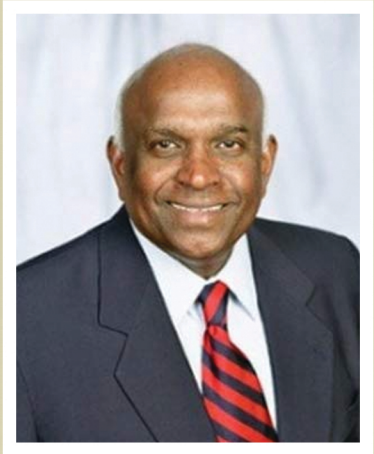
SRI AYYAPPA SOCIETY OF TAMPA, INC
SASTA
Est.2000
SRI AYYAPPA VISION
2022
A PUBLICATION OF SRI AYYAPPA SOCIETY OF TAMPA

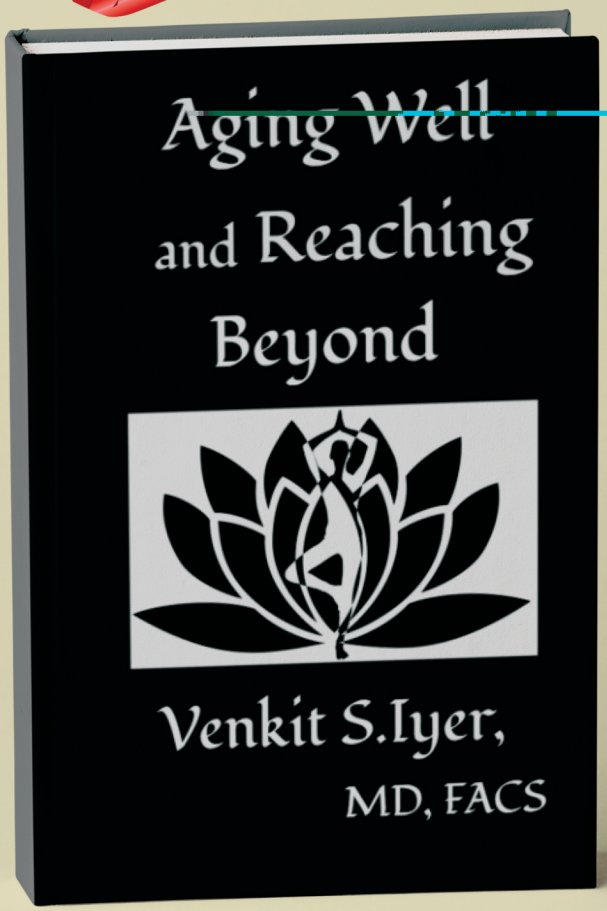
Aging Well and Reaching Beyond!

JUST PUBLISHED

Dr. Venkit S. Iyer, a retired general and vascular surgeon and a long time resident of Palm Harbour, Florida has recently published a new book with the above title. It contains useful information on preventinve health, wellness measures, elder care and end of life issues. Aging is a process and not a disease. Part of it is due to built in codes in our genes, which is “Nature”. However part of it is due to our habits, behaviour and conduct , which is “Nurture”. The book is based on facts and science. It is a must read book for senior citizens, providing information as to how to live well, age gracefully and end the journey of life peacefully. It is available on Amazon and Barnes and Noble websites.



Dr. VENKIT S. IYER



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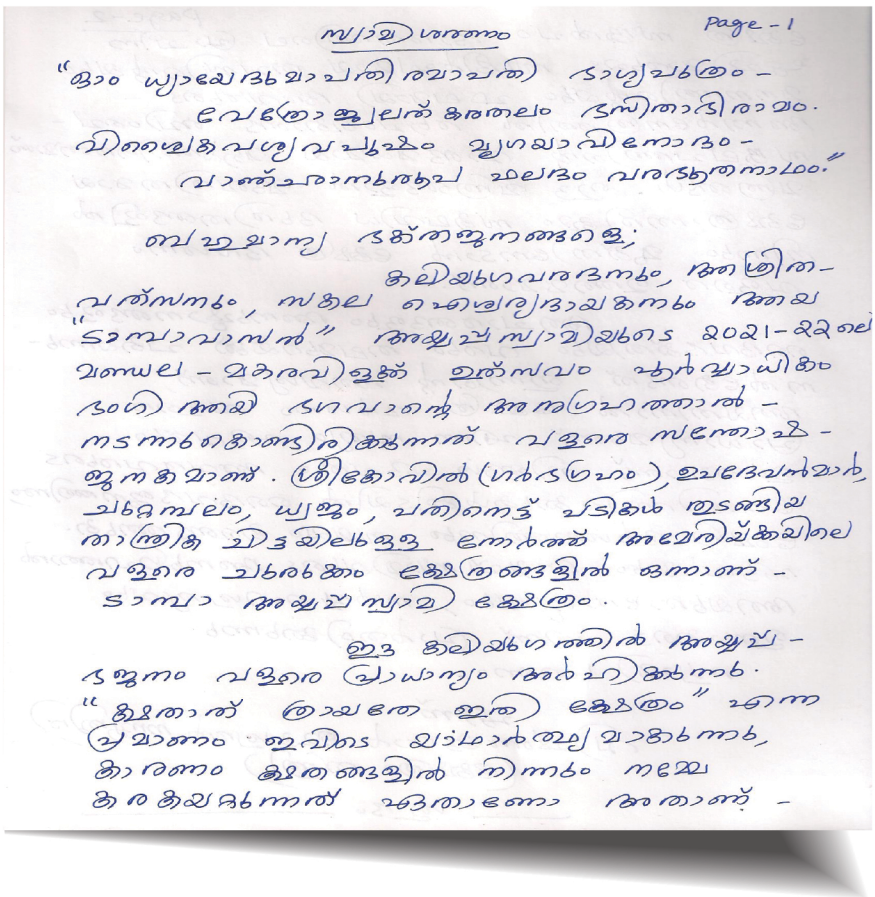
MESSAGE FROM TANTRI

Sri.Vishnukumar Eswaran Namboothiri
Tantri



സ്വാമി ശരണം Page - 1

"ശാം ധ്യായേദ്ദ്യാചിരവാചി ദാഗ്വ്യചരിതം -
വേദോ ജ്വലൻ കരുതലം ദുസിതാദിരാവം.
വിശ്വൈകവശ്യവചുഷം മൃഗയാവിനോദം -
വാഞ്ഛാനടരൂപ ഫലദം വരദൂതനാമം."

ബഹുമാന്യ ഭക്തജനങ്ങളെ;

കലിയുഗവരദനും, അഭിഷിക്ത-
വത്സലനും, സകല ഐശ്വര്യദായകനും അയ
"ടാമ്പാവാസൻ" അയ്യപ്പസ്വാമിയുടെ 2021-22ലെ
മണ്ഡല - മകരവിളക്ക് ഉത്സവം പൂർവ്വാധികം
ഭംഗി അതി ഭഗവാന്റെ അനുഗ്രഹത്താൽ -
നടന്നുകൊണ്ടിരിക്കുന്നത് വളരെ സന്തോഷ-
ജനകമാണ്. ശ്രീകോവിൽ (ഗർഭഗൃഹം), ഉപദേവൻമാർ,
ചുറ്റമ്പലം, ധ്വജം, പതിനെട്ട് പടികൾ തുടങ്ങിയ
താന്ത്രിക ചിട്ടയിലുള്ള നേർത്ത് അമേരിക്കയിലെ
വളരെ ചുരുക്കം ക്ഷേത്രങ്ങളിൽ ഒന്നാണ് -
ടാമ്പാ അയ്യപ്പസ്വാമി ക്ഷേത്രം.

ഈ കലിയുഗത്തിൽ അയ്യപ്പ -
ഭജനം വളരെ പ്രാധാന്യം അർഹിക്കുന്നു.
"ഭൂതനാഥ രായതേ ഇതി ക്ഷേത്രം" എന്ന
പ്രമാണം ഇവിടെ പ്രാവർത്തികമാക്കുന്നു,
കാരണം ഭൂതങ്ങളിൽ നിന്നും നമ്മെ
കരകയറ്റുന്നത് ഏതാണോ അതാണ് -

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MESSAGE FROM TANTRI

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ക്ഷേത്ര സങ്കൽപം. ഭാരതത്തിലെ പ്രാചീന ഋഷിവര്യരുടെ സൂക്ഷ്മശരീര തപശ്ശക്തിയുടെയും മനനത്തിന്റെയും ഫലമായി അവരുടെ - അന്തർനേത്രത്തിൽ രൂപംകൊണ്ട ബിംബ-സങ്കല്പത്തിന്റെ വാങ്മയമായ മൂർത്തീകരണമാണ് വന്ദനങ്ങൾ. ഈ വന്ദനങ്ങളാൽ ആവരിതമായ ക്ഷേത്രാന്തരീക്ഷം സകലവിധ ദുരിതങ്ങളിൽ നിന്നും മുക്തിനേടാൻ ക്ഷേത്ര ദർശനം വളരെ ഉത്തമമാണ്.

ആചാരങ്ങളും അനുഷ്ഠാനങ്ങളും ദൈവദർശനവും വരും തലമുറയ്ക്ക് പകർന്നു-നൽകേണ്ടത് ഇന്നിന്റെ ആവശ്യമാണ്, അതിനാൽ ക്ഷേത്ര ദർശനം വളരെ പ്രാധാന്യമർഹിക്കുന്നു എന്ന സത്യം ഏവരും - ഉൾക്കൊണ്ട് നിങ്ങൾ ഏവരും അവരവരുടെ ജോലിത്തിരക്കുകൾക്കിടയിൽ നൈവേദ്യമുണ്ണുന്നതിനും ക്ഷേത്ര ദർശനത്തിനും സമയം കണ്ടെത്തുക. ഏവർക്കും അയ്യപ്പ സ്വാമിയുടെ അനുഗ്രഹത്താൽ ആയുരാരോഗ്യവും, സർവ്വ ഐശ്വര്യവും ഉണ്ടാകട്ടെ എന്ന് പ്രാർത്ഥിക്കുന്നു.

സ്വാമി ശരണം.

എന്ന്
വിഷ്ണുകുമാർ ഇടശ്ശേരിൽ നമ്പൂതിരി
(ക്ഷേത്രം തന്ത്രി)

ഗുരു.

CITY OF TAMPA

OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

Jane Castor, Mayor

Greetings:

It is a pleasure to join the Sri Ayyappa Society of Tampa, Inc. (SASTA) in welcoming you to the **Mandala Vratham Season** held November 16, 2021 through January 16, 2022, at the Ayyappa Temple of Tampa on Maple Lane. This very special forty-one-day event features worship, activities, rituals, and celebrations, and where devotees are dedicated to leading simple and pious lives. It is an honor to provide this letter of greetings and well-wishes that is included in this special Sri Ayyappa Souvenir Publication.

Dedicated faith-based organizations provide so many needed services to the neighborhoods they represent and play an important role in the social and cultural life in their communities. The Sri Ayyappa Society of Tampa, established in 2000, is a nonprofit religious, social and charitable organization with the mission of sharing Hindu culture and traditions through programs and education, and has contributed substantially to the Tampa Bay community over the years.

For those who are visiting from around the state of Florida and the nation, I encourage you to experience beautiful Tampa and discover our exciting and diverse city. Our many world-class attractions include The Florida Aquarium, Busch Gardens, and ZooTampa at Lowry Park, and of particular interest are the Tampa Bay History Center, Tampa Museum of Art, Glazer Children's Museum, Curtis Hixon Waterfront Park, Water Works Park, Julian B. Lane Riverfront Park and Sparkman Wharf, all located along the Tampa Riverwalk, and nearby Perry Harvey, Sr. Park, each honoring our community's history, heritage, and commitment to the arts.

Again, welcome, and my best wishes to each of you.

Sincerely,

Jane Castor

Jane Castor

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EDITORIAL NOTES

Sri. Rajesh Ramachandran
Editor-in-Chief

Sri.M. P. Ravindra Nathan
Editorial Advisor

Dear Devotees

Swamy Sharanam

We are happy to bring you this souvenir, Sri Ayyappa e-Vision 2022, our 15th Annual Publication consisting of a wealth of information about our Sri Ayyappa Swamy Temple of Tampa, now considered the Sabarimala of the West. The editorial committee has strived hard to put together a nice collection of spiritual, religious and intellectual articles, pictorial display of the many temple events, messages from dignitaries and a few essays from our young writers too, the leaders of tomorrow.

No doubt, 2021 has been a challenging year because of the Covid-19 pandemic that has been raging for over two years now and no family or institution was left untouched. Hospitals saw a record number of losses of lives, many businesses folded, unemployment rate went up and schools were forced to close and go on remote learning, much to the dissatisfaction of the students and parents, just to name a few. The stress levels among all of us have been unimaginable because of the frequent lock-downs, quarantine isolation, inability to attend indoor gatherings and more, putting all of us in an emotional whirlpool.

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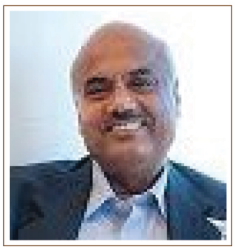
Sri. Ravi Nair

Sri. Venkit Iyer

Sri. Jayraj Nair

Sri. Duzianthan Mohandoss

However, during these times of crises, our Sri Ayyappa Temple of Tampa stood as a beacon of light and hope, providing mental comfort, physical support, and spiritual guidance to all devotees. Observing all the precautions for prevention of the spread of the pandemic, the temple has been able to operate fully giving the devotees the much needed comfort and connection—emotional, spiritual and physical as well. All the temple functions, religious and cultural programs went without interruption while strictly adhering to the guidelines recommended by the CDC. It is a great credit to our priests and temple executives that we didn't need to close the temple even for one day. And devotees on their part have been very disciplined in complying with the prevention guidelines.

As you thumb through this souvenir, you will read many articles that are interesting, informative and, appealing to your taste and imagination. Ravi Nair explains the true meaning of 'Satyameva Jayathe' while Udayan and Raji Menon talks about the 'Chinmaya Mission Connection,' that has done a world of good to our children. Venkit Iyer's 'Yogic Approach to the pandemic,' should be followed by everybody. And Rishi Nair, only 17 yrs, clearly explains the significance of the Holy Eighteen Steps. Dr Venugopal Menon's very scholarly article explains why 'Sri Dharma Sastha' occupies the pinnacle of the celestial pantheons. Dr. Susheela Nathan explains how strong faith and optimism can lead to positive and even miraculous outcomes in one's daily life. Our President Vijay Narayanasamy gives an overview of all the new things that have happened in the temple during the past year in addition to all the current operations. There is so much more to read in this souvenir and we hope you enjoy all of them.

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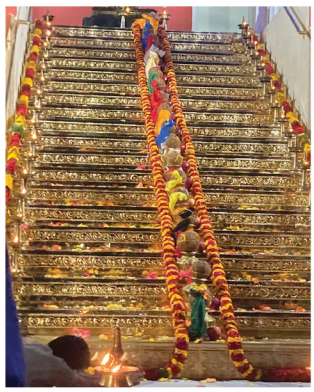
Ayyappas with Irumudi climbing towards the Sannidhanam


Panchaloha cladding of the Holy Eighteen Steps

This year's Mandala season saw many more Ayyappas coming from all over the US, climbing the holy 18 steps with the irumudi, further confirming Tampa Vasa Ayyappa's Sannidhanam has become the destination for Ayyappa worship in the calendar of many devotees. And it has truly become the Sabarimala of the West. Some of the key celebrations included Skanda Sashti with Shatru samhara homam, peaceful interfaith prayer for Bangladeshi Hindus, Kotisomavaram celebrations with special abhishekam, Dhanteras celebration, many padipoojas, Thaipoosam and more.

The Panchaloha cladding of the holy18 steps, certainly one of the most divine celebrations of the season attended by a large number of devotees, needs special mention here. All the divine 18 steps were covered by Panchaloha, specifically crafted and molded to fit each step by artisans from India and brought to Tampa. And our priests Seshadri Iyer and Dileep Narasipura performed the auspicious rituals. The bhajan singing of Sri Manoj from Orlando during the evening was very enjoyable and added to the spiritual atmosphere of the entire evening. And the holy steps were opened to the devotees soon after the ceremony

Noted speaker and author Brian Solis once said, "Community is much more than belonging to something; it's about doing something together that makes belonging matter." We believe our shared sense of purpose and vision along with hard work and dedication has made Tampa Bay SASTA community very strong and this has resulted in the tremendous progress of our temple in such a short time. With the blessings of Lord Ayyappa we hope our temple would continue to prosper in the days to come.

Swamiye Sharanam Ayyappa
Tampa Vasane' Sharanam Ayyappa

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MESSAGE FROM PRESIDENT

Dear Devotees,

Swami Sharanam!

"Faith sees the invisible, believes the unbelievable, and receives the impossible."

Corrie ten Boom

As President of the Sri Ayyappa Temple of Tampa, it is a wonderful opportunity to communicate with you again on behalf of the Executive Committee. We are so thankful and feel blessed for the love, faith, generosity and the way in which our local communities and out of town/state devotees have embraced our temple into their lives and worship.

WHAT IS NEW:

Religious:

1) As advised by our Tantri and in line with Sabarimala, our temple's yearly Utsavam (festival) was conducted coinciding with Panguni Uthiram.
2) The biggest blessings for the Ayyappa devotees were the installation of the Panchaloha Padi for the Holy 18 steps during this Mandala season.
3) Avani Avittam one of the most auspicious festivals for changing the sacred thread, was conducted.
4) Karkidaka Vavu Bali rituals were performed in memory of the departed souls of ancestors.
5) A series of homams with a large group of Rithviks/Priests were conducted this year— 1008 Modaga Ganesha Homam, Chandi Homam and Shatru Samhara Homam.

All the newly introduced religious events were well received by the devotees with their attendance and contributions.

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TEMPLE OPERATIONS IN THE NEW WORLD:

Conducting temple operations during the pandemic under CDC guidelines, adapting to constantly changing rules and maintaining the monthly commitments with little foot traffic were the biggest challenge and learning. Thanks to our banking partners, vendors, priests, committee members and devotees for helping us cope and transition to the new way of conducting business. Quick adoption to online pooja booking platform and live streaming of temple functions using social media helped us stay connected with our devotees. This was augmented with the coverage of our Vishu and Panachaloha Padi opening in Janam TV that went viral with over 400 thousand views globally.

Next Generation Kids' Involvement: The New play area encompassing multiple activities has been well received by our kids. This mandala season saw a record number of kids doing Irumudi as well as Angha pradakshinam (Sayana Pradakshinam)

Coming together for a Humanitarian Cause: SASTA and Tampa families came together and donated a truck load of clothes, essential home goods and other needed materials to the Afghan Refugee Settlement program in Tampa.

Sanatan Dharma Partnership: We were honored and blessed by the visit of Sri Pujya Shobitswarupdas Swami and Sri Pujya Vidyavatsaldas Swami from BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir to our Temple. They shared useful dharmic practices with the devotees, blessed our devotees, priests and shared the Annakut Diwali Sweets.

WHAT IS NOT NEW:

Monthly and yearly religious events are being continued and, performed ritually with flawless execution. We owe this to the entire SASTA working teams.

Positive feedback from devotees far and near: We have been getting repeated positive feedback, three most common comments from devotees are: Very peaceful and beautiful, Divine place and Non-commercial environment.

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Community Give back /Community Partnership continues and very many local and national organizations are engaging and using our premises for charity and other value-added programs. We also continue to donate to 'needy meal programs' and other charitable initiatives in our local community.

Mandala Season, the most prominent season for Ayyappa Swami, was religiously observed with daily Abhisekham for the Lord and weekly Padi Pooja. Swamis from Indianapolis, Massachusetts, Washington, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, New Jersey, Tennessee, Ohio, California, Michigan, Texas and Florida have visited Tampa Ayyappa temple this season to perform their Irumudi rituals.

The temple's progress is all His blessings along with the sincere support from our community and volunteers. However, as a New Temple which experienced the effect of the pandemic during the initial years, we still need to continue to work towards meeting our monthly operational expenses and work towards paying off our loan of about 1.1 million dollars. This will only be possible with your kind support. This is your community Temple, and we are confident that you will continue to support it.

Please accept our whole-hearted appreciation to all those who stood by us and the temple in these unprecedented pandemic times. Special thanks to our Trustee Leadership, founding members, our Priests, fellow Trustees, all committee members, volunteers and devotees. As the journey continues, we are looking forward to serving the Temple with your continued support.

May Lord Ayyappa continue to bless us all.

Sri. Vijay Narayansamy

President,
(On behalf of the Executive Committee.)

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MESSAGE FROM TRUSTEE CHAIR

Dr Ananthakrishna Pillai, MD
Chairman, Board of Trustees, SASTA

Dear SASTA family and devotees,

Hope you and your families are staying safe during these challenging times.
I was entrusted the role of the Trustee Chairman in this unprecedented time. The COVID-19 pandemic is affecting each of us and our communities in different ways. Our temple is no exception. With multiple phases of this pandemic, road to recovery has been much slower than expected. I am grateful to our priests who are continuing their duties and doing all the required rituals in the temple and taking care of the community religious needs.

The Executive committee, sub committees and volunteers deserve an appreciation for playing a vital role in keeping the temple operational during this pandemic. With Lord Ayyappa's Grace and devotees' contributions we were able to just sustain this COVID period. I strongly encourage all community members to actively volunteer and make financial contributions to upkeep your Ayyappa Temple. It is a great privilege and honor to serve as Trustee Chair.

Thank You All and looking forward for your continued support to grow our Great & Unique Ayyappa Temple.

Swamiye Sharanam

Dr A.K.Pillai, SASTA Trustee Chairman

OUR PRIESTS AT SRI AYYAPPA TEMPLE OF TAMPA

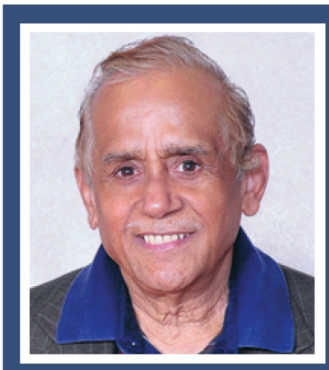
Sri: Sheshadri Iyer

Priest Sri.V.Seshadri Rajan, Hails from the family of well-known Purohits and graduated on Vedic Adhyanam Educations from 1986 – 1993 at Sri. Raja Veda Kavya padasala. (An ancient Veda padasala institutions of 5 centuries old in Kumbakonam, Tamilnadu, India). Conferred with the certificate of "VEDA BHUSHANAM "– Yajur Veda & Temple Pooja Rituals, Agamas. Well versed with conducting various Yagna's, Vedic Chanting's, Kumbhabhishekams, Temple Rituals, Puja's, Alankarams and was blessed with lots of appreciations from reputed institutions. He started serving Tampa Ayyappa Temple since May 2021 and all devotees appreciates his services.

Sri: Dilip Narasipura

Sri. Dilip Srinivasa Narasapura, a graduate from Sri Venkateshwara Vedapatashala (Veda Vignana Peetham) in Tirumala, also successfully completed Vaikhanasa Agama in Sri Venkateshwara Vedapatashala over a period of 8 years. He hails from a Vedic, Scholarly family and obtained all spiritual trainings through Guru shishya Parambara. Very fluent in Telugu, Kannada, Tamil, and English. He joined SASTA since June 2018 to continue service to Lord Ayyappa.

HINDUS CAUGHT UP IN THE PANDEMIC



Dr. CHITTUR V. RADHAKRISHNAN
FOUNDING PRESIDENT,
SRI AYYAPPA TEMPLE OF TAMPA

We Hindus, living in and practicing Sanathana Dharma, do not differentiate between Spiritualism and Religion. Sanathana Dharma is Sanathana or eternal -- everything everlasting and ever present, in everything we, the Hindus do. Adi Shankara shouted centuries earlier, 'Whatever I do, take that as THINE Aradhana"! The present ongoing Pandemic has been diagnosed as caused by infection due to a species of Corona Virus, popularly known as Covid-19. Now the corona viruses are not a new type, they are well known in Medical Virology. We cannot blame this virus, since the virus is doing what is natural to all viruses. They are obligatory parasites and can mutate and replicate fast producing several variants. Nobody knows how long these viruses have been in existence.

Now who is the culprit. The Humans are the culprits. In the Hindu tradition, the humans did some bad Karma. Nobody can escape from the Law of Karma. It is like the Law of Gravity. similar to the third law of Newton which states, "Action and Reaction are equal and opposite." When we do a bad Karma, we pay for it. In a remote corner of the world, a few humans did some bad karma and the entire humanity paid for it. Remember always, VASUDEIVA KUTUMBAKAM - we the humans are all in one family. In a tiny corner of the earth some humans ate dead bat's flesh or other bat materials and the entire world is paying the prize. The Hindu scriptures are shouting for centuries not to eat dead animals, bird, fish, snakes, eggs – they are not Sathvic foods. We have plenty of other safe Sathvic foods to eat but humans in their 'scientific ego' wanted a more effective 'Biological Protein' nutrient and consumed foods not recommended (See Srimad Bhaghavad Gita -for a list of Sathvic foods). Even the modern science has come to its sense and is now recommending not to eat meat and consume vegetarian based diet. Do not think 'Karma' is punishing – it is not but we must face the consequences of our bad Karma.

Let me explain this in simplistic terms. If you are coming to Tampa from Atlanta, you should travel south; instead if you travel North you have to pay the consequences, it is not a punishment. So doing good karma always, avoiding and eschewing bad karma whenever possible and constantly requesting guidance from the Supersoul (The Para-Brahman, erroneously addressed as God), we can live comfortably. Instead, many are blaming the Devathas, Temples and worship services in their ignorance and disappointments. The idea that an Individual can find the Parabrahman is utter ignorance and fully self centered. It is akin to a wave boasting it can find the vast ocean. In the Sanathana Tradition, the question is not whether there is a Paramatman but is there anything else? The Great Philosopher Shankara boldly declared centuries earlier" BRAHMA SATYAM: JAGAT MIDHYA', and so each and every one of us is a little bit of THAT Brahman. Thus each and every one of us has great a responsibility of living with accepted disciplines (ACHARAM).

Sri Veda Vyasa in Sri Vishnu Saharsranama has pointed out thousands of years earlier, "Acharo Prathamo Dharma: Dharmasya Prabhu Achyutha" meaning a disciplined life style is paramount in the Practice of Dharmic life and guidance must be requested daily by meditation on the Brahman (daily meditation - the Gayatri meditation - has been abandoned by many Hindus).When Human leaders fail to lead the public without proper Acharam, the scriptures warns " Athi-Vrishti, anavrithi, Mooshika, Salabha, Suka" - Torrential rain, no rain, disease spreading rodents, birds, insects -, all will torture the earth! Our epics-the Ramayana and the Mhabharatha which are adored the world over, as Theaters of Glory, gives enough examples to render us hope, courage and well Being. Sundara Kantam dealing with the brave acts of Bhaktha Hanuman, is read in our homes to give hope and determination. There are countless episodes in the Maha-Bharatha to guide us. Let us go through one briefly.

The kingdom of Virada was suffering from extreme draught, famine, pestilence and various natural calamities. The King did whatever he can and prayed for guidance. After a few days of prayer, right amount of rains fell, famine was removed, peace returned as if by miracle. The King enquired about this sudden change of fortune. The advisors informed him that 'a pious lady and her five sons have recently moved into their kingdom and that was the reason for the nature to bloom and flourish. The mere entrance of the 'dutiful Pandava brothers who were epitomes of 'dharma, valor, skill, selfless service and honest scholarship,' caused the kingdom to flourish. Thus if one is good, goodness will come around the one.

There is a popular saying "Life is a boomerang. It brings you back what you throw out", so always throw out always good things to help others, hurt nobody, convey your best wishes to everybody, be sincere, humble and cheerfully helpful. Do not be selfish, false friendly, greedy after name, fame and wealth. Devi - the personification of strength -Shakthi is praised " Yogae Yoga Sampoothae". Thus through Yoga and meditation, we can become humble, cooperative and compassionate. Our polluted mind can be cleansed and we can gain more EQ (Emotional intelligence) and Practice Sanathana Dharma.The Avathara of Sri Ayyappa Swami was to establish Dharma by removing Adharma and foolish ignorant ego (symbolized by Mahishi). Aptly adored as Dharma Sastha , the avathara was to show the humanity , the value of disciplined practice and protection of Dharma. Thus our total endeavor should be a recognition of Dharma, reflecting the Upanishadic pronouncement "Dharmo Rakshathi Rakshithaha: (Protect Dharma and Dharma will protect you)." May all be happy, May all be healthy, May all experience auspiciousness, Let none be unhappy ".

Ayyappa the Absolute

About the author: Dr. Venugopal Menon from Houston, is a retired physician, specialized in Pediatrics, Allergy, Asthma & Immunology. He served as the president of McGovern Allergy clinic and also as a director of the Institute of Spirituality and Health. He is a Founding member, past Chairman and Advisory Council Chair of Sri Meenakshi Temple, Houston, and has been recently conferred a title as its Emeritus Chairman. Dr. Menon has published his memoirs, "My Mother Called Me Unni – A Doctor's Tale of Migration", that has been well received as an 'Instant Classic'. He and his wife Devi have been married for fifty-seven years, have three children and six grandchildren.

Dr. Venugopal Menon
MD, FAAP
Houston, TX

Swamiye Saranam Ayyappa.

If God Concept is the Ultimate Inference of the most evolved of His creations, Sri Dharma Sastha occupies the pinnacle of the celestial pantheons. And to hypothesize a nebulous notion of divinity, there is no superior, symbolic enlightenment than what the elemental, principles of Ayyappa impersonation communicate.

Everything about Hari Hara Putra has infinite symbolic significance. Let us attempt a glance into the 'Phenomenon' of Sri Ayyappa.

The very sacred Vigraha of Sri Ayyappa made of Panchaloha represents the Panchadhatu, the five elements of nature. The five metals are gold, silver copper, zinc, and iron. The idol made out of the Panchaloha absorbs energy and disseminates positive vibrations as our five senses are activated. His yogic posture imposing positive energy is emblematic of annihilating negative vibes, fearlessness, the steadiness of mind, and strict discipline assuring a blissful life. The universal uproar against the concept of idol worship in Hinduism is out of sheer ignorance or intentional imprudence.

The temples are deliberately created at places chosen for their positive energy conveyed through the magnetic waves emanated from the structures and can enhance the balance of life, self-confidence, good health, and peace of mind for the devotees visiting them. The layout of every Hindu temple has inherent significance, following a design called Vaastu-Purusha-Mandala, referred to as Yantra. From the sanctity of the Sanctum Sanctorum, the Garbhagriha that houses the deity, to the Vimanam, the Mandapam, the Praharam, the Gopuram, and every aspect has a distinct role and implication.

What is the significance of Pathinettam Padi? Sri Ayyappa's awareness is implied as Shiva and His Cosmic intelligence is expressed in the form of Vishnu. As Hari Hara Putra, both the Awareness and Intelligence are symbolized as Lord Ayyappa. To realize Lord Ayyappa or Awareness-Intelligence, the Brahman, we need to transcend the ego or Ahamkara. The ego is expressed through our body, mind, and intellect in eighteen forms. So, to transcend this one ego, its 18 expressions have to be overcome using 18 different physical, mental and intellectual exercises. The 5 indriyas, the 8 ragas, the 3 gunas, along with vidya and avidya, constitute the eighteen expressions. Another interpretation is of the 18 weapons Lord Ayyappa used to annihilate evil.

And why the 41 days of penance? In religious concepts, one Mandala is 41 days, a prime number, thirty days representing Pratipada, the time between one full moon to the next, along with the eleven days to Ekadasi. In the molecular reunion of Hari and Hara, the Four symbolize the morph of Vishnu with four arms and the One that of Shivaswaroopa, Omkara. During Mandala Vratham, one attains basic purity of body, mind, and spirit which is necessary for any devotional effort. The devotees bathe twice daily, wear black, eat vegetarian food, refrain from sensual pleasures, do

meditation with a mind full of devotion, all with a focus of attaining spiritual cleansing of one's body and mind.

The Sacred Mala of Tulsi or Rudraksham that the aspirant wears further signifies his renunciation of material temptations, allegiance to the Lord, and adherence to ascetic and celibate life.

Equality is exemplified nowhere else as exquisitely as in Sabarimala as devotees call each other Ayyappa with respect, affection, and acceptance, observing penance, and committing time together, engaged in good deeds and thoughts. The devotees follow the guidance of Periaswamy, the senior-most in the group with reverence and obedience, as they cultivate a habit of respecting the elderly and erudite in society.

As Ayyappas climb the trek to the Sannidhi, they are required to carry the Irumudi on their head, with two pouches, the higher one with offerings to the Lord and the lower one for the pilgrim's needs. During the whole climb with the Irumudi on their head, walking on bare feet, the devotee is mandated to keep their heads bent with humility and modesty, discarding every trace of arrogance or vanity.

The issue of women not entering Sabarimala has become controversial out of ignorance, disrespect for faith, and political leverage. Venerating the celibate deity and being kind to women during their weakest days are beyond reasoning for uncivilized minds and ulterior motives. The reverence given to Malikappurathamma abundantly attests to the lofty status of women at Sabarimala. The dedicated shrine for Vavarswami, a Muslim acquaintance of Ayyappa, visited by every pilgrim exemplifies the communal harmony in Kerala, upheld by Ayyappa devotees.

Perhaps the ultimate message from Sabarimala Ayyappa is that of 'Tat Tvam Asi', "Thou Art That", the principal notion symbolic of self-realization that all living beings possess the essence of Brahman, acknowledging the divinity in all. When every pilgrim calls each other Ayyappa, it reflects the understanding that each of us is a part of the Paramatma, declaring the quintessence of Advaita philosophy. As the devotee climbs the Pathinettam Padi, he sees the holy word "Thathwamasi", the Sanskrit word taken out of Chandogya Upanishad, one of the four Mahavakyas in Vedanta Sanatana Dharma.

Considered as the largest pilgrimage in the world, Sabarimala is revered by millions as their final solace, where divinity transcends and translates to the fundamental realities about life and living. Perched at about 1500 feet on the Western Ghat slopes in Kerala, India, aptly named 'God's own country because of the presence of Sri Ayyappa, Sabarimala Sastha. From there, He personifies the highest of philosophical tenets that the most brilliant human minds have pronounced about existence. As much as it offers the utmost comfort and confidence for believers, sadly, it has been a focus of intruders with diverse, offensive intentions, unworthy of mention here.

Sabarimala Dharma Sastha is legendary at many levels. His splendors can appease and gratify every inquisitive mind desirous of knowledge, humble to be receptive, respectful of the enigmatic, and worthy of insightful enrichment. Ayyappa concept represents everything pristine and proper, all the ideals ordained for a laudable living, if one chooses to follow the teachings. The philosophy of one God, one religion, one caste, equality, unity, respect, mutual help, simplicity in living, and ultimate submission to the One High Authority, who is again embodied in each of us, illustrate the highest of spiritual mindfulness.

Can we imagine any nobler, all-encompassing, universal notion, pristine philosophy of Dharma as the future of religions? I am unable to.

Swamiye Saranam Ayyappa

Ask what you can do for God

Dr. Sivaprasad Madduri, MD, FACS

About the Author: Dr. S Madduri is a urologist practicing in Poplar Bluff, Missouri and is also a writer. He was the Editor of AAPI Journal and writes regularly for the local newspapers, Medical Economics and many ethnic magazines.

In temples cosmic and holy
In churches revered and sacred
In mosques divine and synogoguic
We pray God day and night
To help us and our families
Liberate us from sorrows and anguish
Rekindle our lives with Joy and Happiness

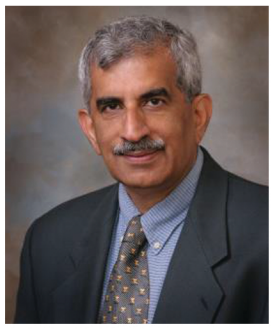
What all we are
And what all we have
Is gift from God
There are no orphans of God
God is like mother
Embraces us with divine love
Never demands any thing in return
We walk one step towards Him
He walks ten steps towards us
His soothing breeze and warm embrace
Overwhelms us with eternal love and divine pleasure
He is our source of life, of wisdom and joy

God, you blessed us with everything we have
How can we return your love and blessings
You are in every man, woman and child
Irrespective of color, creed and religion
Give us the strength to see you in all
Starving child far away land
Homeless with empty stomachs and freezing bones
Natural disasters: cyclones, tsunamis and earth quakes
Bless us to dedicate our lives to take care of those

Love, mercy and compassion should
Surround every act of our lives
Help us to live up to your expectations
You should look at us with broad smile
We know we can count on you
And, you can count on us.

Our Kailash Yathra

Dr Jay K Raman is a surgeon, philanthropist and a writer, based in Houston, Texas.



Dr. Jay K. Raman, M.D. FACS

It is said, Parama Shiva, the Lord We started our pilgrimage from Kathmandu in Nepal. It is a crowded dusty and dirty city like any in India and we felt very much "at home." We prayed at the famous Pashupathinath temple for the success of our yatra. Mr. Rajan got our visas and we started our journey to Tibet by road. After passing the stern looking Chinese soldiers, we crossed "the friendship bridge" (built by the Chinese) to enter Tibet. Slowly the landscape changed. The green hills of Nepal were replaced by the vast flat dusty plains of Tibet with rocky cliffs all around. The first stopof Kailash Himself has to give permission for a person to be able to complete the Kailash yatra. I did not believe in it. But now with my experiences, I have become a believer. It was sobering to realize that many people have gone all the way, but could not complete the yatra because of bad weather, health problems or some other reason.

Essentially the preparation for the trip consists of first, the firm mental commitment and then the physical preparation. We had a complete physical checkup and medical clearance. Regular exercises including walking about 3 to 4 miles with hiking boots is recommended. Also a little trekking experience at a higher altitude like Colorado will be very helpful. Medications like Diamox are a must. About the clothes and other equipment's, your travel agent can advise you.

It was our dream to perform the pilgrimage to Kailash/Manasa Sarovar, partly because of religious and spiritual reasons and also because of the sheer physical challenges involved. We have to thank our dear friends Mr. Raja Puthoor and his wife Dr. Subitha for giving us the final urge. They have already performed the pilgrimage once before. They finalized the plans along with Mr. Rajan Simkhada our travel coordinator at Nepal (www.trektibet.com). We were supposed to go in 2008. Then the Beijing Olympics, and the anti Chinese riots led to the Chinese stopping all visits to Tibet. So the yatra was postponed to 2009. Even then we were not sure of the visas till the last moment. was at Xangmu. Then slowly we went up and up to Nayalam, Saga and Prayang. One word about the hotels or rest places in Tibet. They are very basic. Please carry your own sleeping bags and sheets. The toilettes are terrible. You will be better of using the open fields. Please do watch out for the wild dogs especially at Saga to avoid losing some anatomical parts. It is better to travel slowly by road so that our body can acclimatize to the high altitude.

Manasa Sarovar, Himalayas

The first view of Manasa Sarovar is breath taking. The beautiful emerald green lake with the towering mountains in the back ground is a sight for ever to cherish. We could only get a vague vision of Kailsh as there were some low clouds.

> Obviously Lord Shiva wanted us to wait a little bit more. We spent the night in a tent by the lake side. It was freezing cold, but we did not feel it because of all the excitement. It was one of the most beautiful night skies I have ever seen. The clear sky was filled with stars and the whole galaxy was brightly lit. It is believed during such nights Apsaras come down from the heavens to take a bath in the lake. Probably they are shooting stars, meteoroids. I did not wait around too long for the Apsaras, as I am quite happy with the Apsara, I already have.

In the morning we drove to Darchen (Darshan?). Mr. Rajan arranged a trial trek up Gangtak Gopa. There we had our first clear vision of Holy Kailash.
The abode of Shiva looked so majestic and serene.
There are hundreds of mountains in the Himalayas including Mt. Everest which we saw from the Tibetan side. But Mt. Kailash stands alone in its grandeur with a distinct halo around it.

Our eyes were filled with tears at the holy sight.
The first sight of Mount Kailash was one of the most moving experiences in my life. With tired legs and a mind slightly unnerved by the high altitude, you suddenly wake up to see one of the most magnificent sights in the world. The snow bound abode of Lord Shiva and Parvati. Whether you are a believer or not for a moment you are spellbound. Yes, You see the abode of Lord Shiva right in front of your eyes. All the great Shiva epics pass through your mind and the loud chanting OM NAMASHIVAYA blast into your years even though there is absolute silence all around. Your eyes fill with tears of pure ecstasy. Skanda Purana says "As the dew is dried up by the morning sun, so are the sins of human beings by the sight of Himalayas, Holy Mt. Kailash."

Next day we started on our Parikrama or Kora in Tibetan language. Mt.Kailash is holy to Tibetans also. The Buddhists do the parikrama in a clock wise direction like us, while the Bonapas an ancient pre Buddhist sect do it in an anti clockwise direction. Mr. Rajan has already arranged the horses, yaks and the porters. Please avoid riding the yaks. They are one of the most ill tempered animals; I think they are the real vahana of Yama and only He can manage to ride them. We drove to the assembly area. Each person was provided with a horse, a person to lead the horse and a porter. Yaks were for the provisions.

My porter was a young Tibetan girl who was a Buddhist nun. She was very nice except there was no way to communicate with her. We can use the horse to go up, but downhill you have to walk as it is too risky to ride horses. That is the most difficult part. It was tough and we were short of breath.

All around us it was just silence except for the blowing wind which sounded like …Ohm to me. The air was rented every now and then with … Ohm Namah Shivayah. from us and...Ohm Mani Padme hum... from the Tibetans.

Ultimately we reached the highest point the Dolma La pass at an altitude of about 18,500 feet. From there we could see the beautiful lake Gourikund the private swimming pool made by Shiva for Parvathy.

The total distance was about 52 kilo meters and we did it in about three and half days. We were tired, but still felt so elated. We were back at Darchen. There Mr. Rajan had a surprise for us. He had arranged the best bath in our life. They were natural

springs with boiling water. I never felt so clean in my life.
We drove back to Manasa Sarovar. We took the holy dip in the freezing waters then offered Pithir Tharpanam facing Kailash. We all thanked Lord Shiva for giving us this opportunity. We again spent one night in a tent at the shore of the lake. This was a very different night. Cloudy, no stars and no Apsaras.

Soon we started our return journey. We made a detour to visit Lhasa, the capital of Tibet. We passed through towns called Lo Tingri, Sighatse and Gyantse. All these places had ancient monasteries many of them in ruins. At Lo Tingri we saw Mt. Everest, no comparison to Mt. Kailash. At Lhasa we saw the historic Potala palace. There were fully armed Chinese soldiers everywhere. It was sad to notice that the ancient Tibet which has so many things in common with us is slowly disappearing under the Communist Chinese Empire.

We flew back to Kathmandu. We completed our pilgrimage by offering our thanks and prayers at Pashupathinath temple and finally at Muktinath Temple. To visit, Muktinath temple we flew to Pokara and then to Jon Som in a small plane in which many of us did not feel very safe. From there we drove for about three hours and finally walked up the hill to visit this ancient temple in the Annapurna ranges.
It is said, to get final Mukti (Salvation) after Kailash yatra, one should visit Muktinath. With the darshan of Muktinath, we felt the ultimate bliss.

OHM NAMAH SHIVAYAH

Lepakshi Temple

A Temple of great Archaeological Significance

About the author: Mrs. Mallika Menon MA, Dip in Journalism, is an English Teacher and Journalist in Bengaluru, India

The temple of Lepakshi in Andhra Pradesh, across the border of Karnataka, is only about 170 kilometres from where we live in Bangalore. When I first heard the name Lepakshi, in my mind I broke it down to two words Le and Pakshi. Le in French is 'the' and Pakshi in Sanskrit and in most Indian languages is 'bird'. 'The bird'! I knew I was making this up in my head but hoped that there is some significance related to a bird at the site. My son, fluent in French, had just arrived from France for a holiday....hence the stray connecting thought. And viola! There is a bird indeed! When I saw the statue of Jatayu, the vulture from the epic Ramayana perched high on a rock, as we were getting close to the temple, I felt justified in what I thought.

Smt. Mallika Menon
MA (English), B Ed,
Dip Journalism

THE LEGEND

According to legend, Lepakshi is the place where Jatayu fell, wounded by Ravana, the king of Lanka (while abducting Sita). Lord Rama is said to have compassionately commanded the bird to rise….saying, 'Le Pakshi' which in the Telugu language means 'rise o bird!'. Hence the village was given that name. The historic town of Lepakshi, located in Anantapur district is well known for the famous Veerabhadra temple popularly known as Lepakshi temple. It took us less than two hours to reach our destination. We had to remove our foot wear and leave it at a small shack where they keep everyone's shoes and sandals for a nominal sum.

One of the first sights as we approached the temple was that of the giant monolithic statue of Nandi, the bull, Lord Shiva's vehicle, which is made of one block of granite. It is around 27 feet in length and 15 feet in height. It is a fascinating structure. We decided to see it elaborately on our way back. I was so impressed with the grand Nandi that I expected my first sight of the temple to be equally splendid. I must admit I was disappointed initially. It didn't take my breath away. But once I entered, I stepped into an enticing world of parables, myths and history assisted by exclusive narration.

THE HISTORY

The temple dates back to 1583 AD. Before we entered the precinct, I looked for a guide. There were a few men sitting beneath a banyan tree in front of the steps that lead to the temple. I thought perhaps most of them were guides. But only one among them was on to the job. His name was Virupanna. I did not know how significant that name was in that location till he himself told us the history and beliefs of that place. He did not speak any other language except Kannada, the regional language of Karnataka. My meager knowledge in the language saw us through his narration where he surprisingly used a lot of English words. Interestingly Virupanna was also the name of the chief architect of the temple. He was assisted by his brother Veeranna. The work was assigned to them during the reign of King Achyuta Devaraya of Vijayanagara empire in the 16th century. It is so much like Hampi in architecture that my first instinct was to name it mini Hampi.

It's a small enclave with unfinished monuments. If you don't have a good guide, the only thing you can do is browse, gaze, touch and marvel and be done with it in a few minutes. But we had our wonderful guide Virupanna who explained the rudiments of the structure, using a mixture of Kannada and English.

THE ARCHITECTURE

The temple complex, like the magnificent Hampi, is renowned for its amazing Vijayanagara style of architecture. The opulence of Natya Mandapa, the dance hall and its intricately carved hundred pillars, exquisite sculptures, an extraordinary hanging pillar, ageless paintings on the ceilings, a mammoth sculpture of Nand,i the bull,

and the monolithic Nagalinga (hoods of the divine serpent) unfinished Kalyana Mandapa and above all, so many mysteries and legends give it a meaningful vibe. Every pillar and every stone have an episode of an epic to impart. Veerabhadra is the main deity of the temple. He is the fierce incarnation of Lord Shiva. Other deities worshiped here include Lord Vishnu, Papavinaseswara, Parvati, Bhadrakali and more.

We were asked to place ourselves at a certain angle and lean down to see the gap beneath the hanging pillar. Apparently it was much above the ground when it was built. But with the ravages of time, it has slipped down further and further but yet not touching the ground and it is possible to pass objects such as a thin sheet of paper or a piece of cloth from one side to the other. It is said that when a British engineer tried to move it in an attempt to uncover the secret of its support, the pillar got dislodged a little. If that pillar falls it could shake the foundation of the whole temple. Such is the wonder of its architecture. Then there are others who believe that it was an architectural defect.

We were shown big indented stone platters formed in the ground which apparently were for giant sized people or gods and demi-gods of that time. Whatever the belief, it's fascinating to see compartmentalized stone salvers on the ground made so many years back. There is a distinctive lantern in the middle of it all and a big footprint believed to be of Sita. All this aided to let our imagination run riot.

My most favorite place is the Natya Mandapa. It actually has the feel of a dance hall. I could close my eyes and imagine the dancers, hear their anklets and see the vibrant steps in my mind. It is situated in front of the garbha griha or main shrine. The hall has exquisite sculptures of dancers. Our guide Virupanna pointed out the sculpture of Vasthu Purusha or the ideal man among the dancers. One painting of Lord Krishna is so intricate that his eyes seemed to follow us wherever we went.
The ceiling is covered with beautiful paintings for which we had to stand still and look up for a while. When I saw some people sitting against pillars and looking up, I did the same. Each mural has a unique border. Our man told us that the materials used for the paints were extracts from leaves and fruits. They are still more or less intact. They have not been repainted for 480 years. He also pointed out the almost invisible holes below the paintings where they crushed the dyes. I would not have noticed it on my own.

The hall of creepers is very eye catching due to its delicate work on all the pillars which have creeper-inspired designs. Every pillar has a different pattern and no two sides of a pillar have the same design. Apparently there are sarees made with Lepakshi motifs. We were so impressed by our guide Virupanna's knowledge. He kept our interest alive all the way through.

I HAVE KEPT THE MOST HEART WRENCHING STORY TO THE LAST

Virupanna and Veeranna were brothers who were the architects of this temple complex. They were also officers in the court of King Achyutaraya. After the death of the king, his son-in-law assumed the throne as he had no sons. According to the lore, a vicious rumor was spread that Virupanna embezzled funds from the royal

treasury which was meant for the temple. The king ordered Viurupanna to be blinded. Virupanna was so hurt by this accusation that he gouged out his eyes and flung them on the wall of the temple. There are two spots on the wall with a blood like stain which has withstood centuries of devastation of nature and time.

Our guide informed us that British authorities did a chemical analysis and confirmed that the stains were indeed from human blood! The Kalyana mandap or the wedding hall to denote the union of Shiva and Parvathi which was under construction at that stage, remained unfinished after this incident. It made me very sad to see the incomplete hall and the stain. The pillars of this Mandapa depict the celebrations of the grand wedding.

The word Lepakshi has also been broken down into Lepa Akshi to mean 'eyes smeared' (on the wall) or bleeding eyes. In Sanskrit Lepa means smear and Akshi is for eyes. So Lepa Akshi also represents the gauged eyes. Whenever I looked at that wall, I felt a plunge at the pit of my stomach. There are three stone sculpted statues which monopolize the Lepakshi site. You don't miss them due to their uniqueness and majestic appearance.

THE NAGALINGA STATUE

The Nagalinga statue is imposing and is said to be the the largest monolithic Nagalinga in India. The tale behind it, I read somewhere, is that it was carved with such speed that it was completed even before the cook finished preparing lunch for the workers! The gigantic sculpture of Ganesha is embedded as a shrine into the rock. It's not an imposing stand-alone statue. Yet it's got its own aura. I felt like lighting a lamp there to acknowledge its ancient energy. The Vijayanagara style of art is very evident in the sculpted pillars enclosing the idol in its separate Mandapa (canopy)….. a la Hampi.

On our way back we stopped to see the beautiful Nandi. It is no ordinary bull. He is the sentinel, the protector of Shiva. He keeps watch on the surroundings. Somehow the sight of Nandi anywhere has always soothed me. Being ingrained by stories during childhood, one feels calm by his presence though made of stone.

MONOLITHIC NANDI

The Lepakshi Nandi is made out of a single granite. This Nandi sculpture is said to be the second largest monolithic structure in India. It is 20 feet in height and 30 feet in length. The Nandi statue is decorated with a wide necklace which is a bell chain with small horns. I was told to notice the expression of pride in this Nandi. The head of the bull is held at a higher angle than usual. Apparently in general, this devoted guardian has a look of submission which is typical of any Nandi sculpture in front of a Shiva temple. I am not sure I saw anything different except the bigness of the structure.

Here ended our wonderful journey to Lepakshi temple and back. We were all happy to have seen the ancient structure and heard the stories behind it. But none of us could ignore its deteriorating state. Lepakshi is indeed a reservoir of historical wealth. But I felt cheated because of the condition it is in. I really wish it was better taken care of. The murals for instance are not preserved well at all. It is a tourist destination but why aren't the surroundings of the Lepakshi temple kept in better shape? Shouldn't it be spruced up and shouldn't the monuments be better maintained and conserved for posterity? Even our guide said as much. I hope his sentiment echoes far and wide and be heard and understood by appropriate authority, to act upon. He definitely helped to stoke our imagination to visualize what lay beyond.

THE GARUDA OF LEPAKSHI

MAGNIFICENT PILLARS OF LEPAKSHI

Some Random Spiritual Reflections of a Novice

Sri. Bhanu Vikraman

A child recalled his lonely trips to the Subramanya temple in his village when he was only six years old. He used to get rooted in front of the attractive idol, especially on days when the dark vigraham got decorated with sandalwood paste on the face - chandanam charthal.

The boy acquired a notion through family members and his friendly neighbors of the same belief that he can ask for anything from the god and He would grant those requests.

The boy heard, Sri Ayyppan, resident of a smaller temple on the southern circumambulating path in the same premises, has a hill palace at a mountain named Sabarimala. Other gods he saw in the temple were Vishnu, Brahma and Ganesha. They too had other abodes. Swargam, high up in the sky for Brahma Dev, Palazhi, an ocean of milk for Vishnu, and Kailasam, a beautiful forest resort for Shri Ganesha and his parents. From their permanent residences, these gods would make trips to our village temple on special times but the child was assured that the gods' presence could always be felt by true devotees.

He was also told that prior to making requests, visitors to the temple need to give the gods smaller offerings like bananas, coconuts, incense sticks, flowers and so on. The poor boy always wanted to give the God something big but he had no cash. The name for those gifts, he was told, was naivedyam. Naivedyam could be given only through a priest. No one can do a pooja and offer the God any naivedyam directly. God comes to the temple only at a particular time to give darshanam. For mischievous behavior God would punish the children and adults alike. From the village temple, these gods also make journeys to other places to kill the demons or asuras, and protect the devotees.

The child grew up with love for God. Without any willful choice on his part, life's journey took him to temples in Guvayoor, Rameswaram, Mookambika (Kollur), Kashi, Nathadwara, Somnath, Dakor, Haridwar, Rishikesh etc. By now the child, a grown-up man, made no demands, (well, maybe occasionally) when he stood face to face with those gods, most of the time, but enjoyed a lot of inner serenity.

A few more decades passed by. Grown up by now, he took a fancy to spiritualism and yearned to learn more – a novice being initiated into spirituality. He heard a religious speaker, a Swami, saying occasionally in a lecture series "Hindus are Janthus" meaning animals. But he meant no hatred nor implied any negative connotations in the context he used but just a little humor. No one need to take offence to that statement as it has been used earlier also by philosopher Aristotle and evolutionary-scientist Darwin – Man is a social animal. Moreover, the novice has heard from the Swami, "God himself has been called by several names in different scriptures including shunakan (meaning Dog)!" Shocked? No need to. In some of His avatharas, he also appeared in the form of a tortoise

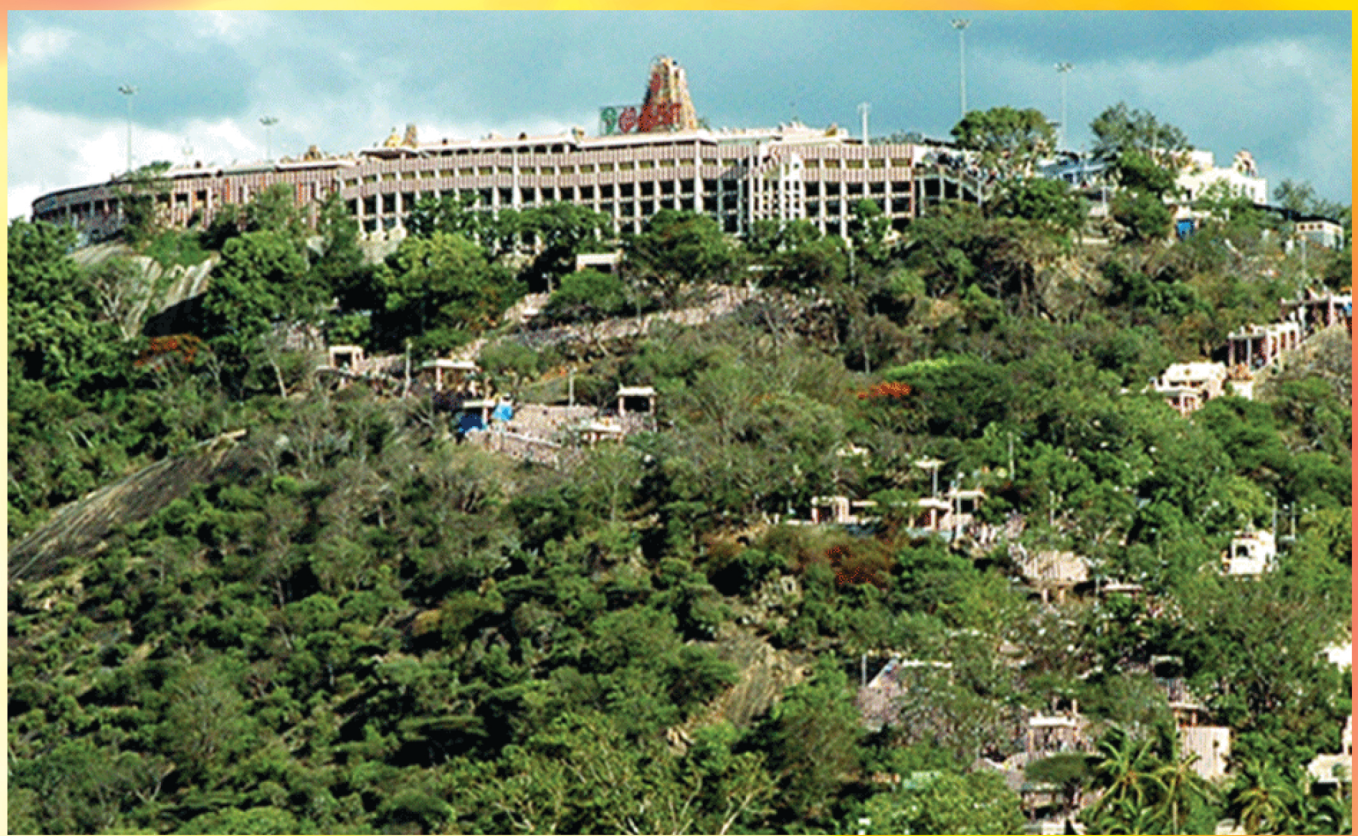
(koorma), a pig (varaha) and half lion – half man (Narasimha). Still the novice developed a liking for that religious expert because he was not glorifying the Guru Parampara, not building up his image for personal gains nor pretending that he stands head and shoulders above his audience. He often said, 'one can be one's own guru', perhaps, without quoting its source.

This prompted the novice to recall what else the Swami had said about a guru: "Anyone who enlightens your mind is a guru. A father, mother, brother, sister or a friend can be a Guru." How true! The novice remembered a causal remark of his younger brother way back in the past. "Brother, you read Bhagavad Gita once; it is said, after reading it, one would have complete peace of mind." Coming from somebody who scarcely showed any religious sentiments, it was a mild surprise. Nevertheless, at the earliest opportunity, the novice bought an abridged edition of the Bhagavad Gita. True to those words, ever since, equanimity has become the second nature of the novice!

Then he remembered the saying of Budha: "When the student is ready the teacher arrives." That day, the novice realized that the unseen Swami is one of his self-discovered gurus for him. While the novice wrote this line a sudden insight flashed through his mind. During the days of his successful entrepreneurship and business he often learned several ideas from his customers! They were, in effect his gurus.

In the same train of thought he discovered yet another guru. After a meditation session he was chatting with a younger person in the group about his urge to write a book on Sanathana Dharmam, to draw out some suggestions from him. That person, also a volunteer at Chinmaya Mission, said that it must come from personal experience. One more guru, this time younger than him. The novice's spiritual quest enabled him to dig out from one of the scriptures the exemplary experience of a king. The ruler using his intellect, acquired wisdom from 24 other gurus. That king's self-discovered Gurus were sky, air, fire, water, earth, sun, moon, a python, a dove, a honeybee and so on. Among those 24, there was a prostitute too who attained wisdom and spiritual illumination through her Guru. Her name was Pingala.

That god sent statement (from his younger Guru) turned out to be the inspiration to scribble down these thoughts. While reflecting on all these ideas, the boy realized, "Often God appears in the guise of someone or something like a sound, dream, a sentence in a book or even a sudden thought." That was the day he knew, 'one must learn to trust one's own intuition.'



WHY SERVICE TO YOUR FELLOW MEN IS EQUALLY IMPORTANT

About the author: Vijayan Nair hails from Calicut, Kerala. He completed his Engineering studies in Bangalore before moving to the US for higher studies. He has been a construction engineer, an Import/Export Trade counsellor for North Carolina, a computer programmer, a Professor of Entrepreneurship and Marketing in Keiser University, and a Dean of Academics in Keiser's Allied health program. In 2011 he was awarded the 'Dean of the Year' across Keiser's 32 institutions worldwide.

Vijayn Nair has been the District Director for Toastmasters International, Florida and Lt Governor, Marketing, New/New Jersey. He has conducted Youth Leadership workshops, covering eight weeks, teaching communication and leadership to over 1500 children from 2006. In 2005 he was voted ' Toastmaster of the Year', New York/New Jersey. He has been a keynote and corporate presenter covering such topics as Mentorship, Leadership, Styles of Communication, Motivation and Developing self-Potential. Vijayn Nair has acted in two films, one Tamil and one English and two stage plays,

Sri. Vijayn Nair
B.Engg, MBA

Just like other worldly religions, Sanathana Dharma has evolved over the years. By foreign influences the world has come to recognize it as Hinduism, but Sanathana Dharma has flourished over centuries, dating back to the Mahabharata to Seven thousand years ago, the Ramayana to Fourteen thousand years ago and the Vedas to twenty-one thousand years, based on research conducted by Nilesh Oak and others. They based their research from a focus on slokas - six hundred, in the case of the Ramayana. They mapped these slokas over planetary, meteorological and geodetic events of the time. These events have been narrowed down, in these classics, to calculate the dates occurring in them.

Modern day technology and scholarly interpretations of both the Ramayana and Mahabharata have aided and brought deeper understanding to our spiritual lives. While many of us who have studied Indian history have been influenced by books written by Western authors and Western educated Indian authors, India relies on a much broader term called 'Ithihasa'. Loosely translated as "history", Ithihasa is told as a story or poem; sometimes an author like Vyasa can also become a character in his own work. Many of our past classical and ancient texts got translated into Persian before being translated into English by Westerners, causing our revered classics to lose meaning and understanding among the new generation. However, all this will change. Vast research has been done over the last 10 years that will bring us more details on Ithihasa and, many findings may even surprise us. While these new findings will give birth to fierce debates, we will nevertheless be blessed with new understanding of our ancient civilization, the last of its kind surviving in the World.

I would like to take this opportunity to explain a couple of topics that we take for granted in Sanathana Dharma.

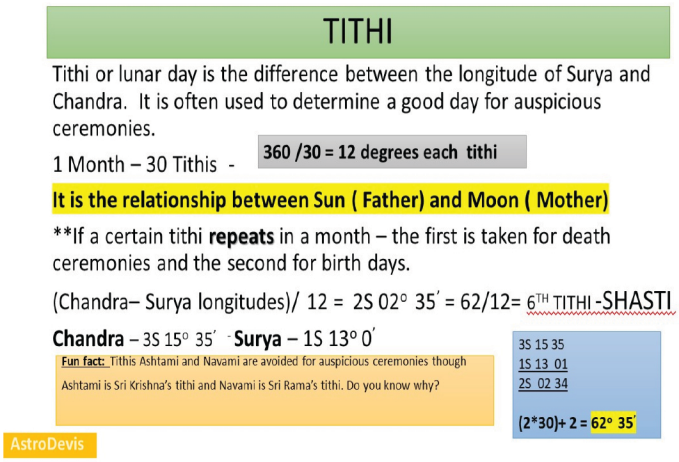
Days of the Week

We are familiar with the order of the days of the week: Sunday, Monday and so on. Have we ever wondered why the days occur in the order that they do? Why does Friday not come right after Monday? Well, this is based on the speed of the grahas or planets in our immediate orbit. Here I would like to bring out the difference between planets and Grahas, though they are loosely translated to mean the same. Planet is from the Greek word, 'wanderer' and graha is from Sanskrit word to mean 'grasp'. Therefore, they will have different meanings in the context that they are used in. Remember, Ithihasa and history? The speed of the grahas, from the slowest to the fastest, are Saturn (Shani), Jupiter (Guru), Mars (Kuja), Sun (Surya), Venus (Shukra), Mercury (Budha), and Moon (Chandra). Here, Sun is substituted for Earth since we are looking at the positions of the grahas from an Earthly station. If we listed these grahas in the order shown, from the slowest to the fastest, and kept repeating them, allotting one hour or 'Hora' for each graha, then we will notice that every 25th hora will be the graha that rules the day. In other words, the first hora on Sunday at sunrise will be the Sun, the first hora on Monday will be the Moon and so on. This explains the days of the week in the order we follow in any part of the globe. I might add here, the references to the order of the days or vara have in Tithis and Nakshatras cited in slokas in the Ramayana and

Mahabharata. So, you can hazard a guess, where the order of the days came from and how ancient it really is.

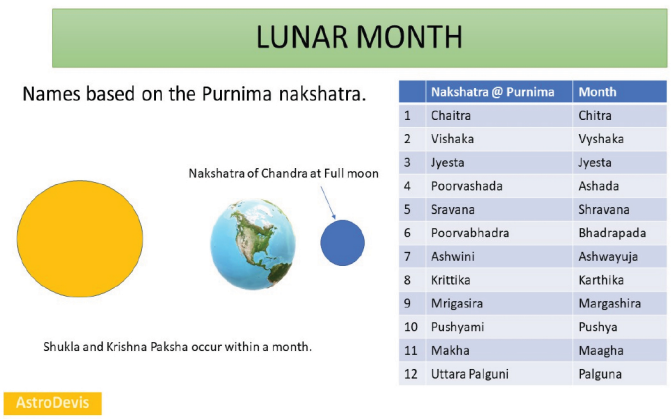
Tithi

Another important term used in Sanathana Dharma is 'Tithi'. Tithi is



defined as the difference between the Sun's and Moon's longitude in multiples of twelve degrees. Tithi is very important in Hindu philosophy and cultural practices. For example, Navami is the tithi of Sri Rama, Ashtami is the tithi of Sri Krishna and Chaturthi is the tithi of Ganesha. Their birthdays are celebrated on these respective tithis combined with the lunar asterism or Nakshatra that their birth falls in. Taking a cue from this I would like to urge our fellow Sanathanis to celebrate their birthdays on the tithi they were born in. By doing so, we consider the Sun's and Moon's placement during our birth that repeats every year. The difficulty with this practice however is that the tithis do not fall on the same day every year. People find it easier to follow the Solar calendar which has a fixed date every year. However, by doing so, of course we would only be honoring our father and not our mother. The tithi birthday helps us to honor both parents, for it is their relationship on the said tithi that gave rise to our presence on this earth. A panchang will help you find the tithi of your birth every year. Hint: It will fall on the same or near the Nakshatra of your birth month.

A tithi, however, is much more than what I signified earlier. A tithi has fifteen divisions in the bright half called Shukla paksha and fifteen divisions in the dark half called Krishna Paksha. People born in the Shukla paksha are more materialistic or outward looking and the ones born in Krishna paksha are more inclined spiritually, all other factors being the same. The lunar month usually starts with the Sun and Moon in the exact degree. This is the start of the lunar month, as opposed to the Solar month named after the presence of the Sun in a particular Rasi or sign. For example, when the Sun enters Vrichika (Scorpio), the Solar month Vrichika starts around Nov 16. This is the start of the Sabarimala season. The practice of using Solar month is followed in Kerala. However, the lunar month starts with the new Moon and finishes with the next new Moon. As the Moon, which is faster than the Sun, moves away from the Sun, we notice that it starts waxing and becoming brighter day by day till the fifteenth tithi called Purnima (Full Moon). The full Moon rises in the East at Sunset, since the Sun and Moon are now opposing each other. The nakshatra that the Moon falls in at Purnima is the name of the Lunar Month. For example, when the Sun is in Scorpio and the Moon is in the opposite sign, Taurus, the Purnima happens in Kartika Nakshatra. Hence the month which starts at Amavasya is called Kartika Masa. When the full moon falls in Purvabhadra\Poorauthratadhi or Uttara Bhadra\Uthratadhi the month is called Bhadrapada which is the month Ganesh Chaturthi is celebrated.



	Nakshatra @ Purnima	Month
1	Chaitra	Chitra
2	Vishaka	Vyshaka
3	Jyesta	Jyesta
4	Poorvashada	Ashada
5	Sravana	Shravana
6	Poorvabhadra	Bhadrapada
7	Ashwini	Ashwayuja
8	Krittika	Karthika
9	Mrigasira	Margashira
10	Pushyami	Pushya
11	Makha	Maagha
12	Uttara Palguni	Palguna

The tithi you are born in is very important to understand all the relationships in your life. As said in Muhurta Chintamani and other classic books, a tithi can damage one's relationships. It may also affect all four limbs of our life: Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha. Many have approached me for quick fixes to solve these problems. As a counselor in many areas including communication, Jyotish, Academic administration, and leadership in community organizations, I have been honored with many opportunities to guide people past the problems they face in life. And to this day, I am convinced the best remedy for most troubles are an ability and willingness to serve our fellow men. Not necessarily in a large measure but within one's ability we should always be pushing the envelope. Teach a child some slokas, visit an ailing individual or call them when they are sick, take time out to say hello to someone who is feeling down or help them past a malady or simply reach out to those who serve selflessly and say Thank You. These remedies give you more protection in life than any ritual you conduct or yantras you wear. Swamy Sharnam.

YOGIC APPROACH TO THE PANDEMIC

About the author: Dr Venkit S. Iyer, MD, MS, FRCS (Canada), FACS is a retired surgeon. He is also a writer and author of two books: "Decision making in Clinical Surgery" and "Aging Well and Reaching Beyond"

Dr. Venkit S. Iyer
MD, FACS

Disasters bring out spirituality in us. Most of us do believe in God. But when a bad situation arises we tend to pray to the Almighty for help and relief more often than otherwise. COVID-19 has rapidly infected and killed millions of people in no time. We take the precautions, we take the vaccination, we wear the masks- still we hope and pray that we will be spared and protected.

Our scriptures describe three yogic approaches to find peace and salvation. They are Bhakti Yoga, Karma Yoga and Jnana Yoga. They are also three pathways to meet the challenges that are beyond our control and to find solace in calamity. They can be ways to handle the current pandemic that is causing havoc to humanity.

Bhakti Yoga is the easiest method for majority of the people. It is prayer, devotion and total dedication to God. This may involve meditation, chanting, and repetition of mantras, isolation, retreat, and singing devotional songs. One may go to a temple of worship, use an idol or sit in a favored corner in the house. One may use items such as a prayer book, a symbol, or a beaded chain to kneed through. Focused prayer is rendered to the chosen form of God. The prayer and meditation is deep and whole so that all worldly issues are forgotten. It is a spiritual way of coping with the disaster on hand.

In Karma Yoga one is totally immersed in work, doing the best job possible, and conducting the work for sake of the work with highest quality and excellence. With such dedication to work, other issues are removed from the mind. It is another way of coping with the pandemic situation and reducing stress. If one is working in the health care field, the person has once in a lifetime opportunity to help the diseased. Their work to save fellow humans in times of need like this will always be remembered.

Jnana Yoga is absolute divine knowledge of the Almighty, the world and universe. This person has attained such spiritual knowledge that nothing will disturb or shake this person's mind. Jnana Yogi sees the pandemic as another act of God and HE will find a way to resolve it also. The Yogi will learn to live with the virus and will take steps to protect self and others and will accept the eventuality as predetermined destiny. Everything happens for a reason, and all events are part of a cycle.

All the above three pathways are good for the Yogi to meet the challenges of the pandemic. A yogi's life style, conduct and behavior will augment the precautions to stop the pandemic from spreading. For example the Yogi is very conscious about hygienic practices, such as bathing twice a day, washing hands frequently, wearing freshly laundered clothes, avoiding crowds, eating freshly cooked hot foods, avoiding alcohol or drugs, avoiding touching other people, meditating and avoiding any stress. Now if we can add vaccination as another step to ward off the evil virus, it will be like wearing a shield in fighting a righteous war.

Our spirituality and conduct will help us to deal with the pandemic and eventually overcome it.

MY UNFALTERING COMPANION

Smt. SUSHAMA VENUGOPAL
M.D. F.A.A.P

December 23, 1976
Santa Cruz Airport, Mumbai

A saree-clad, shy new bride and an older gentleman were about to start the first leg of their journey across the continents to the "Land of Plenty," the United States of America. The young woman carried a fat book that she didn't want to put down in her cabin baggage. She was nervously taking in the new sights and sounds around her when she was startled by someone's query: "Young lady, may I see the book you are holding?" As she gave him the book, the Caucasian looking man took in a surprised breath and thumbing through the pages, said reverentially:

"Bhagavad Geetha! My God, you are holding the best manual that mankind has ever seen. It's guaranteed to lead you into better things in life." Too shocked at the opinion of a Caucasian man and too timid to carry on a conversation with a total stranger with an unfamiliar accent, she just nodded.

Like rain drops on a lotus leaf, years morphed into decades and rolled off into the depths of Timeless Time. The bride transitioned into a withered grandma, her jet black hair decided to choose the peaceful white. As Thirukkural says, Time took back all it gave her in the youth. And….the chaperone on that momentous trip, the last link she held on to, her uncle, well, he too, finished up the drama and faded into a fond memory. The pages of the book too turned sallow, but the contents stayed etched in her mind and her grip on the book only tightened.

My love affair with Bhagavad Geetha perhaps started on one of those long ago summer afternoons, when I sat next to my Appoop-pan, listening to the soothing cadence of his voice as he softly chanted the verses. The first sloka that I had memorized is also perhaps the most well known one in Bhagavad Geetha. It has helped me tremendously all my life, starting with my teenage student days and spanning through my career life. This sloka,

कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन
मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि

karmany-evādhikāras te mā phaleshu kadāchana
mā karma-phala-hetur bhūr mā te sango 'stvakarmani

(Chapter 2, Sanghya Yoga, verse 47) advises us to do our duty to the utmost level of perfection we can, while detaching ourselves from the results. While bobbing through the mundane ups and downs of life, this verse had dried many a tear of mine. As a student immersed in material life, it has saved me from the abyss of grief when crucial examination results disappointed me and later, when in spite of my best efforts, the fruits of my labor turned out to be disappointing.

As life moved on I ploughed through, counting on the power of Bhagavan's words to steer me in the right direction. Whenever I felt like I am at the cross roads of life, facing the dilemma of choosing the proper course of the onward journey, I would read and re read Verse 7 from Chapter 2. This is where, for the first time in his life, Arjuna accepts Sri Krishna as someone who is much more than his friend and relative. At a crucial moment on the battle field of Kuru Kshethra, he accepts Krishna as his ultimate Guru. The plea he makes to Bhagavan, written in beautiful Thrishtup Chandas goes like this: "Now I am completely confused about my real duty. I am requesting you to clearly tell me what is best for me. As of this point, I am your disciple and I surrender myself unto you taking ultimate refuge in you. Please guide and instruct me." Such total surrender or sharanagathy is yet an impossibility for me. But after contemplating on this concept, I have always sensed a better clarity in my thoughts and so far, it has enabled me to decipher the appropriate course of action.

As the journey of life picked up speed, and as many of the older co passengers got off the train at different unanticipated points, I have turned to the soothing philosophy of our Sanathana Dharma narrated in Chapter 2, verse 20

न जायते म्रयिते वा कदाचि् नायं भूत्वा भवति वा न भूय: |
अजो नत्ि्य: शाश्वतोऽयं पुराणो, न हन्यते हन्यमाने शरीरे

na jāyate mriyate vā kadāchin, nāyaṁ bhūtvā bhavitā vā na bhūyaḥ
ajo nityaḥ śhāśhvato 'yaṁ purāṇo, na hanyate hanyamāne śharīre

"The soul is without birth and without death; it is eternal, immortal, ageless, imperishable and undestroyable." This is followed by

जातस्य हि धरुवो मृत्युर्धरुवं जनम मृतस्य च |
तस्मादपरहिार्येऽर्थे न त्वं शोचतिुमर्हसि

jātasya hi dhruvo mṛityur dhruvaṁ janma mṛitasya cha
tasmād aparihārye 'rthe na tvaṁ śhochitum arhasi

"Certain is death for the born, and certain is birth for the dead; therefore, over the inevitable, you should not grieve" (Chapter 2, verse 27). These words, uttered by Bhagavan Himself, are the core concept in Sanathana Dharma regarding the cycle of life. These messages certainly have helped to lessen the punch of the devastation felt following the losses of my dear ones over the years.
Mankind has known about Bhagavat Geetha for the past 5,000 years. Yet it is the most sought after book in Hindu Dharma. Combining philosophy, spirituality, pragmatism and ideology in equal measures, it definitely is the greatest handbook that one can count on in our daily lives.

Geetha me paramaa vidyaa brahmaroopa na samshayah

The Geetha is my highest science, which is doubtless of the form of Brahman the eternal (Varaha Purana-Geetha Mahatmyam)

OUR CHINMAYA MISSION CONNECTION

Smt. RAJI P. MENON, BBA &
Sri. UDAYAN K. MENON, M.S. P.E.

After coming from India in 1975 as immigrants and moving around in different parts of USA, we finally decided to settle down in Ann Arbor, MI. The life was going on without much hardship and our three boys were growing up and getting educated in the local public schools and we both were working hard. It was happy times with three hyperactive boys. We gave a lot of importance to children's education, athletic and cultural activities like any other newcomers to USA. At the same time, we were also thinking about how to instill into the boys our religious beliefs since we are deeply immersed in Hinduism, ***Sanatana Dharma***, and wanted our kids to grow up as Hindus and keep up our cultural values and heritage even though we are living ten thousand miles away from India. We didn't want them to be completely Americanized and become too materialistic like the majority of the current generation. We wanted them to adopt what is good in American culture while sticking to the principles of ***Sanatana Dharma*** and hoped this will continue with successive generations.

Often we were saddened and upset to see what is happening around us and thought, if you don't direct them in our cultural way, they may not be able to lead a good life as prescribed within the Hindu principles we laid out for them. Although Hindu temples were being started in a couple of places, since they were not close by, we couldn't take the children there often enough. Also, those temples were simply worship places and didn't provide any religious teachings.

Gurudev Swami Chinmayananda with kids

In Ann Arbor area there were quite a few families like us working in University of Michigan and other organizations. We were all thinking the same way with regards to our children's religious education. Then we came to know there was a couple in the area who had started giving religious studies to the kids in their basement. This family was part of Chinmaya mission of New York and had recently moved to Ann Arbor. This suited as well and they were happy to take our kids also. These couples were very dedicated and had training in teaching Chinmaya Mission Bala Vihar classes in New York. Slowly the basement of this their house filled with kids. When more kids started participating, separate classes were organized for different age groups. All our three kids were enrolled in different classes according to their age group. More teachers started volunteering and later some of the classrooms were moved to their family rooms, living rooms or any other available areas to fit the different age groups. Once class rooms, teachers and different grades developed, the current directors started the process of affiliating the Ann Arbor group with Chinmaya Mission. It was not difficult to be a group member, since the directors were very familiar with Chinmaya Mission hierarchy especially Poojya Guru Dev Swami Chinmayanandaji and Thejomayanadaji. We became part of the Chinmaya family of Bala Vihar center and classes were conducted there every Sunday 10 am to 12 noon. The strength of class gradually increased, and we moved to Washtenaw Community College hall and classrooms for Sunday classes for nominal fee.

Within short time we also started actively participating in the adult section of Mission activities such as bhajan classes, classical music classes, Bhagavat Geeta Study classes, and also in religious teachings by Poojya Gurudeva Chimamandaji. Thejomsyandaji (Gurudev after Chinmayanandaji), Swami Swaroop Anandaji (current Guru Dev) and others visited the Ann Arbor center. Kids were studying according to Bala Vihar syllabus for the grades starting from age 2 ½ years to high school levels. They were studying, Ramayana, Krishna and Hanuman stories, Bala Bhagavatam, Bhagavad Geeta, Indian culture, religious symbolism and pooja vidhies and more according to their grades and syllabus. They also participated in religious and cultural activities like singing bhajans, chanting slokas, Bhagavat Geeta, Ramayan and Mahabharata, Sri Shankaracharya (all stage play productions) as well as Geeta competitions on regional basis. There were also cultural activities during religious festivals and special occasions. Our kids were acting as Rama, Krishna, Ravana, Sri Shankaracharya etc. in plays, participated in regional Bhagavat Geeta chanting competitions and won awards in the regional chanting competitions a couple of times. All my three boys graduated from Bala Vihar by the time they finished high school. We were very fortunate that we got that opportunity in Ann Arbor Chinmaya Center, named Avantika. Avantika - Chinmaya Mission Center was

Bala Vihar children in various stage shows

built around 2005, a multimillion-dollar complex with large auditorium, class rooms, temple, office rooms, kitchen and dining hall and other facilities as required for a center. Currently this center has expanded to provide services to neighboring cities like Troy, Canton, and Novi, MI with approximately 600 plus kids.

We are certain that our kids learned a lot on our religion which was truly beyond our imagination and that too during our early days in USA. We didn't get that kind of religious education while we grew up in India. Sincerely we did not know at their age who is a Hindu and what is Sanathana Dharma. We are very proud of our Poojya Gurudev Swamiji who created this mission in such an organized way so that all the children and parents can get the benefit from the Mission's activities. Their motto is "To Give Maximum Happiness to Maximum number of People for Maximum Time". We noticed now that our older son's children have started going to Bala Vihar in Chinmaya Center in California. My second one is also thinking to participate in the Bala Vihar classes soon which shows this program is working for them. As ex-Bala Vihar parents we encourage all the Hindu parents and kids to participate in their nearby Chinmaya Center Bala Vihars so that all our Hindu kids will receive a basic knowledge in Hinduism. From little kids to older wiser people, they have appropriate activities that include not only Bala Vihar but also Sisu Vihar, Adults /Parents religious discourses, old age activities, bhajans, chanting, religious festivals and more.

Years after our kids graduated from Bala Vihar, we continued to participate in the Chinmaya Center, Ann Arbor. Later we moved to Houma, near New Orleans, LA. When we were exploring this area, we came to know that there is a Chinmaya Mission Center in Kenner, LA and contacted the director there. The Mission was conducting Bala Vihar classes from the Hindu Temple. Now they have their own small Center and plans to build a larger building, a better facility, in the future. The director requested to join the center as volunteer teachers. Even though we had to drive about 100 miles to and fro from our residence to the Hindu temple to conduct the class on Sundays (10 :00 AM to 1:30 Pm) we didn't mind because this was for a good cause and it would be our way of pay back for their yeomen services to our children. And they needed us badly since they were not getting enough teachers at that time, so we joined as volunteer teachers. For the next two years we did classes in person until the Pandemic started in March 2020 and thereafter, we started zoom classes from our homes along with others. Classes start at 10: 30 AM with common assembly conducted by the director of the center with opening prayers, Hanuman Chalisa, bhajans, story times, Chinmaya mission pledge, Aarthi and closing prayer. Then all kids will be going to their respective zoom classrooms from 11:30 AM to 12:30 PM.

The format for Zoom classes remained the same as in person. We were teaching from our home and kids were attending the classes using computers from their residences. We taught Alphabet class (KG to first grade), Ramayana (second grade), Bala Bhagavatam (third and 4th grade) and Krishna Stories (5th grade), for the last 3 years. Now for this year we are teaching Bala Bhagavatam (4 th grade) and PO BOX MR. GOD (7th grade). We use Chinmaya mission syllabus for teaching and the Mission provides all the books and activities. We use power point presentations in each class so that children understand the lessons very well. They have question and answer sessions, quiet time, activity time, Kahoot games (video game) etc. within those 60 minutes. They enjoy the class and learn as well. According to syllabus, we teach them shlokas, Bhajans, stories, chanting and so on. We enjoy the classes since we are also learning daily something new from teaching as well as listening to kids with their ideas and their world of surprises, all new to us. We enjoy teaching and now know the many unknown stories in our religious epics that were not told by our teachers or parents in our childhood.

There are 300 Chinmaya Mission centers all over the world. There are Universities, Schools, Hospitals, Vedic study centers, Bala Vihars, Centers for adults and older people affiliated with Chinmaya Mission. Bala Vihars are very much an essential component of Chinmaya Mission. We think these kids in Bala Vihar are very smart and intelligent and they are the torch bearers to accomplish the Poojya Gurudev's vision on his Mission. They understand the Santana Dharma– duties performed according to one's spiritual (constitutional) identity as Atman (self) and are thus the same for everyone. The general duties include virtues such as honesty, beneficence, purity, goodwill, patience, forbearance, self-restraint, and asceticism, and hopefully will be transmitted to the next generation. "To Give Maximum Happiness to Maximum People for Maximum Time" is the wish of our new Poojya Gurudev too. All of us in our family as well as others like us are very lucky and blessed to be part of this Grand Chinmaya Mission family. And we would recommend all our children to participate in Chinmaya Mission classes wherever they are.

Author's note: Both Raji P. Menon, BBA and Udayan K. Menon, M.S. P.E. are Teachers at Chinmaya Mission, Kenner, Louisiana. Udayan Menon is a structural engineer and a life member of SASTA and a member of the Building Committee of SASTA Temple of Tampa. He also made pilgrimage to Sabarimala 13 times and hopes to make more trips with the grace of Lord Ayyappa.

Best Compliments to
SASTA souvenir
-Swami Saranam-

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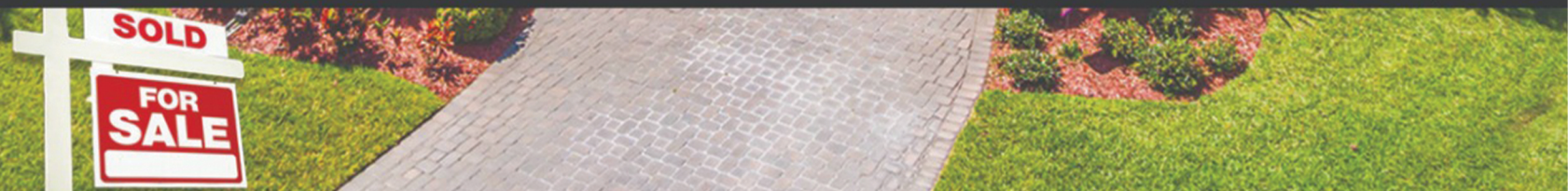

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SATHYAMEVA JAYATHE

TRUTH WILL SET YOU FREE

Sri. RAVI NAIR
VICE CHAIRMAN, BOARD OF TRUSTEES

Everyone likes to hear about winning always, whether in everyday life or in stories we read. If these stories are motivating, helping to mold our growth, aptitude, vision and outlook, then I agree that will help mold our mindset right from the young age.

We have all heard about the story of how Lord Ganesha won the contest with his brother Lord Subhramanya and finally grabbed the captivating Jgnaanappazham as the winning prize from Naradha Muni. Here the Naradha set a contest between the two – "Who amidst you will come first after circling the entire Universe?" Lord Ganesha always being ahead of knowledge and thinking capacity, realized that by circling their father, Lord Siva and mother, Goddess Parvathi, who are the true Universe, is equivalent to circling the entire universe, ultimately won the contest hands down. The ultimate truth here is, 'our own parents are the Gods for us and they are our Universe. As the saying goes, Mathru Devo Bhava, Pithru Devo Bhava, Aacharya Dhevo Bhava and Aathithi Devo Bhava (Matha, Pitha, Guru Dhaivam).

When we get a question whether we have seen God, we always look elsewhere to try and find out where God exists and in what shape or form He/She is etc. Though we were taught from the young age that our Matha and Pitha are the Guru and Dhaivam, we naturally forget to consider them first as God. Just as Ganesha won the contest by considering His parents as "Paramathma" or "the entire Universe", our own mindset needs to be elevated to see God in our Mother, Father, and Guru (teacher) and in everything.

As we learn and grow through the many religious scholarly teachings, Sruthi, Smrithi and Puranas, acquired, obtained and living through our parents and Gurus, the Truth or Ultimate Reality, will emerge—that as narrated in Narayana Sooktham:

Ruthakaum Sathyam Param Brahmam, Purusham Krishna Pingalam,
Urdhweredham Viroopaksham Viswa Roopayavai Namo Namaha!
Om Narayanaya Vidhmahe, Vasu Devaya Dhi Mahi,
Thanno Vishnu Prachodhayath.
Om Namo Bhagavate Vasudevaya.

From Srimath Bagavatham (S.B.1.1.1) before beginning, Sri Veda Vyasa respectfully giving obeisance through the following sloka.

Janmady asya yato nvayad itaratas carthesv abhiinah svarat
tene brahma hrda ya adi-kavaye muhyanti yal surayah
tejo-vari-mrdam yatha vinimavo yatra tri-sargo mrsha
dhamna svena sada nirasta-kuhakam Satyam Param Dhimahi.

I prostrate to Lord Narayana (Sri Krishna, son of Vasudeva), O all-pervading Personality of the Lord of Infinite, I offer my obeisance unto You. I meditate upon Lord Sri Krishna, because He is the Absolute Truth, the primeval cause of all causes of the creation, sustenance and further regeneration of the manifested universe. He is directly and indirectly conscious of all manifestations, and He is independent because there is no other cause beyond Him. It is He only who first imparted the Vedic knowledge unto the heart of Brahmaji, the original living being. By Him even the great sages and demigods are placed into illusion, as one is bewildered by the illusory representations of water seen in fire, or land seen on water. Only because of Him do the material universes, temporarily manifested by the reactions of the three modes of nature, appear factual, although, because of MAYA, they are unreal. I therefore meditate upon Him, Lord Narayana (Sri Krishna) who is eternally (INFINITE) existent in the transcendental abode, which is forever free from the illusory representations of the material world. I meditate upon Him, for He is the Absolute Truth.

Om Sath Chith Ananatha Roopaya, Viswo Pathyathi Hethuve,
Thapathraya Vinasaya Sri Krishnaya Vayam Numaha!
Nithyaya Niravadhyaya Sathyanandha Chithathmane,
Sarvantharathmane Sreemadh Venkatesaya Mangalam.

Sriman Narayana Battathiri attained Nirmuktham, Nithyamuktham from Purusharth athmakam (Dharmam, Artham, Kamam, Moksham) Brahma Thathwam (Eternal Bliss Stage) as evidenced thru his compilation of Sriman Narayaneeyam and his unflinching Bhakthi to Lord Guruvayoorappan.

Vedantha Vinjana Su***nichithartha, Samnasya Yogaal Yathaya Sudha Sathwaa,***
TheBrahma Lokeshu Parantha Kale, Paraamrutha Parimuchyanthi Sarve!

Through Vedantha knowledge, the Ultimate Reality State (Aham Brahmasmi or TAT TVAM ASI) and through leading a pious, Saintly lifestyle, gradually merging into Lord Infinite, or Jeevan Muktha state of liberation from cycle of birth and death will be attained.

Om Swamiye Saranam, Ayyappa Saranam
Pampa Vasane Saranam Ayyappa, Tampa Vasane Saranam Ayyappa.

DEVOTIONAL MUSIC HAS HEALING POWER

Dr. M. P. RAVINDRA NATHAN

After a particularly stressful day, I was hoping to catch some badly needed sleep but no matter how much I tried, sleep eluded me. That was when I switched on a devotional music tape of K. J. Yesudas & the melodious songs started flowing….

Harivarasanam Viswamohanam — हरिवरासनं वश्विमोहनम्
Haridadheeswaram Aaradhyapadukam — हरदिधीश्वरमाराध्यपादुकम् ।
Arivimarddanam Nithyanarthanam — अरविमिर्दनं नत्यिनर्तनम्
Hariharathmajam Devamashraye — हरहिरात्मजं देवमाश्रये ॥ १ ॥

Suddenly my emotional turbulence started easing and even before the song was over, I was fast asleep. Now it has become a routine for me; as soon as I lie down at night, I switch on a soft bhajan music and sleep comes to me quickly.

Is music really therapeutic?

While making rounds in the hospital one morning, I walked into the room of my 80 year old patient, Mrs. Castleman, slowly recovering from a bout of severe heart failure complicated with pneumonia after a heart bypass surgery. She was sound asleep with slow Jazz music from the 40's playing in the background. Given her somewhat stormy course, I was pleasantly surprised that finally she was getting a few hours of good sleep without sedatives. Her daughter quietly keeping vigil at the bedside said, "Mother absolutely loves this music." Clearly, music had aided in her recovery. Such is the salvational power of music, be it bhajans, Carnatic music, choir songs, or just simple melodies!

"Music is a useful adjunct in the treatment of many diseases," says Dr. Vasundhara Iyengar, an exponent of Carnatic Music and a noted Hematologist/Oncologist in Orlando, FL. She was the lead singer in the 'Thyagaraja Aradhana' celebrations at our Hindu Temple, Tampa, some time ago and really made the crowd ecstatic with her rendering of Panchratna Kritis. I talked with her after the concert. "Music is my solace at my worst moments and is always with me to share my joys and sorrows. Carnatic music is like a form of worship and meditation for me. I think music brings out the divinity in you. Even plants and animals respond to music," added Dr. Iyengar. How true! In Hindu mythology, when Lord Krishna plays His celestial flute, all the cows crowd around to greet Him and even wild animals become docile on hearing His melodious music. There is a thread of spirituality running through every lyric in the Carnatic songs. And we all know that divinity and spirituality certainly help the healing process, no matter what your illness is.

The Upanishads, considered the oldest spiritual text on our planet (10,000 years older than the Bible), actually translates into "The Last Song." The Hindu Bhagavad-Gita, which predates the Bible by some three thousand years, literally means "Celestial Song" or "Song of the Lord."

What's the scientific evidence?

Perhaps many people may not know that 'sound' has been successfully used by man as a healing therapy.' During the Annual Scientific Session of American College of Cardiology a few years ago at McCormick Convention Center, Chicago, one of the most important learning sessions I attended was the special lecture titled "Music, Mantras and Prayer: The importance in maintaining your Cardiovascular Health" by Peter Sleight, MD, Director of Cardiology at Oxford University's Radcliffe Medical School. He did extensive studies on the physiologic responses to different types of music including Indian ragas on several groups of people.

Bhajan singing at Sri Ayyappa Temple, Tampa

The rapturous audience

And his findings? "Calm music (like Indian ragas, bhajans and mantras) with a slow tempo can entrain respiration to produce slower breathing that helps your lungs work more efficiently, decrease your heart rate and lower the blood pressure. It is the same principle as in 'pranayama' or the yogic breathing, quite beneficial to your health. When the music was paused, heart rate, blood pressure and ventilation remained decreased, sometimes even below the starting rate. This means that the relaxing effect from the music will last even after you stop listening. Slower music caused declines in heart rate, with the largest decline seen with the Indian raga music, bhajans and mantras. Whereas music with faster tempos (like the loud pop, rap and rock) resulted in rapid breathing, increased blood pressure and heart rate and has negative effects on your brain, not to talk about your hearing, and hence not so good for your general health.

Have you noted that when you go to the temple and sit around the priest who is doing pooja or a havan (homam) constantly chanting mantras and you chant along with him, you feel it is giving you energy, enlightenment and happiness. In many cancer-care centers, music therapists are able to help the patients cope with their pain and suffering. In contending with life-threatening illness of cancer, these soft melodies and songs can reawaken vitality and creative life-expanding energies. In these days of Covid-19 pandemic, frequent lock-downs and resultant anxiety and tension, a lot of people find their sanctuary in good music. When I am sitting and meditating or exercising on a treadmill there is always some soft instrumental music like L Subramoniam's violin, Ravi Shankar's sitar or Praveen Godthkindi's flute that helps me to calm down my fears and help me to concentrate.

Another important aspect to note is that "Music is a divine art, to be used not only for pleasure but as a path to God-realization." Sound or vibration is the most powerful force in the universe and 'Om or Aum' (pronounced ah-uu-mm) ॐ, the highest sacred symbol of Hinduism, is a sacred sound considered by many ancient philosophical texts to be the sound of the universe. And our own Bhagavad-Gita, which predates the Bible by some three thousand years, is a book of slokas or verses directly from Lord Krishna and is considered "Celestial Song" or "Song of the Lord."

Enjoying a few pain free moments

To understand the neuronal underpinnings, one must know the role of autonomic nervous system in the body. The two components of this system are: 1. The sympathetic component which comes into play when you are aroused as in times of anxiety, excitement, stress, fear, etc. tends to produce a surge of adrenaline and other stress hormones that adversely affect the body. 2. The parasympathetic component, on the other hand, when stimulated produces the opposite effect leading to slow heart rate, lower BP and slower breathing. Calm or joyful music seems to do just that leading to peace and tranquility with slow easy breathing making the body more efficient for day-to-day operations.

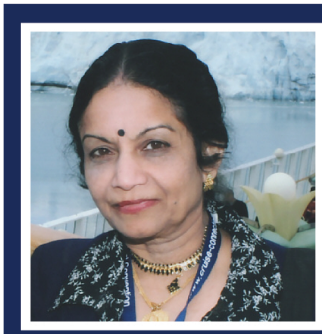
Many doctors and hospitals now are using music as therapy to alleviate chronic pain, tune down rage in people, eliminate fear of their illnesses, boost courage, and to give some sleep for their patients. One day when I was discussing music therapy with one of my older Irish patients, she said to me, "Did you know those Irish mothers sang the most beautiful lullabies to their children during the great famine to sooth their terrible misery: hunger!" Can you imagine that? That was indeed very touching and I had tears in my eyes.

We are all prisoners of our own emotions and thoughts. Music is one way to assuage these unhealthy fluctuations in our psyche and regain self-control. Music has always been a great healer, from the Vedic times onwards. It relieves your stress, relaxes your mind, improves your mood, elevate your spiritual awareness and brings out the best in you.

DR. M. P. RAVINDRA NATHAN

Dr. M. P. Ravindra Nathan MD, FACC, FACP, FRCP, FAHA *is a Cardiologist and a writer and is the Emeritus Editor of AAPI Journal. He is a columnist for Khaas Baat and frequently writes for Tampa Bay Times. His articles have appeared in Medical Economics, Cortlandt Forum, India Abroad, Hernando Today and Journal of Florida Medical Association. He is the author of two books,* ***'Stories from My Heart, A Cardiologist's Reflections on the Gift of Life'*** *(www.amazon.com or www.bn.com) and* ***"Second Chance – A Sister's Act of Love."***

MIRACLES IN EVERYDAY LIFE



Smt. SUSHEELA RAVINDRANATHAN
MD

From the anatomy and internal workings of a tiny bug to the wondrous phenomena of transformation of a seed to a huge tree, we are surrounded by unimaginable miracles in the universe. Adaptations to the environment and evolution of living things over millions of years as well as genetic mutations of viruses and human cells are also nothing short of astounding facts.

In general, one could say things happen in life following the laws of nature. Some attribute special or unexpected events as Niyogam or Shirolikhitham. But isn't there more than a 50-50 chance of the Rule of Nature? We have all heard or read about mystical experiences; a few lucky people have experienced such too. Doesn't every one of us have at least one incident in life that affirms the belief that a brilliant Superpower in the universe had a hand in directing it?

On the one hand, there are recurring heartrending tragedies affecting the innocents and criminals alike in the world that make you wonder if there is any justice in this world. But an equal number of positive experiences to us or to others reaffirm our faith in God, in whatever shape or form He is to each person. Consistently hoping and praying do have an effect not only in someone's immune system, but somehow, things seem to turn around through unexpected circuitous routes to the benefit of that person.

Sometimes what one would initially deem a curse would eventually bring a bright silver lining in the enveloping clouds. For example, a talented professional I know unfortunately had major setbacks with his health which led to complicated, multiple surgeries and long convalescence periods. Just when he thought this was the end of his bright career ambitions, God showed him a way to explore some of his yet undiscovered potentials and he became a well known writer. That detour in his hectic life healed him physically and mentally, brought him glory and he could bounce right back to a long, successful career for decades – a true blessing in disguise! Isn't that a miracle?

Time and again, we read about medical miracles like full recovery from so-called incurable, hopeless cancers or prolonged deep coma, return to life after cardiac arrest, survival after being trapped in deep mines days after its collapse or after devastating car crashes and the disappearance with full recovery from stress-related, chronic autoimmune diseases? Strong faith and optimism do have a role in these marvelous outcomes. A Harvard research study even showed faster or full recovery of patients for whom others prayed intensely from far away! How does science explain that? All I can say is, "There are more things in heaven and earth.., than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

Similarly, loss of a lucrative job could lead to a better appreciation of the ignored blessings in everyday life and stronger work-life balance in a new position – an unforeseen benefit. One of my close friends had narrowly escaped a train crash that was fatal to many when she missed that train, being late to arrive at the station. Retracting the harsh words muttered earlier against her bad luck, she bowed her head in a grateful, silent prayer to the Almighty, as this was a miracle that really saved her life.

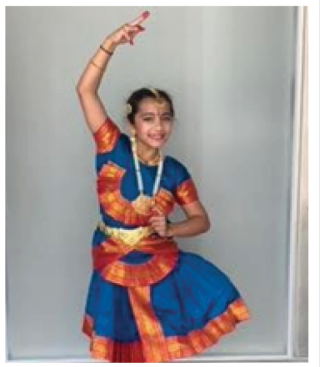
Whenever you help, mentor or inspire another person that could lead to a miracle in that person's life as well as yours.

In conclusion, let me quote from an all-time favorite poem of mine, the 'Footprints in the Sand' by Carolyn Joyce Carty:

God said in a man's dream:
"I love you and I would never leave you.
During your times of trial and suffering,
when you see only one set of footprints (in the sand),
it was then that I carried you."
Miracles do happen in our everyday lives.

About the author: Dr Susheela Ravindra Nathan is a retired pediatrician and writer. Her articles have appeared in many ethnic souvenirs and AAPI Journal and also in Mathrubhumi, a Kerala publication. She is the author of two books of poems in Malayalam – ***Mississipiyute Geetham*** and ***Hrylspandangal***

DANCE & ME



Miss. KIRA SUSHILA NATHAN
11 YEARS, CHICAGO, IL

Bharatanatyam is known for its grace, rhythmic steps and sculpturesque poses. Natya Shastra by Bharatha Muni was written over 2,00 years ago. Nataraja or Lord Shiva is considered the god of this dance form. It is one of the most popular dance styles worldwide for female and male dancers.

Over the years, I've grown a passion for dance. Not hip-hop, or ballet, or any other kind of dance that you may think of. I do Bharatanatyam, which is a type of classical Indian dance. It is a complex, beautiful, divine form of art.

I've been learning Bharatha Natyam for six years and have had a few teachers. Basically, the items of the dances are all the same. Some are based on Indian mythology, linking to stories about all the gods and goddesses such as Krishna, Shiva, Parvathy and many others. I've participated in many recitals with my older sister Anokha, just as 2 of my aunts did when they were younger. My mother had learned Kathak dance when she grew up in Pune, India. So you could say that dance runs in my family.

One of the first dances that I performed on stage was with Anokha, so I feel like she has and will always be my dance partner. One of the things that I like most about performing is the fancy makeup and costumes that I get to wear. When I wear them to go on stage and perform, I feel like I am living what that dance is all about, connecting with the Indian culture. On some occasions, we learned folk dances as well, which are easy and fun to do.

I learned my favorite dance in Florida in a private class that my grandmother enrolled my sister and me about 5 years ago. The teacher, Mrs. Sheila Narayanan, was very friendly and delightful; it has been one of my fondest memories about dance. For this dance, I got to dress up as little Krishna, my sister being Radha. We performed it in Florida, and also at the National NSS Convention in Chicago that year. We used to perform at the National AKMG Conventions, till the pandemic struck the world. Even though we don't go outside Chicago to perform now, my new teacher still holds small recitals for us to show what we've learnt.

When I'm an adult, my past dance experiences will always be my favorite memories. It is an important part of my Indian heritage, of which I'm very proud.

THE MEANING OF KNOWLEDGE

Miss. VANI S. MENON
8 YEARS
SAN FRANCISCO

Two years ago, I asked my mother why I was named Vani, and why she didn't choose the name of a powerful Devi like ***Durga*** (Kaali) or the goddess of wealth, ***Lakshmi.*** Amma said that I was named after Vani Devi or Saraswati Devi, the goddess of knowledge. I still was not very impressed. A fierce warrior Devi who had the weapons of all Devas like the ***Thrishool*** and ***swords***, riding on a mighty lion, seemed way more powerful than the calm goddess of knowledge riding a swan and playing the Veena.

So I took my question to my ***Ammoomma*** (grandma) who leads Sanskrit 'talks' in temples in Kerala and teaches her students about ***Bhagavad Gita*** and ***Devi Maahatmyam*** (which my Amma tells me are some of the most important '***scriptures***' in Hinduism. 'Scripture' is a big-people word for most important books in a religion.)

Ammoomma explained that 'knowledge' is not just math and science. Vani Devi is the goddess of all knowledge, including arts (like music and dance) as well as 'spiritual' knowledge, which she said explains who we truly are. As I still wasn't sure that my name was 'cool', Ammoomma explained that the biggest power in this world is knowledge, which helps us to send people to space and find cures for sick people. She said when we know who we are and the meaning of life, we will have happiness and peace. I had to agree that knowledge does seem super powerful.

Ammoomma also told me that knowledge was also the greatest wealth! She recited a ***slokam*** about how knowledge is the one wealth that cannot be stolen, taken away or split and grows with sharing:

Na chora haaryam, na cha raaja haaryam,
Na bhraatr bhaajyam, na cha bhaarakaari
Vyayee krute vardhata evam nityam
Vidhyaadhanam sarvadhanaat pradhaanam

Now I love my name and proudly explain its meaning to everyone. Knowledge is really the best gift ever!

PARVATHI

Miss. SHYLA MENON
7 YEARS

I like Parvati because my name means "Parvati"! Parvati is the mom of Ganesha and sister of Ganga, the river goddess. I also have a sister!

Parvati's husband is God Shiva. Parvati inspires people to achieve their highest goal. I think this is important because I think all people should reach their highest goal. I hope to help animals when I grow up and I look to Parvati to help me reach this goal.

She also represents fairness and beauty. These are wonderful qualities. I always try to be fair and to be a good person which shows inner beauty!

Parvati is also the goddess of harmony which means "peace" or that "everyone gets along". It can also mean a tune in music. I like this because I think there should be harmony all over the world. I also love music!

Parvati is my favorite because I like all the things she can do to help.

MY RELIGION, MY PERSPECTIVE

Master. PRANAV NAMBIAR
15 YEARS, AMARILLO, TX

Hinduism has always had a meaningful impact on my life all through my school and extracurricular activities. As a child growing up in the Bible belt of America, I feel privileged to call myself a Hindu. The many differences between Abrahamic religions and Hinduism have made me grateful for being a Hindu.

Hinduism and Abrahamic religions have similarities and differences. The latter come from a founder, Abraham. Hinduism, on the other hand, doesn't have one particular founder or a single source of origin. Sanatana Dharma has been present since thousands of years, narrated and codified by many Seers, Gurus and Acharyas. Furthermore, followers of Abrahamic religions worship a higher being as the ultimate superior power while the opposite is true with Sanatana Dharma. The Hindu concept is that God is one with us and is always within ourselves – Tattvamasi (thou art that), as per our scriptures like the Bhagavat Geetha; God is an inseparable part of us, just like sweetness is to sugar or fragrance to flowers.

According to Santana Dharma, God is a power that permeates all objects in the universe equally and is maintained by the vessel it is in. This power or energy also provides a guideline for good living, comforts us during difficult times and shows us the correct path that we should follow. For example, when we are about to make a wrong choice or a bad decision, the power within us that advises us against it, is God himself. While in other religions, the omnipotent God is an entity to be feared, in Sanatana Dharma, He is a power that helps us, like the guiding light in a lighthouse. There are so many reasons why I find comfort in this concept. For one thing, I already have my strict Indian parents to admonish me when needed; I don't want to live in fear of an Almighty, invisible being as well! Secondly, it is also reassuring to know that a part of the superior power is within me.

As opposed to popular belief, Hinduism is in fact monotheistic, like Abrahmic religions, comprised of one all-pervasive God with many forces or facets. We have given different names and attributes to each of these aspects, unlike the only one named 'God' in other religions.

Abrahamic religions follow a set of strict scriptures while Hinduism is much more lenient, and inclusive of everything and everyone. In the latter, the body is just a vessel that holds the energy of God within it. As a Hindu, I try to do my basic duty of preserving the "vessel" to maintain the God within, by making good choices and living a good life. It is also important to set one's own moral compass as well. The God that I think of does not keep track of each of my failings and punish me. Then you might ask, what is the motivation for "staying good?" In my case, knowing my duty to protect the God within myself is the best incentive.

As a Hindu, I do believe in the force of Karma and reincarnation. So when my soul has reached its mortal end, I know I will be judged on how well I have nurtured, protected, and nourished my inner God to be reincarnated in another life.

To conclude, Hinduism has shaped my life and beliefs through the principles of Sanatana Dharma. Knowing that I am preserving the God that I worship, makes me feel confident in life.

IN A NUTSHELL:

Abrahamic:

- Concept of Holy Trinity, One founder for Religion, Monotheistic with one Supreme God.
- Not very inclusive of every being and everything.
- Followers are required to follow a specific code of conduct dictated by a messenger of God or God himself.

Hinduism:

- NOT Polytheistic
- Origin is thousands of years ago.
- Way of life - Just DO GOOD & BE GOOD TO ALL - living, non-living and the Universe
- One higher power which is not superior to you, resides inside yourself, inside an ant and even a rock.
- All-inclusive way of life
- No written code of conduct other than believing in basic values.

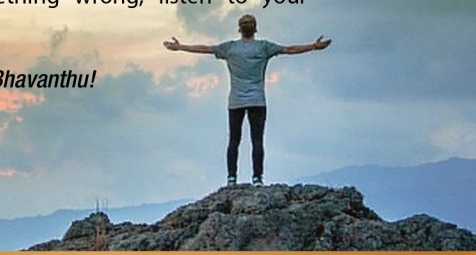
COMPARE & CONTRAST

- Hinduism's supreme power is part of everything.
- Abrahamic religions have a supreme power that sits above everything else: superior to man and nature.
- Hinduism aka Sanatana Dharma advocates the belief that God is not separate from living things; God is a power that permeates all.

MY TAKE ON THIS KNOWLEDGE:

- It comforts, guides, protects.
- Follow Sanantana Dharma- don't have to fear a punitive Supreme God. Believe in basic goodness and stay pure.
- If you are about to do something wrong, listen to your conscience that prohibits it.

Om Tat Sat! Loka Samastha Sukhino Bhavanthu!



MY FAVORITE GOD & THE EPIC RAMAYANA

Master. JITHIN NAMBIAR
8 YEARS

I am a Hindu. There are many gods and related stories in Hinduism. There are many epics also in Hinduism. A good example is the epic Mahabharata. In my essay you will learn about my favorite god and epic and what I think abut Hindu religion.

My favorite god is Karttikeya (Skanda or Muruga if you are from South India).I like Karttikeya because I think it would be cool to ride on a peacock. Even though Karttikeya has a cute appearance, he is the secretary of defense to the Gods' army. He uses a spear and rides on a peacock. Even though a peacock isn't a vicious animal, it is a beautiful bird and it is good at destroying serpents. His parents are Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati.

My favorite epic is the Ramayana. It is a story of endurance and duty.The hero of the story,Shri Rama is the seventh incarnation of Vishnu. It is one of the most loved stories in India. Both Rama and his wife Sita are symbols of courage and dedication.The tyrant king Ravana kidnaps Sita. Rama goes on a quest to find Sita and he overthrows Ravana. Rama got a lot of help from Hanuman and his followers.

My favorite part is when Hanuman and his followers built the bridge to Lanka. The person I like most in the Ramayana is Lakshmana. I like Lakshmana because he was always loyal to Shri Rama.

I like Hindu religion because it has lots of special gods and goddesses. It also has the oldest scriptures known to mankind, called Vedas. We are Hidus and we go to the temple on some weekends and special days. We then pray to the gods and goddesses such as Vishnu, Shiva, Durga, Ganesha and Kartikeya. We also light a lamp and pray in the pooja room in our home.

MY MEMORY OF A SATSANG

Master. SATYAM NARAYANAN
(8 YRS)
3RD GRADE, SHADYSIDE ACADEMY, PITTSBURGH, PA

When I lived in Royal Oak, Michigan, my mother used to take me to her friends' homes in other towns for Satsang on special days. We were all Hindus.

Hinduism is the world's oldest religion which is over 4,000 years old. It is the third largest religion in the world, with 1.1 billion followers. About 5 percent of Hindus live outside India. Hindus hold Satsangs singing Bhajans or Kirtans which are devotional songs about a god or goddess. They are divine. Satsang means a gathering for Pooja or worship in a good company.

The one Satsang I remember was on the day of Sri Krishna's birthday on Ashtami Rohini day (also called Janmashtami). I chanted some slokas my mother taught me. Many aunties and uncles sang prayer songs praising Sri Krishna. After that came the fun part—the big feast with lots of sweets! Then we kids got to run around and play outdoors. All of us enjoyed it very much. I still remember it clearly.

I wish every day was like Ashtami Rohini.

WHAT DOES SANATANA DHARMA MEAN FOR ME?

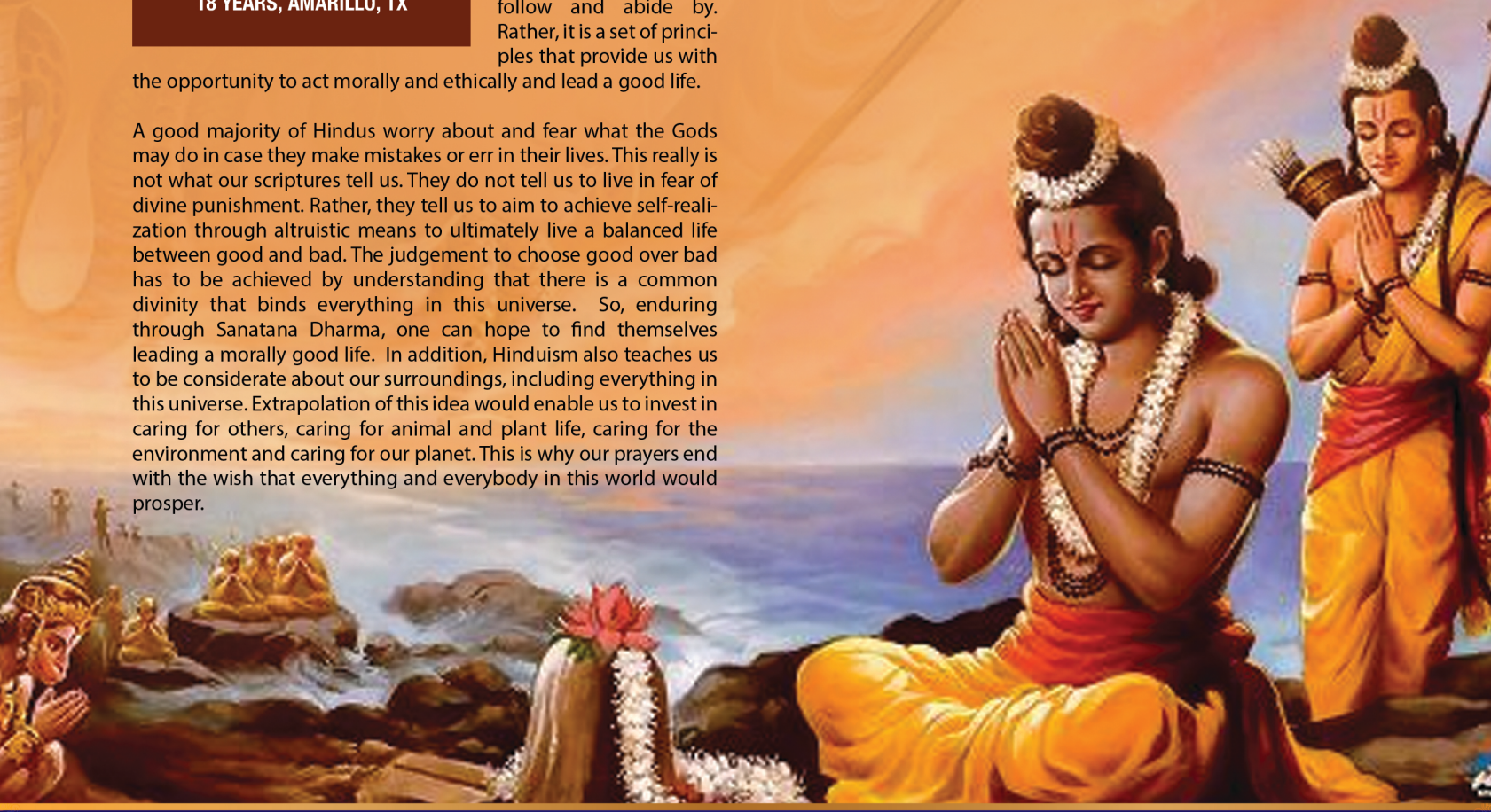
Sanatana Dharma is based on the principle that all of humanity is linked through a unitary consciousness. In its simplest form it is a way of life to maintain the preservation of the purity of humanity. Sanatana Dharma suggests that it is our sole duty to uphold virtues such as honesty, patience, and self-restraint in our daily life. It also advocates that one should try to maintain a strong balance between our spirituality and our own physical duties here on this earth. What most people do not understand is that in essence, Sanatana Dharma is not a rule book that every one of us must strictly follow and abide by. Rather, it is a set of principles that provide us with the opportunity to act morally and ethically and lead a good life.

Master. ADARSH NAMBIAR
18 YEARS, AMARILLO, TX

A good majority of Hindus worry about and fear what the Gods may do in case they make mistakes or err in their lives. This really is not what our scriptures tell us. They do not tell us to live in fear of divine punishment. Rather, they tell us to aim to achieve self-realization through altruistic means to ultimately live a balanced life between good and bad. The judgement to choose good over bad has to be achieved by understanding that there is a common divinity that binds everything in this universe. So, enduring through Sanatana Dharma, one can hope to find themselves leading a morally good life. In addition, Hinduism also teaches us to be considerate about our surroundings, including everything in this universe. Extrapolation of this idea would enable us to invest in caring for others, caring for animal and plant life, caring for the environment and caring for our planet. This is why our prayers end with the wish that everything and everybody in this world would prosper.

When I started college this fall, I found many principles of Sanatana Dharma to be especially valuable. My world expanded and I met a wide variety of people from many different cultures in the University campus. This gave me an opportunity to get a better understanding about the life experiences, outlook, attitude and goals of people from different backgrounds. I realized that the principles of tolerance and acceptance inherent in Sanatana Dharma will be of tremendous help in campus life. Another point is that, understanding and adhering to the basic values that form the cornerstone of our culture, can help in steering clear of peer pressure as well. On a personal level, the teachings of our scriptures that tell us to set high standards for oneself can help me become a better human being. Trying to attain higher goals is the best way to improve oneself.

I hope that the values and principles instilled in me through the teachings of our religion, will enable me to use all my potential and help me to become a better person. Hopefully this will enable me to help and serve humanity in the future.



HOW HINDUISM & GOD HAVE HELPED ME

Master. AKSHAY MENON
15 YEARS, MOUNTAIN VIEW HIGH SCHOOL, MOUNTAIN VIEW, CA.

As life shows, each individual faces many things subjective to their own situations. Some of these things act as experiences that impact us in positive ways, others act as nothing but bleakness, and many carry attributes of both ends of the spectrum. We all have different views on how to deal with these situations. In my experience, many aspects pertaining to my religion have greatly impacted how I deal with these situations.

I recall learning about the "law of consequences" a few months ago, when I was in my Chinmaya Mission class. I think it's important to note that most times, like many others, I do certain things without fully thinking them through. A few days after the class, I learned about some of the material that would be on my final exams at the end of my semester. In normal circumstances, I would probably procrastinate and study at the last minute and I was certainly tempted to do so. However, I vaguely recalled what I learned about dharma, specifically its meaning:

The concept of ***dharma*** relates greatly to the idea of karma. If I were to study at the last minute (or later on), I wouldn't necessarily be fulfilling my duty as a student and it would probably have a negative influence on my understanding of the material in class. However, if I were to take some extra notes and maybe some extra time to ensure that I would be more prepared for these exams, which plays into the concept of ***artha***. As I'm writing this after my final exams, I'm not sure if I did well or not, but I am sure that I had the confidence to attempt all the problems and get them done using the knowledge I acquired from those notes. My prior knowledge of dharma, karma, and to some extent, artha, had helped me.

Another instance of my religion helping me was when I needed the courage to ask my teacher a question. I know how it sounds - quite foolish. But the truth is, asking teachers a question isn't always as easy as it sounds, especially when you don't ask as many questions and the teacher's a bit intimidating. In this case, the intimidating teacher was my math teacher. Looking back at it now, it was just a small question pertaining to my homework, but at the time, it seemed as challenging as Spider-Man getting Venom out of his system. So, I did the only thing I could while I waited in the line of students asking their questions at tutorial - I prayed to Lord Hanuman. One of the things Lord Hanuman has always symbolized is strength, something that is hard to attain, even temporarily. I didn't expect it to have any effect, as I recited part of the Hanuman Chalisa a few times in my head, hoping that my teacher wouldn't be disappointed in my questions. When it was my turn, I nervously asked my math teacher the questions, she responded kindly and helped me with understanding some things pertaining to algebra. After that, I felt relieved and my confidence in asking questions has increased since that day.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE HOLY 18 STEPS OF LORD AYYAPPAN

Master. RISHI NAIR
17 YEARS

Swamiye Saranam Ayyappa! This is the fervent chant heard when the devotees of Lord Ayyappan ascend the holy 18 steps at Sabarimala Temple. On May 27, 2018, during Maha Kumbha Abhishekam at the Tampa SASTA Temple, my father and I had the fortune to ascend the holy 18 steps. It was a deeply religious and fulfilling experience for us. Now, during the Panchaloha Cladding of the holy 18 steps, I am grateful to have the opportunity to write about this occasion and its significance.

What is Panchaloha? This term roughly translates to "five metals," and is a metal alloy used to make traditional Hindu ornaments. Gold, silver, iron, copper and zinc are the primary constituents of Panchaloha. The holy 18 steps at the Tampa SASTA Temple have been cladded in Panchaloha sheets.

Additionally, the famous Sabarimala Temple in Kerala has 18 divine steps (Pathinettampadi) covered with Panchaloha. Before a pilgrim has darshan of Lord Ayyappa, he must climb the 18 sacred steps. Each step symbolizes an aspect of human nature: the first 5 steps represent the human senses; the next 8 represent emotions; the next 3 symbolize Gunas or natural qualities; the last 2 represent knowledge and ignorance.

The 18 hills surrounding Sabarimala are each represented by one step of the Pathinettampadi. The steps are also dedicated to Lord Ayyappan's 18 weapons, meant to protect devotees from evil. Some devotees also believe each step represents a chapter of the Bhagavad Gita.

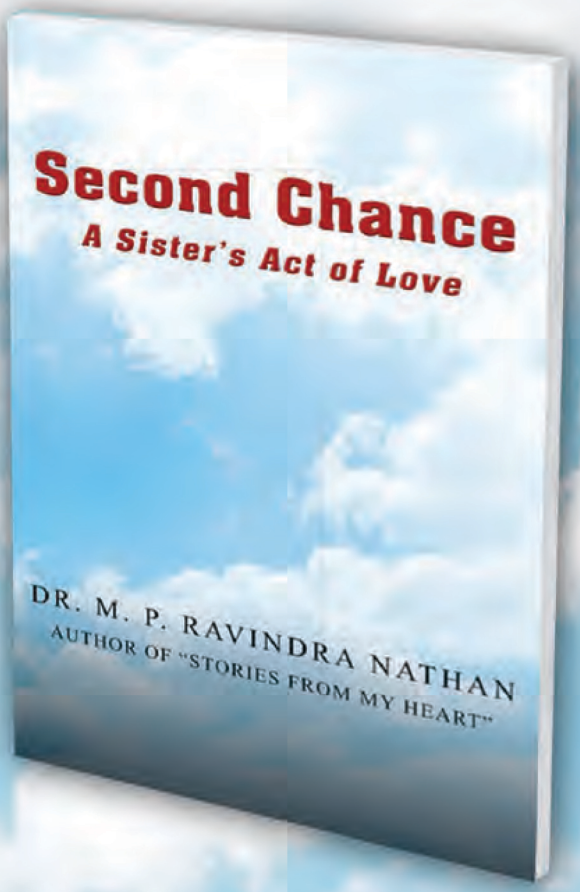
Before entering Sabarimala, pilgrims should fast during a period known as the Vrutham. Pilgrims also carry the Irumudi, a black cloth containing food and some personal belongings, on their heads. Finally, pilgrims cross the Pathinettampadi twice: to enter the temple and to exit. Devotees always face the idol of Lord Ayyappa while on the 18 steps; even while going downhill, they must climb down backwards.

These rituals were practiced during the Maha Kumbha Abhishekam at the SASTA Temple, and continue to hold strong significance in my family. I would like to thank the temple management for giving me an opportunity to write about the divine 18 steps of Lord Ayyappan. Swami Saranam!

About the author: "Rishi Nair is a Senior attending Middleton High School. Outside of school, he is heavily involved with HOSA—Future Health Professionals, Model U.N., and local organizations including Meals on Wheels. He was the proud winner of National Geography Bee in 2016.

NEW Book Published

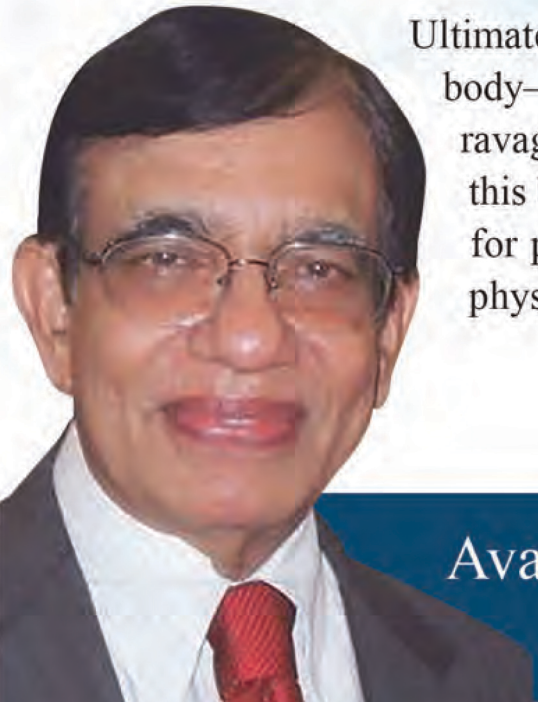
Second Chance:
A Sister's Act of Love



Dr. M. P. Ravindra Nathan (Author of 'Stories from My Heart") has just published his new book: 'Second Chance: A Sister's Act of Love.'

The book describes in detail the author's long saga of his complicated kidney transplant surgery and highlights some of the issues involved in organ donation and transplantation. Dr. Nathan shares his unique perspective regarding the role of kidneys in your body, what happens when they fail, what are the options for treatment, what is involved in getting a kidney transplant and how to adjust to a life after transplant.

This book takes you through the intricate details of how kidney failure could happen to anybody, even to someone who is apparently in good health. But "dis-ease" can happen to anyone-even doctors could become seriously ill, necessitating an organ transplant.



Ultimately, Dr. Nathan recommends, that we need to trust our own body—the beauty, resiliency and ability for its recovery, no matter how ravaged it is with disease processes. He hopes the readers will enjoy this book and find inspiration from his story. This book is very useful for patients with kidney diseases, prospective donors and recipients, physicians dealing with kidney diseases as well as the general public.

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