local panditas, who were amazed by his knowledge of the scriptures and the depth of his wisdom. Thus they treated him as an honored guest.

However, when he inquired from them about the Bodhayana-vrvti, they were reluctant to let him see this book. Being themselves impersonalists, they realized that if Yatiraja were able to absorb Bodhayana's philosophical conclusions, he would be in a position to completely destroy their false mayavada doctrines with his forceful Vaisnava presentation. Thinking in this way, they said to him, "It is true that the book you mentioned was here until recently, but unfortunately it has been eaten by worms and is now completely destroyed."

KURESA'S WONDERFUL ABILITY

Ramanujacarya was dismayed to hear this, thinking all his labor in travelling so far had been for nothing.

However, that night as he was lying down the goddess Sarada (Durga) appeared before him with the book, saying, "My child, take this book and return immediately to your own country." Straight away, having hidden the book amongst their belongings, Ramanuja and Kuresa took leave of the panditas of Sarada-pitha and departed from that place.

A few days later the scholars were rearranging the books in their library and checking to see if any were in need of repair. When they discovered that the Bodhayana-vrtti was missing, they at once concluded that the two Vaisnavas from south India must be responsible for its disappearance and sent a party of men in pursuit of them to recover the book. After travelling day and night for almost a month, they at last caught up with Ramanuja and Kuresa and learned on inquiring from them that they were indeed in possession of the Bodhayana-vrttii. Without another word they took the book from them and returned with it to their home in Kashmir.

Yatiraja was distressed at the loss, wondering how it would now be possible for him to write the Sri-bhasya. Kuresa, on the other hand, did not seem in the least disturbed and said cheerfully, "O Master, there is no need for you to feel unhappy about what has happened. Every night of our journey, while you were sleeping, I was studying that vrtti, and now I know the whole book by heart. If we stay here for a few days, I will be able to write it all down from memory."

Ramanuja was surprised to learn of his disciple's prodigious powers of memory and also delighted to hear that he would be able to retain a copy of the book he had so eagerly sought. Embracing Kuresa, he said, "From this day I am eternally indebted to you."

WRITING THE SRI BHASYA

When Kuresa had finished transcribing the book, they continued on their way and reached Sri Rangam without further incident. Back at the asrama, Ramanuja called all his disciples together and recounted to them what had befallen himself and Kuresa on their journey.

Finally he said, "O devotees, by the strength of your devotion and the wonderful power of Kuresa's memory, the Bodhayana-vrtti has been procured. Now I will be able to refute the foolish ideas of persons who consider that a mere intellectual understanding of the Vedic statements, *tat tvam asi* and *aham brahmasmi* can bring one to a state of full perfection. By falsely stating that the individual souls are themselves God, these scholars have misled the mass of people away from the true goal of life, devotion to Lord Visnu.

"Therefore I shall now commence writing the Sri-bhasya, which will reveal the true verdict of the Vedas,

that only through loving devotion to Lord Narayana can one achieve the perfection of life. Now all of you please pray to the Lord that this may be completed without any impediment. Kuresa, you must act as my secretary, but if you hear some argument which does not seem proper to you, then you must stop writing and sit quietly. Then I shall reconsider my statements and change them if I find any fault."

The next day Yatiraja began to dictate the Sri-bhasya, with Kuresa writing down everything he said. Only once did Kuresa stop writing and refuse to inscribe one of his gurus statements. This occurred when Ramanuja described that the essential nature of the soul was *nitya* and *jnata*, that is, eternal and full of knowledge. When he saw his disciple's behavior, Yatiraja was at first annoyed, saying to him, "Why do you not write the commentary yourself".

But, when he thought deeply about what he had said, he realized that the statement that the soul is eternal and full of knowledge might indicate that the soul is independent. He considered that the statement of the Bhagavad-gita: *mamaivamso jiva-loke jiva-bhutih sanatanah* clearly reveals that the *jiva* is always dependent on the Supreme Lord for his existence. Therefore the Lord is eternally the master of all *jivas*.

Having reached this conclusion, Yatiraja changed his previous statement to say that the essential nature of the soul is *visnu-sesatva* and *jnatrtva*, that is, always completely dependent on Lord Visnu and existing just to engage in His service. On hearing this, Kuresa continued writing, and in a few months the Sri-bhasya commentary was complete. This wonderful book so nicely explains the supremacy of Lord Visnu and so expertly refutes the false notions of the mayavadis, that it is still venerated by all Vaisnavas. Ramanuja wrote several other excellent books of Vaisnava philosophy and in this way presented the doctrine of *Visistadvaita-vada*.

TRAVELS THROUGHOUT INDIA

Having finished the *Sri-bhasya*, Ramanujacarya was satisfied in having fulfilled one of the three vows he had taken to complete the work of Yamunacarya. Now he decided he was ready to fulfill the second of his promises by preaching the Vaisnava philosophy he had presented in the Sri-bhasya all over India. Therefore, with seventy-four of his chief disciples and many other followers, he set off to spread the glories of Lord Narayana and refute the false doctrines of the impersonalists.

First of all they went to Kancipuram, the capital of the Cholas. Having offered prayers to Lord Varadaraja, Yatiraja then continued on his journey to the city of Kumbakonam. When he spoke in the temple there, he was

challenged by some of the local scholars, who were followers of Sankaracarya. However, by citing many verses from different scriptures, he completely nullified their arguments. All the panditas of Kumbakonam then surrendered to Ramanujacarya and became devotees of Lord Narayana.

Next, Yatiraja and his followers travelled to Madurai, which in those days was the capital of the Pandya kingdom as well as a center for all types of scholars. Before a great assembly of learned panditas, Ramanuja spoke about the philosophy of devotion. His presentation was so convincing that at once everyone accepted his teachings and agreed to become devotees of Lord Visnu.

After remaining for a few days in Madurai, the party of Vaisnavas travelled on to the city of Kuranga and from there to Kurakapuri. In both these places Deities of Lord Visnu were being worshipped, and all the devotees took pleasure in singing devotional songs in the temples.

From there they journeyed across to the west coast of India to the city of Trivandrum in Kerala, where they were able to behold the beautiful features of Lord Padmanabha lying on His bed of Ananta-Sesa. Then they travelled all the way up the west coast to Dvaraka, from there across to Mathura and Vrndavana, to Salagrama, Saketa, Naimisaranya, Puskara, and Badarikasrama.

In these holy tirthas Ramanuja preached the philosophy of loving devotion to the Supreme Lord, and all those who heard him were convinced to become devotees. Many times logicians, Buddhists, and the impersonalist followers of Sankara came before him to present their own arguments, but in every instance he was able to point out the deficiencies in these different doctrines and establish the supremacy of the Vaisnava philosophy. Eventually they came again to Sarada-pitha in the province of Kashmir, where Yatiraja and Kuresa had previously endeavored to obtain a copy of the *Bodhayana-vrtti*.

The scholars of that place came to try to defeat Ramanujacarya, but none of them could match his solid arguments. Being overcome in debate, they then resorted to the art of black magic in which they were also adept. They chanted various mantras with the intention of bringing about the death of their opponent. However, because of Yatiraja's spiritual potency, the spells were unable to affect him and returned to afflict those who had cast them. Thus all the panditas of Sarada-pitha fell sick and were on the point of death.

At this time the King of Kashmir heard of what was happening. He hurried to Sarada-pitha and fell at Ramanuja's feet, begging him to forgive those sinful brahmanas. Yatiraja accepted this appeal and cured all of them, after which they became his disciples along with the king.

Having left Sarada-pitha, Ramanujacarya travelled southwards to Benares, where he remained for several months preaching and inspiring many of those who heard him to become devotees. From Benares he travelled to Jagannatha Puri, where he founded a monastery named the Embar Math. By this time his reputation as a scholar and devotee was widely known throughout the whole of India, and as a result none of the pandits of Jagannatha Puri dared to come and challenge him.

Desiring that the priests of the Jagannatha temple adopt the pancaratrki system of worship, as explained by Narada Muni, Ramanuja appealed to the King of Orissa to arrange a debate between them. Being fearful of the outcome of such a confrontation, all the priests prayed to Lord Jagannatha to save them from inevitable defeat. That very night as Yatiraja was sleeping, he was flung three hundred miles by Lord Jagannatha to the holy dhama of Kurma-ksetra.

When he awoke, Ramanuja was bewildered to find himself in a completely different place and without any of the disciples who had been accompanying him. At first he thought that the temple nearby was dedicated to Lord Siva, and so he decided to fast for the day as a penance for his inability to worship Lord Narayana. However, when he inquired from some of the local people, he was informed that the Deity was in fact that of Lord Kurmadeva, one of the incarnations of Lord Visnu. He then went to the temple and happily engaged in the worship of the Lord.

RETURN TO SRI RANGAM

After residing at Kurma-ksetra for several days, Ramanuja was reunited with his disciples, who were continuing their journey southwards. He went with them to Simhacala and then on to Ahovata, where he established another matha. At Isalinganga they were able to see the Deity of Lord Nrsimhadeva and offer prayers at His lotus feet.

In this way, travelling southwards down the eastern side of India, they came at last to Tirupati, Sri Saila, where Yatiraja had previously stayed for one year with his uncle, Sailapurna. At that time a great controversy was raging there, for the followers of Lord Siva were challenging the devotees by claiming that Lord Venkatesvara was actually a Deity of Siva. Ramanuja then explained the history of Venkata Hill, with reference to various scriptures, and established that Sri Venkatesvara was a Deity of Lord Visnu.

Having remained at Tirupati for two weeks, Ramanuja and his followers continued their journey on to Kancipuram, where they were able to worship Lord Varadaraja. From Kanci they passed on through Madurantaka to Vira-narayana-pura,

the birthplace of Nathamuni, Yamunacarya's grandfather and receptor. From there they went on to Sri Rangam and once again took shelter of Lord Ranganatha.

CHAPTER SIX

INSTRUCTIONS TO DISCIPLES

Kuresa was one of Ramanuja's most intimate disciples, always absorbed in thought of how he could assist his guru in his preaching work. He came from a wealthy brahmana family of Kuragrahara, a small village near Kancipuram. As he was in fact the landowner of the whole area around the village of Kura, he came to be known as Kuresa, the master of Kura. He married a very qualified girl named Andal, and together they used the immense wealth he had inherited in acts of charity, providing for all the poor people in the area.

He had known Ramanuja since his boyhood and had always regarded him as a most elevated personality. When Yatiraja adopted the sannyasa order of life, Kuresa and Andal were among the first to become his disciples. Kuresa was widely renowned as a great scholar, for whatever he heard, even once, he would remember for all time. It was with his assistance, as we have heard previously, that Yadavaprakasa was defeated and made into a devotee.

From early in the morning until midnight, the gates of Kuresa's house would be open and any poor man who went there would receive gifts in charity. Once Laksmidevi, the consort of Lord Varadaraja, on hearing the gates of Kuresa's house closing, inquired from her servant Kancipurna as to where the sound was coming from. At that time Kancipurna explained to Mother Laksmi all about Kuresa's activities. "From early in the morning until midnight, service is rendered to the poor, the lame and the blind," he told Her. "Then the gates of the house are closed until the next morning so that Kuresa and his wife Andal may take a little rest. It was the sound of the gates closing that you have just heard." After hearing this description from Kancipurna, Laksmidevi became very anxious to see Kuresa and asked him to bring that devotee to her the next morning.

When Kancipurna saw Kuresa early the next day, he informed him of the Goddess of Fortune's wishes. At this Kuresa appeared astonished and replied, "Who am I? Nothing but an ungrateful, evil-minded man, while Laksmidevi is the mother of the universe, who is worshipped with great reverence even by Brahma and Siva. It is said that a candala may not enter the temple and I, having been polluted by my

wealth, am lower than any candala. Therefore how can I present myself before Mother Laksmi?"

KURESA'S RENUNCIATION

Having spoken in this way, Kuresa returned home and after removing his costly garments and ornaments, he dressed himself in the garb of a mendicant. Then he approached Kancipurna once more. "O Mahatma," he said, "I cannot disobey the order of the consort of Lord Narayana, but it is not possible for me to go before Her at present, polluted as I am by the contaminations of opulence and wealth. Therefore I will take shelter of Yatiraja, my guru, and purify myself by bathing in the water that has washed his feet. Who knows, if I receive the mercy of great souls such as yourself, then I may be able to see the lotus feet of Mother Laksmi even in this life."

So Kuresa set off that same day, walking towards Sri Rangam, with Andal following behind. She too had abandoned all trace of opulent life, retaining only one gold cup from which to supply water to her husband when he became thirsty. After travelling for some time, they entered a dark forest and Andal began to be afraid. "My lord," she said to her husband, "is there anything for us to fear in this desolate place?"

"It is only the rich who have cause to be afraid," replied Kuresa. "If you have no money or wealth with you then there is nothing to fear" On hearing this, Andal immediately threw away the golden cup.

The next day they arrived in Sri Rangam. When Ramanuja heard news of this, he sent at once to have them brought to the asrama. Then, when they had rested and taken prasada, he arranged accomodation for them in a nearby house.

From that time on Kuresa lived in Sri Rangam and maintained himself and his wife by begging from door to door. Although he had been accustomed to living in the most opulent circumstances and was now in a poverty-stricken condition, he considered himself most fortunate, for now he could pass his days in chanting the holy name, discussing the scriptures and serving the feet of his guru. Andal was also completely satisfied by the position in which she found herself, never once lamenting the wealth they had abandoned. Whilst staying in Sri Rangam, Kuresa wrote two books, a commentary on the *Sahasra-giti* and another work entitled Kuresa-vijaya.

THE PURITY OF KURESA'S DEVOTION

Once during the rainy season there was such a torrential storm that Kuresa was unable to go out and beg,

and so he and his wife were fasting for the day. Kuresa was completely undisturbed by hunger, but Andal, who was always absorbed in serving her husband, was very unhappy to see him without food. Within her mind she began to pray to Lord Ranganatha that He might provide something for His devotee Kuresa. A short while later there was a knock at the door, and one of the priests from the temple was admitted carrying a plate of maha-prasada that he had brought as a gift for them.

When the priest had left, Kuresa inquired from his wife, "Did you ask Lord Ranganatha to provide for us? Why else would he send such opulent foodstuffs, the taste of which may reawaken our material desires?"

After Andal had sorrowfully confessed what she had done, Kuresa instructed her, "It is not our business to make the Lord our servant. What has already been done cannot be helped, but please never do such a thing again." Having said this, he ate a small portion of the maha-prasada and asked his wife to honor the rest.

BIRTH OF KURESA'S SONS

About a year later Andal gave birth to twin sons. Yatiraja was delighted to hear of this and sent Govinda to perform the *jata-karma*, or birth ceremony. After the ceremony was completed, Govinda whispered two mantras into the ears of both babies - *sriman-narayana-carana saranam prapadye*, 'I take shelter at the feet of Lord Narayana' and *srimate narayanaya namah*, 'I offer my obeisances to Lord Narayana'.

As gifts for the children, Ramanuja had made out of gold the five weapons of Lord Visnu - the conch, disc, club, sword and bow - so that by wearing them the babies might be protected from ghosts and evil spirits. After six months Yatiraja performed a name-giving ceremony both for Kuresa's twin sons, whom he named Parasara and Vyasa, and for the son of Govinda's younger brother, whom he named Parankusa-purna.

When Ramanuja had stood before the body of Yamunacarya, he had made three vows: to write a Vaisnava commentary on the Vedanta-sutras, to preach the philosophy of devotional service all over India, and to name one disciple Parasara, in honor of the speaker of the Visnu Purana. Now all three of these vows were fulfilled.

PARASARA AND THE PANDITA

From an early age the child Parasara gave evidence of his genius and extraordinary character. When he was only five years old, a renowned pandita known as Sarvajna Bhatta passed along the road by Kuresa's house, accompanied by many

disciples who were beating on drums and proclaiming the glories of the great scholar.

One of the disciples announced, "Here is the unrivalled pandita, Sarvajna Bhatta. All those who wish to become his disciples may come to his feet without delay." On hearing this the child Parasara approached the pandita, scooping up a handful of dust as he went. Standing before the great scholar, the child addressed him boldly, "Let me see if you can tell how many grains of dust are in my hand. If you are truly Sarvajna then you should know everything."

The pandita was very surprised to hear Parasara's question, but, as he considered the child's words, he began to see clearly the emptiness of his pride and vanity. Taking the young boy on his lap, Sarvajna kissed him on the forehead and said, "My child, you are truly my guru. Your question has revealed how foolish I was to be so proud of the little knowledge I have acquired."

Both Parasara and Vyasa grew up to be great devotees of Lord Narayana, dedicating themselves to the service of Yatiraja. Following Ramanuja's instructions, Parasara later married two daughters from Mahapurna's family.

LORD RANGANATHA'S PROCESSION

On the day of the Festival of Garuda, thousands of people gathered in Sri Rangam to see the Deity. At the temple gate a huge crowd had assembled, for on this day Lord Ranganatha comes out of the temple and rides around the city on a palanquin in the form of His carrier, Garuda. Drums were resounding and flags were flying, as rows of brahmanas chanted hymns from the Vedas to make the occasion doubly auspicious.

Suddenly the looks on the faces of the waiting crowd became even more expectant, as the chanters of the Vedas began to move forward and a procession emerged from the inner courtyard. First came a brilliant red banner, held aloft on two long bamboo poles and emblazoned with the marks of the conch, disc, and Vaisnava tilaka. Behind the brahmanas came several decorated elephants, all wearing tilaka on their foreheads, moving forward with a majestic gait, and waving their trunks from side to side. Behind the elephants came a procession of bullocks and horses, all gaily decorated and carrying large drums across their backs. Then all the people felt a thrill of delight as a party of devotees emerged, chanting the holy name of Lord Hari and accompanying the chanting with various drums and cymbals.

Immediately behind the kirtana party came Lord Ranganatha Himself, riding on the back of Garuda with His eternal consort, Laksmidevi. The palanquin was borne aloft by hundreds of devotees, while priests fanned the Lord with many camara whisks and expert singers sang bhajans praising His glorious pastimes. On seeing the emergence of the Lord

from His temple, the throng of people gathered around the gateway let forth a great shout of joy.

In front of the gate a pavilion had been constructed, and the Lord rested there a while before continuing on His journey. At this time hundreds of devotees took the opportunity to present their offerings to Him - coconuts, bananas, plantains, and sweet-smelling camphor lamps. After some time the procession moved on once more, and the sound of the brahmanas chanting the Vedic hymns could be heard in all directions.

As the Lord moved through the streets, housewives appeared at the doors and windows along the way to give fruits, flowers, and betel nuts to the priests for offering to His lotus feet. When the offerings had been made the prasada was returned to the women, and they were blessed by having their heads touched by one of the Lord's helmets. As the procession moved on and on, everyone's eyes were fixed on Lord Narayana and Laksmidevi, their hearts filled with devotion.

DHANURDASA'S MEETING WITH RAMANUJA

However, walking amongst the crowd was one man who was behaving in a completely different manner. He was tall and handsome with broad shoulders and seemed to be walking without any particular purpose, just being swept along by the crowd. With his left hand he held aloft a decorated umbrella with which he was shielding a most beautiful young woman from the sun's rays. In his right hand he carried a fan, which he continually flicked back and forth to remove any discomfort she might be feeling from the sun's heat.

It seemed that the young man's attention was so completely absorbed in the beauty of his lady friend that he was oblivious to everything else that was going on around him. Though many people whispered and some made joking comments on seeing such a public display of affection, the young man did not notice this at all, so great was his attraction to the lady's good looks.

After bathing in the Kaveri and worshipping Lord Ranganatha, Yatiraja was returning to his asrama with his disciples when he noticed the young man walking with his companion on the other side of the road. "Dasarathi," he said to his disciple, "go and ask that man, who is devoid of both shame and hatred, to come to me."

Quickly Dasarathi crossed the street and spoke to the man, who was so engrossed in the beauty of the lady that he had to be addressed several times before he became aware of the other's presence. Slightly disturbed, like a man who has just been roused from deep slumber, he then gave his attention to the brahmana who had accosted him, joining his palms as a mark of respect and saying, "Sir, how may I serve you?"

"Over there," replied Dasarathi, "is Yatiraja, the great devotee of Lord Narayana, and he wishes to speak with you. Please come with me for a few moments."

On hearing the name of the famous acarya, the young man took his leave of the lady and went with Dasarathi across the street to where the devotees were standing. Having bowed down at Yatiraja's feet, he stood in silence before him, wondering why it was that this famous sadhu should want to talk with him. At last Ramanuja said, "What nectar have you found in that young lady that - giving up all hatred, shame, and fear - you think nothing of making yourself a laughingstock throughout the whole city of Sri Rangam by acting in such a way?"

"O Mahatma," the young man replied, "I have seen many beautiful sights on this earth, but nothing which came even close to matching the entrancing beauty of the bright eyes of that young lady. When I see them, I become so captivated that I cannot look away."

"Is she your wife?" Yatiraja inquired.

"No, she is not married to me," the man replied, "but I am certain that, even though she is not my wife, I will never love any other woman."

"What is your name," asked Yatiraja.

"I am known as Dhanurdasa," came the response, "and I come from the town of Nichulanagara, where I am famous for my ability in wrestling. The lady's name is Hemamba."

"Dhanurdasa," said Yatiraja, "if I can show you a pair of eyes even more beautiful than those of your beloved, will you give up this lady and love the other?"

The wrestler replied, "O great soul, if it were possible to discover a pair of eyes filled with a more haunting beauty than those of my Hemamba, then surely I would leave her and worship instead that lady who possessed them."

"Then come to me this evening at my asrama," concluded Yatiraja, "and perhaps we can resolve this matter."

"At your command," was Dhanurdasa's respectful response. He then returned to where the lady was waiting for him and continued walking with her, still holding the umbrella over her head.

DELIVERANCE OF DHANURDASA

That evening Ramanuja left the asrama accompanied only by Dhanurdasa and walked with him the short distance to the outer gate of Lord Ranganatha's temple. Having passed through all of the outer gates, the two of them stood at last before the Deity of the Lord. At that time the arati had just begun, and the priest was offering a fragrant camphor lamp to the Lord and His consort Laksmidevi. Although the inner room of the temple was dark, being

enclosed by walls on all sides, as the lamp was presented before Sri Ranganatha, its flaming effulgence lit up his transcendental features and shimmered on His beautiful, golden, lotus-like eyes.

When he saw this revelation of the divine form of the Lord, Dhanurdasa stood as though transfixed, looking without blinking at the eyes of Sri Visnu, who is known as Aravindaksa. All at once tears of love began to roll down his cheeks as he experienced a taste of the real enjoyment that is found only in the spiritual world. In an instant all his attraction to the pale pleasures of this mundane existence began to fade, like the stars at sunrise.

After some time Dhanurdasa regained his composure and turned towards Ramanuja, falling at his feet saying, "By your causeless mercy, you have given to this most lusty of men pleasures that are sought after even by the demigods in heaven. I am your servant forever. Like an owl of the night, I had turned away from the sun and had become infatuated with a glowworm. Now you have opened my eyes, and thus you alone are my master"

Ramanujacarya then raised Dhanurdasa from the ground and firmly embraced him. From that moment, the young wrestler from Nichulanagara gave up his entanglement in material affairs and became a pure-hearted devotee of Lord Narayana. Hemamba, although a courtesan by profession, had long regarded Dhanurdasa as her husband. Despite her sinful engagement, she was at heart a devotee of the Lord. Therefore, upon hearing of the great transformation that Dhanurdasa had undergone, she was filled with happiness and came also to surrender her life at the feet of the merciful acarya.

Yatiraja arranged for them to be properly married as man and wife, and by his pure instructions he removed the contamination of lust from their hearts. They left Nichulanagara and moved to Rangaksetra, where they rented a house close by Ramanuja's asrama. In this way they were able to associate with their spiritual master and hear the nectarean Vaisnava teachings from his lips.

THE ENVY OF THE BRAHMANA DISCIPLES

Because of his devotion to his guru, his humility, honesty, and gentle speech, all people came to respect Dhanurdasa. In order to show that it is a person's behavior that should be considered and not his birth, Ramanuja would hold Dhanurdasa's arm while returning from the Kaveri, although he would hold the arm of Dasarathi, a brahmana by birth, while walking to the river. When Yatiraja's young brahmana disciples observed their gurus intimate dealings with a person of lower birth, some of them were disturbed and even dared to say that his behavior was not befitting.

Understanding the misconceptions in the hearts of his disciples, Ramanuja decided to teach them a lesson that would bring them to a proper understanding of the character of a Vaisnava. One night while all the others were sleeping, Ramanuja arose and tore a strip off all the dhotis that were hanging up to dry. The next morning when the brahmanas discovered what had happened, a great quarrel arose amongst them with accusations and harsh words flying back and forth. Eventually, Yatiraja himself had to intervene to calm the situation down.

THE BRAHMANAS LEARN A LESSON

That evening Ramanuja called several of his disciples to him and said, "I am sure all of you have observed how my disciple Dhanurdasa is leading the life of an attached householder, while posing as a great devotee. This evening, as usual, he will come to talk with me. While I detain him here, discussing the scriptures, you should go to his house and steal the ornaments with which he is so fond of decorating his wife. Then we will see the extent of his attachments fully manifested"

The disciples happily agreed to this proposal and set off to do their gurus bidding as soon as Dhanurdasa arrived at the asrama. When they reached his house, they saw Hemamba sleeping within. As the door was not locked, they were able to gain entrance without difficulty. Then very quietly and as gently as possible, they began to remove the golden ornaments from the wife of Dhanurdasa. In fact Hemamba was not sleeping and was fully aware of everything that was happening, but she pretended to be in deep slumber, so as not to cause any disturbance to the brahmanas.

When all the ornaments had been removed from one side of her body, Hemamba pretended to turn in her sleep so that the brahmanas could take those from the other side as well. However, at that moment the brahmanas became alarmed, fearing that she was about to wake up. They left the house immediately and returned to the asrama. There they reported everything that had happened to Ramanuja, who then called for Dhanurdasa and told him that he should return home now as it was growing late.

When the wrestler had departed, Ramanuja instructed his disciples, "Go now and follow Dhanurdasa back to his house so that you may observe his reaction to the great loss he and his wife have suffered."

The young men followed their gurus order, and when Dhanurdasa entered his house, they were all watching and listening from a secluded place nearby. On entering the house Dhanurdasa at once noticed his wife's unusual appearance and inquired, "How is it that you are wearing jewels only on one side? Where are the others?"

"Some brahmanas came here while you were gone," Hemamba replied. "Due, no doubt, to their extreme poverty, they have been forced to take up the ways of thieves. At that time I was lying awake, repeating the names of the Lord in my mind, but they must have thought that I was sleeping, for they entered the room and took all the ornaments from one side. When they had done this, I turned over so that they could take the rest of my jewels, but unfortunately they were frightened by my movement and fled from the house."

"This was your mistake," exclaimed Dhanurdasa. "You are still not completely free from illusion, for you were thinking, 'These are my ornaments. I will give them away.' When will you give up this idea and realize that everything is the property of Lord Narayana. If you had remained still then you would have been able to give everything to the brahmanas,"

Hemamba recognized her fault and begged her husband, "Please bless me, so that one day I may become free from this illusion."

Having witnessed everything, the young brahmanas returned to the asrama and told Ramanuja all about the behavior of that devoted couple. As it was by that time late at night, he told them to go and rest, but the next day he discussed the matter fully when they assembled before him to study the scriptures. "You are all learned scholars," he said, "and very proud of your position -as brahmanas. So tell me, whose behavior was more befitting a brahmana - yours, yesterday morning when you found your cloth a little shorter, or that of Dhanurdasa and his wife when the jewels were stolen?"

The disciples could do nothing but hang their heads in shame and say, "Master, it was Dhanurdasa whose behavior was worthy of a brahmana; ours was abominable."

"Therefore," Yatiraja continued, "you must understand that birth and caste are unimportant. It is a man's qualities and actions that show who is fallen, regardless of social position. Now, giving up all pride in your birth as brahmanas, endeavor to serve Lord Narayana with a pure heart. That alone is the way of perfection."

CRITICISM OF MAHAPURNA

A short time after the incident involving Dhanurdasa and the brahmana disciples, word came to Ramanuja that his own guru, Mahapurna, had performed the cremation ceremony for a sudra and that as a result of this many people were criticizing him for transgressing the rules which govern a brahmanas conduct. On hearing this news, Ramanuja went at once to Mahapurna's house to hear from him the truth behind these allegations. When he arrived at his gurus house, he learned that all of Mahapurna's relatives had abandoned him,

considering him fallen, and that he was served now only by his daughter, Attulai, who had come from her father-in-law's house.

When Yatiraja inquired from him about his actions, Mahapurna replied, "Yes, it is true that my behavior was improper according to the Dharma Sastras. But what is real dharma? *The Mahabharata* states, *mahajano yena gatah sa panthah* - true dharma is to follow the example set for us by great personalities. Now consider the example of Sri Ramacandra, for he performed the funeral ceremony of Jatayu, who was just a bird. Then again we have King Yudhisthira, who worshipped Vidura, who was considered a sudra by birth. Why would they act in such a way? The answer is that a devotee of the Lord, being liberated while still in this world, is transcendental to all consideration of family or caste. For Sri Rama or King Yudhisthira no irreligious act is possible. That devotee, whose body I cremated was a pure-hearted servant of the Lord and I consider myself fortunate to have been able to render that service to him." Very pleased at Mahapurna's words, Yatiraja bowed down at his feet and begged forgiveness for his impudence in questioning his gurus activities.

MAHAPURNA AND RAMANUJA

Once Mahapurna came before Yatiraja and bowed at his feet. Seeing Ramanuja still sitting without embarrassment at his guru's behavior, some of the other devotees questioned him in surprise, "Yatiraja, how could you allow your guru to bow down before you without making any protest?"

"My spiritual master acted in that way," replied Ramanuja, "to show how a true disciple should behave before his guru. If Mahapurna has a purpose to fulfill through these activities, it is not my position to interfere with his desires."

Later the devotees inquired from Mahapurna about his offering obeisances to a disciple and he explained to them, "In Yatiraja I see constantly the embodiment of my own guru, Sri Yamunacarya, and therefore it is impossible for me not to bow down before him" On hearing this all of them realized even more profoundly the greatness of Ramanujacarya.

GOSTHIPURNA'S INSTRUCTION

On another occasion Ramanuja observed Sri Gosthipurna meditating for many hours in a room with closed doors. At the end of the day he inquired, "O master, on which form of the Lord have you been fixing your mind and what is the mantra by which you worship Him?"

"I worship only the lotus feet of Sri Yamunacarya, my *guru-maharaja*," replied Gosthipurna, "and his holy name is

the only mantra I chant, for it brings relief from all suffering" From this statement Ramanuja could understand the importance of worshipping the devotees of the Lord.

CHAPTER SEVEN

EXILE FROM SRI RANGAM

At that time Sri Rangam was a part of the dominions of the Chola king, Koluttunga I, who had made his capital at Kancipuram. Although the Cholas had become devoted to Lord Narayana in the time of Yamunacarya, Koluttunga was a great devotee of Lord Siva and an avowed enemy of all Vaisnavas. It was his desire that all the devotees of the Lord give up their faith and surrender to Lord Siva alone. Lord Siva is the most powerful of the demigods, but still he is not on the level of the Supreme Personality of Godhead. Thus all the Vaisnavas refused to abandon their worship of Lord Visnu, which satisfies the conclusion of all Vedic literature.

Koluttunga was well aware that Yatiraja was the greatest Vaisnava acarya in India, and he reasoned that if he could induce him to worship Siva, then the other devotees would also abandon their faith. Even if Ramanuja would not agree to give up his worship of Lord Narayana, the king felt that he would still be able to establish the supremacy of the worshippers of Lord Siva by putting him to death. Accordingly, he sent messengers to Sri Rangam to invite Ramanuja, along with his guru, Mahapurna, to come to Kancipuram for an audience with the king. Little suspecting Koluttunga's evil intentions, Yatiraja agreed to go with them, and entered the asrama to make his preparations for the journey.

Kuresa, however, was considering the matter deeply, and after a while he said to Ramanuja, "I feel certain the king wants you to come to Kancipuram simply to put an end to your life. Please do not go there. While you are living and preaching the true religion of devotion to the Lord, the entire earth is benefiting. For fallen souls like myself, who are scorched by the miseries of material existence, you are the only refuge. Let me go in your place. You take these white clothes of the grhastha asrama, while I put on the dress of a sannyasi and go with the king's men. In this way you may still be able to escape from their clutches."

Yatiraja considered Kuresa's words for a few moments and then agreed to the proposal. Dressing himself in his disciple's clothes, he left the asrama unseen and made his way quickly to the forest to the west of the city. Govinda

and the other devotees also left the city one by one and joined Ramanuja in the forest.

KURESA AT THE COURT OF KING KOLUTTUNGA

In the meantime, Kuresa, adopting the dress and danda of a sannyasi, presented himself along with Mahapurna before the king's men, who then escorted the two Vaisnavas to Kancipuram, completely taken in by the trick. Mahapurna was also fully aware of the danger they faced, but he was now so old that he could not leave Sri Rangam with the other devotees and was perfectly happy to leave this world if that was the will of the Lord.

When they arrived at the palace, Kuresa and Mahapurna went before the king, who welcomed them with respect and saw to it that they were properly accommodated. Koluttunga had good reason to respect Ramanuja, for the acarya had delivered his sister from an evil ghost when the king was just a boy of eight years. However, this memory did nothing to alter his intention of either forcing Yatiraja to renounce the Lord or else taking away his life.

After a few days, the king assembled all of his Saivite panditas and called for the two devotees, still believing Kuresa to be Yatiraja. When Kuresa and Mahapurna entered the assembly, Koluttunga addressed them in a respectful way, "O holy men, please be seated. We have invited you to our city just to hear auspicious talks on spiritual topics. All the scholars of my court are assembled here, eager to converse with you, for your reputation has spread far and wide. Now please tell us, what is the duty for men like us?"

"O King and panditas," replied Kuresa unflinchingly, "Lord Visnu, the savior of all the worlds, is the Supreme Lord of all others. Therefore the duty of every man, whatever his position in life, is simply to worship Him with love and devotion. There is nothing more than this."

On hearing these defiant words, King Koluttunga flew into a rage and spoke angrily to Kuresa, "I had heard that you were a great scholar and holy man. But now I see that you are an imposter, for you worship Visnu instead of Siva, who is the Lord and destroyer of all the worlds. Now you must give up this foolishness. Hear from these great scholars the real conclusion of all the scriptures and then become a devotee of Lord Siva. If you are obstinate and ignore their pure teachings, then surely neither of you will live to see another dawn."

Immediately the court panditas began to present their false conclusions, using fallacious arguments to try to prove that Siva was the Supreme Lord. However, by dint of their vast knowledge of the scriptures, Kuresa and Mahapurna were easily able to refute all their arguments. Eventually

the king became completely exasperated and cried out, "Enough of this wrangling! If you want to save your lives, then acknowledge that there is none greater than Siva"

To this Kuresa mockingly replied, "Why even Drona is greater than Siva" This was a play on words, for Siva and Drona were also the names of units of weight - and, of the two, the drona was the heavier.

In speaking these words Kuresa knew perfectly well that he was bringing his death inevitably closer, but he considered it his great fortune to be able to sacrifice his life in order to save that of his guru. The devotee of the Lord is known as abhaya, fearless, because he fully takes shelter of Lord Hari.

Thus Kuresa was not in the least disturbed by Koluttunga's dreadful threats, but within his mind he began to pray, "O Lord Hari, seeing the mercy that you are now bestowing on me by allowing me to serve Yatiraja in this way, I can partially realize the meaning of Sri Yamunacarya's statement: *namo namo 'nanta-dayaika-sindhava* - I offer obeisances unto You, the unlimited ocean of mercy. Even this mighty king and his proud scholars know nothing of Your unlimited glories, but You have revealed them to such an insignificant person as myself just to increase my humility and surrender. What greater good fortune could I ever hope to achieve!"

KING KOLUTTUNGA'S CRUELTY

Seeing that Kuresa's reply was intended to ridicule them, Koluttunga and all his panditas were filled with rage. The king ordered that the two Vaisnavas be arrested and bound. When this had been done, he told his courtiers, "Take these two blasphemers from our presence and put out their eyes. They deserve to die for the words they have spoken in our presence, but because Ramanuja once saved my sister from a ghost, I will spare their lives."

Following this cruel order, the king's men took Kuresa and Mahapurna to a secluded place, and, after subjecting them to various tortures, they plucked out their eyes. Despite the intense pain he was forced to undergo, Kuresa was undisturbed at heart, and he prayed to Lord Narayana for the forgiveness of his tormentors. He rejoiced that he was able to accept these great sufferings on behalf of his spiritual master. When the king's men had finished with Kuresa, he stood before them with folded hands and said, "May Lord Narayana bless you for allowing me to serve my guru in this way."

On hearing these words and seeing the calm demeanor Kuresa was exhibiting, even those cruel-hearted men were filled with awe. They called to a beggar who was sitting nearby, and, giving him money for expenses, ordered him to lead the two devotees safely to Sri Rangam.

However, the atrocities that Kulottunga's men had committed were too much for the frail body of Mahapurna to bear. Lying down on the road, he rested his head on the lap of Kuresa and said to him, "You must go alone to Sri Rangam, for I can tell that the time has now come for me to leave this world. There is nothing to lament over in this, for my mind is fixed on Sri Yamunacarya and I am longing to be reunited with that great soul. When you meet again with my beloved disciple, Ramanuja, offer millions of obeisances at his feet on my behalf." Having said this, Mahapurna gave up his life, meditating on the feet of his guru.

Not long after he began these cruel persecutions, King Koluttunga became afflicted with an incurable disease and died a short time later. For one who causes distress to the Lord's devotees everything is inauspicious. The son of Koluttunga, who was named Vikrama, then began to rule over the kingdom of the Cholas. Although his father had been such an ardent Saivite, Vikrama Chola later on became an initiated disciple of Ramanuja and learned from him the path of devotion to Lord Visnu.

YATIRAJA IN THE FOREST

Whilst his disciple was suffering at the hands of Koluttunga, Yatiraja had been able to escape from Sri Rangam undetected. In the forest to the west of the city he met up with Govinda, Dasarathi, Dhanurdasa, and his other followers. Fearing pursuit by the king's officers, they proceeded quickly through the forest in a westerly direction, walking constantly for two days and two nights without food of any kind. Eventually they lay down exhausted at the foot of a hill, their feet blistered and their bodies cut by the forest thorns. In a short time the whole party was asleep.

Near to where Ramanuja and his disciples lay was a village inhabited by candalas, men of very lowly birth. When some of the villagers saw a group of brahmanas sleeping near to their homes, they were very anxious to render whatever service they could to these holy men. Therefore, without disturbing the sleepers, they collected large quantities of different types of fruits from the forest and stacked them all around where the brahmanas lay. Then they lit a fire nearby and stood waiting for the brahmanas to awaken so that they could learn what had brought them to that remote region.

Eventually, Yatiraja and the others awoke refreshed from their sleep. When they saw the fruits, the fire, and the forest dwellers standing there ready to serve them, they could understand that Lord Narayana was protecting them from the dangers of the forest. They quickly bathed in a nearby river and then, after offering the fruits to Lord Hari, they satisfied their hunger by feasting on the prasadam. From

the words of the villagers Yatiraja came to understand that they had crossed the border of the Chola kingdom and were now safe from the pursuit of Koluttunga's men.

MEETINGS WITH VAISNAVAS

When they were fully rested, Ramanuja blessed the candalas and continued with his party on their westward journey. That afternoon they came to another village and were guided to the house of a brahmana named Sri Ranga dasa. When they arrived the husband was still out begging alms, but his pious wife, Celancalamba, considered herself fortunate to get this opportunity to render service to Vaisnavas. She invited them into the house, seated them nicely and then immediately entered the kitchen to begin cooking. A short time later Sri Ranga dasa returned home and was also delighted to see so many Vaisnava guests in his house, including the famous Ramanujacarya.

When the cooking was completed, the food was offered to Lord Visnu, and then the prasadam was distributed to the devotees, who all ate very heartily. For two days they remained in the house of Sri Ranga dasa, and just before leaving, Yatiraja gave initiation to both husband and wife.

When the Vaisnavas continued their journey, Sri Ranga dasa went with them as a guide. By evening they had reached a place known as Vahnipuskarini, where they remained for two days. Then, taking leave of Sri Ranga dasa, they continued on to the village of Salagrama, where they stayed with a brahmana named Andhrapurna, who was a very renounced devotee. Having seen his good qualities, Ramanuja initiated Andhrapurna, who then became his personal servant. From that time on he always remained with his guru, desiring only to serve his lotus feet.

Andhrapurna told Yatiraja of a great devotee named Purna who lived in the village of Bhaktagrama, not far from Salagrama. Passing through Nrsimha-ksetra, they then travelled to Bhaktagrama and remained for some time in the association of Sri Purna.

CONVERSION OF KING VITTHALADEVA

The king of that region was known as Vitthaladeva, and he was a follower of the Jain religion. For several years his daughter had been possessed by a ghost, despite all the efforts of the Jain priests to cast out the evil spirit. When the king heard that a group of Vaisnavas had come from the east and were residing in Bhaktagrama at the house of Purna, he invited them to his palace - hoping that they might be able to do something to help the princess.

Ramanujacarya, as a pure devotee, was always filled with divine potency and thus able to drive out the ghost

just by looking at the girl's face. King Vitthaladeva was delighted and amazed to see how easily this devotee of Lord Visnu had cured his daughter, and at once he became greatly devoted to Yatiraja. Desiring to understand the teachings of the Vaisnavas, he bowed down at the feet of the acarya and begged him to reveal the true conclusion of the Vedas.

As Ramanuja spoke about the glories of devotional service and pure love of God, the heart of the king was moved. He began to regret his adherence to the Jain philosophy, which is completely devoid of the spirit of love of God. He called for all the Jain priests and panditas to come into the assembly so that they might hear from this great devotee and philosopher. When Yatiraja began addressing the Jains, clearly explaining the position of the Personality of Godhead as the Absolute Truth, some of the audience began to jeer and make a disturbance, until they were ejected from the assembly on the order of the king.

When Ramanuja had finished speaking, the leader of the Jains arose to attempt to refute the statements that had been presented there. However, being unable to find any way to contradict the flawless logic of the Vaisnava philosophy, the Jain immediately launched into a blasphemous attack on the followers of *sanatana-dharma*, ignoring all the points that Ramanuja had put to him.

King Vitthaladeva, a man of keen intelligence, was in no way taken in by the Jain's diversionary ploy and he spoke out, "There is nothing so simple as speaking ill of others. You are a great scholar. Refute if you can, with precise arguments, the doctrine expounded by your opponent. Otherwise you must give up your false teachings and be initiated into Vaisnavism"

The Jain could find no words to counteract Ramanuja's presentation and was forced to shamefacedly resume his seat in the assembly. Several other Jain philosophers then attempted to establish their own opinions, but all to no avail.

Then the king stood up and addressed the assembly once more. "Today you have all seen the most learned of our Jain scholars utterly defeated by this Vaisnava acarya. What then is our present duty? To stubbornly adhere to doctrines which have been proven to be faulty or to accept and embrace the sublime teachings of loving devotion that we have heard so wonderfully presented? Any sane man will admit that bliss is preferable to affliction and knowledge to ignorance. Therefore let all of us this day be initiated into the true faith by this great devotee and thus become blessed."

All but a few of the Jains accepted this proposal and were initiated as Vaisnavas. The king also accepted Yatiraja as his spiritual master and was given the name Visnuvardhana. From that time on this was the name by which he was always known.

DISCOVERY OF SRI YADAVADRI-PATI

After the conversion of Visnu-varadhana and his priests to Vaisnavism, Yatiraja remained in that city for several months in order to properly instruct his new disciples. Then, accompanied only by the followers who had come with him from Sri Rangam, he travelled on to the town of Yadavadri.

One morning, a few days after their arrival, Ramanuja was walking through a tulasi grove when he saw something unusual sticking out a tittle way from underneath an anthill. Calling for his followers, he had them dig in that place, and it quickly became apparent that what Yatiraja had discovered was a beautiful Deity of Lord Narayana. The Deity was cleansed and then installed upon an altar.

The older inhabitants of the town recalled their fathers speaking of a Deity known as Yadavadri-pati, who had previously been worshipped there. "When a party of fierce Muslims attacked this country," they continued, "all the inhabitants of the town fled in terror. The brahmanas hid the Deity somewhere to prevent the invaders from seizing Him. Since that time nobody has seen Lord Yadavadri-pati. Because of the greatness of your devotion, it seems the Lord has decided to make Himself visible once more"

Ramanuja then confirmed the words of the elders by saying, "This is certainly Lord Yadavadri-pati, for last night He appeared to me in a dream and requested that His service be reestablished in this place. Now all of you must work together to construct a beautiful temple for the worship of the Lord.

Following the order of the acarya, Yatiraja's disciples and all of the townspeople set to work. That same day they constructed a spacious straw cottage in which Lord Yadavadri-pati might be worshipped.

In less than one year, by dedicated performance of devotional service, a beautifully decorated stone temple was built in the town of Yadavadri, and with great pomp, the Lord was moved to His new residence. A nice lake was dug outside the entrance to the temple, and the water was used for the daily bathing of the Lord. Around the shores of the lake the white clay used by Vaisnavas for marking their bodies with tilaka was discovered. Previously they had to bring all of their tilaka clay from the village of Bhaktagrama, and so this discovery saved them considerable inconvenience.

RECOVERY OF SRI RAMA-PRIYA

It is the custom in south India for two Deities to be worshipped in each temple. One Deity is worshipped daily by the temple priests, while the other, generally smaller in size, is carried out of the temple for processions on

festival days. This form of the Lord is known as the *Utsava-vigraha* or the *Vijaya-vigraha*.

One night, a short time after the completion of the new temple, Sri Yadavadri-pati appeared to Ramanuja in a dream, saying, "Ramanuja, I am very pleased with your service, but as My *Vijaya-vigraha* is not present here I am unable to leave the temple to bestow my blessings upon all of My devotees. Therefore, please endeavor to install this Deity, known as Rama-priya, who is at present kept by the Emperor of Delhi, having been carried to the north by the Muslim raiders."

Accepting the order of the Lord as his life and soul, Yatiraja departed for Delhi the very next day, accompanied only by a few of his disciples. After travelling northwards for two months, they finally arrived in that famous city.

As Ramanuja's reputation had by this time spread all over India, he was admitted into the presence of the Emperor, who was very pleased by his purity and scholarship and asked him the purpose of his arduous journey. When Ramanuja informed him of his desire to return Sri Rama-priya to south India, the Emperor agreed to his request. The Vaisnavas were then conducted into a large halt where many different Deities were kept, all of them having been seized by the Muslims on their various raids across India. However, even after a thorough search, Ramanuja saw that Rama-priya was not to be found in that place and returned to the Emperor disappointed.

The Emperor then told them that there was one more Deity in his possession, the most beautiful of all. This form of the Lord was so attractive that the Emperor's daughter was keeping Him in her own apartment. When Yatiraja was shown the Deity he recognized Him at once as Sri Rama-priya and fell down to offer his prostrate obeisances. With the permission of the Emperor, the devotees took possession of the Lord and set off at once for south India. They walked day and night, for Ramanuja was well aware that, if the princess wanted the Deity restored to her, the affectionate father might easily change his mind.

THE PRINCESS'S DISTRESS

In fact, when the princess, whose name was Bibi Lachimar, came to learn that some brahmanas had taken the Deity away, she was overwhelmed with grief, and all her father's efforts to console her were in vain. She refused to eat and grew weaker day by day, until it seemed she would certainly die if something were not done at once to remedy the situation. In great anxiety, the Emperor prepared to dispatch a company of soldiers to pursue the brahmanas and take the Deity from them - by force if necessary. When Bibi Lachimar heard of this, she begged that she be allowed to

accompany them, and the doting father readily acceded to her request.

Therefore, in command of the troop of soldiers and surrounded by many servants, the princess mounted a decorated palanquin the next day and departed from the city of Delhi to find the form of the Supreme Lord who had so captivated her. A young man named Kuvera very much desired to marry Bibi Lachimar, and, in hopes of winning the princess's favor, he also went along with the party.

In the meantime Ramanuja and his followers had been travelling as swiftly as they were able, and by this time they were far ahead of their pursuers. On this journey they were greatly assisted by the candalas, who carried the Deity and showed them the easiest routes to the south. Aided in this way, the Vaisnavas arrived at Yadavadri still a long way ahead of the pursuing Muslims.

Thinking that there still might be danger, Yatiraja had Sri Rama-priya installed in a concealed room in the temple, where He was worshipped in secret with only a few devotees aware of His presence.

Meanwhile the princess continued southwards with her retinue, determined to recover the Deity who was the Lord of her heart. However, when they reached the borders of her father's domain, she became filled with despair, believing that she would never again set eyes on her worshipful Lord. Overwhelmed by lamentation, she shed many bitter tears, and none of Kuvera's words of consolation could alleviate her suffering.

BIBI LACHIMAR FINDS HER LORD

One night, unknown to anyone, Princess Bibi Lachimar slipped away from her attendants into the darkness of the forest. Only Kuvera noticed her absence, and he also left the party and went with her as she continued on farther towards the south. Thinking only of her beloved Lord, the princess journeyed on, while Kuvera acted as a servant, bringing fruits from the forest to keep her alive.

After travelling for several weeks, the couple arrived at the town of Yadavadri. As if by divine inspiration, Bibi Lachimar was certain that their long quest would end at this place. Being guided by the townspeople, she came to "the temple of Sri Yadavadri-pati. There she fell at the feet of the Vaisnavas and begged them to allow her to see her beloved Rama-priya once more. When Yatiraja came there, he saw at once that the girl's heart was filled with pure devotion. Thus, although she was a Muslim by birth, he ordered that she be admitted to the temple to behold the beautiful form of Sri Rama-priya.

From that time on Bibi Lachimar remained at Yadavadri, engaging in the service of the Lord and constantly singing His glories. After a short time she gave

up her body. Being immersed in continual thoughts of Sri Rama-priya, she returned to His eternal abode.

THE DEVOTION OF KUVERA

For all this time Kuvera also remained at Yadavadri, rendering service to the princess like a menial servant. When she gave up her life, he was so overcome with sorrow that he could no longer stay there. Abandoning his Muslim ways, he went to Sri Rangam and took shelter of the lotus feet of Lord Ranganatha. Although he was not allowed to enter the temple, Kuvera remained outside singing the praises of Lord Narayana. He lived on whatever alms the visitors to the temple would give him, seeing everything as the mercy of the Lord.

Once, while absorbed in meditation on the Lord, he heard a voice speaking to him, saying, "Because you are unable to enter the temple, I cannot bestow My full mercy upon you. Therefore you should go to Nilacala, for Lord Jagannatha is the deliverer of all beings."

Having received this order, Kuvera journeyed to Jagannatha Puri. There he was able to see the transcendental form of Sri Jagannatha as He rode to Gundica in the Rathayatra parade. Constantly glorifying the Supreme Lord, Kuvera passed the remainder of his days at Jagannatha Puri. By his unalloyed devotional service he became completely pure at heart and liberated from all material attachments.

Although Bibi Lachimar and Kuvera were born in Muslim families, they attained the highest perfection of life by the purity of their loving devotion. Devotion to God is always completely spiritual, transcending all barriers of race, caste, and creed. To this day the Deity of Bibi Lachimar, the pure devotee of Rama-priya, is worshipped in several Vaisnava temples in south India.

KURESA'S MERCY

After residing for some time at Sri Rangam, Kuresa, who had been blinded by Koluttunga's men, went with his wife and children to Krsnacala. There he worshipped the Deity known as Sri Sundara-bhuja and composed many beautiful prayers in glorification of Lord Visnu and Laksmidevi.

When he learned that Yatiraja was now staying at Yadavadri, he went there, desiring to take shelter at the lotus feet of his beloved guru once more. Coming before Ramanuja, Kuresa fell at his feet to offer obeisances. Raising him from the ground and embracing him warmly, Yatiraja said, "Today I have been purified by the touch of this great soul. This is an auspicious day for me." Kuresa shed tears of joy and was so overcome by emotion that he could say nothing in reply.

A few days later, while Ramanuja was talking with Kuresa, he instructed him to go back to Kancipuram. "Go and take shelter of Lord Varadaraja" he told him, "for He will surely remove your blindness. King Koluttunga is now dead, and so there is nothing to fear"

Assisted by his wife and two sons, Kuresa went straight to Kancipuram where he engaged in the worship of Sri Varadaraja. All day he would remain in the temple, constantly reciting bhajans in praise of the Supreme Lord. Eventually the Lord spoke to him, saying, "Kuresa, what is your desire? Whatever you want I shall give to you."

Kuresa then replied, "O Lord, my only prayer is that You bestow Your mercy on Caturgrama and deliver him from material existence"

This prayer wonderfully reveals the true nature of a pure devotee, for it was this Caturgrama who had caused all of Kuresa's suffering. Originally one of Kuresa's disciples, he had turned away from his spiritual master and become a minister in the court of King Koluttunga. When the king was endeavoring to get signatures from various Vaisnavas admitting the supremacy of Lord Siva, it was Caturgrama who advised him that the submission of Yatiraja alone would be enough to bring about the conversion of the kingdom. Thus, although this sinful man had been the cause of so many difficulties for the devotees, still Kuresa prayed that Lord Varadaraja would have mercy upon him.

The Lord accepted this request and Kuresa continued singing His glories. Again the Lord spoke to His devotee, offering him a benediction. This time Kuresa said to the Lord, "May King Koluttunga be the object of Your greatest mercy." When Lord Varadaraja agreed to this, Kuresa was filled with ecstasy and without regard for his own well-being, he left the temple and returned to his asrama.

KURESA AND LORD VARADARAJA

When Ramanujacarya, who was still residing in Yadavadri, came to hear about these wonderful benedictions that Kuresa had begged from Lord Varadaraja, he sent a message to his disciple in Kancipuram. In this he said, "My dear Kuresa, I am very glad to hear of the ecstasy you are feeling from delivering those who have wronged you. However, in this you have shown great selfishness by keeping the happiness to yourself. Now you must make me happy as well by begging the Lord for the return of your sight. Do you not know that your body and mind are my property? Thus it is your duty to maintain them on my behalf."

When Kuresa received this message, he felt jubilant at heart, thinking that now Ramanuja had accepted him as a fully surrendered servant. Immediately he hastened to the temple and stood before Lord Varadaraja with folded hands. After singing the praises of the Lord for some time, Kuresa

heard Lord Varadaraja speak to him once more, saying, "My dear devotee, what is your desire? Tell Me and I shall fulfill your prayer."

"O most merciful Lord," Kuresa answered, "some time ago I lost two valuable possessions belonging to my master. By your grace I would like to recover them this day"

"Certainly two new eyes will now adorn your body," the Lord said, "and may they bring unlimited pleasure to your master. Just as My devotees desire only to serve Me, so I take great pleasure in supplying everything to My devotees. In this way our exchanges of love become sweeter and sweeter."

On hearing these words, Kuresa was overwhelmed by ecstasy and fell to the ground unconscious. On awakening he realized that his vision was restored and that he was able to see as before. Bowing down before the Deity, he prayed, "O Lord, it was You who gave me sight in the beginning of my life, it was You who took it away and now it is You alone who have restored it to me. Who can understand Your inconceivable pastimes? Your nature is pure transcendental bliss, and anybody who comes in contact with You will experience this bliss. I used to think of this world as a place of misery, but, now that You have revealed Yourself, I see only happiness in all directions. How great is my good fortune. How great is Your mercy."

When people came to learn of this miraculous cure by which Kuresa had regained his sight, they were all astonished. Wherever the news spread, it led to an increase in the reverence that was shown for Lord Visnu and the Vaisnava devotees. All the people of south India thus came to have great faith in the teachings of Ramanujacarya and his followers.

CHAPTER EIGHT

FINAL DAYS IN SRI RANGAM

Not long after Kuresa regained his sight, Ramanuja decided to leave Yadavadri and return to his previous residence at Sri Rangam. On the way, he stopped for some time at Vrsabhacala, near Madurai, to worship Lord Sundarabahu in the temple there. In previous times the great female devotee, Andal, had composed a prayer which said, "O Lord Hari, if you will accept me, I will offer you a hundred pots of sweet rice and a hundred pots of butter."

Shortly after composing this prayer, Andal left this world and returned to the abode of the Lord. Now, Ramanuja fulfilled her prayer by offering Lord Sundarabahu the

hundred pots of sweet rice and the hundred pots of butter she had promised Him. For this act Yatiraja became known as the elder brother of Andal.

From Vrsabhacala Ramanuja and his disciples went on to Sri Villiputur, the birthplace of Andal.

There he saw the Deity of Sesasayi Narayana and offered prayers to Andal in the temple dedicated to her. Continuing on their journey, the Vaisnavas passed through Alvar Tirunagiri, Sri Vaikuntha, and other holy places, before finally arriving back at Sri Rangam. Immediately, all the devotees ran to see Lord Ranganatha, their Lord and master. When the people of the town heard that Yatiraja and his followers had returned, they felt as if they had regained their lives. At that time Kuresa was also reunited with his spiritual master, falling at Yatiraja's feet with tears of ecstasy in his eyes.

DISAPPEARANCE OF KURESA

For the next two years all the Vaisnavas passed their days in Sri Rangam just as they had done previously, singing bhajans in praise of Lord Hari and hearing Ramanuja's wonderful discourses on the revealed scriptures. By this time Kuresa was a very old man and was unable to rise from his bed. Therefore Yatiraja and the other devotees would come to him every day to chant the holy name and discuss the pastimes of the Lord. One day, while all the Vaisnavas were holding joyful kirtana, Kuresa began to shed tears of ecstasy. Taking hold of his gurus lotus feet, he pressed them to his heart. In this position he gave up his life.

On witnessing the departure of this exalted Vaisnava from their midst, all the devotees were grief-stricken, and Ramanuja himself was seen to shed tears. After a short while the acarya controlled his intense feelings of separation and spoke to the others, comforting them and reminding them that Kuresa was now undoubtedly in the direct association of the Lord. Then he said, "Parasara, Kuresa's son, is just like the son of Lord Ranganatha Himself. From today you should accept him as your leader. His devotion is like that of his father, and his wisdom is incomparable. Therefore, he is fully qualified to take the position of *acarya*."

Then he seated Parasara on the *vyasasana* and put a flower garland around his neck. He embraced the son of Kuresa and bestowed all his blessings on him, empowering him to spread the glories of the Supreme Lord.

Kuresa's body was burned on the banks of the Kaveri, and the devotees passed the rest of the day performing the congregational chanting of the holy names of Lord Hari. In this way all grief was removed from the hearts of the devotees. Every day for the next month a great festival was held in Sri Rangam to celebrate Kuresa's return to the abode of the Lord, and Vaisnavas from all over south India came to

take part in the festivities. Many poor people and those who were lame or blind also came there, and all of them were fed sumptuously with prasada from Lord Ranganatha.

ANDHRAPURNA'S DEVOTION TO HIS GURU

Ramanujacarya was now one hundred years old, and, though he lived for twenty years more, he never again left Sri Rangam. For the remainder of his life Andhrapurna was engaged constantly in his personal service, supplying everything that his guru required.

Once when Lord Ranganatha came out of the temple on procession, all the devotees left the asrama to join in the worship. The Lord was gorgeously decorated with jewels and flower garlands as he rode through the streets on a beautiful palanquin. Ramanuja, thus beholding the glory of Lord Narayana, felt himself blessed with divine mercy.

Only one of Yatiraja's disciples was absent from this festival - Andhrapurna, who had remained at the asrama boiling milk for his guru. When Ramanuja asked him why he had neglected this opportunity to worship the Lord, Andhrapurna replied, "If I had gone outside the asrama to worship Lord Ranganatha, then my worship inside would have suffered. How is it possible for me to neglect my devotional duties?"

ANANTACARYA IN SRI SAILA

Another of Yatiraja's disciples was Anantacarya. He had been sent by his guru to Sri Saila, Tirupati, where he lived with his wife, constantly worshipping the Lord. While living in Sri Saila, he saw that the local people underwent great hardships because of a scarcity of water in the area. Therefore he resolved to dig a lake and with only his wife to help him, began the work immediately. By undertaking great labors every day, the couple completed the task, and that lake, which bears the name Ananta-sarovara, is still to be seen in the tirtha of Sri Saila. It is said that once, when Anantacarya's wife was pregnant and too weary to help with the work, the Lord Himself assumed her form to assist His devotee's endeavor.

THE PIOUS BRAHMANA

Once a brahmana came to Ramanuja and said, "I wish to purify myself by serving you, for you are the best of devotees. By such service I shall be freed from the influence of material nature"

Yatiraja accepted the request, saying, "What you have said is correct, for one can be liberated only by service.

If you wish to serve me, then you must stay here and do whatever I ask of you."

The brahmana was very pleased by this reply and said eagerly, "O master, tell me what is your desire. I will do anything you ask of me"

Seeing the man's sincerity, Ramanuja then told him, "O brahmana, I have resolved to purify myself by taking daily the water which has washed the feet of a pure-hearted brahmana. Now, by the grace of the Lord, you have come here. My order is that you stay here, and every day give me the water that has washed your feet. Only if you do this will you be able to render real service to me."

Although a very humble person by nature, the brahmana could not refuse this direct order. From that time on, every day when Yatiraja returned from taking his noon bath in the Kaveri, he would take upon his head some of the water that had washed the brahmanas feet.

One day Ramanuja was invited to take *prasadam* at the home of one of his householder disciples and went there directly after bathing in the river. After they had eaten, all the devotees began to discuss the glories of Lord Narayana, putting various questions to Ramanujacarya and listening intently to the explanations he gave. So sweet were these discussions that the devotees became unaware of the passage of time. Thus, by the time Yatiraja rose to leave the house, it was very late at night.

When they arrived back at the asrama, they found that the only person still awake was the pious brahmana. "Why have you waited up so long for me?" asked Yatiraja. "Have you eaten yet?"

"How could I think of eating," replied the brahmana, smiling, "when I have not yet rendered my service to you"

At this Yatiraja smiled broadly and embraced the man, saying, "You are a wonderful devotee, the perfect servant of the Lord. By being absorbed only in thoughts of service, you have attained perfection" Then he drank the water that had washed the brahmanas feet and offered it to all his other disciples.

INSTALLING DEITIES

When they learned that Ramanujacarya was going to leave them and return to Sri Rangam, all the devotees in Yadavadri were very unhappy at the prospect of their imminent separation. When they presented their distress before him, Yatiraja gave permission for a stone murti of himself to be made.

When it was completed, he said to them, "When you are feeling sorrow because of separation from me, all of you come before this murti. By contemplating this form here, your unhappiness will be removed."

At about the same time the devotees of Bhuta-puri, Ramanuja's birthplace, also made an image of their guru and installed it in the temple according to the proper Vedic rituals. When he heard about this, Yatiraja shed tears and said, "The people of Bhutapuri have made me their captive by the love and devotion that they unceasingly offer to me."

PREACHING IN SRI RANGAM

However, the most fortunate of all were the devotees of Sri Rangam, for they were able to see Yatiraja constantly and listen every day to his discourses on the glories of Lord Narayana. From miles around people came to see the great acarya and on his order took up the path of devotional service.

For many more years Ramanuja continued to reside in the holy city of Sri Rangam - until he was one hundred and twenty years old. During his life he had established seventy-four centers for the Sri Vaisnavas and had many thousands of followers, including several kings and many wealthy landowners. Apart from the householders, he numbered amongst his followers 700 sannyasis, 12,000 brahmacaris, and 300 *ketti ammais*, (ladies who had taken vows of renunciation). Eventually, seeing that his mission on earth was now completed, he decided to give up his frail body and return to the abode of the Lord. Seeing their spiritual master becoming fixed in a mood of intense devotion, many of Yatiraja's disciples were overcome and began to lament loudly.

FINAL INSTRUCTIONS

On hearing their cries, Ramanujacarya came out of his trance and said to his disciples, "My dear children, why do you cry out in lamentation like uneducated men? Do you think this body can endure forever? Am I not fixed in your hearts for all time? Therefore, give up this useless wailing and understand the will of the Lord."

To this the disciples all replied, "O master, as always your instructions are perfect. Nonetheless, it is impossible for us to bear the pain of separation which must surely overwhelm us if you leave us now. Out of pity for your children, we beg you to remain with us for some time more."

In response to this request, Ramanuja agreed to stay with them for three more days. He ordered that all of his disciples should come there, and, when they were assembled, he delivered his final instructions. "Worship all Vaisnavas as you worship your guru," he told them. "Have faith in the previous acaryas and never be controlled by the senses. Never be satisfied simply by worldly knowledge. Study the

scriptures that describe the glories of the Supreme Lord. Transcendental knowledge can overcome the pushings of the mind and senses. Be indifferent to the promptings of the mind. Always relish the chanting of the holy name and qualities of the Lord. The best way to serve the Lord is rendering service to his devotees. Never follow the ways of a Vaisnava for material gain. Always endeavor for purity.

"Every day spend some time in contemplating the greatness of the spiritual master, and every day study the teachings of the Vaisnava acaryas. Always associate with those who are surrendered to the Lord. Avoid those who teach paths other than devotional service and those interested in sensual pleasures. One who sees the Deity as stone, the guru as an ordinary man, the devotees in terms of caste or bodily designation, caranamrita as ordinary water, the holy name of the Lord as a mundane sound vibration, or the Supreme Lord as one of the demigods, is certainly destined for hellish life"

When Yatiraja had finished speaking, the disciples questioned him further, asking how they should conduct themselves while in this world. Again Ramanujacarya instructed them, "One who has surrendered to Lord Narayana should not be concerned about his future, depending always on the Lord's mercy. All duties should be performed as acts of devotion to the Lord and never for material gain.

"Study the Sri-bhasya and teach it to others - this service is the most pleasing to the Lord. If this is not possible, then study the teachings of other devotees and then instruct some disciples. If you are unable to do this, then go to a holy place and reside there or go to Yadavadri and serve the Lord there. If you cannot do this, then remain where you are and surrender to your guru and meditate on the Vaisnava mantras. If all of these are impossible, then simply seek out a pure-hearted Vaisnava and associate with him constantly.

"Discriminate carefully between friends, enemies, and those who are indifferent. Those who are Vaisnavas will be your friends, the atheists and blasphemers will despise and hate you, and the worldly men will be indifferent. Associate joyfully with the devotees, rigorously avoid the blasphemers, and never be disturbed by the materialistic plans of worldly men. Never flatter princes and worldly men, seeking to earn your livelihood thereby. Remember that the Supreme Lord always takes care of those who are surrendered to Him. Take shelter of Him and have faith in Him alone. If you follow these instructions, then you will never be separated from me. Why should one grieve over the disappearance of the temporary body?"

DISAPPEARANCE OF RAMANUJACARYA

When Ramanuja had finished speaking, Dasarathi, Govinda, Andhrapurna, and some of the other leading disciples came forward and made this presentation to him. "Your body, which is ever engaged in the service of the Lord, can never be material. Our bodies are certainly temporary, but you exist only on the platform of spiritual life. Therefore, our request is that we never be deprived of the sight of your transcendental form."

Taking pity upon them, Ramanuja accepted his disciples' request and ordered that expert sculptors be brought there to carve a stone deity in his likeness. After three days the work was complete. Then the deity was bathed with water from the Kaveri and installed upon a newly constructed altar. Yatiraja then came slowly up to the deity and filled it with his potency by breathing into the crown of the head.

Turning to the disciples, he said, "This is my second self. When I have cast off this body, you may worship this form instead of me."

Then he lay down with his head on Govinda's lap and his feet on the lap of Andhrapurna. In this position, with his eyes fixed on the wooden shoes of his own spiritual master, Ramanujacarya gave up his body and returned to the abode of Lord Visnu. It was noontime on the tenth day of the bright moon fortnight in the month of Magha in the year 1059 of the Saka era (1137 A.D.). A few days later, Govinda, Ramanuja's cousin and life long companion, also departed from this world.

The other devotees remained under the leadership of Sri Parasara Bhatta, the son of Kuresa, always endeavoring to follow in their master's footsteps by constantly serving Lord Narayana. By serious practice of devotional service, they were able to feel Ramanuja's presence within their hearts; thus their intense feelings of separation were mitigated. Parasara continued the mission of Ramanujacarya by strongly preaching the doctrines of Vaisnavism. In a great debate he overcame Vedantin Madhava dasa, the leader of the impersonalist scholars, and made him into a devotee. Years later, after the disappearance of Parasara, this same Madhava dasa became the acarya of the Sri Vaisnavas.