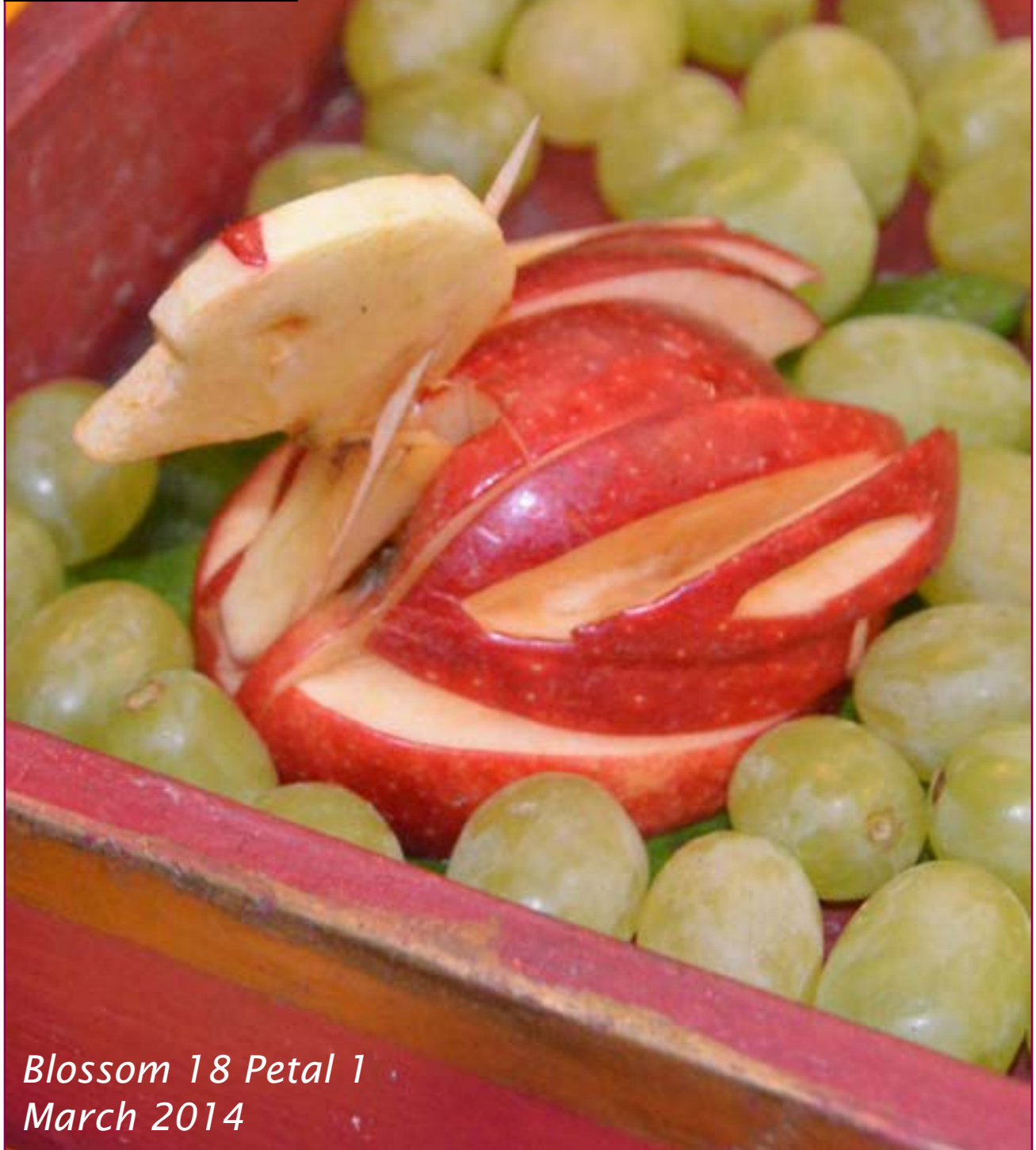




Sri Chakra

The Source of the Cosmos

The Journal of the Sri Rajarajeswari Peetam, Rush, NY



Blossom 18 Petal 1
March 2014

March Newsletter

Since the last issue...

Aiya was in Chicago over US Thanksgiving to perform a few private pujas, after which he returned to Rochester. In early December, he met with Professor Michael M. Bowden from Roger Williams University, who came to the temple. They spent some time discussing Guruji for Professor Bowden's research.

Aiya and Amma left for India Dec. 8th. They started on a proper Kashi Yatra from Dec. 10-19, starting with Rameshwaram; going up to Kashi, Bodh Gaya and Vishnu Gaya; coming back

to Kashi; and from there back down to Chennai and ending in Rameshwaram.

They had a one-day break and then started the India Yatra from Dec. 20 to Jan. 4, visiting 35 temples in total. The tour began with a visit to Sri Amma in Chennai. The group then performed girivalam in Thiruvannamalai, then came back to Chennai and covered the nine Navagraha temples in the area.

Christmas Day, they went to Thiruchi Ranganathan & Akilandeshwari temples, after which they visited Madhurai, and then Kumbakonam.

Dec. 30th was Aiya's 70th in Chidambaram. After that, they made it to the Kanchi temples and

Nemeli Bala.

The group visited Devipuram and Guruji. The yatra concluded in Chennai.

From India, Aiya spent a week in Germany to perform two weddings and a funeral. The second week of January, he did a bunch of house pujas in the Toronto area, and then finally got to go home to Rochester.

As of the end of February Aiya and temple volunteers have been preparing for Shivarathri.

There's a new guideline for overnight stays for temple volunteers. Volunteers are requested to check with temple admin for details.

Past Events

Thiruvempavai, Dec. 9-18

by Abhi Somaskanda



Nataraja receives puja from his namesake on Arudra Dharshanam day. Puja began at 4:30 a.m. that morning

For 10 days in early December, temple devotees celebrated Thiruvempavai, a festival is dedicated to Lord Nataraja and his consort, Sri Sivakami during the month of Margazhi, which is considered extremely auspicious for the Devas.

Temple devotees began puja at 5 a.m. every morning, circumambulating the temple while singing verses from the *Thirupalliyellichi* and Thiruvempavai. The former is meant to wake up God, and then worship Him with Thiruvempavai songs from the *Thiruvachagam*, composed by Saint Manikkavasakar. As each verse finished, devotees were allowed to perform pancha-upachara puja in small groups to Lord Nataraja and Sri Sivakami.

On the final day, Arudra Dharshanam, the divine couple were placed in front of the dvajastambam, and devotees performed abhishekam with milk, panchamrtam, vibhuthi, kumkumam, and other auspicious items as they sang the verses from the *Thiruvachagam*. Afterward, both deities were dressed in beautiful clothing, and adorned with jewels, flowers, and bilva garlands. Following the final aarati, devotees enjoyed a bharatanatyam performance from the temple's own Purvaja Kamat.

Kids' Matangi homam, Dec. 29

by Abhi Somaskanda

Temple volunteers organized another successful Matangi homam for the benefit of all the children participating. Matangi, considered the Tantric form of Saraswati, is often worshipped for success in studies, music, and the arts. Groups of children sat around the homam and offered ahuthis into the fire as the Raja Matangi mantra was chanted. After every child had a chance to participate, devotees enjoyed maha prasadam, which included a beautiful Matangi yantra made of several different kinds of fruit.



One of the apple swans in the 4 corners of the Matangi yantra is on the cover of this issue.

Aiya's Bheemaratha Shanthi, Dec. 30

by Tharuman Thavakumar

Aiya's beemaratha shanthi began at 6a.m. under the Eastern gopuram of the Chidambaram temple, Tamil Nadu, on the morning of Dec. 30, 2013. Both the India Yatra participants and Aiya's disciples who had travelled for the event all gathered there at that time. We walked with Aiya while chanting the Ganapathi Atharvaseersham into the courtyard around the garba graham, which houses Lord Nataraja. It was here that Aiya performed goh puja to a cow and calf, and allowed everyone to feed a type of spinach and bananas to the cow.

As that concluded, we made our way past the Nataraja sannidhi and to a courtyard on the far side, where preliminary sankalpams, Ganapathi pujas and such took place. As these components concluded, Aiya handed dakshina to a certain number of deekshitars who would be chanting.

The dikshitaras then broke off into pairs, resided at each of the entrances to the main courtyard area and began parayanam. During this time, Aiya and the group did darshanam of the entire temple and walked around Chidambaram Nataraja and all the sannidhis.

As Aiya returned and sat in the mantapam in front of Vishnu overlooking the homa kundam, Guruji had already made an entrance and everyone reacted in joy and bliss. Guruji came and sat facing the group with Aiya sitting on the ground below to the side of him and Amma below and to the side of Guruji Amma. Guruji immediately went into meditation and so did Aiya, a moment to cherish.

As Guruji opened his eyes he put his hand on Aiya's head – as soon as that happened, the dikshitaras came and called Aiya for the next

puja, which was the kumara/kanya/dhampathi pujas. It was as if it was timed and gave everyone goose bumps. Aiya and Amma performed the dhaanam to the young, middle-aged and elderly in a very lavish fashion. This was then followed by a kalasa sthapanam and homam with the use of Rudram.

During this time, Sri Amma/Sri Akka (Pujyas-hri Mathioli Saraswathy) had also arrived and made her way to the side, where she sat and observed the entire event. It was the first time a lot of us got to see Sri Amma in such a prominent Shiva Temple in India, and the excitement and energy of the group cannot be described.

The trinity was in our presence, our Sri Guru, Parama Guru and the Devi. As this was happening Sri Amma went into the yajnashala and stood and observed all the puja sequences and was actively overlooking every element of the puja. Guruji and Guruji Amma in their usual nature sat and watched, cracking jokes and spreading love in ways that we were all blessed to be a part of.

In groups, everyone got to go into see Nataraja (right before the panchakshara padi) including Guruji and Sri Amma. As the time kept going, we were all becoming very hungry and tired, but the presence of those around kept the energy and the stamina of everyone up very high. Finally around noon, the main kalasham was taken and abhishekam was done to Nataraja and that water was collected in a very large brass bucket.

The dikshitaras sat Aiya down in the central courtyard and with the direct view of both Guruji and Sri Amma, all the water was poured on Aiya and Amma. Aiya and Amma came in a hasty manner and did namaskaram to Guruji and then Sri Amma – and then went to get changed. Upon their return the final aarthi took place and garlanding and maha prasadam took place at a kalyana mantapam about five minutes away from the main temple.

See pictures of this event on pages 5-6



Sri Amma's New Year's Speech

At the Kanthimathi Kalyana Mantapam on the evening of Jan. 1, 2014, Pujyasri Mathioli Saraswathy (Sri Amma or Sri Akka) gave a speech on how she foresees this new year. This is the edited version of that speech. Thanks to the Nandalala Mission for its English translation of the original speech given in Tamil, and to Bhuvana Subramanian for sending it to the Sri Chakra.

She began her speech by wishing all a Happy New Year and said, "When I think of what I should talk about and what I need not, it is better that I talk about what is good for all of you! January 1st being a Wednesday, the year starts on an auspicious note. Year 2014 adds up to 7 which is Lord Kethu's number.

This year we may not commit mistakes but if we do, we have to face the consequence. Wednesday is considered auspicious to start new ventures, make decisions and procure loans. Buddh Baghavan will bless you with presence of mind."

Loans:

There is an adage in Tamil—"Viralku etha veekam"—

Live within your means. But this year it will not be so. Everyone will opt to take loans because they also will have the capacity to repay. But utilize the funds judiciously.

For Shoppers:

A lot of new products will flood the market leaving one with a variety of goods to choose from. It will lead to confusion.

Education:

Students especially girls, will be achievers.

Discovery:

January 1, 2014 also adds to 9. 1+1+2+1+4. Number 9 represents Lord Sevvai/Mars. This year, because of Mars all diseases will

be cured painlessly. Probably that could have been the reason for the title of my latest book, Vandha vali ponna vazhi. A new drug for cancer cure will be a major breakthrough this year and a boon to cancer patients. Researchers and scientists will progress and benefit in their fields.

Vegetables:

A variety of vegetables will be available in the market. But the prices will be steep. To keep the price down, place that particular vegetable which is high in price, in a container filled with water. The price will drop down.

Cure and use:

Since Vegetables have curative properties, Pavakkai/Bitter Gourd should be included on the food platter daily. Another variant of this vegetable called 'Jimmiki Pavakkai' is good for consumption. The root of Pavakkai/Bitter Gourd removes ill effects /dosham especially for children. It is also worn as a talisman. It absorbs the mantra sounds. Pavakkai is also known by another name—Kaaravalli.

"What is the meaning of Dia-betes?" Sri Akka threw a question at the gathering. Not very happy with the response, She answered, "Dia can be related to digestion,



diaphragm. Craving for food should be in moderation OR it could test (tease) or trigger Diabetes, a metabolic disease.”

Fruit:

The Jackfruit/Palaa pazham is also known as the Mandira Pazham. It contains in it the Bheejakshara shakthi capable of making one a tantrashali. (The mantra vibrations when chanted nearby it are supposed to be absorbed by the fruit). Lord Shiva’s Ganas placed this fruit on their heads when they danced in a temple dedicated to Lord Shiva. This temple is situated at Thiruvathigai Village which is about 2 kilometres east from the town of Panruti. Veerattaaneswarar is the name of the presiding deity.

Also interestingly in the Indian epic Ramayana, Vishvamiitra the preceptor of Rama and his brother Lakshmana gave them the Mantropadesham under a Jackfruit tree on the banks of the Sarayu River on the Deva astras or celestial weaponry (bala and adhi bala).

Thiruvadi Deekshai:

Sundaramurthy Nayanar was another saint who was blessed to receive a touch of the Lord’s feet. While going to Chidambaram, he had to pass the village of Thiruvadigai. Sundaramurthy stayed in a place outside the village. That night, an old man also stayed over, but he did not allow Sundaramurthy Nayanar to sleep in peace. He rested His feet on the Nayanar’s head.

Sundarmurthy Nayanar moved away from the old man. But every time he moved away, the old man moved too, and would not give up. The Nayanar then asked the old man as to why he was being so annoying. The old man responded, “Sundara! Do you not recognize Me?” and then disappeared. The Nayanar immediately realized that the old man was none other than Lord Siva Himself! Thus, Sundara-

murthy Nayanar received Thiruvadi Deekshai.

Read about this episode to understand the relationship between the Lord and his devotee See the Vi-manam of this temple and the look keenly at the sculptures.

Avaloor Sringeeshwarar Temple, Panruti

This temple is under renovation now. Lord Nataraja was supposed to have performed His Aanandha Nadanam (Ajaba Nadanam, Cosmic Dance) here. Lord Shiva narrates this incident to Nandi also known as Sringi.

This dance form known as Ajaba Nadanam is still performed in Thyageshwar Temple in Thiruvarur at the time when the Uthsavar is brought out during the Uthsavam. It is believed that Lord Shiva assumes the form of a Swan and dances in the heart of Lord Vishnu in this temple. This is one such temple other than Chidambaram where the Lord shows his Feet.

Sringi is the Bull’s horn which is used to perform abhishekams to Lord Shiva especially in the North. Karaikaal Ammaiyar lived in this village for a brief period.

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Temple visits:

Visit cave temples like Thiruvannamalai Padhara Lingam, Kalahasthi Pillaiyar, Gatte Subramanya, Vaishno Devi, Kanchipuram Kailasanathar, Thirutani. This year try to also visit temples that house

Devis holding a Lotus in their hands. Pray with faith, teach your children, grandchildren the significance.

Daily Slokam to chant this year:

Kolaru Padhikam and “Namo Narayana” (can chant or write in a book).

Kolam:


Kolam to be drawn for the month of Thai (Jan.15 – Feb. 15th). This special kolam has 8 flags and 8 bells. Seven represents Kethu. These bells and flags represent Hanuman. Look closely at the centre of the picture of the kolam—a shivalingam has been drawn. It is known as Arudra Ther (chariot)



kolam.

You can replace the centre by drawing Lord Murugan’s Vel, Om etc. then it becomes Azhagu Ther kolam. With a Lotus or Svastika for Lakshmi it becomes Sri Ther kolam. With a Japamala, Saraswati yantra, veena, etc., it becomes Saraswathi Ther kolam.

This kolam can be drawn using rice flour in the puja room. You can change the centre according to your Ishta Devatha and seek their blessings by invoking them. Draw these kolams and have a year filled with goodness for all. Jai Nandalala!




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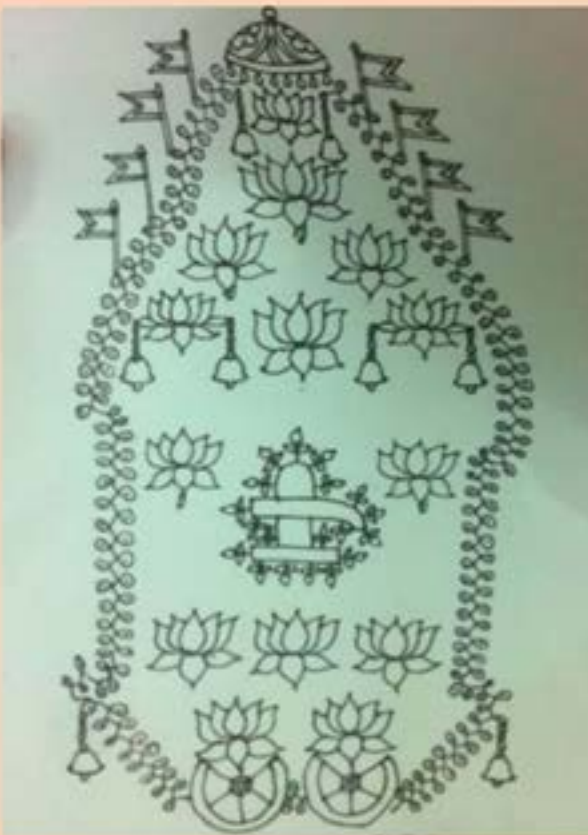
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Pujya Shri Mathioli R. Saraswathy

Thulasi Hours
(Wed. thru Sun. only):
10:00 A.M. – 1:00 P.M.
&
5:00 P.M. – 8:00 P.M.



Excerpt from Pujya Shri Mathioli R. Saraswathy’s message on Jan 1, 2014.



- Kolam to be drawn for the month of Thai (Jan15-Feb 15th)
- This kolam can be drawn using Rice flour in the Puja Room.
- Change the centre according to your Ishta Devatha and seek their blessings by invoking them -svahanam.
- Year 2014 – 2+1+4= 7, associated with Ketu Bhagwan
- 8 Flags, 8 Bells
- Flags and Bells depict Shri Hanuman
- Shiva Bhagwan in center – Arudra Ther (Chariot) Kolam (Rangoli)
- Muruga (Karthik) Bhagwan in form of Vel, Om in center – Azhagu, Sundar (Beauty) Kolam
- Lalushmi Devi as Lotus, Sri, Swastik in center – Pankaja Kolam
- Saraswathi Devi as White lotus, Veena, Japamala, Saraswathy yantra – Saraswathi Kolam
- Draw these kolams and have a year filled with Goodness for all

Blessings to you all!
- Mathioli R.Saraswathy.

A Testament of Faith

by Aparna Hasling

We all know that ego veils God-consciousness from the individual soul and that sadhana is the key to reduce this self-centered existence. However, without adequate faith it is difficult to maintain and deepen spiritual practice. A person with shradha performs ritual puja and serves with a pure-heart; for them, union with God is immanent. But what about the rest of us—how does one build faith?

The ego grows stronger with every drop of doubt, anger, jealousy and pride—it is a storehouse of stagnant energy. It is also a clever opponent, and constantly spews false messages of judgment through the mind—it even congratulates the little self for doing sadhana when others have not! The ego thrives on preferences and aversions, and constantly compares itself to the other. This is why even devotees who have studied the Atmabodha, Avadhuta Gita and other advaitic texts are challenged to find the root of their own ego, let alone eradicate it. Like a chameleon, it changes form when detected.

Since we cannot see our own ego, we need a guru or faith-counsellor to shine light upon it. Only a skilled surgeon can succeed at this task, since the ego is programmed to attack if threatened with too much light! The guru possesses powerful mantras which can melt the chains of ego, and s/he disperses them like medicine. However, the potency of the mantra is decreased by the poisonous kleshas: jealousy, anger, greed and conceit. So this lila of life continues, as even those who yearn to melt at Devi's feet are bound by tenacious false beliefs.

The ancient Upanishads teach that we are all a reflection of Brahman. In this quest for enlightenment, some devotees practice jnana yoga and explore vichara as a discipline of self-inquiry. "Neti neti" is a contemplative practice which may help identify inconsistencies between atman and ahamkara. By doing an inventory of thoughts and actions, it is possible to trace the origin of creation.

However, the ego barely gives space for the peace of cosmic

“The problem is that ego can convert anything to its own use, even spirituality.”

— Chogyam Trungpa —

silence, and distracts the sadhaka from ever reflecting on pure Self. It produces waves of faith-crushing thoughts, and depending on personal vulnerabilities, the ego can make one person feel unworthy of God's love, and guide another to believe in their own God-like powers!

Although I have travelled the spiritual path for many years, last year I undertook a faith-journey to assess my own false beliefs. With the help of a faith-counselor, I identified an energy blockage that I had carried since childhood. An avalanche of unprocessed emotion had festered into a mountain of darkness that seemed to eclipse the light of God. The roots of the pain

extended from past lives and I was weary of the burden. Taking courage, I let the light burn through veils of self-doubt which I had identified as my own self.

In a dramatic struggle, even as the ego was revealed to be the architect, it continued to fight for survival. It argued that it would be selfish to transfer this darkness to my beloved Shiva, and with a whisper it told me to hold on and continue my dance around the mountain. As I agonized through this

dark night of the soul, Aiya seemed to emerge from a mist and offered his hand. He compassionately asked me to release the pain, and assured me that my burden of separation would not hurt him. What I perceived as a toxic, heavy load, was only a drop of

energy he could recycle into amrita. It was a revelation, and as I burst into tears, prana flooded my soul.

Over a year has passed since this experience, but even now my faith grows as I remember and reflect on the power of the guru's love. Since we are all struggling together on this path, today I humbly offer this story and ask that we be patient with each other's impatience. Although the ego tries to keep us in the game by offering great rewards, there is really nothing to gain in this world. Atman is Brahman, guru is God and the only thing that really matters is love. Sri Gurubhyo Namaha!

Q & Aiya

We all love hanging out with Aiya, drinking tea, and sometimes getting some guidance on how to travel down our own paths to the Devi. Here, he addresses the physical effects of japam.

Q: What do mantras do to the body?

Aiya: You're breathing right now. Are you breathing to the maximum capacity of your lungs? No, only a third of your maximum lung capacity is in use. Now, if you chant a mantra out loud, the breathing is extended and you're challenging your lungs to hold more air and slowly expend air over a longer period of time.

Your retention cycle and exhalation cycle become extended. In that time while you're holding and expelling the air, think of the changes that take place inside the lungs. Inside the lungs, an exchange of gases is taking place. Your body is giving up its carbon dioxide and it is accepting oxygen. The rest of the

body will then be diffused with oxygen-hemoglobin through the pumping action of the heart.

Inside the alveoli, there is CO₂. With water vapour, you get H₂CO₂ or H₂CO₃. This is carbonic acid. These two acids are highly unstable—they will break down, giving you a hydrogen ion and carbon. The hydrogen ion's concentration is called the PH value.

Anyway, if you can maintain the same ambiance, the same rhythm in your breathing by japam, the same amount and the same plasma will enter your brain. This is why a mantra is given to you and you keep chanting the same thing over and over again, until you can chant it in your sleep. The same PH has entered your plasma and is now entering your brain. Inside your brain, the cerebro-spinal fluid or CSF becomes infused with the same PH value.

When the PH is entering your brain at optimum levels, which is what the japam will ensure, maximum production of melatonin, serotonin, and other hallucinogenic components are released throughout

the system. If you drilled a hole in your mouth going up through the palate and inside the brain and looked inside, you would see a thumb-sized area called the pineal stalk. The epithelial layers of the pineal stalk produce melatonin, serotonin, and the like.

Only now has the West discovered these chemicals and put them into the forms of tablets and recreational drugs. When nature produces them through your emotional state or through japam or transcendental meditation, you cannot overdose on them. It's dependent on your emotions, your metabolic rate at that time, and natural factors. Whatever is produced and not used by the body will be reabsorbed and have no side effects.

Whatever is put artificially into your body while taking external narcotics will transform into toxins and become poisonous to you. This is why the high of meditation cannot be duplicated with the artificial high you would get by doing drugs. It is foolhardy to think you can quickly get to a place that has taken true aspirants years to get to, simply by smoking something or taking a pill.

So repeated mantra japam with the same rhythm and same format is extremely important. When that constant influence is there, the body and the impulses in the mind will begin to change. And it is transmitted to the rest of the body through a system of cranial nerves, which have branches going throughout every conceivable system in the body. And all the cells in those systems will begin to vibrate at the same rate—to the rhythm of that japam you are chanting.

So what do mantras do? They re-program your entire body. They re-program the cells and the nuclei in the body to resonate with whatever mantras that you are doing. That is the effect of mantra sadhana. But you have to stay with it. You can't do intense mantra sadhana for a month and then get over whatever you're going through and forget about the japam for 2 or 3 years. Then when the next crisis hits, you go and sit down again? Sorry, it doesn't work like that. It has to go slowly in stages.



Train to Kanchipuram

part 1

by Michael Steinberg

My hotel in Chennai had 24-hour checkout, and since my plane got in so early I had to check out before six the next morning or pay for an extra day. I barely made it. The alarm clock on my phone didn't work, but a terribly over-amplified call to prayer from a nearby mosque woke me up a little after five, and I washed up in a hurry, returned the key on schedule, and tumbled out into the pre-dawn darkness.

It was too early for the hotel breakfast but I figured I would go to Egmore Station, a short walk from the hotel, and see what I could find there. There wasn't much to find. Egmore

is a large, red-brick building with white trim that runs for a block along Gandhi-Irwin Road, Victorian in its outlines but with scalloped oriental archways and towers that end with white helmet-like cupolas: the "Indo-Saracenic" style that the British liked to use to acknowledge that they were putting these buildings in India and not in Liverpool or Cardiff. It's nowhere near as deep as it is long, though.

Inside the main archway there was a room with ticket windows to one side and people sleeping on the floor, and past that were the platforms and the pedestrian bridges with their long staircases. I'm sure there was a food stand

somewhere, but I didn't feel like hunting up and down for one and I wasn't sure I would want to eat there if I could find it.

Across Gandhi-Irwin Road I saw a restaurant lit up and I decided that there was where I would eat. I passed through the usual gauntlet of auto-rickshaw drivers ("No thank you, I'm just crossing the street"), put my traffic-dodging skills to



good use in making it to the other side, and dropped into a silver metal seat at a brown formica table in Vasanta Bhavan, a "Family Vegetarian Restaurant."

From what I gathered I was still too early for the kitchen

to open, but somehow there materialized two large vadai and filter coffee. Both were good, but the vadai were to die for. Hot, crisp, and perfectly fresh, studded with onions, curry leaves, and mustard seeds, twice as large as any other I was to have, they left me in a splendid mood. There is no better place on earth to have breakfast than South India, and by the time the kitchen opened and my idli ar-

rived I felt my journey was off to a good start.

I got back to the station in plenty of time. The sun was up and it was already in the mid-seventies, but for Tamil Nadu this qualified as "bone-chilling cold," as the Hindu put it. Some people were wearing sweaters and had protected their children with coats. Others had clipped on leopard-skin print ear warmers. I was perfectly comfortable, of course, dressed in a dhoti tied in the North Indian style and a kurta from Fabindia. Nobody paid me much mind.

When the train pulled up I dashed into one car and dashed out at once; it didn't look as if I'd be able to find a window seat, and of course I wanted to see as much as possible. I walked into the next one without looking. It was then that I saw that the car was basically an open boxcar with a metal floor. The only seats were along the sides. I thought at first I should go to yet another car but the train was ready to leave and I was afraid of being left on the platform. Then I thought, I like it well enough on the floor at



home. There was an open patch of floor close to one of the open doors so I planted myself there, watched the surroundings slip past, and realized with pleasure that I had found the perfect way to see suburban Chennai from a train.

There is not much to see from the suburban line but by the



same token there is a lot. Scrub, of course, the bushes and stunted trees that seem to surround every rail line. The backs of blocky water-stained concrete houses, three or four stories tall, with balconies and laundry strung to dry. Now and then a cluster of older houses, huts really, with thatched roofs. Clusters of commercial buildings, too, grade crossings with people waiting behind and in front of the barrier on their bicycles, motorscooters, motorcycles, autorickshaws, and bullock carts.

Children in school uniforms waiting to get across the tracks to school. Walls along the tracks covered with signs for silk stores like Pothys and the Chennai Silks, political signs, portraits of Jayalalitha, the former film star and current Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, red flags, a picture of Che. Men stand in front of the wall to

urinate no matter what is on it. Others stand outside their houses, brushing their teeth as the train goes by.

Young men are hanging from the open doors, not because there is no room in the car but because young men like to do things like that. A boy who doesn't look to be out of his teens sits in a doorway

with his legs dangling. His head nods for a moment and half a dozen people in the car start yelling at him. He gets up but, standing, holds on to the outside door handle and leans out into the breeze.

The floor



of the open car fills up with metal tubs of fish packed in ice that slowly melts onto the floor and with bundles of cheap brightly printed fabric tied up with yellow nylon rope. An old man and two old women sit on the floor on one end of the car. I eventually head over there because it's the one open space by a door where I can look out towards the front of the train.

One of the women, whose white hair is cropped short, says something to me in Tamil. I gather from her gestures that she thinks I would be more comfortable on one of the benches that run along the sides of the car. The old man seems to agree. I do my best to respond in sign language that I like the floor and the view and he appears to accept my explanation with benevolent amusement. He says something else to me and then guesses the answer.

"Kanchipuram?" he asks.

"Kanchipuram," I answer, and he grins.

"KanchiPURam!" he says to the others.

Later on I take out a bag of snacks, open it, eat a few, and offer it to the others. The woman with cropped hair takes the bag and starts packing it away. I protest and

gesture that I wanted to share instead of donate. She hands it back and spreads her sari while the man unfolds a piece of newspaper. I pour out butter murukku until they signal they have enough. The old man offers me a namaskaram.

We pull into the important junction station of Chengalpattu, past a large lake with some mountains behind it, and then reverse direction to head towards Kanchipuram to the west. We are well out of the city sprawl by now, proceeding along a high embankment. Beyond and below it the ground is ruled into perfect rectangles for paddy. In one a man has tied up his sarong-like lungi for the hard work of planting. In the next, two bullocks, yoked together, wait with their proverbial patience. In the third a tractor is preparing the muddy soil. Soon we are in the holy city of Kanchipuram.

My aim on my first morning in Kanchi is to visit the most famous of its temples, the Kamakshi

Amman temple. This is traditionally where one starts a visit to Kanchipuram, and since Kamakshi is a different form of Rajarajeshwari I'm especially eager to see her. I ask at the hotel for directions and set off on foot.

I don't think I have been in two temples in India that felt exactly the same, but there are temples everywhere in Kanchipuram, and from the outside I can't tell which temple is which. There seem to be dozens of streets lined with bazaars that lead to giant gopurams, only none of them are entrances to the temple I want. I kept walking up to temples for Murugan or Vishnu. The streets twist and bend, I get totally lost, and ultimately I give in and overpay an autorickshaw driver to deliver me to the main entrance to the Kamakshi Amman temple.

I was a little nervous because Kamakshi Amman has a rule against non-Hindus in the sanctuary

delighted and surprised to see me. It seemed, as they say here, highly auspicious, and a nice bit of proof that I really was a Hindu, if proof was actually needed.

I had no time to look around the temple complex; the priest ushered me into the sanctuary through a side door. But I did not end up in the lines for ordinary worshipers. Instead, I found myself planted in a little enclosure for Westerners cut off from other devotees by metal rails. The priest pointed someone out to me, his cousin, he said, who would "bring me in." I should wait.

I waited, looking past several lines of devotees at the distant figure of Kamakshi. It was good, if a little frustrating, to sit in my Westerners' ghetto trying to get a clear view. Temples are good places to sit in no matter where you are, and the distance between you and the god often seems to enhance

the cousin finally appeared I was ushered into a fenced-off space next to the space for Indians where I could see nothing at all, and after a moment I was led around the back where an official asked for a temple donation. I never go to a temple without making an offering, but the hustle and haste left me feeling that I had just been shaken down. I gave him a hundred rupees and left. I never saw my priest again.

Things were not starting out well. I was more than a little put out, but I had just started my journey and kept my hopes up. I knew that from noon to four the temples are usually closed, but in Kanchipuram there are two temples that date back to the seventh century, and while these don't open as living temples until four they're open all day as archaeological sites. I decided to go Kailasanathar, a temple to Shiva as lord of Mount Kailash, which my books told me was probably the best-preserved Pallava temple in existence.

According to Google I could walk from the hotel to the temple in about 20 minutes. That's what I did. Kanchi is decently walkable by Indian standards; no sidewalks and lots of garbage and encroachments, but only moderate traffic and noise. My discontent slipped away as I walked. As I was to find throughout the trip, the inimitably public aspects of Indian life and the constant buzz of activity in the streets served as a tonic.

I like walking in cities anyway, and I like the kinds of discoveries I can make because I move at a slow pace and don't have to worry about parking. Along the way I came across Kanchi Kudil, a century-old bank manager's house which had been turned into a museum, all swelling teak columns, whitewashed walls, and tile roofs around courtyards and pools. Its sobriety and its careful attention to the climate made an odd pairing

with the contemporary fantasies in yellow, green, and fuchsia concrete that surrounded it. Next to their arbitrary and almost comical angles and lines Miami's South Beach is an

exercise in restraint.

In twenty minutes I passed through a mostly residential neighborhood, a school, and a broad, shallow pond fringed by factories. I was already in the suburbs. The blare of Kanchi's traffic faded, and beyond some modest houses, across from the inevitable snack stands and a few stalls selling statues and trinkets,

was Kailasanathar, set off from the rest of the town by a broad lawn and green Archaeological Survey of India fencing. There were only a handful of people around. It was hard to figure out where I should leave my shoes and the ASI guide was not eager to do any guiding and his English was not the best, either. I had the temple almost to myself.

Watch for part 2 of Michael Steinberg's experiences in Kailasanathar in the next issue of the Sri Chakra.



Letting Go

by Sandeep (Sonia) Chadha

I sit down and breathe into my being and as I breathe out I let everything go. I let go of all the tensions, the expectations, the desires, the attitudes and ego I have developed over the years. I let go and I think to myself let god in. When I make this space God can come in.

My desires, wants and thoughts are on the human level, when I let go and breathe out I lift myself out of my body into my spirit and ask my spirit to be fully alive and ask my human self to be the shell it is meant to be.

Don't get me wrong—my human shell is a creation of the divine, it is beautiful, but it is only a shell that I have grown very close to in this life time. But my spirit

is that light of god that shines through the shell. It is full of unconditional love, bliss and the most beautiful: peace.

When I touch that peace I know I have touched God that day and hold on to that peace through each breath of my being that day. I feel moved that Her creation is so magnificent and I swim through God's energy waves. I pray that every day I will be blessed with this freedom to know what divinity truly is.

It feels like nothing but everything is contained in it, it is the irony of the divine, it is. In the depth of my being, God is, and so am I. We emanate together throughout the universe. I am full of the divine energy and all of the outside

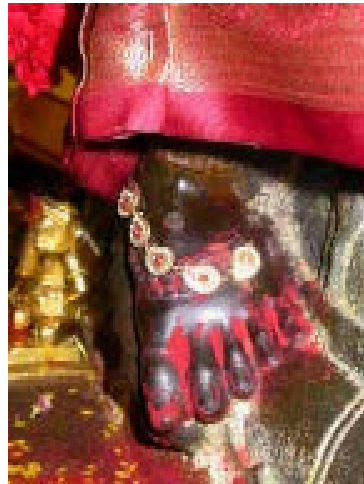
world is just as it is supposed to be. And I accept it and I pray gratitude to the fulfillment of life I have experienced at this very moment. Let go and let God.



and it's known for being strict about that rule. But I was not too nervous because I had an introduction to one of the senior priests there. We had been in touch by phone and I called him once again when I got out of the auto. He was very friendly and warm, and we had just entered the temple when we ran into two devotees from the temple in Rochester,

the feeling of power and presence. A temple band was playing, two drums and two nadaswarams, but my expectations were getting in the way of my focus, along with the hope that when the cousin showed up I would finally get to have the kind of darshan I would have had if I were an Indian devotee.

It did not happen. When



Sri Gurubhyo Namaha