

SRI RAMANUJA

HIS LIFE AND TEACHINGS

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OF the three great exponents of the philosophy of Vedanta in south India—Sankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva, Ramanuja occupies the central place not only in the order of time, but also in the synthetic beauty of interpretation.

Sri Ramanuja flourished in this world between the years 1017 and 1137 A.D. Details of the long and eventful life of this divine personality cannot be easily summarised in the brief manner expected in an article of this kind. He was born in Sri perumbudur, about midway between Madras and Kancheepuram, of Asuri Kesava somayaji and Kanthimathamma. The father was a great vedic scholar and the couple were devoted valshnavites. The child was born in the year Pingala in the month of Chittirai and under the star Thiruvadirai. The usual routine of chaula, upanayana, and instruction in the vedic texts was gone through under the supervision of the father. Lakshmana as he was named by his maternal uncle Srisailapurna of Thirupathi, was a precocious lad and was much influenced by the uncle and even more by Kanchipurna, a close friend of his father. Both Srisailapurna and Kanchipurna were disciples of Yamunacharya (Alavandar) who was then the accepted Acharya of all Srivaishnavites at Srirangam. Not long after he got married, Lakshmana lost his father and as directed by his mother, he began his study of Vedanta under Yadavaprakasa, the famed advaita-vedantin at Kancheepuram. But the disciple frequently differed from the guru in the interpretation of vedic texts and had to part company.

He proceeded to Srirangam to meet Yamuna, but he was a day too late. He could only have darshan of the mortal remains of the great saint. In the presence of the body he took a vow to continue the work of the saint and establish the teachings firmly, by writing authoritative commentaries on the Brahma Sutras and the Sahasrageethi (Thiruvaimozhi) of Nammalvar. The latter is a poem of some thousand Tamil verses of unfading beauty describing the mystic experiences of the Alwar with the Divine. The profound influence of this poem on Ramanuja can be seen very frequently in his commentaries on the Brahma Sutras and the Bhagavadgeetha. Sadly disappointed that he could not meet the great saint, Lakshmana returned to Kanchi and remained in the service of Lord Varadaraja for some time.

Lakshmana sought Kanchipurna as his acharya to initiate him into Vaishnava doctrines, but being a vaisy by caste, the latter would not accept a brahmin disciple. On the advice of Mahapurna (actually a command from the Lord Himself) Lakshmana became a disciple of Mahapurna, another important disciple of Yamuna and got initiated into the Vaishnava doctrines. Because of the incompatibility of his wife with the true Srivaishnava way of life, Lakshmana renounced family ties and became a Vaishnava Sanyasin (Jeeyar) under the title of Ramanuja Muni. Earliest to join him as disciples were a nephew of his, Dasarathi Mudallandan, and a prince, Kuresa, who gave up all his wealth to join Ramanuja as a disciple. This prince who voluntarily became a beggar is affectionately called Kurathalwan by Srivaishnavas. He was a man of mighty intellect and was a source of inspiration to his Master. Soon afterwards the old teacher Yadavaprakasa also joined the picked band of disciples, having become a Vaishnava Sanyasin.

Ramanuja was soon invited to Srirangam to continue the work of Yamuna, accepting the leadership of the Vaishnavites. He moved to Srirangam and began the work of consolidation. But he was not in complete possession of all the Knowledge that had been left for him. He had to obtain this from each of the five leading disciples of Alavandar. Mahapurna had taught him the inner meaning of that mantra of mantras, the Dwayam. He went to Goshtipurna (Thirukkottiyur Nambi) to learn the secrets of the Ashtakshara mahamantra and the Charamasloka (the verse 'Sarwadharmam.....' of the Geetha teaching the ultimate path for salvation). These were taught only to very ardent seekers, after rigorous testing of their worthiness. To convince Goshtipurna of his earnestness and sincerity of purpose in learning what he sought, Ramanuja journeyed on feet from Srirangam to Thirukkottiyur no less than eighteen times, and fasted in the master's presence for a whole month, taking only the consecrated water-prasada of the Lord in the local temple. Having come out whole through the ordeal, he got from Nambi the Upadesa after promising to the Guru that he would not divulge the secret teaching except to the most deserving on the basis of rigorous testing. But the next day he gave an open lecture on what he had learnt from Nambi to the assemblage of devotees in the temple. The Guru was quite angry on hearing of this incident. But the disciple pacified him by telling him with due reverence, 'I transgressed the promise given to you fully conscious of the penalty of hell. I will suffer that happily in the thought that all these Srivaishnavas are assured of spiritual bliss as a result of the Upadesa'. Here was a person who was prepared to sacrifice himself for the welfare of the masses while most others would sacrifice everything else for their own spiritual welfare. Struck by this large-heartedness, Nambi exclaimed 'You should be the all-merciful Lord Himself; and called him 'Emberumanar' (Our great master). Only one with unbounded mercy can be a great leader. This name is one of the most honoured names of Ramanuja.

Ramanuja acquired learning at the feet of other leading disciples of Alavandar. It was now time to fulfil his promise to him. In order to write an authoritative commentary on the Brahmasutras, setting forth the Visishtadvaita Philosophy, he had to consult an ancient commentary—the Vrltti of Bhagawan Bodhayana, only one copy of which was extant in a library in Kashmir. Ramanuja went there with Alwan (Kuresa) and both studied the book. On return to Srirangam, the commentary was written, Kuresa acting as the scribe to the dictation of the master. This commentary is called Sri Basya and

the author is reverently called Bashyakara. An extensive commentary on the Bhagavad geetha was also completed. Two other smaller treatises on Vedanta were composed later—the Vedanta deepa and Vedanta sara. Ramanuja travelled all over India and propagated his religion and philosophy. The number of his disciples swelled. We are told that among his disciples were 700 sanyasins and 12,000 householders, some of them being great stalwarts. Among the most important of these were, besides Andan and Alwan, Arulalaperumal Emberumanar, Embar, Danurdasa, Kidambiachan and Pillan. Arulalaperumal Emberumanar was formerly a famed advaitic scholar who came for philosophical debate with Ramanuja. So vast was his scholarship and debating skill that he engaged Ramanuja in debate for full 18 days, finally to accept defeat and become a Vaishnava and a disciple. Embar is the name of Govindaperumal, a cousin of Ramanuja and a man of great devotion, scholarship and vairagya, who is worshipped as the successor to Ramanuja in the chain of Vaishnava Acharyas. Dhaurdasa was formerly a member of the local princ's bodyguard and a hunter by caste. His wife was a bewitching beauty and the husband was so deeply devoted to her that he would keep her with him even during hours of work and minister to her comforts oblivious of the curious onlookers. The grace of Ramanuja was showered on him and he became perhaps the purest-hearted devotee of the Lord and the master.

The Chola King of this time (Kulothunga I, 1070-1118 A. D.), was an ardent Saivite and commanded that Ramanuja should appear before him and publicly accept, Siva as the supreme God. Sensing personal danger to the divine treasure, Ramanuja, Alwan donned the saffron robes of his guru and impersonated for him in the royal court followed by the aged Mahapurna. Ramanuja donned white robes and moved westward. Since in the court, they would not accept what the King wanted them to accept, these men of God were ordered to be blinded. Unable to bear to torture, Mahapurna passed away and the blinded Alwan returned to Srirangam. This incident caused great sorrow to Ramanuja when he came to know of it later.

The master moved into the Mysore area. King Bittideva, the Hoysala ruler there came under the influence of the magnetic personality of the master and became Vishnuvardhana. This king was of immense help to Ramanuja during his sojourn of nearly 15 years in that area. It was during this time that the Thirunarayana temple at Melkote was established by him. On the demise of the Chola King Ramanuja returned to Srirangam and continued his mission of grace.

When the great master passed away full of years, all were grieved beyond measure. Sri Ranganatha ordered that the remains of this avatar of Anantha, His serpent-bed, should be enshrined in his temple itself. He is worshipped in idol form in all Vishnu temples. An extremely beautiful and captivating idol—a likeness installed in the lifetime of the master in Sripurumbadur—beckons all to come under the religion of Narayana's grace and partake of the fruits of Mokshasamrajya.

The philosophy and religion which Ramanuja taught may now be briefly considered. Unlike the absolute monistic concept (of Sankara) of the Supreme as a pure Being or Bliss without any quality or attribute whatsoever—a nameless and formless Being, the Supreme according to Ramanuja is Narayana, Pnrushothama—with the most beautiful

form and with all auspicious qualities—omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent. All-powerful and all-knowing and ever associated with Sri Lakhmi, Narayana is full of unbounded love for his creation and is most merciful. Ramanuja's Parabrahma is a personal God, Sarveswara—the Supreme Ruler. He is immanent in all jeevatmas and in non-sentient matter. The three entities, Iswara the Lord, Chit (sentient being) and Achit (matter) form a single whole. Just as the soul pervades the body the Lord pervades the soul. Thus he pervades everything and controls everything. He is at once the material, instrumental and aiding cause of the cosmos. This point needs a brief explanation. In making a pot, the potter is instrumental in making the pot from clay (material, with his wheel (aid). In the making of any object three causes are needed. But in cosmic activity the Lord Himself is the sole cause. During the Mahapralaya everything retracts into Him in subtle (sookshma) form and He is then the Sookshma-chitachit-visishta-brahman. By His divine will (sankalpa) He transforms Himself into all the sense-perceived objects (sthoola). The sookshma form is the cause (karana) and the sthoola the effect (karya) form. The former, like clay, transforms itself into the latter—as pot, pan and a host of other objects. He is immanent in all sense-perceived objects and can be referred to as the Sthoola-Chitachit Visishta-Brahman. He is in everything and everything is in Him. His extra-ordinary power is such that He pervades everything inside and out (Anterbahischa thatsarvam vyapya Narayanasthithah). This association of His with the universe is the meaning of the name Narayana. He is the universal Lord and there is nothing that is not His. He is the Sarvaswami and everything exists for His pleasure. This in short is the philosophy of Visishta-advaita. The Chit-Achit—Iswara combination is united whole and is ONE. Chit and achit are but Prakaras or attributes of the Lord. This ONE-ness is the monism of Ramanuja, unlike the absolute monism (of Sankara) of a formless, nameless, attributeless ONE. According to Ramanuja both matter (achit) and the Jeevas (chit) are eternal and real. They stand apart from the Lord, but still, at the same time, are one with Him because of His immanence in them, they constituting His sarccera (body).

In addition to the Vedantic treatises, Sri Bashya, Vedartasangraha, Vedantadeepa and Vedantasara, and his commentary on the Bhagavadgeetha, Ramanuja has given us four other pieces—the three gadyas and a nityam. The last one deals with the ideal of daily life of a true Srivaishnava. The three gadya pieces (gadyatrayam) reveal the religion of Ramanuja. In the first, Saranagati gadyam, we find a classic exposition of prapatti—surrender to the Lord—in practice. Sriranga gadyam is a devotional piece and reveals Ramanuja's devotional fervour to SriRanganatha. The third, Srivaikunta gadyam contains a rapturous description of the beauty of the blissful abode of the Lord and tells how the released Jeeva approaches Him and gets accepted as His servant.

The doctrine of prapatti, and its background are revealed in the three important mantras—the ashtakshari Om Namō Narayanaya, the Dwayam—Srimannarayana charnō saranam prapadye; Srimathe Narayana namah—and the Charamasloka—sarvadharmā parityaiya mamēkam saranam vraja; śhamtwa sarva papebhyo mokshayishyami masuchah. The first stresses the sole dependence of the Jeeva on Narayana, truly His in all respects. The second one spells out the surrender—'I take refuge in the lotus feet of Narayana, eternally associated with Sri; may be accepted in the service of the Divine couple' and prays for the purushartha of service (kainkarya) which is the goal. The third is the

assurance of protection that the Lord gave Arjuna in the battlefield of Kurakshetra. 'Leave aside all other means, the paths to salvation described earlier by Me, and resort to ME alone as your sole refuge. I will save you from the obstacles to your salvation and deliver you unto Myself. Grieve not'.

Karma, Jnana and Bhakti as means to salvation are very difficult, like crossing a pit of fire on a bridge of hair. The Lord commands that these be abandoned. The easy accessibility of the Lord is stressed in the 'ME' serving as the charioteer, Sri Parthasarathi. The 'I' emphasises His infinite power to grant salvation. It should be stressed that abandonment of Karma etc., does not mean total physical rejection. Dharma as ordained for any person according to his station in life has to be practised, but not as a means to any end—not to accumulate punya—but only as service to the Lord and His devotees. This nishkaama kalnkaryaropa karma keeps one active and away from sin, and pure. The Lord is at once the Means and the End. Communion with Him is service for His pleasure and that of His devotees.

Ramanuja's religion is open to all. It transcends the limitations of caste, sex etc. He was a personification of compassion for the masses—dayaika sindhu—as his disciple Kuresa praises him. As Manavalamamunigal, a later acharya, puts it, this visishtadvaitic vaishnavism came to be called Emberumanar (Ramanuja) Darsanam since he threw it open to all these who desired to come into the fold and partake of service to the Lord. His compassion has been compared to that of the rain-laden cloud which precipitates the life-giving water to save all of us and annihilates itself in the process. Ramanuja was an Acharya who was bold enough to sacrifice himself completely for the welfare of the masses.
