



Srimate Ramanujaya namah

# The Life of Bhagavad Sri Ramanuja (CE. 1017 to CE. 1137)

## *The Vedic Tradition.*

**R**amanuja is regarded as the greatest theologian of the Vedic Lineage. The first of the great acharyas of the Vishistadvaita philosophy, Nathamuni, was from a traditional family of Sanskrit scholarship. His father was Iswarbhatt and his son was Iswaramuni. They lived in Viranarayanapuram. Nathamuni, is said to have taken the first steps towards a collation of Vaishnava philosophy and theology. The names of his two Sanskrit works are remembered and quoted, but neither has survived. Nathamuni also compiled the hymns of the Alvars, into a collection of four thousand verses (Nalayira Divya Prabandham). He also made arrangement for these “poems” to be chanted along with the Vedas during the services at Srirangam temple. He is also renowned as the founding father of Yoga. Yoga is the achievement of liberation from the cycle of bodily existences through a difficult process of mental and physical disciplines.

The organization of the Vaishnava community was achieved by Nathamuni's grandson Yamunacharya who was an accomplished Vedic scholar as well as a Vaishnava savant. Adopted into a royal family he lived a luxurious life in early days, but converted later and took to an ascetic life. He succeeded in consolidating the Vaishnava community and establishing Srirangam temple as their headquarters. It was his great ambition to merge the devotion of the Alvars with the Vedantic methodology. He could not himself achieve this ambition but towards the end of his life he met Ramanuja and recognized in him the competent Vedic scholar who could do it. The mission was entrusted to Ramanuja through his five principle disciples. Today there are over 700 Srivaishnava monasteries in all parts of India.

## ***1. Birth of Ramanuja***

Sri Ramanuja (Udayavar) was the only child of a learned Yajur Vedi Brahmana of the Harita clan named Asuri Kesava Dikshita and his wife Kantimati. (Kantimati was the sister of Sri Saila-Purna [Tirumalai Nambi] who was one of the disciples of Yamunacharya. Kesava Dikshita was known by the title of *Sarvakratu*, meaning the performer of all Vedic sacrifices, by way of recognition of his expertise in Vedic rituals. He lived in the village of Sriperumbudur situated about 30 miles to the south-west of the modern city of Madras. This village is famous for the great temple of Sri Adikesava Perumal.

Kesava Dikshita had no children even after several years of marriage. Finally he decided to seek the grace of the Lord Partha-sarathi residing at a place called Tiruvallikeni (Lily-lake), today known as Triplicane in Chennai. There he performed the sacrifice known as *puthra-kameshti*. Krishna appeared to him in a dream and said "O Sarvakratu, I am extremely pleased with your observance of Dharma and steadfast devotion. Fear not, I Myself shall be born as your son. Motivated by selfish intentions and deluded about the true purport of the teachings of the Scriptures, some men posing as religious mendicants are considering themselves to be the God, and out of pride they are becoming wicked and perverse. So unless I incarnate Myself as an acharya, they are doomed. Go back home with your wife and in time your desire will be fulfilled in time".

Accordingly, a year later in 1017 on Thursday the 12th of Chaitra (the fifth day of the bright fortnight, when the sun was in Cancer during the asterism of Arudra) Kantimati gave birth to a son with the auspicious marks of Vishnu on his body, he was named Lakshmana, the younger brother of Rama. Lakshmana was considered to be the incarnation of a part of Vishnu called Adishesha who is the foremost servant of the Lord in His transcendental Realm of Vaikunta. Kantimati's younger sister also gave birth at this time to a son who was called Govinda and would later play a very significant role in the life of his cousin Ramanuja.

## ***2. Early Life***

From his early childhood Ramanuja demonstrated a prodigious intellect. He could master lessons even after hearing them only once from his teachers. As he grew up, his devotional potentialities too, expressed themselves in the form of a great attraction that he felt towards the devotees of the Lord. A great devotee named Kanchi-purna would daily pass Ramanuja's house on his way to Kanchi from his home at Poonamallee, a neighbouring village, for the worship of the Deity Varadaraja at Kanchi. Ramanuja, realizing what a saintly character he was, befriended him and one evening invited him to dinner. Being a member of the Sudra caste, Kanchi-purna at first declined the invitation, but after Ramanuja had repeatedly insisted he finally accepted. After Kanchi-purna had taken his meal, a place was prepared for him to rest, and while he was resting, Ramanuja overcome with joy at having such a great devotee in his home tried to massage his feet. Kanchi-purna was alarmed and protested that he would not allow such a high born Vedic Brahmin like Ramanuja to serve him in this manner. Ramanuja's reply to this protest was; "Pray, is it merely the wearing of a sacred thread that makes one a brahmin? No! One who is devoted to God alone is a brahmin. Everyone knows how Tirupan-alvar born in the Sudra caste is now worshipped by brahmins because of his Love of God!" From this incident we can recognize that Ramanuja was an enlightened saint and so liberal that he had no regard for the social rules of caste. After this Kanchi-purna and Ramanuja became close friends.

## ***3. Discipleship under Yadava-prakasa***

When Ramanuja reached the age of sixteen Kesava Dikshita arranged his marriage to a beautiful girl named Rakshambal. But only a month after the wedding, Kesava Dikshita succumbed to a fatal illness and died. The whole family was plunged into grief and after the obsequial rites were over, decided to move to Kanchi in order to escape the memories of Kesava Dikshita, as well as facilitating the higher education of Ramanuja. He had studied Sanskrit and the Vedas under his

learned father, and was now keen to study Vedanta philosophy. At Kanchi resided a very famous scholar named Yadava-Prakasa who was considered an authority on Vedanta. Yadava-Prakasa was delighted to have such a talented disciple. Ramanuja observed all the disciplines expected of disciples, such as intense study of the doctrines and personally serving his guru. Yadava-Prakasa too loved Ramanuja very much, and he soon became the favourite, and chief disciple.

#### ***4. Growing tension with Yadava-Prakasa***

But as time went on, differences began to emerge between Ramanuja and Yadava-Prakasa. Yadava-Prakasa was an uncompromising adherent of the Non-dualist philosophy (Advaita) and spurned the worship of a Personal God. According to Yadava-Prakasa this changeful and ever-perishing universe is the Cosmic form of Brahman. This form as cosmos is real and not a mere appearance. At the source, beyond time, space and causation is the Supreme Reality which is Existence, Consciousness, Bliss Absolute (sat-cit-ananda). In Ramanuja's mature years this system is very bitterly criticized as worse than Mayavada (illusionist philosophy). He compares such a Brahman (Ultimate Reality) to a man who is pampered and decorated on one side, while his other side is being scorched or hammered. But these philosophical differences were not very clear at that time, and Yadava-Prakasa was considered an authority on Advaita. Yadava-Prakasa's exact philosophical position is rather controversial, none of his works are extant, and the only inkling into his views are the ones that Ramanuja has mentioned and refuted in his commentary (Bhashya) on the Vedanta Sutras.

Ramanuja was a manifestation of love and devotion to a Personal God. So the teachings of Yadava could not please him for very long. This difference in outlook gradually began to manifest openly in spite of Ramanuja's strenuous effort to restrain himself. One day Ramanuja was giving Yadava an oil massage while he expounded a passage from Chandogya Upanishad (1.6.7) in order to clarify a point to one of the disciples.

*tasya yatha kapyasam pundarikam evam akshini*

Yadava, strictly following Sankara's interpretation of the passage, explained it as "His eyes are even as a lotus flower; red as posterior of a monkey". Such a comparison of the eyes of the Lord with a vile part of an animal was too much for Ramanuja to bear, and hot tears flowing from his eyes fell onto Yadava-Prakasa's thigh. Yadava thereupon asked him the cause of his grief. Ramanuja answered and said; "Revered Sir, I am deeply pained to hear a noble person such as you make such a base comparison. What an offence it is, to compare the lotus-like eyes of the Supreme Person with the posterior of a monkey!"

Yadava-Prakasa became intensely annoyed and challenged Ramanuja to give a better explanation, if he could. Ramanuja replied that *kapi-asam* is interpreted as follows; *kam jalam pibati* = "he who drinks water" ie. *kapih* = the sun and the verbal root *as* indicates blooming . The word *asam* therefore means blossomed. In this way the entire word *kapyasam* comes to mean "blossomed by the sun". The passage would then read;

*"The eyes of that Supreme Person are as lovely as the lotuses blossomed by the rays of the sun".*

Yadava-Prakasa pretended to admire Ramanuja's skill in interpretation saying that this was an indirect interpretation not a literal one. Another time, Yadava-Prakasa interpreted the Upanishad passage: *sathyam jnanam anantham brahma*, as meaning, 'Brahman is Truth, is Knowledge, and is Infinity.' Ramanuja objected to it and said that the passage means that Brahman is endowed with the qualities of truth, knowledge and infinitude. These qualities are His, but not He, just as 'my body is mine, I'm not the body.'

## ***5. Yadava-Prakasa's attempt to murder Ramanuja***

Yadava-Prakasa gradually came to the realization that Ramanuja would eventually become a great scholar and establish the doctrine of Personalism and would become an invincible opponent of Advaita. So he finally decided that the best way to prevent such a catastrophe was to dispose of Ramanuja. He took his other disciples into his special confidence and conspired to murder him. It was decided that the whole school would go on a pilgrimage to the holy Ganges. Ramanuja also was persuaded to join the group. At a convenient place on the way they planned to murder him. They could all then absolve themselves of this sin by taking a bath in the holy Ganges.

At an auspicious time the party set out. After some days' travel they reached Gondaranya at the foot of the Vindhyas. In a remote jungle Yadava-Prakasa decided that the time was right to carry out their wicked plan. But Ramanuja was secretly apprised of their intention by Govinda his cousin and co-disciple who was travelling with them. During the night Ramanuja fled. When the time had come and Yadava-Prakasa and his gang could not find Ramanuja they assumed that he had been killed by some wild beast and rejoicing that their purpose had thus been accomplished they continued their journey.

Ramanuja travelled as fast as he could through the dense forest, towards evening, he collapsed under a tree out of exhaustion and fell asleep. When he awoke it was afternoon the following day. Suddenly a hunter couple appeared and befriended him. They intimated that they were going south to Ramesvaram on pilgrimage and invited him to join them. They took him to a convenient place to rest that night near the banks of a river. At dawn the following day they continued their journey and after a while they reached a well. The wife of the hunter requested Ramanuja to bring her water to drink. Ramanuja went down to the well and himself drank its sweet and cool water and brought up some quantities of it for the hunter couple. But to his surprise they had disappeared, and in place of the forest, Ramanuja found himself surrounded by temple towers and rows of houses. Being confused he asked a passer-by where he was and was surprised beyond measure to be told that it was Kanchi-puram, the city of his residence. Ramanuja now felt as if he was aroused from a sleep and recognized that the place was really Kanchi-puram so familiar to him.

Intoxicated with God-love he repeatedly circumambulated the well with tears flowing down his cheeks. His mother was surprised to see him standing on the doorstep and was deeply shocked when he revealed to her all that had happened. But the family resolved to act as nothing had happened.

When Yadava-Prakasa and party returned after some months, Ramanuja rejoined the Gurukula, and carried on his studies and the service of his teacher as assiduously as before. Yadava-Prakasa was at first terrified on seeing Ramanuja, as he was convinced that he was dead. But seeing Ramanuja's humility, he took it for granted that the former knew nothing about his evil designs. He behaved very lovingly to Ramanuja and again began instructing him in Vedanta.

## 6. Yamunacharya

One day the venerable pontiff of the Srivaishnavas Yamunacharya came to Kanchi to worship the Lord Varada-raja. On the way back to his lodgings after having had *darshan* he encountered Yadava and all his entourage of students. Yamunacharya immediately noticed Ramanuja who shone out with spiritual luster walking beside Yadava while the latter rested his hand on Ramanuja's shoulder. The venerable pontiff experienced an intense attraction to Ramanuja and inquired after him. He was informed that this was that very same young man who had composed the elaborate commentary on the mantra *satyam jnanam anantam brahma*. Yamunacharya was delighted and immediately prayed to Lord Varadaraja to bestow His grace on Ramanuja and bring him to the Vaishnava faith.

## 7. The disaffection with Yadava-Prakasa

For a while the student and master continued their association but differences of interpretation soon arose again between them because of the total incompatibility of their philosophical outlooks. One day Yadava was discoursing on the Upanishad passage —

*sarvam khalvidam brahma, neha nanasti kinchana*  
'All this is verily Brahman; there is no diversity here whatever.'

Chandogya Up. 3.14.1

With great eloquence he taught that it meant that the *jiva* and *Brahman* are identical. All the students except Ramanuja were impressed with the eloquence and logic of his interpretation. After the discourse, Ramanuja felt compelled to give his own explanation. Ramanuja told Yadava that in his view the passage would have meant the oneness of all with Brahman, if it were not followed by —*tajjalan iti, shanta upasita* — "This universe is born from, sustained by, and dissolves in Brahman; meditate thus on Him." This qualification makes the earlier part mean: "The things in this Samsara have no independent existence; they are inter-penetrated by Brahman and held as a unity without impairing their manifoldness." Just as a fish in water is said to be born in water, exists in water and dies in water, and may be said to be permeated by water but it never can become water! In this manner the universe is said to be permeated by Brahman but can never *become* Brahman! Yadava was furious at this precociousness of his disciple and expelled him from the Gurukula. In obedience to the teacher's command, Ramanuja took leave of him after prostrating at his feet in reverence and humility. From then onwards, he stayed at home to study on his own and never returned to the school.

## 8. Under the guidance of Kanchi-purna

According to Vaishnava tradition it was the prayer of Yamuna that resulted in the final break from Yadava-Prakasa. One day, as he was engaged in study of the Scriptures at home, Kanchi-purna the great devotee of the Lord arrived. Ramanuja now fell down at his feet in prostration and begged to be accepted as his disciple. Kanchi-purna protested that he was a Sudra, a man of low caste, while Ramanuja was a high-born Brahmin, and master of Sanskrit and philosophy. But

Ramanuja justified his act on the ground that Kanchi-purna's mature devotion to the Lord was far superior to high birth and learning, which generally went only to augment one's pride and egotism. Again falling at his feet weeping Ramanuja begged him for his guidance. Thereupon Kanchi-purna instructed him to carry every day a vessel full of water from a neighboring well for the service of Varadaraja who, he assured him, would fulfil his devotional aspirations. Ramanuja therefore took up this service and also pursued the study of the Tamil hymns of the Alvars

## ***9. Yamuna-acharya's Demise***

Sometime after his split from Yadava-Prakasa the news reached Yamuna-acharya at Srirangam. Yamuna had been seriously ill and some devotees from Kanchi had come to Srirangam to see him on his recovery. Yamuna was overjoyed by the news, because his daily prayer to Sri Ranganatha was that Ramanuja might be brought to Srirangam to take over the leadership of the Vaishnava community after his death. With this intent he had one day composed his great hymn of praise called Stotra-ratnam. He was himself aware that his last days were not far off and the Vaishnava community that he had fostered would then be leaderless.

On the morning of his departure from the world Yamuna walked slowly into the sanctum of Ranga-natha watched by a large and anxious crowd of devotees. Yamuna stood for a short while before the Lord with his palms pressed together and then returned to the monastery. After everyone had partaken of the *prasadam* Yamuna prostrated before them and asked for forgiveness for all the offences that he may have committed against them. The disciples burst into tears saying—how is it possible for you to do wrong O master — and what is there for us to forgive? Yamuna then slowly partook of some food and then sent for Maha-purna. My end is drawing near — go quickly to Kanchi and bring Ramanuja to me. Just after Maha-purna had left the condition of the great acharya rapidly deteriorated. Having delivered his last sermon the master sat in the lotus posture and having fixed his mind upon the lotus feet of the lord, withdrew his breath. The disciples began to make the funeral arrangements.

After four days' walk, Maha-purna reached Kanchi and proceeded to the temple of Varadaraja for darshan. There he met Kanchi-purna and confided in him the purpose of his mission. The next day Kanchi-purna pointed Ramanuja out to Maha-purna and then went about his chores. Maha-purna approached Ramanuja and told him all that had happened. On hearing that Yamuna's health was failing and his death imminent, Ramanuja hurriedly finished his duty in the temple and departed immediately with Mahapurna for Srirangam. After four days of travel they reached Tiruchirapalli in the district of Srirangam and saw a long funeral procession. They were informed that Yamuna had again taken seriously ill and died, and his body was being taken for burial. In abject sorrow and disappointment Ramanuja fainted. After being revived he went to see the dead body of that greatest of Vaishnavas. As he gazed with tear-filled eyes on the body he noticed that three fingers of the dead pontiff's right hand were clenched. He asked the devotees, who were crowding round, whether Yamunacharya's fingers were clenched like that while living too. Upon learning that this had happened only upon his demise Ramanuja made the following declarations:

1. I shall always dedicate myself to the Vaishnava faith. I shall save those who are deluded by ignorance by bestowing upon them the five

- sacraments (Pancha samskara), teaching them the Dravida Vedas and converting them to the religion of *Prapatti* (Surrender to Lord Narayana).
2. I shall write a commentary on the Vedanta Sutras of Badarayana taking the earlier commentaries also into consideration and revealing the saving knowledge to people.
  3. In honour and memory of the great Parasara who produced the greatest of the Puranas—the Vishnu Purana, I shall name a great Vaishnava after him.

After each of these three declarations, one of the fingers relaxed. It was clear to all the assemble devotees that Ramanuja was their future pontiff. After the funeral was over Ramanuja immediately returned to Kanchi refusing to even glimpse the face of Lord Ranganatha who was so cruel as to deprive him of the precious association with Yamunacharya. Ramanuja would often declare that had he been able to have the company of Yamunacharya for a single day he would have constructed a staircase to *Paramapada* and procured free admission for everyone.

## **10. Initiation**

After returning home he spent the days in serious reflection and study. Avoiding his wife and seeking solace in the company of Kanchi-purna and in the service of Varadaraja. This indifference caused much distress to his wife Rakshambal. Again Ramanuja approached Kanchi-purna and begged him to become his spiritual teacher, but the latter in all humility refused his request. Taking this refusal as an indication of his unworthiness Ramanuja resolved to purify himself by eating the left-overs of Kanchi-purna's meal. Accordingly he invited him to dinner and instructed Rakshambal to cook a sumptuous feast. When all was prepared Ramanuja set out to Kanchi-purna's ashram to invite him. Meanwhile Kanchi-purna had intuited the plot of Ramanuja and had arrived at Ramanuja's house earlier than expected. He requested Rakshambal to serve the food quickly so that he could attend to his duties in the temple of Varadaraja. Rakshambal reluctantly complied and after he had eaten and cleared his leaf-plate away, she distributed the remaining food to some Sudras, took a bath and began cooking again for her husband. When Ramanuja returned he was devastated to learn that Kanchi-purna had been treated as a Sudra. All the remaining food had been disposed off and Ramanuja had been thwarted in his purpose. Slapping his head in despair he sat down under a tree and wept. Immediately after this incident Kanchi-purna left for Tirupati where he stayed for 6 months.

Upon his return, Ramanuja went to meet him and while they were discussing the dharma, Ramanuja mentioned that he had some 6 doubts and requested Kanchi-purna to ask the Lord Varadaraja to solve these problems without actually telling him what they were. The next day Kanchi-purna conveyed the following replies from Lord Varadaraja;

1. I am the absolute Brahman, the cause of material nature (Prakrti) from which the universe evolves.
2. The distinction between the Jiva (soul) and Ishvara (God) is self-evident.
3. The only way to attain liberation from the cycle of re-incarnation is by taking refuge at the feet of the Lord.
4. There is no need for my devotees to remember Me at the time of death, because I

shall remember them.

5. As soon as a devotee dies he attains to the Supreme Realm.
6. Take refuge in the great soul Mahapurna and he will initiate you.

Ramanuja was rapt and danced for joy, he immediately set out for Srirangam to meet that great soul Maha-purna. In the meantime, by a divinely ordained coincidence, Maha-purna had already started for Kanchi to persuade Ramanuja to come to Srirangam. It was one year since Yamuna had passed away, and his disciples and devotees could find no-one to take up the position of pontiff. So they approached Maha-purna and requested that he find some solution to the problem — he quickly reminded them that Yamunacharya himself had appointed Ramanuja as his successor and so they forthwith sent Maha-purna on the mission to bring Ramanuja to Srirangam.

The two met at the temple tank in a place called Madhuranthakam and both were overcome with joy and thankfulness to the Lord. Maha-purna suggested that they return to Kanchi and perform the initiation ceremony (*samasrayanam*) in front of Lord Varadaraja. But Ramanuja replied that since the time of death is unknown and could come at any moment he would not tolerate even a moment's delay. So thus cajoled Maha-purna initiated Ramanuja into the Vaishnava fold by branding him on the shoulders with the seal of Vishnu's conch and discus, and imparting the 3 Vaishnava Mantras. Then together they returned to Kanchi-puram. For six months Maha-purna and his wife stayed at Kanchi-puram, during which time Ramanuja studied the supremely sacred four thousand Tamil verses known as Nalayira Divya Prabandham, also known as the Tamil Veda.

## ***11. Renunciation***

The dramatic parting of Ramanuja from his guru Mahapurna occurred abruptly under strange circumstances. One day Ramanuja's wife Rakshambal who was obsessed with caste-consciousness went to the well to draw water with Maha-purna's wife. Some drops of water from the old ladies pot had fallen into hers and sent her into a rage: "Are you blind? Look what you have done by your carelessness! This pitcher of water is now contaminated! Do you think that you can sit on my shoulders just because you are the wife of my husband's guru? Don't you realize that our lineage is superior to yours? How can I use the water that has been touched by you? Well, I suppose that you are not really to blame. Having fallen into the hands of this husband of mine, I have lost my caste and all." She then stormed off in a rage.

Mahapurna's wife who was very gentle by nature was extremely pained to hear these cutting words and told everything to her husband. That very moment they packed their belongings and left for Srirangam. When Ramanuja learnt all that had transpired he finally resolved to separate himself from his wife. He wrote a letter informing Rakshambal that her help was needed at her father's house for the impending marriage of her younger sister. He gave the letter to an elderly brahmin who delivered it to Rakshambal. She was delighted with the news, Ramanuja bestowed all his wealth upon her, and sent her away; accompanied by the brahmin she departed for her father's house.

Ramanuja took this opportunity to perform the rites for entering the holy order of *sannyas* (renunciation) taking Lord Varadaraja as his Guru. He abandoned his white garb and took on the saffron robe in front of Lord Varadaraja. Through Kanchi-purna the Lord gave him the name *Yatiraja* — Prince of Ascetics.

## ***12. The coming of the Disciples***

After this Ramanuja continued to live in Kanchipuram for sometime as the head of a small community. Many disciples gathered round him and Ramanuja taught them Mimamsa—the exegeses of the Karma Khanda and the Brahma-khanda portions of the Vedas. He also lectured to them on Vedanta and Vaishnavism. His first disciple was Dasarathi who was his cousin. The second disciple was a young man with vast scriptural learning called Kuresa, who was to play an important part in Ramanuja's life later on. But the most remarkable conversion was that of Yadava-Prakasa himself. Tormented by the guilt of his past evil conduct Yadava was spending his days in remorse. One day he happened to meet Kanchi-purna, who took the opportunity to speak to him about the divinity of Ramanuja and to advise him to take refuge at his feet; this was the only way in which he would regain peace of mind. So Yadava went to his erstwhile disciple and after hearing his preaching decided to take initiation from him. He was given the new name Govinda Jiyar.

## ***13. Relocation to Srirangam***

When the news of Ramanuja's adoption of sannyasa reached the ears of the Vaishnavas at Srirangam, they were overjoyed, for they felt that the opportune moment to bring him to Srirangam had come. Commanded by Sri Ranganatha Himself, they now sent Vararanga on this mission. At Kanchi, Vararanga earnestly prayed to Lord Varadaraja to release Ramanuja from His service. The Lord, granting his prayer, prompted Ramanuja from within to depart to Srirangam. Reaching Srirangam, Ramanuja was inaugurated as the supreme Pontiff of the Vaishnavas and Lord Ranganatha granted him two mystic powers; the power to heal sickness and the power to protect devotees.

Kuresa came from a very wealthy family. But he was as generous as he was wealthy and everyday throngs of poor people would gather at his door to receive clothing and food. When he met Ramanuja he was so inspired by him that now he resolved to give away everything that he had and to join Ramanuja in Srirangam. He enjoined his beloved wife Andal-amma to give away everything that she had without holding anything back; together they set out. As they were travelling after sunset through a thick jungle, Andal-amma began trembling with fear and expressed her concern— to her husband. Kuresa replied—my dear there is only fear where there is something to protect, I suspect that you have not given away everything as I enjoined you—but have kept something upon your person which is now the cause of fear. Pardon me my lord, said the good lady, thinking that you might need a vessel whereby to drink water on your journey I brought with me a golden cup. Kuresa took the cup from her he hurled it into the jungle—'now my dear lets go on, your fear has been cast away'. When they reached Srirangam Ramanuja was delighted to see them and embraced them warmly.

After some time Ramanuja began to miss his cousin Govinda very deeply. He learnt that Govinda was residing in Kalahasti serving Lord Siva in the form of the Bana-lingam. He wrote a letter to Shaila-purna who was residing in Tirupati requesting him to convert Govinda to the Vaishnava faith. Shaila-purna set out with some disciples and camped on the banks of a large lake where Govinda used to come every day to take his bath. In the course of listening to the lectures

delivered by Shaila-purna to his disciples, one day Govinda entered into philosophical debate and after some time was converted to the Vaishnava faith. He took initiation from Shaila-purna and then went to Srirangam to live with Ramanuja.

## **14. *Gosthi-purna***

In order to complete Ramanuja's education in Vaishnavism, Maha-purna advised him to go to Gosthi-purna, the most pre-eminent of the Vaishnava acharyas of those times, to be initiated into the Vaishnava Mantra (ashtakshari) with its full esoteric import. Ramanuja did so, but was asked by Gosthi-purna to come on another day. In this way, Ramanuja was refused eighteen times. At last, Ramanuja in despair lay down at the doorway to his house and announced that he would fast to the death unless he was given the teaching. Gosthi-purna relented and being satisfied with the earnestness of Ramanuja, he imparted the Mantra with the special instruction that it should never be imparted to anyone else. The mantra was so potent that whoever heard it would attain liberation after death, but the giver would be consigned to hell.

Full of gratitude Ramanuja left and as he passed the temple of Vishnu in the village of Gosthi-pura he called to all the townsfolk to come to the main gate where he would give them a priceless gem. Within a short time all the people of the village assembled at the main gate of the temple. Ramanuja climbed up on the tower and in a loud voice called out to the assembly;—

"Brothers and sisters, all of you are dearer to me than life itself, if you wish to be liberated from the sufferings and afflictions of material existence and re-incarnation please recite this gem of a mantra with me three times." He then pronounced the sacred mantra *om namo naranayaya*— all the assembled crowd responded, three times they chanted it and then became silent — the earth appeared like Vaikunta! All the men, women and children were enraptured.

News of this outrageous transgression of his order soon reached Gosthi-purna, and when Ramanuja returned to salute him. Gosthi-purna denounced him to burn in hell because of this gross and wilful transgression of his commandment. Claspng his Guru's feet in utter humility, Ramanuja said that he would consider it a blessing if such vast numbers of people were liberated through his being consigned to hell. Gosthi-purna was dumbfounded. This total self-abnegation and loving compassion of Ramanuja touched the heart of Gosthi-purna, and he immediately prostrated himself before Ramanuja and accepted him as his Guru. Declaring that from now onwards Ramanuja would be known by the title *Emberumanar* — Our Master.

After this full initiation into the esotericism of Vaishnavism, Ramanuja had a quick but thorough training in all the aspects of Vaishnavism, under the five disciples of the late Yamuna — Kanchi-purna, Maha-purna, Gosthi-purna, Maladhara and Vararanga.

## **15. *Ramanuja and the street boys.***

Everyday Ramanuja used to go to seven houses to beg for his food, a practice which he kept up until the end of his days. One day while he was on his begging round, a gang of boys who had drawn a figure of Ranganatha in the dust, called out to him— "O Swami, here is your God, if He is omnipresent then He must also be here so worship Him then!". Ramanuja was delighted to hear the boys lecture him like this and immediately prostrated himself in the dust and joyfully continued his round. On another occasion the boys had prepared a model of the temple and were

playing at performing *puja* (worship), for holy offerings they offered a heap of sand and when they saw Ramanuja passing they called out to him to receive some *prasadam*—gladly the master accepted the holy offering and continued on his round.

## **16. *The High Priest***

Ramanuja was now fully qualified to be the pontiff of Vaishnava Community. One day, Lord Ranganatha Himself is said to have addressed him thus, “We have endowed you with the wealth of both our Realms, *Ubhaya-vibhuthi*, ie. of both this world and the spiritual world. After examining everything, manage all the works of our house.” Ramanuja thereupon took charge of the great temple of Ranganatha, reviewed everything, including the treasury and finding a great deal of corruption and mismanagement began a program of re-structuring. He dismissed some of the office bearers and appointed new ones, and thus re-organized the administration of the temple. His reforms however did not go un-resisted. The high priest of the temple who was a rich and an influential man resented these reforms which curtailed his power and source of income. He therefore decided to get rid of Ramanuja by murdering him. One day he requested the pontiff to come to his house for alms, having informed his wife to poison the food. When Ramanuja arrived to take alms she was so overcome by his spiritual refulgence and compassion that she revealed to him what she had done and begged him not to eat of her food. Ramanuja was devastated and went for a walk on the banks of the Kaveri river. There he met Gosthi-purna and falling prostrate on the burning sand at his feet, wept inconsolably for the wretched state of the High Priest. Gosthi-purna did not move and ignored Ramanuja lying on the burning sands of the Kaveri. Kidambi Acchan another disciple of Ramanuja came upon this scenario and immediately went to raise Ramanuja from the ground, abusing Gosthi-purna for his inhuman indifference. Gosthi-purna replied that he was simply looking for a person who really loved Ramanuja, and immediately asked Kidambi Acchan to be his cook and body guard.

He returned to the monastery and continually thought of the welfare of the high priest. One day in the evening Ramanuja went to the temple to have *darsan* of the Lord. The high priest was in attendance and gave him some of the sacramental water laced with a virulent poison. Ramanuja went into a trance-like state and staggered out of the temple. The next morning instead of seeing the smoke from his funeral pyre the high priest saw Ramanuja in a state of spiritual ecstasy with tears flowing down his cheeks. Ramanuja had lost all body consciousness and was absorbed in the beatific vision of the Lord. The high priest was filled with remorse and threw himself at the feet of Ramanuja beating his head on the ground. Ramanuja regained body consciousness and tenderly raised the postulant sinner, forgave him and healed his wounds with his touch.

Ramanuja spent the major part of the rest of his long life at Srirangam. He spent his time in discoursing on Nammalvar's Tamil Prabandha of thousand verses. It was in one of those discourses that he revealed, the Alvars stress on the glory and sanctity of Sri Saila [Tirupati] which is equated with Vaikuntam in Nammalvar's hymns and instructed one of his disciples, Anantacharya to go and develop that holy place. Many disciples, both lay and monastic, now gathered round him.

## **17. *Yajñesa and Varada***

One day Ramanuja decided to go on a pilgrimage to Tirupati. On the way he arrived at a village

called Ashta-sahasra where he had two disciples — Yajnesa who was very wealthy and Varada who was quite poor. When the party of pilgrims arrived in the village, Ramanuja decided that they would first visit Varada. When they arrived at Varada's lowly hut he was away on his begging round and his wife was home alone. She had only a single threadbare garment and felt she could not show herself with decorum to the great acharya. So she clapped her hands so that the acharya would not think that nobody was home and go away. Ramanuja immediately understood the situation and threw his upper garment into the house. She picked it up and covering herself came out to welcome the acharya. She prostrated herself and offered him water to wash his feet and a place to sit down. She then pondered about how she could entertain these illustrious guests, having not a grain of food in the house and knowing that her husband would never bring home enough to feed everyone. She remembered that there was one particular merchant in the town that had been lusting after her for a long time; she resolved to offer herself to him in order to obtain the necessary ingredients to entertain her guests. She requested the acharya to wait while she went to obtain the ingredients for the feast. Approaching the merchant she informed him that illustrious guests had arrived and begged him to give her all the vessels and foodstuffs. She agreed to come back afterwards so that he could have his way with her. The merchant was greatly pleased and gave her everything that she requested in anticipation of gratifying his lust. She hurried home and prepared a sumptuous meal for Ramanuja and his party. When Varada returned home he was amazed to see the preparations and inquiring from his wife was even more astonished to hear the circumstances. He wept with joy saying — "you are not a human woman but a goddess you have sacrificed everything, even your honour for your guru!" He immediately told Ramanuja who was overwhelmed by their devotion to him and blessed them again and again.

After the meal Varada accompanied his wife to the house of the merchant carrying Ramanuja's *tirtham* (holy water) and *prasadam*. Varada requested that he accept the same and then do as he wished with his wife. The merchant was overcome by feelings of disgust with himself. He walked around the couple and prostrated on the ground in front of them, saying — "you are like my parents — please forgive my ignorance and stupidity and take me to your guru so that I may take refuge in him". Ramanuja accepted him as his disciple and taught him Dharma. Yajnesa was taught that he should give up all pride and learn humility by washing the clothes of all the disciples. The party then continued on their pilgrimage to Tirupati.

## **18. *The antics of Govinda.***

Ramanuja stayed for a year at lower Tirupati residing in the house of Sri Shaila-purna studying the Ramayana with him. One day while walking through the garden he saw Govinda with his hand in the mouth of a snake. Struck with wonder he questioned Govinda about his strange behavior. Govinda explained that he had seen the snake open its mouth at upon looking closer he saw that it had a thorn stuck through its tongue. Govinda had then put his hand into the mouth of the snake in order to extract the thorn and to relieve it from its suffering. Ramanuja was amazed at this act of compassion by the tender hearted Govinda. When Ramanuja returned to Srirangam Govinda accompanied him filled with love and adoration.

One day in Srirangam Govinda's mother in the hearing of Ramanuja scolded him for neglecting his young wife and demanded that he come and live with her according to the way of the world and to consummate their marriage; Ramanuja supported her and instructed Govinda to spend at least one night in bed with his wife. The chamber was prepared and Govinda went in to his wife. The whole night he sat on the bed giving her a discourse on God and His Glories, rapt in the narrative. In the morning the matter was reported to Ramanuja who laughed and said — "Govinda you have passed the greatest of ordeals that a pure soul can be put through — worldly life is not for you" — and immediately ordained him as a Sannyasin.

## **19. *The meeting with Yajna-murti***

There was a celebrated Advaita scholar from the south named Yajna-murti. He had just returned after travelling all over North India challenging and defeating scholars of various traditions in debate. Now hearing about Ramanuja, who had become the leader of the Vaishnava school, he hastened to Srirangam to engage in Vedantic polemic with him. Upon being challenged Ramanuja bowed down to him and said "O Great Minded one! What is the necessity for debate and wrangling? You are a renowned scholar, victory follows you everywhere, I hereby accept defeat." Yajna-murti replied, "If you are accepting defeat does that mean that you accept the flawless doctrine of Advaita and reject the erroneous Vaishnava doctrines?" And in this manner Ramanuja was drawn into debate against his will. For 17 days the arguments and controversy between Impersonalism and Personalism continued. Unable to defeat this great scholar Ramanuja became dejected and took refuge in the Deity of the Math and implored His help. That night in a dream Lord Devaraja appeared and told Ramanuja that the superiority of the path of *bhakti* would be demonstrated on the following day. The next day, during his morning devotions Ramanuja went into a state of divine consciousness. Over-flowing with ecstasy Ramanuja approached the residence of Yajna-murti. Upon seeing his divine refulgence Yajna-murti realised the emptiness of his sophistry, he readily admitted defeat and became a Vaishnava and a disciple of Ramanuja. He was initiated with the name Devaraja-muni. Ramanuja commissioned him to spend his time in writing texts on devotional philosophy beneficial to mankind. In obedience to his guru Devaraja-muni wrote two books in Tamil — *jnana-sara* and *prameya-sara*.

Days passed in this way, with Ramanuja winning hostile opponents to his fold and exhorting Vaishnavas to live a life of devotion and renunciation. His monastery at Srirangam came to be inhabited by seventy-four disciples, all of them learned, all-renouncing and devout.



## ***20. The writing of the Sri-bhashya***

Ramanuja now felt that his first promise to Yamuna had been fulfilled. He had popularized the Tamil Veda and converted large numbers of people to Vaishnavism. Now he decided to fulfil the second — that of producing a Personalist commentary on the Vedanta-sutras of Badarayana. For this purpose he felt it necessary to get Bodhayana's gloss on this Text, as it was an authority on the philosophical tradition which devotional Vaishnavism represented. He could, however, find no copy of it anywhere in the South. He learnt that the only place it was available was at Sarada-pitha in Kashmir, and so set out on the long journey accompanied by his disciple Kuresa.

After a journey of three months they reached Sharada-pitha. The great Pandits received him cordially and were very impressed by his engaging personality and great learning. When he asked for permission to study the Bodhayana gloss in their library, they became alarmed and replied that the book had been worm-eaten and thus lost. After talking to him at great length they felt that if this Personalist scholar studied that text, he would be able to create havoc with Advaita philosophy. Ramanuja became dejected and was lying down in his room in a state of depression when Goddess Sarasvati, the presiding Deity of the Math herself appeared before him. She handed over the gloss to him, and instructed him to depart immediately. On discovering the disappearance of their manuscript, the Pandits sent some stalwart young disciples after the Vaishnavas. After four days journey they overtook Ramanuja and retrieved the manuscript from him. At this, Ramanuja's dismay knew no bounds, however he was relieved when Kuresa informed him that during nights instead of sleeping he had been studying the book and had committed the whole of it to memory. On reaching Srirangam, Ramanuja dedicated himself to writing the commentary now famous under the name Sri-bhashya. Kuresa was his amanuensis and the invigilator to check whether what was dictated was faithful to Bodhayana's ideas.

## ***21. The Conquest***

After completing the Sri-bhashya, accompanied by 74 of his chief disciples, Ramanuja went on a pilgrimage, which was also of the nature of a *Digvijay* (Universal Conquering). Wherever he went he would confront philosophers and theologians of other schools and challenge them to a polemic. He first visited all the Vaishnava pilgrimage centers of Tamil-nadu and Kerala and gradually moved northward, visiting Dvarka, Mathura, Vrindavan, Salagrama, Saketa, Badarinath, Naimisha, Pushkara and at last the Sarada-pitha in Kashmir. The Pandits of Sarada-pitha had acrimonious debates with him, but he was able to convert the ruler of Kashmir to Vaishnavism. Here Ramanuja had a vision of Hayagriva, the Divine Incarnation of Wisdom. Then he went to Kasi (Benares), where he stayed for sometime and converted many learned men to the faith. He then travelled south-ward to Sripurushottama-Kshetra, now known as Puri. He founded there a monastery called Embar Math. The scholars of that place, who controlled the temple, refused to face him in debate for fear of defeat. He next went to Ahobila, situated on Garuda mountain, where he established another monastery. Next he worshipped Narasimha-murti at Isalinga, and afterwards reached the temple of Venkatesa at Tirupati. There he settled a dispute on the question whether the icon of the temple was of Siva or Vishnu, in favor of the Vaishnavas. He then returned to Srirangam via his old residence of Kanchi-puram where he did obeisance to

Varadaraja.

In the course of this 'victory tour', Ramanuja however was defeated by divine intervention on two occasions. One of his objectives of this tour was to standardize the liturgy of all the Vaishnava temples, and to get them to conform to the canons of Pancharatra. He failed at two places — at the great temple of Ananta-padmanabha at Trivandrum and at Jagannatha Puri. It is said that in both-these places, at the earnest prayer of devotees, the Lord transported Ramanuja to a distance of several miles while he was asleep. These are still the only two temples in the South where the codes of the Pancharatra are not followed.

## ***22. Parasara Bhattar***

Sometime after his return, he was able to fulfil his third promise to Yamuna, which was the naming a worthy person after Parasara and Vyasa in gratitude for having produced the Vishnu Purana. Kuresa was previously a wealthy landlord owning vast property near Kanchi-puram. He was also very pious and extremely charitable in disposition. His gates were open from morning till night to give hospitality to all those in need. His wife Andal too was of the same disposition. They attached themselves to Ramanuja and followed him wherever he went. after Ramanuja's relocation to Srirangam, Kuresa lost all interest in worldly life. He abandoned all his wealth and, accompanied by his wife, went to Srirangam to serve Ramanuja. There they maintained themselves by begging. One rainy day they could not go out on their rounds and so remained fasting all day. Then feeling great compassion for her husband, Andal prayed to Ranga-natha for relief and soon a handsome young priest arrived at their house with Maha- prasadam (food offerings) from the temple of Ranga-natha. Kuresa surprised at this inquired of Andal if she had in anyway asked the Lord for anything. When she tearfully affirmed his suspicions he rebuked her and enjoined her never to ask for anything from the Lord ever again.

Tradition has it that 9 months later Andal gave birth to pair of handsome twins, whom Ramanuja named Parasara and Vyasa. He thus fulfilled his third promise to Yamuna. Parasara who came to be known as Parasara Bhattar grew into a great saintly scholar and succeeded Ramanuja as the pontiff of the Srivaishnavas.

## ***23. Dhanurdasa***

Another famous disciple was Dhanurdasa, a handsome accomplished young athlete of the Sudra caste. He was enamoured of a beautiful courtesan by the name of Kanakamba and never left her presence. During the Chaitra festival Kanakamba and Dhanurdasa came to Sriangam to participate in the celebrations. As they walked through the crowd, Dhanurdasa holding an umbrella over Kanakamba's head to shield her from the sunshine, they were seen by Ramanuja as he returned from the Kaveri river. Ramanuja was intrigued to see such devotion to a woman and such uninhibited of public display affection and solicitude. Wondering what it was that made one so madly in love as to disregard everything else including public opinion, Ramanuja sent for Dhanurdasa and asked him to explain himself. Dhanurdasa replied that it was Kanakamba's eyes that had so entranced him — "those eyes and my heart are one, if her beauty should fade my heart would burst"! Ramanuja replied — "My son what if I could show you a pair of eyes more beautiful than those — of one whose beauty would never fade?" "Ah master, if you could it would be a great gain to me!" The great Acharya took him into the temple, into the sanctum

sanctorum and showed him the eyes of the Lord of the universe, Dhanurdasa was transported with rapture and could not move. He surrendered there and then to Ranga-natha.

After she had heard all these things Kanakamba too took refuge with Ramanuja and became his disciple, She even excelled her lover in wisdom and all other spiritual perfections. While going down to the river to take his daily bath Ramanuja would hold the hand of a brahmin disciple but when returning he would hold Dhanurdasa's hand. When questioned by the infuriated Brahmins Ramanuja replied — "Dhanurdasa is utterly devoid of the threefold vice of pride — pride of learning, pride of wealth and pride of birth, but you are all completely soiled by them. The waters of the sacred Kaveri purify my body but my mind is purified by the touch of this *Manamati* — a devotee imbued with great wisdom and love of God". The Brahmins hung their heads in shame and retreated.

## **24. *Kulottunga Chola I***

The Cola king, Kulottunga I (also called *Krimikantha* 'the worm-throated' by the Vaishnavas) a fanatical Saivite, residing in his capital of Kanchi decided to make Saivism the state religion. To accomplish this purpose he first had to convert all the Vaishnavas. This could be easily done his ministers advised him, by converting the pontiff of the Vaishnavas. If conversion through debate did not work his execution would achieve the desired end. Accordingly Ramanuja was summoned to the capital for this purpose. Kuresa, suspicious of the Chola invitation insisted on going in Ramanuja's place and together with Periya Nambi set out for the capital. Thinking Kuresa to be Ramanuja the king received the two well and invited them to participate in *dharmacharcha* (discussion of the dharma). Very soon the king and his pandits realised that they would not be able to achieve their aim through theological arguments and so they issued an ultimatum. Either sign a proclamation that there is none greater than Siva or face death. Kuresa immediately answered "Why, every child knows a *drona* is greater!" (both *Siva* and *drona* refer to measures). The king was furious and decided to punish them immediately. He decided not to carry out the death sentence because Ramanuja had exorcised a demon from his sister when she was a child. Instead he ordered their eyes to be gouged out. Tradition has it that Kuresa exclaimed. "You need not take this trouble, I myself will pluck out my eyes, for after seeing a great sinner like you they are unfit for seeing the sacred person of my guru Ramanuja!" He then gouged his own eyes out and cast them before the astonished king. Unfortunately Periya Nambi Mahapurna, being an old man, could not bear the ordeal and died. Some people escorted Kuresa back to Srirangam. Kuresa retired to a great Vaishnava temple Tirumalirunsolai near Madurai after sending word to Ramanuja of what had happened.

## **25. *King Bhittideva***

After being informed of the intentions of the King, Ramanuja and his followers resolved to leave the Chola territory and fled through the hilly regions of the Western Ghats. They were helped by a tribe of chandalas and were delivered to the modern Mysore territory, which was then ruled by the Jain King Bhittideva of the Hoysala dynasty. The Vaishnavas were well received by the King and were very soon engaged in polemics with the court pandits. Ramanuja refuted all their arguments and defeated them. The King Bhittideva then resolved to convert to Vaishnavism and

was named Vishnu-Vardhana. A large number of his subjects were also converted. With that king's active patronage Ramanuja founded a great temple at Yadava-giri now known as Melkote, and five others in other places. Gradually large numbers of Srivaishnava refugees fleeing from persecution crossed the border into Mysore territory and colonies of Srivaishnavas were established around

these temples. Melkote was particularly favoured by Ramanuja because of the abundant availability there of the white earth with which Srivaishnavas put the mark of Vishnu on their foreheads.

## ***26. Sampat-kumara***

There is an interesting tradition about the deity at Melkote temple. The villagers informed Ramanuja that the ancient local temple had been destroyed by some Muslim invaders. The icon known as Yadavadripati had been saved and buried by the priests somewhere. That night Ramanuja had a dream about the very same Deity and its whereabouts were revealed to him. Ramanuja then retrieved the idol by digging up an ant-hill and made arrangements for its installation. Later a magnificent temple came into existence there. The Deity was not satisfied with this because the Utsava-vigraha (a proxy icon for being taken in procession outside the temple) was missing. The Deity informed Ramanuja that the proxy icon known as Sampat-kumara had been stolen by the Muslims and was then in the keeping of a Muslim ruler at Delhi. Ramanuja and a disciple went to Delhi and impressed the Muslim king by their learning and holy demeanor. But once they had found the image they were informed that the daughter of the king had become very attached to this particular image. Nevertheless the king delivered the image to the two Srivaishnavas and they departed immediately. The king's daughter Bibi Nachiyar who was deeply attached to the Deity became inconsolable and set out in pursuit accompanied by a contingent of soldiers. After Ramanuja had crossed the border a chandala tribe helped them to reach Melkote by carrying the sacred icon. The chandalas have been given special privileges at the Melkote temple.

Bibi Nachiyar accompanied by one prince named Kubera crossed the border and continued their pursuit to Melkote. When they arrived Bibi Nachiyar was overcome with emotion at the sight of Sampat-kumara. The Vaishnavas were astonished to see such devotion in a Muslim princess. Ramanuja recognised her as a great devotee, and allowed her to enter the temple. Ultimately her body is said to have 'dissolved' into the body of Sampat-kumara. An image of her is still kept and revered in many temples in the south in recognition of her unparalleled devotion. Kubera then renounced everything, went to Srirangam and took initiation from Ramanuja. It is said that once a dog stole his bread as he was baking it, he ran after it calling out "Narayana! Wait let me smear a little ghee on it, so that you will enjoy it more!" Such was his capacity to see the Lord everywhere and in all things.

## ***27. Return to Srirangam***

After Kulottunga's death in 1118 a more tolerant and liberal-minded ruler succeeded to the Chola throne. Ramanuja decided to return to Srirangam. Sorrow-stricken at the prospect of separation from him, his devotees at Melkote implored him to instil his presence into a statue of him that they had made. Leaving Yadava-giri, Ramanuja and his disciples set out on their journey. At a place called Tirumalirunsolai they stopped to worship the Lord Sundarabahu. Andal the great woman saint of the Srivaishnava pantheon had once vowed to offer a hundred jars of sweet rice and a hundred jars of butter to the Lord Sundarabahu. But she had never been able to fulfil this

vow and so Ramanuja made the offerings in her name. For this act of love he was named as Godagraja — the elder brother of Andal.

They then proceeded to Srirangam visiting many holy places on the way such as Srivilliputtur, the birthplace of Andal and Alvar-tirunagari, the birthplace of Nammalvar the first and greatest among the Alvar saints. Upon their return the Srivaishnavas who had remained were delirious with joy. Kuresa hearing of Ramanuja's return hastened to meet him accompanied by his son Parasara Bhattar. The joy of the two great saints meeting was indescribable. Ramanuja was very pained at Kuresa's having been blinded. One day he exhorted Kuresa to pray to Lord Varadaraja to restore his sight, Kuresa refused to ask the Lord for anything and after much chiding by Ramanuja went to the Lord and prayed: O Lord I beseech you to let me see your bewitching beauty' — the Lord responded by granting him that wish but Kuresa could see nothing else but the bewitching beauty that he had requested! Kuresa remained with Ramanuja for another two years and then passed away surrounded by devotees chanting the Holy Name. Ramanuja then took the opportunity of appointing Parasara Bhattar as his successor. At the height of his career at Srirangam Ramanuja's lectures were attended by 700 male sannyasis, 1200 householders, and 500 nuns (called *kothis* in Tamil) — besides innumerable non-brahmin devotees and students.

## ***28. The Last Days***

After the death of Kuresa, Ramanuja lived for another 17 years, which he spent peacefully at Srirangam, teaching his disciples and devotees and producing some of his later works dealing with the pure Vaishnava form of devotion. One day, while giving a discourse, he suddenly lost body consciousness. After a while, two drops of blood trickled down the corners of his eyes. On returning to normal consciousness he was asked by his devotees the reason for this trance-like state. He replied. "Today the people of Sriperumbudur have made me a captive of their love. After invoking my life force into the stone icon, they have this moment completed the rite of "the opening of the eyes".

## ***29. The Final Teaching***

When Ramanuja felt that the time of his earthly sojourn was drawing to a close he summoned all his disciples and gave them a summary of his teachings and an exhortation to follow them. The gist of those teachings were as follows;

'Worship all holy men exactly as you would do in the case of your own spiritual preceptor. Have sincere faith in the teachings of the previous acharyas and Alvars. Never become enslaved by your senses. Be not satisfied with the acquisition of worldly knowledge; spend your time reading literature which deals with the greatness of God and the wonders of His creation. By the Guru's grace, the attraction of the senses will cease to torment you. Learn to maintain equanimity in feelings of joy and sorrow, attraction and aversion. Enjoy the chanting of the names and glories of God's devotees with as much relish as the chanting of God's names and glories. Never forget that service to the devotees of God is greater than service to God Himself. He who renders service to God's devotees speedily attains God Himself. Do not take the life of a devotee as a

means for acquiring any selfish advantage.

Devote a portion of the day, at least one hour, to the contemplation of the greatness of your spiritual preceptor and some time every day to the reading of the sacred writings of the Alvars or the acharyas. Always seek the company of those that pursue the path of self-surrender to God and avoid the company of those that say, "There are other paths leading to salvation." Do not associate with materialists who are in pursuit of prosperity and sense-enjoyment, but mingle with the devotees of God to the extent possible. Whoever looks upon the sacred icons of God as mere stones, his own spiritual teacher as an ordinary human being, eminent devotees as high or low according to the caste of their birth, the holy water that has touched the feet of God and has as a consequence acquired the power to purify and purge one of all sins as ordinary water, the sacred Mantras as a collection of sounds, and the Supreme Lord of all the worlds as one not higher than the Devas — let him be considered as an unworthy person fit only for purgatory."

"He who has truly surrendered himself at the feet of God should not spend thought on his future, which is entirely at the disposal of God. For the least anxiety felt in that connection betrays hypocrisy in self-surrender. One's present life is entirely determined by the past karmas; so it is not proper to grieve over it. Let not the performance of your duties be regarded as a means for achieving worldly rewards, but consider it only as service rendered to the Supreme Lord. Study the Sri-bhashya and teach it to others — this is most pleasing to God. If this is not possible, study the holy writings of Saint Sattakopan and the other great Saints, and teach them to qualified disciples. Failing this, spend your lives in service to the Lord in the sacred places. Or else construct a hut at Yadavadri (Melkote) and live there in perfect peace. Or remain in your present station, surrendering all your burdens to God and remain immersed in the contemplation of the Sacred Mantras. If none of the above is possible, seek out a holy man who is full of wisdom, devotion and desirelessness, and move with him in such a way that he may be kind towards you. Renouncing all your egoism, follow his teachings — this itself is a means for your enlightenment.

Distinguish between those who are your friends, enemies and neutrals. The spiritually-minded are your friends; those who are inimical to God are your enemies and the worldly-minded are your neutrals. Let your heart rejoice at the sight of friends as though you have come across fine pleasure-giving objects. At the sight of your enemies let your heart tremble as though you are confronted by a tiger. To the indifferent, pay as much attention as to a pile of rubble. Association with devotees, spiritually-minded and spiritual teachers will lead to spiritual illumination. Never ingratiate yourself with atheists for the sake of worldly gain. For such benefits are sure to turn your mind from God. Remembering that the All-merciful Lord is ready to supply you all that you pray for, never beg of your enemies."

### **30. *Pari-nirvana***

Yatiraja perceiving how distressed the disciples were becoming with the thought of his imminent demise addressed them saying; "My children I have now dispelled your ignorance, you have realised that the Bhagavan, bhakti and bhagavathas are but one. How then can a devotee ever be separated from God? I am within you, and you are within me forever. Grieve not over the demise of this perishable frame".

Still the disciples lamented the separation from Yatiraja's divine form. Yatiraja then instructed them to summon the artisans and have a statue made. Within three days they had completed their work. Having the statue properly consecrated he transferred his powers into it. He then said to the

assembled Srivaishnavas; "My children, this is my second half, there is no difference between

this statue and myself, from now on this statue has been empowered with my spiritual energy". He then laid his head on Govinda's lap and placed his feet on that of Andhrapurna. With Yamunacharya's wooden sandals placed in front of him passed into the supreme state of supreme bliss. It was noon on a Saturday, the 10th day of the bright half of the month of Magha in the year 1137 AD. A few days later Govinda joined him and Parasara Bhattar took over the pontificate of the Srivaishnava community.

### **31. Works of Ramanuja**

The Opus Magnus of Ramanuja is the Sri-bhashya — a commentary on the Vedanta-sutras of Badarayana which is one of the three basic texts of Vedanta (the others being the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads). Besides this, he produced nine other works. These are:—

1. *Vedanta-sangraha*, an independent work expounding the philosophy of the Upanishads;
2. *Vedanta-sara* and
3. *Vedanta-dipa* which are brief synopses on the Vedanta-sutras;
4. *Gita-bhashya*, a commentary on the Bhagavad Gita;
5. *Nitya-grantha* dealing with daily rituals and devotional practices for Vaishnavas.
6. *Gadyatraya*, three prose works which are of great sectarian importance with a theological base.
7. *Saranagati-gadya*, an exposition on the greatness of self-surrender (prapatti) and the method thereof.
8. *Sriranga-gadya*, is a prayer to Lord Sri Ranganatha to grant eternal servitude
9. *Vaikuntha Gadya* which is a poetic description of Vaikuntha — the Lord's eternal Transcendental Abode. This work is used as a contemplative device which brings great solace.

