

Sri Ramanuja



Sri Ramanuja was the most important philosopher-saint of Sri Vaishnavam and one of the most dynamic characters of Hinduism. He was a philosophical as well as a social reformer, displaying a catholicity that was nearly unparalleled in Hindu religious history before him. He is seen by Sri Vaishnavism as the most important acharya (teacher) of their tradition who followed Nathamuni and Yamunacharya, and by Hindus in general as the leading expounder of Vishishtadvaita, one of the classical interpretations of the dominant Vedanta school of Vedic philosophy. He revitalised Indian philosophy and popular religion so much that nearly every aspect of Hinduism has been influenced by his work. His life and works show a truly unique personality, combining contemplative insight, logical acumen, catholicity, charismatic energy, and selfless dedication to God.

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When & Where Born

In the year 1017 AD, Ramanuja was born in the small village called Perumbudur, around 25 miles west of the present day Chennai, Tamil Nadu. His father's name was Keshava Somayaji and his mother's name was Kantimathi. It is said that Kantimathi was an extremely pious and virtuous lady. Ramanuja's Tamil name was Ilaya Perumal.

Brief Life History of Sri Ramanuja

When Srisaila Purna, the maternal uncle of Ramanuja came from Srirangam to see the child and take part in his naming ceremony, he noticed the divine traits in his nephew. He was of the firm opinion that his nephew had all the qualities of Adishesha in Kali Yuga like Lakshmana of Treta Yuga.

Hence the family decided to name the child Ramanuja or the brother of Ram. Interestingly, Ramanuja's month of birth (Chaitra) and Zodiac Sign (Cancer) are the same as that of Sumitra's sons Lakshmana and Shatrugna. Vaishnavites generally regard Ramanuja as the manifestation of both Adishesha (just as Lakshmana) and the five weapons of Lord Vishnu.

Ramanuja lost his father when he was very young. It was after his death that Ramanuja's family moved to Kancheepuram with the intention of initiating young Ramanuja in the study of the *Vedas*. Those days the town of Kanchi was a great centre of learning and Ramanuja began his Vedantic study under one Yadavaprakasha, a teacher of Advaita philosophy.

Even before his formal initiation into the gurukula for Vedantic studies, Ramanuja was married to one Rakshakaambaal, when he was around 16 years of age.

Young Ramanuja was a very brilliant student and could grasp what was taught to him very quickly. There were many occasions when Ramanuja found his guru Yadavaprakasha's interpretations of Vedic texts were



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not satisfactory and had errors. With courage and honesty, Ramanuja used to point out his teacher's mistakes and would also offer his own understanding of a particular lesson. While the rest of the students cheered Ramanuja and appreciated him, Yadavaprakasha did not enjoy his student's fearless approach and knowledge.

Yadavaprakasha found out that Ramanuja had all the calibre of demolishing Advaita philosophy and creating a new one of his own. Fearing this, he plotted to kill Ramanuja by drowning him in the River Ganga while on a pilgrimage of the country with his disciples. When Ramanuja came to know about this plot through Govinda, another disciple, he slipped out into the forest in the middle of the night. Miraculously, an aged hunter couple appeared before him and guided him through the dense forest. Ramanuja fell into a blissful sleep and when he woke, he found himself on the outskirts of Kanchi but the aged couple had disappeared. He recognized it was none other than Lord Narayana and Mahalakshmi who resided in Kanchi as Lord Varadaraja and Perundevi Thayar. Overwhelmed with gratitude, Ramanuja vowed to serve the Lord and began carrying water from the lake to the temple daily.

Yamunacharya also known as Alavandar (or the conqueror) was a profound influence on Ramanujacharya although the two had never met. Born in 916 AD, he composed six major works that outline the principles of *Vishishtadvaita*. Yamunacharya's writings are today revered as the basis for Ramanujacharya's great systemization of *Vishishtadvaita*.

Yamunacharya sent one of his disciples, Mahapurna, to bring Ramanujacharya to Srirangam. But as fate would have it, Yamunacharya died before Ramanujacharya could reach Srirangam. Mahapurna took Ramanujacharya close to the body of Yamunacharya for a final look at the great master and that was when Ramanuja observed that three fingers of Yamunacharya were folded into his right hand's palm indicating his three unfulfilled wishes.

Closing his eyes and contemplating for a minute, Ramanujacharya then declared aloud, "Remaining fixed in devotion to Lord Vishnu, I shall free the people from illusion by spreading the glories of the Lord throughout the land." As these pious words were uttered, one of the fingers got straight and relaxed. Ramanujacharya uttered again, saying, "To establish that there is no truth beyond Lord Vishnu, I shall write the *Sri Bhasya*—the commentary on the *Vedanta-sutra*." At this, Yamunacharya's second finger became straight. Ramanujacharya declared again, "In order to show respect to the Sage Parasara, who has so wonderfully



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described the glories of the Lord in the *Vishnu Purana*, I shall name one learned Vaishnava after him." With this final statement, the last of Yamunacharya's fingers relaxed and became straight.

The crowd rejoiced that a suitable successor had been found and Ramanujacharya would be the future torchbearer of the Sri Vaishnava tradition.

By the time he was around 32 years of age; he relinquished his family life and became an ascetic. He was given the name Yatiraja by Kanchipurna, one of the senior disciples of Yamunacharya. This point in Ramanujacharya's life was really the beginning of his long journey as a philosopher and preacher within the school of Sri Vaishnavism. He spent the next 80 years preaching Sri Vaishnava philosophy and writing commentaries/books. Ramanujacharya's fame quickly spread far and wide and he attracted many disciples, Dasharathi and Kuresha being the most important ones among them. With these disciples in tow, he soon started off his tour to north India where he visited many sacred places including Kashi, Kashmir, Badrinath, and even Puri.

At Kashmir, Shri Sharda, the Goddess of learning made herself present before Ramanujacharya and showered her blessings upon him by presenting him the icon of Hayagreev, a form of Vishnu with the face of horse. At Puri he reorganized the temple service at the famous Jagannath shrine and also established the Embar Mutt. At Kashmir, he procured the old commentary on the *Brahma Sutras* by the philosopher Bodhayana after a lot of struggle. However, en route the return journey, the manuscripts were stolen by force but thanks to his disciple Kuresha who had memorized each and every word, Ramanujacharya was able to retrieve and read it before commencing his own work. His work drew inspiration from Bodhayana's earlier rendition.

On his return to the Southern India, he reached Tirupati and found the Shaivites and the Vaishnavites quarrelling with one another over whether the main deity in the Tirupati temple was a form of Shiva or Vishnu. The priests were asked to leave the ornaments of both the Lords at the feet of their respective images and wait outside throughout the night. In the morning, when the doors were opened, the priests found that the image of Lord Vishnu was adorned with all the ornaments. This decided that the temple should follow Vaishnava traditions and it has remained so ever since.

By the time Sri Ramanujacharya reached Srirangam, he was 100 years old and although he lived for another



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20 years more, he did not travel anywhere else and spent all his time in Srirangam. It was during this period that Ramanujacharya completed his famous Vedanta-sutra commentary, the Sri Bhashya. Through his Sri Bhashya, he established the monotheistic principles of Sri Vaishnavism or Vishishtadvaita. He proclaimed to the world, the concept of bhakti and prapathi i.e. the doctrine of devotion and surrender to God.

It was in the year 1137 A.D. that Ramanujacharya gave up his physical body and returned to the abode of Lord Vishnu. While the life-like statue was installed at Sriperumpudur, his birthplace, near present day Chennai, his physical body is said to be preserved even to this day in a sitting posture in the sanctum sanctorum dedicated to him in the south west corner of the Srirangam temple complex.

His philosophical concepts continue to be disseminated through his team of 74 disciples and several Mutts (institutions for propagating Vishishtadvaita) that were built in different parts of India to carry on his tradition of Sri Vaishnavism.

Principles & Practices in Spiritual Life

Ramanujacharya was also a social reformer who snubbed the caste system and promoted equality. He also stressed on the fact that every person on this earth, irrespective of his caste, creed and sex can completely surrender unto Lord Narayana to seek his divine grace.

Whenever Ramanuja went to meet Nambi at Thirukoshiyur to learn the ThiruMandhiram from him, on reaching there, he said "I have come to meet you....." But he was turned back on 17 occasions by Nambi. On the 18th occasion, Ramanuja started with "Adiyen Daasan (your disciple) Ramanuja has come." On that moment Nambi welcomed him saying 'Your arrogance is gone. Now we can talk'. Then Nambi duly initiated Ramanuja and said: "Ramanuja! Keep this Mantra a secret. This Mantra is a powerful one. Those who repeat this Mantra will attain salvation. Give it only to a worthy disciple previously tried".

But Ramanuja had a very large heart. He was extremely compassionate and his love for humanity was unbounded. He wanted that every man should enjoy the eternal bliss of Lord Narayana. He realised that the Mantra was very powerful. He immediately called all people, irrespective of caste and creed, to assemble before the temple. He stood on top of the tower above the front gate of the temple, and shouted out the sacred Mantra to all of them at the top of his voice. Nambi, his Guru, came to know of this. He became furious. Ramanuja said: "O my beloved Guru! Please prescribe a suitable punishment for my wrong action". Ramanuja said: "I will gladly suffer the tortures of hell myself if millions of people could get salvation by hearing the Mantra through me". Nambi was very much pleased with Ramanuja and found out that he had a



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very large heart full of compassion. He embraced Ramanuja and blessed him. Having thus equipped himself with the necessary qualifications, Ramanuja succeeded Yamunacharya.

Teachings of Sri Ramanuja

Sri Ramanujacharya gave special emphasis to selfless surrender to God, which he called prapathi. He said that one should give up attachments to material objects, give up his/her ego and completely surrender to God. Only through this surrender can man attain salvation.

He believed that God is omnipotent and omnipresent and the ruler of the Universe. He alone is the Divine personality and superior to all other living and non-living beings.

Ramanujacharya also believed that happiness as a concept was more of an illusion, a maya and one should strive not just for happiness but to get the grace of the Lord, who is our everything—the mother, father, friend, philosopher and guide.

He was of the opinion that a true devotee is one who spends his time, energy and money in the pursuit of realizing God. As maintained by Ramanujacharya, God showers his Supreme Divine bliss upon all those who ask for forgiveness in a humble manner.

It was when Ramanujacharya reached the age of 120 years; he delivered his final message to his disciple: "Shed your ego. Love the devotees of God. Serve the cause of mankind who is God's children. Nobody is infallible; do not humiliate any one. What is of supreme importance is purity of mind and deed."

Vishishtadvaita philosophy is widely followed in Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, South Karnataka, Gujarat and some parts of Maharashtra.

Writings of Sri Ramanuja

1. Vedartha-Sangraha – A treatise presenting the tenets of Vishishtadvaita, a reconciliation of different conflicting srutis.
2. Shri Bhasya – A detailed commentary on the Vedanta Sutras.
3. Gita-Bhasya – A detailed commentary on the Bhagavad-Gita.
4. Vedanta-Dipa – A brief commentary on the Vedanta Sutras.
5. Vedanta-Sara – Another brief commentary on the Vedanta Sutras and meant for beginners.
6. Saranagati-Gadya and Shri Ranga-Gadya – Manuals of self surrender to Lord Vishnu.
7. Shri Vaikuntha-Gadya – Describes Shri Vaikuntha-loka and the position of the liberated souls.



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8. Nitya-Grantha – A short manual intended to guide the Shri Vaishnava Devotees.

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